Malaysian Indian Muslim’s Oscillating Identity: Swinging Between Home and Host Countries

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Introduction

Malaysia is a highly diverse country, home to peoples of many different languages, religions and cultures of origin. Like other Southeast Asian countries, it faces challenges in maintaining the goal of integrating its diverse aspects while preserving their uniqueness. Of Malaysia’s 29 million population, Malays make up 58 percent, Chinese make up 27 percent, Indians account for 8 percent and the remaining 7 percent comprises *orang asli*¹ (native population), Eurasians and Indonesians.

In 2011 there were around 700,000 Indian Muslims, the majority of them involved in restaurant and retail businesses in urban centers such as Penang, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Perak, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis. In large centers such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, the Indian settlements have come to be known as ‘Little India.’ The areas consist mainly of narrow, two-storied shop houses in which owners and shop assistants live and work side by side. The areas also have an Indian mosque or *Masjid India*, and surrounding complexes known as *jalan Masjid Indi* which include *madrasah* (Islamic schools).

Two main questions will be discussed here:

i) How Indian Muslims arrived in Malaysia.

ii) How they managed to remain a distinctive community within the Malaysian entity while also becoming an integral part of the Malaysian citizenry.

Research Method

The research focused on Indian Muslims living in Kuala Lumpur. It involved direct observation of the activities of mosque attendants, *madrasah* pupils, and community organizations. In-depth interviews were carried out with key informants from religious and community organizations, including mosque leaders (*Imams*), mosque organizers (*Pengerusi Masjid*), madrasah teachers, and committee members of non-government organizations (NGOs) who speak the Tamil language as their mother tongue and English and Malay as second languages.

Arrival of Indian Muslim Traders and Islamization

Indian Muslims first came to Malacca in the 15th century, when the area was ruled by King Parameswara. They came mainly as textile traders, but also sold perfumes, spices and ceramics. Gradually, they built up their businesses, and began marrying local people, becoming permanent members of the local communities, and spreading the Islamic religion among locals who had previously subscribed to animist and other beliefs.

Their success may reflect on their trading ethics which emphasized offering good quality items at fair prices. This gave them a reputation for trustworthiness and gained them permanent customers among the locals. The development of cordial relationships facilitated intra-marriages and the Indian Muslims became an integral part of local life.

Some Indian Muslims were known as royal traders since they sold silk, jewelry and spices to local nobles. Trading and intermarriage with royal family members connected them to noble circles, which were also among the first to convert to Islam.

As Indian Muslims spread the teachings of Muhammad, they built mosques; of which the oldest ones still remaining include Masjid Tangkera and Masjid Kampung Keling in Malacca, Masjid Kapitan Keling in Penang, Masjid India in Kuala Lumpur, and Masjid India Sultan Kelana in Kelang, in the state of Selangor. According to one informant, Datok Tasleem Ibrahim, all early Muslim traders from India had a strong bond with their religion. Wherever they were, they always built a mosque at the heart of the city. The main cities in the country, even in Kuching and Sarawak, still have Indian mosques. Without the Indian Muslims, Islam in Malaysia would not have been as developed as it is today.²
Between the 15th and 16th centuries Islam spread into Sultanate territory of the major Malay Peninsula. Judith Nagata described the success of Indian Muslim traders in Islamizing Malaysia as follows:

It is now widely accepted that the Islamization of much of the Malay Peninsula can be attributed to the influence and activity of Indian Muslim traders, who carried the faith along with their worldly commodities. Some of these traders made regular circumnavigations of the entire Southeast Asian region, including Sumatra and other islands of the Indonesia archipelago, South Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and then back to Coromandel coasts. A number of them no doubt settled permanently in the region, marrying and becoming absorbed into the local (Malay population).

Mosques, surau (places of worship that are smaller than mosques), and madrasah (Islamic schools) soon became strategic meeting places for all sorts of social, cultural, and religious gatherings. Today these institutions still perform a crucial role in strengthening the social and spiritual bonds of Indian Muslims tied by common origin, language, culture and religion. Key celebrations and events within the Islamic calendar include:

1) **Mauludur Rasul** (Prophet Muhammad’s birthday) is celebrated for twelve days from the 1st until the 12th of Rabiul Awal.

2) **Isra’ Mi’raj.** Celebrated on the 27th of Rabaj, this is the anniversary of the prophet’s excursion from Masjidil Haram in Mecca to Masjidil Aqsa in Palestine (*Isra*’), and from Masjidil Aqsa to Sidratul Muntaha (*Mi’raj* - heaven) to receive Allah’s command about the conduct of daily prayer.

3) The **Nispu Syaaban.** Celebrated on the 15th of Syaaban.

4) Fasting month, held during the month of Ramadhan. At the Masjit India the mosque committee holds a free daily distribution of *babur lambuk* (porridge) and beverage for the breaking of the fast. The porridge is served a few minutes before the *adzan* (call to prayer).

5) **Nuzulul Quran** is celebrated on the 17th of Ramadhan to commemorate the day when the *surah* (chapter) of the Qur’an descended down to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, marking his prophethood.

6) The **Ied** prayer is celebrated at the end of Ramadhan.

7) The **Hari Raya Haji or Qurban** (Day of Sacrifice) on the 10th of Zuhijah, when cattle and lambs are slaughtered to mark the sacrifice of Prophet Ibrahim and his beloved son, Prophet Ismail.

8) The **Ma’al Hijrah** or Islamic New Year on the 1st of Syawal.

9) The anniversary of the death of Syech Abdul Kadir Jailani, outstanding Ulama from Baghdad, who had a large following in India. The celebration takes place from the 1st until the 10th of Rabal Akhir.

10) The anniversary of the death Syech Shahul Hameed, a venerated religious figure from Nagoore, southern India, is held from the 1st to the 10th of Jumadil Akhir.

11) The anniversary of the death of Azmir Syarif, a respected religious figure from northern India, is held for one day (in India the celebrations last for ten days, from the 1st until the 10th of Rajab.)

The mosques are usually named for the home country, i.e. *Masjid India.* The language of sermons and preaching is Tamil, the most widely spoken language among Malaysian Indians. (Besides Tamil-speakers, there are also a small number of Malabarian Muslims who speak Malayalam and maintain a surau called surau Malabari.)

**Cultural Mechanisms in Maintaining Malaysian Indian Muslims’ Identity**

Shared history and cultural background has always contributed significantly to the construction of Indian Muslims’ identity. Today, history still instills a sense of pride in the community’s past as royal traders who spread trade and religion in the region.

The present generation of Indian Muslims maintains their ancestral legacy throughout a set of ritual conducts performed in the mosque or *surau* as mentioned above. The legacy of their ancestors is also preserved in cultural elements such as dress code, Indian spices and cuisine, Indian arts and movies, and newspapers and magazines in Tamil, all of which can be found in the areas known as ‘Little India.’
The wearing of the sari distinguishes female members of the community from Malay women, who usually wear the baju kurung. Indian Muslim women’s sari, with long sleeves and veil, is different from the sari worn by Hindu Indians, who wear the sari with short sleeves, bare waist, and no hair scarf. More recently, some Indian Muslim women have begun to wear the baju kurung, either for fashion reasons or because they wish to identify with the Malay culture.

Indian Muslim restaurants serving halal food and known as mamak are found in Little India as well as other areas, and illustrate the wide social acceptance of the cuisine among Malays and Chinese Malaysians. Referring to the wide acceptance of the cuisine among Malays, one informant stated:

“Where will they find any other halal food than the Malay restaurant? The only place that they can go to is the mamak restaurant, since it is impossible to go to Chinese or Tamil-Hindus restaurants which are non halal”.

Popular aspects of the cuisine include nasi kandar, nasi bryani, tandoori chicken, meat or beef karee, roti canay and drinks such as teh tarik.

Tamil newspapers and magazines read by both Muslims and Hindus include the daily papers Tamil Nesam, Makkal Osai, Malaysia Nanban, Muslim Murasu, Mani Vilakkai, Namhikai, and Ungal Kural. The Malaysian government provides support for the Tamil language, which is widely used as the medium of instruction in Tamil schools, households, Indian mosques and surau. A daily television news program in Tamil, Vanakam, is broadcast on channel TV2.

Different degrees of assimilation of Indian Muslims into the wider culture have led to the following categorizations:

1. The descendants of those who have inter-married with Malays are recognized as Malays or are known as Jawi Pekan or Jawi Peranakan.

2. Those whom may not have inter-married with locals but are seen as a part of the wider Malay culture. They may, for example, wear Malay-style clothing, work and live amidst Malays and follow Malay customs in weddings and other ceremonies.

3. Those who have not inter-married and retain a strong Tamil identity. They may not speak fluent Malay, they read the Tamil newspapers and magazines, and maintain strong links with India. Among the people belong to this category are the Imam (prayer leaders), caretakers of Masjid India, and restaurant workers who work in Malaysia under a contractual basis.

The above categories are not mutually exclusive. The assimilation and hybridity referred to in the first category indicates that Indian Muslims have always played a part in the nation-building process in Malaysia.

Indian Muslims and the Process of Nation-Building in Malaysia

National diversity is a matter of social pride in Malaysia. The fact that citizens come from different origins (Indian, Chinese, Malay, and orang asli) is an essential part of the country’s socio-cultural capital. Reflecting this, the government has set up a policy to celebrate and represent the mosaic of ethnicities, languages, religions and customs through the visual arts and through stories of achievements disseminated in the mass media, including government-controlled newspapers, magazines, and television.

The government is also promoting a tourism campaign known as ‘Malaysia - Truly Asia’ which further promotes the idea of diversity. The culture of the Indian Muslim diaspora features strongly in this campaign, through its historical sites and objects including the sea ports of Penang and Malacca, and old Indian mosques. ‘Little India’ is projected as a part of the ‘Truly Asia’ motif, and also supports ideas around national goals such as ‘We are different but remain united’ under ‘One Malaysia’.

Bumi Putra Rights and the Challenge for Malaysian Nation Building

In Malaysia, the designation of ‘indigenous’ or ‘Bumiputra’ (BP) is not generally defined by place of birth, citizenship, or contributions made as citizens and productive members of the nation. It is, rather, decided by the government. The designation of BP provides for helping the poor, especially those living in rural areas and those with low-income status. Support is given in areas such as free admission and tuition in colleges and universities, student loans, business
licenses, bank loans and employment in state agencies. The policy allows beneficiaries to receive supports throughout their lifetimes.

The Malaysian government recently tried to modify the policy by introducing the concept of meritocracy. However the initiatives have not satisfied the Indian Malay population, which has seen the number of Indians recruited in the civil service decline from 40 percent in 1957 to 2 percent in 2005. Although the community has lived in Malaysia for more than three generations, its members are exempt from BP status. When the government granted BP status to other minorities such as the Kadazan and Iban communities in Sabah, the Bidayuh and Dayak in Sarawak, the Portuguese in Malacca, and the Pattani in Kedah, the Indian Muslims tried to demand equal status. The president of PERMIM (Indian Muslim Association in Malaysia), Hj Syed Ibrahim, expressed his concern on the BP issue thus:

Indian Muslims are around 700,000 people and not all of them are well-to-do families. Around 60 percent of them are poor, low income, laymen. 40 percent are middle class income, "boleh tahan". We urge the government to help the poor families, giving them special privilege of BP. The Portuguese in Malacca, Iban, Dayak, Bidayuh in Sabah and Serawak, they are all Christians, and yet they are BP. The Portuguese are the community with the least numbers, they are around 100,000-200,000 people, but the government helps them.

Malaysia’s constitution guarantees that an Indian can become Malay and enjoy BP status automatically if s/he professes Islam, speaks Malay, and conforms to Malay customs and tradition. The constitution thus suggests that Indian Muslims should assimilate themselves to be an integral part of Malay culture. Since there is no religious difference between the communities, intermarriage is encouraged as a way to gain BP rights. However, not all Indian Muslims want to be Malays. They want to retain their own culture, while also gaining BP status. An informant stated:

“Special BP status through assimilation might take a long time, bearing in mind that many Indian Muslims want to be themselves, rather than pretending to be "like the Malays". Assimilation through marriage has started, but the number is not very big. Now assimilation is not going as fast as before. And now people are even becoming more racially conscious”.

Thus the identity of the community as Malaysian citizens of Indian origin is seen as being problematized by the lack of access to the same rights and status as that enjoyed by those identified as Malays or others. The special privileges enjoyed by one sector are seen as impeding the process of nation-building.

Conclusion

Malaysian Indians have a dual identity. Embedded in this identity is a distant memory of their country of origin (India) and the new realities of life as a diaspora in a new country.

The diaspora’s emotional ties with the country of origin remain strong, and are reflected in mainly religious conduct and the celebration of religious events. Cultural elements such as language, cuisine, and clothing also bind people together.

Indian Muslims perform a delicate balancing act to ensure their double needs i.e. becoming Malaysian without necessarily losing their identity as Muslims of Indian origin. Unfortunately, national policies excluding the community from bumiputra status are seen as having restricted the community’s position to that of a marginalized minority group.

The bumiputra policy is seen as fostering divisions among citizens and resulting deterioration in relationships between those ethnic groups who are beneficiaries and those who are not. It thus weakens the nation-building process and the achievement of goals such as ‘One Malaysia’. An integrated Malaysia would rather require the government to ensure equality and justice for all irrespective of faith and ethnic origins.

Malaysians share plenty of aspects that create a shared identity. There are also many elements within the different cultures that create distinct identities. It will be important that these tensions be reconciled. Meanwhile, the Indian Muslim community continues to struggle with the desire to be Malaysian citizens with equal rights to others, without losing the pride they feel in their identity.
### Table 1: Indian Mosques and Madrasahs in Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Mosque and Madrasah</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masjid India</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid India Tuanku Sultang Klana Klang</td>
<td>Klang, Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid Kampung Kling</td>
<td>Melacca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid Kapitan Keling</td>
<td>Penang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid India</td>
<td>Johor Bahru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid India Ipoh</td>
<td>Taiping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surau India :Madrasah At-Ghautriyah</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surau Malabari</td>
<td>Taman Selayang, Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrasah Indian Muslim, Kampung Pandan</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Indian NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Organizations</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESMA-Persatuan Pengusaha Restoran Muslim Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabungan Syurah Indian Muslims Perak</td>
<td>Perak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIMMA-Kongres India Muslim Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIMP-Persatuan India Muslim Port Dickson</td>
<td>Port Dickson, Seremban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERKIM-Persatuanan Pertubuhan India Muslim Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala Muslim Jema’at</td>
<td>Taman Selayang, Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persatuan Muslimin, Brickfields</td>
<td>Brickfields, Wilayah Persekutuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persatuan India Muslim Marumalartchi Klang</td>
<td>Klang of Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liga Muslim Pinang (Muslim League Pinang)</td>
<td>Georgetown, Penang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Klang Indian Muslim Association</td>
<td>Port Klang, Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persatuan Kemajuan India Muslim Taiping</td>
<td>Taiping, Perak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Muslim League Johor Bahru</td>
<td>Johor Bahru, Johor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angkatan Kemajuan Muslim, Selangor</td>
<td>Wilayah Persekutuan &amp; Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persatuan India Muslim</td>
<td>Selangor &amp; Wilayah Persekutuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selangor Muslim League</td>
<td>Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persatuan Penukar Wang Asing (Muslims Money Changer Association)</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Paper Merchants Association</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEPIIMA-Pergerakan Belia India Muslim Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pertubuhan Ansarul Islam Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badan Amal Islam</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>Seremban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIM-Majelis Madrasah India Muslim Malaysia</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persatuan India Muslim Malacca</td>
<td>Malacca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERKIM- Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia</td>
<td>Malacca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia Alaghankulam Muslim Jama’ath (MAMJ)</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES

1 Native communities include the Kadazan and Iban in Sabah, and the Bidayuh and Dayak in Sarawak. Communities of Portuguese origin are found mainly in Malacca. The Pattani community lives mainly in Kedah.


3 Food considered lawful when the animals are slaughtered in the ways prescribed by Islam.


5 Some of the orang asli or the natives are the Iban, the Kadazan, the Pattani, the Portuguese, and the Bidayuh.

6 This means that they can bear their daily living costs and can afford to send their children to tertiary education.

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