

# INDIAN MALAYSIAN: ORIGIN, CLASSIFICATION, KINSHIP AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS\*

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## Origin and Classification

It is possible to trace the origins of the Indian Malaysians to a period as far back as the beginning of the Christian era when trading activities between Indian kingdoms and their counterparts in the Malay Archipelago had resulted in the establishment of settlements in the Malay Peninsula.

The advent of the British into the Malay Peninsula set the pace for large scale and permanent Indian settlements here. There is some evidence of Indian prisoners being engaged in the construction of roads, buildings and other civil works in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca as early as the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some settled in these settlements while others returned to India. Records indicate that a large number of Indian prisoners have set foot on Malaysian soil and helped lay the foundations of the early civil works, remnants of which are evident till now.

Migration and subsequent settlement of large numbers of Indians in the Malay Peninsula began with the signing of the Pangkor treaty in 1874 between the British and the Malay rulers of Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang (collectively referred to as the Federated Malay States). The Treaty allowed for the appointment of British Residents in each of the Malay States, and their role was that of advisors to the Rulers. However, with passage of time, these Residents assumed greater powers and established a modern system of administration which necessitated the setting up of various government departments. The British planters also made their way into these States and opened up tea, coffee, rubber and coconut plantations. All these developments required labourers, and the British turned to India which had an abundant supply of both English-educated, skilled and unskilled manpower to be dispensed off. Hundreds of thousands of Indian labourers were transported to Malaya to work not only to clear the virgin jungles to make way for plantation agriculture but also to lay the roads and railways needed by the States. They were drawn largely from South India, partly due to its proximity to Malaya and partly due to their socio-economic conditions which eventually made them docile workers and amenable to work in all kinds of unfavourable conditions.

The poor health and unsanitary conditions under which they laboured resulted in the decimation of thousands of these early migrants who laid the foundations of the country's modern transportation system and made it possible for large scale plantation agriculture in Malaya.

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\* This paper was presented at the second International Conference on Religions and Cultures in the Indic Civilisation, organised jointly by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Manushi. It was hosted by India Habitat Centre, New Delhi during December 17-20, 2005.

To manage the government departments and the railways, English-educated staffs were needed, and South Indians and Sri Lankan Tamils emigrated to meet this need. North Indians, especially the Sindhis and Gujeratis came as commercial immigrants to capitalize on the growing Malayan economy and focused on the textile industry. While the Chettiyars from South India monopolized the money-lending business, the Indian Muslims engaged in the commercial activities of import and export of goods between the two countries. The link established by the commercial classes between India and Malaya continues till the present day. Table 1 indicates the sub-ethnic distribution of Indians over the period 1844 to 1941.

Table 1: Ethno-linguistic composition of Indian Labour Immigration into Malaya, 1844-1941

Total number of arrivals	percentage (%)					
	Tamil	Telugu	Malayalee	Other South Indians	Total South Indians	North Indians
2,725,917	85.2	6.8	6.4	0.8	99.2	0.8

Source: K.S. Sandhu, 1960, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)*. London: Cambridge University Press, p.159

The process of migration and emigration has been an on-going phenomenon till Malaysia attained independence in 1957 and census statistics indicate that more than 4 million Indians had come to Malaya. Table 2 indicates migration figures for the period 1786 to 1957.

Table 2: Composition of total Indian immigration into Malaya, 1786-1957

Period	total number of arrivals	percentage (%)			
		labourers	non-labourers	Malaya	
				South Indians	North Indians
up to 1941	3,823,812	72.5	27.5	92.3	7.7
up to 1957	4,245,990	65.3	34.7	91.3	8.7

Source: K.S. Sandhu, 1960, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)*. London: Cambridge University Press, p.159

The historical development of the country had clearly defined the distribution of Indians in Malaysia. States where plantation agriculture was introduced such as Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Johor and pockets of areas in Kedah and Pahang had seen a greater influx and settlement of Indians as evidenced in Table 3. Table 3 indicates the distribution of the Indian population of Malaya over the period 1891 to 1957.

However, the rural-urban distribution of Indians which had been determined by early economic developments witnessed a dramatic shift in the last two decades. A predominantly rural population till the 1970s that worked in the plantations began to migrate to the urban centres in the post-1980 period due to retrenchment caused by a shift in plantation agriculture from rubber to less labour-intensive oil palm, the rising education level and rapid industrialization leading to greater employment opportunities in the urban areas. Statistics indicate that about 65% were rural-based in 1970 which gradually decreased to 55% in 2000.

The nature and process of migration to Malaya had resulted in the emergence of a heterogenous community differentiated not only by language and ancestral origins but also on the basis of religion, caste and class.

Sub-ethnic groups that are broadly classified as North Indian include the Punjabis, Sindhis, Gujeratis and Pathans while the South Indian category comprises of the Tamils, Telugus and Malayalees. The Sri Lankans who comprise of the Tamils and Singhalese have been for enumeration purposes, classified as Ceylonese although there is an increasing tendency among the Sri Lankan Tamils to identify themselves as Indians. The Tamils constitute the largest sub-ethnic group forming 85.0% of the Indian population of about 2.0 million as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Population by Detailed Ethnic Group of Indians in Peninsular Malaysia, 1980

Ethnic	Total	Percentage (%)
Indian Tamil	925,448	85.09
Malayalee	34,864	3.20
Telugu	26,113	2.43
Sikh	32,684	3.00
Other Punjabi	5,148	0.47
Other Indian	32,118	2.95
Pakistani	9,898	0.91
Bangaladeshi	787	0.07
Sri Lankan Tamil	17,421	1.60
Other Sri Lankans	3,080	0.28
Total	1,087,561	100

Source: Population Census, 1980, p. 227

The Indians in Malaysia constitute the third largest ethnic group next to the Malays and the Chinese. They are heavily concentrated in West Malaysia. They formed about 8.3% (1,323,100) of the population of Malaysia or about 10.1% of the population of West Malaysia in 1985 (Malaysia, 1985). By 1996 the Indian population in West Malaysia grew to 1,511,709 people or about 9.17% of the population of West Malaysia. But when it is compared to the total population of Malaysia, the Indians make up about 7.43% (Malaysia, 1997) and the current population of Indians in Malaysia is 7.3% (Malaysia, 2005). The term Indian encompasses many ethnic groups from the Indian sub-continent. But the overwhelming majority of migrants from Indian Malaysia were the Tamil speakers from South India, accounting for about 80% of the Indians in Malaysia.

## Kinship

In the Malaysian Indian kinship system, the family, inevitably, becomes the focal point upon which relationships are further developed. Its features, functions, its relationship with others and the changes it has undergone naturally affected the Indian kinship system. As in all societies, the Indian family in Malaysia, despite the changes affected upon it, continues to function as the fundamental multipurpose social organization for many of the principal needs of an individual. It is the basic unit where the fundamentals of one's culture are learnt, and the individual learns how to link with others and with whom he/she can contract matrimonial alliances.

The traditional concept of a joint family means that benevolent parents, brothers and sisters and their spouses display cloying affection towards each other and share their happiness in the family. In a joint family, one can provide a wonderful support system emotionally and financially. For a joint family system to work, the members learn to adjust, to overcome their petty jealousies, to develop mutual respect between the generations, and learn to give each other space. This has changed drastically due to the nature of migration process and the demographic characteristics of the migrants. Moreover, majority of the Malaysian families are nuclear based.

Except for families engaged in commercial activities where the need to pool the resources and live under one roof becomes a necessity, the majority of the Indians who were salaried persons gravitated towards the idea of establishing their own nuclear families. Only the rudimentary elements of the joint family like elderly

parents of the husband or wife living with the children and other elements like patriarchal arrangements and patrilineal descent are still in vogue.

Hierarchical arrangement within a family is another important feature with age and sex being the main ordaining principles. This is evidenced in the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children and between brothers and sisters. An Indian husband is expected to be superior to his wife in every respect and to secure both symbolic and actual deference from her. This is clearly depicted in the choice of a husband who is superior in age, height, size, education and even income. An Indian wife is neither expected to call her husband by name nor openly object to his decisions or opinions. This particular aspect/expectation has since changed due to modernisation and socialisation where both men and women have equal rights. Devotion of the Indian wife is still regarded as one of the proud virtues of family wife.

In parent-children relationship it is expected of children to show deference to parents in keeping with old Tamil adage *maathaa, pithaa, guru, are deyvam* (mother, father and teacher are god). As a sign of deference children who disagree with their parent's views do not openly contradict them. They treat both parents with respect and this entails obedience and avoidance of behaviour that indicates a contrary will. Parents, too, should not behave in a manner that makes it difficult for children to respect them.

As a son, he is expected to take care of his parents, more so if he is the eldest son. Between father and son, relationship is rather formal and restrained. Despite the affection for each other, there is gradual loss of intimacy or demonstration of affection and the father becomes a distant person isolated in his authority. A mother is respected and motherhood is even revered. She has a close relationship with the son and acts as an intermediary between the father and son in times of strained relationship.

In contrast to a son, a daughter enjoys closer relationship with both the parents. The mother takes on the responsibility of training her into a proper social person. As she grows older, she is drawn closer to the mother who realizes that she will soon marry and leave the house.

Beyond one's immediate family a man or woman is related to several classes of kinsman. The most frequent interchanges are usually with those families close to him in patrilineal and matrilineal descent, i.e. the men are brothers or patrilineal cousins and the women are sisters who are married elsewhere or the children of sisters. These kinsmen usually perform formal ritual functions together in all customary events especially marriage or mourning ceremonies. Failure of a family to invite them to a marriage can precipitate turmoil. Second classes of kinsman are those derived through his wife, his married sisters, his married daughters, the relatives of his brother's wives. Of these feminal kinsmen, those derived through his wife are more concerned about him as a person. He develops a close relationship with his wife's brothers and receives affection and respect from them.

The South Indians generally divide all descent lines into those with whom one may marry and those with whom one may not i.e. in a man's own generation males are either brothers or brother-in-laws and the females are either sisters or potential spouses.

## Religion

Malaysia harbors many different religions including Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Islam. The majority (58%) of the country are of Islamic faith. Buddhism makes up about 27% of the population due to the strong ties that Malaysia has to China. Hindus are approximately 8% of the population. The other 9% of the population is composed of a large number of different religions including Christianity, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shamanism.

The nature of the migration process and the eventual composition of the Indian population in Malaysia have resulted in the major Indian religions being practiced by them, namely Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and

Sikhism. According to Malaysian population census of 1991, 85% are Hindus where Hindu religious value and belief system are the influencing factors.

The absence of homogeneity is evidenced by the fact that in their religious affiliation there are among the Tamils, Hindus, Christians and Muslims; the Punjabis are followers of Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam; the Malayalees adhere to Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, and the Telugus are largely Hindus. As reflected in Table 4 below, about 83.66% of the Indian Malaysians are Hindus with 5.38% adherents of Islam, 7.57% Christians and others.

Table 4: Indian Population According to Religion, Peninsular Malaysia, 1991

Religion	Indians	
	Total	Percentage (%)
Islam	68,964	5.25
Christianity	106,402	8.10
Hinduism	1,091,602	83.10
Buddhism	9,196	0.70
Confucianism/Taoism	1,313	0.10
Tribal/folk	1,313	0.10
Others	34,154	2.60
No Religion	656	0.05
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,313,600</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: General Report of the Population Census, 1991, Vol. 1, p.79

## Hinduism

The Hindus adhere to both the philosophical and supplicatory aspects of the religion. The Saivites, who belong to Saivism, which is a branch of Hinduism, worship Siva as the Supreme God. The 12 *Tirumurais*, especially the *Tevaram* and the *Tiruvagasam*, (Tamil hymns mainly in appreciation of Lord Siva) fulfil the need for philosophical knowledge while the Vaisnavites (worshippers of Lord Vishnu) feel that Lord Vishnu is preeminent among all the gods. The Vaisnavites consider Lord Vishnu as "the primal person and the first-born of creation, who has neither beginning nor end". They seek solace in the scriptures, *Naalayira divya pirabandham*: (Tamil hymns mainly in appreciation of Lord Vishnu). The ritualistic aspect of the religion allows for the worship of deities in the Hindu pantheon. Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, Lord Muruga, Lord Ganesha, Goddesses Parvathi and Saraswathi, etc. are regarded as higher deities and constitute an important element of both temple and domestic worship. Rituals and ceremonies are observed, and offerings in the form of fruits, sweetened rice and flowers are made to them. There are many temples dedicated to these deities all over the country.

At its core, a *religion* is a belief in divine (superhuman or spiritual) being(s) and the practices (rituals) and moral code (ethics) that result from that belief. Beliefs give religion its mind, rituals give religion its shape, and ethics give religion its heart. Of the three elements that make something a religion (beliefs, rituals, and ethics), beliefs are the most important because they give rise to and shape the ethics and the rituals of a faith.

Six underlying themes that describe the Hindu world-view are diversity, time, tension, tolerance, monism and religious integration. The Hindu world-view knows no sacred/secular dichotomy. Hinduism is a world-view based upon many deities and endless life-death cycle. What best describes the Hindu world-view is that individuals get what they deserve.

The main tenets of Hinduism revolve around the existence of Monotheism (one God). The five principles by which Hindus abide are:

- Supreme Being;
- Prayers;
- Law of Karma;
- Reincarnation; and
- Compassion

Hinduism is more than a highly organized religious and social system; it is a way of life. The central beliefs of Hinduism revolve around two key concepts, namely *dharma* and *moksha*. *Dharma* emphasizes the social and physical world in its demand upon human destiny to uphold and preserve the physical world and society as a whole. On the other hand, *moksha* refers to the ultimate release from the world, or salvation that can only be obtained by transcending all physical and social limitations.

*Karma*, the moral law of cause and effect, sees nothing as happening by chance or accidents. Individuals have personal responsibility. Each thought and deed carries a destiny producing effect. Transmigration sees the birth of the soul in successive life forms. Karma directly ties into this series of rebirths. Karma is movement that happens in the body via the senses and in the mind via the mental projections and experiences. If you practise *asana*, you are altering the karma of the body. If you practise *pranayama*, you are altering the karma of vitality and the brain. If you practise meditation, you are altering the *karma* of the subtle mind and of the spirit. This is the way to manage the *karma* that influences us in either a positive or negative way. *Karma* is awareness of the movement of life. It is not hard work, it is not service, it is not cause and effect, it is an understanding of how we interact with ourselves and with our environment.

In addition to the above, there are also deities like Muniandy, Pechaayee, Angaalammaa, Kaatteri, etc. who are regarded as non-Sanskritic and placed lower in the Hindu pantheon. The form of worship does not involve recitation of religious hymns of the scriptures, and offerings are normally non-vegetarian items including sacrifices of animals. Changes have taken place lately, stopping sacrifices due to formal education and religious textual knowledge. Classified as guardian deities they have dedicated temples in the rural and urban areas, and they suffice the supplicatory and ritualistic need of the lower section of the Indian community that has no religious education.

Malaysian Hindu religious educational changes include major influences from Hindu movements, such as Malaysian Hindu Sangam, Hindu Darma Maamandram, Arul Neri Thirukkuutam, etc. Religious classes and teachings are conducted by these organizations. Their basic activity is to improve one's knowledge of Hinduism. The emergence of neo-Hindu movements based on the teachings of religious saints, philosophers and spiritual leaders in the last two decades continues to attract followers from among the educated, middle class Indians in the urban areas. The Satya Sai Baba Movement, the Hare Rama Hare Krishna Movement, Divine Life Society, Krishna Consciousness Society, and Saiva Siddhanta Church etc are among the popular movements serving the needs for alternative or complementary Hindu beliefs and ideas and they are all worldwide and have connection with India. Some of the religious organizations such as Divine Life Society and Satya Sai Baba have their Head Offices in India. The movements emphasize on overall Hindu belief and social activity (welfare of Hindus). These organizations differ on the basis of their founder's understanding of the teachings of Hinduism and Hindu philosophy. For example the Divine Life Society emphasizes Vedanta philosophy, whereas Arul Neri Thirukkuutam, Saiva Siddhanta Mandram and Saiva Siddhanta Church emphasize the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta. Although there is diversity, there is a common unification of all these organizations and understanding in respect of preaching and teaching Hinduism in Malaysia.

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