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**The Hindu Rights Action  
Force (HINDRAF) of Malaysia:  
Communitarianism Across Borders?**

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## ABSTRACT

One of the consequences of the Islamisation process in Malaysia from the 1980s is the entry of religion into the public domain of mainstream politics. Malaysia has witnessed the growth and expansion of a parallel religious civil space with more Muslim NGOs and lobby groups coming to the fore. The formation of the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) marks a new expression of religious based politics and social mobilization among new expression of religious based politics and social mobilization among Malaysia's minority Hindu community along ethnic-religious lines. This paper examines the recent development of Hindraf in Malaysia and its impact on the country's complex plural and sectarian landscape. It analyses the ways through which Hindraf has managed to carve a space for Malaysians Hindu minority while also forging links with the global Hindu community worldwide. It also raises questions about how Hindraf may also add another challenge to Malaysian politics that is already configured along sectarian lines, and what such a movement can do towards further normalising the penetration of religion into the public sphere. Finally it ends with some observation on Hindraf's role and impact on the election results of March 2008.

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# **The Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) of Malaysia: Communitarianism Across Borders?**

## **I. Hindraf as a *Malaysian* Phenomena: Race, Ethnicity and Religion as the Permanent Factors in Political Mobilization.**

“I believe that as much as I want to be Malaysian, the Malay majority Muslim do not want me as a Malaysian, they do not recognize me as a Malaysian, they do not accept me as a Malaysian.”

Ponnusamy Uthayakumar,  
De facto head of Hindraf,

Speaking of his disillusionment with the Malaysian government following the Kampung Medan racial clashes<sup>1</sup>

On 15 November 2007, a letter of appeal was sent to Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, by Ponnusamy Uthayakumar, legal adviser to the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) of Malaysia (see appendix A). The letter, which was circulated to the Malaysian press and widely disseminated to many websites, blogs and discussion boards on the Internet, began by stating that:

“Commonwealth Ethnic Indian peace-loving subjects in Malaysia (are being) persecuted by government-backed Islamic extremist violent armed terrorist [sic]”.<sup>2</sup>

It then went on to add that:

“The ethnic minority Indians in Malaysia were brought in to [sic] Malaysia by the British some 200 over years ago. Since independence in 1957 the Malaysian Indians have been permanently colonialised [sic] by the Islamic fundamentalist and Malay chauvinists UMNO led Malaysian government.”<sup>3</sup>

The letter went on to state that over one hundred Indians “were slashed and killed by the UMNO-controlled Malaysian government in the Kampung Medan mini genocide” and that “despite numerous appeals, the Malaysian Human Rights Commission has refused to hold a

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with P. Uthayakumar, “Uthayakumar: I’m no racist”. Malaysiakini.com TV, accessed from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKz-wpr\\_uBc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKz-wpr_uBc).

<sup>2</sup> For the full transcript of the 15 November 2007 Hindraf letter of appeal, see appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

public inquiry” into the matter. <sup>4</sup> The letter then noted, “Every week one person at average [sic] is killed in a shot [sic] to kill policy and in every two weeks one person is killed in police custody. About 60 per cent of these victims are Indians though they form only eight per cent of the Malaysian population.” It also added, “In every three weeks one Hindu temple is demolished in Malaysia.”<sup>5</sup>

Coming at a time when Malaysia’s capital Kuala Lumpur was witness to a series of large public demonstrations, the scale of which had not been matched since the 1998 *reformasi* campaign at the peak of the East Asian economic and financial crises, the Hindraf letter of appeal to the British government and the calls for Hindu mobilization across Malaysia was seen as worrisome by the Malaysian government. They also brought to light the activities of a hitherto relatively unknown organization—the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) of Malaysia—that was the latest newcomer to the Malaysian political arena.

Hindraf’s demonstrations were the biggest Hindu-led demonstrations in Malaysia since the 1930s and 1940s when Hindu groups formally organized themselves into political organizations that lent their weight to the anti-colonial movement and the struggle for independence. This time, however, it was clear that the Hindraf-led demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur were more sectarian and communitarian in tone and tenor, as they were intended to highlight the plight of one community in particular: the Malaysians of South Asian origin who—as the name Hindraf itself implies—were of the Hindu faith.

### **Hindraf: Origins and Profile**

Set up by a broad coalition of about 30 Hindu-based non-governmental organizations and associations to defend the language, culture and identity of the Hindu community in Malaysia and to preserve the secular constitution of the country against what they saw as the encroachment of pro-Muslim *shariah* laws, the Hindu Rights Action Force of Malaysia came to prominence in 2006 when it campaigned against the demolition of Hindu temples across the country.

Hindraf was led primarily by a number of Malaysian lawyers of Tamil-Hindu descent, including Ponnusamy Uthayakumar, Ponnusamy Waytha Moorthy, Malayalam Manoharan,

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<sup>4</sup> The letter then claimed, “The UMNO controlled Malaysian courts struck off a victim’s public interest civil suit for a Public Inquiry to be held without even the said UMNO controlled government having to file in their defence. The UMNO controlled Attorney General and the Inspector General of Police refused to investigate and / or initiate an inquest into the death of at least six Indians in this tragedy despite [sic].” (ibid, p. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

K. Ganghadaran and S. Ganapathi Rao. While acting as the legal advisor to Hindraf, P. Uthayakumar is widely acknowledged as the de facto leader of Hindraf. Among the leaders of Hindraf, some, like M. Manoharan, are also members of political parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) of Malaysia. Uthayakumar and Wayna Moorthy are brothers and both of them happen to be second-generation Malaysians, their grandfather being one of the thousands of South Indian workers who had been brought to Malaysia during the colonial era to work on the railway lines that were built all over the former British colony. To finance their studies abroad, the father of Uthayakumar and Wayna Moorthy was forced to sell their family home.

Hindraf's leaders began mobilizing public support following the demolition of a number of well-known Hindu temples across Malaysia in 2006. In 2006, Hindu temples demolished included the Sri Siva Balamuniswarar temple (Setapak), the Sri Kumaravel temple (Kampung Medan), the Muniswarar temple (Midlands Estate) and the Muniswarar temple (Seremban). Despite the protests that were organized by Hindraf throughout 2006, temple demolition continued across Malaysia up to 2007. This prompted the leaders of Hindraf to file a four trillion dollar lawsuit against the British government on the grounds that, as the head of the Commonwealth, Britain had a responsibility towards its former colonial subjects. The lawsuit claimed one million dollars in compensation for every Malaysian of Indian origin living in the country for the "pain, suffering, humiliation, discrimination and continuous colonization" suffered by them.

After filing the lawsuit against the government of the United Kingdom on 31 August 2007—the day that Malaysia celebrated its fiftieth year of independence—the Hindraf organizers stated:

"We (Tamil Hindus) were removed by duplicity and force from our villages (in India) and taken to the then Malaya and put to work to clear the forests, plant and harvest rubber and make billions of pounds for British owners. After a century of slaving for the British, the colonial government withdrew after granting independence and they left us unprotected and at the mercy of a majority Malay-Muslim government that has violated our rights as minority Indians".<sup>6</sup>

As Hindraf could not afford the legal fees for such a lawsuit, its leaders also submitted a petition with 100,000 signatures calling on the Queen to appoint a Queen's Counsel to take

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<sup>6</sup> Baradan Kuppusamy, Rights-Malaysia: Ethnic Indians Blame Britain for Sorry Plight, accessed from [ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=39221](http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=39221).

up the case on their behalf. At the same time the leaders of Hindraf also demanded that Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution, which acknowledges the special role and status of the Malay language and culture as the defining factor of Malaysian identity, be struck off and that the Malaysian government should state categorically that Malaysia is still a secular democratic state.

Hindraf then went on a road show across the country to explain to the public what they were fighting for, though some of these public talks were disrupted. Hindraf's leaders then claimed that these disruptions were caused by agents planted into the crowd by the security forces, and called on the Inspector-General of Police to ensure that their public rallies would not be disrupted in future. On 15 November 2007 the leaders of Hindraf sent a letter of appeal to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Gordon Brown<sup>7</sup>, calling on the British government to use its influence to get the United Nations to intervene on behalf of the Hindus of Malaysia. This coincided with the demolition of another Hindu temple, the Mariaman temple of Kampung Jawa, the same day.

Finally, on 25 November, Hindraf organized its biggest demonstration, calling on 20,000 protesters to meet at the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Ampang district to submit a petition to the British High Commission. The police did not issue the organizers a permit for the demonstration and Malaysians were warned by the government not to take part in the rally. In the event, the demonstration actually consisted of several demonstrations, with two major confrontations taking place in Ampang, near the British High Commission, and another at the Hindu temple of Batu Caves. Two thousand police personnel were present, and tear gas and water cannons were used to disperse the protestors; 136 Hindraf supporters were arrested by the end of the day.

As tension between the Hindraf organizers and the Malaysian government peaked in December 2007, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi signed and issued warrants of detention without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA) on 12 December. All of the leaders of Hindraf were taken under detention, with the exception of Wayna Moorthy, who left Malaysia on 23 November to begin a worldwide tour to promote the cause of Hindraf and to highlight the situation of Hindus in Malaysia. Wayna Moorthy first visited India, where he lobbied the Indian government before moving to the United Kingdom, Geneva, Brussels and the United States (where he spoke at Washington, D.C., New York and Atlanta). In the meantime, Hindraf supporters gathered in Malaysia to plan for other rallies and

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<sup>7</sup> For the full transcript of the 15 November 2007 Hindraf letter of appeal, see Appendix A.



demonstrations in the future, including several candlelight vigils calling on the Malaysian government to release the Hindraf leaders who were detained under the ISA.

### **Hindraf: Reaction and the Fallout after November 2007**

Hindraf is not the first communitarian-based organization in Malaysia and it could be argued that, in many ways, its emergence on the Malaysian political scene is a reflection of the state of race-based and religion-based sectarian politics that has already existed in the country from the time of independence in 1957 and even earlier, during the colonial era. While Hindraf's membership is drawn primarily and almost exclusively from the section of the Malaysian public that are of Tamil-Hindu background, other race and religion-based organizations also exist. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)<sup>8</sup>, which is a component party

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<sup>8</sup> The origins of the Malaysian Indian Congress (originally known as the Malayan Indian Congress) go back to the earliest stages of political mobilization among the colonial subjects of British Malaya in the 1930s. Most of the Tamil-Hindu labourers and plantation workers then did not have any form of union leadership and were not able to create effective workers' organizations. Consequently, the standard of Tamil vernacular education was extremely poor and social problems such as domestic violence, theft and alcoholism were prevalent in the estates. During the same period, a small number of Indian activists emerged. One of them was John Aloysius Thivy, a Malayan colonial subject who had studied law in London. Thivy was influenced by the anti-colonial struggle in India and was a follower of Mohandas K. Gandhi. He returned to Malaya in 1932 and began to practise law while working closely with the emerging nationalist movement in Malaya and India then. In August 1946, John Thivy, along with a number of other nationalists, created the Malayan Indian Congress, which was heavily inspired and influenced by the Indian Congress Party. The MIC then maintained close contact with the Indian Congress Party, and when India gained its independence in 1948, Thivy was chosen to be India's representative in Malaya and Southeast Asia. Between 1947 and 1950, the MIC was led by Budh Singh and was seen as a primarily left-leaning anti-colonial and anti-imperialist party. It worked alongside other left-leaning nationalist parties such as the Malay-dominated Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malay Nationalist Party of Malaya, PKMM) as well as various workers-based trade unions. It also supported many trade actions, boycotts and *hartals* organized by the left-leaning coalition of parties and unions in Malaya that were aimed at crippling the colony's economy. With the declaration of the Emergency in 1948 and the banning of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) at the same time, however, many of these workers movements and parties were put under surveillance. In 1952, the MIC, under the leadership of K. Ramanathan, contested the elections in alliance with the multi-racial Independence for Malaya Party (IMP) led by the former leader of UMNO, Dato' Onn Jaafar. The failure of the IMP-MIC coalition at the polls meant the end of the IMP party and Onn Jaafar's career but the MIC continued in its struggle to represent the Indian minority in Malaya. K. Ramanathan was then replaced by Kundan Lal Devaser, who began the process of negotiating with the conservative ethno-nationalist UMNO party and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA). In 1954, Devaser brought the MIC into the Alliance (Perikatan) coalition as the third party in the multi-party alliance. Kundan Lal Devaser was later replaced by Veerasamy Thirunyan Sambanthan (Tun V. T. Sambanthan), who became the fifth president of the MIC. Like the MIC's founder John Thivy, Sambanthan was an ardent supporter of the anti-colonial movement and was influenced by the pacifist struggle against colonialism in India pioneered by leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Nehru. In 1954, he helped to set up the Mahatma Gandhi Tamil school in Sungai Siput, Perak, which became one of the first of the MIC's projects for the Indian minority community. When independence was finally granted in 1957, Sambanthan was one of the signatories of the independence document. By then, however, the MIC under Sambanthan had lost the support of many Indian intellectuals and activists who felt that the party had come under the domination and patronage of the stronger UMNO and MCA parties of the Alliance. It was during Sambanthan's long presidency of the MIC (1955–1973) that the MIC came to be seen as a Tamil-Hindu dominated party that served the interests of the Tamil-Hindus primarily. Opposition within the MIC against Sambanthan led to his fall from power and he was replaced by Tan Sri V. K. Manickavasagam.

of the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition, is, for instance, a primarily Indian-based party with an overwhelming number of its members being of Tamil-Hindu background as well. Apart from the MIC there is also the Indian-Muslim KIMMA<sup>9</sup> party, which appeals primarily to Muslims of Indian ancestry and has been trying to join the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition since its foundation in 1979.

Hindraf's exclusive appeal to Malaysians of Tamil-Hindu background is thus not unique and in many ways is a reflection of the state of Malaysia's own race and religion-based politics, which has become normalized over the past five decades. Despite the fact that Hindraf's ethnic posturing is hardly novel to the country, the reaction to the movement has been swift and vocal. Thus far, the reaction to Hindraf has been complex and manifold.

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Manikavasagam re-vamped the internal structure of the MIC in organizational terms, creating branches and sub-branches all over the country, though the MIC remained a Tamil-Hindu dominated party in the 1980s. Manickavasagam passed away in 1979 and was then replaced by Samy Vellu on 12 October 1979, who became the seventh president of the MIC.

<sup>9</sup> The Kesatuan India Muslim Malaysia (KIMMA, also known as Kongres India Muslim Malaysia) was formed in 1979 in Penang, though its roots go back much earlier to the first Malay and Peranakan Muslim organizations that had sprung up in Penang and other British colonial Straits Settlements during the British colonial era. That Penang was the birthplace of KIMMA in 1979 was not surprising, considering the higher level representation of Indian Muslims and Peranakan Muslims in Penang which goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, after the island had been turned into a free port by the British. The Indian Muslims of Penang created the Penang Muslim League, which was overwhelmingly supported by Indian Muslims and shared ties with the Muslim League of India. The Penang Muslim League was allowed to nominate one of their own members to sit on the British-dominated Penang Straits Settlement Council. During the 1940s, Penang was also the home of other Indian-dominated and Indian-led communitarian organizations such as the Penang Muslim Chamber of Commerce. Cognizant of their status and position in Penang's commercial free port as independent traders, the Indian Muslims of the Muslim League and Muslim Chamber of Commerce resisted attempts to integrate Penang into the Malayan administration system then. India's independence and the split between India and Pakistan, however, introduced rifts among the Indians in the overseas Indian diaspora as well, dividing them also along religious-sectarian lines. As Malaya's own independence grew closer (in 1957), the Malays and Chinese had already organized their own ethnic-based parties (UMNO and MCA). The creation of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), however, left many Indian Muslims in a dilemma as to whether they should opt to join the predominantly Hindu-Tamil MIC or to join the predominantly Malay-Muslim UMNO. For some of the Indian Muslims of Penang, both options (of joining UMNO or MIC) were unacceptable for the simple reason that they were not about to deny their ethnic-racial origins and were unwilling to join a party that was dominated by Hindus either. As a result of an internal conflict over the disposition of funds in the Penang Muslim League, the Kesatuan India Muslim Malaysia (KIMMA) was formed by Muslim League dissidents in 1979 (Nagata, 2006: 528). Support for KIMMA was strongest in Penang, owing to the sizeable Indian Muslim community there. Nagata (2006) notes that in 1980, KIMMA boasted a membership of 200,000 members, with 70 nationwide branches (20 of which were in Penang) (ibid., p. 529). KIMMA immediately began to appeal to the parties of the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition to be allowed into the coalition as a component party but to no avail. UMNO and the MIC both opposed the appeal on the grounds that KIMMA was a divisive force that would weaken the Malay-Muslim vote bloc. The MIC leadership, on the other hand, had continually maintained that KIMMA had divided the Malaysian Indian community along religious-sectarian lines. Unable to gain a place in the ruling National Front coalition, KIMMA continued its efforts to mobilize Indian Muslims across the country, with Penang as its political base. (Re: Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonisation, Nationalism and Separatism*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1996; Judith Nagata, "Religion and Ethnicity among the Indian Muslims of Malaysia", in A. Mani, Kernial Singh Sandhu (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006; "Hindu-Muslim Confrontation Raises Old Fears in Malaysia", by Chen May Yee, *Indian Express*, 16 April 1998)

- For the Malaysian government, and the leaders of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party in particular, Hindraf has been viewed with a mixture of embarrassment and contempt for the simple reason that it represents an organic grassroots organization whose membership base is a popular one, drawn primarily (though not exclusively) from the disenfranchised members of the Malaysian underclass. Many of Hindraf's supporters who attended the rallies at Batu Caves and at the heart of Kuala Lumpur on 25 November 2007 came from rubber estates and plantations. They publicly lamented the fact that after five decades of post-colonial development many of them had not seen or enjoyed any of the benefits of independence. This comes as a blow to the image and reputation of the Malaysian government—which purports to be the government of *all Malaysians* and not just one ethnic community—and, in particular, it left the leaders of the MIC in a bad light for demonstrating the MIC's neglect of the marginalized Indian poor. Unsurprisingly, the leaders of the MIC reacted to the claims by Hindraf by stating that the organization was bent on spreading ill will towards the MIC leadership and weakening the bonds of solidarity among Malaysians of Indian descent.
- Advocates and representatives of Malaysia's civil society reacted in a somewhat different manner, with a number of prominent public intellectuals, civil-society activists and human-rights NGOs cautioning Hindraf for its sectarian ethnic posturing at a time when Malaysian civil society seemed to be about to transcend the boundaries of race, religion and ethnicity. Several prominent secular human rights lawyers and activists, like Haris Ibrahim, a well-known advocate of pluralism and religious freedom, criticized Hindraf's campaign on the grounds that it was designed to promote solidarity among Malaysian Hindus in particular but at the expense of Malaysia's newly emerging civil society as a whole.<sup>10</sup>
- The reaction from the conservative Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalists affiliated to the ruling UMNO party and the vernacular Malay press were the most vocal in their vehement condemnation of Hindraf. In the editorial columns of Malay newspapers like *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian*, Hindraf was roundly condemned as being racist, anti-Malay and "ungrateful" for the fact that Indians in Malaysia have a better life than their counterparts in other parts of the world. Continuous attempts were

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<sup>10</sup> Haris Ibrahim, "Still Not Walking this Sunday", Accessed 25 November 2007 from [harismibrahim.wordpress.com/2007/11/25/still-not-walking-this-sunday/](http://harismibrahim.wordpress.com/2007/11/25/still-not-walking-this-sunday/); M. Nithiyananthan, "Hindraf's Goals Noble, But Flawed", accessed from [thecicak.com/hindrafs-goals-noble-but-flawed-a-malaysian-indian-pleas-for-solidarity/](http://thecicak.com/hindrafs-goals-noble-but-flawed-a-malaysian-indian-pleas-for-solidarity/).

made to discredit the movement and its leaders and, on 3 January 2008, *Utusan Malaysia* ran a story entitled “*Pemimpin Hindraf mengaku kalah*”<sup>11</sup> (Hindraf leader admits defeat) in an manoeuvre to heighten the spin around the official line that Hindraf’s campaign had been in vain and that the leadership of the movement was effectively neutralized. The *Utusan*’s columnist Awang Selamat, however, raised the stakes of the confrontation further when he openly warned the leaders and supporters of Hindraf not to challenge the special position and status of the Malays in the country, lest the Malays be provoked to “do something that we might all regret in the future”.<sup>12</sup>

None of these criticisms swayed the leaders and supporters of Hindraf from their campaign to demand for their rights and protect the Hindu minority in Malaysia.

Hindraf’s leader-in-exile, Wayna Moorthy, continued his visits to the capitals of foreign countries to drum up support and attention to the state of the Indian minority in the country, and demonstrations were held in places like London (on 1 February 2008). Back in Malaysia, on 12 February 2008, a crowd of about 300 Hindus from the Makkal Sakthi (Peoples’ Power) movement gathered at the Komtar complex in the middle of Georgetown, Penang, to meet with the Chief Minister of Penang, Koh Tsu Koon. They appealed to the Chief Minister to intervene to ensure that their planned demonstration at the Parliament Building on 16 February would be allowed to proceed without violence or harassment from the police.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that the members of Makkal Sakthi chose to appeal to Koh Tsu Koon, a Malaysian politician of Chinese descent and of the Gerakan party, instead of the leaders of the MIC. To further underscore the extent to which the MIC’s support among the Indian voters had plummeted, MIC President Samy Vellu was booed and jeered by Indian students who had been assembled by various Indian student societies to listen to him at a closed-door briefing session the very next day. Social activist Anil Netto noted, “It seemed that the groundswell against Samy Vellu and the MIC was much larger than even the MIC could have imagined.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “*Pemimpin Hindraf Mengaku Kalah*”, *Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2008.

<sup>12</sup> “Awang Selamat” is a pseudonym for one (or several) of the columnists of the *Utusan Malaysia*, which runs the regular column “Bisik-Bisik Awang Selamat”. Re: “UMNO’s Veiled Threats and Hindraf’s Complicity?”, accessed from [www.bobjots.org/2007/08/umnos\\_veiled\\_threats\\_hindrafts.php](http://www.bobjots.org/2007/08/umnos_veiled_threats_hindrafts.php).

<sup>13</sup> Re: Anil Netto, “Makkal Sakthi’s Drama at Penang CM’s Office”, Accessed 12 February 2008 from [anilnetto.com/2008/02/12/makkal-sakthi-at-penang-cms-office/](http://anilnetto.com/2008/02/12/makkal-sakthi-at-penang-cms-office/)

<sup>14</sup> Re: Anil Netto, “Samy Walks out in a huff after students failed to humour him”, Accessed 13 February 2008 from <http://anilnetto.com/2008/02/13/samy-vellu-walks-out-in-a-huff-as-students-fail-to-humour-him/>

## II. The Tamil Hindus of Malaysia: Some Basic Statistics

Malaysians of South Asian origin make up just under eight per cent of the Malaysian population today, of which an overwhelming majority happen to be of Tamil<sup>15</sup> (Tamil Nadu and Sri Lankan) background. The online Ethnologue Encyclopedia Project ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)) notes that, in 1993, about 1,060,000 Tamil speakers were in Malaysia as part of the wider global Tamil-speaking diaspora. The Tamil language is widely spoken in the country and the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) is littered with Malay words that could trace their etymological roots to Tamil.<sup>16</sup>

While large-scale Tamil migration to the Malay Archipelago took place in earnest during the colonial era between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Tamils are hardly strangers to the Malay world. The earliest historical records found across the Malay Archipelago point to the mass movement and migration of Indians to the Southeast Asian region, bringing with them not only traded goods but also ideas and belief systems that led to the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism (and later Islam) across the archipelago. Coedes' (1968) study on the Indianized states of Southeast Asia examines the significant role played by numerous Indian powers in the spread of Hindu and Buddhist ideas, literature, languages and architectural styles that have permanently marked the Southeast Asian region until today, and which contributed to the first wave of Indianization of the archipelago.<sup>17</sup>

The remnants of long-term Indian contact can be seen in the Indian-inspired monuments of Borobudur, Angkor Wat, Pagan, Pegu, May Son and other former centres of Hindu-Buddhist teachings, as well as the numerous forms of plastic and performing arts that have persisted, which include the puppet-theatre performances of the Indian epics of old such

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<sup>15</sup> The Tamils of southern India are an ethno-linguistic community bound by their common language, Tamil, which is revered as the “mother” of the Tamil peoples. Originally settled in the broader territory known as Tamilakam (encompassing Tamil Nadu, Kerala and parts of northern Sri Lanka) and of proto-Dravidian origin, the Tamils are different from the northern Indo-Aryan peoples of the Indian subcontinent and this is reflected in their language (which is less influenced by Sanskrit compared to other Dravidian tongues), literature, architecture and religion. In terms of their belief system, the popular deities and ritual practices of the Tamils show less influence of the more exclusive, hierarchical and caste-oriented Vedantic practices of the northern Indo-Aryan Indians. Rituals surrounding the worship of the god Murugu (Murugan), for instance, include trance dances (*veriyaattu*) that are not led by priests or high-caste Brahmins and are performed in open spaces bereft of religious architecture, akin to some forms of early Tantric worship. The worship of the mother-goddess Mariamman (Amman), the goddess of fertility and crops, also involves earthy rituals more related to pre-Aryan and pre-Vedantic agrarian Dravidian communities than the Brahmin-officiated rituals and practices of orthodox Vedantism.

<sup>16</sup> Malay words such as *kapal* (English: ship; Tamil: *kappal*), *tali* (English: string; Tamil: *tali*), *kakak* (English: sister; Tamil: *akka*) and *kedai* (English: shop; Tamil: *kaddai*) are clearly of Tamil origin and the Malay language, which happens to be a lingua franca of the Malay archipelago borrow heavily from both Sanskrit and Tamil.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: East-West Center, 1968.

as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. There is thus ample evidence to state that the presence of the Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia is not a new development in the long history of trans-national contact between South Asia and Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup>

It was only during the period of British colonial rule in British Malaya (as well as Sri Lanka and British Burma<sup>19</sup>) that the mass migration of (primarily male) Indian (and notably Tamil) workers to the Southeast Asian colonies began. British colonial rule in Malaya (as in Burma) took place in stages, first with the acquisition of Penang, Singapore and Malacca as

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<sup>18</sup> From the third century BC to the fifteenth century, the Tamil lands (Tamilakam, in southern India) were home to several great Tamil dynasties that eventually developed to become maritime imperial powers: the Chola, Chera and Pandya kingdoms. During this period, maritime contact between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia via the Indian Ocean was extensive, leading to the spread of the religions of India—notably Hinduism and Buddhism—to Southeast Asia and contributing to the further Indianization of the latter region. In time, the Tamil kingdoms waged wars of conquest across the Indian Ocean from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia. The naval power of the Cholas extended all the way from the Sinhalese kingdoms of Sri Lanka to the Sumatran kingdom of Srivijaya, and the Cholas established ties with the Thai and Burmese kingdoms. The records of the Chola kingdom during the time of Raja Rajendra Chola note that the king's armies had conquered a number of other Southeast Asian kingdoms, including Sri Vijaya (Srivijaya), Kadaran (Kedah), Llangosagam (Langkasuka), Mappalam (Pegu), Malaiyur (Jambi, Sumatra) and Madalingam (Tambralingga, Ligor). Another Tamil kingdom, the Chera kingdom, also extended its influence all the way to the Malay Peninsula, leaving behind traces of its former settlements such as the settlement of Cheras in present-day Selangor. This long period of maritime commerce and occasional warfare led to the emergence of a common geography that spanned the Indian Ocean and which linked key settlements in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and Maritime Southeast Asia together. Hence the semantic continuity of place names such as Malaya/Malayu (Malay Peninsula), Malayadvipa (Sumatra) and Malaiyur (Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu), for instance. The Tamils also left behind them numerous inscriptions in both Tamil and Sanskrit that are to be found in areas such as Kedah, where there remains Tamil inscriptions (dated 1086 AD) left behind by the ruler Kulothunka Cholan of the Chola kingdom. The Ligor inscription in present-day southern Thailand that is dated 779 AD also describes the maritime commerce that took place between Ligor and the Tamil kingdoms then. Tamil power began to wane by the fifteenth century with the defeat of Aryan-Hindu powers in the north to the Muslim incursions from Central Asia. With the establishment of Muslim rule and the rise of the Moghul Empire further north, the Dravidian kingdoms in the south were eclipsed in power and regional influence. Muslim domination of maritime trade between India and Southeast Asia meant that the economic clout of both the Tamil and Sri Lankan kingdoms in the south was diminished. The Pandyan dynasty came to an end by the sixteenth century and henceforth there was no effective central power that united the Tamil communities. In time, some of these communities drifted apart to form power centres of their own, such as the southwestern Tamils of Malayali who evolved their own distinct Malayalam language and culture. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Moghul Empire was threatened by the arrival of the Europeans and this led to the eventual loss of control of their dominions. British, French, Dutch and Spanish forces carved up the Indian subcontinent and a British colonial presence was soon established in Bengal. The Tamil lands were likewise contested and both the British and French governments took advantage of the Tamils' lack of political unity to divide the many splintered minor Tamil kingdoms and principalities. Eventually, European enclaves like the French colony of Pondicherry were established in the region of Tamil Nadu. With the eventual colonization of all of India, the British colonial authorities united what was left of the Tamil states under the regional government of the Madras presidency, centred at Madras but answerable to the colonial offices based in Delhi. The region of Tamil Nadu was incorporated into the colonial economy as a source of resources as well as labour, and Tamil-indentured labourers were recruited by local Tamil go-betweens to serve the colonial economies of other conquered British possessions like Sri Lanka, South Africa and British Malaya. (Re: K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *South Indian Influences in the Far East*. Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1949; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "Takuapa and its Tamil Inscription", *The Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. 22, 1949; Georges Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: East-West Center, 1968; K. S. Ramaswamy Sastri, *The Tamils: The People, Their History and Culture*, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 2002; S. Swaminatha Iyer, *A Brief History of the Tamil Country*, G. S. Maniya, Tanjore, 1910.)

<sup>19</sup> Re: D. G. E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, Macmillan Asian Histories Series, Fourth Edition. London. 1981; and Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma*. 1988.

Crown colonies then known as the Straits Settlements, then with the creation of the Federated Malay States (FMS) and ultimately the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS).<sup>20</sup> The sole exception was the Malay kingdom of Johor that had resisted British colonial intervention up to the First World War.

With the consolidation of British colonial rule in Malaya and Burma, the British colonial administrators introduced new laws and regulations that radically altered the economy of both colonies. Working in cooperation with the Malay sultans and rajas, the British introduced colonial Residents at the various Malay courts. Their task was to “advise” the Malay rulers on matters related to economic and political policies while leaving matters such as Malay religion and customs in the care of the Malay royals and nobility.<sup>21</sup> These new policies effectively ended the era of inter-Asian proto-capitalist trade, as Blaut (1993) has noted.<sup>22</sup> The asymmetrically developed import-substituting colonial economy became geared towards the export of raw materials instead, and in Malaya all labour was directed towards the production of tin (and later, rubber), which would be exported abroad in exchange for goods manufactured in England, the primary manufacturer to the British Empire. To facilitate the process of exploitation and the export of the resources, a centrally-planned railway and

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<sup>20</sup> The Straits Settlements (SS) were formally created in 1826, to be followed by the formation of the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1896 and, finally, the Unfederated Malay States in 1909.

<sup>21</sup> The early British colonial officials and officials of the East India Company were quite willing to work with the many Malay rulers when it suited them. Francis Light, for instance, was bold enough to supersede the authority invested in him when dealing with the Sultan of Kedah in his bid to take over the island of Penang (Prince of Wales Island) in 1786. Stamford Raffles was also adept at such tactics, and managed to win possession of the island of Singapore in 1819 by dealing with the contending parties that were disputing the throne of Johor-Riau and supporting the faction of the Temenggung. This trend would continue up to the late nineteenth century. Rather than challenge the many different centres of power spread across the many different Malay sultanates (and thus risk the threat of mass retaliation and resistance), the British Colonial Power was the first to use the Malay courts as tools for extending their influence and dominion over the Malay kingdoms. This was done via a series of treaties signed in the 1870s onwards with the various Malay sultans, pretenders to the throne or warring factions, and eventually introducing British advisors (termed “Residents”) to the respective Malay courts, who in turn “advised” the Malay rulers in their actions (with British interests in mind). The Resident system was particularly effective in two crucial respects: (i) It propped up the facade of the Malay rulers as sovereigns of their own kingdoms. (ii) It allowed the British to influence the internal affairs of the Malay communities without having to exercise the use of force directly. Instead, they relied on the Malay rulers' own traditional powers of coercion and command.

<sup>22</sup> J. M. Blaut notes that prior to 1492, there existed all over the world other non-European “proto-capitalist” trading networks and commercial centres, engaged in intensive exchange of goods, services and ideas that rivalled the patterns of exchange in the West. It was the Spanish and Portuguese expansion westwards and eastwards respectively that disrupted these non-European networks and redirected the flow of wealth and ideas towards Western Europe and gave it the edge that it fought to conserve and exploit even further in the future. Thus a diverse array of networks of exchange was violently re-territorialized within another network centred around the metropolitan centres of Latin Europe and, eventually, Northern Europe. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the era of the independent Malay entrepot state was coming to its end, and even Malay kingdoms such as Aceh were feeling the brunt of the weight of competition from British, Dutch and French trading companies. (J. M. Blaut, *The Coloniser's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*. New York: Guildford Press, 1993).

road-transport system was introduced. It was geared solely towards the need of the colonial economy, and not the local population or local industries.<sup>23</sup>

This massive project of re-structuring the colonial economy was facilitated by the logic of ethnic and race-based communitarianism that separated the various ethnic communities according to a colonial register of “higher” and “lower” races that were meant to carry out different economic functions. While the Malays were seen as a primarily agrarian people who were economically backward and therefore deserved the protection of the colonial authorities, the Chinese and Indians who were brought to the colony in large numbers were meant to serve different functions within the complex plural economy (to borrow Furnivall’s phrase) that was being built.

Working with the “Kapitan Cina” (Chinese captain) system, British and other European companies contracted Chinese middlemen to bring Chinese coolies to serve the needs of the newly developed tin-mining industry. For that reason, many of these Chinese migrant workers eventually settled in places like Taiping, Ipon, Kuala Selangor and Ampang, where there were high concentrations of tin.

The Indian workers, on the other hand, were brought in to serve the needs of the rubber and tea industries, and to also work on the railway and road-transport systems that were being built to connect the resource-rich areas of the peninsula to trading centres and ports on the west coast. Indian migration into the British Straits Settlements and the protected Malay Sultanates increased rapidly in the later half of the nineteenth century. Between 1891 and 1901, the number of Indian migrants rose by 188 per cent (compared to the increase in Chinese migration of 83.5 per cent). Unlike the generations of Indian traders, teachers and mystics that had come in previous centuries, the new generation of Indian labourers and

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<sup>23</sup> The studies done by Amarjit Kaur have shown that the arrival of the British railway system was not at all designed or intended to help in the genuine development of the Malayan economy. The simple reason for this was that foremost in the minds of the colonial authorities and business interests was the desire to maximize profit by moving commodities as fast as possible. The trains, coaches and tracks used to transport these goods were themselves imported from Britain, thus saving the need to develop an advanced manufacturing industry in Malaya (Kaur, 1978). Instead, the railway system effectively contributed to the maintenance of Malaya’s status as a colonial economy plugged into the British Empire’s market and dependent upon Britain’s manufactured goods. She concludes thus: “The railroad facilitated the transformation of Malaya into an export-oriented, lopsided economy heavily specialized in tin and rubber” (1978: 124.). The deplorable conditions of the railway construction force itself—made up mostly from migrant Indian coolies—was made worse by the negligence of the colonial administrators. The only positive aspect of their working lives was that the railway workers were generally more heterogeneous than the estate workers. There were also a minority of Chinese and Malay labourers among them. Consequently, they viewed their problems from a more political angle rather than in terms of solely ethnic-based concerns (Kaur, 1990). (See: Amarjit Kaur, “Railways, Roads and Communication: Their contribution to Asymmetrical Economic development in Malaysia”. Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. 1978; and “Working on the Railway: Indian workers in Malaya, 1880–1957”. In Peter J. Rimmer (Ed.), *The Other Side of Malaysian History*. Singapore, 1990)



coolies were distinguished by their lack of wealth and influence.<sup>24</sup> Most of these Indian labourers were brought in by the system of indentured labour or the *kangani* (overseer) system, which was widely practised in India. They became the wards and dependents of their overseers and European estate managers, and their condition was much poorer than those of the Chinese labourers, who had the benefit of the Chinese protectorate (*kongsi*) system. In the estates, the Indian labourers were often left to the mercy of Western plantation owners who spared little thought for their welfare or education, and cases of abuses were significantly higher among them.<sup>25</sup>

### **III. The Colonial Census, Racialized Capitalism and the Invention of the “Tamil race” (Among Others)**

“*By nature, the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief and the Indian is a drunkard. Yet each, in his special class of work, is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised.*”

C. G. Warnford-Lock,  
*Mining in Malaya for Gold and Tin* (1907)<sup>26</sup>

“More than rubber and tin, the legacy of colonialism in Malaya was racial ideology.”

Charles Hirshmann,  
*The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya*<sup>27</sup>

Looking at the state of Malaysia’s post-colonial politics, it is clear that the country remains deeply divided along the lines of race, ethnicity, language and, increasingly, religion. This is not to deny that ethnic and cultural differences exist or to suggest that these differences were purely invented during the colonial period. That communities such as the Tamils have existed long before the advent of colonialism is evident, as is the fact that there is such a thing as the Tamil language, culture, arts as well as a host of distinct and particular social phenomenon. Yet the era of colonial rule helped to solidify and entrench this sense of communal feeling and collective identity (among Malays, Indians and Chinese) to the point where the equally

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<sup>24</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*. London: MacMillan Press, 1982 (p. 179).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>26</sup> C. G. Warnford-Lock, *Mining in Malaya for Gold and Tin*. London: Crowther and Goodman, 1907 (pp. 31–32).

<sup>27</sup> Charles Hirshman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology”, *Sociological Forum* (SF), Cornell University Press. Vol. 1. No. 2, 1986, p. 357.

important parallel history of cultural overlapping, cross-cultural fertilization and cultural hybridization was eventually diminished, if not lost altogether.

Central to this task of ethnic-racial homogenization and streamlining was the colonial census, which was used to monitor the development and expansion of the various ethnic-racial-linguistic communities in the colonial economy while also keeping those communities separated from each other, according to a violent oppositional hierarchy that perpetuated the myth of “superior” and “inferior” races.

In his study of the working of the colonial census in British Malaya, Charles Hirshman (1986, 1987<sup>28</sup>) noted that the British colonial authorities from the time of Stamford Raffles were not primarily concerned with the massive inflow of Chinese and Indian migrant workers into the Malay states and the Straits Settlements. The migrant coolies served both as a source of cheap labour as well as a market for goods that the British themselves enjoyed a monopoly over. As Hirshman notes, “The British colonial establishment, both in the Straits Settlements and for the early decades of their rule in the Malay states, was almost completely dependent upon Chinese entrepreneurial activity for their economic base.”<sup>29</sup> It was thus hardly surprising that the colonial authorities were less inclined to look at the issue of migration as a “problem” until it was highlighted to them as such by the Malays and the disparities became so glaringly obvious that even the colonial census began to register the disproportionate results of the colonial “open-immigration” policy.<sup>30</sup>

The real concern of the colonial authorities then was not to assuage the insecurities of the various communities—both natives and migrants—but rather to ensure that this fragile coalition of communities could be made to play their respective roles in a racialized economy intended to maximize profits for the British Empire. The maintenance of the ethnically plural economy thus depended on devices that were used to prop up the notion of separate and distinct racial groups, and, to this end, the colonial census afforded a sense of pseudo-scientific credibility to what was essentially a policy of divide and rule.

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Hirshman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology”, *Sociological Forum* (SF), Cornell University Press. Vol. 1. No. 2, 1986; Charles Hirshman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 3, 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Hirshman, 1986, p. 346.

<sup>30</sup> The fear that the Malays might be “swamped” by migrants and reduced to a minority in their own country became clear by the time of the 1931 census. By the time the 1931 census was taken, it was clear that the Malays (who numbered 1,962,021 in total) were no longer the majority group in their own country (whose total population was 4,385,346). By the time of the 1940 census, it is also clear that the Malay community was smaller than the Chinese migrant community.

The practice of race relations emerged as a matter of colonial policy then, and Charles Hirshman (1986) has noted, “Modern race relations ... in the sense of impenetrable group boundaries, were a by-product of British colonialism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Direct colonial rule brought European racial theory and constructed a social and economic order structured by “race”.<sup>31</sup> The hardening of ethnic cleavages in turn allowed the creation of segregated communities, each with its own internal power structures and vertical ruling hierarchies, all of which turned to the Western colonizing power as the final arbiter that would keep these groups apart as well as manage the allocation of wealth and resources among them. Thus, while the Chinese coolies were entirely dependent on their Kapitan Cina representatives, the Indian migrant workers who were assigned to the rubber estates, tea plantations and railway and road works were entirely dependent on their assigned Indian *kangani* overseers, who spoke on their behalf and exploited them in turn.

The fact that the divisions introduced to the racial groupings were heavily influenced by European perceptions of racial supremacy, the imperialist notion of “paternalistic duty” and “the white man’s burden” towards the coloured races, as well as the colonial-capitalist conception of the Malays as “lazy natives”<sup>32</sup> who required Western intervention merely reinforced pre-existing ethnic and racial differences and allowed these differences to crystallize into a rigid framework of segregated ethnic and cultural spaces. The colonial authorities themselves were indifferent to the fact that they had complicated the situation even further by “creating an unstable demographic balance among widely divergent cultural populations by an unrestricted immigration policy” and by “policies which sowed fear and distrust among the Malays, Chinese and Indian populations”.<sup>33</sup> Whatever possibility of inter-racial cooperation among the Asian populations in Malaya “were diminished as European theories of racial difference were imported and as direct colonial dominance was widened geographically and deepened institutionally”.<sup>34</sup> The impact of this ideology made itself most

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<sup>31</sup> Hirshmann, 1986, p. 345. “This was particularly true after the ‘forward movement’ policy of the 1870s when the British colonial powers began to encroach upon the Malay sultanates beyond the Straits Settlements themselves and as such required an ideological basis to justify their policies of expansionism and intervention. Racial theories of difference which explained and justified the necessity of ‘paternalistic’ domination over the coloured races thus allowed the British to intrude into the affairs of the Malay kingdoms. Their belief in their own cultural and racial supremacy thus reconciled the contradictions between their notions of civilization and their own rapacious intentions, and kept their sense of missionary obligations and moral integrity intact.” (Ibid, p. 330)

<sup>32</sup> For a study of the invention of the notion of the “Lazy Malay” native, see: Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. London: Frank Cass, 1977.

<sup>33</sup> Hirshmann, 1986, p. 332.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 332.

acutely felt in the way that it rigidly categorized and compartmentalized the different cultural and racial groupings into their appointed spaces.

Complicating matters even further, for the Indian migrants in particular, was the fact that most of them were settled in rural or semi-urban areas such as plantations and the countryside where railway lines and roads were being built. Most of the Western-owned estates offered only the most rudimentary public services like schools and clinics, and consequently a large number of Indian migrant workers suffered from diseases that were rampant in the countryside. Lack of basic schooling also meant that the children of the Indian coolies had little chance to improve their economic lot or move up the social ladder, restricting their social mobility further.

These conditions affected the Tamils of British Malaya mostly. Apart from the Tamil coolies, other migrants from South Asia were also present and active in the British colony but were mostly found in other occupational streams. The northern Indians from regions such as Kashmir, Punjab and Bengal were often independent merchants and dealers based in the urban areas as cloth and gold dealers. Sikhs, Nepalese and Punjabis were in turn especially favoured by the British, who regarded them as members of the “martial races” (compared to the Bengalis, who were regarded as belonging to the weaker “feminine races”). They were consequently recruited by the colonial army or police force. Yet, at the bottom of this complex and internally-differentiated hierarchy of racial categories were the Tamils, most of whom were Hindu, who were regarded as a source of cheap labour that could be easily domesticated and controlled.

The net result of the combined use of the colonial census, colonial-capitalist ideology as well as the imperialist doctrine of racial supremacy and irreconcilable racial differences effectively brought the Malayan lands together under a centralized yet fragmented plural colonial economy, where racial tension became increasingly intensified and problematic. Andaya (1982) observes, “While uniting the disparate political units administratively, the British contributed to the hardening of ethnic divisions which was to plague all subsequent governments of Malaya/Malaysia.”<sup>35</sup> It was also against this backdrop of a highly uneven and biased colonial economy that Indian political mobilization first began in the late nineteenth century, which led to the first political movements and unions that brought together Malaysians of Indian origin in the country. Yet, many of these movements had internalized the logic of racial-ethnic difference and were thus from the outset *communitarian* in character.

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<sup>35</sup> Andaya, 1982, p. 204.

#### **IV. The Emergence of Hindraf and its Implications for Malaysian Politics**

Earlier in this paper, we tried to show that despite its spectacular achievements in such a short space of time, Hindraf's emergence on the terrain of Malaysian politics is neither novel nor revolutionary. Ethnic and religious-based parties and organizations have been the norm in Malaysia, with race-based parties like UMNO, MCA and MIC dominating the mainstream of Malaysian politics and religious-based parties like PAS<sup>36</sup> also firmly established on the local political scene. Hindraf's appeal to both ethnic and religious sensibilities is but a twist to an old script and, in that sense, it does not mark a radical departure from the mainstay of Malaysian politics.

However, it must also be stressed that Hindraf's sudden appearance and the sophistication with which it got its message across—using all modes of communication available to such subaltern groupings ranging from public meetings to leaflets to Internet communications and free online media outlets such as YouTube—had caught the Malaysian government and the MIC party in particular off guard, prompting a defensive reaction that varied according to the circumstances.

In this final section, we shall look at the implications of Hindraf's campaign thus far and consider to what extent it has altered, if at all, the modalities and norms of Malaysian politics.

##### **IVa. Hindraf and the Global Indian Diaspora: Extending the Frontiers of Domestic Politics to the International Arena**

From the outset, it became clear that Hindraf's aim was to highlight the situation of the Tamil-Hindus of Malaysia by playing to a wider—in this case, international—gallery. It is important to remember that, after its appeals to the Malaysian authorities (on the issue of temple demolitions) had fallen on deaf ears, the leaders of Hindraf turned to the governments of other countries instead. The letters of appeal addressed to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the Queen of England, the Secretary-General of the United Nations and other foreign dignitaries signified not only the willingness to go above the heads of the Malaysian

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<sup>36</sup> For an account of the historical development of PAS and its Islamist ideology, see: Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951–2003*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), 2004.

government but also a commitment to internationalize the Hindraf cause far and wide. In this respect, Hindraf is both a communitarian organization and a trans-national one.

Perhaps, understandably, the leaders of Hindraf have focused much of their attention to the Hindu community in India and in the global Indian diaspora, cognizant of the fact that India today is a rising economic power in Asia and that the global Indian diaspora includes a large number of wealthy and influential Indians who have settled all over North America and Europe and who would then be able to petition their own respective governments on behalf of the Indians of Malaysia. In this respect, the leaders of Hindraf were not only aware of the power of the Internet, the media and modern communications in the age of globalization, but had also taken a leaf out of the book of the Chinese minority of Indonesia, who had likewise turned to the global Chinese diaspora for help during the violent and brutal anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in late 1998.

With such considerations in mind, Hindraf's leader-in-exile, Wayna Moorthy, left the country to highlight the Hindraf cause in India in November 2007. The reaction to Hindraf's campaign in Malaysia was swiftest and strongest in India. Across India—and in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in particular—Indian politicians voiced their concerns and protested to both the Indian and Malaysian governments. Immediately after the crackdown on Hindraf activists in Kuala Lumpur, the Chief Minister of the state of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi, demanded that the government of India take action to ensure that the plight of Malaysian Hindus would be looked into closely. In a letter addressed to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Chief Minister Karunanidhi stated that he was “deeply pained” by the treatment of Hindus in Malaysia. He went on to note: “You are aware that Tamils constitute the largest percentage among the Indian minority in Malaysia. The protesters were carrying poster-size pictures of Mahatma Gandhi.”<sup>37</sup>

Other prominent leaders from Tamil Nadu also spoke up. They included the Secretary-General of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), V. Gopalswamy (@Vaiko), who called on the Indian government to “take immediate action to protect the Tamils of Malaysia”. Claiming in his letter to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that there were “alarming signs” that the future safety and welfare of ethnic Indians in Malaysia was under threat, Gopalswamy's letter likewise reiterated many of the claims of other Indian leaders and Hindraf as well. Gopalswamy's letter noted: “[Malaysia's] Indians are historically underprivileged, compared to other ethnic groups and have long felt

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<sup>37</sup> “Kurananidhi Protests ill-treatment of Tamils in Malaysia”, Rediff News, 27 November 2007, accessed from [www.rediff.com/news/2007/nov/27malay.htm](http://www.rediff.com/news/2007/nov/27malay.htm)

discriminated. ... More than 90 per cent of ethnic Indians in Malaysia are Tamils. They have contributed to bring economic prosperity in Malaysia, shedding their sweat of labour all these years. But they have been discriminated in education, jobs and business opportunities by Malaysian authorities.”<sup>38</sup>

Lending his voice to the chorus of disapproval was the former Chief Election Commissioner and member of the Rajya Sabha, M. S. Gill, who also called on the Indian government, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in particular, to employ diplomatic means to take up the cause of the Hindus in Malaysia. Speaking to the Indian press, Gill noted: “It is evident that they (Malaysian Hindus) are not getting equal benefits and treatment in economic well being and in other ways from the Muslim Malay majority who run a robust democracy. If they are not even allowed to hold peaceful demonstration, (this) is a matter of concern. As equal citizens, they must get equal and fair treatment from the Malaysian government and majority community.”<sup>39</sup>

It did not take long for the Malaysian government to respond to statements emanating from India and, shortly after India’s Defence Minister A. K. Antony ended a three-day visit to the Southeast Asian region to boost defence ties with the country’s regional neighbours, reports emerged that the Malaysian government would suspend all further recruitment of foreign workers from India and Bangladesh. The ban was supposed to take effect from 31 December 2007 and it meant that there would be no further renewals of work permits for all workers from India and Bangladesh, including those who were already working in Malaysia. Malaysia’s Home Minister Radzi Sheikh Ahmad stated that there were simply too many Indian and Bangladeshi workers in the country, and that Malaysia no longer needed to employ foreign workers in such large numbers, a comment that was also repeated by Sammy Vellu, the MIC leader who was then in New Delhi for a conference.<sup>40</sup> Following his meeting with India’s Prime Minister, Samy Vellu clarified that the “ban” amounted to more stringent checks on the number of foreign workers in the country due to the fact that Malaysia had already exceeded its limit of 1.8 million foreign workers. (There were then around two million legalized foreign workers in Malaysia.<sup>41</sup>) This did not, however, stop segments of the Indian press from speculating about whether the tougher restrictions on Indian workers was a

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<sup>38</sup> “Take Immediate Steps to Protect Malaysian Indians: Vaiko”. *The Hindu*, 27 November 2007.

<sup>39</sup> “Concern over maltreatment of Malaysian Indians”. *The Hindu*, 27 November 2007.

<sup>40</sup> “Malaysia on the Defensive, Says No Ban on Indian Workers”, India enews.com, 10 January 2008.

<sup>41</sup> In September 2007, 2.2 legal foreign workers were based in Malaysia. 35 per cent of them were employed in the country’s factories while 17 per cent were employed in the rural estates. Among them, Indonesians made up almost 60 per cent of foreign workers while Nepalese, Bangladeshis and Indians constituted 11, 9 and 7 per cent of the legal foreign workforce respectively.

result of the Hindraf demonstrations in November and the support that Hindraf had received from some notable Indian politicians shortly after that.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, despite the brief exchange of rhetorical pyrotechnics, it was clear that Indian-Malaysian relations remained good and that neither side was willing to allow the Hindraf issue to deter them from respecting bilateral agreements such as the Indian-Malaysian Defence Pact.<sup>43</sup> Malaysian leaders have also held the view that India was a major regional power that was important to the country's security and that good bilateral relations were necessary to ensure that the power balance in the region was maintained, while Indian leaders still viewed Malaysia as a moderate and progressive Muslim-majority state that was crucial in both the global "War on Terror" as well as a model for other Muslim states to follow.

Apart from India, the leaders of Hindraf also appealed to the governments of a few Western countries and the members of the Indian-Hindu diaspora settled there. Talks and meetings were held in New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and London. But, once again, none of the governments approached by Hindraf was willing to take up Hindraf's appeal to castigate the Malaysian government for the ill treatment and relative poverty of the Indian minority in the country.

While Hindraf failed to mobilize the support of foreign governments (including the government of India) to its cause, it did manage to spread its message and concerns to ordinary Indian citizens and members of the Indian-Hindu diaspora abroad. In this respect at least, Hindraf's success has been mixed. In political terms, it did not manage to secure a standing before the foreign governments it appealed to, but it did succeed in renewing the diasporic bonds between the Indian minority in Malaysia and the Indians of India and the Indian diaspora overseas. This further confirms Hindraf's status as a communitarian and sectarian organization that now has a trans-national presence abroad.

#### **IVb. Hindraf and the Malaysian-Indian Community: Strengthening Communal Identity or Problematizing "Indian-ness" in the Malaysian context?**

While Hindraf's appeal to the Indian minority in Malaysia is primarily communal and sectarian, it has also introduced a cleavage—both political and ontological—into the

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<sup>42</sup> "No Malaysian move against Indian workers", *The Hindu*, 9 January 2008; "Malaysia Bans intake of Indian Workers", Express India.com, 9 January 2008.

<sup>43</sup> "India, Malaysia to sign new Defence Pact". *People's Daily*, 20 February 2007. In early 2007 India and Malaysia concluded the fourth India-Malaysia Joint Commission Meeting where India agreed to help train Malaysian Air force pilots who were now flying on newly-purchased Russian-made Sukhoi jet fighters. Both countries also discussed the possibility of joint-training manoeuvres and work closer in the Indian Ocean.



Malaysian-Indian community itself. Hindraf's sustained efforts to highlight the marginalization, alienation and discrimination in all walks of life did not merely challenge the staid rhetoric of the Malaysian state whose brand of multiculturalism dates back to the mode of race-relations first developed during the colonial era but, more importantly, rendered hollow the MIC's claim to be the main representative, patron and protector of the Malaysian Indian community.

Many of the accusations levelled by the leaders of Hindraf towards the leadership of the MIC and its President, Samy Vellu, in particular, were based on long-held grouses that were nurtured over Samy Vellu's long stewardship of the party. During the time of Samy Vellu, the MIC expanded its patronage machinery and used its educational outreach unit, the Maju Institute of Educational Development (MIED), to sponsor the education of more than 10,000 Tamil schoolchildren. In 1982, Maika Holdings was created by the MIC to help pool together the economic resources of the Indian minority so that they could collectively invest in Malaysia's economic development. Maika, however, was criticized by some as a patronage arm of the MIC, despite the fact that it was built from the collected sum of RM 106 million, which was raised by many poor Tamil families. Following a succession of mismanagement scandals, Maika faced serious losses and many of the Tamil families could not recover their investments. In the face of growing criticism of his leadership, Samy Vellu maintained a strong grip on the MIC. S. Subramaniam, who was brought into the MIC during the time of former MIC President Manickavasagam, was one of the strongest opponents of Samy Vellu and accused the latter of nepotism, corruption and mismanagement of the party. Nonetheless, Subramaniam was defeated at the MIC Annual General Meeting of 2006, shoring up Samy Vellu's position in the party even further.

When Hindraf began mobilizing its supporters in defence of the Hindu temples that were being demolished all over the country, much of its criticism was directed towards Samy Vellu and the senior leadership of the MIC, whom they accused of betraying the Indian minority and not being able to stand up to the demands of the UMNO party, which leads the ruling BN coalition. Linked to the Hindu temples issue were other complaints related to the MIC's finances, its alleged failure to uplift the economic condition of the Hindus, and its failure to defend Hindu culture, language and identity.

As a result of these complaints being aired in public, Hindraf inadvertently exposed the class divisions that now exist within the membership of the MIC and the gulf of power, wealth and influence between the MIC leadership and the rest of the Indian minority community. This is ironic, considering the fact that the MIC was originally set up to defend

the interests of the Indian working class and struggle for economic and social equality in the first place. By emphasizing the weakness and marginalization of ordinary Malaysian Indians and contrasting their lot to the opulence and luxury of those who claimed to be their leaders and spokesmen, Hindraf has actually introduced the fault line of class difference within the Indian community itself, thereby rendering any simplistic attempts to homogenize the Malaysian Indians as a singular political constituency more problematic.

Here lies the paradox that Hindraf itself has introduced into the equation of Malaysian politics. On the one hand, it is a communitarian and sectarian organization that seeks to mobilize and consolidate the Indian minority in Malaysia on the basis of an exclusive racial and religious identity. On the other hand, it has succeeded in doing so by adopting the rhetoric and discourse of betrayal and neglect of the community by some of its own, namely the leaders of the MIC. Hindraf has therefore contributed to the problematization of the category of “Indian-ness” itself, making it consequently more difficult for both the MIC and the ruling National Front to maintain its divisive form of communal sectarian politics that has always relied on the instrumental fiction of neatly divided and compartmentalized racial groupings.

What Hindraf has done via its street demonstrations and campaigns to discredit the MIC leadership is to demonstrate that the Indian community is not a singular bloc that can be reduced to one essentialized stereotype or compartmentalized within neatly defined and hermetically sealed borders. The net result of this shift in perceptions and understanding of identity—including political identity—would be seen and felt at the General Elections that came soon after.

## **V. Postscript: Hindraf’s Impact on the 12th General Elections of Malaysia**

Hindraf’s impact was most keenly felt at the 12th General Elections, which were held on 8 March 2008. Hindraf’s lobbying intensified throughout much of late 2007 and early 2008, and in February the exiled leader of Hindraf appealed to the Malaysian Indian-Hindu community to maintain its pressure on the UMNO-led BN government of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (see Appendix B).

During the two weeks of campaigning that led to the fateful day when Malaysia’s political landscape was altered for good, the component parties of the Barisan Nasional adopted a somewhat contradictory posture towards Hindraf and the Malaysian Indian-Hindu community in general. Mainstream media reports noted how the many concerns that had been

raised by Hindraf were now being taken seriously by senior leaders of the Malaysian government. The issue of temple demolition was finally being discussed at the cabinet level; the Prime Minister had vowed that he would take matters into his own hands; and the thorny issue of Malaysians of Indian origin who still—despite the fact of being third- and fourth-generation Malaysian citizens—were not in possession of legal identity cards and passports would be dealt with. Senior leaders of the MIC and UMNO also promised to look into the issue of the under-representation of Malaysians of Indian origin in the civil service, corporate sector and institutions of higher learning in the country.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, the BN's election campaign also included a substantial amount of fear-mongering and threats to non-Malay and non-Muslim voters, calling on them to vote for the MCA, MIC and Gerakan parties in particular or run the risk of losing their voice in the BN government. It was apparent by the last week of campaigning that many of the senior leaders of the BN component parties were aware of how the non-Malay and non-Muslim votes were about to swing to the opposition, with many disgruntled Malaysians voting for the DAP and the PKR in particular in the urban constituencies of the west coast of the peninsula.

When the election results were finally announced on the evening of 8 March, it was clear that the Malaysian electorate had swung decisively for the opposition. By the morning of 9 March, the BN-led government had managed to secure its victory at a terrible cost. The combined weight of the opposition parties had secured 82 parliamentary seats in all—the highest number of parliamentary seats ever won by the opposition in Malaysian history. Furthermore, five state assemblies fell into opposition hands, including the states of Kelantan, Penang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor. The opposition also won control of the Federal Territory.

The election results of 2008 marked the nadir of the political career of both Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the leader of the MIC, Samy Vellu.

For Prime Minister Badawi, the shock results of 2008 have shown just how ineffective, unpopular and discredited he had become in a space of four years. The man who had won the highest and biggest mandate in the history of Malaysian politics was now left with a BN coalition in tatters, and a severely weakened UMNO within which calls for his resignation were loud and clear. Badawi's claim and promise to serve as the "Prime Minister of all Malaysians" has been proven hollow, as it was clear to all that the BN had been abandoned by non-Malay and non-Muslim voters of the country who felt that the Badawi

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<sup>44</sup> See: "Hope for the 'Stateless' at Last", *New Sunday Times*, 27 January 2008; and "Indians Promised more Jobs in Government", *The Star*, 2 February 2008.

administration had singularly failed to register and represent their interests and anxieties. On issues ranging from the destruction of Hindu temples, the refusal to allow permits for the construction of churches, the controversies over freedom of religion and the right to leave Islam, among others, Badawi had failed to act decisively and firmly, in particular with regards to the increasingly bellicose rhetoric that has emanated from the more extremist communitarian voices in his own UMNO party and the wider Malay-Muslim communitarian lobby.

Furthermore, Badawi's failed attempt to promote and entrench his own moderate understanding of Islam through his "Islam Hadari" project has shown that, even as a Muslim leader with sound Islamic credentials, his brand of moderate Islam has failed to gain ground among the Malay-Muslim voters in the country. Beaten on all fronts due to his own apparent paralysis and inability to take firm and decisive measures to control the rise of ethnic and religious communitarianism in the country, Badawi became yesterday's man overnight as soon as the election results were known.

The fate of the embattled leader of the MIC, Samy Vellu, was also decided at the General Elections of 2008. Despite his boasts of having the Indian community in his pocket and being able to secure the Indian-Hindu vote, the MIC was thoroughly wiped out at the elections in no uncertain terms. Samy Vellu himself lost his parliamentary seat at the Sungai Siput constituency, and the election results effectively neutralized the MIC for good as a political force in the country.

It is significant to note that in the course of our fieldwork done during the election campaign in Malaysia at the time, we met and interviewed a number of former MIC members and supporters who had defected to the PKR and DAP; as well as a number of disaffected MIC members who even claimed that they were willing to support and vote for the Islamist party PAS on the basis of tactical voting. This may have been a protest vote in some respects, but it did register the extent to which the Malaysian voters of Indian origin were no longer beholden to the MIC as their sole and primary representative in the government. Both the DAP and the multi-ethnic PKR party were now at hand to speak up for the Indian community and the record of both the DAP and PKR in speaking up on issues vital to the interests of the Malaysian Indian community were proven by then. The MIC, in turn, was thoroughly discredited by virtue of the unpopularity of Samy Vellu, its close proximity to UMNO and the popular view that the MIC—like the MCA and Gerakan—were unable to stem the rise of Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalism and sectarian extremism in the ruling UMNO party. More than any other leadership crisis that has ever visited the MIC party, the rise of Hindraf and

the results of the 12th General Elections marked the turning point in its history and the loss of the MIC's vote base for good.

Now, with the MIC all but discredited and leaderless, the future of the Malaysian Indian-Hindu community is left to be decided. It is not known if the transfer of support from the MIC to the opposition parties will lead to the dilution of the MIC's membership and support base, and what this holds for the future of the current generation of MIC leaders, most of whom have failed to secure their seats at the Parliamentary and State Assembly elections. Furthermore, it is not certain how Hindraf will develop now and in the near future, as there are several options that present themselves.

Hindraf may continue to work as a powerful and vocal pressure group, lobbying both the government and opposition parties to take heed of their demands and to highlight the plight of the marginalized Malaysian-Indian minority in the country. Should this be the option taken, then Hindraf will certainly be seen as a power broker of considerable influence and clout as it has demonstrated its capacity to mobilize large numbers of Malaysian citizens as political actors and agents in the public political domain. This also makes it a powerful actor that all the major political parties have to heed and negotiate with during any election process.

Hindraf may also become diluted in time as its members formally transfer their political loyalties from the MIC and BN to the opposition parties, notably PKR and the DAP. This would mean that Hindraf has served the role of political mobilizer and training ground for a new generation of Malaysian-Hindu activists and political actors and, in this respect, it can be compared to the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), which began as a sectarian Muslim youth movement but whose leaders and members then left the organization to become formally involved in conventional party politics, like Anwar Ibrahim, who left ABIM to join UMNO, and Hadi Awang, who left ABIM to join PAS in the 1980s.

Another option that presents itself to Hindraf is to formally transform itself into a political party that assumes the mantle of leadership of the Malaysian Indian-Hindu community from the now-discredited MIC. Should this be the case, then Hindraf's sectarian and communitarian character will be confirmed even further, as it remains a sectarian organization appealing to the exclusive demands of a singular ethnic-religious community, albeit one that has come to learn the rules of wider political engagement in a more open and plural public political domain.

Whatever the options taken, it is clear that in a short space of time the entry of Hindraf into the Malaysian political scene, which has always been configured and determined

by the logic of racial differences and race relations dating back to the colonial era, has not put an end to sectarian politics in the country. If anything, Hindraf has demonstrated that demonstrations and public agitation can and do secure concrete political results and that they do serve to foreground the interests and demands of a minority community. Malaysia's political landscape may have been complexified as a result of Hindraf's arrival on the scene, as there is now a new actor on the stage of Malaysian politics that demands that its voice be heard. But in terms of its fundamentally sectarian race and religious-based character, Hindraf's arrival on the Malaysian political stage has done little to move the country away from race and religion-based politics. Such are the contradictions of Malaysian politics today, though it cannot be said that Hindraf was primarily responsible for the racialization of Malaysian politics in the first place. The responsibility for that falls on the shoulders of the ruling BN parties that were the real inheritors of the legacy of colonial race relations and the legacy of racialized capitalism that continue to haunt the present generation of Malaysians half a century after the demise of the British Empire.

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