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THE MARGINALISED TAMIL INDIANS AND THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE IN MULTICULTURAL MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the Tamil Indians' lived experience during the country's economic progress under Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's premiership as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia. The period was chosen to reflect on the nation's economic success since independence. The study adopts the Acculturation Model to analyse the living conditions of minority groups, particularly in the multiracial context of Malaysia. Using in-depth interviews with 23 informants, ranging from political leaders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics, media organisations and youths, qualitative data was collected. Data for the study were analysed using the NVIVO 12 software and a thematic analysis approach was adopted for analysis. Two broad themes derived from the findings of this study are the responses to marginalisation issues and aspirations of Malaysian Tamil Indians. Findings from this study highlight the existence of the acculturation model, which Malaysian Tamil Indians encounter as one of the minority groups in Malaysia. The study suggests a need for improvement to the system to avoid institutional failure within multicultural Malaysia in the long term.

Keywords: marginalisation acculturation model, minority, multicultural, Malaysia, Tamil Indians

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multicultural society, which consists of three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians with a population breakdown of 69.1%, 23.0% and 6.9%, respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2018). According to Appudurai and Dass (2008), the Indians in Malaysia mainly originated from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Out of the 755,322 South Indian population in 1957, 634,681 were Tamils from the state of Tamil Nadu, and the number grew to 1,396,480 or 87.6% in 2000 (Raman 2009, 11–12). The Indians are referenced to the Tamil Indian community, one of the minority groups in Malaysia. Within the context of this research, the research will refer to the community as Tamil Indians.

The development of Malaysia can be discussed based on the pre-New Economic Policy (NEP) period (1957–1969) and after-NEP (1971–1990). During the pre- NEP period the economic development of Malaysia was dependent on market forces. The 13 May 1969 racial riots in Malaysia indicated the socioeconomic imbalances among Malaysians. It was found that about 86% of rural Malays were in the poverty category and during that point of time, 70% of Malaysian Indians were working in the plantation sector indicating their income was below the poverty category. To ensure the fair distribution of socioeconomic opportunities to all races, the NEP was introduced as a 20-year action plan (1970–1990). The plan aimed to eradicate poverty regardless of ethnicity and to correct the economic imbalances among Malaysians. Specifically, the NEP aimed to raise the income levels of the poor in rural areas regardless of ethnicity and create more job opportunities in urban areas. However, it was found that the plan did benefit the Tamil Indians (Raman 2009). NEP figures showed that the ownership of share capital of limited companies (1970–1988) of the *bumiputera* individuals and enterprises rose from 1.9% in 1970 to 7.5% in 1982 to 13.0% in 1988, compared to the Chinese at 22.5% in 1970, rising to 33.4% in 1982 and standing at 32.6% in 1988 (Raman 2009). This is compared to the Indians which stood at 1.0% in 1970, dropping to 0.9% in 1982, and rising to 1.2% in 1988. Interestingly in 1971, the Indians' stake in the national equity was 1% and it remains the same or static after the implementation of NEP (Ministry of Economy 1990). However, the ownership of *bumiputera* increased from 1.5% in 1969 to 18.5% in 1990 compared to the Indians' ownership which increased from 0.9% in 1969 to 1.5% in 2005 (Jomo 2004; Beng 2007). Besides that, through the implementation of the NEP, many estates were fragmented to allow new developments which affected the Tamil Indian estate workers (Raman 2009). In 1971, the *bumiputera*'s share of the national equity was at 1.9% and rose to 19.4% through the implementation of NEP; the Chinese national equity was 22.5% in 1971 and increased to 32.6% at the end of NEP compared to the Indians whereby their stake in the national equity was 1% in 1971 and rose only to 1.2%

at the end of NEP (Ministry of Economy 1990). This situation indicated the poor development of Tamil Indians compared to other ethnicities in Malaysia.

In 1974, an economic seminar on NEP and Malaysian Indian, which was sponsored by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) discussed the worsening situation of Malaysian Indians, specifically the situation of the Tamil Indian plantation workers, the Indians' position in employment, land and capital ownership and education (Raman 2009). It was expected that the National Development Policy (NDP), covering the period 1990–2000, would replace the NEP to tackle the issues of socioeconomic imbalances among different ethnicities in Malaysia. However, the NDP did not significantly impact the development of Tamil Indians, especially the plantation workers (Ramachandran and Shanmugam 1995). Research conducted by Nair (2003) and Anbalakan (2003) showed that at the end of NDP in 2000, the Indians had yet to achieve equal access to economic opportunities. During the Seventh Malaysia Plan period, rubber-planted areas declined from 1.7 million hectares in 1995 to 1.4 million hectares in 2000 as a result of conversion to oil palm and other uses, which leads to employment in rubber plantations declining from 163,577 in 1979 to 13,366 in May 2004 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 1985, 196). Consequently, more than 300,000 Indians who worked and lived in the plantations were displaced during the 20-year period from 1980 to 2000. The Indians' share in different sectors of employment has also reduced drastically. For instance, in the professional and technical employment sectors, the Indians' share dropped from 10.8% in 1970 to 7.6% in 2000, in the clerical jobs the Indians' share dropped from 17.2% in 1970 to 8.6% in 2000 (Chakravary and Abdul Hakim 2005). The marginalisation process has continued since then.

Discourses on leadership in Malaysia have often exemplified Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad as a prominent leader not only in the country but also at the international level. Malaysia has succeeded in many sectors under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981–2003). Under his premiership, Malaysia has shown economic growth with the leadership skills of Mahathir. Mahathir showed his leadership qualities through the ideas, vision and policies that he introduced. He believes that universalism could affect the identity of Malaysian culture and the religious values held by Malaysians (Ishihara and Mahathir 1996). This research aims to look into the lived experience of a minority community in the multicultural society of Malaysia during the premiership of Mahathir as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia.

THE ERA OF MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

Mahathir Mohamad had been the longest-serving Prime Minister who led the nation from 1981 to 2003. Upon stepping down as Prime Minister in 2003, he was again chosen to lead the nation in 2018, which made him the fourth and the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia. The context of this study analyses the policy imposed during his leadership as the fourth Prime Minister which impacted the Indian Tamil community. This tenure was chosen because Mahathir had contributed to the development of Malaysia at that time.

According to Mauzy and Milne (2002), Mahathir provided a rationalisation for all actions to stimulate satisfaction and understanding among followers. This is evident in the communication process between Mahathir and his followers. Mahathir initiated the concepts of Asian values due to international democratisation, extensive economic activities and political stability in the 1990s before the economic turmoil in July 1997, which affected most Asian countries (Naisbitt 1997; Inoguchi and Newman 1997). This shows that Mahathir has a rationale for each of his actions and had communicated his decisions to the people.

In February 1991, Vision 2020 was introduced by Mahathir to ensure a better future for Malaysia. Mahathir also emphasised the notion of Bangsa Malaysia, which aimed to establish a common identity for all Malaysians (Hassan 2005). Mahathir put the effort into establishing a vision, guiding and motivating Malaysians to achieve the vision. The notion of Bangsa Malaysia, which was part of Vision 2020, was a step to foster unity among Malaysians. Mahathir tried to create a stronger bonding among Malaysians and shared the same identity regardless of different ethnic groups. This had been a significant step taken by Mahathir to create a harmonious environment in Malaysia by avoiding conflicts between ethnic groups. Thus, it shows that he tried to create a united Malaysia.

TAMIL INDIANS IN MALAYSIA

The Tamils were brought into Malaya as indentured labourers at the beginning of the 19th century. These labourers were recruited mainly to work for the expansion of colonisation and became the foundation for the presence of the Indian community in Malaysia. The demand for Indian labourers in Malaya increased after the introduction of rubber in 1905 (Raman 2009). More Indians mainly Tamils were brought into Malaya through the Kangani system to work in the rubber and tea estates and were termed as coolies (Report of a Meeting of the General Labour Committee 1920, as cited in Raman 2009). Lal (2006) indicates

that the Indian labourers from South India were the most preferred by the British due to their submissive characteristics, "not demanding or not ambitious" (Raman 2009). Apart from that, Jackson (2004) also stated that Indian labourers were found to be most adaptive to harsh working conditions and physical labour. However, the labourers found themselves enveloped by dire and squalid living conditions, earning low wages, lacking necessities such as medical attention, educational and vocational opportunities, death by malaria, anaemia and childbirth, and a bleak hope, all of which continued to shape their lives and the generations after them (Stenson 1983).

To be the voice of the Indian community, the MIC was established amid the chaos of the immediate postwar period in Malaya to represent the interests of the minority Indian community (Rajagopal and Fernando 2018). According to Willford (2007), while it sits within the bigger political party of Barisan Nasional, which was politically strong during Mahathir's era of premiership, many issues of marginalisation faced by the Tamil Indians remain unresolved as MIC is seen as unrefined, crude and ignorant of the needs of its people (Willford 2007).

THE ACCULTURATION MODEL

The acculturation model introduced by Berry (1992) focuses on the orientation of immigrants towards a new society. The model is widely used in studies of migrants and their assimilation into new societies. Although Malaysian Tamil Indians are naturally Malaysian citizens, the acculturation model is chosen due to the historical context of generational Tamil Indians as has been described in the earlier section of the study. The model identifies four strategies of acculturation whereby firstly, individuals who are minorities in the society are torn between holding to their own culture and identity, and simultaneously value contact with the majority (integration). Secondly, individuals who value interaction with the majority and wished not to preserve their own culture and ethnic identity (assimilation). Thirdly, individuals who want to hold on to their own culture and identity and simultaneously reject interaction with the majority group (separation). Fourthly, individuals who unwillingly let go of their own culture and identity but simultaneously have no preference to interact with the majority (marginalisation).

However, marginalisation is not always viewed as a strategy but rather, a forced position immigrants (minorities) find themselves in when dealing with majorities who are prejudiced against them (van der Zee and van Oudenhoven 2022). Immigrants who are minorities arrive in a new country with differing attitudes on assimilating with the new society (majority), and these attitudes are heightened

due to the actual and perceived level of acceptance given by the majority group (Phinney et al. 2001). Some neither feel ties with their own nor with the new culture of the majority but still actively engage themselves with the majority with an open mind towards others (van der Zee and van Oudenhoven 2022). This study does not argue that the minority Tamil Indians in Malaysia have become targets of prejudice. Rather, foregrounded on the ethnic and national identity formation of Malaysia, this study argues that the extent to which a minority group is able to adapt to the majority depends on many factors, among which include their own attitudes, advocacy by the media, and policies imposed by authorities which either leads to progression or regression of the group. Ethnic and national identities are formed through the process of acculturation (Gudykunst and Nishida 2001) of a nation. Therefore, this study focuses on the acculturation model from the aspect of race and ethnicity (of the minority) in the multicultural nation of Malaysia during the period in which the nation developed economically under the premiership of Mahathir.

THE MARGINALISATION OF TAMILS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

Since gaining independence in 1957, the newly formed Malaysian governmental policies were mainly based along ethnic lines (Bhopal and Rowley 2005). Through its NEP plans, the government mainly aimed at eradicating poverty among the rural and urban Malays to minimise the socioeconomic differences among the different races (Gudykunst and Nishida 2001). In contrast, after the 13th May racial riots in 1969, the manifestation of the inter-ethnic conflict over the distribution of political and economic power became an ethnocentric cause. Often disguised as an effort at maintaining inter-racial harmony, the policies implemented thereafter mainly aimed to please the socioeconomical demands of the major ethnic group, the Malays through institutionalised *bumiputera* privileges (Bhopal and Rowley 2005).

Deprived of substantive aid under the NEP Tamils found themselves mostly neglected from mainstream development by the mid-1980s. To demonstrate the continuity of this trend, Sikri (2013), Singh (2013), Teo (2021) and Anbalakan (2015) found that the marginalisation of the Tamils from the mainstream development happened across all sectors in Malaysia, including the business sectors, opportunities at vocational, pre-university and higher educational institutions, state-sponsored scholarships, job openings, selections and promotions at both public and private sectors, and many more.

Coined as the "estate fragmentation" phenomena by Selvakumaran (1994), the 1990s brought another era of isolation to the Tamils during Malaysia's transition through rapid urbanisation. The estate fragmentation phenomenon refers to the relocation of estate workers without proper planning, which was largely made up of Tamils. It was found that a very large number of estate workers' displacement occurred during the leadership of Mahathir. As evidenced in a study conducted by the Centre of Policy Studies, under the Seventh Malaysia Plan, the rubber planted areas in Malaysia declined drastically which in turn, automatically reduced employment in rubber plantations from 163,577 in 1979 to 13,366 in 2004 (Ministry of Economy 2005, 209). This eventually caused more than 300,000 estate workers to lose their jobs and were displaced from the year 1980 to 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 1985, 196).

Estate fragmentation became one of the main issues that had a profound effect on the social well-being of the Malaysian Tamils (Raman 2009). Most estate workers had not only lost their jobs, but also other necessities, such as estate housing, and their social and economic sustenance that depended on the estate community and the estate environment (Raman 2009). This situation forced many estate dwellers to relocate to the urban areas in search of a new life, which presented an array of social problems for the Indian community, especially for its youths. Furthermore, Raman (2009) indicated that the 10% Indian quota at the public universities set by the Malaysian government was never met during the entire duration of NEP although the National Economic Consultative Council (NECC), which was formed in 1985 reported that the poor progress of the Malaysian Tamils under the NEP had indicated the need for more robust implementation of educational opportunities for Malaysian Tamil Indian youths in Malaysia. In its report, NECC highlighted the failures of NEP to help the Malaysian Tamil Indians who were neglected in many aspects of socioeconomic growth (Raman 2009). Poor educational opportunities for Malaysian Tamil youths have contributed to low levels of literacy. In a survey conducted in 2005, the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) found that indiscipline and juvenile delinquency among Malaysian Tamil students who came from poor homes were worrying as Malaysian Tamil youths fell within the 30% hardcore poor bracket of the Malaysian population (Raman 2009). Lacking academic qualifications, skills and vocational expertise, many turned to a life of committing crimes as a way out of urban poverty and harassing social situations.

In addition, the socioeconomic marginalisation of Malaysian Tamils could be seen clearly in terms of job opportunities in the public and private sectors. According to Kuppuswamy (2010), Malaysian Tamil participation in the civil service dropped from 40% in 1957 to just 2% in 2007. Raman (2009) stated that even those with appropriate academic qualifications found it difficult to be employed. In contrast,

the implementation of the NDP did not encourage the growth of Malaysian Tamils. In terms of economic opportunities, the NDP initially incorporated ideals of equality and justice. However, this ideal was practically ignored while it was propagated (Chakraborti 1996; Anbalakan 2003). Through the NDP, the idea of *bumiputeraism* essentially provided economic autonomy and governmental aid to the Malays. However, in Chakarborti's (2004) study, two-thirds of the Malaysian Tamils remained poor labourers; one-fifth of Malaysian Tamils have reached middle-class standing, while only 10% ranked as professionals and entrepreneurs, benefiting from the NDP and NEP.

The marginalisation of Tamil Indians which caused dissatisfaction among Indians became deeper after the premiership of Mahathir. The dissatisfaction can be seen in a more obvious manner from the reaction of Malaysian Indians during the leadership of the fifth Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the sixth Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Najib Razak. After 50 years of independence, in 2007, the Indian Hindus protested against the economic marginalisation of the government through the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rally (Kaur 2018). HINDRAF was a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which aimed to safeguard Hindu community rights in Malaysia (Cangi 2014). On 25 November 2007, a group of Hindu activists in Kuala Lumpur handed over a 100,000-signature memorandum to the British Embassy. The memorandum was a petition to Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom to appoint a Queen's Counsel representing marginalised Malaysian Indians. Syed Husin (2008) stated that the factor that contributed to the HINDRAF rally was dissatisfaction among the Indian community against the policies of the ruling class, which consists mainly of Malays. This particular rally can be classified as a significant incident because it was one of the biggest rallies in Malaysian history which attracted both local and international media attention. As a result, the Indian community felt that their rights in Malaysia were not protected by the leaders of the nation (Bukhari 2006).

METHODOLOGY

In general, Creswell (1998) divided qualitative traditions of inquiry into five: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. Each method is different in their purposes and process of inquiry (Patton 2015). This study adopted phenomenology inquiry. The founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and it involves careful examination of human experience (Husserl and Welton 1999). Despite many arguments about the usage of phenomenology, phenomenology is said to be suitable for examining peoples' lived experiences from an individual

perspective (van Manen 1990). Moustakas (1994) also discussed that in a phenomenological study, research could build a comprehensive description about people's experience. Consistent with the discussion by van Manen (1990), this study selected the influence of Mahathir's leadership towards marginalisation of Indians as the phenomena. Based on the Indians' responses towards Mahathir's leadership, essential themes that reflect the Indians' responses will be developed.

This study employed a phenomenology approach, specifically using in-depth interviews to explore the lived experience of Tamil Indians on the marginalisation in Malaysia during Mahathir's leadership as the fourth Prime Minister. The founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and it involves careful examination of human experience (Neuman 2006). This study posited that the qualitative method enables researchers to capture the complexity of leadership and follower dynamics, including the cultural context (Creswell 2014). Furthermore, qualitative research is a dynamic method focused on getting an insight into the meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell and Poth 2017). This research involved 23 informants, ranging from political leaders, NGOs, academics, media organisations and youths. The informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the recommendation by Patton (2015). This is consistent with the suggestion of Neuman (2006), who indicated that purposive sampling should be used in exploratory research to select cases that will better contribute information to the research study, generating more insights into the problem statement and the research question. The informants were selected using purposive sampling based on recommendation by Patton (2015). There are two main reasons to select 23 informants. Firstly, it is based on the suggestion of data collection method. According to Neuman (2006), purposive sampling is used in exploratory research to select cases that will better inform the research study, enabling more insightful linking of the problem statement and research question. He added that the maximum purposive sampling should be selected from the qualified pool of candidates is 20. Besides that, Polkinghorne (2005) recommended that a researcher should interview 5 to 25 individuals who have experienced a phenomena and Creswell (2013) also suggested 5 to 25 informants. Interviewees were selected to ensure the pool of researchers had diversity in terms of arguments and detailed explanation from the respondents. This is to ensure the researcher is able to analyse the data and develop relevant themes. Purposive sampling also allows the study to elicit information from rich findings (Patton 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were used for textual data and organised into themes. To ensure that the interviews yielded the depth of information required for the

study, interview questions were open-ended, which provided an opportunity for informants to share their responses and perceptions on the issue. Informants were offered the opportunity to add additional information about the research topic that was not directly solicited (Creswell 2013). As the data drives the information structure in qualitative research, the form and order of the interview questions were specific to the study phenomenon (Polkinghorne 2005). The information about the informants' backgrounds is available in Table 1.

Table 1: Informants' background information

Informants	Type of organisation	Role	Age (years old)	Working experience	Religion
Informant 1	NGO	President of NGO	44	More than 20 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 2	NGO	CEO of NGO	43	More than 20 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 3	NGO	CEO of NGO	45	More than 20 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 4	Political Party	Political leader	50	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 5	Political Party	Political leader	52	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 6	NGO	Founder of NGO	50	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 7	Institution of higher learning	Academic with management position	47	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 8	Business	Businessman	49	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 9	Religion	Chairperson of a temple committee and temple priest	55	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 10	Politics	Political leader	53	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 11	Media	Writer	48	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 12	Institution of higher learning	Academic with management position	46	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 13	Business	Businessman	46	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1: (*continued*)

Informants	Type of organisation	Role	Age (years old)	Working experience	Religion
Informant 14	Religion	General Secretary of a Hindu religious organisation in Malaysia, a temple priest	47	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 15	Political party	A member of parliament and state assemblyman	54	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 16	Political party	President of a political party	56	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 17	Political party	A member of parliament	53	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 18	NGO	Chairperson of a Hindu organisation	53	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 19	NGO	Chairperson of a Hindu organisation	54	More than 30 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 20	Working in a private organisation	Youth	24	At the beginning of career	Hindu
Informant 21	NGO	CEO of NGO	43	More than 20 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 22	Academic	A researcher who is active in ethnic-based studies	52	More than 25 years of experience	Hindu
Informant 23	Writer	Youth	26	Active in Indians-based NGO activities	Hindu

The interview provides researchers with rich and detailed qualitative data for understanding informants' experiences, how they describe those experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Based on the recommendation of Castillo-Montoya (2016), to ensure the reliability and validity of the interview protocol developed, the researcher of the current study adopted the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework which includes a four-phase process to develop and fine-tune interview protocol. The collected data were thematically analysed. The data were analysed using NVIVO version 12.0.

The research question derived: What is the lived experience of the Tamil Indian community as a minority in the multicultural society of Malaysia?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on thematic analysis, Figure 1 of Malaysian Tamils' lived experience was developed. Based on thematic analysis, two themes were developed which are the responses towards marginalisation and the aspiration of Malaysian Tamils. Each of the themes is explained in turn.

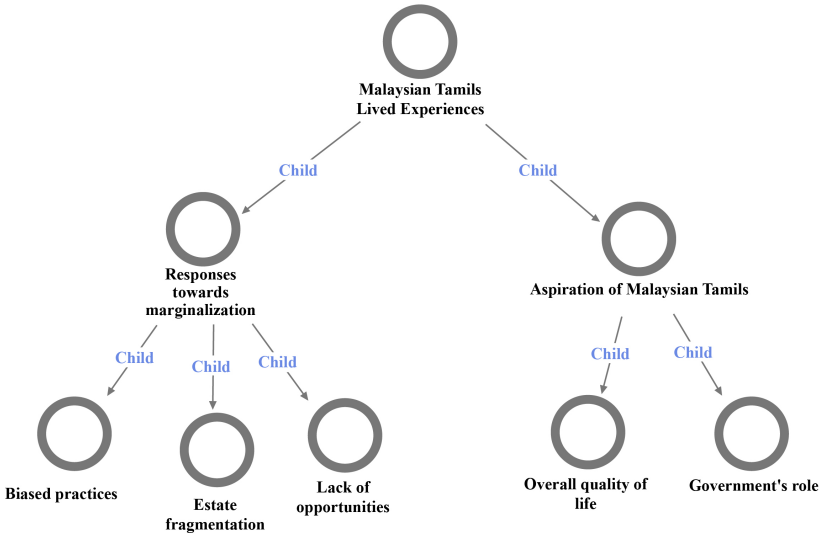


Figure 1: Malaysian Tamils lived experiences.

Theme 1: Responses towards Marginalisation Issues

Most of the informants agreed that marginalisation has greatly affected the Malaysian Tamils' social and economic development and attributed these drawbacks to the policies implemented by the Malaysian government.

Biased practices

Informants 3 and 12 indicated that Mahathir's leadership led to the marginalisation of the Malaysian Tamils, which is evident in their responses.

> The leaders in Malaysia are more concerned about the *bumiputera* agenda and it has affected the other communities, especially the Malaysian Tamils. They are very committed and determined to bring up the *bumiputera* community. (Informant 3)

> No, Mahathir's leadership was an era where Islamic principles, values, and policies were implemented. The developments of the *bumiputera* were emphasised. Malaysian Tamils were marginalised, and a lot of double-standard practices could be seen. I would say the policies and modernisation process by Mahathir have caused a lot of social issues among Tamils such as gangsterism. For example, the displacement of Malaysian Tamils from the estate. When they were displaced, they came to urban areas, but they have no source of income, job, etc. They were helpless and involved in gangsterism and more. Education-wise, during Mahathir's era, the merit system replaced the quota system. The merit system itself is biased as it doesn't serve all the same. If a *bumiputera* student gets a CGPA of 3.0, he or she can enter Universiti Malaya; however, Malaysian Tamil students must obtain more than 3.0 to enter Universiti Malaya and it resulted in the number of Indian students' intake to university dropping to 4%–5%. (Informant 12)

Informant 23 indicated that the policies introduced by Mahathir favoured the Malays and it was clear in the following excerpt:

> His policies were aimed to uplift the Malay community. I would say that Mahathir has managed to uplift the Malay community, especially in economic status. Recent statistics show that 42% of GLC companies' shares are controlled by the Malays. That shows the economic status of Malays. Who led them to this situation? It was Mahathir.

Estate fragmentation

On estate fragmentation, Informants 8 and 10 further explained:

> The estates were fragmented, they lost their homes, shelter, and the estate which was their security. The Tamils had become a landless community. During the colonial era, the British promised them land, but they didn't get it. The Malaysian Tamils not only have become landless but also jobless and helpless. The Malaysian Tamil youths have become a part of this hopeless community and become gangsters with and without choice. The real danger posts as second-generation gangsterism. (Informant 8)

> The government has fragmented the estates without offering proper compensation or benefits to the Malaysian Tamil such as including them in the housing or businesses of the urbanisation projects. Many Malaysian Tamils did buy houses in these new residential areas that sat on their estates; however, they ended up bankrupt as they were not able to keep up with the rising cost of living. They lost their homes, again. This happened because the leaders didn't give the Tamils options that were practical. There were no prospects. (Informant 10)

According to Informant 21:

> He contributed to the marginalisation of Malaysian Tamils, indigenous communities and rural Malays through his policies. During Mahathir's time, industrialisation and development were rapid and the plantation lands or estates were taken away and replaced. Malaysian Tamils lost their lands and were relocated without proper necessities. They ended up as urban pioneers. The majority of those Malaysian Tamils became gangsters today. Most Malaysian Tamils suffered without basic needs,

Lack of opportunities

Informant 10 also highlighted the disintegration of the Tamils as one of the impacts of Mahathir's policies.

> He had fragmented the estates. The government didn't give much opportunity to the Tamils. Estates were fragmented without proper benefits given to the Malaysian Tamils such as temples and houses. Then the Malaysian Tamils bought houses in residential areas but couldn't afford to pay and ended up being bankrupt. This happened because Mahathir as a leader didn't give the Malaysian Tamils better options. He didn't show better prospects for them.

Despite that, Informants 9, 20 and 23 indicated that Mahathir's policies brought some developments to the Indian community in Malaysia but on a small scale. They expressed that Mahathir communicated his plans well through his speech. As far as the Indian community is concerned, many Malaysian Tamils had benefited from Mahathir's leadership. According to some informants:

> He had done something; we cannot say that he didn't do anything to the Indian community. It was partially successful. Certain policies we can accept. Sixty percent of his policies can be accepted and 40% we cannot accept because it was against our will. One is education, and the second is the privileges of the Malays that we cannot accept. For instance, the *bumiputera* issue. Personal experience: he came and sit in front of me and

> asked me, do you all want to become a *bumiputera*? I was shocked and I answered him; "why not and for your information without the Malaysian Tamils and Chinese, Malaysia would not have developed." For example, rubber plantations, railways, and highways were built by the Malaysian Tamils. Chinese were brought in to do mining work. (Informant 9)

> We must understand Mahathir's policies. During Mahathir's years, some Tamils benefited from the system. For instance, through the contract system, the Tamils received a certain percentage of profit. Mahathir made some billionaires; Indians, Chinese and Malay billionaires. So, the elites emerged. (Informant 20)

> The development of Malaysia was based on the framework that was established by Mahathir Mohamad. Mahathir built confidence among Malaysians to develop or progress. The policies that Mahathir introduced were aimed at the development of the nation. For instance, the development of KLIA and Putrajaya was Mahathir's development plan. (Informant 23)

The next section explains the findings for the second theme on the aspiration of Malaysian Tamils.

Theme 2: Aspiration of Malaysian Tamils

Based on the interview sessions that were conducted, the Malaysian Tamils' responses fell within two themes which consist of improving the overall quality of life and having an increased involvement of the government towards the betterment of the Malaysian Tamils. These are presented in the following section.

Improving the overall quality of life

The participants almost unanimously echoed that they aspired for the Malaysian Tamils to improve their overall life qualities. First, they emphasised that efforts to improve the community should start with the individual itself. Informant 2, said that "the Malaysian Tamils need to be self-motivated and shed the 'i-cannot' mentality". To succeed, the participant mentioned that individuals must work hard and not complain or depend on others. This included becoming competent in their areas of work or professions and not being dependent on government schemes.

Secondly, the informants also hoped that Malaysian Tamils would start embracing a lifelong learning attitude to secure a brighter future. They felt that young people in the community needed to improve their knowledge, skills and talents to possess a

competitive advantage over the other races. Informant 2 conceded that the "Indian youths are not using the internet and social media to their advantage." She opined that more Indian youths should come forward as young online entrepreneurs or internet celebrities to promote their brands and skills. The participants also felt that most Tamil youths were using technology for the wrong reasons, being absorbed in its "useless" entertainment features and wasting precious time. Informant 8 contended that "the internet can be put to good use to overcome a lack of proficiency among the Indian youths." He explained that Indian youths needed to improve their English language skills, especially public speaking. He further commented that such soft skills would be essential at the workplace and during interview sessions.

Greater role of the government

The participants also wished for the government to be more proactive in listening and assisting youths to overcome their social obstacles and become a voice for the nation. Firstly, they felt that the government should reduce racism and create a fair level playing field in all aspects of social life. According to Informant 20, "Malaysian Tamils would only succeed and excel when opportunities are open or distributed based on equal fairness." This includes the education sector, the job market, and the media. On the other hand, the informants also hoped that the government allocate more seats for Indian students in its public institutions. This includes polytechnics, matriculation and vocational skills centres. Informant 18 reiterated that this is crucial in "providing more avenues for Indian youths to further their studies after SPM."

Secondly, the participants felt that there should be more job openings for Indian youths in the civil service, at governmental administrative centres and the government-linked companies. Informant 19 highlighted the effect of racism in the Malaysian job market. According to him, "the tendency of preferring *bumiputera* or Mandarin speakers had sidelined the Tamil youths from securing jobs, despite having better qualifications and merits."

DISCUSSION

Although there is a significant development in the Indian community in various sectors during the era of this study, policies implemented have caused issues of social exclusion among the marginalised minority of the Tamil Indians in Malaysia. The implementation of the NEP was imbalanced and does not reflect a multicultural, multireligious nation of Malaysia. For instance, the idea of NEP initially incorporated national ideals of equality and justice (Chakraborti 1996).

However, in practical terms it contradicted the national policy it propagated (Chakraborti 1996). Its implementation had caused two-thirds of Indians in Malaysia to remain as poor labourers and only one-fifth of Malaysian Indians reached the middle-class standing (Chakraborti 1996).

The issue of estate worker displacement was one of the major impacts that resulted in issues of social exclusion in the said community. As evidence, in the Seventh Malaysia Plan, the rubber plantation areas were reduced drastically, which saw declines in employment in rubber plantations from 163,577 in 1979 to 13,366 in 2004 (Ministry of Economy 2005, 209). This caused the displacement of more than 300,000 estate workers from 1980 to 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 1985, as cited in Raman 2009). Therefore, the findings suggest displacement brought negative impacts, particularly to the displaced estate workers who lost their jobs and their houses and that led to many social problems in the Indian community.

The modernisation plan during Malaysia's prosperous economic progress has caused issues of marginalisation, particularly among the Malaysian Tamil Indians. As identified previously, in the process of modernisation, the estate workers were relocated without any compensation and proper necessities, which led to issues of exclusion within the community.

Although a few of the nation's policies during the period of this study contributed to the development of the Indian community, it was discovered that the development happened on a small scale and some Indians did not benefit from the policies, especially the lower income group. Findings from this study suggest the struggles of Indians in Malaysia as minorities before and after independence require better or inclusive policies to improve the condition of the community.

The findings of this study highlight the Malaysian Tamils' perspective on marginalisation based on the acculturation model of race and ethnicity of the minority in Malaysia. Berry (1992) identified six types of changes to exist in groups going through the acculturation process which are physical (e.g., a new place to live), biological (e.g., new diseases), political (e.g., minority groups being controlled), economic (e.g., new forms of employment), cultural (e.g., alteration of religious, educational institutions or replacements imposed) and social (e.g., alteration of group communication dynamics). This study argues that the process of acculturation is witnessed in this study through several types of changes identified above.

CONCLUSION

While the nation progressed exponentially during the 1990s, it was found that a large number of estate worker displacements that occurred have led to many social issues among the Malaysian Tamil Indians as reiterated by informants in this study. Some of the key highlights which were repeatedly mentioned by informants revolved around leadership communication, which is an integral part of community development. Informants from this study suggest the ideal leader is one who represents the Indian Tamil community in Malaysia. Vital characteristics of a leader include one who is not detached from the community, fulfills the promises to its people by addressing grassroots issues faced by many and able to solve problems raised by the community.

Holistic and inclusive policies for all are vital towards better integration and development of a unique and complex nation such as Malaysia. An inclusive style of leadership is needed to bring social change and development to the Malaysian Tamils. If there is no substantial effort taken by those in power to care for their community, the issue of marginalisation in multicultural Malaysia will continue to escalate and result in the institutional failure of the country in the long run.

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