Ascription, Aspiration and Achievement: Malaysian Indian Trajectory

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The sociological thesis of my presentation for Malaysian Indians may be looked upon as a transition from ascription towards aspirations and moving to achievements. As policy recommendation I am helped by Schumpeter's concept of the impact of innovation as "creative destruction"" where creation and destruction are not polar opposites, but in a relationship of continuum. Hence it is not the same as Lenin's famous dictum, "there can be no real reconstruction without destruction", justifying total revolution. In pursuing the goal of achievement to the middle class status for Malaysian Indians this policy is guided by the imperatives of human choice, agency, and pragmatism within the macro-framework of a liberal democratic state and civil society.

Ascription

Let me first look at ascription which for the dominant Hindu population of the former Malayan and present Malaysian Indian community in the past related to caste or jati and, among other statuses, as a proletarian and subaltern community on rubber plantations. In what follows I endeavour to move away, as did the majority Indian community, from the major bugbear of ascribed identity, that of caste, to new aspirations. I would first like to dispose of the old chestnut of caste in Malaysian Indian politics.

I do not elaborate here the conceptual distinctions and relationship between ethnicity, class and culture. The only point that I would wish to make, however, is that ethnic identity as Indians in Malaysia and even sub-ethnic identities as Tamil, Telugu, Sikh, Malayalee, Sindhi etc. within the Indian group contribute to a rich diversity so long as it remains cultural and does not get contaminated by divisive politics. The same could be said of sub-

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sub-ethnic identity, for example, caste in the Tamilian group. I notice that in a recent internet blog my Malaysian sociologist colleague, Prof. P. Ramasamy, has made precisely this point and, indeed asserted that caste among Malaysian Indians is of no consequence in politics though it may still have some cultural relevance in domestic and community ritual affairs. If this is so, I am very happy to note it. This observation conforms with and confirms one of my own generalizations about comparative Indian diaspora, namely, that whereas the role of caste in politics in India, for example, shows politicization of culture, caste and its associated religious observances-- as one of the markers of cultural identity in pluralistic overseas Indian settings-- may be interpreted as "culturalization of politics".

Let me expand my cryptic remarks about the politicization of culture in India as contrasted to the culturalization of politics in the diaspora. To take up, somewhat more fully, Prof. Ramasamy's remarks about caste among the Malaysian Indians what he said was that caste was of far more relevance for Malaysian Indians of the previous generations than it is for the youth today. And, also, if I may further expand on what he said, caste was still important in the politics of parties like the M.I.C. and the I.P.F. The first part of his statement is unexceptionable; this is also what I understood him to be saying. The second part needs some explanation. Firstly, here Prof. Ramasamy is speaking strictly not as a sociologist but as a Malaysian Indian politician, as leader of a political party (Pakatan Rakyat) opposed to the M.I.C. (or even of an all Malaysia political party, the D.A.P., opposed to the ruling B.N. of which the M.I.C. is a component). Now, even if I concede to him the point that in the MIC leadership elections there is caste conflict— the Gounders vs. the Mukkulathors—the point I would wish to make is that here it is a political tussle between two sub-sub-ethnic groups of Indians (a caste division among Tamils). Numerically, in terms of democratic party-political electoral politics in Malaysia, what consequences in terms of real parliamentary representation does this caste conflict have? We are talking here of a further minority, the Tamils, (though undoubtedly a sub-ethnic majority within the Malaysian Indian ethnic group (about 8% of the total population of Malaysia). Further, if it be said that this minority within a minority represents the old educated Indian middle class and a smaller proportion of the upwardly mobile "new" Indian middle class, this too may be conceded. But in the first-past-the-post electoral Malaysian democracy (without ethnically proportional representation) this does not constitute a significant, decisive, profile in the Malaysian parliament as a whole.

Considering the above, I can only come to the conclusion that in effect what the Malaysian Indian professor is actually worried about is the perceptional message this caste politics conveys to Malaysian Indians and to non-Indian Malaysians in general, namely, that there is no unity among Malaysian "Indians". However, as I have already pointed out, this caste conflict (or even between linguistic-cum-regional categories like the Telugu and the Tamil) is actually not pan- Malaysian Indian; here then is the play of the figure of thought and speech called synecdoche (where a part stands for the whole). This stereotypical illusion is further strengthened by what Malaysian Indians read about India as the proto-typical situation. It is further exacerbated by those political propagandists who go on to say, that if this is the situation within the Indian ethnic group, what can we expect by way of its contribution to the inter-ethnic project of One Malaysia? In the light of my analysis, do I need to add that this is the illogic of a non-sequitur?

The position with regard to caste among Malaysian Indians, on the ground, is very different from that suggested by its populist political synecdoche. This is based on my own longitudinal anthropological research of the last fifty years and more. Caste by name and certain associated behavioural stereotypes is still there. In marriage and certain communal activities there have been changes and upheavals, but by and large caste endogamy and a certain restricted amount of occupational specialization is still practised. There is a notional ritual hierarchy of castes. However, when it comes to actual mobility among castes and large groups of castes (like the non-Brahmin and the Adi Dravida); there is evidence not only of its obsolescence but of actual reversals.

About this last phenomenon, I have written ironically of "a caste war" among the Malaysian Indian estate workers and ex-estate workers of Tamilian origin in the Batang-Berjuntai - Kuala Selangor region of coastal West Malaysia (Jain, 2011). May I add in parenthesis that this "war" can be seen in analogy to what is known as "the war on terror" in the parlance of global politics of our day? To illustrate, here in this region unfettered by rules of purity and pollution in their choices of occupations and interactions, the numerically dominant proletarians and ex-proletarians of the Adi Dravida castes have gained exceptional mobility even outdoing their non-Brahmin cohorts. The cinema hall in the town, the bus-company and the position of priest-cum-marriage registrar in the Thandayudpani temple are owned by members of these castes. Here, if I may say so there is a mes-

sage for India: in this caste war the tables are turned through socio-economic and political mobility of the traditionally downtrodden without the stultifying and caste-enhancing "prison-like" political bait of Reservations for the dalits in contemporary India.

The overall message, therefore, is that in the respect spoken of above, if one does not intellectually replicate and superimpose the Indian reality on to the Malaysian one, an altogether new and dynamic scenario emerges. The challenge is to counteract the entrenched mind-set, the stereotypes, by ground reality. And this to my mind is what sociological research is all about as it could open up new horizons for assessing the possibilities of Malaysian Indian mobility sui generis and also in consonance with the findings of comparative Indian diasporic communities. As to the action forward, especially, for political mobility the Malaysian Indian minority would do well to not only look at the parliamentary democratic process and dispensations of the ruling party but also at the inter-ethnic NGOs.

What I have said so far may be epitomized by what is widely known as the soft power of culture in politics. I termed this as the "culturalization of politics" in Indian diaspora in contrast to the better known, but slowly changing, "politicization of culture" in India itself. For the Malaysian Indian diaspora, I have discussed this phenomenon with special reference to caste or jati when it does not operate within an all-encompassing caste system. To sum up the forward looking facet of my argument thus far, not the bugbear of caste but interethnic and intra-ethnic eco-geographical regions and social classes would be the framework for assessing the problems and prospects of Malaysian Indian politico-economic mobility.

Aspiration

Aspirations for the community that we are discussing were signalled in the very recent past by HINDRAF (with its mixed impact), new electoral choices, and social mobility processes in general. The flip side was displacement, unemployment, criminality, drugs, poverty, urban slum-dwelling, etc. Some issues are real and substantive others are mainly perceptional (as I would argue later) as they are bound to be in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, pluralistic society. Of course, there is a two-way interaction or interface between hard reality and the perceptions.

What are the solutions, in the negative domain, of the many problems as listed above, and in the positive domain, of the moves towards mobility? The latter, as Prof. Shamsul has perceptively pointed out in the Foreword to a recently edited volume (Jayasooria and Nathan, 2016), should never be judged by the numerical minority that is the Indian community in Malaysia. As political processes in the nation and moves towards professionalization and socio-economic mobility clearly indicate, the Malaysian Indian community's present contribution and future potential is far greater than its small numerical strength in the total population. With this in mind, let me return to the real hard problems faced by the vast majority displaced from erstwhile plantations and now constituting the lumpen population in urban slums. One way of tackling these problems, as the authors/contributors to the above stated volume have demonstrably opined, is that the solutions are contained in the proper analytical diagnosis of the problems themselves. This leads me to the heart of the problematic, namely, the problems, prospects and processes of mobility of the majority of the Malaysian Indian community into the ranks of a Middle Class in Malaysia.

In this context, we speak of the inter-ethnic or multi-ethnic situation in the nation state of Malaysia. As sociologists, we may look upon the predicament of Malaysian Indians who constitute a considerable proportion of the socio-economically deprived community either in the perspective of an ethnic minority or in that of a deprived socio-economic lower class for which the avenues of mobility are either closed or very meagre. The latter perspective fitted the majority population of Malaysian Indians before the structural adjustment/liberalization/market reforms (note: this is the language of Indian economic transformation; you may substitute it with Malaysian Economic Plans) of the 1980s and 1990s. To borrow a phrase from the anthropologists of plantation economies and societies in Latin America, this was an era of "closed resources" for the Malaysian Indian proletarians and subaltern groups. How has the situation changed, in sociological terms, following the structural changes that I just noted? The displacement of Indian proletarians from plantations was accompanied, whether our more radical sociological colleagues like it or not, by a simultaneous process of the opening up of resources. In other words, theoretically at least, once the fetters of an involute plantation economy were removed, along with its inevitable opening up of the market economy, there should or could have been greater opportunities for the displaced plantation workers for socio-economic mobility.

What happened in practical terms? The findings here are mixed, if not ambivalent. Scholars studying Malaysian Indian poverty emphasise 'persistent poverty 'of this class even in the changed economic scenario while, at the same time, commenting on its growing aspirations and awareness, they speak of a new "middle class" emerging from this very category. My own research findings (though mainly in the Batang Berjuntai—Kuala Selangor region) resolve this conundrum through evidence that both these processes were simultaneously at work. One may therefore conclude at this stage that there was no inherent/inbuilt/structural red-line preventing limited socio-economic mobility even among the ex-estate proletarians of the Malaysian Indian population.

It will be noticed that in my sketch so far I have spoken only of the proletarians and subalterns experiencing long term "persistent poverty" as a working class. I have not considered in these remarks, about the opportunities and their utilization by Malaysian Indians of the other classes, viz., white collar workers, those in service occupations, traders, professionals etc. Apart from some statistics on the rural-urban divide, there is very little by way of detailed data on the incomes and savings of these classes. (I shall later make a reference to the significance of having data regarding savings by the Malay middle class during the period of economic upswing).

When we begin to break the supposedly homogeneous Malaysian Indian ethnic group into its changing and differential socio-economic profile of the present and the future, of opportunities and the outcomes, this is precisely where the political rub lies. Unfortunately the discourse of discriminatory bugbear of being a numerical and uniformly discriminated minority begins to loom so large that its situation vis-a-vis the Malaysian class structure as a whole (viz., there are Upper, Middle, and Lower classes and grades in-between among all Malaysians irrespective of ethnicity) is lost sight of. This is precisely the juncture where the disjunction between the reality and its perceptions, especially in a multi-cultural pluralistic society like Malaysia, sharpens and the hard reality of social class divisions gets obfuscated by stereotypes about ethnicity, minority persecution, and religious divisions. To sort out the stereotypes from the hard reality—without denying, of course, the interplay between the two in the real life-worlds of people—is the task of social scientists. In this task, to revert to our Malaysian Indian case, and in its relation to the all Malaysia B40 Category (those having incomes below M$4000 a month), we should be careful to assess

the distinctions between a numerical minority and a persecuted minority, between past history and present aspirations, between the older generation and the youth, and between gossip and researched information. One should also be guided by the canons of social scientific comparison and contextualization.

In the above perspective, the concept of class structure for Malaysian society that I have in mind will not be the Marxian one of more or less violent class conflict and an eventual "dictatorship of the proletariat". These insinuations are to my mind highly utopian rather than realistic. Also, I believe that in the contemporary world of global markets and international trade, as in the present Malaysian economy, it would seem ostrich-like to harp single-mindedly upon forces of production and relations of production moving in a dialectical fashion through an assumed linear historical process. If an intellectual paradigm is needed, even though provisionally, one would rather think of Max Weber's writing on Class, Status and Power where market forces (for life-chances or opportunities in the economy), status considerations (the choices of life-styles, in other words, consumption and culture), and the play of power (as in the negotiations of political processes) constitutes an explanatory trinity. And yet, should one make the mistake of thinking that this is a model of some ideal capitalistic economy and society, let me hasten to add that there is no such thing in the real world. The dangers of a runaway capitalism are ever so present. Peoples and nations will have to counter its ravages by whatever means possible including secular and ethico- religious ideologies and practice.

The solutions to the problems that face the contemporary Malaysian Indian community have been outlined in policy recommendations contained in the Jayasooria and Nathan volume (2016) referred to above. They have been framed in the back-drop of hard data that the various contributors have provided. Thus they speak of uniform citizenship procedures, inculcation of skills to the young men and women, quality education inclusive of that in the mother tongues, entrepreneurial avenues, empowerment of women, religious freedom, and so on. Let me finally say that they have not tried to brush under the carpet the various problems encountered in nation-building and statecraft of a multi-cultural society on the verge of economic development. All they have done is to state the aspirations for balanced and sustained developmental goals, where it will be possible for a large cohort of the B40 Category, inclusive of Malaysian Indians, to not

only aspire (as they already do) but to achieve the secure status of at least "middle class" citizens of the nation. The scenario they project is that of just and equitable growth for all Malaysians among whom the Malaysian Indians are a proud component.

Achievement

Not merely a wishful thinking or reiteration of excellent recommendations already made, here are a few pointers for transition from aspirations to the achievement of mobility and developmental goals as I see them. To do this let me now return to aspects of the politico-economic, geopolitical and, finally, sociological, dimensions of the inter-ethnic rather than exclusively intra-ethnic solutions to the crisis of B40 category of Malaysian Indians. I am emboldened to do so because of my past and continuing research on comparative diasporas with special reference to the contemporary Indian diaspora.

(1) In some of my recent writing (Jain, 2011) I have discussed the politico-economic merits and demerits of Prime Minister Mahathir's long rule by UMNO and the Alliance in recent Malaysian history. I agree with the observation made by Dr. Francis Loh (2010), that there was during that rule and policy dispensation, a spurt in the economic development of Malaysia (for example, despite world-wide recession in the economies during the last decade of the last century, note the Mahathir move of stabilizing Malaysian currency by fixing its value against the US dollar), encouragement to foreign investments, and a steady rise in the incomes of the Malay middle class. In my writing I have also said that during the same dispensation the Chinese in Malaysia were—as always—left to their devices and thus retained by and large a plateau of well-being. Only the bulk of the Malaysian Indians (proletarians and subalterns)—again as always—was left high and dry. If at all, the curve of their incomes and economic well-being showed a downward slope. On the positive side, however, (and here we traverse the sociological side of the Mahathir dispensation) the moderately affluent Malay middle class, often to the chagrin of Western expatriates, was advised by the powers that be to practise Islamic restraint in consumerist behaviour. Although to the best of my knowledge no academic study exists on Malay savings during the period, one should not be surprised if their savings showed an upward curve. Here one might add the impact of the

ideology of hudud (limits or moderation), of Rukun Negara (national principles) and of Malay adat (culture) in general. Needless to say, these ideas also resonate with Indian/Tamilian ethics spelled out in classics like the Thirukkural. This entire spectrum of values goes much beyond Mahathir's regime and has been re-formulated in Najib's "One Malaysia" call.

The point I wish to make, and this is premised on my reading that no structural change in the Malaysian capitalist economy has occurred between the Mahathir and post-Mahathir periods of governance, is that the upwardly mobile aspirations of youth of the Malaysian Indian ethnic group (participating in the improvement of national economy as a whole) may do well to take a leaf out of the middle class Malay thrift in the face of economic stability, if not actual buoyancy. In other words, rather than view their own persistent relative deprivation and hurdles to future aspirations, on the one hand, and Malay economic betterment, on the other, as a zero-sum game, it would be instructive for Malaysian Indians to focus on future secular gains through self-imposed thrift rather than harping on an imagined religious (Islamic vs. Non-Islamic) divide and deprivation.

(2) I would like to make a point where the dual ethnic identities of Malaysian Indians, as Malaysians and as people of Indian origin, can be harnessed as an advantage. There is no question here of where their political loyalties as citizens lie—unambiguously with Malaysia. And yet, in socio-economic relation to India, buttressed no doubt by a sentimental attachment, and in the perspective of India's contemporary burgeoning economy, Malaysian Indians supported by their own leadership can construe a win-win relationship between the two countries. An early sounding of such a possibility through partnership was made by the then Minister of Works, Government of Malaysia, Dato Seri S. Samy Vellu at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in New Delhi, as early as in 2003. He said: "There is a large pool of talent to share with the world. Fostering partnership between India and the Indian diaspora is a two-way process. The key dimension is how can there be a win-win situation from multiple players... Malaysians had been successful in investing and participating in infrastructure projects in India. We could further facilitate these through collaboration partnerships, which will be beneficial for both India and Malaysia." (cited in Jain 2010).

My argument here is that whatever the political controversy surrounding a particular Malaysian Indian leader within Malaysia then and now, the ad-

vantage of a dual identity as diasporic Indians in Malaysia beckons the B40 group, inclusive of other Malaysians, to tap the possibilities of economic buoyancy in India. These possibilities seem even brighter given the present Indian Prime Minister's thrust for global, including Malaysian, collaboration with the Indian diaspora.

(3) Let me now make a point that emerges not only from the Indian diaspora but from comparative diasporas globally. This is of special relevance to Malaysia, inclusive of Malaysian Indians, and indeed for the Malaysian government too. I refer to the lessons which even the non-Chinese Malaysians can learn from the official PRC attitude to the world-wide Chinese diaspora, the way China seduces its overseas benefactors to the mainland. There is in the PRC a largely decentralized, eco-geographically demarcated, and localized approach to tap into the investment potential of countrymen settled abroad (cf. Woon, 1997). The Chinese government, besides having good economic liaison with big businesses abroad, does not forget small towns, medium-sized businesses and even retailers having direct trading links with manufacturers and buyers abroad. And in this activity networking is crucial. There would be, in the case that we are discussing, vertical (inter-class) and horizontal (intra-class) networks traversing Malaysia and its various diasporas. These can be charted out and mobilized if regional businesses are informed and encouraged.

Conclusion

To sum up, in conjunction with their diasporic advantage, I have suggested a few pointers to an inter-ethnic paradigm for Malaysian Indian social mobility, and as you can see this is only a preliminary to a more complete strategy which resonates with the attainable ideal of One Malaysia. Further, I wish to underline that the wider economic framework within which such a strategy is set escapes the allure of a destructive runaway capitalist development like the one that led to the mid-decade slump in advanced European and U.S. economies during the 2010s. As I already pointed out, Malaysia had succeeded creditably in stalling such a crisis earlier, and if you needed a living exemplar of this model, we have Singapore in the neighbourhood.

An afterword

A word of caution apropos the allures of an ideology of runaway capitalism:

(1) Unlike the lawyer Waythamoorthy of HINDRAF, who filed a billion pound suit against the British government—nothing short of a millenarian dream—our bright Malaysian Indian minds, lawyers and other scholars, should try and procure all the documents of the formative period of the Constitution-making for independent Malaya, 1957. And, thence, if a scrupulous examination exposes complicity and collusion between the departing British authorities and a bigoted section of Malay interlocutors in a direction inimical to the formation of a basically pluralistic and liberal state, then the matter should be taken up at the highest international Court of Justice for redress.

(2) It seems that the populist ferment in Malaysia today to focus single-mindedly on alleged financial corruption in high places could again be a symptom of what I call the allure of a runaway and populist capitalist ideology. This has happened in India too before, and some radical scholars in India have alleged and even tried to document the role of experts from bodies like the World Bank and the IMF in exacerbating hype and gossip regarding corruption as the diabolical major cause of economic underdevelopment, hence diverting the attention away from persisting asymmetry of fiscal advantages between developed and developing economies. Here again reason, restraint, and patience with an impartial judiciary should be the watchword instead of a frenzy that smacks of a witch-hunt.

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