IDENTITY

Like most social phenomenon, identity formation takes place within a ‘two social reality’ context: first, the ‘authority-defined’ social reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure, and, second, the ‘everyday defined’ social reality, one which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life. These two realities exist side by side at any given time. (Shamshul 1996: 477)

Although intricately linked and constantly influencing and shaping each other, they may or may not be identical. They are in fact rarely identical because the ‘everyday defined’ social reality is experienced and the ‘authority-defined’ social reality is only observed and interpreted. Both then, are mediated through the social class position of those who observe and interpret social reality and those who experience it. (Shamshul 1996: 478)

It is a fact that social categories such as ‘race’ (both in biological and social component and meanings) and ‘nation’ entered into local cosmology and worldview through colonization hence the slow dismantling of the traditional thought system in due course and its displacement by the Western-based system. The introduction of such a system has a humble and unnoticed beginning. For instance what seemed to be a ‘harmless’ bureaucratic practice of census-taking has actually helped to invent, evolve, and consolidate ‘racial categories’ such as Malay, Chinese, and Indians in Malaysia. The introduction of legislations like the Malay Reservation Act, the setting up of a Department of Chinese Affairs and the special government approved toddy shops for the Indians during the British rule drove home the point further, at the everyday defined level, to the people at the grassroots that racial categories such as Malay, Indian and Chinese mattered very much if one is to take advantage what the colonial bureaucracy
offered or in order to avoid its wrath. Hence being a Malay, a Chinese, or an Indian the colonialist way is critical for everyday existence. (Shamshul 1996: 482)

The evolution and consolidation of these racial categories was accompanied by political conscientization through colonial bureaucratic practices and race-specific socialization particularly through a plural Western-oriented vernacular education system. It was in such a context that the racial categories, once consolidated and became meaningful to the social actors developed into ideas about racial-based notions about nation hence issues of identity and its economic and political implications. In other words, there was a two-way traffic in the appropriation exercise during the colonial period, not only the colonialists were appropriating what the locals have to offer but the locals too were selecting, appropriating, and internalizing what the colonialist offered them (both through coercion and other methods). Hence 'difference' as a defining mode of everyday existence, as opposed to the top down homogenizing schemes, dominated the mind and practical life of the populace. (Shamshul 1996: 482)

Other Image

Malay attitudes towards the Indians were significantly influenced by religion. Outside the boundary of Islam however, social relationship between the two groups was superficial. It is difficult to document private Malay feelings towards Indians. But there is some evidence to indicate that in the Malay states, even at the time when the Malay Reservation Act was first introduced in 1913, there was no hostile feeling towards the Chettiars (Indian money-lenders). The Malay Reservation Act owed its origin to the initiative of British officers who felt that the Malays were rapidly losing their lands to the Indian money-lenders through foreclosures. But, it has been said that many Malay’s tended to think of the Chettiars as good-hearted (baik hati) persons. It was believed that those who managed to establish close relations with the Chettiars would be able to borrow small sums without collateral. (Kim 1993: 6)
On the other hand, by the 1920s, political consciousness was beginning to have a telling effect on Malay attitudes towards non-Malays. In fact, in 1919 R O Winstedt was severely criticized for some of his views on the history of Malay culture, in which he spoke extensively about how the Malay culture had its origin in India and that even Islam came to the peninsula via India. A certain Muhammad Al-Johori, in a letter claimed that any similarity between Indian and Malay cultures would be coincidental and Islam was brought by the Arabs. This was practically the beginning of conscious attempts to deny that Malay culture had borrowed heavily from Indian culture. Malay attitudes towards the Indians at this juncture may well have a reaction to the increasing demands made by the Indians for greater privileges in Malaya. (Kim 1993: 6)

Malay attitudes towards the Indians in the 1920s and 1930s showed marked variation. In Singapore, Malay distrust and suspicion of the other Muslim groups first became noticeable. In 1926 the Malays of Singapore founded the Singapore Malay Union. It admitted only persons who were considered Malays, that is, those of the Malay Archipelago as a whole; local Arabs and Indian Muslims were excluded. It was felt that the Arabs and Indian Muslims had been too preoccupied with their own interests and could not be depended upon to promote the welfare of the Malays. The influence of the Union was to grow in later years, reaching in 1938 the other Settlements, Penang and Malacca. (Kim 1993: 4)

In 1928, a supposedly Malay author stated that the Malays knew fully well that, ‘if they get rid of the British they will be worse off under some other power who would be sure to overrun the country’. “We have learnt what the Chinese are doing to the Malays to retard their progress; and there is only need to mention about the Indian money-lenders who, by the manipulation of interest upon interest, literally suck the blood out of the Malays until they are left almost bloodless and weak.” (Mahajani 1960: 137)

On the east coast of the peninsula, however, there is no evidence of the existence of any concrete move to establish and perpetuate a pure Malay identity. One obvious reason was the negligible number of Indians there. When the Federal Council was
reconstituted in January 1932 and no Indian member was appointed. Indians in various states held public meetings and elected delegates to meet in Kuala Lumpur. As a result a memorandum was sent to the High Commissioner, Sir Laurence. The justification for Indian representation in the Federal Countries was claimed on the following grounds:
1. Largeness of the Indian population.
2. Indian capital and trade were substantial.
3. Indian labour was important.
4. Status and rights of the Indians as residents of the Federated Malay States: and
5. Status and rights of the Indians as Subjects in the British Empire. (Kim 1993: 6)

Although the Indian demand made little impression on the colonial government, Indian nationalism, a spill-over from India, was clearly on the upsurge in Malaya. For example, in late 1935, there was an announcement of the appearance of an Indian weekly in Malaya called the Indian. The object of the journal was to tell the Indians two things: That he is an Indian; and that he is not to forget that he is an Indian. (Kim 1993: 6)

In 1936 the Indians in Malaya were still pressing their demands for “equal rights”. N. Raghavan referred to a tendency in the country to pamper certain communities and proposed that a Vigilance Committee should be formed to submit grievances to the proper quarters and to fight for the rights and privileges of every British-born citizen. The vociferous political demands of the Indians, coupled with widespread hardships brought about by the world economic depression in the early 1930s, eventually stirred up hostile reaction from the Malays. Malay newspapers in the 1930s, for example, began to allocate more and more space to a discussion of the political threats posed by Indians as well as Chinese. (Kim 1993: 7)

In 1937 when the High Commissioner, Sir Shenton Thomas, announced that non-Malay’s would be admitted to responsible posts in the technical services in the Federated Malay States, he was criticized by the Malay people. (Kim 1993: 7)
The Malay Sultans also expressed severe reservations regarding the loyalty to Malaya of the Indian and Chinese population: ‘There is now in Malaya a strong and organised Indian National movement. The Indians in Malaya though they must use these political rights, will never regard themselves as anything but Indian or have that tie with the British Empire which the Malays have always had in the past and wish to continue to have.’ (Ampalavanar 1981: 82)

From time to time, Malay members of the Federal Council asked for greater representation for the Malays in the government services, keener government interests in Malay women’s education and a more ‘rigorous policy of preference for qualified Malays’. The Malayan Union of Singapore formed in 1926, took a grave view of the economic and educational advance of the non-Malay Asians who, they charged were ‘alien immigrants’. During the two Pan-Malayan conferences in 1939 and 1940, the members aired their grievances against ‘inadequate consideration’ shown for the Malays and demanded that the Malays should be appointed to various posts. (Mahajani 1960: 136)

It is noteworthy that the Malays were not animated by a spirit of colonial nationalism which had aroused all the Southeast Asian countries into nationalist movements against the Europeans. There was a lurking element of jealousy and inferiority complex against the Indians and the Chinese who, by going to English schools, were advancing rapidly. There was also resentment of the economic acumen of the Indians and the Chinese. (Mahajani 1960: 136)

The easiest and cheapest way to give expression to Malay pride was to adopt the motto, ‘Malaya for the Malays’. Che Onn, a Malay official member of the Johore State Council wrote in December 1940 in the Straits Times Annual, “A cry for Malayan status and a share in administration of the Malay sates from the decedents of former immigrants now styling themselves Malayans, came as a startling reminder to the Malays that indeed their very birthright was being assailed and that apathy and dependence on the policy of the benevolent government would not save them from being relegated to the background.
or at best from being absorbed as an entity in a Malayan composition.” (Mahajani 1960: 137) But for these isolated instances of Malay resentment against Asian non-Malays in the pre-war era, there did not arise any overt Malay nationalism against immigrant minorities. (Mahajani 1960: 138)

The Japanese Occupation came with a breathtaking, suddenness that had a traumatic effect on the Indians as it did on all other races of Malaya. As a vast majority of the community was dependent on service in the British colonial administration and on British private enterprise, the collapse of both of these with the Japanese victory left these Indians without a means of subsistence. There was an exodus to India just before the Japanese marched into the country, especially among the upper and middle classes. Those who could not leave themselves, sent their wives and children away. The feeling of insecurity and the recourse to safety in the mother country was to have a lasting impact among these classes. It was to reverse the process of looking upon Malaya as their new home and to reorient them towards India as their permanent refuge. This attitude resulted in another mass exodus to India at the end of the war. For many years after the end of the war, the upper and middle classes had an ambivalent attitude in looking upon Malaya as their permanent home. This fact was not missed by the Malays, who felt justified in looking upon these migrants as not really committed to their country of adoption. (Arasaratnam 1993: 20)

The immediate post-war period witnessed a meteoric rise of Malay colonial nationalism to redeem the sovereignty of their Sultans. Resentment against ‘immigrant’ non-Malay communities was only a stream that turned into a torrent for a short time but then resumed a steady course. (Mahajani 1960: 138)

Malay opinion began to assert influence on British immigration policy after the War. Early in the 1940’s Malay opinion was beginning to form itself on the whole question of unrestricted immigration into Malaya. Educated Malays were getting alarmed at the thousands of Chinese and Indian immigrants flooding the country, providing cheap labour and enjoying the benefits of employment, only to depart with what they had made
out of it. They felt that this keeping the Malays out of their share in the benefits of the plantation boom. And they were worried of the demographic effects of the migration movement on the position of the Malays as the autochthonous inhabitants of the land. This was one of the first issues around which Malay nationalist opinion began to form itself. (Arasaratnam 1970: 39)

India’s ban on the emigration of labour had caused some years of labour shortage. But after a time, the labour situation evened itself out with the increasing readiness of Malays to offer themselves for plantation labour. Yet immigration from India did not cease. Now it was limited to those who came in paying their own passage, to earn a living as domestic servants, shop assistants, hawkers, peddlers, clerks and in the professions. This movement came increasingly under the scrutiny of Malay nationalists, who had by now organised themselves effectively and were able to form public opinion. They would ask questions in the Legislative Council on the number and categories of Indians to whom entry permit was given annually. They pressed for a total ban on all types of immigration of Indians and Chinese. (Arasaratnam 1970: 40)

The argument of those who pressed for immigration control was that the post-war Indian inflow was such as to depress wages and living standards, and create tensions among communities. Further, these immigrants would impose a burden on the welfare facilities, particularly medical services and education, available in the country, and thus affect the domiciled population adversely. Consequently, action was initiated in 1949, and two Acts were passed which came into operation in 1953. By these Acts the entry of Indians into Malaya was controlled. (Arasaratnam 1970: 40)

The activities of the MIC apart, Malayan Indians in the post-war years had shown undisguised concern for political developments in India and tendency to identify with India continued to be pronounced — the buying of Indian flags, the admiration for Gandhi, and the reception which Nehru received when he visited Malaya in April 1946. Hindu-Muslim conflict on the eve of the birth of Pakistan which had serious repercussions in Malaya did little to allay Malay doubt that the Indians could ever change
their political orientation. (Kim 1993: 12) Until today, the Malays have continued to retain the notion that the Indians have lost none of their close attachment to India because apart from the attention paid to Indian politics, Indian movie stars are worshipped here as much as they' are in India, and there is fervent support for Indian teams in sporting contests even against Malaysian teams. (Kim 1993: 12)

The political factor, beginning from not later than the 1920s, has significantly' influenced Malay attitudes towards the Indians. The Malay's have acquired the distinct impression over the years that the Indians political and emotional link with India has remained ineradicably strong. As a result, the Malay's are wont to regard the Indians as still very much an immigrant group in Malaysia. (Kim 1993: 13)

Politics apart, Malay’ attitudes towards the Indians have been shaped by a number of other factors which are largely related to the general behaviour of the Indians, their occupations, their economic status, ethos, and even the colour of their skin. For example, the Malay’s (and even the Chinese, too) have formed certain unfavourable impressions about the Indians, who have often been seen to over-indulge themselves in the consumption of intoxicating drinks, especially toddy but often samsu as well. Until quite recent times, in many towns Indians could be seen frequently arguing noisily in toddy shops or staggering along the road in drunken stupor. (Kim 1993: 13)

In a rather unusual book published in 1925, written by Abdul Hamid Daing Muhammad Salleh, a well-known author of that era, lengthy remarks were passed on the non-Malay population in Malaya some of which, if uttered today, would be considered racial slurs. The author was especially severe on the Indians. For instance, he said that Malay’s had often been deemed to be lazy but it was difficult to ascertain whether it was inherited or a mere imitation. However, careful observation would show that there was no other race in the country’ which possessed that trait except the Hindus (meaning the Indians). He cited as an example the attitude and behaviour of Indian workers. Despite the vigilance and reprimands of the mandor (overseer) they often continued to shirk their work. (Kim, 1993: 13)
However, if the Indians were to attend to their own work, they could be most industrious. This was not the case with the Malay’s. The Malay imitation of the Indians went beyond employment; the Malay’s were diligent even when doing their own work and this was nothing short of self deception. Abdul Hamid also referred to the lack of personal cleanliness among the Indians and the unhygienic conditions in which they lived. Indeed a large percentage of the Indians, whether in the estates or in the urban areas (whether they were employed in the Public Works Department, Sanitary Board, Railways, and Harbour Board), lived in coolie lines provided by their employers. They were among the poorest segment of the local population. There needs were simple; so were their living conditions. In the day’s before independence when communication between rubber plantations and towns was as yet comparatively inefficient, Indian labourers who flocked to towns to participate in religious festivals (for example, Thaipusam) were compelled to pass the night by sleeping along the five-floored way of shophouses. The men looked unkempt, the women were often carelessly dressed; and both men as well as women chewed betel-nuts perpetually and spat indiscriminately. (Kim 1993: 13 – 14)

The larger proportion of the Indians in Malaya were employed to do menial jobs; they were the gardeners, school caretakers, road sweepers, garbage collectors, and grass cutters. Because of their poverty and the colour of their skin, there has long prevailed the opinion that socially the Indians belonged to the lowest strata of the Malaysian society. (Kim 1993: 14)

This is not to say that there was no awareness of the fact that many of the professionals - doctors and lawyers in particular — as well as junior officers in government service (CCs and EOs) were also Indians. In the earlier days of Malay movies, the doctor in any story was usually an Indian. The Indian involvement in the legal profession has also given rise to the regular belief that the profession suits them because they are talkative. This impression is to some extent closely linked to the nature of the Tamil language. The Malay’s find the tongue-twisting Tamil (or for that matter the
Malyalam or Telegu) language amusing and the more crunching sound of the Chinese
language crude. (Kim 1993: 14)

Tamil movies have also helped to shape Malay perception of the Indians. It is
pertinent to observe that Tamil movies are extremely popular among Tamils, irrespective
of whether they are English or Tamil educated. Malayans feel that there is a great deal of
similarity between the behaviour of Indians in general and the behaviour of characters in
Tamil movies. In both instances melodrama pronounced; they talk loudly, are extremely
demonstrative when expressing grief, yell loudly, beating their breasts or heads in the
process. There is a tendency to view this behaviour as exaggerated and, therefore,
calculated to deceive. In short, Malay opinion is that the Indians are habitual liars and
great pretenders. (Kim 1993: 14)

Despite the lack of social ties between Malay’s and Indians of North Indian
origin, compared to those which exist between Malay’s and Tamil Muslims, the Malay’s
have in fact come to accept North Indian ethos as being more refined and sophisticated.
Hence although religion has made fusion between the Malay’s and Indian Muslims
possible, there also exist Indian Muslim stereotypes- Indian Muslims have long had close
economic ties with the Malay’s; they are considered astute and shrewd businessmen so
much so that the Malay’s have felt themselves taken advantage of and exploited. More
than that, Indian Muslims are said to have frequently made attempts to covet Malay
women. Because they are well-off, they have been relatively successful. Many Indian
Muslims have wives in India as well as in Malaysia. But in the course of time the Indian
Muslims have also acquired a reputation for sexual prowess. In the villages, in particular,
this often forms the subject of conversation whenever a marriage takes place between an
Indian Muslim and a local Malay girl. (Kim 1993: 15)

On the whole, however, Malay’ attitudes towards Indian Muslims have been
comparatively less cynical or at least ridicule has been tempered by respect for those
endowed with religious zeal. In recent times, too, a religious movement known as the
Tabligh Jamaat has had profound influence in Malaysia. This movement began in India in
the nineteenth century and its leading light was Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885—1944) It has spread to various parts of the world. ‘Tabligh’ means to communicate or to disseminate; the movement aims at spreading the message and teachings of Islam. The movement was first introduced in Malaysia in 1952, but for many years its followers and advocates were Indian Muslims. In the early 1970s Malays began to participate in the movement. In Kuala Lumpur the Indian Muslim mosque in Malay Street has been the centre of activities. (Kim 1993: 15)

In Malaysia’s plural society, where political activities since independence have contributed to the tendency to preserve ethnic identity, Malay attitudes towards the Indians have not altered since stereotypes of them first emerged a long time ago. Certain unfavourable impressions of the Indians have been crystallized into proverbs and popular beliefs which, when printed, have evoked umbrage among the Indians, leading to the burning of newspapers and books. The recent clashes between Hindus and Sikhs in Malaysia following the assassination of India’s Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, although isolated in nature, have tended to reinforce Malay perception of the average Indian as more a son of India than of Malaysia. (Kim 1993: 15 – 16)

Self Image

The settlements of the Indians in Malaya have been, and are, markedly nucleated, in contrast to the comparatively largely dispersed and sprawling settlements of the indigenous people. This characteristic of the Indian settlements has been chiefly the result of the fact that the majority of the Indians came to Malaya as gangs of labourers, mainly to work the estates. For convenience of management and security these undertakings, many of them employing hundreds of labourers, usually grouped the labourers together in dwellings located close to the office, factory and managerial staff quarters. This pattern did not change very much after its inception in the pioneering stages. In fact, it was further accentuated by the Emergency resettlement programme of the Malayan government. Those Indians who did not enter the estate economy settled mainly in towns.
The majority were absorbed by the government services and the commercial trades. The government, though maintaining field camps, housed its employees in or adjoining existing urban centres, while the commercial Indian community was quite naturally chiefly in the urban areas, though many of them did travel to the rural areas to conduct their business. This picture of the Indian population outside the estates did not change to any marked degree over the years. In fact, the trend over recent years has been for the rural farm population to drift towards the urban further emphasizing the nucleated pattern of Indian settlement. (Sandhu 1969: 218)

The tendency of the Indian settlement to be nucleated is nothing new, in the sense that almost all the Indian immigrants into Malaya came from traditionally nucleated villages in India. But, other than the ubiquitous temples, the form of the Malayan nucleation bears no relation to the generally compact, wall-to-wall and back-to-back village forms of India. This is chiefly because the Indians came to Malaya largely as wage-earners and not as colonizers, and their settlements and dwellings were designed and provided by their employers, usually Europeans. Furthermore, the constantly wet Malayan climate and other environmental factors are not conducive to the Indian village life (mud houses, for example) in Malaya. In any case, until recently the Indian regarded his stay in Malaya as a temporary exile from the village in India, and he was not concerned with establishing familiar settlement types: Indian permanent settlement is thus comparatively recent. Those who settled have been in Malaya for a long time and their outlook towards settlement has been conditioned to an appreciable extent by the Malayan environmental conditions and local municipal requirements. The urban centres of modern Malaya are principally the creation of Europeans, Chinese and Indians. Here, too, they bear little or no resemblance to the traditional town patterns of India or China, but have been laid out more on the lines of English towns. Furthermore the Malayan towns were subject to European municipal regulations, which prevented, or at least hindered, the earlier tendencies of the Indians, Chinese and other Asian immigrants to continue to huddle together. (Sandhu 1969: 218 – 219)
There have been few settlements in Malaya designed exclusively for, or peopled wholly by, Indians. Even these, apart from being inhabited by Indians, have not always been markedly different in their layout from the analogous types of the other immigrant groups. In these circumstances the settlements of the Indians, or more usually settlements containing Indians, are most conveniently discussed as part of the overall Malayan settlement pattern. (Sandhu 1969: 219)

Rajoo points out how the Malaysian Indians are not a homogeneous group and are divided on the basis of language, religion and place of origin. These cultural differences are, no doubt, divisive factors; but, on a positive side, it must be pointed out that, over the years they have developed an ‘Indian identity’ over and above their primordial loyalties. The policy of the Malaysian government to club them together as ‘Indians’, both for political and administrative purposes, has further given a fillip to this process. (Rajoo 1982: 36)

From the viewpoint of dominant society, that is, the Malays, and other bumiputras, Indians in Peninsular Malaysia are a homogeneous ‘community’ and, thus, politically and administratively, they are treated as Indians as such. However, in reality, the Indians consider themselves as belonging to distinct communal groups or ‘communities’ and also behave as such. Each of these groups views itself as having distinct cultural roots, identity and life-style and also believes itself to enjoy different socio-economic status, capabilities, privileges and opportunities in the Malaysian plural society. Such actions, inevitably, have brought about intra-communal tensions, anxiety and conflicts among the various sub-groups. It is true that among them the feeling of ‘Indianness’ has grown significantly over the last fifty years but such a thought is mainly confined to a small group of urban, English educated, ‘Westernised’ Indians and to certain social and political elites of the larger Indian community. But even among them there is a tendency to behave as Indians in one situation, especially in relation to the larger society, and as members of the respective sub-groups in another. (Rajoo 1982: 52)
Chakraborti has observed that cultural diversities have, however, over the years, converged to create an ‘Indian identity’ over and above their primeval loyalties. The policy of the Malaysian government to amalgamate them together as ‘Indians’, both for political and administrative purposes, has further reinforced this process. (Chakraborti 2004: 196)

A common form of Indian local community in Malaya is a body of workers on an estate, housed and supervised by an industrial concern. Indians on such estates are ethnically distinguishable from the Chinese, Malays, or Europeans who may also reside there, but there has been little miscegenation on estates between the Indian and other ethnic categories. Thus, culturally and racially, Indians constitute a recognizable category. There are variations within it, however, and of these variations are patterned. Indians on the rubber estates are distinguishable by language, religion, and place of origin in India. The distinguishing criteria (except for religion, which, in the case of many Indians and Ceylonese Christians, tends to become an achieved criterion) are ‘ascribed’ criteria of distinction within the Indian category. Among the distinguishing criteria of achievement, occupational status and education are most important. There is usually a correlation between the criteria of ascription and those of achievement in Indian community resident on an estate. The majority of semiliterate labourers are Hindu Tamils from Tamilnad State, whereas members of the staff are mostly English-educated Christians hailing from Kerala State in India (Malayanees) or from Jaffna in Ceylon (Jaffna Tamils). By and large, this pattern of social stratification of Indians on a rubber estate is as true today as in the past. (Jain 1970: xvi)

However, social stratification among Indians resident on a rubber estate is part of a larger pattern of social stratification—that imposed by the occupational hierarchy of the estate. Whether one tries to explain the overlap between distinctions of ascriptions and achievement in the Indian community or to discover the comprehensive occupational structure in which Indian labourers and members of the staff found themselves in an enterprise for the large scale production of labour, it becomes apparent that the traditional categories of South Indian society and culture fail to unravel the principles of social
organisations. It is important to realize that such an Indian community compromises both prewar immigrants from India and their children and grandchildren, the majority of whom have known no other locale in Malaya than a rubber estate is a matter of 'specialized adaptation', as proposed by Wolf in 1959. (Jain 1970: xvi)

Vasil points out how the Indians in Malaysia are divided into three main groups:

1. labour in rubber estates and plantations
2. Urban working class and small businessmen
3. Middle class professionals and civil servants

The estate-dwelling Indians, most of whom are Tamil-speaking, have always formed a separate insular group. They have remained isolated physically not only from other communities but also from other Indians and have generally lived their own life. Economically depressed and not having had the benefit of adequate educational facilities they have tended to remain under the strong influence of estate owners and officials, trade union leaders, and sometimes leaders of the Malaysian Indian Congress. They are essentially apolitical, not concerned with either ideological or communal issues. By and large they have constituted a loyal dependable following of a political or a trade union leader. (Vasil 1980: 119) Most of the Indians in Malaya are from South India. Ramaswamy, Arunachalam and Simhachalam are all common names. The labourers in the coconut estates are mostly Telgu people and those in the rubber estates are Tamilians. Both speak Tamil and live as if they were of one family. They intermarry among themselves. (Sastry 1947: 47)

The urban Indian on the other hand, whether of the working class or from the professions, is politically mature and sophisticated. Many of them have been active participants in the trade union movement in the country; in fact, a large part of leadership of trade union movement, since about 1950, has been provided by them. They have generally tended to support non-communal political parties; Indians had constituted the
largest single group in Dato Onn Bin Jaafar’s Independence of Malaya Party and had remained loyal to it until its end. (Vasil 1980: 119)

In Malaysia the often used concept of Indian is employed to describe Malaysian of Indian decent who migrated to the country during the time of British colonial rule. While the concept might be used in a legal/judicial sense, in the real everyday/cultural/emotional sense, Malaysian Indians would like to identify themselves as Tamils, Sikhs, Malayalees, Telugus, or in other smaller categories of sub-communal groups. (Ramasamy 2001: 4312)

The growth of an Indian working-class consciousness, with a class culture of its own and within it a specifically plantation-oriented culture, as one of the most significant evolutions of the twentieth century. This was helped by the homogeneity of Indian labour, being overwhelmingly Tamil and drawn from rural districts of Tamil Nadu. Yet this consciousness was in developing and was achieved only with the reorientation of the attitude and outlook or the Indian labourers. (Arasaratnam 1993: 4)

Tamil, Malayalee’s and Telgus, which belong to the Dravidian ethno-linguistic family in India, constitute over 90 per cent of all Malayan Indians. This gives a certain homogeneity to an otherwise divided community. (Arasaratnam 1970: 45) The socioeconomic gaps between Indians of different regional origins have reinforced subethnic loyalties and perceptions. As Lee and Rajoo have pointed out, many Malayalis, Ceylonese Tamils and North Indians were better educated than the South Indian Tamil and Telgu labourers, thereby having greater access to high positions and income. These socioeconomic differences have yet to undergo radical transformation despite the increased movement of plantation labourers into the cities since the country’s independence in 1957. They continue to influence subethnic perceptions and interactions. The South Indian Tamil ‘coolie’ is often stereotyped by other Indians as inferior, illiterate, drunk and subservient, while Malayalis and Ceylonese Tamils are usually considered to be haughty and selfish. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 392)
The Indian plantation experience in Malaysia has been characterised by an enclave situation of their life chances and expectations. They have looked upon themselves as an appendage of south India and on Malaysian plantations have been effectively isolated and insulated from the wider currents of the society. (Jain 2004: 178)

Within the Indian Diaspora, which makes up approximately 7 per cent of Singapore’s population, two subcategories emerge as particularly salient bases for community; subdivisions based on religion and ethnic differences based on place of origin. At one level the latter subcategory has adopted a north-south divide which is particularly salient in Singapore and Malaya. At another, the mid-categories ‘south’ and ‘north’ can themselves be subdivided along regional lines – Tamil, Malayalee, Telgu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Gujrati, Bengali, etc. it has often been the case, however, that the history of subordinate communities has been appropriated by larger groups that are seen to define the ‘racial’ category in and of themselves. (Rai 2004: 1)

Caste was yet another factor which further contributed to the segmentation of Indian society. Although caste differences existed among all categories of Indians, they were more significant among the Indian Tamils. The reasons were that the Indian Tamils were preponderant in number and among them each caste category was represented in substantial numbers to enable the retention of caste identities. (Rajoo 1982: 56)

Among south Indian residents on rubber plantations in Malaysia, Jati exists as a framework for ascribed identity and distinction on various levels of the segmentary scale. For carrying out traditionally ascribed functions those of priests, drummers, washermen etc., for example, a distinction and hierarchy is maintained between the non- Brahman and Dravida. (Jain 2004: 178)

It is a fact for Malaysia as a whole, that Brahmans did not migrate to work as estate labourers and are, therefore, conspicuous by their absence in labour lines. Martial ties, increasingly but yet thinly are formed right across the board of the caste structure. There are two especially dense points of distribution a: the Vanniar as a subcategory of
the non-Brahman Jati of Tamil Nadu and the ‘kindred around Kanganay’ or ‘micro caste’ given the traditional preference for cross-cousin marriage among south Indians. The Vanniar level is located in the middle ranges of the segmentary caste structure and the ‘micro-caste’ at the lower end. The system of caste stratification is cut across by the common status of labour-line residents as wage labourers on the plantation, but only imperfectly. (Jain 2004: 179)

The system of Kangany recruitment and supervision and the formation of ‘kindreds around Kanganies’ among both the non-Brahman and the Adi-Dravida had led to the marginal retention of caste, by and large, in marriage, in the distribution of informal power and social control and even in the settlement pattern of a typical large European-owned rubber estate in Malaysia. Though the ideological basis of the caste system such as ritual pollution, untouchability and commensality has now considerably disappeared, yet endogamy is still stressed. The Brahmans, Chettiyars, Vellalas, Kavuntars and Vanniyars regard themselves as dominant castes. They also differ in ritual and life-styles and enjoy relatively a greater degree of high position in the socio-economic scale. Belonging to a high caste rank is considered prestigious and, thus, is desired. This inevitably also results in lower caste men seeking marriage alliances with high caste girls (hypogamy), especially whenever there is an improvement in their socio-economic status through education, occupation, income and a change in life-style. In such instances, it is also not unusual for the process of Sanskritisation to occur among members of lower castes. Thus, caste became a crucial determinant factor in inter-group relations among the Indian Tamils. In fact, certain high castes such as the Brahmans, Chettiyars, Vellalas, etc., prefer to identify themselves and are identified in turn by virtue of their dominant status, as distinct ‘communities’. Perceptions of caste ranking also exists among Indian Christians who, again, avoid inter-caste marriages between ‘high’ castes and ‘low’ castes. There is no caste distinction among the Indian Muslims. (Rajoo 1982: 57)

Ethnic and caste alignments and their continuity were made possible also by the size and concentration of specific sub-ethnic groups and castes in particular geographical
and residential areas. The Indian Tamils were primarily confined to the plantations and in the certain residential localities in towns and cities in their places of employment, namely, railways, public works departments, municipalities, telecommunications, port authorities, etc., the Telugus were concentrated in lower Perak, around Sungie Patani in Kedah and certain parts of Johor and Selangor; North Indians settled mainly in cities towns like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Taiping, Batu Gajah, Sereuban, etc.; the Malayalis, Muslims, Christians, Brahmins, Chettiyars, certain Indian Tamil Vellalas and Mukkulattor castes were found in sizable numbers in all the major cities and towns. (Rajoo 1982: 57)

In the estates, there was the territorial segregation between the non-Brahmin clean castes and ‘untouchables’. In the urban areas, too, the ‘un-touchable’ castes who were usually engaged in their traditional occupations such as scavenging, had separate quarters and residential areas. Such a distribution of the Indian society enabled close kinship ties within specific sub-ethnic groups and castes. This also resulted in the emergence of exclusive social, religious, caste and cultural associations among the respective groups. Thus, Indian Tamils, Malayalis, Telugus, North Indians, Ceylonese, Tamils, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Brahmins (Tamils) Chettiyars, Vellalas, Mukkulattor, Vanniyars, Natars, Maruttuvar and Adi Dravidas founded separate associations emphasizing insular identities, cohesiveness, group loyalty and interests. These associations, thus formed the social niches of the different sub-ethnic groups and castes. (Rajoo 1982: 58)

Prakash C Jain while analysing the Indian community in Guyana and Malaysia points out how the Malaysian case represents a situation where the Indian community from the very beginning has been divided into two classes: (a) the working class which mainly consisted of rubber estate workers, and (b) segments of the petty bourgeoisie (traders and money lenders, government servants, teachers, lawyers, etc.). Except during a brief period of subcommunal nationalism in the 1930s when, in order to raise its status in the eyes of other communities, the Indian petty bourgeoisie showed some concern about the oppressed condition of Indian workers and provided them with organizational leadership, the two classes have been isolated from each other. (Jain 1989: 127)
Lee and Rajoo further suggest how caste conflicts in Malaysia tend to resolve around the question of ritual purity and its consequences. Until 1935 the rules of untouchability and commensality were strictly observed that resulted in the prohibition of the lower castes from worshipping in temples controlled by the higher castes. Members of the lower castes worshipped in their own temples dedicated mainly to village deities such as Munisvaran and Muniyanti. In 1935 and after, many agamic temples opened their doors to the lower castes, as a result of the temple entry movements in India. However, the higher castes still prohibit the lower castes from direct participation in temple affairs such as running for administrative positions or cooking for temple feasts. These caste disputes have resulted in several cases of physical violence. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 393)

It is significant to note that the particular articulation of the labour-line residents caste identities and their common identity as a plantation proletariat found cultural expression in 1950s and 1960s in and through collective mobilisation as ‘Tamilians’, that is a sub-ethnic categorisation. ‘Tamilian’ silent features were, (a) It cut across castes without being especially anti caste but by being anti-Brahman; thus its target of attack conveniently were the Brahmans who were essentially not part of the ‘lived in’ experience of estate workers, (b) it was derived from India, hearkened back to another mythical target for Malaysian Indians, the southern Indians rebellion against the dominant north Indians; and (c) it marginally reflected the knowledge and the overall structural significance of sub-ethnicity in this population of Malaysian Indians. It was a ‘false consciousness’ which functioned to legitimize symbolically their particular station in life as an Indian plantation proletariat in Malaysia. (Jain 2004: 179)

The Indian Tamils had their various caste associations as well as a few social and cultural associations based on linguistic-regional alignments. Although closeness to the country of origin may not necessarily contribute to the perpetuation of ethnic and other forms of identity, in the case of the Indians in Malaysia it did have some important bearings. In the first instance, the bulk of Indian labour was brought under the contract system and unlike the West Indies and Fiji, the British colonial government in Malaya
never attempted to settle the Indians here permanently. Secondly, the close proximity to
the subcontinent enabled many Indians to maintain kinship ties with their village of
origin. Thirdly, India as a great nation and the home of the great Indian cultural heritage
has always attracted the Indians here. Further, before and after World War 2, Indians
have been able to follow closely events in the subcontinent and whenever possible, even
attempted to initiate political and cultural events. Such factors indeed made it possible for
the retention of not only their Indian identity but also sub-ethnic and caste identities. This
is also reflected in the instances where a visitor from a particular region, linguistic group
or caste is entertained by the respective subgroups through their associations. (Rajoo
1982: 59)

A further significant and crucial factor which accentuated ethnicity, caste and
dominant and subordinate statues creating situations of conflict between the sub-ethnic
groups and castes, was the level of educational attainment, occupational specialization
and economic positions along sub-ethnic and caste basis. The Malayalis, Ceylonese,
some North Indians, Brahmins, some Indian Tamil Vellalas and Christians in general had
a very high level of educational achievement as against the vast majority of the illiterate
and semi-literate working Indian class. This background gave the opportunity for those
groups with high education an opportunity for greater degree of occupational and social
mobility, access to high positions, income and wealth. The Malayalis occupied clerical,
supervisory and, later, managerial posts in the plantations while many also became
professionals, clerks, teachers, executives and technicians in the government service and
in private sectors in towns and cities. There were some Malayalis employed as plantation
labour but they were subsumed under the dominant position of other Malayalis. The
Ceylon Tamils were engaged in clerical and teaching services as well as in professional
lines. (Rajoo 1982: 59)

Institution of caste among Indians in Malaysia is a cultural variable. It is not an
aspect of stratification, as in the overseas Indian situation the ideological rather than the
structural functional dimension of caste takes precedence. Caste passes into ethnicity in
Malaysia. (Jain 2004: 182) Due to the function of caste as a cultural variable in the
context of ethnicity cutting across socioeconomic strata in Malaysia, we are alerted to the possibility that social stratification – comprising the dimension of class, status and power – may not be the determinant framework of Indian identity in the overseas context. Through a socio-historical sketch the typification of the Indian community as proletarians on Malaysian estates is sociologically inaccurate. (Jain 2004: 183)

Many Brahmins, too, occupied a similar position. The North Indians, especially Punjabis were mainly in the police force. But, later, many of their children acquired secondary, college and university education and became professionals while others entered into other categories of white-collar jobs. There were many among them, especially Sindhis, Gujratis and Punjabis, who entered into business. The Christians with their educational background entered into white-collar jobs. The Muslims were mainly engaged in all kinds of business enterprises while the Chettiyars became money-lenders and financers. Thus, though they were statistical minorities they constituted the sociological majorities. (Rajoo 1982: 60)

On the other hand, the bulk of the Indian literate Tamils and Telugus came as 'coolie' labourers under the organised indenture and, later, the kangany system of migration. This coolie was usually also a lower caste or an Adi-Dravida untouchable, condemned to a low social position. Moreover the coolie usually served under a Malayali supervisor in the estate or under a Ceylon Tamil in the railways, public works, etc. These contact situations further widened and accentuated feelings of superordination and subordination along ethnic lines between the sub-groups. Thus the cultural and economic factors enabled the North Indians, Malayalis, Ceylon Tamils, Brahmins, Chettiyars and a few high or dominant castes to emerge as status groups in the Indian society. There were, of course, conflicts within the Hindu Malayalis and the Christian Malayalis or among North Indian subgroups but such conflicts were always minimal vis-a-vis the conflicts between broader groups. (Rajoo 1982: 60)

Thus, ethnocentrism and conflicts existing between the different groups came to be reflected in certain characteristics attributed as social stereotypes to each individual
group. For instance, the Indian Tamil coolie was thought of as low caste, inferior, illiterate, drunkard, subservient and so forth. On the other hand, a Malayali or Ceylonese was considered to be selfish. Even specific phrases came to exist in this connection. (Rajoo 1982: 61)

Intra-communal conflicts became more pronounced after the War as a result of certain structural changes in the Indian community. From the 1930s there was a growing unrest within the working class Indian Tamils. This is revealed in the emergence of certain social movements such as the Tamil Social Reform Associations and Adi-Dravida Associations. These movements were essentially associated with the backward classes and fought for the social upliftment of these classes. These movements more or less, imitated the ideology of the Dravidian Self-Respect Movement (DK) in South India. (Rajoo 1982: 62 - 63)

In this period the lower classes also witnessed some rapid structural changes in their social structure with the rise of the Malayan-born Tamil educated youths. It was in this situation that the Tamil cultural nationalism under the influence of Dravidian Progressive Movement (DMK) in South India became a great force. The journalists of the local Indian newspapers, the Tamil Murasu of Singapore and Tamil Nesan of Kuala Lumpur, played an enormous role in propagating the ideology of Tamil unity, more or less, based on the South Indian DMK ideology. (Rajoo 1982: 63)

The course of events that followed the advent of the Tamil unity movement created some apprehensions in the minds of the non-Tamils. It was felt that the movement was destroying Indian unity. The two Tamil newspapers assured that the movement was concerned with unifying the Tamils who were otherwise divided on various factors and that it was in no way anti-Indian. (Rajoo 1982: 64) The rise of the movement also coincided with other events in the Indian society. For instance, there was a general discontent among many Indians arising from the ineffectiveness of the MIC leadership in this period. The non-Tamils were always outvoted by the Tamil majority at
the grass-root level where the party tried to establish its base. Since then the leadership of
the MIC devolved firmly into the hands of the Tamils. (Rajoo 1982: 64)

The Tamil unity movement, undoubtedly, widened the exiting rift between the
various subgroups. For instance the non-Tamils remarked that there was no place for
them in the MIC. This discontentment was expressed in such statements as ‘MIC is a
‘Tamilian Party’, ‘MIC politics is Tamilian politics’, MIC is a party of the dhotis. (Rajoo
1982: 64)

The birth of Tamil unity movement also resulted in the emergence of similar
sentiments among other subgroups and sometimes even gave rise to the formation of such
movements. For instance, the Telugus formed the Andhra Association in 1955 and
emphasized a Telugu unity on the basis of Telugu language and culture. In fact, wherever
the Telugus and Tamils lived in substantial numbers, the latter emphasized the use of
Tamil language in public functions, as in temple festivals and in screening of movie films
in the estates. This led to direct confrontation with the former. The Telugus argued that
since they too contributed in the running of such functions, it was fair that their legitimate
aspirations be also fulfilled. The Tamils, on the contrary would argue that while the
Telugus understood Tamil, the Tamils did not understand Telugu and, therefore, it was
fair that Tamil was used as a medium since it could be understood by everyone. Then,
there were occasions when the Tamils would build a temple in honour of Mariamman or
Subrahmaniya, the popular deities among the Tamils, whereas the Telugus, being
Vaishnavites would ask for a temple of Vishnu or Rama. (Rajoo 1982: 65)

Such developments can also be seen as a reaction in the light of the social and
political processes of the wider society in which group is engaged in search of its own
identity. (Rajoo 1982: 65) Caste has also constituted an important area of social conflict,
particularly between the non-Brahmin middle ranking castes and the lower caste
untouchables. Until the first half of this century, rules of untouchability and
commensality were rigidly observed which resulted in residential segregation between
the ‘clean’, higher castes and ‘unclean’ lower castes. The latter were, thus, prohibited
from entering high caste Hindu temples. In the estates, the adherence to this rule created a further problem. For instance, there the lower castes too, subscribed to the maintenance of the major temples, yet they were not given equal rights on matters of worship. (Rajoo 1982: 66)

Such caste discriminations resulted in the formation of the Malaya Dravidian Association in 1927, which apparently took the ideology of the Dravidian Movement in South India. Indeed, subsequently, the lower castes succeeded in their demand for temple entry in many places but they were excluded direct participation on matters like cooking and so forth during a temple feast. The Malayan-born lower castes youth resisted such treatment accorded to them. In many places they even refused to perform certain caste services like digging the grave for the ‘high’ castes and beating the traditional Indian band. There have also been occasions when violence broke out when ‘lower’ caste youths insisted on cooking and serving the temple for the ‘high’ castes. In some instances even the police was called in to settle the disputes. (Rajoo 1982: 67)

An interesting development in the caste structure is that it has come to acquire a new significance with regard to power. The various castes now attempt to further their socio-economic and political interests through their caste associations. Moreover, in many areas the ‘lower’ castes now want to occupy positions just as the ‘higher’ castes do. Such efforts by the ‘higher’ castes are not always welcomed by the ‘higher’ castes and so they resist. (Rajoo 1982: 67)

By no stretch of imagination can it be assumed that caste organisation among the Indians in a Malaysian rubber plantation setting is roughly similar to caste organisation in the kinds of Indian settings out of which the immigrants to Malaysia came. In India, most had lived not only within relatively well-defined regional environments but also as residents in small towns and villages, in settings where both ascriptive and interactional criteria are usually blended in defining a particular caste’s local position. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 70)
By contrast in Malaysia, to follow the arguments of R K Jain (1970: 345-353), (1) there usually is the co-residence in a single estate community of people from widely different regional *jati* networks in India, the result being that wide areas of ambiguity concerning the hierarchical positions of the various groups occur; (2) almost no Brahmans have ever migrated to work in Malaysian estates, the result being that the organisation of castes in any particular setting has always been cut off from the highest *varna* levels of the system; and (3) such things as wider economic opportunities, the break-down of relatively permanent locality identifications and payments in cash rather than kind have resulted in a degree of mobility that has rendered impossible many of the patterned relationships between higher and lower caste persons and groups that can be found in at least most non-metropolitan Indian settings even today. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 70)

No one understands well the *varna* classificatory scheme. The emphasis in the south of India from which by far the majority originated and in relation to which they continue to inform themselves have been anti-Brahminic for quiet sometime and the Kshatriya and Vaisya labels have never been specifically applicable even in South India. However, none of the Indians has any difficulty in identifying himself with a sub-caste unit. Most of the Indian people in Malaysia came out of the Sudra and Harrijan levels of Indian society. And the distinctions between these two groups of *jatis*, clear as they were and continue to be in at least much of South India, were clearly transferred into Malaysia. Until the middle 1950’s, the two groups of *jatis* were housed in separate line areas. In those days the management saw to it that low ranking jobs – drain sweeping, latrine cleaning and rubbish collecting, for example – were done by persons of the lowest castes. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 72)

*Jati* specifications in mannerisms, occupations and dress have never been generally observed in Malaya. Coming out of distinct Indian backgrounds (regionally, linguistically and religiously), often coming individually rather than as members of family units, the people never found it possible to introduce in Malaysia many of the characteristics of the Indian *jati* system. Some (the barbers and the washermen,
particularly) did come to practice their customary occupations in the course of time. Others early on disdained contacts with persons of what they considered ‘lower purity’ levels. But apart from the basic Sudra-Harijan differences that found reinforcement in the ways in which living accommodations were established – few other differences were immediately apparent. Workers were assigned tasks in the system of rubber production. Their incomes were rationally defined. Their living quarters were assigned. And the membership numbers of all but several of the jatis were too low to enable meaningful jati supports. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 72)

By now, the quarters formerly for Harijans alone have been dismantled and the Harijans live interspersed with the rest of the Indians. By now it is impossible to identify people with particular jatis in considering physically observable differences and it is impossible for persons unfamiliar with the setting to distinguish Sudras and Harijans. There are many influences that have worked together in cutting back caste realities. Many of the India-born have passed away from the scene leaving behind mostly the Malaysia born with their weaker ties with Indian social processes. The power and economic interests of the Indian Malaysians are now pursued primarily in the understanding that these will be most adequately accomplished if the Indians work together as a general ethnic community rather than in terms of sub-community interests, given the challenges posed by other ethnic groups. Also there are no differentiations by caste in the workings of the schools and certainly there are none in the way Malaysian system of education is defined. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 73)

Changes in attitudes have accompanied the other changes that have taken place. According to one of the political leaders among the Indians in Kedah: ‘In Malaysia, we don’t have differences like those between Chettiar, Gounders, Pariahs, Ceylonese and Malayalees… no more there such a thing as caste here.’ (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 73) More recently, Harijans have demanded the right to serve food at temple functions and have succeeded considerably in obtaining this right. Harijans have continuously sought more representation on the community’s temple committee. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 74)
Much has worked against the persistence of caste in Malaysian settings. Clearly, the system here does not approximate that in an Indian setting of similar population size. Nevertheless, caste remnants are strong and it hardly seems likely these will disappear in the foreseeable future. Reinforcing the system of rankings, stereo-typical attitudes among the groups remain. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 74)

Recognitions or at least suspicions of differences among the jatis are widespread. And these are often reflected in the ways in which the people refer to each other. An emphasis on the Sanskritization – the process whereby certain practices and beliefs of groups higher in the system are adopted by groups lower in the system- of beliefs and practices continue to operate in numerous ways. For example, none of the Harijans of Pudthukuchi publicly purchase or consume beef. Many of their jati level fellows in India continue to do so but here it is no longer considered right for Hindus of any jati level. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 75)

A slight indication of persistence of caste differences is that marriages here continue to be organised primarily along jati lines. According to some though not jati, money now makes the difference. Most would agree that jati restrictions in the arrangement of marriages are not nearly as strict here as in India. Yet intra-jati marriages are still far more preferred than inter-jati marriages. Only about ten percent of all marriages have so far occurred across jati lines. Especially shunned are most potential alliances between the Sudras and Harijans. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 78-79) People of many different jatis eat together in public places, including among the younger men especially people of both Sudra and Harijan jatis. But in homes, such liberties are very seldom taken. Publicly, toddy drinking is generally okay for the Harijans alone. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 79)

But all said and done jati considerations do exists among Indian Malaysians. As S. Arasaratnam notes (1970 :197), whatever the changes in physical yearnings for and political orientation towards India, there remains among Indian Malaysians ‘...a solid
core (that) ...desire to retain its traditional religious and cultural roots'. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 80)

The process of migration and settlement was attended by authoritarianism and paternalism at every turn and had the effect of seriously curtailing the labourer’s freedom of action and narrowing his horizons in his new environment. Housing and living conditions were laid out, as far as possible, so as not to disturb his orthodoxy and lifestyles. Untouchability was practiced, with labourers of untouchable castes forming a little over a third of the total labour force. Labourers continued to inter-relate in caste categories and there were enough in the non-polluting castes among them to allow this. Thus vellalai, vanniyar, and kamma were among castes that were able to form links through associations. Because migration involved movement of whole lineages, the Dravadian practice of cross-cousin and maternal uncle marriages could be carried out, at least in the early stages. The pressure to conform was reinforced by the expectation of return after a period of contracted service and the necessity of being accepted back in the structure of village society from which the migrants came. (Arasaratnam 1993: 4)

Despite the difficulties in the way of social cohesion, there was some movement towards social change and social modernization, in some respects faster than in the country of origin. The impetus to change was inherent in the very act of migration and settlement, in the fundamentally new environment, and in the necessity of bringing about new social interrelationships. It was noted above that the plantation management sought to retain caste separation and preserve caste taboos, at least within a broad hierarchy of castes. Thus untouchability was preserved and practiced for many years. Caste members below the pollution barrier were required to take up occupations associated with each caste, such as the disposal of corpses, the beating of funeral drums, the removal of human and other refuse, and the tapping of coconut and palms for toddy. These untouchable castes were not allowed to draw water from wells and taps provided for others and they were refused entry to the temples frequented by the ‘clean’ castes. The maintenance of these fundamental precepts of purity and pollution was encouraged by the fact that
repatriation to the natal village was a continuing aim and indeed was substantially achieved till well into the twentieth century. (Arasaratnam 1993: 17)

Changes began to occur from the 1920s with the rise of a generation born and bred in Malaya and, of course, with the spread of reforming influences from India itself. The depressed castes formed themselves into an Adi Dravida Sangam, assisted by enlightened upper caste leaders with Gandhian principles. The first move towards the abolition of discrimination were made and gathered momentum in the 1930s. Gradually, caste obligations unrelated to their employment were abandoned as untouchables refused to perform jobs connected with funerary rites for the upper castes- A major success was the gradual achievement of temple entry for the untouchable castes. In 1935 a major Agamic temple in Penang attended by the upper castes opened its doors to untouchables, followed by temples in other parts of Malaya and Singapore. The opening of temples to untouchables was achieved well in advance of Madras state and with less opposition from the higher castes. (Arasaratnam 1993: 17)

A more potent force towards reform was the ideology of Dravidianism which had largely been responsible for the reform of untouchability. Its leaders mainly Tamil-educated and of lower middle class origins closer to the workers were seeking to move religious practice away from Brahminism and towards their concept of a pure Tamil religion with little ritual and the widespread use of Tamil in place of Sanskrit as the language of worship. Under their influence, Tamil was popularized as the language of ritual even at the larger urban Agamic temples. In this respect also, the Malayan Hinduism moved faster than South Indian practice where the protagonists of Sanskrit were considerably stronger. Another element of the attack on Brahminism was the opposition to Brahminic ritual in marriage and its replacement by simple Tamil ceremonies conducted by a respected elder in the community. This form of marriage became immediately popular among the lower classes, mainly because of its cheapness and the difficulty of access to Brahmins in rural areas. (Arasaratnam 1993: 18)
The beginning of an attempt to divide the community between ‘local born’ or ‘Malayan born’ and others is seen as early as the 1920s. ‘There is discernible a growing tendency among the younger generation of Indians’, wrote an observer in May 1925, ‘to disclaim all connections with India and take pride in calling themselves ‘Straits born’. A rapid move towards westernization appears to have taken place among these people, in order to divest themselves of their ‘Indian-ness’ and move away from being identified with labour. This process was helped by the nature of the educational system, since children of middle-class Indians went to schools which imparted education in the English medium from the primary stage. There were no bilingual schools as in India or Ceylon, and the vernacular schools were of very low standard. The older people viewed with alarm the growth of a generation which could not read or write its Indian vernacular, and had no knowledge of, nor interest in its Indian heritage. The Indian’s editorial in November 1925 asked for the arrest of this process by the firm implanting of Indian institutions in the country, so that this increasingly alienated generation could remain within the folds of the Indian community. (Arasaratnam 1970: 100)

The granting of concessions to Indians such as representation on Councils, eligibility for employment in certain services, and facilities for higher education, further widened the distinction between those who were born and domiciled in this country and those who were not. (Arasaratnam 1970: 101)

There is, in fact, a convert antipathy between “Indian” Indians and “Malayan” Indians. The former view with disdain the ‘free way of life into which the younger generation of Malayan Indians have degenerated’. To the latter, the cultural inhibitions of Indian society are unbearable. Also, lack of proper independent Indian high schools blocked the surest way of inculcating ‘Indian’ patriotism among the local born Indians. (Mahajani 1960: 116)

Indian ethnic diversity as described above implies that on one level of analysis the basis of Indian unity is precarious, undermined by the crosscutting loyalties of caste, regionalism and religion. Even the MIC, generally assumed to be the political
representative of the Malaysian Indian community, is rife with factionalism that often reflects the ethnic diversity. Yet, on another level of analysis the minority status of Malaysian Indians constitutes an important reason for their efforts to minimize subethnic differences, as they compete with the Malays and Chinese for limited resources. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 395)

On the whole the Indian community is a tightly-knit community. Informal communication networks- first along the lines of family, age categories and sex, but later along the lines that extend throughout the community- link together various groupings in interactive ways, even with reference to knowledge about very private matters. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 86) Marriage and family, pilgrimage, jati, political and economic relations tie the Indians into their wider social environments while also helping to pattern social life. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 87)

The mutual dependence of ethnicity and culture in Malaysia is crucial in defining the collective identity of Indians in Malaysia. This correlation also explains why language is the prime indicator of ethnic and sub ethnic identities among Indians in Malaysia. Issues of identity were attributed to the degree of fluency in Tamil language and devotion to Hindu beliefs and practices. (Guan 2001: 45)

Language

Language is the vehicle by which one knows one’s roots, one’s culture, - that is, language measures a person’s closeness to his/her race. In an important sense, language is like the notion of racial blood. Just as racial blood can be watered down by ‘interracial’ marriages, language can be watered down by not learning it and thus being able to speak only other languages. (Kahn 1998: 89)

In the plural society of Malaya it was inevitable that the issues of language and education would be politically contentious. There was an unavoidable conflict of interest
between, in the one hand, communal newspapers, cultural societies, and communal leaders, and on the other the British authorities attempting to foster a Malayan identity through a national system of education in which the two main media of instruction were to be English and Malay. As a result the perennial question was whether the various races should be encouraged to assimilate or integrate whilst preserving their separate identity. (Ampalavanar 1981: 128)

In spite of the handicaps, an active Tamil literary culture has been implanted and continues to flourish. The first Tamil newspapers published in 1920s and thereafter there has been considerable publishing activity in newspapers, periodicals, literary magazines, and some novels and religious expositions. Many of the newspapers, periodicals, and literary magazines were shortlived and financially unsuccessful. Two Tamil national dailies, Thamil Nesan in Malaysia and Thamil Murasu in Singapore, have succeeded in establishing themselves soundly for over thirty years. To these a third national daily has been added in recent years. Some periodicals and journals have appeared recently in different parts of the country. A Tamil literary magazine for Malaya of any standard is yet to be established. This is partly because magazines from South India come in cheap rates and are widely read. The Kalki and Ananda Vikada, two such magazines from Madras, are popular among the Malayan Tamil reading public. Before 1940 all the literary material published in Malayan Tamil newspapers was of Indian origin. All editors and their assistants had to be employed from Madras because of the absence of educational opportunities in Tamil beyond standards 6 and 7. (Arasaratnam 1970: 193)

Since 1950 there has been a conscious attempt to develop a Malayan Tamil literature. Immigration rules made difficult the continued employment of Indian nationals, and newspapers began to take the lead in creating enthusiasm for Tamil writing. They ran Sunday literary magazines and competitions in various literary forms such as the short story, verse, serialized stories, and plays. Today all published literature, whether in newspapers, magazines, or anthologies is by Malayan writers. Tamil teachers have been in the forefront of this literary movement. Opportunities created by journalism, radio and television brought out other hidden talent and stirred up a latent interest. Tamil
literary Associations cropped up in many parts of the country. They ran literary competitions. Classical Tamil literature was studied in study groups organised by these associations. The Thirukkural Manram, an association for the study of the Thirukkural, a second century Tamil classic, is active in many parts of the country. (Arasaratnam 1970: 193)

There are now estimated to be about 300 Tamil writers in Malaysia and Singapore, some of them achieving a standard comparable to that in Tamil Nad. The short story and the play are popular literary forms. The former can be easily published in newspapers and periodicals, the latter produced over radio and television, or in club entertainment. There is an active Tamil Writer’s Association co-coordinating the activities of these writers. What is noteworthy is that for most of these people creative writing in Tamil is at best a hobby. None can make a living out of it. Without State support in any form, lacking the patronage of wealthy foundations or individuals, the very existence of Tamil literary culture in Malaya is an index to the deep roots of the Tamil tradition in Indian society. (Arasaratnam 1970: 194)

There have been instances narrated by those who have travelled to India know their Tamil is more pure than commonly spoken in madras. The Pudthukuchi Tamil is ‘...simply like that spoken in Madurai’ (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 64)

With the establishment of British rule in Malaya the day-to-day business of the government and commercial departments and agencies came to be conducted mainly, if not wholly, in English. (Sandhu 1969: 67) Indian children in Malaya received their education either in one of the English-medium schools or in Indian schools. The first regular Indian language school attached to the Penang Free School founded in 1816. It does not appear to have lasted long. The Singapore Free School started Tamil classes in 1834 but soon abandoned them. Around 1850 there is reference to an Anglo-Tamil school in Malacca which also had a short life. Similar Anglo-Tamil schools are also referred to in Singapore and Penang. In 1859 the Singapore St. Francis Xavier Malabar School
started classes in Tamil. Probably these were all attempts by missionaries to serve the old settled Tamil population in these three settlements. (Arasaratnam 1970: 178)

After the 1870s, Tamil schools sprang up in these places as well as in other areas such as Province Wellesely and Johore where Tamils were employed. The first efforts to open these schools were made by missionary bodies such as Ladies Bible and Tracts Society, the Society for the Propagation of Christianity, and the big Church Missions. Later the Government stepped in, and put up the first Government Tamil schools in Perak and Negri Sembilan in 1900. In some coffee and rubber plantations, the management opened schools with a view to attracting labourers to settle or stay longer. Thus there were some Tamil schools in the country by 1920s, founded and managed by a wide array of authorities. There was no proper policy or control, as is seen by the appearance and disappearance of schools. The Government clearly did not want to take on the responsibility of providing education for immigrant communities, and expected missionary and plantation managers to fulfil the need. But no attempt was made to make this obligatory on planters and so the provision of education facilities on estates varied widely. In most plantations there were more nurseries and crèches to look after children while the parents were at work than schools. (Arasaratnam 1970: 178–179)

It was only in 1923 that some attempt at a policy was made. In the Labour Code of 1923, at the request of the Government of India, provision was made for the education of labourer’s children. The Code stipulated that a school be erected on each estate with ten or more resident children of school going age. The school going age was defined as from 6 to 12 years. It was one thing to legislate for educational facilities; it was another to see that these were conscientiously provided. From the outset, it was obvious that the planters had accepted this obligation only to ease the flow of Indian labour. This is clear from the attitude taken by the planters’ representatives in the Federal Council when the Code was debated. Planters were never reconciled to the view of the Government that it was their responsibility to provide education for their labourers’ children while the Government was discharging its obligations to the rest of the community. Thus the planters became the reluctant custodians of the education of the vast majority of Indian
children. Many of the ills of the estate educational system flowed from this shift of responsibility. (Arasaratnam 1970: 179)

The Controller of labour was responsible for seeing that estates set up such schools for their children, but he was not concerned with what happened in these schools. So the estate educational system grew with a nominal acquiescence in the provisions of the Code. Very few estates would undergo the expenditure of employing teachers. Clerks, kangany, and even literate labourers would function as part-time teachers. The school was often a dilapidated shed, set apart to concur nominally with the provisions of the Code, and to keep the children out of trouble. (Arasaratnam 1970: 179)

In the 1920s, employment was available even for children after the age of 10, when their parents would send them off to work. The parents saw no benefit in educating their children. From the age of 10 the child would be a labourer and he would not be any better for having acquired an education. However, from the passing of the regulation, the number of Tamil schools in the FMS and the Straits Settlements showed an increase. In 1925 there were 235 Tamil schools in the FMS with an average enrolment of 8,153 pupils. By 1930 these had increased to 333 schools with an average enrolment of 12,640 pupils. The Depression saw a setback to Tamil education. A number of estate schools were closed, but with economic recovery many of them were reopened. (Arasaratnam 1970: 180)

The major problem connected with Tamil education in Malaya has been, and still is, its quality and content. In many other Asian countries, education under colonial powers has been a powerful influence towards leveling social inequalities by opening a path to social progress for children of the under-privileged classes. Through the acquisition of English education, children of Indian middle-and-upper class parents were able to better their lot and enter the elite groups in Malayan society. From the outset this opening was denied to the children of labourers, for both by the quality and the content of the education they received they were isolated from the rest of the society and ill-equipped to play any role in the country’s development. The most serious problem was
the quality of teachers. In many estates, clerks, conductors, dispensers, kanganys, or even labourers would be detailed to take charge of the school for a few hours of the day. In those few estates that had provision for a teacher, the pay was so meager that none but the least fitted for the pedagogy offered themselves. (Arasaratnam 1970: 180)

Even so, in 1937 out of 800 Tamil teachers in the FMS and SS, less than a quarter held training certificates. There was no provision for the training of Tamil teachers in Malaya until 1937. For all these years the whole system of Tamil education in the country was nothing but a sham and a mockery. (Arasaratnam 1970: 181)

Some limited attempts were made by the Government to improve the position in Tamil schools in this period, though they did not go far enough. The Government pressed managers to appoint full-time teachers to replace the part-time arrangements that were then functioning. In 1926 it attempted to get a European officer with a knowledge of Tamil to report on these schools, but with no visible effect. Again in 1929 it drafted regulations for the organization and administration of Tamil schools, printed these regulations, and distributed them to all estate managers for compliance. A Grants-in-Aid Committee that sat in 1932 recommended the payments of grants to vernacular schools at the rate of 6 dollars per pupil per year. This grant was to be based on examinations and average attendance. From 1935 this grant was increased to 8 dollars. The provisions to use revenues from estate toddy shops also made available some funds for Tamil schools. In some estates, out of this money children were given free uniforms and texts books, and sometimes even parents were given a gift of rice if the child’s attendance was satisfactory. (Arasaratnam 1970: 181)

Absence of provision for specialist inspection of Tamil schools also made them grow as Cinderella’s of the education system. In 1930 for the first time an officer with a knowledge of Tamil was appointed to the Malayan Educational Service to inspect Tamil schools and supervise their work. This officer died shortly after his appointment, and the office was not filled for some years. In 1937 the post was revived, and a substantive Inspector of Indian Schools was appointed to the Department of Education. The officer
first studied Tamil at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Then he was sent to India to acquaint with colloquial Tamil and to study the Tamil primary education system in the Madras state. This proved an effective step in improving the Tamil schools of Malaya. (Arasaratnam 1970: 181 – 182)

At about the same time, the Government initiated a scheme for training Tamil teachers. Classes for such training were opened in many training centres of Malaya. It was found that the response was good. The results of these measures were soon felt in at least some schools where an enlightened management cooperated with the education authorities. The curriculum in these schools was reformed, and a more meaningful training was given to the children. With the emphasis on land settlement and agricultural side-occupations for the labourers, an agricultural bias was given to the teaching. (Arasaratnam 1970: 182)

In cities and townships, educational facilities were of varied character. The Government itself was rather backward in facing up to its responsibilities for the children of large groups of labourers employed in various services. Tamil schools in towns with Public Works and Railway labourers in large concentrations were most inadequate. In the SS, there was not a single Government Tamil school before the war, and in the FMS there were only 13. It was left to private effort to step in where Government had failed. There were some Christian missionary activity, though they preferred to concentrate their main energies on English education. Indian Associations and groups of Indian philanthropists ran some schools. In Penang, the Indian Association founded two schools. The Ramakrishna Mission opened schools in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. In Singapore, the Tamil Reform Association helped in founding a few schools. (Arasaratnam 1970: 182)

It must be noted that all these Tamil schools were primary schools. All Tamil education stopped there, and there was no provision in the country to carry on further. The full course in these schools, on paper, lasted six years with one primary year and five standards. But very few schools had the fourth and fifth standards, most of stopping with four-year course at the end of standard three. All the teaching was in Tamil; no English or
Malay was taught, leaving children unable to carry on any of other educational streams. The subjects taught were reading, writing, dictation, arithmetic, and, in the higher classes, composition and geography. Physical education and agriculture were introduced later. Very few pupils stayed on even for the basic four-year course. In 1937 there were only 650 pupils in the entire FMS in standard 4, and less than 200 in standard 5. (Arasaratnam 1970: 182 – 183)

In any case, with the medium of instruction in these primary schools being Tamil, Telgu or Malyalam, this education was neither useful for further schooling, nor for job opportunities, as in either case the knowledge of English was necessary. Thus for lack of education, the generational mobility of domiciled Indian estate labourers was effectively blocked in the colonial period. (Jain 1989: 105 – 106) Lack of English schooling on the estates also tended to block the intergenerational mobility of those who stayed in Malaysia. (Jain 1989: 105 – 107) In English medium schools no Tamil or other Indian language was taught, with the exception of a few Ramakrishna Mission Schools and one or two Christian schools. Thus, while the children of Indian labourers were taught no English, Indian middle-class children learned no Tamil. A number of Indian children born and bred in Malaya thus grew up ignorant of their mother tongue. Leaders of the community showed alarm at this. (Arasaratnam 1970: 183)

Even for children of the educated classes, there was more demand than places available in schools. They felt this acutely, as education was the sole means by which these groups had risen in society and by which they could continue to keep their status. The Indian member in the Federal Council referred to the availability of educational opportunities for Indians more than once. After the Depression, when the Government spending on education was reduced, the pressure was even more acute. School fees were raised in 1934, and this affected Indian parents very much. They felt that there was discrimination in admissions to schools and higher institutions. Srinivas Sastri took this up with the authorities, and was assured by the Department of Education that there was no discrimination in admission. Indian enrolment in English schools was quiet heavy, ranking next to the Chinese and ahead of the Malaya. (Arasaratnam 1970: 183)
Indians made greater progress in education in the SS, where the principle of open competition was operating in admissions. Some sent their children to India for post-secondary and university education. The educational system before the war, as far as Indians were concerned, was in many ways unsatisfactory. It hardened existing divisions among them and contributed in no way towards their future orientation towards Malayan society. (Arasaratnam 1970: 184)

Indian education, like the education of all communities, suffered under Japanese occupation. All schools were converted into Japanese schools, and anyone with a smattering of Japanese was appointed as instructor. When British power was reestablished the education system had to be remoulded. The Colonial Government after the war took a more positive attitude towards social welfare. Education received high priority in its development policies, and Indian education soon felt the impact of the new reforms. (Arasaratnam 1970: 184)

From 1947, Tamil primary schools were incorporated into the national system. All primary education was in the child’s mother tongue and from the four language streams, after a primary school-leaving exam, the child could opt out to go into the English secondary school or continue in the mother tongue medium. The demand for secondary education in Tamil was very poor, and there is one such school which is able to take in all pupils who want to continue their education in the Tamil medium. Tamil could be taken as a subject in the English school, more satisfactory provision being made than in Malaysia by instituting centres where children from schools in an area could go to learn Tamil. Because of these factors, the standard of literacy in Tamil among the Indian middle class is higher in Singapore than in Malaysia. (Arasaratnam 1970: 192)

It is a curious phenomenon of the Tamil educational pyramid in Malaya that it has a base and a top but no middle. Secondary education in Tamil, is noteworthy by its absence. But it was decided to establish a Department of Indian Studies in the University of Malaya in 1956 with Tamil as its main language of study. It was a recognition of the fact that both Malaya and Singapore needed people with high academic qualifications in
Tamil, albeit in small numbers, to man some services where Government comes into contact with the Tamil-speaking public. Yet it is a serious defect of the educational structure as far as the Indian is concerned that the established educational institutions in the country provide for his studying Tamil at the primary level and at university level with wide gap in between. Those who want to study Tamil at the university are students who have succeeded in retaining their limited proficiency in the language through private informal study. This must inevitably affect standards of teaching in the university, and hamper the further development of this Department as a place for Tamil literary learning of a high order. (Arasaratnam 1970: 192)

Education is one of the significant factors that tends to divide the Indian community into two classes. A big gulf divides those who have secured English education from those who have not. These divisions are in a sense frozen, on account of the educational structure as it affects the Indians. The English-educated groups are a self-perpetuating oligarchy within the Indian community, in the absence of opportunities for others to break into this category. In theory, a child from the Tamil school can end up with a university education. But the actual possibility is very remote. About 80 per cent of Tamil schools are in estates. In spite of improvements many of them are still single-teacher, multiple-class schools. The drop out rate after the first three years is excessive. Even if the parents are willing, financial difficulties stand in the way of their sending the child to the nearest English school outside the estate. The children who learn in English schools from the earliest stage of their educational career forget the little Tamil they might have picked up at home. They are unable to speak the language, let alone read and write it. The gulf between the two groups grows wider. Children of labourer groups cannot aspire to improve their status. There has been very little or no occupational mobility among these groups. All the mobility is restricted to a slight upward movement of one grade from a very low status occupation to one somewhat less so. (Arasaratnam 1970: 194)

The steep social rise that was made possible in India and Ceylon by a wider spread of English education has not been possible among the low status groups in
Malaya. It is not surprising that there has in recent times been a serious suggestion among young radical Indians to do away with all Tamil primary schools and convert them into national primary schools teaching mainly in English and Malay, with Tamil as one subject. In this way at least the door will be continuously open to a small gifted minority every year to escape from being condemned to life-long occupation as plantation labourers. (Arasaratnam 1970: 195)

This dilemma was well expressed by Dr. N. K. Menon, a prominent Indian of Penang: Without a good English education, the future in Malaya for the Indian community is hopeless in every walk of life. An increased number of Indian children are going to English schools, but it is a source of distress to their parents that they are illiterate in their mother tongue. (Straits Times, November 15, 1947) The English-educated Indians attained their maximum influence and prosperity in the 1950s and early 1960s. The expansion of administrative and commercial services after independence in 1957 opened a number of avenues of employment. Malayization of executive positions increased these opportunities, and made possible fast promotions for gifted young men. Both in Malaysia and Singapore, Indians occupy positions in higher echelons of public service in far greater proportion to their population. There are heavy concentrations in professions that Indians have especially taken to, such as medicine, law, engineering, and teaching. Standards of living and levels of affluence of the educated have vastly improved. Yet some aspects of their present position are the cause of concern. Their education and their ways of life have alienated them from their traditional cultural heritage, to which they are now, by and large, complete strangers. They are growing up, particularly those at school, as a rootless generation. In a country still divided into its distinct cultural traditions, a group that alienates itself from what is its own will have no cultural home. (Arasaratnam 1970: 195)

It will be seen from a review of the political and social attitudes among all classes of Indians that the growth of education and the gradual increase in literacy had a very important determining influence on the development of these attitudes. For the English-educated professionals and white-collar employees, the continuing access to English
education for their children was an acute necessity. The provision of facilities for English education in schools and colleges was an issue that occupied the attention of their associations and representatives. They enrolled in government and Christian mission schools in the Straits Settlements and the Federated States in numbers considerably larger in proportion to their population as compared to the Chinese and the Malays. The expansion of English education in the peninsula was insufficient to meet the demands of this burgeoning middle class. Members of this middle class tried to cope with the situation by opening independent schools using the community’s resources and by sending their children to Indian tertiary institutions. This and the constant immigration of English-educated Indians created much competition for white-collar jobs in the government and private sectors. Inevitably, Indians and Sri Lankans occupied these positions disproportionate to their numbers, creating ill-feeling among the Malays, their major competitors for government employment. (Arasaratnam 1993: 12)

The increase in the number of Indian children born in Malaya and educated in multiracial English-medium schools, with no exposure to their native language and its literature, produced a generation of middle-class Malayan Indians whose attitudes diverged from those of their parents. There was among them less knowledge of traditional Indian culture and therefore less adherence to traditional Indian practices. There was a tendency to interact in the first instance across linguistic subgroups in pan-Indian social inbcu and then across ethnic dividing lines into multiracial clubs, associations, and groups. This led to a gradual weakening of the emotional ties to the country of origin — India or Sri Lanka — and the entry into a Westernized Malayan elite culture. The only feature that tended to cut across this development was the spread in the 1930s of Indian nationalism and an identity with the struggle of Indians against British imperialism, a struggle coming into the Malay Peninsula. (Arasaratnam 1993: 12)

In analyzing the census of Malaya which he organized in 1931, C. A. Vlieland found the local Indian labourers largely illiterate. “The percentage of literacy of this class;” he wrote, “is far below that of any other section of British Malaya . . . (it is) a section of the community which the Malayan education system is powerless to touch.
In less euphemistic terms, the pre war colonial government of Malaya accepted no responsibility for the education of non-Malay races beyond some small grants-in-aid and the requirement that employers in specified cases must provide a modicum of instruction to the children of their labourers.

Before World War II few of the schools had qualified teachers. Most were kanganis, clerks and other similar part-time teachers. The schools were usually simple sheds, often with no provision for separate classes, all the grades being taught in one class by the same teacher. Attendance was seldom compulsory. Indeed, most estates provided job opportunities for children from the age of ten to twelve years. This incentive, coupled with the general ignorance and illiteracy of the parents and the need for the children to work in order to supplement the family income, meant that most children left school after a few years. In any case these were only primary schools and no skills, other than the tautological rudiments of the three R’s were taught. Moreover, the medium of instruction in these schools was not English, the passport to a better-paid job in contemporary Malaya, but Tamil, Malayalam or Telugu. (National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings, October, 1929, B proc. 58-67)

The Malayan government, for its part, refused to support English education in estate schools, principally on grounds of cost. Furthermore instruction in the mother tongue of the immigrants was acceptable to the Madras authorities. There were English schools in the urban centres, but the labourers’ earnings were generally so low as to leave them little margin for such luxuries. Thus the one language—English—In the country which might have enabled the children of labourers to find other occupations was on the whole denied to them. Furthermore, the parents, segregated by language, culture and conditions of service from the mainstream of Malayan life and themselves appallingly ignorant of and almost always illiterate, were hardly in a position to inculcate in their children anything more than what they knew themselves, that is the wielding of the manvetti or the katti. (Sandhu 1969: 260)
It was not until a few years before the war that Indian voices were raised in protest against this situation. The CIMA was the first to complain that the Tamil education in Malaya had been grossly neglected and to demand that the government assume more responsibility in this regard. Its president N. Raghavan, late in 1940 bewailed that “our 750,000 Indians in Malaya have to await the pleasure and convenience of a none-too-sympathetic government to receive an education.” (Straits Times, Nov. 4, 1940) The problem, he said, was both chronic and acute; Indians had no proper schools, not enough teachers, and no policy, and the vast majority of Tamil schools were such in name only. In the Federated and Unfederated Malay States there were a few government Tamil schools, but none at all in the Straits Settlements. The government, he went on to complain, enforced the educational provisions of the Labour Code, against estate employers, but made no effort at all for its own employees or those of urban employers, As taxpayers, he believed, Indians had the right to free education provided by the government, but while 30 percent of its budget was spent on the Malays and 3 percent on the Chinese, only 1.5 percent was allocated to Indian education. But the Indian community itself failed to respond adequately to the CIAM’s appeal in November 1940 for enough funds to build a central Indian high school. (Thompson and Adloff 1955: 115)

On the eve of World War II there were 628 Indian vernacular schools in Malaya, attended by 27,539 pupils. Small as this number was, it represented a quantitative improvement over the situation in 1931, when there were only 10,000 students attending Indian schools in the country. Any comparable improvement in the quality of these schools depended upon getting more and better Indian teachers. For the hard and useful work he did, the Tamil rural teacher received a princely salary ranging from Str. $10 to $30 a month and he enjoyed none of the housing or other privileges accorded to the Asian estate staff. Tamil teachers in government schools had a few more amenities. (Thompson and Adloff 1955: 115)

Many basic difficulties explain the uphill struggle of Indian education in Malaya. In rural areas, parents preferred that their children earn money rather than attend school. Estate managers, with few exceptions had no real interest in the education of their
coolies' children and undertook it simply because the law required it. Teachers were overworked, underpaid, and largely untrained, and enjoyed neither prestige nor authority. (Thompson and Adloff 1955: 115) Also, perhaps because of the instability of the local Indian population, Indian schools have lacked the wealthy patronage that in Malaya has been a great boon to Chinese education. And finally, it was not until 1912 that the government began to assist Indian schools and then only with minuscule grants-in-aid.

A Malay school was started in Pudthukuchi sometime after the Second World War, at the time when the local Malay population came to require its own educational system. A Tamil school was set up long before the Second World War. Initially, this school enabled at best only the learning of elementary skills. Indians here and in similar places, after all, were in Malaysia to wok in rubber. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 165)

As per the account of a school teacher from a Tamil School from 1949 to 1958, “when I first came, only twenty-two names were on the register. There should have been 100. The old manager was not interested. Sometimes he would come and make fun of the students who had come. Children then could go off and help their parents in the field and earn ten or fifteen cents a day. Nobody cared much about school”. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 165-166)

The orientations of the Tamil schools in Malaysia used to be towards India, even as most of the general orientations of the people. The pictures on the walls of the school were of Indian leaders, India was called ‘our motherland’, the national anthem the children learned was Jana Gana Mana and the books the children read were written and published in India, distributed under the auspices of the Madras Municipal Corporation. In those days it was not uncommon for a teacher to exhort his students in their studies with words like, ‘If you do not study well, you will feel embarrassed when you go to India’ (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 167)

It is still by no means difficult to identify a Tamil school, even when no teachers or students are around. Hindu icons still usually hang in the office areas: so do pictures of Indian leaders or poets. But by now such symbols are merely representations of patterns
of life common within Malaya, not of another country's ways. Meanwhile, the orientations encouraged in books and lessons are by now distinctly Malaysian. Textbooks use names common among the various ethnic groups of Malaysia, rather than Indian names alone. (Wiebe and Marriappan 1978: 167)

A distinctive feature of English education in the Malay Peninsula was the mixed ethnic composition of the classes. Unlike the vernacular schools which catered almost exclusively to a particular ethnic group, Malays, Indians, Chinese, Europeans attended the same English-medium institutions (apart from those especially reserved for Malays). The shared aspirations of the students, their largely elite origin and the conformity to certain ideals imposed by the English school system helped create a bond which to a considerable extent overcame differences in ethnicity and social background. In mission schools, religion could also play a unifying role, though Malays tended to avoid such institutions because of their reluctance to be associated with any religion except Islam. But in the government English schools, a shared language and educational experience for the first time bridged the cultural and linguistic gaps that had separated Malay's various ethnic groups. (Babara and Leonard Andaya 2001: 235)

In Wilkinson's (1903) views we can thus see some divergence from the official British stance that the Malay Peninsula belonged to the Malays and that the other ethnic groups were transient. His vision of the Chinese and Indian children reading Malay classics implies some recognition that migrant communities were becoming a permanent part of the Malayan landscape. (Babara and Leonard Andaya 2001: 237) Thus, with the exception of English-medium schools, the educational systems in Malaya also emphasized a distinct ethnic culture and history that helped preserved separate group identities. This development was not actively fostered by the British; on the contrary, it arose through colonial inactivity. (Babara and Leonard Andaya 2001: 240)

To conclude one can say that Malaysian Indians do not comprise a homogeneous group and the idea of Indian ethnicity cannot be treated in a monolithic sense. Structurally, Malaysian Indians may see themselves as an ethnic group in contrast to the
numerically dominant Malays and Chinese. But in everyday social interaction Malaysian Indians tend to differentiate among themselves according to various social categories. Thus Lee and Rajoo suggest that the idea of Sanskritization as an integrative factor does not necessarily work on all levels of analysis. Within a macro-perspective Sanskritization seemingly provides a point of convergence for all Indians concerned, but at a micro-level the process becomes less clearcut. Sanskritization in Malaysia is also distinctly an urban phenomenon. This characteristic reveals an important aspect of social change involving interaction between Indians and other ethnic groups. The reformers of that period agitated for changes in Hindu practices which they had perceived as detrimental to Indian dignity. Rapid urbanization after the war has brought more Indians into contact with the Malays and Chinese. It can be assumed that within the context of increased ethnic interaction, Indian concerns with their self-esteem has also intensified proportionately. The widespread upgrading of Hindu temples and attempts at spreading religious literacy may be considered as a part of a general effort at improving the Indian ethnic image. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 411)

The Indian middle class is in many ways more apprehensive about the status of their community since they are concentrated in the urban areas and hold occupations that require more ethnic interaction than the rural Indians who are isolated on rubber and palm oil plantations. It is also the urban middle class Indians who have taken the initiative in introducing the Hindu scriptures to their working class counterparts in the rural areas. These urbanites maintain contact with various religious centres in India, thus assuming the role of intermediaries between innovations on the subcontinent and local needs. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 411) The increase in Christian and Islamic proselytization in the urban areas has aroused the concern of many Hindus over the problem of mass conversions. At a social and political level, Indians face great difficulties in meeting these threats because of their minority status and the fragmentation of their community along caste, class and regional lines. However, symbolically, Sanskritic Hinduism and Tamil Saivism are important parameters for the delineation of Indian ethnicity. The dominance of the English educated middle class in contemporary Hindu affairs suggests that the Sanskritic trend will continue to prevail. But until these religious symbols are successfully
integrated with social and political actions, Hinduism will merely remain an ephemeral vessel of Malaysian Indian unity. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 413)

It is through the manipulation of religious and cultural symbols that Malaysian Indians are able to project images suggesting communal solidarity. The ideal of the ‘Great Tradition’ in Indian culture, however vague, forms an object of pride for many Malaysian Indians, thereby providing a model of cultural and religious behaviour that reaffirms communal bonds. The process of Sanskritization reflects the pursuit of this ideal and is presently discernible as an expression of Indian ethnicity in various religious and social activities. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 396)

**Important works referred**

* National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings, October, 1929, B proc. 58-67


