

Indian And Chinese Diaspora in Malaysia

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Abstract:: Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with three major ethnic communities: Malays (68.8%), Chinese (23%) and Indians (7%). A major chunk of the Indian population in Malaysia is poor, while most ethnic Chinese are prosperous. However, at the socio-economic level, both the Indian and Chinese community feel being discriminated and that they are not being accorded equal citizenship rights alongside the Malays, while there is revival of Islam in the country. This feeling of marginalisation and vulnerability in non-Malays has affected the process of national unity and integration. The author seeks to argue that it is very important for a developed country like Malaysia to accommodate the concerns of citizenship and discrimination of Indian and Chinese diaspora. Revising the policy of Bumiputera will go a long way in achieving this vision. Also, this will help foster better bilateral relation with India and with China.

Keywords: Diaspora, India, China, Malaysia, Bumiputera, Ethnicity, Islam.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Malaysian society has a population of 32 million approximately, comprising of three major ethnic communities: Malays (68.8%), Chinese (23%) and Indians (7%). The word Bumiputera means 'the sons of the soil'. In Malaysian context, the Malays and other indigenous people are collectively known as Bumiputera. Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia provides special position to the Malays and the 'natives' of Sabah and Sarawak. It also empowers the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Head of the State of Malaysia) to make reservations for these people in the public service, educational institutions, scholarships, and business permits or licenses. The post-1969 racial riots period witnessed an increasing tendency towards Malay assertiveness and dominance. In 1971, the Constitution was amended to establish the absolute power of the Conference of Rulers in maintaining the privileges of the Malays, in that any change to the privileges accorded to Malays and the people of Sabah and Sarawak now required the consent of the Conference of Rulers as well as the required two-third's parliamentary majority. Today, a major chunk of the Indian population in Malaysia is poor, while most ethnic Chinese are prosperous. However, at the socio-economic level, both the Indian and Chinese community feel being discriminated and that they are not being accorded equal citizenship rights alongside the Malays, while there is revival of Islam in the country. This feeling of marginalisation and vulnerability in non-Malays has affected the process of national unity and integration. The author seeks to argue that it is very important for a developed country like Malaysia to accommodate the concerns of citizenship and discrimination of Indian and Chinese diaspora. Revising the policy of Bumiputera will go a long way in achieving this vision. Also, this will help foster better bilateral relation with India and with China. Theoretical Background: The term 'diaspora' was used for the first time when the Jewish people were exiled from their homeland, Palestine in the 6th century BC, and they scattered in different countries. In the contemporary international system, the diasporas are seen as people or community or section of them, leaving their native country and settling abroad in other countries, with or without thought of coming back to their homeland. The "classical" definition of diaspora emphasises the forced dispersion of a clearly identified group of people from their homeland, with a distinct collective memory and a "myth" of return. The group maintains its collective identity by establishing and

controlling boundaries around it, while maintaining communication with other similar communities and with the homeland (Panossian 1998). The term Diaspora is increasingly being used to describe practically any population that is considered "deterritorialized" or "trans-national"- that is, which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe (Vertovec 1997). Berns-McGown defines diaspora as a space of connections with two dimensions. The first is the tension between elsewhere (or what he calls "mythic" homeland) and the adoptive country. The second lies in the connection to the wider "mainstream" society, which may or may not be fraught. The nature of both of these connections is critical to questions of social harmony, tension, or cohesion, and they have immense implications for security, social policy, and foreign policy (Berns-McGown 2007). In other words, the term diaspora refers to those migrant groups who are dispersed in other countries for a variety of reasons such as historical, political, economic or social but they still feel connected to their land of origin in some way or the other. Historical Evolution of Indian and Chinese Diaspora: The history of Indian and Chinese emigration to the Southeast Asian region is an old one. The first phase of Indian emigration went to the region as merchants and traders. While the 18th century witnessed the largest Indian migration to the region, when the colonial British rulers took them as indentured labourers and under Kangani system to work in the rubber plantations in Malaya. Another phase was in the 19th century, when Indians went as clerk, traders, bureaucrats to the region. Latest round is the Indian IT professional moving to the region for better economic prospects. On the other hand, the Chinese traders had established trading relations with the region long ago. However, the story of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia began only in the 19th and 20th century British colonial rule. At this time, the British colonial economy was characterised by the rapid expansion of tin industry and later, rubber plantations in the Straits Settlements of Singapore and Penang. The industry required adequate labour; while on the other hand, poverty and debt had gripped the Southern parts of Chinese territory. Poor Chinese started migrating in large numbers to the region in search of employment and better life avenues; thinking they would eventually return back to their own land. Once Malaysian economy started growing at a

faster pace, new sets of challenges came to the Indian community that worked in plantations for generations. With rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, Indian plantation community got uprooted and were forced to come to urban Malaysia to seek petty jobs. Urban cities also offered them inflated prices in travelling, food and rent, making their conditions more vulnerable economically. They started living in urban slums, making the periphery their home. It also meant that they now become devoid of the healthcare and education benefits which were part of the plantation industry since the British rule. All these has led to severe problems of high poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, illiteracy, alcoholism and even high cases of suicides. Chinese politics in the post-Independence Malaysia was primarily the politics of national identity in the Malaysian nation-building process, their citizenship entitlements politically, economically and educationally and the recognition and respect for their language, mother tongue education, culture and religion. This politics of national identity was not confined to the Chinese but also affect the Indians in Malaysia, who represent the third largest ethnic community in the country (Siang 2000). The May 1969 Riots: A Turning Point in the history of post independent Malaysia, the year 1969 marks a watershed. For the first time, the Malay dominated party United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) could not secure two-third majority in the Parliament. The May 1969 elections were soon followed by the worst kind of racial riots that engulfed the whole country. Hundreds of ethnic Indians and Chinese were killed. The government of Tun Razak swung into action, declaring an emergency and suspending the Parliament for two years. The National Operations Council was created to centralise the power. A series of economic measures called New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in 1971 to eliminate poverty irrespective of race and to restructure the Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance so as to reduce or to actually eliminate the identification of race with economic situation. The quota system introduced in the educational institutions also worked to the detriment of the Indian community. Post-1969, the pre-eminence of Malay culture in the society became a non-negotiable proposition with the introduction of an amendment to the Constitution that prohibits any questioning regarding the status, culture and privilege of Malays. The NEP was further replaced by National Development Policy in 1991. However, emphasis on Bumiputera benefits to the Malays still remained in the new policy. This was again witnessed in 2001 when a new vision document called National Vision Policy was made. In other words, Bumiputera policy continued. Meanwhile, the Constitution was amended in 1971 to reinforce the impression of a Ruler-Malay community linkage, in that any change to Malay (and natives of Sabah and Sarawak) privileges now required "the consent of the Conference of Rulers as well as the required two-third's parliamentary majority (Harding 2007). This effectively has meant that without the consent and will of the Malays, any attempt to amend special privilege of the Malays would only meet with failure on the part of the non-Malays. Mahathir bin Mohammad, who ruled the country for two decades, himself made a case of similarity on the status of the Red Indians in America and the Malays in Malaysia. In his book, he wrote: It is not enough to be legally privileged, it is also necessary

for the equality to be real. It is clearly necessary for the Indians to have their share of the economic prosperity which characterises the America of the Whites... In Malaysia, there can be no denying that the status of the Malays differs from that of the non-Malays. The Malays and the Red Indians of America are more or less in the same category. Malays are accepted as the indigenous people of the country, but the country is no longer exclusively theirs (Mohammad 1970). Conclusion: Indigenism and Islamic revivalism best characterise the state of Malaysia today. The concept of Malay political dominance was present since independence, but was firmly established post 1969 riots when the Prime Minister Tunku Rahman was ousted and UMNO leaders reiterated the concept at several occasions. While Malays are not ready to part with any of the privileges and concessions they enjoy, the ethnic Indians and Chinese cannot associate fully with the Malaysian society due to the discrimination they face. Chinese and Indians feel that they are not adequately represented and that they are excluded from supreme policy-making and even full citizenship rights. Several reports highlight the growing inequality within the Malaysian society, and how the Bumiputera policy has hindered the growth of Malaysia and its vision of national integration. For instance, the World Bank Malaysia Economic Monitor 2014 highlights "high inequality is detrimental to growth because it weakens social and human capital and could induce political and economic instability. Cross-country evidence suggests that inequality may be detrimental to growth through at least two channels: first, by undermining progress in health and education and reducing human capital accumulation; second by leading to political and economic instability with attendant negative effects on investment. It is in this context that the Malaysian government must take remedial measures to incorporate the cancers of discrimination and citizenship of the Indian and Chinese diaspora.

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