

# Indian community in post-colonial Malaysia

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## COMMENT

By Wazir Jahan Karim

INDIANS make up seven per cent of Malaysia's population of 25 million, much less than the Chinese at 31 per cent. The Malays are the majority at 56 per cent.

Bordering on the poverty line are former estate and plantation working-class Tamil Hindus, descendants of those introduced by the British to convert rainforests into rubber plantations and estates.

Tamils have since deserted the plantation sector now manned by foreign labour but many continue to be labourers and semi-skilled workers in the towns and cities.

The Tamil elite are second and third-generation Tamils who benefited from local public and private higher education while the *crème de la crème* of foreign graduates are middle-class Tamils, Tamil Muslims, Jaffna Tamils, Sindhis, Punjabis and Sheiks whose forefathers came voluntarily through community networks, seeking a better life in Malaya.

At one time, they dominated journalism and the legal, medical and engineering professions but the Chinese and Malays have overtaken them in numbers.

Many have at least secondary education and are now aware of a widening wealth differential. Comfortably well off are traders and entrepreneurs of other Indian minorities.

The professionally successful younger-generation Tamils are clearly visible in the media, communications, ICT and law.

Since 1957, poverty levels have declined from 50 to 5.7 per cent, backed by an aggressive policy of rural development and tertiary education. While there are wide wealth differentials in all ethnic communities, the majority of Indians are in work environments which offer little mobility.

Dr R. Thillainathan, in a paper on the "Indian Economic Position in Malaysia: A Review of Performance and Priorities for Action" (2002), argues for greater emphasis on the economics of inequality in Malaysia.

After independence in 1957, the Malayan government found massive poverty among Malays in the rural areas, a region denied of economic development — also a legacy of colonisation.

There was also rural destitution in the plantation sector among Tamils and abject poverty among the Orang Asli or indigenous people of Malaya, again a consequence of the British pursuing an export-driven capitalist economy through the resources of its colonies.

Under the New Economic Policy of 1970, the government focused on rural poverty, the most compelling source of Malay dissatisfaction, leading to the May 13, 1969 ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur.

It left the plantation sector to be tackled by its Indian leaders. Trade unionism, through the National Union of Plantation Workers, became a source of Tamil activism for better wages and economic livelihoods.

In a nation with a constitutional democracy upheld by Barisan Nasional, comprising dominant ethnic-based parties, Indian representation has been increasingly problematic. The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) rejects representation from the MIC and wants to talk directly with Umno.

Chairman P. Waytha Moorthy is seeking support from international human rights agencies. Yet another Indian party, the Malaysian Indian United Party, was formed in November by Datuk S. Nallakaruppan, who quit Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) in May last year.

This party supports the policies and manifesto of the BN but introduces yet another contestant for Indian national

leadership.

The vice-president of PKR is R. Sivarasa, a Tamil lawyer. The president of the multi-ethnic People's Progressive Party, Datuk M. Kayveas, agrees to the manifesto of BN but differs with MIC on issues of effective representation.

Indians in Malaysia inherit a complex trilogy, of economic history, linked to an insidious form of labour recruitment from 1786 to 1947, poverty encapsulation where the plantations offered little mobility, and contests for ethnic political representation.

In a class-stratified society, urban poverty is an area of concern especially when it affects very specific communities. Ethnic representation through party politics should be coordinated with civil movements which are sensitive to social reform and equality.

Productive welfarism and a strong civil society may be the choice of the future. All communities have problems of sustainable livelihoods but Indian and Malay urban poverty is a product of encapsulated environments which are unable to regenerate human capital.

Uprooted, dislocated and fragmented, they are the potential hotbed of discontent. But ethnic jitters aside, most working-class Malaysians are more concerned with the security of their economic livelihoods and the kinds of public representation they can have in everyday life.

There are undoubtedly "competing interests" but to advance human capital equally among all communities, political culture and economic opportunities must gel.

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