

Identity and Language of Tamil Community in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract. Malaysia's ruling party came under scrutiny in the 2008 general election for the inability to resolve pressing issues confronted by the minority Malaysian Indian community. Some of the issues include unequal distribution of income, religion, education as well as unequal job opportunity. The ruling party's affirmation came under critical situation again when the ruling government decided against recognising Tamil language as a subject for the major examination (SPM) in Malaysia. This move drew dissatisfaction among Indians, especially the Tamil community because it is considered as a move to destroy the identity of Tamils. Utilising social theory, this paper looks into the fundamentals of the language and the repercussion of this move by Malaysian government and the effect to the Malaysian Indians identity.

Keywords: Identity, Tamil, Education, Marginalisation.

1. Introduction

Concepts of identity and community had been long debated in the arena of sociology, anthropology and social philosophy. Every community has distinctive identities that are based upon values, attitudes, beliefs and norms. All identities emerge within a system of social relations and representations (Guibernau, 2007). Identity of a community is largely related to the race it represents. Race matters because it is one of the ways to distinguish and segregate people besides being a heated political matter (Higginbotham, 2006). As a matter of fact, race and identity of a community is a much preferred political agenda in a multiracial country, such as one like Malaysia.

Malaysia is a culturally rich country, thanks to the contribution of a vast number of ethnic populations such as Malays (majority), followed by Chinese, Indians, large ethnic groups from Sabah and Sarawak and other minority groups. Malaysia is a race-based ruling nation because the political spectrum of the country itself is divided by race, whereby the major component parties of the ruling party are United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). These divide and rule connotation was instigated by the British colony in the 19th century and is still kept in practice despite the rhetoric of unity in diversity by the ruling party in Malaysia.

Through library and document analysis methodology, this paper offers the issues and challenges being faced by Indian population as a result of race base ruling in Malaysia. Prior to proceeding into the details, it is highly important to understand the historical anecdote of the Indian population in Malaysia.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Tamil Community

The Tamils are mostly Hindus with sizable number of Christians and Muslim populations. In Malaysia, based on February 24, 2010 statistics, 9% of Malaysia's estimated population is Indians ("<http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?lang=en>"). An estimate of 75% of Indians are made up by Tamils and other Indian communities in Malaysia include the Telegu, Malayalee, Punjabi, Sindhi and Benggali (Anjum, 2007). The Tamil community is mostly in their fourth or fifth generation now. Historically, based on the archaeological findings, the early Tamils came from Chola Dynasty to Malay Archipelago especially the northern part, LembahBujang in Kedah as invaders as well as traders (Khuo, 2009).

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Later, during the British colonization, many Indians were brought in as labourers to work in the rubber and sugar cane plantations (David & Govindasamy, 2007). The positioning of different races to specified areas by the British paved way for isolation between the races and less interaction between them. Once each community began to increase in size, the process of socialisation required that schools should be established (Khoo, 2009). In order to confine the different ethnic groups in their determined territories, vernacular schools were established (Hirschman, 1972) whereby, Tamil schools began to predominate especially in estates while the Chinese schools were established in the urban areas. The middle class Indians especially government servants from the Jaffna (Sri Lanka) community preferred to send their children to English medium schools in the urban areas while the Tamil schools in the estates were solely dedicated for the children of those parents who work in the plantations (Kaur, 2000; Smith, 2003).

Being pushed to the interior of the state from the beginning, the poor Tamils have been confined to the estates and were only exposed to the Tamil medium of instruction schools in their early education. Their lives were marked by lack of upward mobility and continued marginalization from the British colony and later, after independence by the ruling party in Malaysia (Morris & Maniam, 2001).

The country had been ruled by race based parties from the time of independence. The Malays, who are the majority are represented by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), while the Chinese by Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Indians by Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) (Saw, 2006). These three major parties unite as National Front and had been leading the country for more than half a century from the time Malaysia gained its independence in 1957. The members of the leading parties are more interested in fulfilling their individual agenda rather than addressing the public agenda. Many pressing issues such as inequality of wealth distribution, unequal education and job opportunity, cultural and religious matters, displacement of the Indian from estates due to commercialization and residential purposes, and Tamil school matters that go unnoticed by the government made the people in Malaysia; especially the Indians begin to feel the marginalization and pressed for a change in the ruling government (Osman, 2007; Retnanathan, 2010).

As a result, the people of Malaysia, especially who were dissatisfied with unfulfilled promises, portrayed strong electorate protest by voting for the opposition in the 2008 general election and denied 2/3 majority to the ruling party (Kim, 2008; Moten, 2009; Noor, 2008).

Despite many challenges and issues faced especially by the Indian community in Malaysia, this paper provides a platform to look into the Tamil language issue because language represents identity of a community and denying the language is equivalent to diminishing the community's identity, which is emotional to any particular race.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Identity Theory

The Race Convention, which extends to discrimination on the basis of race, colour, descent and national or ethnic origin, covers a wide range of government policies, from political rights to economic, social and cultural rights (Lim, 2009; Mariner, 2006). This is considered as fundamental to any developing nation with multiracial and multicultural people and environment as the convention upholds rights of a citizen in a democratic state that extends to the social identity of a person (Stryker, 2000).

Social identity explains how an individual labels himself or herself as a member of a group, nation, social class, ethnic group, language group, gender and so forth. The norms developed within a community guides the behaviour and enable the members form a collective identity (Haslam, 2001; Hogg, 1995; Jenkins, 2004). Multiple communities thrive in a society and have distinct frameworks of knowledge, which are the product of specific social arrangements within a society (Komito, 1998). It should be noted that this phenomenon also allows us to understand that an individual may have multiple social identities (Korte, 2007). Social identity, whether individual or group is made based on their past conducts and behaviours and such formations of identities are not necessarily sustainable in the future (Hogg, 1995). However, in this paper, the authors take the approach that gives appropriate consideration to community aspects of individual and group, with the understanding of the characteristics of social identity which is ideal for the group and also catalyst for individual references (Komito, 1998; Korte, 2007). Based on this understanding, the paper aims to discuss the social identity of Malaysia's Tamil community in relation to Tamil language.

3.2. Tamil Language and Literature

Language defines and determines one's place and identity in the world. According to Alastair Pennycook, language is an element of a broad semiotic system and it is formulated and infused with ideological, historical and political symbols (Akbari, 2008). Therefore, language does not simply mean a set of sounds

and it is completely intertwined with the lives of people. Sometimes, suppression of a language denotes subjugation of a community (Afzal, 2008).

As far as Tamil community worldwide is concerned, they have strong feelings towards the Tamil language, which is often venerated in Tamil literature as “Tamilannai” (Tamil mother). Tamil language is central to the Tamil community’s identity. Besides Sanskrit, Tamil language is also considered by many scholars to be one of the oldest languages with rich literary tradition spanning more than three thousand years or even earlier (Baird, 1987). Book of ethics, *Thirukkural* was authored by Thiruvalluvar in the 2nd century and is considered to be posterior to Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* (Muniapan, 2009). Following the legacy, Malaysia also has its own tradition of Tamil literature that has emerged since 1930’s and the community continues to be identified with Tamil language.

4. Discussion

4.1. Tamil Language in Malaysia

Tamil is widely used among the Tamil community as well as by Telegus, Malayalees and even Punjabis when communicating with the Tamils. The government also recognises Tamil language through media channels such as Radio-TV Malaysia (RTM). Besides electronic media, Tamil is also widely used in the print media and this is evident by the growing number of Tamil newspapers such as Tamil Nesan, Malaysia Nanban, MakkalOsai, Thinakkural and various weekly and monthly magazines. Tamil has also earned its rightful place as an Internet language along with English, Spanish, Hindi and Mandarin (Rekha, Anand Kumar, Dhanalakshmi, Soman, & Rajendran, 2012). Tamil schools have always been the core to the development of Tamil language in Malaysia. The first Tamil school was founded in 1816 in Penang which was part of Penang Free School (Willford, 2007). Many Tamil schools have been established by certain parties which are non-political and religious movement on their own efforts. Currently, there are a number of 524 Tamil schools inherited from the British (Ashcroft, 2006). Almost all Tamil schools are primary level schools and recognised by Malaysian government.

4.2. Current Scenario of Tamil Language

Most of the Tamil schools in Malaysia comprise of old buildings and poor infrastructure (Arumugam, 2008). These made many Indians feel neglected because the ruling government is not showing much consideration to those who study in Tamil schools. Issue of Tamil school is one of the reasons for the loss of support from the Tamil community in 2008 election (Hirschman, 1987). It is a known fact that Tamil schools lack of modern facilities, their location being in the interior areas and others are hindering the progress of Tamil language and its community. These are reflections of the inability of the Indian political parties and the elites to represent the community over the years (Anjum, 2007).

Despite the compromising condition of the Tamil schools in Malaysia, Bernama news reported that 817 Tamil school pupils scored straight A’s in the 2012 Primary School Evaluation Test (Bernama, 2012, Nov 19). This proves that vernacular school students can perform equally well as the national school students. As such, many Indian parents prefer to send their children to Tamil schools because it is felt that their children could perform better in vernacular schools. This proves that children who has early education in their mother tongue tend to perform better in schools in comparison to those who study in their second language (Walter, 2011).

In spite of the good performance by the Tamil school students, the Malaysian Education Ministry had recently decided against allowing Tamil language to be included as one of the counted subjects for the Upper Secondary public examination. This has become the most recent pressing issue regarding Tamil language and the school as the government is not giving due recognition to Tamil language as a key subject for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) public examination (Sua, 2012). This decision is against the Razak Report of 1956 which forms the backbone of the education structure in Malaysia. This attempt of the government is considered as a demotion of Tamil language, community and also Indians in Malaysia. The question raised is why Tamil language that is widely used by one of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia is not given recognition while French and Spanish that is hardly spoken in this country is taken in as one of the counted subjects for the SPM examination that is equivalent to O’ Levels? As language plays an important and emotional role to ethnic identity, it would be advisable not to meddle with such tender issues as it is capable of shaking people, especially the minority Indian community’s faith and trust in the ruling party.

5. Conclusion

The situation is grim considering the fact that many Indians want to revive the language and the government’s move does not contribute to support the initiative. This has in many ways disheartened the Indian community because Tamil language constitutes an integral part of their existence and identity. It is

essential for the political parties within the government and opposition to be united in finding an amicable solution for this current pressing issue. Apart from this, the National Front government should also refrain from giving excuses and ensure that the minority groups are included in the mainstream educational development. Unless comprehensive policies are devised to deal with issues confronting the Indian community, the future of Tamil community's identity, language and their prospect of progress in Malaysia will be drastically affected.

6. References

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