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Being Hindu in Malaysia: On a Par With Other Religions or a Cause of Disharmony?

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The earliest contacts between the area of present-day Malaysia and the Indian sub-continent reach back as far as the second century CE, and from the fifth to eighth centuries Hinduism was partly spread in coastal areas in Malaysia (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002, 73ff, 107ff). But generally, Malaysia never belonged to the main Hindu or Buddhist kingdoms of South-East Asia. After the spread of Islam across the Malayan peninsula, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that we find Indian people there again – as a result of British colonial rule over large parts of South and South-East Asia. Indians were brought to the Malayan peninsula by British authorities as low budget workers in rubber plantations, in tin mines and for agricultural work. Ethnically most of the Indians who came to the Straits Settlements in those days were Tamils from South India (cf. Sandhu 1993, 151–162).

The situation of this early immigration is partly still to be seen today, if we focus on the geographical spread of Indians. We find a significant concentration of Hindus at the western coast of the peninsula, starting in the north with the island of Penang and the now federal state of Kedah, then extending to the federal states of Perak and Selangor and the capital Kuala Lumpur, finally reaching further south to Melacca and Johor, and crossing the modern border to the island of Singapore. When the Malayan sultanates and colonies gained independence from 1957, Singapore merged with the newly independent state from 1963 to 1965. Since then however, Singapore has been a republic of its own, with about 180,000 Hindus living there. Though they have now been separated from their co-religionists for nearly four decades, in a historical perspective Singaporean Hindus and Malaysian Hindus have much in common.

Present-day Malaysia has 25.5 million inhabitants and according to the census for the year 2000¹ the total population comprised 65.1 % Malays, 26.0 % Chinese and 7.7 % Indians. Along religious lines, 6.3 % or 1,600,000 of

1 For the 2000 Malaysia Census and other statistical materials see www.statistics.gov.my/English (accessed October 25, 2004). – Cf. also Sandhu 1993, 161 and Gabriel 2000, 159–163 for further statistics.

the total population are Hindus, and we can also reckon with roughly 310,000 Indian Muslims and about 45,000 Sikhs. In my paper I will concentrate on the Hindu community in Malaysia. Against a background of religious harmony, its problems and practices, we have to be aware of the religious situation of Hindus in Malaysia as well as of their economic and social situation. All these factors contribute – within the multiethnic and multicultural situation in Malaysia – to religious harmony, but they also can foster “sacred tensions” as Raymond L. M. Lee and Susan E. Ackerman (1997) put it in a book title.

1. The Indians’ Social and Economic Dilemma

Malaysian society is made up largely of three ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians. At least since 1971 the New Economic Policy of the Malaysian government began to favour Malays as *bumiputeras* (“sons of the soil”). Thus within Malaysian society, the Malay majority is in a favourable position in bureaucratic areas, also in the public sector, while the Chinese population group exercises its influence in economy and business. At the social level, therefore, Indians, being demographically the smallest group, face some problems (cf. Lim Kit Siang 2003):

- they have the lowest life expectancy rates with only 67.3 years (compared to the national average of 71.2 years);
- they have the highest drop-out rate in schools: only 5.3% of the Indians reach tertiary school level (compared to the national average of 7.5%);
- the quality of Tamil schools as centres of primary education is very poor;
- there is a very high incidence of alcoholism and drug addiction;
- about 60% of serious crimes are committed by Indians;
- although Indians make up nearly 8% of Malaysia’s population, their financial means cover only 1% of the national income.

Therefore, Malaysia’s Indians must be considered as “the third class race” (Kuppuswamy 2003) and their main political representative, the Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC), is challenged with the necessity of working for the improvement of the living conditions of the Indians. I think this situation is one aspect in Malaysian society that is not very helpful in creating harmonious interaction between Indians and Malays. Reports about violent crimes committed by Indians are not unknown. When I was in Malaysia in February 2002 and July 2003, I was sometimes told by non-Indians, when I talked about my research on Hindus in Malaysia, to be careful of Indians – because they are ugly and black (cf. also Nadarajah 2000), not trustworthy, and on a

low moral level. I think such opinions are partially based on prejudice, but they also show the Indians' own dilemma, in that for the Malay and Chinese majority in Malaysia, they are perceived as low class people.

2. The Hindus' Religious Dilemma

More than 80% of the Indians are Hindus, thus being different from the Malay majority not only ethnically, but also in terms of religion. At a closer look, the Indian Hindus are the prime targets of those prejudices I have just mentioned, because the Sikh community is economically better off and the Indian Muslims, at least at the religious level, find an easier way of interacting with the Malay Muslim community.

In Article 11, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia guarantees freedom of religion, but also says that Islam is the official religion in Malaysia (cf. Gabriel 2000, 94). Therefore it is not surprising that among the state-wide official holidays there are three Islamic holidays, namely Hari Raya Puasa, Hari Raya Qurban and the prophet's birthday, and only one Hindu (Deepavali), one Buddhist (Vesakh) and one Christian (Christmas) holiday each. The Hindu Thaipusam festival (celebrated in January or February) is an official regional holiday in the Federal states Selangor, Penang, Perak and Negeri Sembilan. This festival (mainly at the Batu Caves outside of Kuala Lumpur and on the island of Penang) attracts hundreds of thousands of Indians (and Chinese) every year. Thus it becomes an opportunity for many Hindus to claim their position within Malaysian society, to claim public space, to demonstrate their presence and oppose against the dominance of Islam in public (Hutter 2005, 93–95; Collins 1997, 62–88). Despite this legal basis, the actual situation in recent years features some concerns of the Hindu population regarding religious freedom. In recent years there appeared strong trends for the strengthening and revival of Islamic traditions in Malaysia (cf. Yousif 2004). A moderate Islamisation is widely accepted by the Malay majority, though fundamentalist and Islamistic political programs are rejected, as became evident with the general elections in March 2004, when the opposition Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS), which wants to establish an Islamic state in Malaysia, lost most of its seats in the parliament. But nevertheless, Hindus face some problems which arise from time to time:

1. One point of conflict and disharmony is the issue of the registration of religious monuments or shrines. A conflict broke out in March 1998 in Penang between Hindus and Muslims.² The starting point

² Cf. the different statements published at www.indianmalaysian.com/demolition.htm#DAP%20not%20to.

was the relocation of the Sri Raja Mathurai Veeran Temple which was located close to the Kampung Rawa mosque to a place more remote from the mosque. But after the relocation of the temple, some rioting started from the mosque, because Muslims were told that Hindus wanted to raze it. This incident gave rise to intensive discussion among both the Muslim and Hindu communities, but also among different political parties who tried to gain profit for their own political aims. Though the rioting was calmed down by the police in Penang soon, and the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim persuaded the local community leaders to reconcile by shaking hands, the episode left a deep impact because it fostered Hindu fears within a wider context. As early as 1983 the government started to instigate control over the indiscriminate building of shrines and temples, and since the middle of the 1990s it has become necessary to have temples and shrines officially registered, although local authorities generally did not pay too much attention to this (Ramanathan 2001, 107–108; Gabriel 2000, 99–101). But after the Penang incident the Government announced a nationwide review of unlicensed Hindu temples. According to governmental guidelines, at least 2,000 adherents of a non-Muslim religion living within a certain area are necessary for having a temple approved by the government. It was only after protests and complaints from the “Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism” (MCCBCHS) that this number requirement was lifted. The complaints of the MCCBCHS also focused on the point that for Muslim shrines no such numbers were necessary – a sign of disadvantage for Hindus and other non-Muslim religions to practice their faith compared to adherents of Islam as the state’s official religion.

2. Another aspect showing up-coming restriction of religious freedom and thus bringing non-Muslim religions in Malaysia into a dilemma turned up in September 2001. Prime Minister Dr. Mohammed Mahathir announced in public that Malaysia was an “Islamic state” (*negara Islam*).³ As a result, especially among non-Muslims, discussion arose as to what “Islamic state” could mean and what consequence possibly could arise from this situation for a pluralistic country like Malaysia with diverse ethnical groups, and with 40% of its population not belonging to Islam. Representatives of the MCCBCHS were

3 Cf. *Hindu Sangam*, July–September 2001, 3. – See also the CNN headline “Mahathir: Malaysia is ‘fundamentalist state’” from June 18, 2002, in: <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/06/18/malaysia.mahathir/> (accessed September 21, 2004).

very active in searching for further discussion to uphold the idea of Malaysia as a secular state, laid down in the constitution. Therefore the MCCBCHS in January 2002 re-issued again its statement – first published several years ago – about the necessity of religious freedom in general and the government’s obligation to safeguard religious freedom on the basis of the country’s constitution. Article IV (3) is worth being quoted (MCCBCHS 2002, 4):

The Government shall notify and consult with the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism on any laws or amendments or Executive policies affecting the Freedom of Religion or Belief before the tabling of such laws and amendments and the formulation of such Executive policies.

Officially, Malaysia did not become an Islamic state in 2001, and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in February 2004 also announced that non-Muslims do not have to fear the government’s effort to instil Muslim values among Malay people, because the constitutional rights of the different ethnic groups to pursue their cultural way of life will remain guaranteed; the Prime Minister means to maintain and to lead Malaysia as a secular democracy with Islam only as the official religion. Although Badawi’s stance thus is clear, not all problems are solved, as became evident from a conversion case in April 2004. The Hindu woman Shamala Sathyaseelan had tried a lawsuit against the forced conversion of her children from Hinduism to Islam that was initiated by the children’s Muslim father. Although a civil court decided the case for her at the first degree, a subsequent *syariah* [*shari’ah*] court order accepted the children’s conversion, putting the father in the right. The Kuala Lumpur High Court definitely ruled out the mother’s application to nullify the conversion of her children, thus reducing Hindu freedom of religion.⁴

3. Within the above-mentioned MCCBCHS, the Hindu position is represented by members of the Malaysia Hindu Sangam (MHS), which tries to solve disadvantages for Hindus as a non-Muslim community. But even though the council is acknowledged by the government⁵, there is one problem: until now Muslims have refused to join the council or to cooperate with this council on the basis of forming a new

4 MCCBCHS 2004; cf. also MHS 2003, 50.

5 For the role of the MCCBCHS and inter-religious contacts in general cf. Lee and Ackerman 1997, 24–25, Gabriel 2000, 121–31 and Abu Bakar 2001, 70.

“inter-religious council”.⁶ Efforts to create such a body have been going on for several years, but one point at the moment seems to be an obstacle that cannot be overcome: Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs focus on religious freedom which would include the right also to propagate their religion everywhere – also amongst Muslims, which presently is not allowed according to the constitution. Muslim representatives, from their traditional point of view, do not accept the conversion of Muslims to another faith, and therefore until now no common basis for an inter-religious council – covering all five religions in Malaysia – could be reached. Thus in my opinion⁷, the dilemma remains: religious minorities – and maybe to some degree Hindus more than others – are standing until now apart from the Muslim majority; common aspects based on religion to contribute to nation-building are until now rarely to be found. Therefore – though broadly speaking no massive religiously motivated riots and clashes occurred as yet – Hindus in Malaysia are only on a par with the other non-Muslim religions, but there is still a good part of (hidden) disharmony with Muslims which still has to be overcome through mutual contacts; only an increase of such contacts in the future would provide knowledge and mutual understanding of the different religions.

3. Efforts and Aims to Solve the Hindus’ Dilemma

The religious dilemma of the Hindus explained above should be solved in order to contribute to religious (and ethnic and social) harmony in Malaysia. In recent years, the MHS has been involved in improving the general situation of Hindus with some success, but of course much remains to be done at a practical level. The MHS was founded in 1966. It is a representative body for all Hindu concerns in Malaysia⁸, both at a religious level as well as at an administrative level. Its constitution focuses on the main aim of fostering spiritual, moral, cultural and social concerns alike for the benefit of the Hindu commun-

6 Yap Mun Ching 2003. – See also the headline from “*THE HERALD (The Catholic Fortnightly)*”, September 19, 1999 “MCCBCHS sends Memorandum to PM”, in: <http://www.malaysia.net/lists/sangkancil/1999-09/frm00292.html> (accessed September 21, 2004).

7 I do not share the – too optimistic – position expressed by Kanthasamy 2002.

8 The MHS’s importance must also be stressed in relation to the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC); the MIC – as a political party – can represent Hindu interests in political terms, but is also restricted due to political processes in the Malaysian government; the MHS on the other hand is not confined to such connections and can operate more “freely” and independently, cf. further Gabriel 2000, 104–105.

ity in general. One further interest of the Sangam is to aim at coordinating the activities of various local Hindu organisations and temples all over Malaysia.

In November 2002 the MHS began to launch a "Hindu Renaissance programme" with workshops, seminars, and lectures. The general aim is shown by a five point Action Plan covering the following areas⁹:

- (a) to have extensive campaigns to impart religious knowledge;
- (b) to urge temples to become community centres;
- (c) to increase social welfare and counselling services;
- (d) to revive appreciation for the world-acclaimed Hindu culture;
- (e) to move fast in the IT age with the use of modern media facilities to expand religious knowledge.

In my opinion, the aims to be reached through this action plan for the coming years can strengthen Hinduism and Hindu identity in Malaysia, as the plan tries to bring improvements for the Hindus' religious and social-economic dilemmas alike.

The general increase of religious knowledge is not only necessary to give Hindus self-confidence in their own religion, thus bringing them on a par with Muslims in religious discussions, but also with other religions, because they then can argue and demonstrate also on an "intellectual" level that their religion is still useful in modern times. But this new knowledge of religion is also helpful in resisting missionary work not only of Muslims (*dakwah*) but also of some Christian denominations, which are sometimes even more offensive against "Hindu superstition" than Muslims are. Thus classes in religious literature – both in Tamil and Sanskrit –, booklets on religious behaviour and the carrying out of worship¹⁰ surely are a real basis for an improvement of "Hinduism" in Malaysia, and also as a source of energy for social change. M. Thambirajah, who is engaged in this Hindu Renaissance Programme, mentions in this connection two important aspects, namely understanding *and* practice: "Understanding would require the internalisation of the TRUTH: the philosophy of the Agamas. Practice would involve acquiring knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures, Festivals, Hindu Saints and correct practice and procedure of ceremonies."¹¹

The principle role of the temples as "community centres" also cannot be overrated for strengthening Hinduism, because they serve the prime religious needs of the population – with ritual services, but also as bearers of religious-cultural services. One problem which temples are still facing is the role of

9 MHS 2003, 56; *Hindu Sangam* 5(9), January to June 2003, 4ff.

10 Cf. e.g. the two booklets by Sivachariar, n.d.

11 Thambirajah 2003, 13. – Cf. also Kanthasamy 2002: "The modern Hindus and Sikhs, especially the youths, have to be trained so that they could understand the customs, values and the philosophy of their religion."

priests. Priests are quite often lower paid than other professions, therefore for young Malaysian Indians a worldly career is more attractive than a priestly career. Another problem connected with priests lies at the political level, as priests from (South) India, who would like to come for a long-term stay in Malaysia, sometimes are not given a visa by the government. Therefore the MHS from time to time tries to intervene with the Department of Immigration to be more liberal in the issuing of visas for Hindu priests, temple musicians, singers, and also sculptors, whose technical skill is needed for regular restoration work in the temples (MHS 2003, 42).

The last important point touches the social and economic level: it will be important for the future of the Indian community in Malaysia to raise their educational level; one aspect of this surely would be to improve the knowledge of Tamil – not only as a mother tongue, but also to improve the quality of Tamil schools, which are often functioning only at a very limited level. Furthermore, it is also necessary to make Tamil compulsory for Hindus in secondary schools, and to stress the importance of trilingualism, that is for Indians, Tamil, English and Malay.¹² Then Indians would have better chances among the Malay majority both in business and in mutual understanding; only such mutual understanding will be able to reduce prejudices and discrimination, which possibly lead to crimes or social unrest. Efforts of the MHS and the MIC to lead Indians upwards in this area may be the big challenge for both organisations for the years to come in Malaysia.

4. Conclusion

At the 26th annual national meeting of the MHS on June 29, 2003 the Sangam's president A. Vaithilingam asked "all Hindus in Malaysia to unite and work together for the progress and upliftment of the Indian community in general and the Hindu community in particular". This year, on June 14, 2004, Seri Samu Vellu, president of the MIC and member of the MHS, said at the opening of the 27th annual national meeting that he – as political party leader – will try to introduce religious studies in primary schools as a compulsory subject, because he thinks that religious education is more suitable than only moral education to help to overcome social ills among Indian students.¹³

12 For further details see the study by Santhiram 1999, esp. 103–135 who also argues for the necessity of better mastering of Malay language by Hindus for National unity and integration.

13 The press reports are published at www.hinduism-today.com/hpi/2003/7/5.shtml and www.mic.org.my/newsdetails.php?id=42&PHPSESSID=69941abbae2cdadecb8066b5a85dc3e9 (both accessed September 21, 2004).

I hope it has become clear from my contribution that managing religious pluralism is no easy task and that there are still aspects of disharmony to be removed within the Malaysian society. But I also hope that I have been able to show that there are possibilities to find a way of living in harmony, especially when it is possible also to improve social and economic factors for Indians in Malaysia. The recent efforts by the Hindu organisations in Malaysia seem to be on the right track for contributing to mutual understanding among the ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia.

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