

**POLITICAL EXPEDIENCIES AND THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY  
CONSTRUCTION: THE QUEST FOR INDIAN IDENTITY IN  
MALAYSIA**

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*One way of gauging identity construction in a community is by studying how the community organises itself into associations, the causes these associations fight for and the stands they take on issues pertaining to their communities' interests. The English-educated Indian elite in Malaysia began making efforts in the last quarter of the 19th century to organise themselves into socioeconomic and quasi-political associations. However, no cohesive ethnic identity was visible even among this English-educated middle class until the mid-forties. The Indians at large remained as fragmented as ever. Ironically, they did not even have a truly national organisation with which they could identify themselves as an ethnic community. This situation began to change with the formation of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in August 1946. The MIC was the first full-fledged political party of the Indian community in Malaysia, and it was formed to defend Indian interests. True to this objective, the MIC played a crucial role in defending the rights of the Indian community during the period soon after the Second World War. With that, the MIC inadvertently paved the way for the transition of Indian identity from being an immigrant community to being rightful citizens of Malaysia. An analysis of the MIC's role in and stance on various issues that affected the community from the time of its inception through the mid-fifties is imperative for understanding identity construction among Indians in Malaysia. An attempt is made here to study the various phases that the MIC went through during its political struggle as the representative of the Indian community and its influence on the transition of Indian identity from an immigrant community to citizens.*

Keywords: Indians, MIC, identity construction, dual citizenship, Indian association

## **INTRODUCTION**

Most studies on Indians in Malaysia focus on issues related to immigration and settlement, labour unrest, political economy and sociocultural movements. In fact, as early as 1936, works of these kinds began to be published. The works of Krishnan (1936) and Neelakandha Aiyer (1938), for instance, gave a vivid picture of the hardships suffered by Indian plantation labourers during the early period of their immigration. Netto's work (1961) analysed the mode of immigration and gave valuable statistics on the number of Indians brought to Malaysia by the British. Writing eight years later on similar issues, Sandhu (1969) provided more comprehensive details on the pattern of Indian immigration and the problems faced by the labourers. Indian labour problems and the degree of exploitation the labourers were subjected to are well addressed in Ramasamy's work (1994). Some of the notable works on Indian sociopolitical history were written by Mahajani (1960), Arasaratnam (1970), Stenson (1980) and Rajeswary (1981).

These works, in general, give a deeper and broader understanding of the history of Indians in Malaysia. In fact, these works cover nearly all of the important aspects of the history of the Indian community—no doubt about that—but they are written with the misconceived premise that the community was homogeneous and shared a given cohesive ethnic identity, largely because ethnicity is often misunderstood to mean race. In actual fact, these terms refer to two different categories of people. As Abraham (1997: 10–12) observes, a race is identifiable, for example, by biological traits such as skin and hair colour that a group of people share among themselves, whereas ethnicity refers to a group that shares cultural traits such as religion and language. According to Smith (1986: 23–31), unlike race, ethnicity is fluid and is constructed through historical processes. Moreover, some of the prerequisites for being an ethnic group are sharing a collective name, myths, origin, past history, a distinct and separate culture and an association with a territory. In short, race is a biological given and one acquires it through birth, whereas ethnicity is cultural and constructed through historical processes. Constructing an ethnic identity is a never-ending process that lasts for as long as a particular issue or situation requires (Eriksen, 1992: 111)<sup>1</sup>, and because it is fluid, it may change to suit the situation.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, works on the history of Indians in Malaysia have failed to appreciate the contentious nature of the term "Indian." The disparate nature of the Indian community and the inherent cleavages within the community were not aptly analysed in these works. Although Rajeswary (1981) allocated one whole chapter to discussing the factionalism that was prevalent in the Indian community and the fractured nature of the community's struggle, the historical process that had brought about ethnic consciousness among these fragmented groups, who fought as a community for their rights, was not at all analysed (see Chapter VI). It has to be understood that the Indian community went through a long historical process before it was able to carve out a distinct ethnic identity in Malaysia. It

was through this process that the community was able to move away from being referred to as a transient community to become rightful citizens of Malaysia, and it is this aspect of Indian history that has not been given ample attention in most of the studies on Indian history. Here, an attempt is made to analyse this historical process for the brief period between 1946 and 1957.

This research was conducted using the Tamil press as the main source. The Indian leaders and their associations did not leave behind much record of their activities and struggles, and even in the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur, there are very few significant source materials on Indian history other than Tamil newspapers; there are not even records there on the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). There are also no collections in the National Archives of the personal papers of any of the leaders who were prominent during this period. Fortunately, two such collections are found in local libraries. The Personal Papers of Balakrishnan, which is deposited in the Universiti Sains Malaysia library, is a valuable source for studies on the MIC for the period between 1946 and the 1950s; Balakrishnan was an active Pulau Pinang MIC leader during this period. The other collection is the Thivy Papers, which is found in the University of Malaya library. Thivy was the founding president of the MIC. This collection in addition to providing information on how the MIC was formed also narrates the MIC's political struggle during the Malayan Union period. However, there are ample secondary works on the history of Indians in Malaysia. These works, some of which were consulted for this research, are extremely helpful for overcoming the limitations caused by the dearth of primary sources. In addition, let it be made clear at the outset that although Malaysia was known as Malaya until 1963, to avoid confusion, the term "Malaysia" is used throughout this article, even for the period before 1963, except where it is felt absolutely necessary to use the term "Malaya".

## **EARLY MIDDLE CLASS EFFORTS**

The quest for a distinct ethnic identity began to take shape among the Indians in Malaysia, in particular, the English-educated middle class, during the last quarter of the 19th century; however, the task was never easy. It should be noted that establishing an acceptable ethnic identity that could meaningfully represent all those who came to Malaysia from India remains elusive even to this day. The linguistic, religious and geographical variations among the Indians made the quest extremely difficult. Many Indians prefer to identify themselves with their linguistic affiliations, whereas others choose to use religion as their ethnic marker. There was also an attempt by some Tamils to force the British administrators in Malaya to recognise them as Dravidians instead of Indians (Anbalakan, 2008: 119–125). The situation is not much different in other colonies to which Indians were taken. In Sri Lanka, the native Tamils make

strenuous efforts to maintain a distinct identity from that of the immigrant Tamils from India. The Indian Tamils who were herded by the British into Sri Lanka to work in the tea plantations, in contrast, prefer to identify themselves as *Malaiyaga Tamils* in an attempt to maintain their past history (Kingsolver and Balasundram, 2008: 31–40). The Tamils in Sri Lanka are also divided based on religion. In Mauritius, the cleavages between the South Indian and North Indian immigrants remain as strong as ever to this day. The Tamils, who form roughly seven percent of the population there, in fact, have lost touch with their mother tongue, the Tamil language. Nevertheless, they have zealously struggled to maintain their distinct Tamil identity (Eriksen, 1992: 109–111).

The British administrators in Malaya were not at all concerned about these sub-communal cleavages within the Indian community. For the sake of political expediency, they categorised all who had geographical affiliation with South Asia as Indians. Interestingly, on one occasion, they even went to the extent of identifying, albeit wrongly, the Sri Lankan Tamils as Indians as well (Neelakandha, 1938: 93). Nevertheless, the English-educated middle class Indians continued their efforts to establish a cohesive and distinct identity for themselves. The rapid political changes that occurred in Malaysia soon after the Second World War gave the much-needed impetus for this endeavour. The active involvement of the English-educated Indians in local political developments had slowly but surely paved the way for the evolution of the Malaysian Indian identity by the time the country was approaching independence.

The earliest effort ever made by Indians to establish their ethnic identity in Malaysia was in 1892. It was in that year that steps were taken for the first time to form an Indian association, by a group of English-educated middle class Indians in Pulau Pinang. This association was intended to provide facilities for the Indians in Pulau Pinang to organise social and cultural activities, but needless to say, the aim was none other than to strengthen ethnic solidarity among the Indians. However, this association did not last long, and its achievements are unknown. Despite this failure, the middle class Indians continued their endeavour, especially in Taiping and Pulau Pinang, to organise similar associations. However, only after the second decade of the 20th century did any viable associations begin to be organised. In most major towns throughout the country, Indian associations were formed, and social and cultural activities were held aimed at uniting the Indians as a community. One of the most successful of these was the Pulau Pinang Indian Association. Formed in 1924 under the leadership of P. K. Nambyar, this association continues to function today (Khoo, 1992: 18–24).

It is interesting to note that all of these early associations were called Indian associations. It should also be noted here that even in India, the earliest sociopolitical associations formed were called Indian associations, even though it is not clear if such a cohesive ethnic consciousness had already evolved in India by then. Clearly, the idea behind this was to establish a common ethnic identity

for all Indian immigrants in Malaya based on their place of origin. All of these associations were formed independently and functioned without much coordination between them. In 1936, an effort was made to form a central body to coordinate the activities of all of the Indian associations in Malaya and with that, to represent Indians at the national level. The result was the formation of the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM). However, the efforts of these associations, to a large extent, did not succeed in uniting the Indians as a community. Neither were they able to infuse any amount of common ethnic consciousness into the community.

The reason for this failure is not difficult to determine. Within the category Indian, there are many subgroups, such as the Tamils, Telugus, Malayalis, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Bengalis and others. Each of these subgroups has its own concept of ethnicity and had always strived to remain separate and distinct from each other. The English-educated middle class Indians who formed these associations, however, seemed to have ignored these differences and acted on the broad assumption that all who came from South Asia were ethnically Indians, and they went on to organise activities in the name of the community without pausing to find out whether their efforts were being well received. More interestingly, all of these organisations were dominated by non-Tamils, and all of their day-to-day affairs were conducted in English, whereas the majority of the Indians in Malaysia were Tamils, most of whom were not literate in English. Hence, and not surprisingly, the majority of the Tamils did not associate themselves in any way with these Indian associations and their activities. The Tamil labourers, for example, refused to have anything to do with these associations. Although the Central Indian Association of Malaya had gotten involved in the welfare of the plantation labourers, especially in the Klang labour strikes of the forties, the Tamil working class never looked upon the group as their representative (Anbalakan, 2002: 63–68).

The situation continued in this manner even up to the period of the Second World War; no one organisation commanded the support and respect of the majority of the Indians in Malaysia. It was only after the war that changes began to take shape. It was partly the wartime experiences, particularly the suffering under the Japanese army, that brought about the changes. This changed environment made the CIAM and all other associations of the pre-war period incapable of representing the Indians anymore. It was the MIC, formed following the introduction of the Malayan Union Scheme, which slowly developed into a truly national body of the Indian community. However, it too had to go through several phases of baptism before finally coming to be accepted as the political party that represented the interests of the Indians in Malaysia.

## **CHASING RAINBOWS?**

The MIC was formed in August 1946, just a few months after the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), as a political party that claimed to represent the Indians and their interests. Yet sadly, as the UMNO grew from strength to strength to become the undisputed voice of the Malay community, the MIC had to struggle to gain the confidence and support of the Indians. From the very beginning, the party faced problems in marshalling community support. One of the reasons for this was that the term "Indian" was not at all defined explicitly by the party. Just like those pre-war associations, the MIC too seemed to have assumed that the ethnicity of the Indians was a given and not problematic. Hence, in its objectives, the MIC had stated that it would fight for the rights of all Indians; it did not even specify the geographical locations of the Indians it intended to fight for. It was very ambiguously stated that the party represented all Indians wherever they were. Worse still, it was also declared that the party would promote Hindi and would take steps to make it the common language for Indians in Malaya (*Jananayakam*, 7 August 1946). Perhaps the MIC had thought that Hindi would be accepted by the Indians in Malaysia as a common ethnic marker because it had been proposed to be the national language of India. However, even in India, especially in the south, there was vehement opposition to designating Hindi as the national language of India,<sup>3</sup> and it is surprising that the MIC was not aware of this. Thus, it is apparent that during the first phase of its existence, which was roughly until 1950, the MIC was somewhat confused about whom it really represented and whose rights it was fighting for.

It has to be remembered that in addition to the linguistic and regional divisions, the Indians were divided into immigrants vs. Malayan Indians. These sentiments began to appear among the Indians as early as the second decade of the 20th century and were among the reasons the local-born Indians remained indifferent towards most of the efforts made by the middle class to organise associations. The general assumption among the local-born Indians was that those associations had been organised by immigrant Indians solely to protect their own interests. Many times, the elite among the local-born had warned the immigrant Indians not to meddle with local politics and to let the local-born decide their future on their own (*Indian Daily Mail*, 21 June 1949; 5 July 1949; *Jananayakam*, 5 July 1949). It also has to be noted that as early as 1932, the local Indians had formed a separate organisation, the Malayan Indian Association (MIA), to fight for their rights (Stenson, 1980: 77).

As the numbers of local-born and domiciled Indians increased, this division also became more apparent.<sup>4</sup> In 1946, roughly 50% of the Indians were local born and another 25% were permanently domiciled in Malaysia (Ratnam, 1965: 74). A large number of these people had lost contact with India and accepted Malaya as their homeland. Furthermore, from at least the late 1920s, the

Malayan colonial government had been urged to grant citizenship to this group of Indians and absorb them as rightful citizens of Malaya (*Indian Pioneer*, 24 January 1930). The Malayan Union Scheme actually proposed to do that. Under its proposals, all of these Indians were eligible to become citizens, with all of the attendant privileges. Surprisingly, the MIC decided to oppose that scheme.

The Malayan Union Scheme had actually offered the best opportunity for the middle class in the MIC to educate the Indian masses politically and unite them as a cohesive community. The Malay middle class made full use of this opportunity to unite the Malays as a community and mobilised them against the implementation of the Malayan Union Scheme. The political education that the Malay community received during the first few months after the UMNO was formed was tremendous. The British administrators, who had taken the Malays for granted prior to this, were made to realise that they could not continue their rule without Malay cooperation. Using this historical support from the masses, the Malay elite had successfully managed to force the British to replace the Malayan Union Constitution with a more acceptable Federation Agreement (Mohamad Nordin, 1974; Thivy, 1948). Meanwhile, the Indian middle class, rather than educating the Indian community on the brewing political controversy, had wasted its time and energy chasing elusive goals in the name of democratic principles and independence, and in the process, not only had the MIC incurred the wrath of the colonial government but also lost the support of a large section of the Indian community.

The MIC did not pause for a moment to find out how the Malayan Union Scheme was going to affect the community, particularly the domiciled and local-born Indians. Rather, it was more interested in seeing if the scheme was designed to lead Malaya towards independence. Thus, when it realised that there were no provisions for elected legislatures and no assurance of decolonisation in the near future, the MIC decided to oppose the scheme. The MIC was also so naïve as to believe that the UMNO had similar reservations about the Malayan Union Constitution. Thus, John Thivy, the founding president of the MIC, travelled around the country cautioning the Indians not to support the Malayan Union Scheme and also urging them not to demand anything over the heads of the Malays because it could hamper their freedom struggle (*Jananayakam*, 14 May 1946; 23 May 1946; Thivy, 1948).

Actually, Thivy's intention was to win over the UMNO's goodwill and cooperation to fight against the British for independence. He even went out of his way to declare that the Indians recognised the fact that Malaya belonged to the Malays and gave assurance that the Indians would not demand anything that opposed Malay interests (*Jananayakam*, 5 August 1946; Thivy, 1948). These overtures by Thivy received severe criticism from the Indian community. The *Indian Daily Mail* (16 June 1947), for example, took him to task arguing that "the Indians did not have to appease anyone to get their rights recognized in this country." It advised the MIC to instead fight for a rightful place for Indians based

on their contribution and not to beg for alms. However, the adamant Thivy continued his overtures to the UMNO, hoping to bring the group over to his side. Not until the UMNO unilaterally participated in secret negotiations with the British to formulate a new constitution did he realise that the group's struggle was not against the British but rather the non-Malays.

Even after this, the MIC did not focus its struggle on defending the rights of the Indian community. Rather, it continued its confrontational politics against the government. It joined the All Malayan Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) and participated actively in the anti-Federation movement that went on until the Declaration of Emergency in June 1948. During this struggle, the MIC had played a crucial role in drafting the People's Constitution (Anbalakan, 1999: 94–97). However, this type of confrontational politics was not at all supported by the community at large. The professional and business community was among the most disturbed by these activities (Rajeswary, 1981).

Interestingly, the main reason for the MIC's opposition to the Federation proposals was not the strictures placed on Indian citizenship but the ambiguous nature of the citizenship to be awarded under the constitution. The federal constitution did not accord nationality to its citizens; an Indian who opted to become a federal citizen could still keep his/her Indian nationality. In short, the new constitution allowed space for a type of dual citizenship. This liberal clause was welcomed by the business community, who had no intentions of giving up their Indian connection. However, the MIC criticised this provision as an anomaly that was not appropriate for any sovereign nation, and the group called on the government to rectify the provision (*Jananayakam*, 17 January 1947; 25 February 1947; Thivy, 1948). Naturally, this position irked the professional and business community. They warned the MIC that they would pull back their support for the party if it continued to oppose this provision (*Tamil Nesan*, 30 October 1947). *Tamil Nesan* (5 July 1948; 3 November 1948) supported the position of the professional and business group and advised the MIC not to oppose the provision that allowed for dual citizenship.

Nevertheless, the MIC continued its opposition, arguing that it was not right for anyone to hold dual citizenship. Coincidentally, right around this time, the Indian government also passed a resolution that echoed the MIC's position. Nehru declared in the Indian parliament that an overseas Indian who had acquired citizenship in the country of domicile would automatically cease to be a citizen of India (*Jananayakam*, 5 March 1948; 20 March 1948). It is not clear if Thivy had anything to do with this. However, considering his rapport with the Indian National Congress leaders in the government, it may not be wrong to assume that he could have had a hand in it. This declaration, of course, helped to strengthen the MIC's stand on the Malayan citizenship issue, but undeniably, it also antagonised an important section of the community—the business and professional group.



In addition to this, the stand taken by the MIC on official acceptance under the federal constitution had also annoyed the professional and business classes. From the time the MIC began boycotting the new constitution, it had instructed all of its members to reject any offer from any government office. However, this was not acceptable to many in the professional and business group. They argued that the MIC's stance was not at all in tune with the community's interests. They even felt that it was because of the MIC's antagonistic politics that the government did not consider any Indian members for appointment on the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC)<sup>5</sup> (*Indian Daily Mail*, 20 April 1949; 20 September 1949). Thus, when offers for political positions in the various government and statutory bodies were made, members of this group defied the MIC's embargo and accepted them. The MIC, enraged at this "misconduct," took immediate action to expel these professional and business group members from the party. Thus, between March and April 1948, 15 members were dismissed from the party for accepting government positions (*Indian Daily Mail*, 20 September 1949).

Obviously, the MIC was more concerned about the principles it held dear and was not willing to compromise even if it meant losing support from its own members. The professional and business community was disillusioned at the type of role the party was playing. R. Ramani, a prominent Tamil Brahmin lawyer, took the MIC to task. He argued that its confrontation with the government had not helped the community in any way. He also criticised the MIC as having failed to recognise the professional and business community's aspirations, thus neglecting their welfare. He even declared that the MIC had failed to represent the Indian community effectively. This fallout soon led this group to found a new body, the Federation of Indian Organisations (FIO), purportedly to represent Indian interests more effectively (Netto, 1961: 65).

Not only the professional and business community but even the labouring class was disappointed with the MIC. This antagonism began on the very day of the MIC's inauguration. It may be noted here that during the period immediately after the Second World War, the plantation workers were organised into trade unions with the assistance of the General Labour Unions (GLU). The GLU was actually under the influence of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). It is not a secret that the CPM had its own political agenda and was using trade unions as front organisations to mobilise the support of the working class. Nevertheless, the CPM initially gave its blessings to the formation of the MIC, hoping that the party would confine itself to the political interests of the community alone. However, when Thivy came up with the idea of establishing a labour bureau within the MIC, the CPM became cautious. It feared that the MIC labour bureau would undermine its Indian labour support. To counter this, as Stenson (1980: 148) suggests, the CPM gave special instructions to the GLU delegates to the MIC inaugural meeting to register their strong opposition to the labour bureau. When the MIC refused to budge, the GLU delegates staged a walkout from the

meeting, and after that walkout, the GLU took care not to let labourers join the MIC (see Balakrishnan, n.d.).

The MIC could have used the Malayan Union and later the Federation Agreement controversies to turn the tables in its favour. It could have won the support of the labourers if it had only chosen to fight for the interests of the ordinary Indian instead of dreaming of playing the same role as the Indian National Congress in India (INC).<sup>6</sup> The democratic principles and political idealism espoused by the MIC had had no immediate relevance to ordinary Indian labourers. As such, the MIC's fight for those ideals had failed to excite the workers. Ordinary Indians were more concerned about their future in Malaysia. They needed to be educated on the importance of citizenship and how to acquire it. Unfortunately, the MIC took no initiative at all on these matters until 1950. Never once did any of its leaders advise the masses on this citizenship. Rather, they were more concerned about the "immediate inauguration of democratic institutions and popular rule and not merely a conversion of protected states into crown colony" (*Indian Daily Mail*, 11 July 1947). Ironically, the MIC leaders themselves showed no interest in federal citizenship. Worse still, MIC membership was still open to all Indians in Malaya irrespective of being a citizen of the federation.

Furthermore, linguistic differences had also kept the working class from joining the MIC. The working class was largely composed of the Tamils, who also formed the majority of Indians in Malaysia, whereas the MIC was dominated by the non-Tamil middle class. Thus, the Tamil working class found it difficult to identify with the MIC. It is well to remember here that it was this same factor that had held back the Tamil working class from joining the various pre-war Indian associations. Instead, they had formed their own bodies, such as the Dravidian Association, the Maruthuvar Sanghams and others, to promote their subcultural and linguistic interests.

Therefore, until 1950, despite the fact that the MIC had been actively involved in local politics, the Indians remained as divided as ever. The MIC had not only failed to command respect and support from the community it purportedly represented, it had also failed miserably to bring about any type of ethnic cohesion among the larger community. Interestingly, the UMNO, in contrast, had made full use of the constitutional politics to unite the Malays as a cohesive community. Through fiery speeches, its leaders went on a vigorous campaign to strengthen ethnic consciousness among the Malays.<sup>7</sup>

## **THE POLITICS OF PRAGMATISM**

Actually, it was the Declaration of Emergency in June 1948 that finally brought changes in the political approach of the MIC leaders. The draconian Emergency Ordinance that the British introduced, purportedly to curb the leftist menace, had

forcibly driven the MIC leaders to put a stop to the confrontational politics they had thus far been espousing. Nevertheless, the party, under its new president, Budh Singh, continued to boycott the Federation Agreement until 1950. The MIC had to wait until the advent of its third president, Ramanathan Chettiar, to put an end to this boycott.

It should be noted here that Thivy, the first president, and his successor, Budh Singh, both had close rapport with the Indian National Congress leaders. In fact, they had learnt politics from the Indian nationalists and had consulted them regularly on important issues that affected the Indians in Malaysia. Thus, it is not surprising that their political actions and decisions were more akin to those of the INC. Ramanathan, however, had no connections of this kind with any of the INC leaders. In fact, he was more of a businessman than a politician. Accordingly, he was not particularly concerned about the lack of democratic principles in the Federal Constitution. Rather, he was more pragmatic, and he focused his attention on gaining political recognition for the Indians in Malaysia. Hence, when he took over the helm of the MIC, he declared that he would cooperate with the government in the interests of the Indian community (see Balakrishnan, n.d.).

This change of stance marked the turning point in the identity construction of the Indians in Malaysia. Ramanathan initiated immediate actions to gain for the Indians a rightful place in Malaysia. He openly urged them to acquire the federal citizenship, which the leaders before him had been unwilling to do (*Tamil Murasu*, 1 May 1950), and to overcome the difficulties Indians faced in acquiring citizenship, he led a delegation to meet James Griffith, the Minister of Colonies, and appealed for the relaxation of the language proficiency test, a prerequisite for citizenship, for the Indians<sup>8</sup> (*Tamil Murasu*, 23 November 1950). Not stopping at that, he went further to restrict MIC membership to only citizens of the Federation of Malaya (*Tamil Murasu*, 28 November 1950).

The decision to restrict MIC membership to federal citizens only was crucial to the Indian community's effort to earn recognition as a rightful people of Malaysia. As was argued above, despite the fact that the majority of the Indians in Malaysia were either locally born or had become a domiciled community and had accepted the country as their homeland, they had never been accorded due recognition. The government had continued to consider them a transient community even until the 50s, and the MIC's confrontational approach was not at all helpful for overcoming this prejudice. In fact, from as early as 1948, a group of local-born and permanently domiciled Indians had become too uncomfortable with the MIC on this aspect and had urged the leadership to allow only Malayan citizens to become members of the party. They even demanded that the party's name be changed to the Malayan National Indian Congress to reflect the aspirations of the citizens of this country. The Selangor branch of the MIC was strongly behind this move and attempted to marshal support from other branches. At the 1949 Annual General Meeting (AGM), this group attempted to adopt a resolution to this effect. *Jananayakam* gave its full blessings for this move. Its

editorial on 9 July 1949 urged the AGM delegates to give serious thought to the issue. However, the resolution failed to receive enough support and was shelved; only the Selangor delegates had supported it (*Jananayakam*, 12 July 1949).

Unlike his predecessors, Ramanathan did not remain long as president of the MIC; he kept the post for an only year. However, within that short period, he navigated the MIC towards a completely new course. After that, the MIC was a full-fledged Malaysian party. Its actions became more focused, and it began to cooperate with the government and to participate positively in Malaysia's political developments. Ramanathan's successor, K. L. Devaser, a local-born Punjabi Hindu, continued that tradition and geared up the MIC's continuing struggle to gain political recognition for the Indians. Thus, when the government announced elections for the various municipalities in 1951, the MIC decided to contest. However, Devaser knew well the MIC's precarious position—with so few voters, the Indians could hardly dream of winning any elections—so this time around, the MIC was a little more pragmatic. It formed a coalition with the Malay-based Independent of Malaya Party (IMP), which was led by Dato Onn bin Jaafar, to contest the elections for Kuala Lumpur municipality. However, although two of the three MIC contestants had won that election with the support of the IMP, the MIC did not remain long in the coalition because both Dato Onn and the MIC came to realise that the coalition had no future, and they decided to part ways. In 1954, Devaser, brushing aside concerted opposition from his own party leaders, joined the UMNO and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) as the third member of the Alliance Party, and by doing so, he managed to secure the Indians not only a rightful place in Malaysia but also a share in its administration. It was this decision that paved the way for the transition of Indian identity from that of an immigrant community to that of Malaysian citizens.

## **TAMIL IDENTITY VS INDIAN IDENTITY**

Devaser's decision to join the UMNO-MCA alliance was the best tactical move any MIC leader could have made to ensure a dignified future for the Indians in Malaysia. Following this decision, in the first federal elections of 1955, the MIC was given two seats to contest and won both; it should be noted that the victory in both contests was not decided by Indian votes. In addition, for the first time, one of the victorious MIC candidates was given a cabinet post in the government that was formed subsequently. Surprisingly, however, Devaser, who had worked hard for this coalition, was not among those who gained from these new developments. In fact, he had become a political outcast by this time as the result of a surging Tamil consciousness that had suddenly come into the fore around this time. Ironically, Devaser's opponents had used his decision to join the UMNO-MCA alliance to discredit him.

The Tamils formed the majority of the Indian community in Malaysia, but for the reasons that were elaborated earlier, they had never been prominent in any of the Indian organisations; they had largely confined themselves to Tamil-based associations. Thus, there was great unease among the Tamil elite against the domination of non-Tamils in all of the Indian organisations. Among the most vocal of these Tamil elite was K. Sarangapany, the publisher and editor of *Tamil Murasu* and the *Indian Daily Mail*. He started *Tamil Murasu* specifically to mobilise the Tamil Indians by stirring up Tamil consciousness. In Singapore, he founded the Tamil Reform Association and the Agila Malaya Tamilar Sangam (All Malaya Tamil Association) as far back as 1939 to arouse Tamil ethnic consciousness. He was also one of the founding members of the MIC, but he was not at all happy to see non-Tamils dominating the party. In many of his editorials, he had expressed his disappointment over the absence of Tamil leadership in the MIC. He had urged Tamils to join the MIC in large numbers and to wrest control of it (*Indian Daily Mail*, 29 September 1947; 22 December 1948; *Tamil Murasu*, 10 March 1955).

Sarangapany's advice appeared to have brought about a positive change among the Tamil masses. Beginning in the 1950s, more and more Tamils began to join the MIC. It is not denied that this could have happened because of the changes in the MIC that had begun during Ramanathan's tenure as president. However, the fact that the Tamil schoolteachers who had remained aloof all of this time had now become active players in MIC politics shows that this development was largely a result of Sarangapany's effort. From early on, the schoolteachers were attracted by the Tamil reformism championed by Sarangapany. Now, following his advice, they began to play an active role in encouraging more and more estate labourers to join the MIC. They formed and headed a number of branches with mainly Tamil labourers as members, and thus, the party slowly began to become more representative of the Indian community. Yet, the increase in Tamil membership began to pose a different type of problem. Devaser faced problems from a number of branches dominated by Tamils from the very beginning. Beginning in 1953, Tamil-dominated branches, especially in Pulau Pinang and Singapore, began to work against him (Balakrishnan, n.d.). Devaser's decision to join the UMNO-MCA alliance was manipulated to be used against him. Sarangapany criticised Devaser as having mortgaged the community's dignity by bringing the MIC into the coalition. He argued that Devaser had done so for his own personal benefit and claimed that Devaser was promised a seat in the federal elections for his efforts (*Tamil Murasu*, 24 October 1954; 23 December 1954). He even went on to argue that there was no future in the MIC and called on all Tamils to boycott the party (*Tamil Murasu*, 10 March 1955).

It was in this atmosphere that a group of Tamil MIC leaders from Kuala Lumpur managed to convince V. T. Sambanthan to run against Devaser in the 1955 presidential election (Arunasalam, 1997: 33). It may be noted here that

around this time, Sambanthan was not yet a popular leader. In fact, he was not even well known outside of Sungei Siput, his hometown. His ability to lead an organisation such as the MIC had also not been tested. He was an arts graduate from one of the Madras universities. Perhaps Sambanthan's oratory skill in Tamil and the Tamil cultural dress he usually wore had convinced the Kuala Lumpur group that he was the best bet to take on Devaser.

It was not difficult for Devaser to read the atmosphere. He realised that he stood no chance against the surging Tamil ethnic sentiments. Thus, he scrupulously pulled out of the race and fielded his colleague, V. Manickavasagam, a Tamil from Kelang, against Sambanthan. However, the tide was clearly in favour of Sambanthan, who easily defeated Manickavasagam (Balakrishnan, n.d.).

Sambanthan's victory marked another epoch in the identity construction of the Indians in Malaysia, and the MIC was Tamilised from then on. The Tamil language and culture were projected as the markers of Indian ethnic identity. MIC meetings at both the branch and national levels began to be conducted in Tamil. Sambanthan, too, for his part, did everything he could to strengthen this trend. Soon after his victory, he toured the estates and encouraged the Tamil labourers to join the MIC (Arunasalam, 1997: 68). Branches were opened on most of the estates, and most of these branches were headed by Tamil schoolteachers.

The end result of this development was that it became practically impossible for any non-Tamils to aspire to lead the party anymore. This fact was attested by the two unsuccessful attempts made by Devaser to oust Sambanthan in the following years. Perhaps Devaser had still harboured hopes that the MIC delegates appreciated his contributions to the party and community, but if so, he was wrong; the Tamil sentiment in the party was too strong for such a miracle to occur. In his first attempt in 1956, Devaser could manage only 1,383 votes against Sambanthan's 7,654 (*Tamil Murasu*, 13 May 1956; 14 May 1956). Two years later, the margin was even wider; he won only 1,540 votes, while Sambanthan swept to victory with 15,353—almost ten times more (Means, 1970: 209). This decisive victory by Sambanthan marked the end of an era. There were no further attempts by any non-Tamils to contest for the president's post. After that, the MIC became a Tamil affair, and the non-Tamils, in general, began to move away from the party. These non-Tamils, especially the Punjabis and North Indians, either became inactive in politics or joined other political parties.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of identity construction in the Indian community was very much influenced by the role played by the MIC. This party, formed by a group of English-educated elites, passed through a number of phases before it came to play a more meaningful role as a representative body of the community. During this

period, the identity of the Indians, too, transformed from that of an immigrant community to a rightful people of Malaysia. In the initial period, the MIC elite wasted too much time and energy on things not directly related to the community's interests and, as such, failed to evoke any degree of ethnic sentiment among the Indians. The confrontational politics the party espoused during this phase disappointed a section of the professional and business community, who drifted away and ended up establishing their own association. This group never returned to the MIC even after the FIO folded. The failure of the MIC to fight for the interests of the local-born and domiciled Indians kept these groups away until the 50s, and the domination by the party's English-speaking elite alienated the Tamil working class, who formed the majority in the community. However, when positive changes began to happen and the MIC succeeded in gaining political recognition for the community, the sub-communal sentiments began to cloud the party. After that, the MIC came to be dominated by the Tamil elite group. Ultimately, it became a Tamil party, thereby alienating the non-Tamils, and the Indian identity gradually became synonymous with Tamil identity.

However, this is not the end of the Malaysian Indian quest for ethnic identity. As was mentioned above, ethnic groups are not objective entities but rather cultural constructs that take different forms based on the issues being championed, and this is more likely to happen among extremely diverse communities such as Indians. These same Indians could unite under another cultural trait—religion, perhaps—at a different time. In that context, the Tamil ethnic identity might be surpassed by the Hindu or Muslim or even Christian identity<sup>9</sup>, and the process will go on endlessly.

## NOTES

1. According to Eriksen (1992: 111), "the actual compass of a particular ethnically-based collectivity will depend on the social context. Continuous negotiations and redefinitions of ethnic relationships and of the relevance of ethnicity take place in response to changes in situation and context."
2. This truth is well elaborated in Nagata's (1979: 189–190) study on how the Indian and Arab Muslims came to be accepted into the Malay fold in Malaysia.
3. For an elaboration on the Tamils' vehement opposition by the Tamils in South India against the imposition of Hindi as the national language of India, see Anbalakan (1991: 160–177).
4. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that there were deep, sharp cleavages between these two groups. The founder president of the MIA, G. V. Thaver, for example, was also a member of the Negeri Sembilan Indian Association and a founding member of the CIAM. See Stenson (1980: 77).
5. The CLC was formed in January 1949 to gauge the response of the various communities on the implementation of the federation proposals. Only Malay and Chinese representatives were appointed to this committee, and the government

- refused to consider demands from the Indians for representation even when the CLC was later expanded. See Rajeswary (1981: 109–110).
6. The Indian National Congress (INC) was formed in 1885. From the beginning, it opposed the constitutional proposals introduced by the British in India. It boycotted every constitution introduced beginning in 1909. Only in 1935 did it participate in an election. Even then, on winning the elections, it decided to frustrate the British effort by refusing to accept office. See Anbalakan (1991: 17–37) for details.
  7. See Mohamad Nordin (1974) for an elaboration on this.
  8. Under the Federal Constitution, one had to pass a language proficiency test in either English or Malay, which was prohibitive for the working class, who were illiterate in both languages.
  9. See Whitaker's (2008) study on Sri Lanka and Younger's (2008) on Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa and Fiji for a discussion on the dynamic role played by the Hindu religion and temples in evoking ethnic consciousness among the Indians in these countries irrespective of their geographical variations.

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