

# VOICES OF THIRD GENERATION MALAYSIAN INDIANS: MALAYSIAN OR MALAYSIAN INDIAN?

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## Abstract

In this article, the third generation Indian voices in Malaysia are examined to see whether they perceive themselves more as Malaysian or Malaysian Indian. This is essentially to discover how individuals manage and reconcile their ethnic identities with their national identity. Through a series of semi-structured interview questions, the respondents narrate what can be considered as constitutive of their ethnic identity. Based on the 22 Malaysian Indian respondents, it is found that their identity is recognisable through four main pillars: physical appearance, religion, Tamil language and cultural practices at home. While the third generation respondents have a keen awareness of their ethnic identity, they view themselves as Malaysian first rather than purely stressing on their ethnicity. This is reflective of how Malaysianized they are.

**Keywords:** Malaysian, Indian, ethnic identity, national identity

## Introduction

Identities are best understood as being continually constructed through interactions (Fougere 2008). Identities develop and evolve over time. Not only are identity formation and maintenance influenced by one's ethnicity, politics, location and environment (Harries et al. 1995), but persons such as parents, family, and peers also play an important role in the shaping of identities (Peterson 1989). In a situation where the culture of the Indian community in Malaysia is constantly changing and interacting with the dominant culture in the nation, how well third generation minority Indians know their own ethnic identities, and how far they have been 'Malaysianized' after 58 years of independence, is the main focus of this article. 'Malaysianized' in this article denotes the willingness to be identified and feel proud of being a Malaysian instead of exclusively identifying with one's respective ethnic identity. This article also explores how individuals manage and reconcile their ethnic identities when national identity is being emphasized and cultivated by the Malaysian government.

## The Socio Cultural Background of Malaysian Indians

Malaysian Indians are Malaysians of Indian origin and they form the third largest ethnic group in Malaysia after the Chinese and the Malays. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today, the Indians in Malaysia have gone through a lot of challenges and are subjected to a variety of influences. Despite sub-ethnic group differences, the first generation of Indians had to adapt to local society

and culture. The second generation re-emphasised a common Indian culture, while the third generation, who are the subjects of this article, are moving towards a westernized life-style and Malaysianized way of living.

Tamils form 70% of Indians with other linguistic groups of Telugu, Malayalee, Punjabi, Bengali and Ceylonese Tamil making up the rest of the population. Hinduism is the main faith, followed by Christianity and Islam. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the British colonization of Malaya (1874-1957), the British recruited two types of Indian labourers and they were occupationally segregated. The former 'white collar' labourers were to fill roles in the administration as clerks or managers (from the Ceylonese Tamils and Malayalee groups) and policeman (mainly were the Sikhs) whereas the indentured labourers were from South India who were put to work in rubber plantations and the building of the railways (Stenson 1980). According to Ramachandran (2002), the majority of the Malaysian Indians have been mired in the proletarian under-class status. This position was more or less maintained in post-independence Malaya and Malaysia. They have low educational achievement, face social inequities and lack political and economic influence along with other socio-economic problems such as high rates of school dropout, high crime rate and the dependency on political and economic handouts (Ramachandran, 2002).

Upward mobility to professional and middle class ranks can be seen but are mostly confined to the sub-ethnic groups that have English education backgrounds. These Indians constitute 15.5 % of professionals (doctors, lawyers, dentists, veterinary surgeons, engineers and etc.) in the country (Ramachandran 2002). There are an increasing number of successful businessmen in the Indian community, namely among the Sindhis, Gujeratis, Punjabis and Indian Muslims.

In general, according to Lyngkaran and Kunaletchumy (*Indian Malaysian Online* 2007), Malaysian Indians are placed in a favourable dimension:

... among all the Indian Diasporas in the world we in Malaysia are in one of the most advantageous positions. The community has a well-structured Tamil primary school system ... government funded Tamil radio and Television service, Tamil cinema and video services, well-patronised Hindu temples all over the country, a myriad registered Indian NGOS, Chair in Indian studies in the University of Malaya, and Indian based political parties and Indian political representation at the federal and state levels. We can use this advantage to improve ourselves and also to provide leadership to the Indian Diaspora in the rest of the world. Indeed the Malaysian Indian community is in a unique position for this role.

## **Ethnic Identity and Narratives**

Giddens (1991) sees identity as fluid and malleable and thus, individuals who are living in the modern world with the changing nature of identity, constantly have to self-reflect to decide what they should do and who they should be. This can be done by creating biographical narratives that will explain themselves to sustain a coherent and consistent identity. Fougere (2008) argues that self-narratives 'imitate' people's experience and their experience in turn comes to imitate their narratives. The narratives for these people are thus a way to 'construct themselves' (Bruner 2001: 30). In the context of an interview, when someone is asked to talk about his/her experience, in which they produce self-narratives, it is possible for the person to develop a way of examining themselves closely and they may reconstruct their identity simultaneously.

With the influence of the dominant culture of the nation which overshadows their ethnic identity, how do Malaysian Indians perceive their identity? In what ways do they assert their ethnic identity? These are the major concerns of this article.

## Methodology

Data was collected from an interview-based qualitative approach, which was conducted between September and December of 2012. Semi-structured interviews were applied to allow for some flexibility in data collection. Four main themes were selected, namely how respondents see themselves as Malaysian Indians, what symbolizes Malaysian Indian identity, parental influence on identity formation, and if there is a sense of pride to be identified as Malaysian Indians. Each respondent was interviewed individually by the researcher and the interview was recorded. The average time for each interview ranged between 25 to 45 minutes. All the interviews were transcribed and categorized.

The sample consisted of 22 Malaysian Indians (11 males and 11 females), ranging from 24 to 67 years old; eight of them were aged above 50, seven aged 31 to 50 (both age groups were categorised as senior respondents) and seven of them were less than 30 years of age (junior respondents). All respondents were third generation Malaysians. They were either working or studying in Klang Valley (mainly Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya). Snowball sampling was applied; the details of the respondents are as below:

Table 1: Details of participants

Numbers	Occupation	Working place
6	Lecturers	FLL, UM
1	Lecturer	Other faculty in UM
3	Lecturers	Other universities in Klang Valley
4	Laboratory officer	PPUM
1	Administrative executive	Klang Valley
1	Secondary school teacher	Klang Valley
1	Police officer	Police Di Raja Malaysia
1	Hospital manager	Private hospital
1	retiree	
3	MA students	FLL,UM

Each respondent was given an acronym for identification once his/her statement was quoted (e.g. K, RT). In the analysis, respondents were divided into two groups, 1) the junior respondents and 2) the senior respondents, to find out if there were any generational differences between these two groups.

In selecting subjects, main consideration was given to respondents with tertiary education backgrounds, to ensure that they provided substantial reflection on their identity. Additional consideration was on the samples' distribution by different age groups to find out if there were any generational variations on the issue discussed.

The limitations of this study are the restriction imposed on having only respondents with tertiary educational backgrounds, the small sample size, and that only a single session interview was conducted with each participant. A sample with a variety of educational backgrounds together with repeated interviews, and a larger sample size would have provided more comprehensive data and given more insight into the issue. Therefore, the researcher considers this study a preliminary study of Malaysian Indian identity.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are based on the 22 Malaysian Indian respondents' perception towards their socio-economic cultural identities constructed on four main identity markers: physical appearance and temples, Tamil language, and parental teaching of traditions/cultural practice at home. The findings on whether or not they are proud to be a Malaysian Indian will be discussed..

### *Physical Identity Marker*

In the eyes of the respondents, female Indians can be recognized easily from their appearance; dark skin colour, wearing pottu on the forehead (red pottu indicates that they are married, black indicates that they are single or widowed), wearing traditional costumes e.g. saree, wear silver ring on the wrist by the Punjabi Indians. They speak different languages like Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu and celebrate the New Year which Tamils call *Chithirai Varuda Pirappu*, Malayalees call *Vishu*, and Telugus call *Ugadi* according to their own sub-ethnic calendars. From the type of saree the women wear, their sub-ethnic origin can be differentiated, for instance, the Malayalee women wear beige sarees.

Many respondents contend that temples and Tamil language symbolize Malaysian Indian identity. The participants commented:

KV: 'temples are more than schools'

G: 'most Indians go to temple'

KH: 'temple symbolize identity, people go to temple once a week to pray, to make boon, do cooking together'

SH: 'temple is mushrooming a lot but not the Tamil school'

RJ: 'temple can be seen almost every corner, in less than 1km we have 5 temples in my housing area.'

MD: 'temples are more than Tamil schools. What they care is only temple.'

SP: 'temple unites the Indians'

RM: 'my Indian identity only shown on appearance and the cultural celebration not from my thinking and behaviour.'

In short, it can be safely said that Tamil temples can be found in many places. In the opinions of the respondents, the temples mean significantly more than the Tamil schools. In their

viewpoints, temples not only symbolize Indian identity, but they are places for prayer and places that unite them.

### *Language Identity Marker*

Most Indians in Malaysia speak Tamil. It is apparent that Tamils unite under the Tamil language.

MD: 'Language is the soul of a nation' (bahasa jiwa bangsa)

SH: 'language is the way we can introduce ourselves as Malaysian Indian' and she wants her children to learn Tamil language as she knows Tamil language is rich in literature.

SR: 'religious rituals are performed in Tamil and Sanskrit.'

G: 'language is identity'

KH: 'language represents community, and we should respect our mother tongue'

SR: 'language helps to develop a person's identity; we can mix with people who speak the language'

It can be observed that there is a high social demand for Indians to speak Tamil. However, the proficiency in written Tamil is not required based on the interviewees' background details. All of the 22 interviewees spoke Tamil, but only 6 of them could write in Tamil.

Many of the junior respondents reported that they learned Tamil through family and friends or at work places. According to KN,

'I use very informal Tamil [in] conversation; don't need to think of the right words to use like English in teaching'.

RH said that she learned Tamil through colleagues at work. AN speaks Tamil to show togetherness. She noticed that if one speaks only English they may be considered as outsiders or as being arrogant especially if they are in a Tamil social function. They are able to speak in English in Churches that uses English. For those who cannot speak Tamil, SR thinks that:

'It is their problem, they should learn the language. I learned Tamil through friends and movies'.

Despite knowing the important role played by Tamil language, many of the respondents (except K, SP and G) still do not want to send their children to Tamil schools to learn the language. The reasons given for not sending their children to Tamil schools are mostly negative. Seven out of eight junior respondents complained about the poor physical condition and environment of Tamil schools, poor achievement in English, students have bad behaviour and the possibility of being involved in gangsterism is there. The negative impression of Tamil schools can be inferred from the respondents' statements below:

PM: 'no good teachers in Tamil school'

SR: '[students in Tamil school are] hopeless in English and they speak with Tamil accent'

YG: 'the government should abolish all the Tamil schools as it produces children with bad proficiency in English that is resulting in the high dropout rates of Tamil schools'

To improve the impression the respondents have of Tamil schools, SR said if he has money, he 'wants to revamp the Tamil school curriculum'. Only two out of 14 senior respondents said that they sent their children to Tamil schools. Nevertheless, it is common to have exceptions to the norm. The primary Tamil school 'Vivekananda' in Brickfield, Kuala Lumpur, outperformed many national schools as many of the students obtained good results in their UPSR (Primary School Evaluation Test), scoring 7As for all subjects. Some of the parents from the sample who are professionals are sending their children there for primary education. A case in point: Ananda Krishnan, a Malaysian Indian and the second wealthiest man in South East Asia, attended this school for his primary education.

Another main reason for Indian parents not to send their children to Tamil schools as conveyed by the respondents is that they think their children can learn Tamil at the POL (People's Own Language) classes that are offered in the national schools. The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural backgrounds that the national schools possess are one of the factors that influence Indian parents to send their children to gain primary education there.

Being born as Malaysians, many of the interviewees have positive perceptions towards learning additional languages other than Tamil, Malay, and English, such as Mandarin, Arabic, and Japanese. YG, a linguist, thinks that 'the more language you know, the better you are'. In her opinion, those who do not speak Tamil are not hindered from progressing in life. After all, they do not feel it is a loss not to speak Tamil because they feel they are Malaysian. However, YG does not deny the beauty of the Tamil language and its richness in literature. YG says 'as language is for enrichment, they should learn Tamil after Malay and English'. KN says that because they learn English and Malay from young, the Malaysian Indians speak without a heavy Indian accent thus distinguishing them from the Indians from India.

KN and RT think that language is learnt for a purpose. Recently, many Indians want to learn Mandarin for better future job prospects. Tamil is not a global language and there are no secondary Tamil schools in Malaysia. Some of the respondents like RT, RJ, and SS send their kids to learn Mandarin or Arabic, as this language is thought to have high economic value for their kids in the future. A junior respondent, PM, said 'I want to learn Mandarin because it is useful.'

### ***Cultural Identity Marker***

In the responses of the junior respondents, the role played by their parents (the second generation) in constructing Indian identity is somewhat arbitrary. Some respondents said that their parents did not teach Indian identity deliberately but that they are role models to follow for instance in practicing cultural celebrations, such as celebrating *Thai Ponggal* and *Deepavali*, performing prayers in the morning, attending religious festivals such as *Thaipusam*, wearing Indian Saree, respecting nature and the elderly people, and so forth. Some of them learn about religious celebrations from temples and some pick up Tamil from friends. The junior respondents said that they would teach their children the Indian cultural traditions once they have their own kids.

However, the senior respondents (particularly those who are in their 40s and above) have a higher awareness of their identity, not only teaching their kids how to perform prayers, fasting on Tuesday and Friday, eating Indian cuisine daily, but also sending their children to Tamil tuition class to learn the language (SS), the Tamil literature and philosophy (SS, SR), and are even

willing to pay for their children to attend spiritual camps (SR). Respondent SD invites her neighbour's children to join her family prayer at 6pm during the weekend. RT is a Christian, but when it comes to Indian celebrations, he brings his children to his friend's house to let them see and experience how cultural functions are celebrated.

On the other hand, MD, an atheist, does not teach his kids anything about Indian identity but only wants his children to grow up with good values and discipline. RM is teaching her kids about Malaysian identity, not Indian identity. The intermarriage among Indians with other ethnic groups and the emergence of a multi-ethnic culture, for instance in food and speaking many languages, has led RM to think that their Indian identity has become less prominent. However some respondents mentioned that compared to the Indians from India, they are happy and think that they are fortunate to live in Malaysia. Thus, some of them want to be recognized as Malaysian Indians. RM says,

'I am Malaysian first, Indian after' but at the same time, I want my Indian identity to be maintained. 'I retain my Indian identity. I observe all the cultural festivals, practice them traditionally, wearing Indian clothes, put up Indian wall decoration at home' (RM).

### *Malaysian Indian Identity and Socio-Economic Status*

It can be deduced from the perception of the respondents about the general image of the Indian community that there are two groups of Indians in Malaysia, one known as 'poor people' and the other as 'educated people'. The under-privileged and poor Indians are seen as lacking in knowledge as to how to advance socio-economically. Both the junior and senior respondents think that negative perception such as 'not progressive', 'very poor', 'no interest in education', 'not self-dependent', and 'always wait for the government's help' are characteristics that are associated to this group of Indians. Thus, the junior respondents think that in general, other ethnic groups are looking down on the 'poor people' who are said to be involved in gangsterism and crime. The respondents think that the government has not targeted the 'poor people' with assistance and opportunities; and according to the respondents the Indians in this group have been marginalized (SP). Respondent SP says the government has forgotten about the Indian contribution to the country; Malaysian Indians built the railways and cleared the jungle and turned them into plantations. The government thinks that the Indians are a minority and are insignificant. He adds that they (the political party) always think that these poor people can be bought by money (during the general election). SP says 'we have been betrayed by the government e.g. less job opportunities in government sectors, poor funding in education for Tamil schools, less enrolment in universities, poor involvement in economic sectors and little representatives in government top posts.' In addition, SS perceives that the Indian community is not cohesive and united, 'we are fragmented, Telugu, Sikh, Malayalees etc., don't unite'. She added that the caste system is not strictly followed in Malaysia as intermarriages do occur. SS further added that 'there are professionals out there, at the same time, there are many struggling ...we don't help each other to grow'.

Comparing the period prior to the 1980s, ML thinks that the Indians were better and happier, 'Indians were happy in the early days. They were given education, jobs but now all being deprived.' Under the government policy in 1980s, which gives priority to the Malay ("Bumiputra" - sons of the soil), ML perceived that fewer Indians are working in banking sectors and medical services which were once dominated by many Indians. Many of the respondents observed that the political control of the dominant ethnic community has disadvantaged Indians of socio-economic benefits and opportunities. However, looking at it positively, K said that 'the

awareness of identity is getting higher nowadays; people take pride as a Tamil.' This is because many Malaysian Indians have successfully climbed up the social ladder and have prospered financially in business. For instance, Tony Fernandez, a Malaysian Indian and the founder of *Tune Air Sdn. Bhd.*, introduced budget airline, *AirAsia*. *Forbes Asia* (an American business magazine serving as a leading source for reliable business information) ranked him at number 21 on the Forbes list of Malaysia's Richest.

### ***National Identity of Malaysian Indians***

The final question in the interview asked 'Are you proud to be an Indian in Malaysia? In what ways? The respondents' answers were positive but varied in what they were proud of.

Among the junior respondents' answers, six out of eight of them said that they were proud of being a Malaysian Indian in terms of culture, freedom, and the improvement and success that some of the Indians have achieved. The colourful culture in food, saree, and traditions they celebrate make them proud (KH). PM is proud of the famous temple in Batu Caves where the world's tallest statue of the Hindu Deity, Murugan, is placed. Compared to the Indians in India, these young Indians think that they have less restrictions and are not controlled by the caste system. They also enjoy the freedom to worship (RU, KV, SR). KH thinks that Indians are doing well in community service, and have good public speaking skills. SH reveals that although the government policies are in favour of the dominant ethnic group, some Indian businessmen are high achievers in the entrepreneurial world, for instance Ananda Krishnan and Tony Fernandez and many Indians are professionals in jobs such as doctors, engineers and lawyers (Ramachandran, 2002).

The two junior respondents (KN, SH) who gave a negative response said they were proud to be a Malaysian but not Malaysian Indian. KN is proud of the contributions of their forefathers and the fact that various ethnicities in Malaysia try to work together. However, he still thinks that Indians are not united and they are far behind compared to the other ethnic groups in this country.

On the other hand, the senior respondents gave various reasons why they were proud of being Malaysian and not proud respectively of being a Malaysian Indian. YG, SS, AN, and RJ are proud of their own achievements but are not happy with the performance of the Indian community as a whole. AN is sad because she thinks the Indians are not progressing, 'depending too much on the help of government', 'involving in gangsterism'. YG is disappointed in Malaysian society because of the politics of ethnic favoritism but feels at home in Malaysia. RJ works hard and has established himself socially and economically. MN attained his personal glory when he was given a chance to represent Malaysian in the World Tamil Conference in India. SS was proud of his ancestors' achievements but embarrassed of the unemployed Indians contributing to the high crime rates in the country.

K, MD, RT, AG, RT are proud to be Malaysian owing to the harmonious environment they live in: they enjoy the freedom of expression and worship, freedom to earn money if one is hard working, no restriction on the use of their mother tongue, and recognition of Tamil schools by the government.

On the other hand, RM and SP are proud to be an Indian and proud of its rich culture, but are not proud as Malaysian Indians. Their reason is that, 'Indians are not fully accepted' as citizens' in this country' (SP). ML and SD are proud of the Indian language and culture. SD is proud of the influence of the Indian language on the Malay language, wedding ceremony, arts like 'wayang kulit' (shadow puppet performance), and she is also proud of all the forefathers who contributed to the development of Malaysia. It is her view that 'only the Indian people with

high melanin can work under the hot sun in this country'. She feels it is great that the present Indians are working hard to give their children better education.

## Conclusion

All the third generation respondents in this study have a high awareness of their ethnic identity. They are practicing their cultural traditions in their daily life and observing many of the Indian celebrations and festivals. Language and temples are two cultural identity markers for them and efforts taken to send their children to Tamil language class are noteworthy.

As all the respondents belong to the 'educated people' group, they want the group categorised as 'poor people' to work on getting rid of their negative stereotypes and become more self-dependent and proactive, not wallowing in self-pity but moving forward to achieve what they want in life. The achievement made by the Indian entrepreneurs has made them proud. The respondents think the Malaysian Indian ethnic identity awareness is high.

Some of them wanted to be recognized as Malaysian but retained their ethnic identity, as many of them think that their culture is rich and unique. The majority of the respondents think that they are happier, better off, have more freedom in worshipping and expression, and face less caste restriction in Malaysia compared to Indians in India.

Some of the senior respondents (ML, SP) think that the affirmative action policy directed towards the Bumiputras introduced by the government after the 1969 race riot namely the National Economy Policy (NEP) which was succeeded by the National Development Policy is a major factor that hinders national unity in Malaysia.

Most of the junior respondents are more aware of their ethnic identity formation, but at the same time, their desire of wanting their children to blend into Malaysian culture at the national schools instead of enrolling in Tamil schools is strong. The awareness of the benefit and usefulness of acquiring many languages is high among the respondents, and this is attributed to the Malaysians multi-cultural, multilingual environment that cultivates the ability to appreciate diversity and in also making Malaysians multi-lingual. It can be concluded that the respondents were rather optimistic in that they viewed that with the help of the One-Malaysia concept and the government's endeavour in helping all ethnicities equally, the dream of building national identity and national unity may come true.

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