

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Expatriate Encounters and Colonial Legacies: Discursive Constructions of Indian-ness in Malaysian ICT Workplace

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Abstract: This paper examines the constructions of “Indian-ness” in Malaysia and the way these constructions shape the interactions between Indian expatriate professionals and the local Malaysian workforce in the ICT sector. The paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the “texts” on Indians and Indian-ness produced in interviews with the professionals—both Indians and Malaysians—in the ICT sector, a sector driven by the transnational workforce. The analysis will be structured along three questions: What defines and categorizes Indian-ness in Malaysia and how are these constructions of Indian-ness a product of the socio-political ideologies borne out of Malaysia’s colonial legacy? How do these discourses of Indian-ness influence the behavior and perceptions towards expatriate Indian professionals, especially from the ICT sector? What is the potential for cross-cultural hybridity (if any) underlying these representations of Indian-ness? By posing these questions, the paper explores cultural nuances that shape the interactions between local population and the Indian expatriates in Malaysian workforce in order to understand how the presence of Indians from India or Mainland Indians (as they are referred to in the common parlance) fit into, challenge, and modify the notions of Indian-ness.

Keywords: Malaysia, India, Indian-ness, discourse, colonialism, expatriate, Information Technology

On March 17, 2003, under the pretext for conducting a search of illegal immigrants, Malaysian police conducted a raid in a condominium in Kuala Lumpur. The condominium was occupied predominantly by Malaysian citizens of Indian descent. The police rounded 270 people, mostly Indian professionals working in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector. Nearly 200 were detained and their passports were allegedly defaced by the police. It was followed by eight hours of physical and mental harassment until an intervention by the Indian High Commission brought the nightmare to an end. All the detainees had valid visas, and some were working for

companies connected with the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor project. Many Indian professionals left Malaysia immediately after the incident. India sharply reacted and toyed with the idea of issuing a travel advisory against Malaysia and reexamining the bilateral trade agreements between the two countries. This forced the Malaysian government to apologize and order a probe (Tyagi, 2017, p. 158).

Kuppuswamy (2003) insisted that the treatment meted out the Indian expatriate professionals in 2003 was an extension of the police’s attitude of Malaysians of Indian origin or Malaysian-Indians. Malaysian-Indians are one of the most economically deprived

and socio-politically vulnerable sections of Malaysian society. Comprising of 7.7 % of Malaysia's total population, the Malaysian-Indian community consists of the "descendants of workers or labour brought from South India by British administrators during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Gopal & Karupiah, 2013, p.103). Grappling with poverty and low socio-economic status since colonial times, it is a major contributor in gangsterism and crime in Malaysia. According to the recent statistics, there are more than 200 thousand Malaysian-Indian households earning less than RM3,900 a month. These are categorized as B40, the poorest Malaysians. Further, it is estimated that about 70% of criminal gang members in the country are Indians (Augustin, 2017). Over the years, there has been an increase in the presence of Malaysian-Indians in sectors like medicine, law, and education, but the numbers remain small.

On the other hand, the Indian expatriate professionals in Malaysia are fulfilling the country's requirements for skills and expertise. According to statistics by the Malaysian Immigration Department, nearly 21% of the 61,113 expatriate employment pass applications in Malaysia in 2012 were from India (Tan & Ho, 2014, p.2). Indian professionals have been at the center of Malaysia's economic development blueprint dominating sectors like ICT where the country faces an acute shortage of skilled workforce (Selvadurai & Dasgupta, 2016; Yapp, 2012). A report from the Indian High Commission claims that at the start of 2018, there were approximately 150,000 Indian expatriates and workers in Malaysia.

The March 2003 incident reflects a clash between the existing perceptions of Indian-ness in the Malaysian society and the new professional workforce from India whose skills, particularly in the ICT sector, are much in demand. This clash is produced and reproduced in everyday workings of ICT workspaces of Malaysia which are dominated by the Indian workforce.

This paper examines the constructions of Indian-ness in Malaysia and the way these constructions shape the interactions between Indian expatriate professionals and the local Malaysian workforce in the ICT sector. The paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the texts on Indians and Indian-ness produced in interviews with the professionals—both Indians and Malaysians—in the ICT sector, a sector driven by the transnational workforce. The analysis will be structured along three questions: What defines

and categorizes Indian-ness in Malaysia and how are these constructions of Indian-ness a product of the socio-political ideologies borne out of Malaysia's colonial legacy? How do these discourses of Indian-ness influence the behavior and perceptions towards expatriate Indian professionals, especially from the ICT sector? What is the potential for cross-cultural hybridity (if any) underlying these representations of Indian-ness? By posing these questions, the paper explores cultural nuances that shape the interactions between the local population and the Indian expatriates in Malaysian workforce in order to understand how the Indians from India or Mainland Indians (as they are referred to in the common parlance) fit into, challenge, or modify the notions of Indian-ness.

The article begins with an overview of the constructions of Indian-ness in Malaysia by going over the existing social representations and tracing the continuities with the colonial discourses that have shaped these representations. Indian-ness here refers to the attributes of being an Indian which are seen manifested through various cultural, linguistic, and social behaviors. An important thing to keep in mind is that these attributes of Indian-ness are discursively constructed, and one of the most problematic aspects of these representations is their tendency to collapse the diversity of India within a social, interactional, and cultural stereotype. Moreover, these stereotypes are fixed and repetitive. The article claims that to a large extent these representations are a colonial inheritance in Malaysia and as the paper explores the traces of colonialism in Malaysia's contemporary socio-cultural sphere, the term Indian-ness is held up for inspection.

These conceptualizations of Indian-ness in Malaysia are problematized in the subsequent discussion about the Indian expatriate community in Malaysia, especially those in the ICT sector. This inquiry into Indian-ness as a research site offers a number of potential advantages. Firstly, the inquiry examines how, through social interactions and communication, certain versions of Indian-ness emerge and are legitimated in Malaysia. Secondly, given the high number of Indian professionals working in the ICT sector, it is a rich field to study the cultural nuances that affect a technology-driven workforce. Lastly, given the priority accorded to the ICT sector by the Malaysian government, it is important to look at the complicated cultural and social networks that underscore the sector's workforce.

The paper integrates the postcolonial theory with CDA. Postcolonialism has recently made inroads into the field of Organization Studies driven by the aim of “unsettling, disrupting and displacing (the logic and trajectories of) the Western discourse of management, giving radically new meanings and directions to the theory, research and practices” (Prasad, 2012, p. 22). In this research, the postcolonial aspects of organizational interactions are explored through the tools offered by CDA, especially those underlined by Wodak (2001) in her formulation of discourse historical approach (DHA). DHA explores textual inconsistencies and links them to the social context and social theories through a socio-diagnostic critique. Its crucial dimension is its attempt to contribute to a change of attitude through the prognostic critique (Wodak, 2001, p. 65). This layered approach takes into account the multiple genres and texts that surround a topic along with the historical context and future ramifications. Hence, a thorough DHA is beyond the scope of this article. However, the article uses the discursive strategies foregrounded by DHA to contextualize the contemporary texts on Indian-ness within the spectrum of history and colonial discourse. The interactions with the expatriate Indians are grounded in the discriminatory racial and ethnic practices and their historical roots in Malaysia where Indians occupy problematic, yet integral space, in society.

The Cultural Landscape

Indians in Malaysia or the Malaysian-Indians

In their examination of discursive constructions of terms like “globalization,” Banerjee and Linstead (2001) pointed out that “globalization is not an uncontested process but ... both produces and is founded upon a tension between the global and local” (p. 684). In Malaysia, this tension between the ideas like globalization and cultural diversity, and the local socio-political discourses is palpable. Despite its multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial population, Malaysian society is divided deeply along the axis of race, ethnicity, and religion. These fissures that shape the attitudes of different communities, their economic and social positions can be linked to the racial ideologies of colonial Malaysia.

Malaysia’s multicultural population is a consequence of migration and intermingling of racial and ethnic groups over a long period. Based on the archeological

evidence, the early Indians, mainly Tamils, came to the Malay archipelago between the 4th and 9th century CE, as invaders as well as traders (Khoo, 2009). The bustling ports attracted Indian, Chinese, and Arab traders, making Malaya a home to several hybrid communities. During the heyday of Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century and later, Indian traders flocked to the region trading in gold, spices, tin, and other local produce. Several stayed back and mingled with the locals, contributing to the racial diversity of the Malay Peninsula.

The social fabric of Malaya underwent a major change with the arrival of the British in the 19th century. To be profitable, the colonial enterprise required labor and this was imported from China and India. Several authors and scholars have linked the British economic policies with Malaysia’s current racial schisms. Although the British attitude towards the ethnic Malays was marked with paternalism, the attitude towards the Chinese was one of resentment and hostile admiration; on the other hand, “the dominant view of India was as a source of cheap and docile labor” (Hirschman, 1986, p. 347). In a speech discussing the development of North Borneo in 1885, a British official insisted that:

There are many who prefer the Indian coolie, and consider [them relative to Chinese labour] better suited to the peculiar wants of the locality.... They regard the Indian, moreover, as creature far more amenable to discipline and management than the sturdy and independent Chinese. (Walter H. Medhurst, as quoted in Hirschman, 1986, p. 347)

Although the plantations were extremely profitable, the Indian labor earned low wages and lived in poor conditions. Thus a “docile” Indian fulfilled the need for labor and justified the recruitment and displacement of the workers as he as the “most amenable to the comparatively lowly paid and rather regimented life of estates and government departments” (Sandhu, 2006, p.154). The mortality rate among the laborers, primarily Tamils from southern India, was as high as 84.8 per 1,000 in 1908 due to poor living conditions (‘Sucked Oranges’ 1989, p. 28). The structure of plantation society ensured the relegation of the community in their marginalized state. For instance, the Tamil schools set for the children of the plantation

workers during the colonial era were meant “to insure that the children of plantation laborers will remain plantation laborers. If education there must be, let it be an education designed to make hewers of wood and drawers of water better hewers of wood and drawers of water” (Thompson, 1943, p. 715).

This colonial categorization of Indian-ness ignored the sub-communal differences and diversity that marks India and Indian community. Indians in Malaysia comprised all who had a geographical affiliation with South Asia with several subgroups, like the Tamils, Telugus, Malayalis, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Bengalis, and others. Each of these subgroups has its own ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity and strives to maintain its difference. However, the British administration of Malaya was not concerned about such minutiae as it relocated workers from India and Sri Lanka and often lumped together under the single label of Indian-ness (Mulloo, 2007, p. 93).

It is important to consider these historical trends because these frameworks created the racial ideologies to gloss over the economic and political realities of colonialism. In 1957 when Malaysia emerged as an independent nation, the population was divided deeply along ethnic, cultural, and religious lines and these divisions are part of Malaysian social fabric until today (Cheah, 2002; Dasgupta & Singh, 2015).

The position of the Malaysian-Indian community has been particularly precarious. Post-independence, Indians formed about 52% of the plantation population (Nadaraja, 2016, p. 52). The dynamics of their citizenship and their place in the Malaysia society were shaped by the nationalist ideology, focusing on the idea of “Malay ownership of the Peninsula.” This “historical legacy of British colonialism since British indirect rule in the name of the traditional Malay rulers required the maintenance of this political myth” (Ting, 2009, p. 38) contributed to the marginalization of the non-Malay communities from political and economic spheres.

If language and cultural practices are the prominent markers of communal identity, then their status is an indicator of the status of that community in the larger national collective (Edwards, 1985; Bloomaert, 2005). Several studies and surveys have mooted concerns about the decline of Tamil language spoken by nearly 86% of Malaysia Indians (Schiffman, 2003; Jameelah & Mohideen, 2012). Tamil schools suffer from inadequate infrastructure, lack of facilities, and

funds which create a sense of dissatisfaction in the Malaysian-Indian community (Arumugam, 2008).

Coming to religious and cultural practices, according to the 2010 census, nearly 86% of Malaysian-Indians follow Hinduism (Yahya & Kaur, 2010, p. 133). For the plantation and estate workers, hundreds of temples dotting the Malaysian landscape are a mark of a distinct cultural identity. The governmental destruction of the temples as illegal structures was one of the main grievances of the Malaysian-Indian community during the historic HindRAF protests in 2007 (Leong, 2009). Following the protests, the Hindu festival of Thaipusam was declared a public holiday in Kuala Lumpur. The festival is noted for extreme forms of penance where the devotees, in an ecstatic trance, allow their bodies to be pierced with needles and hooks and skewers as they complete the pilgrimage to the temple, Thaipusam. According to Willford (2007), the practice presents “Hindu ritualism within its sometimes Dionysian expressions of possession, divine madness and self-mortification” and plotted Indian-ness as a signifier of “a backward and superstitious Hinduized past in Malay history” (p. 82).

Hence, social and cultural practices reveal the status of the majority of the Malaysian-Indians as the proletarian underclass. This position was more or less maintained in post-independence Malaysia. Upward mobility is mostly confined to the sub-ethnic middle-class groups. According to the 2018 statistics by Indian High Commission, Indians constitute 30% of professional doctors and lawyers in the country (“PIO Community,” 2018). Generally speaking, Malaysian-Indians have low educational achievements, face social inequities, and lack political and economic influence along with other socio-economic problems such as high rates of school dropout, high crime rate, and the dependency on political and economic handouts.

During the recent 2018 General Elections, prime ministerial candidate Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who was subsequently appointed the Prime Minister of Malaysia, came under fire for using the term *Keling* which is deemed derogatory to the Malaysian-Indian community. Though he apologized later, the usage reinforced the marginalization of the community (Tan, 2018). Material handicaps of the community are compounded by the persistent and prejudicial stereotypes as

those coming with a begging bowl, deserving

(if at all) not of equal treatment as fellow citizens but as subjects of charity and patronization, being a menace to society through gangsterism and other forms of criminal activities and the wide publicity accorded in the media to high suicide-rates and police detentions etc. among Malaysian-Indians in gross disproportion to their numbers. (Jain, 2009, p. 212–213)

These ideas of Indian-ness, reinforced repeatedly through a variety of cultural, political, and social practices that are problematic in several ways. Firstly, they fail to take into account the desperate nature of the Indian community and its inherent cleavages. Scholars like Jain (2009) and Willford (2007) have pointed out diversity inherent to Indian-ness in terms of the linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of India. Secondly, the ambiguous yet persistent link between Malaysia's Indian community and India marginalizes the community by associating it with a place distant in time and space. The "othering," as we see, is echoed in socio-cultural exclusion, economic disparity, as well as the disparities in state policy, reinstating the Malaysian-Indians as outsiders in the nationalist narrative. These are the socio-cultural perceptions surrounding the term "Indian" that an Indian professional encounters when he or she comes to Malaysia.

Indian Expatriates in Malaysia

Given its multicultural and cosmopolitan nature, Malaysia is one of the preferred expatriate destinations. According to the 2017 survey by Internations ("Expat Insider," 2017), Malaysia ranked 5th out of 65 countries in terms of the Ease-of-Settling-In-Index. The conditions are even more conducive for Indian expatriates given the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic proximity to India and the long history of migration from the Indian subcontinent.

However, the migration from India post-1990s is fundamentally different from that of the 19th century. India, as well as Southeast Asia, have seen a transformation in the last few decades. In India, the economic liberalization, proliferation of new technologies, and a general internationalization of the market and economy have restructured the perspective towards migration.

The Malaysian Multimedia Supercorridor has attracted a large number of Indian IT companies. In

Malaysia, the drive for progress and globalization has created a demand for skilled professionals and knowledge workers, and India, with its vast human capital, has been able to fill the gap.

Despite the significant presence of Indian professionals in several parts of the world, the experiences of the Indian expatriates or the implications of their presence for the host country is a nascent field of scholarly research. The research on expatriates mostly focuses on cross-cultural adjustments, the processes of acculturation, or the role of these factors in the success or failure of the migration process. The movement of Indians ICT professionals to the developed countries in the West has been documented by Khadria & Meyer (2013) and Lakha (1994) who discussed the internationalization of Indian professionals as a result of the globalization of production and institutional practices. Xiang (2001) has discussed the global mobility of Indian professionals as a "transnational" group which is a structured process of recruitment, training, and standards amongst the Indian ICT professionals. Faizal Bin Yahya and Arunjeet Kaur (2010) explored the transnational trends of Indian migration in Southeast Asia but not the day to day interactions. During my research, I did not come across any study that explored the current wave of migration of Indian professionals to Malaysia in the context of earlier migrations to the trace the continuities and discontinuities.

Theoretical Approach

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This study uses CDA informed by the discourse-historical approach developed by Wodak and others. The approach seeks to integrate multiple genres of discourse surrounding a topic and adds a historical dimension to the analysis. Wodak (2001) defined discourse as

as a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across the social field of action as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens, very often as 'texts', that belong to specific semiotic types, that is genres. (p. 66)

Hence, discourse is

- A cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices situated within specific fields of social action.
- Socially constituted and socially constitutive: Although social and institutional contexts shape the discourse, the discourse, in turn, influences the social and political reality.
- Related to a macro-topic: DHA allows for a multi-dimensional deconstruction of the way certain representations of a particular concept (in this case, Indian-ness) are formulated and manifested.
- Linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view (Wodak, 2001, p. 89).

In other words, discourse is constituted by and constitutes the social context. Four macro-strategies outline the present discourse as a social practice (Van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999).

Constructive strategies refer to the linguistic events that serve to build or establish groups. These strategies are primarily indicated by utterances that constitute a “we” group and a “they” group. For example, the discursive formation of the groups like the “foreigners,” “expatriates,” and “locals” not only form these categories but also create solidarity within the “we” group and distance them from the “they” group. These strategies serve to construct a national identity through discourses of belonging and othering. Strategies of perpetuation and justification maintain, support, and perpetuate these identities. They attempt to justify the social status quo, for instance, the colonial ideologies that facilitated the migration of colonial labor and the perpetuation of their disadvantaged position in the plantation economy. Strategies of transformation modify a relatively well-established situation by acts of redefining and reformulating. Destructive strategies, on the other hand, demolish the status quo by challenging the constructive strategies or the strategies of perpetuation and justification. Such strategies can be seen in the discursive interactions between the Indians expatriates and the local populace that challenge and revise the existing constructions of Indian-ness.

These strategies evoke a positive presentation of the self and a negative one of the other. Hence,

the discursive construction of “us” and “them” and their reification as social categories of identity and difference is a simultaneous process that has preoccupied postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial Theory

Recent research in Organizational Studies has been marked by an interesting postcolonial turn that examines colonial traces in contemporary concepts like globalization, multiculturalism, and diversity (Prasad, 2012; Banerjee & Linstead, 2001). Calas and Smircich (1999) insisted that “the stories we have written in much organization theory, our concepts and representations, no matter how ‘global’ (or precisely because of this), represent the ways of thinking of certain people and not others” (p. 662). Noting the epistemic coloniality of the field of Management and Organization Studies, Jack, Westwood, Srinivas, and Sardar (2011) insisted that the postcolonial approach has the potential to open an interrogative space to challenge the nuances of neo-colonialism and other forms of colonial assumptions that underlie discourses of diversity and cross-cultural interaction. Thus, a postcolonial approach to contemporary Asian organizations offers a space for “retrospective reflections on colonialism” (Said, 1978, p. 45). Instead of being premised on the West’s relations with erstwhile colonized subjects, it explores the colonial continuities in a technology-driven, globalized workplace like the ICT sector in Malaysia.

Although postcolonial theory offers a diverse field of inquiry, this study concentrates on the constructions of “otherness” and identity that has preoccupied theorists like Said (1978) and Bhabha (1994). Psychosocial theories of identity highlight the constructions of the self through identification with those similar to the self and a distinction from those perceived to be different. These theories of similarity-attraction, social categorizations, and comparisons cement the bonds between the members of in-group as well as its boundaries with respect to the outgroup (Tajfel 1981; Turner & Oakes 1986).

Postcolonial theory adds another layer to the theories of social identification by pointing out the uneven balance of power in the signification of the self and the other. In the colonial discourse, the discursive constructions of otherness, or the colonial stereotypes, are not only meant to categorize, fix, and know the other but also to enhance self-perception by attributing positive qualities of the self and the negative to the

other. The 19th century colonial constructions of the Indian-ness discussed earlier illustrated the kind of 'othering that Said (1978) has discussed in Orientalism. Orientalism identifies how the West expressed its understanding of the non-western world. Said (1978) argued that the Orient comes into existence only when the Occident animates it, that is, the features of the colonized depend only on how the colonizer characterizes his or her own creation (Said, 1978, p. 208). The other entity (the colonized) is never truly known but through the constructs that enhance the distinction between us and them, the colonizer and the colonized.

Extending Said's analysis, Bhabha (1994) pointed out the productive ambivalence underlying the discursive constructions of otherness. The incessant repetition of the stereotype not only fixes the other with a given image but also underlines the anxiety accompanying the process. As otherness cannot be proven, it depends on repetition to impose its truth. Hence colonial discourse produces reality which is an ideological construct that establishes hierarchy and articulate difference. Self and the other are produced simultaneously in such articulation.

The "civilizing mission" of colonialism, in turn, seeks to obliterate this difference by educating the colonized to emulate the colonizer. However, this mimicry of the colonized is fraught with resistance given the persistence of difference: the subject is "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 102). Bhabha's focus on ambivalence and disruption accompanying the discursive constructions of otherness point to the hybridity and cross-cultural potential inherent in these constructions.

In the context of this study, such discursive intricacies underlying cross-cultural interactions in Malaysia ICT organizations produce the in-groups and out-groups—the "us" and "them" as imagined communities. The terms "foreigner," "expatriate," "Indian," and "locals" all acquire complex, multifarious meanings.

Methods

This study used two qualitative instruments—semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions—to collect data from four ICT firms. Three of the four firms have successfully hired and retained expatriate staff, especially Indian professionals, earning them the

epithet of the "Indian Companies" in the market. Over 90% of the staff were Indian consultants, with a smaller number of other foreigners. Malaysians constituted only a small percentage of the work teams and were mostly employed in non-technical capacities. These firms were owned or partly-owned by Malaysians. Significantly, most of the employees in two of these firms were young, male professionals. There was a noticeable absence of women employees except those involved solely in day-to-day administrative services and human resources. The third firm, however, had a sizeable number of women consultants with a female Indian expatriate professional helming the position of the Chief Executive Officer. The fourth and the last firm consisted of local employees, primarily ethnic Malays hired through local connections and socio-professional networks. The company is wholly owned by local Malay partners.

We identified three separate zones of interactions where the ethnic and racial difference was overlaid with an additional layer of organizational hierarchy: firstly, the interactions between the team members (locals and foreigners) and their expatriate team leader; secondly, the team members amongst themselves. For this, small groups of locals and foreigners (primarily Indians) were called separately for group discussions. Thirdly, semi-structured interviews with the team leaders (Indians and locals) and senior management. Over six months, we interviewed the participants in their offices in and around Kuala Lumpur. Nine separate group discussions were conducted with the team members in different firms, and six semi-structured interviews with either one or two participants were conducted with the key informants including the team leaders and owners. Various observation techniques were also used extensively to gather insights from team building sessions, lunch hours, and other informal socialization events.

Interviews with the team leaders and management leaders (one Singaporean, one Malaysian, and six Indians) centered on specific areas of questioning. After an initial discussion about the nature of work, they were asked the reasons for hiring foreigners, especially Indians. We asked them about the cultural differences within their multicultural teams and also between the teams and their leaders and the impact of these differences on team performance. Finally, we discussed the challenges as well as the benefits of working with foreigners.

To the culturally diverse ICT teams, we posed different questions to understand the dynamics of cultural interactions between the foreigners and locals. In the general discussion, we asked about stories and anecdotes about cultural differences. We asked for funny stories to put the participants at ease and observe the group dynamics. In smaller group discussions with culturally homogenous members (that is, the Indian group), we posed questions regarding adjustments and acceptance—did they feel accepted on equal terms by their local counterparts? What was the level of intimacy? Did they spend their out of work hours like the lunchtime with the others? We asked them about language, food, and miscommunications and misunderstandings pertaining to these cultural elements. We put similar questions to their Malaysian team members who were in a considerable minority in ICT organizations.

Individual interviews and focus group discussions enabled a variety of data that included participant responses and response characteristics. Apart from this, another set of secondary texts was created from the data gathered through observation. Deppermann (2013) distinguished between approaches treating the interview as text and approaches dealing with it as social interaction. This study relies on the interactional approach which treats interviews and interactions as situated social practices.

Results

For the following analysis, the text was analyzed in terms of content, identifying various dimensions of cultural difference and conflict. Subsequently, excerpts were selected that developed argumentations of difference by constructing the image of the other, that is, Indian-ness in this case and also imagining a self in the process. In the final step, these excerpts and themes were studied in light of theories put forth by postcolonial scholars, especially Bhabha and Said. The cultural difference was underlined in terms of language barriers, food, and cultural practices; working style is traced through to the process of categorization and stereotyping which is integral to the constructions of the self and other.

On a broad level, when the participants were asked if they liked working together, most of them unhesitatingly insisted that they did. There was a general consensus among the Indians that Malaysia,

was fairly liberal, cosmopolitan, and easy to live in. The Malaysian counterparts, on the other hand, regarded the Indians as ICT experts and essential for the organization's performance. However, some probing during smaller group discussions and interviews revealed conflicts arising out of difference.

Cultural barriers

Cultural practices and the ensuing barriers figured prominently in day-to-day interactions with each other and often with the clients. The senior management, as well as the teams, interviewed agreed on the issue, citing the dominance of Indian workforce which tends to marginalize other foreigners and, in many cases, even the locals. These cultural barriers center mostly on issues of language, food, and styles of working.

We do not understand them. Though English is the common lingua franca in most of the companies, several problems were voiced relating to the usage of English and other vernacular languages. Apart from the language, the technology-mediated communication, like emails and messaging, and the associated protocols were other issues of cultural misunderstandings.

A Malay employee from one of the companies said that "Indians speak too fast, the accent is different... [I] couldn't understand over the phone and have to meet in person to communicate." Another local employee summarized that the barrier is not limited to the usage of English but also the associated non-verbal elements like gestures and intonations, for instance, "we need to understand and learn their [Indian's] body language and gestures such as nodding the head for yes or no ...which is very confusing." The participants underscored their conscious or active efforts to communicate with or "need to understand" the incomprehensible accent and gestures of Indians. A senior from an ICT multinational made an interesting observation on the hierarchy of English skills amongst the workforce: "I would hire a Filipino any day if his technical skills are good." The Filipinos were followed by Indians and then Chinese in his hierarchy.

Apart from the usage of English, both groups repeatedly mentioned the habit of the other group lapsing into its native language which created discomfort and often a lack of trust. One of the local employees pointing out the tendency of the Indian group to talk in Hindi: "I often feel they are talking about me." Another mentioned similar uncertainty: "I heard my Project Manager mention my name as he

talked in his own language to our CEO. So I was like why is he talking about me? Why does he not talk to me?"

A dialogue among a group of three local interns in one of the organizations revealed interesting insights on the group formations based on spoken language. One of them had been with the organization for about four months and the other two for just over two months. The intern who had been with the company the longest began relating her experiences as the only local in the team.

Before they came [gesturing to other two interns], I used to eat with the development team. They [the development team] sometimes invited me but I can still see and feel the language barrier because they still talk in Hindi. So as soon as they came ...it was easier for me to talk because they can communicate and they talk well with me.

"They [Indians] forget that they are talking in Hindi. Like when we speak Bahasa and then we realize that we are speaking in Malay. So, Indian with Indians. I guess it is subconscious," her friend added.

"I think for me, language barrier is always an issue," the third intern said and added:

The reason why we speak Malay is not because we are Malaysian...It is because we...they have their language, their own identity. We tend to speak English. But you feel like why are we the only ones to speak English while they speak their Hindi. So that is why I usually speak Malay. I don't have issues speaking English. Maybe it will be nice if everyone speaks English. That should be fine for me.

All three agreed on the linguistic barrier and their experiences of feeling left out. The older intern mentioned this persistent uncertainty and lack of trust though the Indian group would often invite her for lunch. Their own group formation is predicated on the ease with which they could communicate in Malay, the local language. Although one of her friends tried to justify the usage of the vernacular by citing their own subconscious tendency to lapse into Malay, the other intern operated under the presupposition that usage of vernacular language was associated with the assertion

of identity and, hence, assumed a defiant stance ("why are we the only ones to speak English").

Thus, from the local perspective, Indians were often incomprehensible due to their accent and their tendency to communicate with each other in their native language. These tendencies became evidence of their cliquish nature: Indians tend to stick together, in their own groups and did not show consideration for the presence of the others, unlike the Malaysians who were taught and it was emphasized, that these are bad manners. So linguistic barriers had a noticeable effect on the creation of in-groups and out-groups. This was noticed during the group discussions where, though the groups interacted with each other cheerfully, each member sat with those who were ethnically similar. There were frequent asides within these sub-groups often in their native languages which the members of the other groups did not understand. In the companies where the Indians dominated, different Indian languages like Telegu, Tamil, or Hindi were used to communicate within the sub-groups, indicating further subcategories within the larger categorization of Indians.

When probed on the issue, the Indian professionals said that they often found it easier to communicate and explain things in their own language. Moreover, linguistic connections in a foreign land created a sense of belonging: "When I first came here, it was so good to find somebody who could talk in my language. We instantly became friends." Moreover, many Indians who are not comfortable with English found it easier to communicate and explain complex issues to their Indian peers in their native language. An owner of a small ICT enterprise confided that many Indian professionals do lack communication skills when they come to Malaysia: "Their English is not good. They come from small towns in India. They learn as they live here." Interestingly, one of the project managers heading a team of mostly Hindi speaking Indians said that if he had to reprimand one of his team members, he does it in Hindi: "I don't want others to hear it" (the others here being the non-Indians).

Eating together. Discussions about food and eating habits figured as frequently as language. There were jokes which veiled complex cultural issues. One of the Indian consultants recounted how the vegetarianism of their Project Manager (who is also an Indian) became a standing joke after a particular incident: "Once, one of the local employees bought some crackers and offered

it all of us. Our Project Manager took it and as soon as he realized it was prawn crackers, he ran to rinse his mouth. The girl got so scared that after that even if it were vegetables, she would tell him each ingredient to make sure he was ok.” The Project Manager insisted that he was not upset and it was “an honest mistake.”

However, when in a smaller group, the Indian professionals revealed their discomfort. “Local food is different. Their cooking is different,” one of the Indian employees who had been working in Malaysia for over a year pointed out in a group discussion with other foreign employees. “Sometimes the aromas are too strong. I am skeptical of trying new food because I am a vegetarian.” “I have eaten so much of what I am not supposed to eat,” added another Indian in the group.

The other members in the group were Sri Lankans who share the Hindu taboo against eating beef. “I ate beef once,” the Sri Lankan manager shared her experience. “I told the waiter that I don’t eat beef. But still, it was there on the plate. And I ate and I knew it was beef. It was a mistake and I was ok with it. But I have not gone back to that place again.” Such narratives and anecdotes were shared by many to justify their reluctance to eat out or go *belanja* (spend on hawkers) which is a common local practice.

Recounting these experiences, the Indians also mentioned the habit of the locals to impose their culture and practices. This was also reflected in the stories told by the locals. In one of the firms where the local ICT workforce is in the majority with only a handful of foreigners, a manager mentioned his irritation with one of the Indian expatriate who had been with their firm some time ago.

He would always leave during the lunchtime. We would invite him for lunch but he made excuses. Then he would eat the food he had brought from home with some of his friends from outside [not from the organization]. So one day I asked him to come with me to a meeting and I took him to a restaurant. I told him we had to meet a client but once we were there, I made him sit and tell me why he had a problem eating with me. I wanted to know.

This tussle for agency—the Indian employee’s choice of lunch companionship versus the power of the local manager who after making attempts to be hospitable, used his authority to demand

justification—supported the claim of the Indian expatriates that locals often impose their thoughts and practices on the newcomers. Another Malaysian-Indian employee highlighted the gendered aspect of the food and cultural sanctions: female Indian expats, she suggested “have problems in adapting as they have many social sanctions, observe many rituals, and have rigid food preferences. This creates resistance from both sides.”

The presupposition that cultural practices, like social sanctions and food taboos, define the level of adaptation that, to fit-in, Indians needed to let go of these practices. The resistance to local food and food practices became an example of the fact that the Indian nationals were “not adaptive to local culture...they don’t like to try out the local food or go out with locals for lunch.” “They don’t go out with Filipino expats either,” said another senior manager. Another team member added that, “The Indians are used to being in their own comfort zone. So they won’t try out many new things.”

Indians employees, on the other hand, insisted on cultural difference: “one cannot always explain why one practices vegetarianism some days of the week or why we don’t meat. We don’t. That’s it.”

Us and them. The discussions on linguistic and food barriers and cultural practices gave way to stereotyping and self-categorization. Lack of cultural awareness was also pointed out as an issue in one of the organizations. “A little example,” a local team leader told the researchers, “the foreigners are not aware that government clients cannot be called during the time of the Maghreb or the evening prayer. A local employee knows these things automatically.”

The idea of Indians as socially and culturally awkward outsiders was further reinforced in the work arena where one of the senior managers said that “they [the Indians] don’t follow the protocol.” “It is because they don’t socialize much (with the locals),” a Malay team leader added. “They tend to work alone. It sometimes creates problems.” At the professional level, the complaint was concerned with the noncompliance to the standard methods of handling the projects: “This creates problems in the later audit and maintenance stage,” the team leader confided. “We don’t know how to fix a program because they haven’t done it the way we do... wastes a lot of time.” Another problem related to the sphere of work was the tendency of the Indians to say yes “to say everything is possible. They will say

no problem; we can integrate the data and later they say it depends.”

When the stereotype came up in another organization, an Indian manager related a story to position his own actions in a similar context and challenge the dominant stereotype:

I was with one of the clients recently. You know they talk about what could be done, what are the possibilities, and you talk to them saying how it could be done. And all over lunch. And then they assumed we were doing it. But it was all in the mind. So they complained that we did not deliver. After that I keep everything documented, all on paper. But here documenting happens on also.

These stereotypes center mostly on the barriers of communication and cultural understanding. As theories of identity and colonial discourse pointed out, categorization of the other is done in a way that it enhances the self-perceptions. The words of one of the Malaysian interns at the end of the discussion emphasized the qualities of “We, the Malaysians” in contrast to the foreign Indians: “We are Malaysians and we grew up in diverse cultures. We are exposed to difference. We are always respectful to one another. That is what we have learned.”

This self-perception not only strengthened the in-group by defining Malaysians in contrast to the Indians but in appropriating the qualities of cultural tolerance and progressiveness, it relegated the behavior of the Indian peers as parochial. Thus, the classification and categorization between us and them, the local Malaysians and Indian professionals, underscored the discussions on cultural practices and stereotypes. Arguments, narratives, and justifications were used to reinforce and reproduce these constructions. During the discussions, Indians groups revealed a different point of view. However, as different groups approached each other with pre-existing perceptions, they often missed the other points of view and ended up reproducing the same stereotypical categories and discourses which circulate in the larger socio-cultural atmosphere of Malaysia.

There are just too many Indians. As mentioned earlier, in three of the four organizations where the research was conducted, nearly 90 % percent of the staff are Indians from India. When the owners and

senior managers were asked, they said, “We have to admit that the best in the IT business today are Indians.” A young Malaysian consultant agreed that Indians are “way ahead than Malaysians” in technical skills: “young Indians boys were becoming good programmers even while in high school.”

More than one participant expressed their desire to hire Malaysians and deplored the lack of suitably skilled local graduates: “Most of the time we have no choice. I would hire locals because they are cost-effective. But there are not enough skilled ones.” Another senior manager confided his helplessness: “I have to hire whoever is available, and turn a blind eye to their ability to adapt to Malaysia, or their ability to communicate effectively.”

However, the question that arises is why only Indians? Apart from Indians, we met some Filipinos in one of the organizations but the number is minuscule. One of the reasons for this is Malaysia’s cultural proximity to India. Apart from technical expertise, one of the main criteria of hiring was the network of family or close friends “back home,” or “from my village in India.” Over the years, this criterion has expanded to include those similar in the regional, linguistic, and cultural background.

Another significant reason for the overwhelming presence of Indians, as shared by a Malaysian–Indian manager, was that the facilities and remuneration given to Indian software consultants by some organizations were not up to global standards because “they know Indians will work for less money.” Compared to other international expatriates, employing Indians brought in world-class expertise at less cost.

It is a disparity that the Indian professionals are well aware of. An issue frequently mentioned by the organizational seniors and owners was the tendency of the Indians to treat Malaysia as the first step towards international employment: “They are always on the lookout for better-paying jobs,” said one. Another senior manager remarked that “They [Indians] don’t have a sense of belonging.” On the contrary, an Indian expatriate pointed out that “There is nothing wrong in pursuing better opportunities because we are here for money. And we are hired because we are paid less than say, Europeans or Australians.”

Discourse Strategies

Several argument patterns, including personal narratives, comparisons, and self-justifications,

contributed to the relational construction of Indian-ness: though the stereotype seemed absolute, it was always constructed in relation to the self (Malaysians) that simultaneously came into being through the discourse. Table 1 sums up the findings using the discursive strategies outlined by Wodak (2001) in the discourse-historical approach.

Discursive Production

Postcolonial theories highlight the way the discursive productions of colonial other or the orient act as interpretive frameworks for action—to know and fix the degenerate colonized other and justify the mission to civilize. However, the question “how do we see others?” is inextricably linked with how we see ourselves. Hence, the construction of the other and the self is an ongoing process of differentiation—the other comes into being through a simultaneous separation from the self. The postcolonial theories reveal the ideological operation with a repertoire of positions of power, domination, and dependence as well as resistance and challenge inherent in the discourses about the other. This “productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse” produces an imaginary social reality and establishes a hierarchy by articulating difference (Bhabha, 1994, p. 96).

Discursive reproduction of colonial tropes.

Despite the globalized and multicultural nature of Malaysian ICT workplace, traces of coloniality were evident in the discursive constructions of Indian-ness. For instance, India still emerged as a source of cheap and abundant labor. Moreover, the expectation of loyalty and obligation by showing a sense of belonging also hints at the colonial paternalistic attitude that overlooks the material conditions of employment of Indians as cost-effective resources to fill the gap in the local talent pool. An interesting insight is offered by the term “body-shopping,” “the practice whereby a firm recruits IT workers and then farms them out to clients for a particular project, though the firm itself is not involved in the project” (Xiang, 2001, p.1). Although senior managers may opine that “we are not hiring robots,” the prevalence of the term during the hiring process in the sector imagines Indian IT professionals in terms of a functional metaphor—bodies who can fulfill a given task.

Thus, the image of Indian as a proletarian migrant persists. An Indian expatriate pointed out that “we might be technical experts but we are still seen as

migrants while the expatriates are usually the whites or the Westerners. That is the common image.” The observation echoes Pauline Leonard’s (2010) study of expatriates and the association of the term with the West, whiteness, and privilege. In Malaysian sphere of work, the distinction is evident with a clear hierarchy of expatriates (in terms of race, class, and nationality) that governs the position in an organization, salaries, and other benefits.

Moreover, the linguistic and cultural diversity of India often evident in the form of sub-group formations within the larger group of Indians is often ignored. In one of the dinners organized by a company, the Indian professionals gravitated towards the subgroups of similar linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. A project manager pointed a Kerala table and a Tamil Nadu table, referring to two southern Indian states. However, though Indians practice the distinct cultural sub-identities, these were largely ignored by the category and stereotype of Indian-ness imposed on the community.

Discourses of cultural resistance and lack of modern broadminded outlook, cited through the examples of cultural practices like food taboos and language usage, created a contrast between the parochial, cliquish Indians and the progressive, multicultural Malaysia. To a large extent, these images mirror the perception of Malaysian-Indian community in Malaysia which, as discussed earlier, is a socio-economically underprivileged section labeled in terms of cultural backwardness, lack of education, and poverty. Discussions with Indians professionals challenged these stereotypes of cultural insensitivity and, in turn, cited the tendency of the host culture to impose their habits and discourses on the newcomers.

Discursive challenges to existing practices.

Though cultural difference and ensuing stereotypes have been acknowledged as sources of conflict (Selvadurai & Dasgupta, 2016), Bhabha (1994) insisted that their repetition, as well as disruption, carries the potential of hybridity. The colonial tropes were disrupted at multiple levels, for instance the repeated acknowledgment of the high level of technical expertise that the Indian professionals brought with them. Unlike the colonial plantation labor, the current Indian workforce is highly skilled and much in demand in the global talent pool. Apart from the senior managers, the interns revealed their admiration for the team leaders: “We can learn a lot from him.”

Table 1*Summary of Discursive Strategies Findings*

Discursive Strategies: Objectives	Devices
Referential/nomination strategies: Construction of in-groups and out-groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We: The Malaysians, the host • They: The Indians, expatriates, the foreigners, too many • Relational construction of us and them
Predication: Labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indians: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Culturally insensitive, difficult to understand, cliquish, less adaptive, numerous, and cheap workforce. Also experts, technically skilled, and essential for Malaysia's ICT sector. ♦ Mostly labeled through the existential process "Indians are..." in relation to Malaysians are agents <i>who make</i> efforts to understand, communicate, and so forth. • Malaysians – Multicultural, perceptive, and broad-minded, but lacking in technical expertise in the ICT sector (relational constructions).
Argumentation: Justification of positive or negative attributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawn primarily from experiences and anecdotes. • Collectivization: The experiences involving individuals were cited and become the basis to collectivize under a generic label of Indian-ness. • Condensation: The narratives are condensed into a few key features, for example, various narratives to justify the cliquish nature.
Perspectivation or discourse representation: Expressing involvement or positioning speaker's point of view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country perspective vs. foreigner/expatriates • Employer's perspective vs. employed professionals • Colonial perspective vs. colonized migratory labor underclass <p>In each of these perspectives, the balance of power exists in favor of the former rather than the latter group.</p>
Intensification and mitigation strategies: Modifying the epistemic status of a proposition	<p>Mitigation strategies: Acknowledgment of expertise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admission of a technical gap in the Malaysian workforce <p>Intensification:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narratives and anecdotes to justify and reinforce • Fallacy of equating culture difference with resistance or insensitivity • Expectation of obligation/loyalty versus the monetary aspects of employment. • Collectivization and condensation in the process of stereotyping

An Indian project manager, when confronted by discomfort caused due to their usage of Hindi, said that “We will keep that in mind in future. We are trying to learn Malay. Our team members are teaching us a word a day.” Hence, though colonial discourse fixes the Indian workforce with stereotypical features, such interactions hinted at a space for intercultural understanding and hybridity.

However, as members of task-driven technical organizations, the participants were less concerned by cultural difference, though conflicts were acknowledged as a source of disharmony. The focus was on overcoming the difference to minimize conflict and attain the organizational goals. In the current scenario, it translated into the need to know, fix, and normalize the difference by drawing on the existing stereotypes which were resisted by many. Moreover, the stereotype failed to capture the other in its entirety. This excess and difference call for cross-cultural engagement. If social reality produces and is produced by discourse, then it also has the potential for modifying the existing reality.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the discursive texts on Indian-ness produced during the encounters between expatriate Indian professionals and local workforce in Malaysia’s ICT sector. This was done firstly by CDA through which we examined the texts produced by a variety of social actors—Malaysian team members, project managers, and team leaders as well as the owners of small and medium scale firms. These discourses were examined as products and producers of social realities structured along the larger racial and ethnic schisms of Malaysian society. Secondly, the postcolonial theory was used to study the persistent traces of coloniality that shapes the interactions in postcolonial societies. The article explored existing social representations of Indian-ness in Malaysian society and their link to the colonial discourse. I analyzed how these constructions continue to inform the cross-cultural interactions in a global workplace. The discussion also highlights how these discursive constructions that attempt to fixate Indian-ness reveal their own ambivalence through incessant repetition. However, the persistence of cultural difference called for a deeper engagement with cross-cultural exchanges.

The study also addressed the gap in research pertaining to the expatriate community, particularly

expatriates who are neither white nor from the West. Further exploration of such expatriate experiences is required to explore the ideological bias associated with the term. As a final reflection, the main limitations of this study was that it focuses only on interactions in the ICT sector. There are constructions of Indian-ness in other spheres like media, films, and many more which impinge on these interactions. Moreover, the scope was limited to Indian expatriate professionals. There is a substantial percentage of the workforce from other South Asians nations in Malaysia. The low waged migrants would have their own stories which are beyond the scope of this study. Further research may also benefit from a comparison of expatriate experiences of different racial and national group to throw more light on the social and economic dynamics of expatriation to Malaysia.

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Ethical clearance

The study was approved by the institution.

Conflict of interest

None.

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