CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

After analysing the settlement and migration patterns of the Indian community we can say that though the Indian population constituted an overall minority of around eight per cent of Malaya's population, it is not physically submerged in it. Their manner of migration and settlement has ensured for them certain areas of Indian dominance, or at least of a substantial Indian presence. And this was possible because of the plantation settlements, whereby the labourers were housed in especially constructed quarters grouped together in a division of an estate. As these estates were grouped end to end in particular parts of the country, these parts had large Indian concentrations.

As production on the Malayan plantations was organised on industrial lines, labourers' consciousness as a wage earning proletariat was impeded by their inclusion into closed, productive societies headed by Europeans. Virtually all South Indian labourers were housed in employer-provided lines, often situated in very isolated areas. Until the 1930s, when busses and bicycles began to open up communications, only small groups of Indian labourers, such as those working on the docks or in the railway workshops, had any significant contacts outside the workplace.

This informal but effective bonding of the labourers to the estates and the consequent arresting of their opportunities and social consciousness, formed the most exploitative aspect of the plantation system. The low wage and high profits, the high death rates, the violence of supervisors, the shoddy barrack-like housing lines, the deplorable conditions of estate schools, labourers' addiction to toddy, the prevalence of violence and quarrels arising from the lack of women, marital instability, have been the hallmark of the system. What is significant is that these were not temporary sufferings. Although death rates were lowered, housing improved and the causes of sexual quarrels reduced in the 1930s, and even more so in the 1950s and 1960s, with estate society
becoming more permanently established, the majority of the labourers remained tied to the low wage, socially degraded environment of the plantations. Of those who left the plantations, relatively few rose into the ranks of the professions or into other sections of the bourgeoisie.

As Indians moved into cities and towns this clustering continued. Newcomers also tended to move to those parts where their compatriots already lived, not only out of a feeling of security but also to share in the services already built around the community. Before Independence, official policy too tended to encourage this, as it was easier to deal with communities separately than to grapple with the many problems that arose when they came together.

With respect to political participation one observes that few Indians took interest in the constitutional questions, though occasional interest was not altogether lacking. There were some instances of Indian politics to stream into Malaya. The geographical remoteness had drawn an emotional curtain between the two countries. On the other hand, Indian labour problems in Malaya were often projected into Indian politics, but in the form of colonial nationalist grievances. The Indian National Congress lent a sympathetic ear to the petitions and representations from the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) and deemed it a matter of India’s national honour to redress the grievances of Indian labour in Malaya.

Owing to the plural society in Malaya, the numerical strength of the Indian community had little relevance to the type and gravity of the problems arising from their settlement. Indians occupied the third position in economic life. Almost all of the middlemen and petty shopkeepers etc. have been Chinese, which precluded the possibility of closer contact between the Malays and the Indians. Consequently in Malaya, as the Chinese were an economic buffer, the Indians did not directly bear the brunt of Malay nationalism. Nor have the Indians been powerful enough to arouse nationalist hatred and fear.
The juxtaposition of the Indians and the Chinese in relation to the Malays has been a mixed blessing for the Indians. In Malaya there has been no corresponding clash of Malay and Indian labourers. Indians have been concentrated on the estates, a field in which the Malays have recently started entering after India imposed a ban on unassisted unskilled emigration. The Malay labour force in the estates has not reached the point where the presence of Indians is viewed as competitive.

One observes that Indian workers came to Malaya to fulfill two economic objectives, to improve their economic status; and to remit money to their families in India. They remained on the bottom rung of a highly segmented labour market and led miserable lives, bound by their docile status to a cycle of poverty on the estate. There was lack of co-operation between the different Indian groups that barred any unity among them, and any attempt made by workers to resort to industrial action was easily quashed by the colonial authorities. Consequently the Indians remained a marginal group in Malaya. Nevertheless, their contribution to Malayan economy and society was undeniable.

Although overseas Hindu communities evolved differently and related to India in their own different ways, they all took an affectionate interest in it, and regarded it as their cultural and spiritual home. Over time the ties weakened, but they were never severed. Also effective in determining social evolution of the Indian community was the class composition as determined by economic activity and overall relationships in the colonial economy. As Indian immigration to Malaya was essentially an import of labour and it resulted in a majority of immigrants employed in various forms of manual labour. Though this overwhelming predominance dropped as migration progressed and became diversified in its content, but at the end of World War II, it still left the Indians as a predominantly working-class community. This feature, coupled with the nature of the organisation of the plantations and their spatial location, was an important factor in shaping Indian attitudes and patterns of life and culture in their new environment.
By the end of World War 2, Indian population in Malaya was broadly divided into plantation labourers, labourers in the cities, small number of English educated middle class, a few independent professionals and merchants. This horizontal division of the community was cut through with a vertical divide on the basis of language, culture and religion. The Malayan Indian thus found himself integrated in a number of ways with conflicting pulls and pushes, loyalties and separation, in his new home.

The Indian educated and commercial classes looked upon themselves as more permanent residents of Malaya than the labour class. They were more disposed and had the wherewithal to plant permanent institutions, acquire property, and acclimatize themselves in Malaya. Though, they too had their share of problems in the process. The pull of the motherland was as strong among them as it was among the labourers. But they had better means to reproduce an Indian cultural environment in Malaya and since these middle-class migrants came with their families, it made the process easier.

The labour movement in Malaya was unique, as it incorporated adaptations of both the indentured system of Indian labour recruitment prevalent in the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius and southern Africa, and the basic ingredients of the kangani, maistry and garden sirdar system of labour recruitment of Ceylon, Burma and Assam respectively. In addition it included other methods of formal and informal recruitment—assisted, voluntary and free immigrants and a variation of the Chinese credit-ticket system of immigration. It was the non-labour section of the Indian immigrants which first sunk its roots in Malaya, thus beginning the stabilisation of the local Indian population. Though initially vast majority of labourers formed a transitory floating population which had been coming and going, and the volume of their movement essentially depended on the economic conditions in Malaya. The Indian population increased steadily, through immigration, until the 1930s and later through natural increase, following the improvement in the sex-ratio and the general stabilisation of the community. Most of the Indians in Malaya are now locally born and are multiplying at a fast rate.
Daily life of the labourers in the ‘lines’ was marked by unending work routine. As a result their morale and ambition were generally low. Social problems were rife. Opportunities for escape, other than return to India, were slim. Their customs and languages cut the estate population from other Malayan communities, among whom they were held in low regard. Employment opportunities outside the estate were essentially limited to the railways, the PWD and municipal sanitation departments. Therefore one finds that the Indians in Malaya exhibited a low rate of socio-economic mobility.

In general, the first generation of immigrants clustered together and for a good time preserved their own identity. It is an established fact that overseas Indians tend to recreate Indian social structure wherever they go and hold fast to their native culture in their lands of adoption. Their mode of adaptation is marked by a clear preference for economic integration more than cultural assimilation.

Region and religion seem to be more important determinants of their social organisation than language and caste. Indians continue to cling to their norms of endogamy, marital stability and family solidarity, kin orientation, religion and mother tongue. They are nostalgic about Indian food and their women tend to stick to their saris. As a mechanism of cultural preservation, they have the temples and Gurdwaras, festivals and functions, and ethnic associations and organisations. Today, Hindu temples are inescapably part of the social, cultural, spiritual and physical landscape of Malaysia. Indians, like other diasporic communities find their culture as a defence mechanism against a sense of insecurity in alien settings, they tend to bank on their culture as a compensatory mechanism for the loss of status in foreign lands.

With respect to self identity, we observe that it has two important aspects- of self image and how the migrants perceive themselves while dealing with other communities. Self image explores how the migrants identify themselves- in terms of a pan Indian identity or in terms of a parochial ethnic category. We find that the migrants generally tend to identify themselves in terms of narrow ethnic categories; when it comes to interacting among themselves their regional, religious and or linguistic identities take
precedence, but while dealing with non Indians they tend to take on an pan-Indian identity.

Regarding the instinct of cultural preservation and identity of Indians in foreign settings one must understand that perhaps every ethnic group tends to stick to its culture in strange surroundings, as delicately as do the Indians. We find that Chinese immigrants are no different in holding on to their cultural forms and traditions. While the first generation immigrants tend to stick to Indian culture with vigour, the second and subsequent generations give evidence of distancing from it.

With respect to adaptation, it can be safely said that Indians in Malaysia have followed the mode of cultural preservation along with economic integration. That is, in the cultural domain Indians preserve their identity while in the economic domain they are quick to integrate.

Apropos the class position of the Indian immigrants, one notices that Indian estate labour in Malaysia could not make to the grade of a peasant, whereas in Caribbean they did. This is attributed to the difference in the two systems of recruitment, namely indenture and kangany, under which Indians were brought to the Caribbean and Malaysia respectively. Because of its strictly contractual nature, the indenture system allowed occupational freedom to its recruits at the termination of the contract, which offered them the option of a passage back home or in lieu of that a piece of agricultural land, thus facilitating the rise of Indian peasantry in the Caribbean. On the other hand, kangany system did not provide access to land to the estate worker. They went on being accommodated from one plantation to the other by the contractors with whom they had village or regional affinity. This prevented them from becoming a peasant.

One also notices that the cultural continuity of the Indian community has been marked. Sociocultural elements carried by the first generation of immigrants from India consisted of religion, language, music, art, dress, cuisine, etc., often in the folk form, but in their regional variants. The experiences of these cultural elements in different diasporic
situations have been varied: some of these elements have disappeared; some have survived or persisted; others have experienced assimilation, syncretism or change and a few elements have been sought to be revived.

With respect to the other immigrant communities in Malaya, Indians are trusted more than the Chinese community. They are considered simpler, straight, trustworthy, hard working and true to their duties. The proportion of population that is India-born is decreasing and relatively few people now travel back and forth. In addition to the occasional local travelers, people are informed about Indian things via radio broadcasts and the newspapers and periodicals they read. And they are at times also aware of the issues debated in Indian politics.

Given a rather marked ethnic insularity and the variety and number of contacts between the Malays and the Indians, we can conclude that the Indians are not going to lose their ‘Indianness’. Indians in Malaysia, in terms of outwardly easily discernible characteristics, in no ways appear to deny their cultural and social heritage. The ‘Indianness’ of people is unmistakable and is here to stay. But our evidence indicates that their long term orientations are increasingly being focused into distinctly Malaysian directions.

The problems of the Indians in Malaysia are varied. But, Malaysia looks relatively more attractive to the Indian people. They have strongly identified their best interests in terms of citizenship in and allegiance to Malaysia.

The social life of Indians does not overlap with that of Malays and Chinese. While they retain close identifications with Indian ways, in citizenship they are now identified primarily with Malaysia. Indians are definitely conscious of the role played by them in the development of Malaysia, especially their contribution to the rubber plantations and railroads. And they have expectation from the government that they should now be well looked after.
In small towns with Indian population, national policies and definitions have little direct following. The political horizons of the Indians are limited. But they have been made to understand that currently the government’s principal interests are in helping the Malays first.

Regarding the unions, one observes that they are more inter-ethnically defined and both Malays and Indians belong to the same unions. But here too, intimate concerns among the Indians and Malays are locally handled. The prices of rubber affect wages. Government initiatives in promoting the interests of the Malays have tended to put the Indians on the defensive, as more and more Malays have been employed in plantations.

Indians have had some problems with respect to less work opportunities. This is not to say the Indians are not officially planned for in Malaysia’s development plans. But it is to say that planning emphases have so far been minimal on the actual processes. The result has been a continuing, much higher unemployment rate among Indians than among other communities and a situation wherein the Indians, have had to look out for themselves. There are jobs in contemporary Malaysia. But the problem is that the Indians have little or no training in preparation for jobs and they are not receiving enough support, enabling them to cross over easily from the estate context into the work context outside.

Though every person in Malaysia has the right to profess and practice his own religion, those who profess Islam have a certain edge, Islam being the state religion. Though normally this makes no difference, from time to time, sometimes purposefully and sometimes unknowingly, Malay government officials cross the thin line between what is implied in having Islam as the state religion and what would be implied if Malaysia were to be an Islamic state. Their statements have sometimes led to concern among both Indians and Chinese. Such considerations make a difference in the multi-religious context of Malaysia. As the three major ethnic communities in Malaysia remain socially separated, so do their distinct religious orientations.
The Hindu observances in Malaya symbolically tend to preserve and intensify the religion’s own local identification here. Cut off from India in ways, yet still culturally and socially aligned in others, the Indians in Malaysia are symbolically relatively well-united.

Though now one needs to think in terms of politics of accommodation. One notices that a general accommodation not ‘integration’ of life styles has occurred in Malaya in certain ways. The relations among the ethnic communities are relatively peaceful. The underlying reason for this seems to be the similar participation of both of the major communities in the local economic and political arenas. Their political participations extend along different channels, but neither community dominates the other. In economic terms, members of both communities participate similarly in the ‘market place’.

It can be safely inferred that whatever the differences that prevent integration and assimilation among ethnic communities in Malaysia, successful accommodation is possible, owing to roughly similar economic and political participation by the different communities.

Indian community in Malaysia is generally referred to in the press and by the government as Malaysian Indians. The point is minor in ways. But as some observers rightly feel, it identifies a continuing misconception. Indians should now be referred as Malaysians, or at least Indian Malaysians. These people retain an ‘Indianness’ in many of their attributes and interests and, they will continue to do so. But their citizenship, their economic orientations are in Malaysia and their young people see their future here, and their political representations extend into coalition arrangements.

The role and character of Indian participation in the political life of Malaya has also undergone changes and they have started taking part in local politics. This has been particularly so since World War II. Prior to this they had little political interest in Malaya, their activities being largely oriented towards their mother country, with which they retained strong economic, political and sentimental links.
However, over the last three decades the position of Indians in Malaya has undergone a number of fundamental changes. Firstly, there has been a stabilisation of the Indian population, more than two-thirds of which is estimated to be Malayan born. Secondly, though many Indians still retain their emotional ties with India, actual contact with the country has been diminishing. This is evident from the decreasing frequency of visits of 'Malayan Indians' to India. Thirdly, Indians in Malaya, following the independence of India, were hoping to acquire dual Indian and Malayan citizenship, so as to enjoy the benefits of both. This idea was condemned not only by Pandit Nehru but also by the Indian government, which made it clear that all Indians outside India must decide either to remain Indian citizens or become citizens of the country where they lived, preferably the latter, and that no dual citizenship would be allowed.

Faced with the alternative of remaining aliens in independent Malaya, most of the Indians had decided to become Malayan citizens, following the liberalization of the country's citizenship laws in 1952 and 1957 which allowed non-Malays to become citizens of Malaya, provided they fulfilled certain requirements. As Malayan citizens, they now occupy a position that seems to be increasing in importance in the political life of the country. The Indians form an important minority in a plural society predominantly Malay and Chinese. The political role of the Indians appears to be assuming increased importance, as they are wooed both by the Chinese and Malay leaders in their bid for political power. The Indian community is also increasing at a faster rate than the Chinese, thereby increasing their relative voting strength and future representation in the government.

One observes that the distribution pattern of the Indian population and its economic concentration in plantation agriculture- Malaya's chief industry, also has important political implications. The large Indian concentrations on estates often lie between the major rural and urban concentrations of Malay and Chinese populations respectively, they may have the power to act either as unifying or separating agents or to remain neutral. In the economic sphere, through their strong position on estates as administrators and labourers, now organised into powerful trade unions, have a crucial
role to play in the country's economy through its major primary product and chief item of export.

In addition, Indians provide the top ranks, and the bulk too, of the trade-union leadership of Malaya while they are also members of the important non-communal, multi-racial political parties of the country. It appears that in contrast to their earlier role as birds of passage, the Indians are now becoming increasingly Malayanized, and they tend to identify their interests with the future of the country, and hence will assume an even greater role in its politico-economic development.

By and large the Indian minority does not constitute a problem in Malaysia. They do not arouse hostility from other communities. Further, their unassimilability is not so aggressive, and their prosperity is not so marked, so as to arouse jealously of other Asian communities.

The plurality of Malayan society has produced a plurality of nationalities, if not in constitutional theory, at least in constitutional practice. In spite of their professed adherence to a single nationality for Malaya, the Malays are not prepared to implement the doctrine fully. The Indians and the Chinese are expected to acquire a Malayan nationality and a citizenship of the Federation of Malaya. On the insistence of the British authorities, the Alliance government had conceded the recognition of the principle of dual nationality by virtue of which a British European subject may retain his British nationality even after acquiring citizenship of the Federation.

However, an Indian citizen-cum-national of the Federation of Malaya is not entitled to all the privileges accruing from such a status. As indigenous nationals, the Malays have certain special rights over and above the rest, even though they may have acquired citizenship automatically and not by naturalization. Moreover, the elaborate network of Malay privileges is based on the constitutional definition of Malay, as one who habitually speaks the Malay language, habitually practices Malay customs and follows Islam. The Indian in Malaya cannot become Malay and gain access to the special
privileges reserved for the Malays. In Malaya, the factors of religion and culture differentiate between one type of national and another. As a result, the Indians and the Chinese have been asked to renounce their Indian and Chinese nationalities respectively without the assurance of uniform rights of Malayan citizenship and nationality.

Both minorities, ethnic and alien, are here to stay. The government has to offer them enough stake in the country to induce them to merge with the majority people in a common nationality.

The Indian community in Malaysia is still in the process of coming to terms with the newly awakened Malaysian nationalism. The long term policy of the Malaysian government is to create a Malaysian culture, which will be essentially Malaysian in character, but intermingled and enriched with other cultures. Until such a national culture evolves, the government should let Indian cultural forms remain the way they are. Though at present, Indian culture, in its popular forms, is still flourishing in Malaysia, yet the younger generation is slowly moving away from it.

The Indians, like the Chinese are slowly, but surely, emerging as distinct communities, linked with certain cultural affinities with the land of their forefathers, but also different in many respects from those societies. Cultural persistence – retaining aspects of their culture in an alien environment – and adapting to new surroundings; are twin facets of these diasporic communities.

To conclude one can say that the effects of British rule were so profound – so too were the consequences of its withdrawal. The British were vigorous in promoting the growth of different groups under local customs. Other policies were aimed at maximizing development through economic specialisation and a division of labour. The Malays remained essentially farmers, while the brighter ones amongst them were recruited in the junior administrative positions. The Indians were deployed as rubber tappers, and are still to be found on the estates. The Chinese came as traders and subsequently expanded into tin mining and local industries, a role which led to their concentration in urban centres.
Thus, providing the backdrop for making of a plural society. Its essential characteristics were the presence of different ethnic groups with no common purpose or will. Where each ethnic group lived separately, had its own means of functioning and communication, while subscribing to the overall policies of the British rule. Integration was absent except in the market place.

Such a social and economic setting made the presence of an external power essential. And as long as colonialism remained, the management of pluralism was simple and manageable. The views of Malay Sultans, Indian and Chinese leaders, through their clans, secret societies and respective communities were implemented, and these underground channels of authority strengthened the plural nature of society. But Malaya remained the land of Malays – and of the Sultans under the British rule. Pluralism as an issue developed at the tail end of colonialism. Once the idea of independence took shape, the thought of having to interact with each other dawned on these semi-segregated communities.

Economically the Indian labourer remains where he was when he came to Malaya. Over the years, neither assimilation nor the lesser aim of accommodation has essentially succeeded. The majority community- Malays, has been unenthusiastic to assimilation, and therefore the government has not sought to accelerate the pace of integration.