Being ‘Indian’ in the French West Indies and Malaysia: Two Extreme Geo-Political Identity Models within the Spectrum of the ‘Old Indian’ Diaspora

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Being ‘Indian’ in the French West Indies and Malaysia: Two Extreme Geo-Political Identity Models within the spectrum of the ‘Old Indian’ Diaspora

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1. Introduction

This paper compares the recent attempts at reviving or reasserting ethnic identity by Indian diasporic communities in the French Overseas Department of Martinique and Malaysia. Both communities trace their origins to the earlier wave of labour migration out of India as indentured labourers. The paper examines and compares the identity self-perception of both diasporic communities who settled as respective citizens in these two countries which have very different geopolitical and juridical frameworks of integration. The so-called Old Indian or Labour Diaspora in Malaysia and Martinique may be seen as scenarios of “two extreme cases” (Cohen 1997) of a whole spectrum of socio-political contexts in which various Indian diasporic communities in the world live.

On the other hand, even though the French Overseas Department of Martinique and Malaysia present widely different situations in terms of geography, history, geopolitics and politics, they also present specific historical, anthropological, cultural and intercultural similarities within our concern. Hence the interest of examining the conditions from which resulted in the present ‘Indian communities”, or at least a large part of them, projecting themselves to a more and more globalized future in terms of ‘ontological’ identity, national belonging and citizenship. If the quest for hypothetical ‘global identities’ has become a very visible trend of research in this domain (Dubey 2002; Oonk 2007), there is still much to investigate between particular cases which are seldom, if ever, brought together for comparison. And above all, there is also much to elaborate in terms of building up an ever more harmonious international community.
2. On a Spectrum of Comparability

In 2005, the Indian Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs categorized the some 26 million Indian diaspora all over the world into two broad groups. What is termed the Old or Labour Diaspora designates a population of People of Indian Origin (PIOs) mostly issued from indentured labour. The prominent countries concerned are Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, Guyana, and Suriname. Three of them are in the Caribbean, which therefore constitutes a strongly pertinent regional research field, whereas Malaysia, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa can hardly be considered as forming a coherent sub-group. On the other hand, the major host countries of the so called New Diaspora are mostly Western countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand -- with emerging countries such as Singapore in Southeast Asia. Apart from this broad categorization, a good number of Indians live in the Gulf region, while a large concentration of Indian diaspora also live in neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Myanmar. All these diasporic communities are beyond the scope of the present paper, in which only Martinique and Malaysia are posed as both the crux and the heuristic limit of a “controlled comparison”, to quote D. Horowitz (2007).

If much research has generally been conducted in this field, inter-regional comparative studies are rare due to the linguistic barrier among established academic traditions. Comparative studies involving Malaysia do exist, such as those conducted at IKMAS which made comparative studies between Malaysia and Sri Lanka or Fiji (Abdul Rahman Embong 2007). Yet comparative studies between East and West Indies (Jain 2004, 2011) still remain a preoccupation mainly outside either of the two regions concerned, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. Besides, such international comparative studies hardly extend their attention to the French West Indies (and conversely), whether such studies are carried out outside the Caribbean region (Sahoo 2006, Mahabir 2009), or even within the region itself (Samaroo & Bissessar 2004). It is also a fact that French research on the Indian diaspora has mostly been focused on the French historical postcolonial framework - what I call here “France in all its states” (Metropolitan France and French Overseas Departments) and present Territories or former colonies.

According to the often quoted provocative statement of the specialist of the Indian diaspora Vinay Lal, “There is no ‘Indian’, properly speaking, in Trinidad and Tobago or in Guyana”.2 Such a theoretical statement could certainly be considered even truer in the case of Martinique, had the French Overseas Departments been taken into account. In Martinique, almost all the Indians brought to the island during the indenture period (1853-1898)
underwent forced conversion to Catholicism, lost their language to be replaced by Creole and French, and have in many cases lost their names. Added to this and owing to the French political model of race-blind citizenship, they often slip through the official statistics. Yet “the flame of identity” and religion have remained (Devi-Voisset 2010), and despite all outside forces against their survival as an ethnic group, they have survived and as such they present an exceptional case study of identity resilience. For the first time an Indo-Martinican was elected since March 2012 as the President of the Conseil Régional (Regional Council or Territorial Assembly) and after years of expectation and demand by different members of the Indo-Martinican community, the creation of an Indo-Caribbean French Cultural Centre is underway. It is to be built on the very land where the first Indians had landed in 1853, and where they had hopelessly waited for the promised boats to bring them home when the crisis in the sugar industry threw them into the most inhospitable parts of Fort-de-France, and into the most menial and despised urban survival activities.

Since 2003 several political leaders of Indian origin in the Caribbean have grouped themselves under a forum called Indo-Caribbean Leaders’ Forum. In 2010, the election of Kamla Persad-Bissessar to the post of Prime Minister in Trinidad and Tobago, the first woman Prime Minister of the country, could not but appeal strongly not only to the regional Indian diaspora, but India as well. In Martinique where the Indian presence had been reduced to quasi invisibility, such events are part of a genuine and deep “revival”. This revival has made them create cross-border and transnational relations with Trinidad, Canada, Pondicherry, Reunion and beyond to join regional and international organizations, and become part of transnational networks like the World Tamil Confederation (2002) in order not only to preserve and revive their culture but also to benefit from the rise of India as a new 21st-century world power (Charrin 2007). The creation of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) in 1989 in New York, with the aim of uniting the entire Indian diaspora to safeguard and promote its interest, has been followed by the creation of a multiplicity of local GOPIOs in various places, including Guadeloupe, La Réunion and recently, Martinique (2010). The creation of new transnational diaspora networks has induced the need to stimulate more transversal comparative studies and renewed interest in carrying out research on more extensive regional, transnational and global perspectives.

Anglo-Saxon research on diasporic communities in the Caribbean concentrated mainly on the Commonwealth Caribbean, where most of the countries are relatively poor, with important socio-economic imbalances and outward emigration including the Indo-Caribbeans. In the French Overseas Departments, on the other hand, the economic and national issues
have undergone very specific transformation within the French Republic since 1948. Besides, the political and juridical framework of the egalitarian non-discriminatory system inherited from the French Revolution of 1789 renders the case of Martinican ‘Indianness’ the most elusive of the Old Indian diasporic global landscape. In Martinique, where some 25,000 coolies were imported for the sugar plantations (1853-1885), the affirmation of an Indian ‘community’ per se among the roughly 450,000 inhabitants has been invisible until very recently. As such, it may somehow be interpreted as opposed to the Malaysian case, where rightly or wrongly, community identities are ‘embedded’ in the ‘dominant societal paradigm’ (Milner 2011) since many decades if not longer. Malaysia is culturally at the fringe of an inter-civilizational continuum with India and Eurasia. It accommodates one of the biggest Indian diasporic communities in the world, where the affirmation and reference to ethnic identity in the public sphere are commonplace.

3. **Martinique / Malaysia: Framework of a ‘controlled comparison’**

Setting aside obvious differences between the two ‘polities’, we can draw several points for comparison. First, these two ‘polities’ are examples of a strongly dominant South Indian presence, particularly Tamil (constituting 87% of the Indian community in Malaysia). The Dravidian presence is equally important in the French landscape owing to the colonial connections with Pondicherry: a quasi-exclusive presence of the Tamils is a specificity of Martinique. In both cases, the populations concerned left from the same respective area, maybe the same villages of Chennai Constituency and French trading posts, and brought with them the same statues of their village gods and religious books. It is to be noted that during the period of intensive Christianization of Martinican Indians, almost all the Hindu temples which were the characteristic of the sugar-cane plantations landscape had disappeared.

When the Indians were ‘imported’, it was the land of their ancestors and the gods that they brought with them on the boat. The reconstitution of their village temple in the new lands, however rudimentary, and for decades even secretly hidden in Martinique, was the manifestation of this belonging. But after the campaign of intensive colonial de-‘paganization’ and Christianization, followed by the crisis in the sugar-plantation industry and following their emigration to the cities, only five such chapels still exist today as the link to their origins. Since the sugar plantation land belonged to the White Béké planters, when the coolies left the plantations most of them lost all claims to their temples.

All differences taken into account, the radical transformation of the Malaysian landscape during the era of New Economic Policy (NEP, 1970-1990)\(^5\) and the Islamic revival
of the Malay society under a new ‘look Middle-East’ identitarian, political and economic policy is not completely without similarities, as far as the ‘sense of alienation’ resulting from such similar processes of ‘dispossession’ is concerned.

Second, in both cases, these Tamil / Dravidian populations form a similar relative demographic ‘weight’. Undertaking such comparative analysis seems first to depend greatly on the weight and position of both communities within the general population, although this parameter is far from being sufficient in itself (Horowitz 2007). But in the case of Martinique and Malaysia, we have a very similar context in terms of this demographic weight. In Malaysia, the Indian community has gone down from 10% to roughly 7% of the population. In Martinique, around 25,000 Indians were brought between 1853 and 1885, and despite the fact that barely 5 or 6% returned to India, their descendants who still claim themselves as Indians form around 4% of the island’s population today. In both cases, after having been lured by the imperial powers to produce plantation crops for the development of their economy with an enormous human cost, both communities are today affected by a deep sense of having been left behind by History following the shift to new upstream crops and industries, as their development relies on new foreign manpower which is more economical (Haitians and St. Lucians for Martinique). This feeling is reinforced by the similar decrease of their relative demographic weight in both societies.

Third, both communities share their social position as minorities in the respective countries. With a common cultural past as indentured labourers and plantation experience, they also happen to have had in the recent decades a very similar trajectory: that of marginalization within the local and national dominant ideological system. In the case of Malaysia, it is due to a national system, whereas in Martinique, as I shall explain, it is the process of a local dominant cultural model enhanced by the implicit backing of the Republican model of ‘ethnic invisibility’.

Fourth, both communities emphasize the value and role (positive or negative) of an ‘Indian diasporic consciousness’ (I include in this consciousness a ‘diasporic imaginary’ or ‘Indian imaginary’). Economic conditions are obviously a determinant factor in identity perception whether in a positive (self-appreciation) or negative (deprecation) sense. But they are not the sole factors, and so is the globalizing influence of the media on societies and polities all around the world. While the demand for a recognition of their basic right to maintain an Indian identity in their country by the Malaysian Hindu Indians has been widely and internationally publicized during the past decade, expressions of deep frustrations and claims for ‘a right to exist’ (Gamess 2003) have equally been voiced in Martinique.
The present need of some Indo-Martinicans to find relatives and community bonds in the Pondicherry area or other areas around the world, with organized trips and enquiries into archives, reveals a deep and persistent psychological need to heal a past trauma in the relatively affluent Western economic and free political context of this French Department. Despite all obvious and basic distinctions that can be advanced between these two cases, we perceive here the similar syndrome of a long-lasting stigma of their historical trajectory, re-activated within the globalization context. In this respect, subjectivity plays a very important role in any analysis; the weight of the dominant ideology is such (all major different issues being taken into account) that an important part of the comparative research should be allocated to interviews, as has already been attempted in other studies of Malaysia (Ong 2007).

Fifth, the last comparable element concerns their misgivings with regard to their respective national juridico-political framework. Derived from the French Revolutionary ideals, the French Republican constitutional model enunciates and promotes itself to the world as a basic model which affirms universal human rights. According to Article 1 of the French Constitution (the current version being adopted on 4th October 1958), “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organized on a decentralized basis”. The fundamental implications of the provisions of this Article for the French society cannot be more strikingly different from those of Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution. Yet, since the Mahathir era at least, the Malaysian model has also been ideologically enunciated strongly in the dominant part of the collective psyche, and promoting itself as a model to the world.6 And it is important to note that both cases operate socially as ‘counter-models’. In the Martinique polity an alternative counter-model to the (negatively interpreted) Republican assimilationist model has been promoted as a new global model, the Creolization model, outreaching and expressing in its depth the dominant local societal imaginary, if not governance. In Malaysia, the “Malaysian model” has been strongly promoted as an “anti-Western” model (cf. the “Look East” policy) before being presented as a balanced model between “modernity” and Islam. Therefore, the ‘Indian diasporic consciousness’ should be examined in relation to both these complex national political contexts.
4. Indo-Martinicans: From the French National Republican Assimilation Model to a Reassertion of Identity

It is through the struggle of the Guadeloupean Henri Sidambarom amongst others that the Indians of the French West Indies were given French Nationality in 1925. At the beginning, they were reluctant to participate in the national political life. But progressively they got involved in the local political debates. In 1948, they became citizens of the ‘whole and indivisible’ French national territory, when the colony became a French Department within the Republic. I will briefly provide an overview of three main factors that have, half a century later, led to the emergence of this collective urge to ‘re-exist’.

First, the national framework: the constitutional conception of citizenship as provided in Article 1 and the State assimilationist policy. ‘Measuring’ populations, groups and communities which acknowledges the existence of sub-national collective identity is not envisaged by the legal system in France. All ethnic-based statistics are outside the constitutional framework due to Article 1.

Whereas linguistic or religious identity can be accounted for by several means outside or within the juridical-political system (the Ministry of Interior is for example also the Ministry of Religious Affairs), religion, language and name cannot provide an adequate framework to comprehend expressions of an Indian identity, except by means of self-identification. Today, the loss of name through the substitution of Indian names by Christian names in the Etat-civil (state registry office) is precisely the first major factor leading to attempts at renewing international diasporic links with Mother India and other countries in order to trace and rebuild genealogical links. The French national juridical-political system is not the only reason, but explains why in Martinique, more than in any other part of ‘France in all its states’, the ‘Indian identity’ demands have remained for long neglected by Paris, despite the active expressions of claims to ‘the right to be different’ on the part of the Department’s society and governance in general from their metropolis.

Yet, are the Indians, generally speaking, a particularly ‘invisible’ community within the French Republic? The question can at least be inferred from the title of an official report on the subject by C. Moliner entitled Invisible et modèle? (Invisible and Model?)? Although it concerns an entirely different segment of population and different issue, it raises potential similarities in the difficulties to comprehend ‘Indianness’ as a unique phenomenon at least within the French vision of societies, nations and cultures – but maybe also more generally (Brown 2006, p. 104): “The emigrant populations from South Asia fall completely outside the
general public knowledge. So the specificities of their migratory trajectory remains unknown not only to the population at large but also the professionals who deal with them and the institutions which define the public policies concerning integration. A huge confusion reigns concerning the multiplicity of their religious, ethnic and national identities”.

The second factor which induced the current reassertion of identity among Indo-Martinicans is the role played by the Creole movements (Créolité, Creolization), which present themselves as a vigorous alternative anti-universalist ideological system within ‘France in all its states’. The resonance of such movements not only in the Overseas landscape, but in the heart of the nation itself, fundamentally set aside the problematic of the Indian identity, theoretically only implicitly included in the concept of ‘Creoleness’. The latter is considered as the “trademark” of the globalizing dynamics interpreted from the Franco-Caribbean socio-cultural paradigm. In Martinique especially, the basic legitimacy of the Creole movements is the exceptionally thorough métissage (hybridization) process which affected this island, not only culturally but also genetically. This unique feature distinguishes Martinique from among all other plantation societies in the world. One example of the depth of this phenomenon is the complete local integration of the Muslim Saint Nagur Mira, a Saint who is also found in other local Hindu practices of the Tamil kovil (Indian temples or ‘chapels’) of the island diasporic communities (a shrine dedicated to this ‘keramat’ is a similar indication of the intercultural Malaysian landscape in Penang).

However, despite the many ‘Indian’ features of these Creole movements, Créolité (Bernabé et al. 1989) or Creolization (Glissant 1989), their mainly Afro-Creole impetus and demands towards the metropolis reveals a privileged relation between former African colonies and the metropolis. Feeling slighted/sideline, the ethnic Indian identity is articulated in the form of a ‘wounded identity’ (‘identité blessée’), turning to strengthen new bonds with the 21st century image of a “New India”. The new ‘soft power’ of India plays in this context an important role, as it does in other Caribbean islands where the Indian presence is already a religious, cultural, anthropological and/or economic reality (Devi-Voisset 2012).

A consequence of this (second) assimilation process is that when there was a split within the GOPIO in 1992 in Paris, Guadeloupe like the Malaysian GOPIO chose to belong to the new association called GOPIO-International based in Mauritius which is more oriented towards the Old Indian diaspora, while still belonging to the original New York-based GOPIO, which is more non-resident Indian and business oriented. Later, in 2012, Martinique too chose to join the GOPIO-International, an evidence of its attachment to an ‘Old Indian Diaspora Identity’. This choice confirms a stronger tie between Guadeloupe and Martinican
communities to Pondicherry, Mauritius, Malaysia, Fiji, La Réunion, Trinidad and Tobago as
old strongholds of a ‘forgotten people’ who eventually considered that they had been forced
too long to “live in the shadows” (Lal 2008). But ultimately, the choice itself is triggering an
effect which seems to be a fundamental characteristic of any Indian ‘society’ at any scale – a
never ending process of fragmentation.

Indeed, free identity choices for integration such as the Creole identity movements
(‘Creole Hinduism’) and the ‘Coolitude’ (Khal 2002) are being revived among the Indo-
Martinicans: either within a pan-Caribbean context with its heritage of ‘New World Hinduism’
(supra, Lal) or within the relations established between the different historically linked
French-speaking polities of America and the Indian Ocean (L’Etang 2009). But a new
parameter has appeared with the appealing emergence of Mother India and the multiplication
of the networks, thus radicalizing and (re)splitting the ever more intertwined new transcultural
lines of fractures within a reconquered ‘Indianness’. An example of the ‘re-Indianization’
process is the work of the essayist and novelist Camille Moutoussamy. He first wrote Eclats
d’Inde (Pieces of India, 2000) and is now engaged in the rewriting of the Ramayana
(Princesse Sita, 2009) and the Mahabharata in order to revive ‘remnants’ of local oral Tamil
traditions (nadron), while at the same time strengthening the bonds with the original Indian
Sanskrit and Tamil literary traditions.

Thirdly, globalization exerts in turn its pressure on the Martinican Indian identity as it
does everywhere else and for all markets. Many networks have appeared such as the World
Telugu Federation, created in 1992, or the World Tamil Conference already mentioned. In
Martinique the opportunity to re-introduce the learning of Tamil, the lost language, the major
common trend nevertheless comes from the ‘mainstream’ linguistic-religious phenomenon of
‘neo-Brahmanization’. On the Malaysian scene, marked by political restrictions, the
contradictory dimensions between this ‘modern’ Hinduism and the rural ancestral traditions
maintained by plantation Hinduism (the Dravidian village Hinduism which is the basic
identity of the ‘40% poor’), have led to demonstrative crispations, a threatened identity
finding its defence in an ‘ethnic fetishism’ (Wilford, 2009), what I term an ‘archeo-identity’
(Devi-Voisset, 2010).

In Martinique, where Hinduism was almost entirely lost along with the Tamil
language, the identity choices are less dramatic but no less problematic: between this
patrimonial archeo-identity as the central pillar of self-identification (and in many instances
self-esteem) and the choice of a largely rediscovered ‘e-Indianness’. The very recent creation
of the Tamil Association in Martinique (Association Culturelle et Régionale Kannavedi), and
the introduction of ‘pure’ Brahmanic ceremonies and festivals, are signs of the new tension and fracture within the community, but also a visible manifestation of its revival.

5. Malaysian Indians: Looking Forward in a Multicultural Society

What the Martinican case demonstrates is that it took almost a century for an Indian community that issued from the colonial plantation system (following the agricultural and industrial transformation of the economy with the formation of a new dominant socio-cultural paradigm) to see its identity claims re-emerging and recognized. In Malaysia, the recent trauma experienced by a community sharing a common origin is not without similarities, and this point forms the crux of our comparison as already mentioned. A totally ‘plantation-dependent sub-society’ was suddenly deprived of its means of living, of its housing, of its ‘world’, only to be plunged without any appropriate rehabilitation into the margins of a modern society which was alien to it.

5.1 Is there an ‘Indian Problem’?

The existence of a ‘Malaysian Indian problem’ has been a recurrent issue since the beginning of the New Economic Policy (Colletta 1978, Stenson 1980), widely and internationally highlighted as it became a major national issue after the tsunami of the national elections of 2008 (Muzafar 2008). In reference to Malaysia, A. Singh (2007) notes that, “Though diasporas have emerged as powerful factors in developing relations between nation States, it seems to have worked in the opposite direction in the case of India-Malaysia”.

Vinay Lal considers that “Malaysia has perhaps a more just claim to be viewed as a genuine experiment in ‘multiculturalism’, but equally nowhere else do Indians feel more weighed down by life”.

At the very least, this is a statement which touches on psychological, moral and ethical aspects that cannot be discarded as irrelevant.

Precisely, as Malaysia is reaching a decisive ‘crossroads’ of its History, “is this a real problem or an imagined one, or are Malaysian Indians really no worse off than other communities?” (Jayanthi & Dass 2008, p. 13). The authors assess that “the official statistics on poverty do not support the Indian perception”. Maybe the interrogation should then be formulated otherwise: (a) has the Indian community, in general or a section of them, experienced a recent relative impoverishment compared to other segments of the Malaysian society? (b) if so, which part of this Indian community is affected, and (c) why? The segment of the Indian community most concerned by this feeling of destitution has been well identified: “The plantation workers who are largely Indian have become the only group whose
lot has become progressively worse in the development process and in some instances because of it. The plantation workers are pushed further into poverty” (Nair 2007, p. 142).

In 1957, 70% of the Malaysian Indian households lived in the plantations. At present, as a result of the development of the plantation areas and the replacement of the Indian workforce by foreign workers, they are 80% urban. As a consequence, “It is probable that more than 40% of Malaysian Indians households fall within the low-income category (less than RM 1,200/month as defined by the government) and that is cause for concern” (Jayananth & Dass 2008, p. 17). Yet, if it is generally accepted that the phenomenon is a ‘cause for concern’, its implications and the means set up to fight against this problem are equally questioned. Even though recent efforts have been made by the government or the Malaysian Indian Congress(MIC) or other party / institutions to address the issue despite the lack of visibility of statistics on the matter (Jayasooria 2012), it has also been a matter of growing academic concern that the government policy “does not specifically contain any program to address the problems of income inequality or disparity among lower income Malaysian Indians”; or more generally, as in the 9th Malaysian Plan (2006-2010), “does not provide detailed data on the percentage of Non-Bumiputera households in the bottom 40% of households”, while “data on intra-ethnic income distribution by household size are not officially published” (Jayananth & Dass 2008, p. 18).

This is why it is widely claimed, as in the study mentioned above, that the government should assume responsibility for dealing with the economic, social, cultural and psychological consequences of the plantation dismantlement and “not as previously leave the responsibility to the MIC” (Jayananth & Dass 2008, p. 30). The absence of specific data, coupled with a general opacity on released or estimated statistics, is also a problematic matter beyond the evidence of the relative economic progress of the Malaysian Indian community. A sense of being pushed to the background may also be shared among those other than the ‘hard-core poor’ and the ‘40% poor’ of the economic structure. Whereas Indians represented in the past a significant proportion in the public administration (health, police, etc) they have also been displaced from these functions, and today the “reconverted” community as a whole owns barely 3% of the nation’s share equity, a phenomenon which enhances a feeling of diminished national value, if not accounting impoverishment (see Table 1).

Table 1: Employment in the Civil Service Sectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2%</td>
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</table>

Source: Sadatul Nahir and Rosli, Utusan Malaysia, 12 September 2005
Moreover, the economic policies have also created ‘new poor’ in all strata of the society, in East Malaysia particularly. This reinforces the evidence that analyzing the socio-economic problems of the Indian community within an ethnic framework would prevent us from getting to the bottom of the root cause of their problems. The author fully agrees with this view, shared by almost all the politically engaged people I managed to interview, that such an issue should be resolved horizontally and not left to political parties or NGOs. According to Dr. Palanisamy Ramasamy of the multi-ethnic party coalition of Pakatan Rakyat who is also a Deputy Chief Minister of the state of Penang, Malaysia has to move away from identity politics and start a program of ‘affirmative action’ for the poorer sector of the population, especially the ethnic communities sidelined by the governmental economic and political policies over the last 40 years. But can an economic approach, even within a national framework, resolve the problem effectively without a political reassessment by the Government of its policies concerning the future of the nation?

5.2 A “Social Contract” Went Astray?

The purported social contract proposed to future Malaysians at independence was one allowing for a special status for the Bumiputera. The Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Najib Razak, in his speech to the UMNO General Assembly in October 2010, explained that the Bumiputera were a “race chosen to lead a plural society” and that a “national social contract” was “sealed in the Constitution” between Malays and Non-Malays: “in exchange for citizenship, the Non-Malays had accepted the principle of Malay special privileges”, and that therefore they accepted a “Malaysian citizenship” that was not “based on equal rights and opportunities” (Milner 2011, p. 7).

If that were the case, it seems difficult to conceive a trans-ethnic, multidimensional solution to the poverty issue that would not end up in a kind of ‘expedient multiculturalism’ (Ting 2011), i.e. the constant reinforcement of vertical communal divisions in order to counterbalance the growing effect of horizontal class divisions and consciousness. Such doubts have also been raised about opposition parties recently. While signs of trans-ethnic relations within the Malaysian society are apparently growing and inducing trans-ethnic assertions among opposition political parties, such signs may also be interpreted as the mere continuation of a tradition of such an ‘expedient multiculturalism’. On the other hand, despite such growing trans-ethnic relations and horizontal class consciousness, it is not generally accepted within the Indian community that race relations have improved in the country, a sentiment which is clearly confirmed among certain academics themselves: “After more than
four decades of concerted efforts to enhance national unity and integration, there are concerns that inter-ethnic relations in the country have not improved significantly and in some instances have worsened” (Nair 2007, p. 114).

In any case, it would require imagination to initiate effective trans-ethnic reforms from within a paradigm which, if one follows the terms of the Prime Minister’s speech mentioned above, seems to be a reassertion of what could be called a ‘Malacca model’ of plural societies, a model in which “indigeneity carries a distinctive power by virtue of the primacy of the belief ‘our group’ was here first before all others” (Ong 2007, p. 218). The reason being that “at the level of ‘authority-defined social reality, which is Bumiputera dominated ... the issue of national identity is perceived by the State as a non-issue because its basis and content has been spelt out in a number of policy documents within the framework of the Malaysian Constitution” (Shamsul 2007, p. 206).

Article 153 of the Malayan Federal Constitution of 1957 is one of the most controversial articles in the Malaysian Constitution. Critics consider that it has created an unnecessary and racialist distinction between Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds, leading to the implementation of affirmative action policies which benefitted only the Bumiputra, who comprise a majority of the population. But technically, discussing the repeal of Article 153 is illegal, even in Parliament, although it was initially drafted as a temporary provision to the Constitution. The question is further complicated by the evolution of the role and position of Islam within the nation in relation to minority religions, as underlined by N. Othman, M. C. Puthucheary and C.S. Kessler: “All citizens including the Non-Malays had consented and were subsequently bound by the nation’s consent, to the idea of Malay primacy and had consented to ascendency of Islam not only as the official religion of the Federation but its Malay-backed ascendency over national life as a whole” (2008, Introduction, page XII). M.C. Puthucheary goes on to say that “Chief Justice’s suggestion that the time had now perhaps come to replace the derivatively English Common Law with local jurisprudential traditions, notably that of the Sharia and related Malay custom, as the basis of the Malay legal system: all these elements combine to generate quite widespread feelings of disappointment, disquiet, and even apprehension” (2008, p. 37).

K.S. Nathan suggests that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak faces mounting challenges in his attempt to implement his 1Malaysia vision in the face of “the political pressures stemming from conservative and even extremist religious forces committed to upholding the supremacy of Islam over other religions in this multi-religious country” (2010, p. 288). There is a ‘disquiet’ among Malaysian Indians of both Hindu and Christian faiths arising from the
many dramatized circumstances such as the demolition of Hindu temples and the burning of churches (Devi-Naidu, Voisset 2010).

Can the Malaysian Constitutional model, therefore, pave the way towards a genuine multicultural model? A. R. Embong states that “Although the historical resources for pluralism which had their roots in the country’s cosmopolitanism are insufficient to ensure participation and civility in modern multi-ethnic Malaysia, they nevertheless constitute an important cultural repository (2000, p. 32). In 2007, Ong Puay Liu revisits this ‘insufficient repository’: ‘To rebuild a “nation” out of a plural society consisting of fragmented and ethnic minded individuals ... requires breaking down existing mindsets that give priority to the idea of Malaysia as a nation of unequal ethnics rather than a nation of equal citizens’” (p. 231).

5.3 The ‘Displaced Syndrome’

The second displacement of the Indian plantation workers and households, this mini downtown kalapandi (‘the crossing of the Black waters’, a reference to the trans-oceanic displacement of the indentured labourers), has obviously been one too many for a community which has felt badly affected by this “unequal citizenship”. Herein lies the root of a widely commented social dysfunction syndrome where the “Malaysian Indian community is beset with problems ranging from high rates of crime, gansterism, substance abuse and a whole host of dysfunctional behaviours (J. Appadurai, G. A David Das, 2008, p. 26). This is a major intra-ethnic factor to be taken into account as it is without equivalence in other Malaysian communities. And it resounds strongly and symbolically, in the common psyche of the whole Indian Adi-Dravida majority of the country, as a ‘blesse’ (psychological wound) as it is described in French creole. My interviews have confirmed the prevalence of such feelings of a very deep and genuine second loss of territorial livelihood and identification which reinforces a sense of loss of home. This ‘blesse’ is linked to an unbroken tie with a twice elusive Mother India which has always, and still continues to be at the heart of the diasporic imaginary.

Furthermore the living conditions and inhuman treatment of Indian workers in the plantations have often been downplayed, first by the British for their own financial interest and later by the post-independence government which advantaged Bumiputra development while sidelining the ‘Indian problem’. One example of this neglect is the condition of the Tamil schools. Until recently the Tamil Schools were often just mere apologies of what schools should be. Table 2 demonstrates the depth of this ‘societal dysfunction’ within the Indian community as compared to other ethnic groups in the country.
Table 2: ‘Societal Dysfunction’ in Malaysian Indians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Juvenile Delinquents</th>
<th>Wife and child beaters</th>
<th>Beggars</th>
<th>Successful University Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rates of suicide per 100,000</th>
<th>Malays</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indians</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *The Economist*, 22 February 2003

The MIC’s incapacity to fight for the rights of the displaced Indian plantation workers, often ill-equipped to fit into an urban environment, only added to this societal dysfunction. It is in connection with these societal problems that one notes the resurgence of religious and cultural features in the community which are expressions of resorting to what I previously termed an archeo-identity. This phenomenon has been well studied in Malaysia by Andrew Wilford, in reference to rituals of “possession and displacement” in urban Kuala Lumpur (2003, 2006). All these factors have contributed to what is called the “dependency mindset”.16 Finally, as Janaky Raman Manickam recalls, “while the government is mainly responsible for the economic shortcomings of the Indians, there are also many other factors at play....these factors are insidious and related to the Indian psyche”(2009). Some aspects of this Indian psyche are analyzed by the psychoanalysts and writers Sudhir Kakar and Katharina Kakar, who recall for example that for Indians (from India) “a person’s self-worth is almost exclusively determined by the rank he (alone or as a part of the family) occupied in the profoundly hierarchical nature of Indian society” (2007, p. 8). This factor could be considered as even more true in the circumstances that we have described.

I certainly agree with the sharpest observers in Malaysia that “Academics should undertake research to understand issues on a wider societal scale not just through ethnic lenses” (Jayananth & Dass 2008, p. 31). But on the other hand, a wider comparative framework may also put the stress on different ways to mobilize the Indian community itself to take its fate into its own hands in a positive way.
6. Conclusion

I am aware that the framework that I presented here is not only transversal in geopolitics, but also perfectly trans-disciplinary. From a strictly explicit geopolitical constraint in Malaysia to a strictly implicit socio-cultural constraint in Martinique, one cannot but resort to the traditional academic fields of research called anthropology, history and sociology. But in the end, it is an ethical problem and an ontological one. On the other hand, the more the research work is carried out in certain ‘sensitive’ socio-political fields, the more prominently these problems are highlighted.

Notes

1 This paper is the written version of the oral presentation of my research work conducted from April to June, 2012 in Malaysia. The paper was presented while I was a Visiting Fellow, at a seminar organized by the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi on 28th June, 2012.

The French national territory includes five Overseas Departments. Martinique is one of the three Departments in the Americas with Guadeloupe and Guyane, the other two in the Indian Ocean being the islands of La Réunion and Mayotte. La Réunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique, among them, have a significant minority Indian population.

2 Diaspora: “Groups of people with a common ethnicity who have left their original homeland for long periods of time and often permanently; who retain a particular sense of cultural identity and often close kinship links with other scattered members of their group, thus acknowledging their shaped physical and cultural origin and who maintain links with the homeland and a sense of its role in the present identity” (Brown 2006 23).


4 A position homologous to a Chief Minister in a Malaysian state.

5 “At least 10,000 Hindu temples have been demolished in Malaysia since its independence in 1957” – The Pioneer, New Delhi December 9, 2007.

6 I quote the Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Najib Abdul Razak: “Malaysia’s success in uniting the peoples of various races and religion can make the country a model for other nations of the world. This success is a fact and a reality.” (The Sun, June 6th, 2012). Cf. also Norani Othman (2007), “...the strange legacy of all our efforts to become a model society – the best community”.

16


9 The death of the last native Tamil speaker in Martinique, a highly respected local Hindu priest who passed away in 1992, sent big wave shocks among the Indian community, contributing to the present sense of loss.


12 The term ‘Bumiputera’ is used by the Malaysian Government to refer to “Malays and other indigenous races”, while the term ‘Non-Bumiputera’ is used to refer to other Malaysians especially of ethnic Chinese and Indian origin.

13 E.g. the dismantlement of Prang Besar, Medingley, Sedgeley and Galloway estates to give way to the Putrajaya project with the relocation of workers to Dengkil instead of Putrajaya as building low cost houses ‘would spoil the landscape’.

14 According to Dr. Jeyakumar Deveraj of the *Parti Sosialis*, there should be less of ethnic politics and more of national unity thus breaking away from capitalism with a mainstream grassroots leadership where the politicians play the role of service providers working with all the ‘races’, interview with the author, 20/6/2012.

15 Dr. Xavier Jayakumar (Pakatan Rakyat) who is a member of the Selangor State Legislative Assembly and a state executive councilor holding the Portfolio of Health, Plantation Workers, Poverty and Compassionate Government, insisted on the point during my interview: poverty uplifting should start with better educational opportunities for all. Concerning the Indian Community, with 80% of the 523 Tamil schools in a deplorable situation, this should mean among other things more vocational schools and new modern Tamil Schools with new Malay and English intensive teaching methods to achieve a trilingual level.

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