

Indians

Profile

Estimated population: 1.9 million (US State Department Estimate, 2006)

Ethnicity: Tamils, Malayalees, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Sindhis

First language/s: Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, Sindhi, English

Religion/s: Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity

'Indians' are the second largest minority in Malaysia after the Chinese, making up about 8 per cent of the country's population. As in Singapore, the term is something of a misnomer, since it includes a large number of different ethnic and religious groups whose main point in common is their origin in the Indian subcontinent. Most 'Indians' live in peninsular Malaysia and are mainly Tamils (around 80%); others include Malayalees, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Sindhis. Indian Muslims have a high rate of intermarriage with the Malay community.

Before independence many Indians were employed in rubber plantations, though some occupied other labour force categories: the Punjabis for example tended to work in the police force. Their economic situation has tended to deteriorate since independence in 1957 and the closure of many rubber plantations, since they are excluded from the Bumiputera policies and have not succeeded as well as the Chinese in economic and educational terms.

Historical context

There has been an Indian presence in Malaysia for over a thousand years, as Tamils and others from the subcontinent brought Hindu and Islamic religion and culture to Malaysia. There is evidence of 'Indianized' kingdoms in the area some 1,500 years ago, but it was with the development of the plantation economy under British rule that large-scale Indian immigration occurred from the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Large numbers of these new arrivals were indentured labourers from Tamil Nadu (mainly) and other parts of India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh brought to work in rubber plantations.

Because of its relative geographic proximity to Malaya, the largest groups of Indian migrants until the mid-1900s were from South India, and in particular the Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam minorities. Others were brought in, often for particular economic functions, such as building and maintaining the railways. Their economic position has tended to be weak in Malaysia, as many of them worked as labourers in plantations with little or no access to quality education.

By the early twentieth century, it is estimated that Indians represented as much as 15 per cent of the population of what is now Malaysia. This was, in demographic terms, the highpoint for the Indian

minority, as many either left or did not take up Malayan citizenship after independence in 1957. The outward flow of Indians also increased after the May 1969 race riots. Though the Chinese were the main targets, members of the Indian minority were also among the victims, as they had supported the opposition parties associated with the ethnic Chinese. Following the departure of tens of thousands of Indians, by the 1990s, their proportion of the Malaysian population had fallen to around 8 per cent.

Current issues

Indians continue to be disadvantaged economically as they are not Bumiputera and do not have the demographic weight to be able to exercise any large degree of political power. They continue to face significant poverty and relatively low levels of education as compared to the Chinese, without being able to benefit from any of the affirmative action programmes restricted to Bumiputeras.

As with the Chinese community, Indians have also expressed disquiet at the government's language policies, such as the exclusive use of Malay, which creates a tangible barrier for employment in the civil service, and the refusal to allow Tamil to be used as a language of service, as well as the continuing refusal to teach in Tamil in public schools, despite the 2003 announcement that Tamil could be taught as an elective in some state schools. Education in Tamil usually occurs in private schools which in 2006 were still not fully funded by the Malaysian government.

There are also concerns that recent statements by UMNO (United Malays National Organization) leaders during its 2006 Annual General Meeting may signal an increasingly pro-Muslim and Malay agenda that may result in further restrictions on the religious and cultural practices of the Indian minority.

In September 2007, a lawsuit was filed in London by Malaysian lawyers backed by the Hindu Rights Action Force. The suit, on behalf of Malaysia's 2 million ethnic Indians, is against the current British government and demands that the court hold the British colonial authority liable for shipping millions of Tamil-speaking South Indians to Malaya and later abandoning them without adequate safeguards for their position, rights and future. The lawyers are calling for £1 million in compensation for every minority Indian in Malaysia for their 'pain, suffering, humiliation, discrimination and continuous colonization', and want the court to declare Malaysia a secular state and not an Islamic one.

In November 2007 the ethnic Indian community staged its biggest ever anti-government street protest in Kuala Lumpur when more than 10,000 protesters faced riot police to voice complaints of racial discrimination. Ethnic Indians claim that the government affirmative-action policy in favour of majority ethnic Malays has marginalised them and the protest was politically significant ahead of the coming elections.

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