

MAJORITY-MINORITY SITUATION IN MALAYSIA

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Indians, Ceylonese¹ and Others

Although the Indians constitute one of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, they are in fact a minority group, albeit the largest of the minority groups. The Ceylonese form another important minority group. The distinction between the Indian and the Ceylonese is clear-cut, but even in Malaysia persons outside the two groups have not always been able to distinguish one from the other. There had been some attempts, even before World War II, to merge the interests of the two groups; for example, by having a common representative in the Federal Council. However, until today, the Indian and the Ceylonese have kept apart from each other politically, socially and economically.

The racial composition of the population of Malaysia (Malaya until 1963) has remained relatively unchanged since the 1931 Census. The following figures show the racial balance in that year:²

<i>Malays</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indians</i>
<i>(Including Indonesian immigrants)</i>		
1,962,021	1,709,392	624,009

The total population in 1931 was 4,385,346. Malays, Chinese and Indians totalled 4,295,422. Therefore, these three together formed about 97.9% of the total population. The others were made up of Ceylonese, Europeans, Eurasians and "Others."³ Despite the war and the curb on immigration, there has been a sizeable increase in the popula-

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tion by 1947. The Census taken that year revealed a population figure of 5,848,910.⁴ The figures for the three major ethnic groups were as follows:

<i>Malays</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indians</i>
<i>(Including Indonesian immigrants)</i>		
2,543,569	2,614,667	599,616

It is at once observable that the Indian population alone suffered a decline in number. One of the major factors was the high death rate among Indians during the war years, caused by the recruitment of Indian labourers to work on the Death Railway in Burma. But, by 1953, the Indian population picked up again, reaching a figure of 752,727. However, as stated earlier, the overall racial composition remained largely unchanged. Since 1921, the Indians have formed between 10 to 14 per cent of the Malaysian population.⁵ At the 1970 Census, the following figures were obtained for the three races:

<i>Malays</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Indians</i>
4,689,379	3,126,336	934,030

The total population in 1970 was 10,452,309.⁶

As a minority group, and for that matter, as a considerably less significant political force, the Indians have been disadvantageously placed in comparison with the majority groups, ever since colonial times. For example, the Indians could not obtain representation in the Federal Council until the late 1920s.⁷ Even then that representation was the result of direct pressure from India. In Malaysian politics today, the Indian electorate is a force in its own right only in a few areas and in some cases where the Malay and Chinese electorates are evenly balanced, the Indian voters are important only because they are able to tilt the balance one way or the other. There is therefore just one Indian political party — the Malaya Indian Congress — whose membership is exclusively Indian.⁸ Among the other non-Malay political parties in Malaysia, the

Chinese dominate all except the socialist party — Parti Rakyat.

The lack of numerical strength is but one of the problems faced by the Indians. Some of their more serious problems are inherent in the Indian social organization itself. Basically, these problems are similar to the problems present in India.

It would not be too far-fetched to say that of the three major ethnic groups in this country, divisiveness is most conspicuous in the Indian community. Admittedly, the Tamils (from what was known as the Province of Madras) form about 80% of the Malaysian Indian population. But the Tamils themselves are divided in numerous ways. There are Hindus, Muslims and Christians among them. Some are English-educated, others are Tamil-educated, or illiterate. Caste is another significant divisive element. The majority of the Tamils, a large proportion of whom are labourers, are located in two separate areas — by far the greater number in the rubber estates, the remainder primarily in urban areas where they were originally recruited to work in the ports, Public Works Departments, Sanitary Boards and railways. Despite the predominance of the labour class, occupational specialization is marked among the Tamils. Two prominent groups of businessmen are found among them. The better known of the two are the *Nattukotai Chettyar*. They form a caste of their own. They are professional money-lenders and owners of landed property. The other group of Tamil businessmen are mainly Muslims. They are either the principal agents for the supply of books, magazines and stationery in Peninsular Malaysia or owners of small shops retailing the same goods, or proprietors of restaurants. As stated earlier, the majority of the Tamils are labourers and therefore constitute a distinct occupational group. Most of the labourers are of comparatively low castes. It is seldom that they succeed in stepping out of the ambit of their immediate social environment. Education appears to be the best means of achieving social mobility but not necessarily within the Indian society. An Indian from the estate who succeeds in acquiring high professional or academic qualification can gain recognition in his own profession in the society at large, draw a good salary and acquire modern comforts and luxuries. However, socially he would still be unacceptable to Indians of higher castes. For example, he would be unable to marry the daughter of a Brahmin (a member of the highest

caste).

What has been said of the Tamils applies generally to the other regional-linguistic groups of Indians, namely, the *Malayali*, *Telugu* and *Punjabi*, who constitute the remaining important groups of Indians in Malaysia. Each group tends still to confine close social ties to members of the same group, but within each group, horizontal as well as vertical division is clearly defined. Of the three, perhaps the *Malayali* and *Punjabi* have done better for themselves in the sense that many of them are well educated and are successful professional men.

The heterogenous nature of the Indian society is indeed a very serious problem faced by Indians who belong to the lower strata of the society and they form the greater proportion of the Indian population. Because they are largely labourers, their incomes are small and their social conditions do not assist but tend to retard the educational progress of their children. In urban areas, many of these Indian labourers live in semi-slum conditions. Those who are government employees are, however, provided with slightly better housing facilities. In general, their children perform poorly in schools. Although Tamil education has been available since colonial times, there have been no secondary Tamil schools and the Tamil-educated cannot hope to find good prospects for employment. The situation is so acute today that many Indian leaders have advocated the abolition of Tamil schools⁹ so that Indian children may be encouraged to enrol in the national schools, where they can be better prepared to enter the single-stream educational system at the secondary level — where, by the early 1980s, the national language (Malay) would be the sole medium of instruction.

Indians of the professional (doctors, lawyers and engineers, in particular) as well as commercial class do not, at the moment, face pressing economic problems. Both the government as well as private sectors are still able to absorb a large number of professional men. In fact, professional men can also be profitably self-employed.¹⁰ Indian businessmen, too, are relatively affluent. They have never really faced serious competition from the Chinese as each ethnic group tends to be engaged in a particular form of business enterprise and there is little or no overlap. The Indian textile merchants, for example, deal largely in goods imported from India. Some of the Indian commercial houses have also for many years served as agents for the distribution, even retailing, of British

goods.¹¹ Such wealthy commercial families have often merged their interests by marriages and they have successfully kept aloof from Indians who do not belong to the same caste and regional-linguistic group.

It is not really possible within the brief confine of this paper to explain more clearly the numerous complexities existing in the Indian society, but suffice it to say that divisiveness within the society has made it difficult for a large majority of Indians to achieve social mobility and better economic conditions. In other words, those of the higher strata have done little to uplift the well-being of those at the lower strata.

Government policy is necessarily aimed at solving the serious problems of the majority groups — the indigenous population and the Chinese. And since, of the two majority groups, the economic problems of the indigenous population are more acute, considerably more attention has been devoted to the solution of their problems. However, in order that there may be a fairer all-round distribution of employment opportunities, the Government has endeavoured to impose a quota on the racial composition of employees in the private sector, which in the past was and is still dominated largely by non-Malays, while the government services attempt to absorb a larger number of Malays. Implementation of the policy has been difficult. Racial prejudices present a formidable stumbling block. In certain instances, commercial firms are able to show on paper that there is the desired racial balance among the employees. But, on closer scrutiny, it is found that a large proportion of the higher positions are held by members of one ethnic group while the menial or unskilled jobs are distributed among those of the other ethnic groups. The Indians are particularly hard hit by the small number of Indian-owned commercial houses existing in the country and therefore employment opportunities for them are limited in the private sector except for those with high professional qualifications.

The Ceylonese are considerably smaller in number than the Indians and for census purposes have for long been placed under the category of "Others." The 1970 Census shows that in Peninsular Malaysia, 70,183 persons are listed as "Others." Of these, the Ceylonese must account for no less than 50%, if not more. As a whole, the Ceylonese do not, at this stage, face any serious economic problems. Almost all the Ceylonese

were brought to Malaysia (or more appropriately Malaya) in colonial times to serve in government departments and the railways. They were English-educated and held positions as clerks, stationmasters, dressers and surveyors. Their descendants have had good English education and until Malaysia achieved independence, the Ceylonese continued to dominate the higher administrative positions in government services, second only to the Europeans and a small number of select Malay civil servants. The situation has changed radically since 1957. However, because the Ceylonese as a group have been relatively affluent and therefore have been able to afford a good education, they have not had to depend solely on the government sector for employment or if, at all, on those areas of the government sector which are still able to absorb a large number of persons, namely, the teaching, technical and medical services.

The Ceylonese have perpetuated the old custom of offering dowries when contracting marriages¹² and although this system is frowned upon by those who believe that ancient customs should be discarded, it has helped many an able but relatively poor Ceylonese young man to acquire a good education and become economically independent. It is a trend among the Ceylonese to encourage their children to become professional men — in particular, doctors, engineers and lawyers. Lately, young Ceylonese men have begun to go to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to study accountancy as the qualification is recognized in Malaysia and the expenditure involved is considerably less than that required to obtain the same qualification in Australia or Britain.

Although a small group, the Ceylonese generally are well able to stand on their own feet. They are certainly a more cohesive group than the Indians. For purposes of implementing the government policy of a racial quota in employment, the Ceylonese are classified as "Indians." However, few Ceylonese are found among the labour class and, therefore, the Ceylonese do not compete for manual jobs. There are fears, of course, among the Ceylonese, as in the case of the Indians, that being in a minority group, their children, in the future, may be neglected and displaced by the majority groups, or as an historian has put it: "It is a fear for the course of future developments which are as yet unknown and unforeseeable."¹³ But, despite the fear, there has been no tendency among them to return to their homeland.

Of the remaining minority groups¹⁴ in Malaysia, there is perhaps

one group which requires some comments, namely, the Eurasians. A large majority of the Eurasians in this country are of Portuguese descent.¹⁵ Although the Dutch ruled Malacca longer than the Portuguese, the cultural impact of Dutch rule was considerably less significant. And many Dutch Eurasians,¹⁶ who until the late 19th century, constituted a wealthy landowning class in Malacca, chose to settle in England. The Portuguese Eurasians are found in the urban areas, but generally few of them have achieved outstanding success in professional fields. A few hundred of them are still congregated at Malacca where they live in poverty and are dependent on fishing as a livelihood. They continue to speak a local form of Portuguese language and cherish their traditions dearly. Eurasians of other European descent have fared better educationally and professionally, but many of these have migrated from time to time.¹⁷ They seem to face serious problems of cultural orientation and generally prefer to identify with the West.

Economic needs may be the prime concern of people everywhere but among the minority groups in Malaysia, there is constant anxiety over the question of culture. The Indians, Ceylonese and the particular group of Portuguese Eurasians in Malacca have steadfastly held on to their basic ancestral culture. In the case of the Ceylonese and the English-educated Indians, absorption of elements of western culture has taken place over the years. And now many have accepted the need to study and use more intensively the national language (Malay). However, in the minds of these two peoples, ancestral customs and traditions must be preserved at all costs. Of the two the Ceylonese have proved more resilient owing to the fact that they cannot now easily identify themselves with Ceylon (Sri Lanka,) which is widely accepted as the home of the Sinhalese. The Ceylonese Tamils in Malaysia who originate from the province of Jaffna are as much regarded as immigrants in Sri Lanka as they are in Malaysia. Recent political developments in Sri Lanka have helped to slacken further sentimental ties between the Ceylonese here and Sri Lanka.

The position of the Indians is significantly different. A large percentage of the Indians have by no means loosened ties with India. Easy mobility between India and Malaysia enables the Indians to keep in close touch with their homeland. Tamil newspapers in the country

continue to carry important news about India. Among the labour population, in particular, owing to the fact that they have been little exposed to the process of westernization (also because of the near absence of close social contact with other ethnic groups), the sentimental attachment to Indian culture remains strong. Indian film stars, dancers and politicians have a large following in Malaysia. Indian sportsmen are worshipped whenever they visit Malaysia. This class of Indians are likely to face difficult problems of adjustment as the government steps up measures to re-direct the cultural orientation of the immigrant population. The resistance towards non-Indian cultural influence will be hard to overcome, but with the final establishment of a single-stream educational system by the early 1980s, there are likely to be far-reaching cultural changes in Malaysian society.

Government policy at the moment aims at national integration in particular, it attempts to produce a new generation of Malaysians whose basic orientation will be towards Malaysia. In other words, the Government hopes to instill stronger national consciousness among the non-Malay population of the country. At the same time the constitution guarantees the rights of the non-Malays to perpetuate their religions, languages and customs. It is as yet difficult to foresee how far the Government's plan of national integration will succeed. But in any political system where party politics is an accepted way of life, the ruling party has perforce to take cognizance of political reality, hence the voices of the majority are likely to be more clearly heard than that of the minority. And with the economy of Malaysia also controlled largely by the majority groups, the minority groups will have to find the means by which closer cohesion may be effected within each of them and between them, so that to some extent they may yet be able partially to stand on their own feet.

FOOTNOTES

1. Although Ceylon has since been renamed Sri Lanka, among the people of Malaysia, the term 'Ceylonese' continues to be popularly used.
2. See C. A. Vlieland, **British Malaya: A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics** (London, 1932).

3. 'Others' here include a wide range of foreigners, the more common among them were, perhaps, Arabs, Siamese and Japanese.

4. See M. V. del Tufo, *Malaya: A Report on the 1947 Census on Population* (London, 1949).

5. Comparative figures for the years 1921, 1931, 1947 and 1953 are given in N. Ginsburg and C. F. Roberts, Jr., *Malaya* (Seattle, 1958), p. 57.

6. *Malaysia 1972: Official Year Book*, vol. 12, p. 23. The figures for 1931 and 1947 given in this paper include the statistics for Singapore which have been excluded in the 1970 figures. However, the total population of 10,452,309 includes 654,943 persons in Sabah and 977,438 in Sarawak. The number of Indians in Sabah and Sarawak is negligible.

7. The Federal Council was formed in 1910. From the very beginning the Chinese were given representations, although a token one.

8. Ceylonese are eligible to become members of the MIC, but they are unable to secure important offices in the party. As a result, the majority of the Ceylonese do not look upon the MIC as a party capable of representing their interests.

9. There are three distinct types of primary schools in the country — national schools (medium of instruction is the national language), Tamil schools, and Chinese schools.

10. Many well-to-do Indians now send their children to India to study medicine.

11. Such large Indian firms are just beginning to face competition from modern business corporations which are engaged in a race to build multi-storeyed shopping complexes.

12. It is customary for parents of the bride to offer dowry to the bridegroom and the amount given is proportionate to the social position of the groom. Usually, a doctor tops the list.

13. S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, 1970), p. 200.

14. Since 1957, only citizens are included in census counts and therefore, although there are still a sizeable number of Europeans and Japanese who are not citizens, they are discounted.

15. The Portuguese Eurasians can be identified by names such as Nunis, Danker, Sta. Maria, Lazaroo, de Silva, Gomes etc. but they should not be confused with many Christian Malayali who also have names such as de Cruz, de Silva and Gomez.

16. Many of the Dutch Eurasians had names such as Esterhout, de Wind, Neubronner, Velge and Lembrugen.

17. Lately many Eurasians have migrated to Australia.