

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, while undertaking research in the Oriental and Indian Office Collection Library in London, I uncovered a truly shocking passage contained within the 1957 Federation of Malaya Census Report. Noting that 4 million Indians had been recruited to work in colonial Malaya and that 2.8 million had subsequently returned to India, the report commented: "Much of the 1.2 million net immigration appears to have been wiped out by disease, snakebite, exhaustion and malnutrition, for the Indian population of Malaya numbered only 858,614 of which 62.1 per cent was locally born."¹ The bland matter of fact language cannot begin to disguise the tragedy and horror which lurks behind these raw statistics. Nor does this brief summation of the premature deaths of hundreds of thousands of Indians begin to evaluate the appalling human toll that was exacted in the development of a prosperous colonial economy that enriched many investors and contributed significantly to the wealth of Great Britain. There is no official monument to the nameless Indians who laid the economic and infrastructural foundation upon which the emerging modern Malaysian economy was constructed, but working class Indians will inform you that their legacy is to be found in the railway sleepers and rubber trees of Malaysia; each representing the sacrifice of an Indian life.

Although at that point my energies were directed towards the completion of a doctoral dissertation on the Hindu festival of Thaipusam in Malaysia, my research continued to generate a considerable volume of historical material which I felt cast fresh light on the Indian experience in Malaya/Malaysia. During the fieldwork for my doctorate, I interviewed members of a vanishing generation of Indian Malaysians; people who had been recruited under the kangany system; who had personal experience of the Klang strikes of 1941; who had participated in the wartime politics of Indian nationalism; who had been active in the early years of the

Malayan Indian Congress; and who had known the leading figures who had helped shape contemporary Indian society in Malaysia. Although in recent years there have been a number of historical, political, sociological and anthropological studies of aspects of the Indian experience in Malaysia, an increasing number written from the subaltern perspective, as well as two collections of studies published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore,² there has been no comprehensive general history of Indians in Malaysia since the publication of the two seminal works over forty years ago, namely K.S. Sandhu's *Indians in Malaysia: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement*³ and S. Arasaratnam's *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*.⁴

Neither of two recently published works, both of which are general studies of Indians in Malaysia, can be said to constitute the comprehensive history which would complement the works of Sandhu and Arasaratnam. Apart from its detailed discussion of educational issues, I found Muzafar Desmond Tate's *The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future*⁵ a slight and disappointing study, incomplete and disjointed.⁶ (I subsequently learned that Tate had died before he could revise or edit the work.) Janakey Raman Manickam's far more substantial work, *The Malaysian Indian Dilemma: The Struggles and Agony of the Indian Community in Malaysia*,⁷ provides a brief historical overview as an introduction to a thorough and primarily sociological study of contemporary Indian society in Malaysia, coupled with a heartfelt analysis of the immediate problems facing Indian Malaysians.

Much has occurred since the publication of Sandhu's and Arasaratnam's great pioneering studies: the 13 May incident; the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the emergence of a substantial Malay middle class; the Mahathir era and the total transformation of the Malaysian economy; the rapid decline of rubber as a vital component of Malaysian exports; the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Indians from the great estates of Malaysia; the unprecedented importance of Islam to the construction of Malay cultural identity; the emergence of Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)/Makkal Sakthi and their impact on the elections of 8 March 2008; and the rise of the influential albeit fractured opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR). Moreover, many of the established assumptions which informed much of the histories written forty years ago have been challenged and indeed overturned. Thus, for example, on the basis of received scholarship of that time, Sandhu could write of indentured Indian labourers:

The relegation of these classes to the level of animals in a caste-ridden society naturally tended to deprive them of initiative and self-respect, and made them a cringing, servile group. These people had neither the skill nor the enterprise to rise above the level of manual labour and were also willing to accept low wages.⁸

No informed scholar working today would write in this fashion. In the intervening period scholars have rejected the largely Victorian-created narratives of an unchanging and immutable hierarchical Indian society, and have demonstrated that the supposed “inflexibility” of caste was largely an invention of British orientalist anthropology. Indeed, precolonial South Indian society was not only extraordinarily diverse but also dynamic and mobile.

But while this history draws upon the earlier studies of Sandhu and Arasaratnam, it aims at something more than merely updating these works. The major point of departure is the exploration of those aspects of the metropolitan and colonial background which bear directly upon the Indian experience in Malaysia, as well as discussion of the ideologies and events which have proven formative in shaping the sort of society in which Indian Malaysians now find themselves. This book examines the colonially initiated economic and structural reforms which encouraged, and in many cases forced, Indians to leave their homeland; demonstrates the legacy bequeathed by black slavery to schemes of indentured Indian labour; and reviews the colonial ideologies of “race” which were developed in British India and later exported to Malaya. The latter not only shaped Malayan conceptions of “race” in ways that continue to profoundly influence contemporary Malaysian political and cultural discourse but also refashioned Indian perceptions of identity in terms of caste, religion, origins, and culture.

Indian interaction with the Malay Peninsula and indeed the wider Malay Archipelago has a long and complex history dating back to the centuries EFH As Rajesh Rai has pointed out, Southeast Asia “is one of the few regions, if not the only region outside South Asia, where the journey of Indians has continued from the pre-modern, through the colonial, and into the contemporary age of globalisation”.⁹ Indic civilizational impulses played an important if not dominant role in the formation of early Malay states and in fashioning indigenous cultural and religious forms which obtained within the wider Malay world. However, more recent migrants have overwhelmingly consisted of those recruited to

work as labourers within the colonial economy, a development which denied them opportunities for economic and hence social mobility, and created a framework for postcolonial exclusion. Colonialism left as an unwelcome residue an array of highly negative images of the “coolie immigrant”. As P. Uthayakumar has remarked, in modern Malaysia Indian working classes are “to be cast aside socially as the drag [*sic*] with the social stereotypes as labourers, drunks, untrustworthy fellows, black and smelly fellows, dependent and always complaining ... [these are] a few of the stereotypes usually associated with being Indian poor in Malaysia”.¹⁰ The continuing Malaysian controversy over the novel *Interlok*, which is perceived to reproduce and perpetuate these demeaning representations, reveals the enduring impact of impressions initially forged by colonial racial ideologies.

An underlying premise of this study is that it is impossible to understand the marginalized status of Indians in Malaysia without reference to the construction and inculcation of theories of “race” in Malaya/Malaysia and the ultimate creation of a Bumiputera (Malay)/non-Bumiputera (non-Malay) “racial” dichotomy which governs Malaysian political, cultural and social life. These ideologies have had an especially marked impact upon the construction of Malay ethnicity. A substantial body of scholarship has documented the dynamic, fluid, and mobile character of pre-colonial indigenous societies, the fact that these societies were not especially ethnicized, and that the emergence of an identifiable ethnicity known as “Malay” is a comparatively recent development.¹¹ British colonialism imparted ideologies of race, which in the Malayan context consisted, *inter alia*, of a narrative of a weak and backward Malay “race” of tradition-bound subsistence farmers residing in kampungs, who but for British protection would be subjugated by the more enterprising and predacious “immigrants” (primarily the Chinese), who would seize the commanding heights of the economy and usurp political control. The Malay nationalism which emerged following the Pacific war was defensive, driven by a fear of “immigrant” domination, concerned with Malay “backwardness”, and obsessed with the recurrent anxiety that Malays might “disappear from this world”.¹²

The politics of communalism which have dominated Malayan and Malaysian political, social and cultural life, the continual re-inscription of “racial” boundaries, have not only deepened ethnic divisions but also mandated ethnic mobilization within the political sphere. As a minority

ethnic group, lacking an economic base of any substance, Indians have inevitably found themselves disadvantaged in this process. In recent years, inter-ethnic politics have been rendered increasingly problematic by the continuing negotiation of Malay cultural identity and conceptions of self, in particular by the Islamic criticism of *adat* (Malay custom), long held to be a fundamental pillar of “Malayness” and thus what it means to be a Malay, and by changing perceptions of Islam itself.¹³ These developments have obvious implications for the future of Malaysia and the type of society it is set to become, but in the interim have impacted disproportionately upon the Indian community.¹⁴

In this book, I have used the term “Indian” as it is understood in Malaysia, i.e., that it refers to all people who originate from the Indian subcontinent (including Sri Lankans) and who maintain a distinctive civilizational identity which derives inspiration from metropolitan South Asia. I have used the term “Malay world” in a generic sense to refer to the diverse peoples of the Malay Archipelago; that is, the extensive body of islands that fall between Southeast Asia and Australia, but including the Malay Peninsula and incorporating the territories of contemporary Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, and East Timor. Although I am aware that the term “Malay” has an application beyond Malaysia, and that this wider usage incorporates Christians and animists as well as Muslims, as well as embracing an extraordinarily wide range of *adat* or custom (some of which would not be recognized as such in Malaysia), in this book “Malay” is generally used, with all its ambiguities, to describe those who are designated as such by the constitutional settlement of 1957.

This book is structured into three basic sections. The first section consists of Chapters 1–4 and provides an overview of the premodern and early modern history of the Malay Peninsula leading to the Melaka Sultanate, the intrusion of European colonialism, the development within British India of colonial ideologies of conceptions of racial and societal hierarchies, and the subsequent imposition of these ideologies upon the Malay Peninsula. The second section, Chapters 5–10, traces the migration of Indians to Malaya throughout the colonial era, and the creation of an incipient Indian social consciousness. Chapter 5 looks at organized black plantation slavery and the inheritance which was passed on to Indian indentured labourers. Chapters 6 and 7 document indentured and assisted labour recruitment, the reforms which disrupted Indian social and economic structures and which

encouraged emigration, and conditions under which the Indian workforce laboured. Chapter 8 details other Indian migratory streams, while Chapter 9 traces the evolution of political movements among Indians in pre-war Malaya. Chapter 10 explores the impact of the Japanese occupation, in particular the cohering of ethnic identities and the formative experiences of Indian nationalism. The third section, Chapters 11–16, examines post-Malaya/Malaysia, events leading to Merdeka, the creation of Malaysia, 13 May, the introduction of the NEP, the Mahathir and Abdullah eras, and the UMNO reaction to Hindraf. Each of these chapters provides a preliminary overview of the wider Malayan/Malaysian context before focussing upon the impact of political, societal and cultural developments upon the Indian community. The final chapter furnishes an overview of Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1Malaysia policies, the rapprochement with the Indian community, and the election of May 2013. In the Conclusions I have drawn together the main themes covered within the book.

At this point it is apposite to add a personal note. I was first posted to the Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur in 1976 as an employee of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. Prior to my departure I was assured that I would find Malaysia a comparatively transparent country, easy to understand and containing no hidden mysteries. My pre-posting programme consisted of a series of rather superficial briefings, many of which were tintured with the discourses of neocolonialism, and which bore no relationship to the realities of the Malaysia in which I found myself. Indeed, it was only when I stood on the verge of return to Australia in 1979 that I felt that I was beginning to fully comprehend many of the more subtle and recondite nuances of this most complex of societies. Malaysia is a country of astonishing contradictions: an "authoritarian" regime in which people often speak their minds with alarming frankness and which permits a surprising array of scholarly and other opinion; a country whose official religion is Islam but in which Muslim security forces guard non-Muslim religious processions; a society whose official culture is resisted by a multitude of particularistic ethnic and religious impulses; a multi-ethnic society in which communal structures are inscribed within the formal political process but which at the grass-roots level often proves remarkably tolerant and liberal. It is impossible for any historian not to be immediately engaged with such a society. In my case, this engagement has been both encouraged and enriched by the friendliness and hospitality which pervades Malaysian life.

Notes

1. At the time of independence, Indians constituted 12 per cent of Malaya's population (K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* [Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1965], p. 1). By 2000 the Indian component of the population of Malaysia had fallen to 7.8 per cent (Saw Swee-Hock, "Population Trends and Patterns in Multiracial Malaysia", in *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, edited by Saw Swee-Hock and K. Kesavapany [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006], p. 16), and by 2010 to 7.4 per cent (P. Uthayakumar, *Marginalization of the Indians in Malaysia*, paper emailed to the author on 6 April 2010).
2. K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani, eds., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); K. Kesavapany, A. Mani, and P. Ramasamy, *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).
3. K.S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
4. Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).
5. Muzafar Desmond Tate, *The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development, 2008).
6. See Carl Vadivella Belle, "Malaysian Indians: An Incomplete History", *Malaysiakini*, 25 June 2009 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/opinions/107202>> (accessed 26 June 2009).
7. Janakey Raman Manickam, *The Malaysian Indian Dilemma: The Struggles and Agony of the Indian Community in Malaysia*, 2nd ed. (Klang: Janakey Raman Manickam, 2010).
8. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, p. 57.
9. Rajesh Rai, "Positioning the Indian Diaspora: The Southeast Asian Experience", in *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories and Representations*, edited by Parvati Raghuram, Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Brij Maharaj, and Dave Sangha (New Delhi: Sage, 2008), p. 29.
10. Uthayakumar, *Marginalization of the Indians*.
11. See for example, Alberto Gomes, "Ethnicisation of the Orang Asli: A Case Study of the Semai", in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes, and Azly Rahman (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), p. 302.
12. Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), p. 16. Milner's work is a multifaceted study of the subject of "Malayness" and a detailed consideration of Malay ethnicity.
13. See for example, Ahmad Mustapha Hassan, *The Unmaking of Malaysia: Insider's*