INDO-CEYLONESE RELATIONS IN MALAYA

R. RAJAKRISHNAN

INTRODUCTION

Malaya, before World War Two, represented a case where more than half the population comprised immigrants (1) who emerged as distinct and significant minorities in the development of the country. The Malays, the local people, remained a predominantly peasant population with little initiative to go beyond small scale agricultural and fishing activities. The Chinese dominated the mining and mercantile sector of the economy, the Indians provided the labour for the plantations and public works, while the Ceylon Tamils, with some English-educated Indians and Chinese, dominated the subordinate ranks of the civil service. The significance of this policy of immigration fostered by the British government and the subsequent division of labour was that these communities were securely locked within communal compartments. With each community tenaciously preserving its social and cultural characteristics intercommunal interaction was rather superficial.

For anyone studying intercommunal relations in Malaya the striking feature would be the amicable relationship that existed among the various communities. This may be true for a casual observer but it is definitely something to ponder about for one who attempts an indepth study of this aspect of Malayan history. The Malays, who were obviously envious and jealous of non-Malay domination of the civil service and the economic sector, overtly expressed their feelings of hatred in the form of protest against the Malayan Union proposals in 1946 which sought to grant equal citizenship rights to all races in Malaya. While this represented the stand of the host community against the immigrant races, there were also instances to indicate interracial hostilities between individual communities at different periods in the history of Malaya. Sino-Malay relations strained during and after the Japanese occupation of Malaya which culminated in outbursts of physical violence (2). In the same manner Indo-Ceylonese relations, too, which reached simmering proportions in the pre-war period resulted in occasional instances of physical violence.

(1) In 1931 there were 1,962,021 Malays, 1,709,392 Chinese, 624,009 Indians, 17,768 Europeans, 16,043 Eurasians and 56,113 others. The non-Malay population, almost entirely immigrants totalled 2,423,325 persons. See *Census of British Malaya*, 1931. (Kuala Lumpur, Government Printers, 1932), p.120.

(2) On Sino-Malay hostilities, refer *Despatches, British Military Administration (Malaya) to Secretary of State for Colonies*, 7 March 1946, C.O. 537/1580.

The Ceylon Tamils and the Indian Tamils, the dominant subethnic groups in the Ceylonese and Indian communities respectively, with physical, cultural and linguistic similarities ought to have led an amicable coexistence. Instead, the communal rift between the two subethnic communities widened with passage of time and each nurtured intense feelings of hatred towards the other. This paper will provide a brief historical perspective of Indo-Ceylonese relations in Malaya and subsequently seek an explanation for the nature of the relationship that emerged between the two communities.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Ceylon Tamils came to Malaya as English-educated immigrants to fill the occupational gap in the public sector. In the pursuance of this personal goal they depended for greater job opportunities on the acceptance of the British officials, and not so much on the goodwill of the host society. Thus, they did not find it desirable to decrease the impact of their ethnic stigma and did not find the necessity to deny parochial ethnic allegiances. In fact, they undertook conscious efforts to heighten ethnic solidarity so as to maintain their distinct identity. Through organisational activities they brought to the community the awareness and appreciation of cultural origin, of a moral commitment and social responsibility to the primary group. The strength of this commitment to preserve their cultural and social heritage gave them the vitality in their struggle for existence and for preserving ethnic identity. Their community leaders and parents, too, infused in them the conviction to attain success because these early immigrants had a definite ideal, not only to make a success out of every individual Ceylon Tamil but, explicitly, to provide a foundation upon which to build an ideal Ceylon Tamil society within the framework of a Malayan nation.

The Ceylon Tamils accomodated to the host society as far as was necessary in order to make a living without antagonising them. They retained most of their folkways and organised themselves into voluntary associations, especially mutual aid organisations to serve their recreational, convivial and utilitarian purposes (3). They had as a priority the establishment and

(3) Ceylon Tamil organisations in the pre-war years included the Selangor Ceylon Tamils Association to safeguard their general welfare,, Selangor Ceylon Tamils Saivite Association and Vivekananda Ashrama for religious needs, the Tamilian Physical Culture Association for sporting needs, the Sangeetha Abivirthi Sabha and Chum's Dramatic Society (later Kalavirthi Sangam) for cultural needs and Jaffnese Cooperaative Society to solve their economic problems. Post-war associations included the Central Council of Ceylonese Associations of Johore, the Ceylon Federation of Malaya and Malayan Ceylonese Congress, the latter two took a political role.

maintenance of their own religious congregations, both Hindu and Christian, wherever they domiciled. The temple and the church became the most important centres of the community, a symbol of ethnic identity, a common meeting place, a generation of sentiments of solidarity and a custodian of their folk tradition. The ability of the community to create a social environment to meet the emotional and expressive needs without having recourse to the host society or the numerically larger Indian community helped them to maintain their distinct ethnic identity in multi-ethnic Malaya.

The Indians had often attributed the presence of communal associations and institutions among the Ceylon Tamils to be symptomatic of their unwillingness to sacrifice their separate identity. But the development that hurt most the feelings of the Indians was the Ceylon Tamil domination of official appointments to represent the Indians and Ceylonese on the various official boards and committees. Such appointments stood the British in good stead, particularly before World War Two when Indian nationalism had begun to rear its head. At this period the British were anxious to deny recognition to Indian communal and nationalistic sentiments which were fast gaining currency among Indians in Malaya and, symptomatic of this, was the refusal by the Biritsh of the Central Indian Association of Malaya's demand for settlement and citizenship rights to Indians. Instead, by 1938 they replaced all three Indian members of the State Councils with Ceylon Tamils.(4) The Central Indian Association of Malaya remained undaunted and took retaliatory measures in June 1938, whereby it successfully persuaded the Indian government, which was currently concerned about the upliftment of Indian immigrants, to ban emigration of assisted labour to Malaya. Simultaneously, the Indian government lodged a protest concerning the wages and living conditions of Indians in Malaya. The point was also made about the inadequate representation of Indians in official bodies. Their stand was endorsed by the Secretary to the Government of India who wrote that, "Jaffna Tamils should not be held in any sense to represent Indian opinion. . . . . Though there was a historical and racial connection between Indians from Madras and the Jaffna Tamils, the latter in Ceylon were inclined to look upon themselves as wholly distinct from Indians and

(4) G. Netto, *Indians in Malaya: Historical Facts and Figures* (Singapore, 1961), pp.59–60. S.N. Veerasamy was appointed to the Federal Council in 1928; Louis Thivy to the Perak State Council in 1928 and, again, in 1931; Dr. S.R. Krishnan and S.N. Veerasamy to the Negeri Sembilan and the Selangor State Councils respectively. Rerer also M. Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1980), pp.47–49.

had in fact in many matters been in direct opposition to them. For this reason alone it was desirable that no impression should be allowed to develop that the Indian community in Malaya were content to be represented by Jaffna Tamils"[5].

Both the planters and the Malayan government, who were pressed for labour, pleaded with the Indian government to revoke the ban promising, in turn, to grant minor wage concessions, improvement in the living conditions of labourers, and the replacement of Ceylon Tamils with Indians in official councils.[6] The Ceylon Tamils' reluctance to relinquish their separate identity and merge with the Indian population merely aggravated the problem of Indian representation. Relations with the urban Indians, in particular, were strained, though it was obvious that the British only used the Ceylon Tamils to hit out at the radical Indian leadership that was emerging at that time. This Indo-Ceylonese problem was openly discussed in the various dailies during the 1920s and came to a peak in the 1930s when Indian leaders discussed the relations of the Ceylonese vis-a-vis the Indians with dignitaries from India like V.S.S. Sastri[7] and Pandit J. Nehru.[8]

The Ceylon Tamil Reaction to Indian Nationalism.

The Japanese occupation of Malaya between 1942 and 1945 brought much economic hardship to all Malayans, especially the immigrant communities. Moreover, due to Sino-Japanese animosity elsewhere, the Chinese were victims of Japanese reprisals, while working class Indians were the target for labour recruitment for the Siam-Burma railway. Although the Ceylon Tamils as a race feared internment because of their alleged loyalty to the British, they did not, in fact face any serious political threat. Furthermore, as a community which was potentially the most useful in running the civilian affairs of the military administration, they were less vulnerable.[9]

(5) *Despatches, Secretary to Government of India to Colonial Secretary*, Singapore, 28 March 1939, C.O. 273/654, File No. 50027.

(6) *Despatches, Malayan Government to Government of India*, 18 June 1940, C.O. 273/654, File No. 50027.

(7) *The Indian*, 16 January 1937, p. 3.

(8) *Ibid.*, 5 June 1937, p. 2.

(9) On the position of Ceylon Tamils in Japanese administration during the war years, refer R. Rajakrishnan, *"The Tamils of Sri Lankan origin in the History of West Malaysia, 1885 – 1965"*. (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of Malaya, 1986). pp. 151 – 155.

With the continuing political and cultural ties maintained by Malayan Indians with the Indian sub-continent, the effect of the Japanese forward policy in Asia on the independence movement in India brought important repercussions in Malaya. Two organisations set up in Malaya in association with the Indian independence struggle were the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army.(10) The Japanese overtly encouraged both organisations to assist in driving out the British from India. The membership of these organisations, however, were drawn mainly from Indian-born working class Indians whose patriotism lay in their country of origin. Middle class Indians and Ceylon Tamils, in the main, reacted unenthusiastically and those who joined did so not out of genuine sympathy for the movement but to benefit from the various concessions the Japanese made to members of the League.(11) Those who joined were able to gain concessions like the freedom to cross the state boundaries and immunity from arrest by the Japanese. Otherwise, the sentiments of the Ceylon Tamils lay strongly with their country of origin as was attested, for example in 1948, when they celebrated Ceylon Independence Day with much enthusiasm at the Town Hall in Kuala Lumpur. Amongst their guests of honour they entertained the Deputy High Commissioner, the Sultan of Selangor, the Resident Commissioner and leaders of various communities.(12)

The indifferent attitude of the Ceylon Tamils to the Indian nationalist movement attracted the attention of Subash Chandra Bose, the leader of the independence struggle outside India who worked closely with the Japanese. On 2 December 1943, he called upon the Ceylon Tamil community to explain their attitude. A deputation comprising R.P.S. Rajasooria, the president of the Selangor Ceylon Tamil Association, K. Arumugam, a planter and prominent member of the community and M.W. Navaratnam, president of the Ceylon Association of Selangor, met Bose in Singapore. They claimed that their community, being largely government servants, owed their services and loyalty to whichever Government was in power.(13) The truth, however, was that many Ceylon Tamils remained

(10) Refer G.P. Ramachandra, "The Indian Independence Movement in Malaya, 1942–45" (M.A. Thesis, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1970); S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 102–111.

(11) G.P. Ramachandra, *ibid.*, p. 182.

(12) *Malay Mail*, 11 February 1948.

(13) *Selangor Ceylon Tamil Association Platinum Jubilee Souvenir*, p. 80.

loyal to the British in the firm belief that they would return shortly. To the Ceylonese representatives who met Bose, service in the Indian National Army was unthinkable but they agreed, all the same, to participate more actively in the Indian Independence League.(14) Bose, on the other hand, conceded to their unequivocal desire for separate status by setting up a separate section, at all levels of the League, for the Ceylonese community in Malaya. His suggestion that the Ceylonese give token payment to the movement to allay the suspicions of the Japanese was tantamount to political blackmail and was the outcome of failure on his part to win the genuine sympathy of the Ceylonese. The Ceylonese, however, refused to be intimidated. A majority "felt that the question of Indian independence was not their business and, therefore, they should not be taxed for contributions."(15) Some Jaffna Tamils and Sinhalese, nonetheless, took on the management of the Ceylonese sections within the League while Dr. N. Mootathamby and S.C. MacIntyre, served as Chairmen of the League proper at the Johore Bahru and Batu Pahat branches respectively.(16) Gladwin Kottlewala of Malacca, M. Saravanamuthu of Penang and Justice M.V. Pillai of Singapore were persuaded to tour Malaya and urge the Ceylonese to support the Government of Azad Hind and to take an oath of allegiance to it.(17) Despite these appeals and the commitment of a number of Ceylonese leaders, there was no widespread support from the community. Few, in fact, came forward to take the oath or join the Ceylonese sections of the League.(18)

The general reluctance of most Ceylon Tamils to contribute financially, morally and physically to the struggle for Indian independence and the existence of separate sections in the Indian Independence League for Ceylonese left no doubt about the cleavage between the two communities. The Ceylonese were treated by Indians with suspicion and dislike and Ceylon Tamil conductors in estates were accused of being mainly responsible

(14) *Tamil Nesan*, 18 June 1946; "Report on the General and Economic Conditions of the Ceylonese in Malaya," *Ceylon Sessional Paper*, No. 9, 1946.

(15) *S.C. MacIntyre, Through Memory Lane* (Singapore, University Education Press, 1973), p. 120.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 119. Others included V.K. Chinniah (President of League, Klang), M.K. Murugesu (Member in charge of Social Welfare, Education and Culture, Kampar Branch) and S. Selvanayagam (Member in charge of Social Welfare and latter Education and Culture, Perak Branch). *Malayan Ceylonese Association Silver Jubilee Souvenir* (Jaffna, 1962).

(17) *Syonan Shimbun*, 9 November 1943, 25 January 1944. Cited from G.P. Ramachandra, "Indian Independence Movemment in Malaya, 1942 – 1945" p. 182.

(18) *Malai Sinpo*, 11 May 1945, cited from G.P. Ramachandra, *ibid.*

for sending away many Indians to work in the Siam–Burma Railway.[19] Strained Indo-Ceylonese relations during the pre-war years were not alienated by post-war political developments.

Indo-Ceylonese Political Separation

When at the inaugural meeting of the Malayan Indian Congress (M.I.C.) in 1946 the question of admitting Ceylonese was raised by John Thivy (then president of MIC), he blamed the British for dividing the Indians and Ceylon Tamils in Malaya and pointed out to the existence of Ceylon Tamils, both as members and office bearers, in Indian National Congress in India and the Ceylon Indian Congress in Ceylon. Indeed, in Malaya as well, a number of Ceylon Tamils had and were actively involved in MIC and other Indian organisations. Notable among them were S. Ratnam (the first secretary of MIC), Swami Satyananda (founder member of MIC and Working Committee member in 1946) and N.T.R. Singham(President of Selangor Regional Indian Congress in 1949). Arguing on the principle that "the destinies of Ceylon and India are inextricably woven together"[20] and that sooner or later Ceylon would merge with India, John Thivy urged members of MIC to welcome "every Ceylonese who, aware of his past ties and future destiny, identifies himself with the oneness of the Indian race, politically, socially, economically and culturally."[21] But there was a general reluctance among members of MIC.[22] Representatives from Singapore commented with sarcasm, at the Working Committee meeting of MIC in August 1947, that every Ceylon Tamil who wished to join the MIC should give a written undertaking that they were prepared to lose their Ceylonese identity and take an oath that they were Indians.[23] The leading critic of Ceylon Tamil membership in MIC appears to have been R. Jumabhoy, the President of Singapore Regional Indian Congress, who wanted the MIC to remain exclusively for Indians.[24] It is clear however, that majority opposition to

(19) M. Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia*, p. 100.

(20) *Indian Daily Mail*, 24 June 1947; *Malaya Tribune*, 25 June 1947.

(21) *Ibid.*

(22) *Indian Daily Mail* (Editorial), 28 June 1947; *Tamil Nesan* (Editorial), 6 August 1947. Thivy's advice was criticised as unsound.

(23) *Jananayakam*, 4 August 1947. This view was vehemently opposed by other Working Committee members.

(24) *Tamil Nesan*, 17 October 1947; 13 March 1948 and 24 May 1948.

the inclusion of the Ceylon Tamils into the MIC was based on resentment of the social discrimination and seclusiveness of Ceylon Tamils themselves and their persistence in maintaining a separate identity.

It was in the course of the prevailing controversies pertaining to whether or not to include Ceylonese into the MIC that the Ceylonese came out openly to express their own stand on this issue. The President of the Ceylon Federation of Malaya, E.E.C. Thuraisingham, categorically stated that the Ceylonese in Malaya had already obtained recognition from the Government as a distinct minority community, as for instance in the Census Report of 1947, and this had given him reason to believe that they would, in due course, be granted separate representation when independence came. Hence he asked John Thivy, the President of MIC, to quit bothering about admitting Ceylonese into the MIC.(25) In fact, they soon gained separate representation when, in accordance with the Federation of Malaya Agreement of 1948, a member of the community, E.E.C. Thuraisingham, was appointed to the Federal Legislative Council. Later, in March 1951, the Member System, based on racial representation, was introduced to head the various ministries with the aim of providing administrative experience to the future leaders. The British appointed, apart from R. Ramani to represent the Indians, a Ceylonese representative, E.E.C. Thuraisingham, amongst twelve other members.(26) Thuraisingham was appointed as Member for Education. Thus, the likelihood of Indo-Ceylonese cooperation in the political arena suffered a complete breakdown.

THE EXPLANATION

It is possible to identify the interplay of two pertinent factors, viz., ethnicity and social status which separated the two communities in Malaya.

(25) *Malaya Tribune*, 25 June 1947; *Tamil Nesan*, 26 June 1947.

(26) There were 6 Europeans, 3 Malays, 1 Chinese and 1 Ceylonese. An Indian was not included because R. Ramani declined the offer for personal and political reasons. *(Indian Daily Mail, 14 March 1951).* R. Ramani was offered the appointment as president of Federation of Indian Organisations (F10) at a time when MIC, FIO and Malayan Indian Association were fighting over the issue of which was the representative of Indian community. Ramani's acceptance would have led to severe criticism. The Indian community criticised government that another person could have been offered the appointment. *(Indian Daily Mail,* 4 July 1951). In October 1953 the Member System was expanded and again the Indians were not appointed. It was only after the five Indian Councillors of the Federal Legislative Council representing various professions resigned in October 1953 and much criticism from the community that the Government finally appointed two Indians in December 1953. *(Sunday Times,* 11 October 1953; *MIC Annual Report 1953 – 54).*

Ethnicity

Following Cohen's definition of an ethnic group as a "collectivity of people who share some patterns of normative behaviour and form a part of a larger population interacting with people of other collectivities within th framework of a social system",(27) it follows that ethnicity would refer to the degree of conformity by members of the collectivity to these shared norms in the course of social interaction. This phenomenon of ethnicity with its concomitant characteristics of ethnic consciousness and ethnic identification was enough to cause ethnic group solidarity among members of a community. In fact this sort of concern over their identity was present among any group that immigrated to a different country or environment. The different communities in America like the Chinese, Italians, Greeks, Sicilians and Poles all preserved their separate identity. Even in the inter-island migration of Indonesia it was found that groups "more often than not keep together and try to preserve as much as possible of their common cultural heritage".(28) Even within the Indian community in Malaya, ethno-linguistic groups like the Malayalis, Telegus, Tamils and Punjabis try to preserve their subethnic identity. Thus, migrant groups normally try to achieve a kind of integration in a new society without losing a certain identity as a distinct group. In the totality of the receiving society they will occupy a certain position in accordance with their economic status and potential strength.

For the Ceylon Tamils identification with their own ethnic group served as a source of emotional security in the plural society in Malaya. It was common to find strong adherence to traditonal forms of behaviour and cultural patterns as a means of attaining a measure of continuity with the past. There was intensified interaction with members of their own group and this together with adherence to traditional cultural forms drew the boundaries with other ethnic groups more distinctly and increased their visibility as a separate tehnic group. The participation of the Ceylon Tamils in their own socio-cultural activities and their patronage of ethnic institutions reduced the chances of establishing interpersonal relations across

(27) A. Cohen, (ed), *Urban Ethnicity* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1974), p. 10. Normative behaviour refers to the symbolic formations and activities found in such contexts as kinship, marriage, friendship and ritual. See also R. Kolm, "Ethnicity in Society and Community", in *Ethnic Groups in the City: Culture, Institutions and Power.* Otto Feinstein (ed.), D.C. Heath and Co., Toronto, 1971), p. 59.

(28) W.F. Wertheim, *East-West Parallels.* (The Hague, W. Van Hoeve Ltd., 1964), p. 201.

ethnic boundaries, particularly with the Indians. Such an attitude among the Ceylon Tamils reminded them of their common past, their cultural characteristics, their motive for migration to Malaya and their distinct identity.

Though the relationships within the Ceylon Tamil community was based on religion, village origin and caste, providing a diffused sense of identification, its members engaged in few relationships with outsiders in which strong bonds of solidarity were likely to arise. Their desire to return to Ceylon on retirement from service constantly reminded them of a responsibility to preserve ethnic purity through strict adherence to cultural norms and abstention from intermarriage with outsiders. The Ceylon Tamils had always viewed intermarriage more as a threat than an opportunity because they were never assimilationist in orientation. They experienced the threat of intermarriage both on a collective as well as on an individual basis. On a collective basis intermarriage threatened the continuity of the group and in its individual aspect it threatened the continuity of generations within the family. It is this desire on the part of the Ceylon Tamils not to intermarry, not even with the Indian Tamils with whom they shared linguistic, physical and cultural similarities, which makes the study of this aspect of the relationship between the Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils so significant, and in some respects so poignant.

While the 'ethnic' factor easily and convincingly explains the existence of the Ceylon Tamils as a distinct community in multi-ethnic Malaya, the 'social status' factor soughts to explain the refusal of the Ceylon Tamils to identity with the Indians which widened the relationship and contributed to mutual antagonism between them. Social status here refers to both class and caste status.

Class status

As a consequence of economic, administrative and educational changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Malaya, the Ceylon Tamils emerged as a middle class community. Deriving their success as a result of the scarcity of English-educated personnel among the Malays and other immigrant communities, they found a new focus of identification as government servants. Integrated around and dependent upon this enterprise they managed to derive the status of an English-educated middle class community. By virtue of this and their relationship with the British officers they became Anglophiles in orientation, some imitating their superiors in manner, dress, speech and character while others merely adopted gentlemanly qualities of the English described as "self-reliant and correct, courageous and abstemious, inexplicit and taciturn, responsible and

amateurish, and always displaying loyalty and respect for tradition."(29) Such reference group behaviour produced in the Ceylon Tamils typical values, attitudes and qualities identified with English-educated middle class, whether in England(30) or America(31). The Ceylon Tamils displayed achievement values which stressed the importance of education and career in their lives. The offsprings of the early migrants benefitted greatly from the social responsibility of the latter that they provide an English education to their children. They acquired professional education and rose to be members of an upper middle and professional class. These qualities made the Ceylon Tamils stand apart from the other Malayan communities, particularly the predominantly working class Indians, in terms of status, achievement sand distinctness.

As an educated middle class community holding responsible positions, the Ceylon Tamils had always observed a social distance between themselves and the working class Indians, especially the Indian Tamils. As supervisory staff in the plantation sector they had stretched the rules of discipline and observance of social distance to such an extent that they offended the South Indians. Regarding the bad treatment that they accorded the estate Indians it was recorded in 1926 that:(32)

> Those who exercise control over the labourers are Kanganis, Mandurus (mandors) and Kranis. The Kanganis and Mandurus are mostly Tamils, while 99 per cent of the Kranis are Jaffnese. The hardships to which the labourers are subjected by Kanganis and Mandurus under the instruction of Kranis, are indescribable.

Furthermore, they accepted a considerable element of social patronage from the European managers and, together with their "imitation of European social styles and their ostentious displays of empire loyalism,"(33)

(29) J. Raynor, *The Middle Class* (London, Longmans Green and Co., 1969), p. 20.

(30) *Ibid.*, R.H. Gretton, *The English Middle Class* (London, 1911); R. Lewis and A. Maude, *The English Middle Classes* (Bath, Portway, Cedric Chivers Ltd, 1973).

(31) H.M. Hodges, *Social Stratification: Class in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Schenkman Publishing Co., 1964).

(32) *Despatches, Indian Office to Colonial Office*, 31 May 1926. C.O. 273/534, File No. 11413.

(33) M. Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaya* (1980), p. 26.

found themselves alienated from the Indian labourers. They found little or no identity with the Indians which contributed to ill-feeling and much misunderstanding between the two communities. The lack of goodwill between the two communities culminated in resentment against the Jaffnese who were believed to have mercilessly sent many Indians to work on the "Death Railway".(34) Restoration of authority to Ceylon Tamil staff(35) after the Japanese Occupation led to protests. Sporadic incidents of violence against the 'Black Europeans' as they were known involved, in one case, in the death of an estate conductor.(36)

Even their relationship with the urban Indians was not cordial as the Jaffnese were alleged to look down upon local Indians.(37) Instead of using the Ceylon Tamils' good position to mobilize the Indian and Ceylon Tamil community as a whole, they were more concerned about improving their qualifications, status and economic position. For example, in the 1930s, Ceylon Tamil leaders mounted a campaign to request for greater employment opportunities for non-Malays in the government sector when they felt threatened by the strong pro-Malay policies in staff recruitment launched by High Commissioner Sir Lawrence Guillemard (1920 – 1926), but paid no heed to the conditions of the Indian masses.(38) They were reluctant to

(34) *Ibid.*, p. 100; R.K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (New York, Yale University Press, 1970), p. 302; *Indian Daily Mail*, 24 August 1946. It was reported that about 75,000 estate workers were sent to work on the railways, of which about 45,000 died. The remaining 30,000 returned to Malaya with virulent diseases like ulcers, beri-beri etc. Pre– and post –war population figures for Indians indicate a decrease of 4 per cent, partly attributed to these deaths.

(35) M. Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia* (1980), p. 135.

(36) *Malayan Union File 207/47*, Vol. II. Report of the Commissioner for Labour, Kulim, 20 March 1947 (Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur). It was reported that A.M. Samy, the leader of the Thondar Padai (Volunteer Corps), a lower class movement united by Tamil chauvinism and inculcated with reformist ideas, murdered a Ceylon Tamil conductor, S. Karthigesu, in December 1941. Samy's relationship with the Labour Department in Kulim was strained because the Assistant Labour Inspector for the district was a Ceylon Tamil. /*Malayan Union File 207/47*, Vol. II, Confidential Report of the Deputy Commissioner for Labour, Kedah, 29 March 1947 (Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur)/.

(37) *The Indian*, 6 February 1937, p. 11.

(38) R. Ampalavanar, *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya, 1945–1957* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 6; W.R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Natinalism*, (Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1967), pp. 114–118.

identify themselves with the socially depressed and impoverished Indians and concerned themselves only with issues and problems relevant to their own community. The Ceylon Tamils had their own associations and places of worship to cater for the activities of the community and they even petitioned the government that they be enumerated separately as Ceylon Tamils.(39) The sense of class superiority certainly contributed towards alienating the two communities although these feelings were never sufficiently intense to give rise to physical conflicts comparatble to the violent outbursts of the Sino-Malay hostilities. The sense of separateness between the Indian and Ceylon Tamils was reflected in all their relationship, especially in their attitude to intermarriage.

Caste Status

Class status and its attributes certainly brought to the Ceylon Tamils the feeling of superiorty over the working class Indians, though toned down in their interaction with middle class urban Indians. On the other hand, caste status distanced them from most of the Indians by placing constraints in their relationship, in terms of social interaction and marriage. In fact the class status gave further impetus to the already superior feeling engendered by their caste position. As a predominantly *vellalar* population, the Ceylon Tamils felt superior to the South Indians who were mainly drawn from the lower segment of the social hierarchy in Indian society. As a ritually pure caste they observed a social distance not only in their interaction with the Indians but also with the non-*vellalar* Ceylon Tamil population in Malaya, though the latter formed only a small proportion. The position and power that the Ceylon Tamil *vellalars* commanded and the concomitant attributes they arrogated for themselves in Jaffnese society has relevance in the manner they treated the Indians, both in Ceylon and Malaya.

The caste-based society in Jaffna, Ceylon, superimposed on an agrarian social order with agriculture as the main pursuit of the people determined

(39)
Memorandum in Connection with the Proposed Decenial Census of Population in British Malaya, 1940. (Submitted by various Ceylonese Associations).

a patron-client relationship with the associated practice of slavery.(40) The depressed castes, mainly of impure ritual status, together with the *koviars*, a ritually pure caste, were slaves of the *vellalar* landlords in Jaffna. They were bought and sold or given as dowry during marriage by their owners who invariably were the *vellalars*. The latter had the right to exact services, provide care and maintenance and order the lives of the slaves they owned, even to the extent of arranging and endorsing their marriages.

By virtue of their secular dominance the *vellalars* not only provided their children with English education, once this became available, so as to prepare them for government employment, but also took steps to lay a number of social prohibitions on lower castes(41) who attempted to educate their children. This was evident when, at the encouragement and protection of the Christian missionaries many lower castes, especially the *koviars*, educated their children and the *vellalars* reacted with contempt and suspicion. In fact, the occasional attempts by the lower castes to exert their individual rights proved a constant source of friction between the *vellalars* and *koviars* in Jaffna.

Although Jaffna constituted many different castes, the *vellalars* who ranked highest formed, numerically, almost half the population(42). The

(40)
In 1806 British passed a regulation which recognised that "all question that relate to those rights and privileges which subsist in the said province (Jaffna) between the higher castes, particularly the Vellalas, on the one hand, and the lower, particularly the Covias, Nalluas and Pullues, on the other, shall be decided according to said customs and ancient usages of the province." Slavery was recognised during the initial period of British rule where they introduced rules relating to registration of slaves. But in 1821 they passed a regulation whereby all female slave children were purchased by the government at birth and adult slaves to purchase their own freedom. Arbitrators were appointed to determine the rate for adult slaves. However, with the introduction of Regulation No. 20 in 1844 slavery was abolished in Ceylon but this did not bring any drastic effect in Jaffnese society as members of the slave castes remained as *de facto* slaves for economical reasons. Even towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries though slavery was not practised overtly, the relationship between the *vellalar* landlord and his labourers of the depressed castes who worked on the fields smacked of slavery.

(41)
Umbrella, fly whisk and palanquins were to be used only by *vellalars* besides expecting the lower castes to bare the upper part of the body as a sign of respect to the high castes.

(42)
M. Banks, "The Social Organisation of the Jaffna Tamils of North Ceylon With Special Reference to Kinship, Marriage and Inheritance", Ph.D. Dissertation (Trinity College, University of London, London, 1957), p. 350. The author carried out a survey of caste distribution in Jaffna through the assistance of village headmen and found there were about 48 different castes. But the majority of the population were distributed as follows: *Brahmins* 0.7%, *Vellalars* 50%, *Koviar* 7%; *Pandaram* 1%, Goldsmith 0.6%, Carpenter 2%, *Nattuvar* less than 0.2%, Dhobies 1.5%, Barbers 0.9%, *Nallavar* 9%, *Paraiyar* 2.7%, *Thirumbar* 0.2% and the rest of *Karaiyar* caste.

status and dominance of *vellalars* in Jaffna society undoubtedly had great bearing on the socio-cultural life of Jaffnese. By tradition they were landlords, independent farmers and holders of political office, first, under the old kings and, later, under the colonial powers. It appears that Jaffna was governed by *vellalars* and neither the Portuguese nor Dutch employed *brahmins* as advisers. Referred to by the honorific title of *kamakaran,* or field men, they were conscious of their high social status in that no *vellalar* would work for a lower caste and, sometimes, not even for another *vellalar. Vellalar* peasants who were in poverty preferred to rent or share-crop rather than work for others. Even as farmers they did not do all the work on the land. Menial tasks, such as climbing trees and weeding paddy fields, was left to the lower castes.(43) Some *vellalars* even declined to plough, harvest and winnow. The image of a 'gentleman' farmer who worked less on the field but could produce his own rice and provide a surplus to feed his servants and slaves was the ideal that every *vellalar* tried to achieve. Such was the sense of self-esteem held by the *vellalar.* (44)

Kathleen Ryan talks of an implicit equation of gods and kings with *vellalars* in Jaffna society and this may be understood in terms of the privileged position of the latter.(45) In Jaffna high walls had encircled the royal residence of kings as well as the temples. On more modest proportions, walls also encircled the homes of *vellalars* for protection both from mortal and spiritual forces. According to Hindu belief the deities were the fountain-head of fertility, social order and auspicious conditions and the kings were their earthly counterparts. It was, moreover, the foremost duty of the king to safeguard *dharma* (righteousness) and preserve the cosmic and social order in society. Kathleen Ryan argues that though there were no kings in Jaffna after the establishment of European rule, the idea persisted that those who possessed power were responsible for maintaining the ecological and social order. The *vellalars* as patron-chiefs in Jaffna society were

(43)
C.S. Navaratnam, *Tamils and Ceylon,* (Jaffna, Saiva Prakasa Press, 1958) p. 191. In ancient Jaffna there were two classes of *vellalars* namely *uluthuviththunpor* (those who get their fields ploughed by others) and *uluthunpor* (whose who plough their fields themselves).

(44)
Banks, "The Social Organisation of the Jaffna Tamils of North Ceylon", p. 377. Though the traditional prestige of the farmer disappeared during British period in favour of government employment the close association between landownership and influence still remained. Village headmenship were still held by the landowning *vellalars.*

(45)
K.S. Ryan, "Pollution in Practice: Ritual, Structure and Change in Tamil Sri Lanka," Ph.D. dissertation (Cornell University, 1980), pp. 39 – 41.

expected to adhere to *dharma* and emulate the role of kings. Thus we find the *vellalars*, who replicated the role of kings or rulers on a lesser scale, were considered responsible for the stability and welfare of the community. Their paternalistic role earned them an enhanced position in society and items and symbols such as umbrellas, fly whisks, palanquins and head-dress, paraphernalia traditionally associated with gods and kings, became also the privileged possession exclusively of the *vellalar* caste.

In time, their relative dominance in terms of wealth due to their numerical preponderance in well-paid non-agricultural employment during British rule added to a feeling of superiority among them. They occupied the ranks of middle and upper classes in Jaffna society as clerks, professionals and government officials. Even the *brahmins* who were ritually the highest caste were servants to the *vellalars* who owned and administered the temples. They dismissed *brahmin* priests at will and did not hesitate to punish priests guilty of misbehaving. Their exclusive right to own slaves and employ servants also contributed to their psychological dominance in their attitude towards others. In every village the temples were the property of the *vellalars* who expected the other clean castes to attend and support them and sometimes, they even used sanctions to enforce participation.(46) In these temples the hierarchical implications of the ceremonies and their stigmatised roles in the rituals were not lost on the lower castes. The efficient management of the temples in Malaya built by the Ceylon Tamils was a direct result of their experience in Jaffna.

As a community ritually next to the *brahmins*, the *vellalars* observed their socio-cultural traditions with such tenacity that social and political developments caused little or no change at all to their social status. Occupying a high status with regard to caste and as administrators and persons holding political office and the greater proportion of the wealth in the community, they were the undisputed elite. As such they were the custodians and repositories of the various cultural traditions that characterised Jaffnese society. Every Jaffnese of *vellalar* descent was exposed to his customs and practices which gradually because assimilated into his socio-cultural life. Although the customary laws and tradition affected all Jaffnese, irrespective of caste, the *vellalars* alone who had the education, power and wherewithal observed them with the greatest tenacity. This was not surprising in view of the fact that customary laws and practices provided

(46) *Ibid.*, p. 55. Only in the 1970s were the unclean castes in Jaffna able to gain entry into some of the larger temples, but in most of the villages they were still denied entry.

the stability and continuity of a community within which they enjoyed a dominant position. Their dominance over all other castes engendered self-confidence, perseverance, leadership qualities, dominant traits and community consciousness among them. These straits were significant in the context of Indo-Ceylonese relations in Malaya as evident in their aloofness from the predominantly working class and lower caste Indians. In fact, the above traits, coupled with their notion of caste superiority, impressed upon the Ceylon Tamils in Malaya to keep the Indians outside a certain socio-psychological aura of the former's individuality.

CONCLUSION

Ethnicity separates communities and allows social interaction within the social boundaries of respective communities, but by itself does not create intercommunal friction. More often than not, other factors manifested in the social framework of communities contributes to the rise of hostilities between communities. In the case of the Ceylon Tamils, caste and class status had engendered feelings of racial superiority over the Indians. It emphasised that they were racially and culturally superior to the South Indians, particularly to that of the 'coolie' culture of the working class Indians. The Ceylon Tamil adherence to scriptural Hinduism, preservation of their cultural heritage, their middle class status with its corresponding values and higher caste status stood in direct contrast with that of the South Indians and gave weight to the idea of racial superiority over the latter group. The feelings that were a community superior in every sense and apart could not cut across the physical, cultural and linguistic similarities and establish an amicable relationship. While they did enjoy a 'friendly' relationship with middle class urban Indians, as evident in the organisation of Indo-Ceylonese games and competitions and Indo-Ceylonese associations, their relationship with the working class Indians, both urban and rural, was definitely on 'unfriendly' terms.

Social inequality being the keynote of social status reigned as the theme of the social etiquette of Ceylon Tamils in their relations with the Indians. The xenophobic aspect of such intense status consciousness and communal feelings, nurtured complex negative attitudes towards the Indians which tended to reinforce the sense of group separateness. These was distrust, envy, fear and hostility among the Indians while cultural arrogance, contempt and condescension was exhibited towards Indians by most Ceylon Tamils. A researcher summed up the relationship when she wrote that " . . . . the Indian Tamilians nursed a nagging inferiority complex because an ethnic group closely related to them, was nevertheless far ahead of them in terms of job ranking and social prestige, a gap which widened after indepen-

dence instead of narrowing. The Jaffna Tamilians, on the other hand, looked down upon the low caste and often uneducated Indian Tamilians as stupid barbarians".(47)

(47)
D.H. Rajanayagam, "The Tamilians in Malaysia – Problems of Culture and Political Identity", *Journal of Tamil Studies*, vol. 25, June 1984, p. 22.

REFERENCES

a) **Official Documents**

Ceylon Sessional Paper, No. 9 of 1946. Sri Lanka National Archives, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Despatches, British Military Administration (Malaya) to Secretary of State for Colonies, 7 March 1946. C.O. 537/1580. Public Records Office, London.

Despatches, India Office to Colonial Office, 31 May 1926. C.O. 273/534. File No. 11413. Public Records Office, London.

Despatches, Malayan Government to Government of India, 18 June 1940. C.O. 273/654. File No. 50027. Public Records Office, London.

Despatches, Secretary to Government of India to Colonial Secretary, Singapore, 28 March 1939. C.O. 273/654. Public Records Office, London.

Malayan Union File, 207/47. Vol. II. Report of the Commissioner for Labour, Kulim, 20th March 1947.

b) **Books, Theses and Articles.**

Ampalavanar, R. *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaysia, 1945 – 1957.* Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1981.

Arasaratnam, S. *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore.* London, Oxford University Press, 1970.

Banks, M. *The Social Organisation of the Jaffna Tamils of North Ceylon with Special Reference to Kinship, Marriage and Inheritance.* Ph.D. Thesis, Trinity College, University of London, London, 1957.

Census of British Malaya, 1931. Kuala Lumpur, Government Printers, 1932.

Cohen, A. *Urban Ethnicity.* London Tavistock Publications, 1974.

Gretton, R.A. *The English Middle Class.* London, 1911.

Hodges, H.M. *Social Stratification: Class in America.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Schenkman Publishing Company, 1964.

Jain, R.K. *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya.* New York, Yale University Press, 1970.

Lewis, R and Maude, A. *The English Middle Classes.* Bath, Portway, Cedric Chivers Ltd., 1973.

MacIntyre, S.C. *Through Memory Lane.* Singapore, University Education Press, 1973.

Navaratnam, C.S. *Tamils and Ceylon.* Jaffna, Saiva Prakasa Press, 1958.

Netto, G. *Indians in Malaya: Historical Facts and Figures.* Singapore, 1961.

Otto Feinstein (ed). *Ethnic Groups in the City: Institutions and Power.* Toronto, D.C. Heath and Co., 1971.

Rajakrishnan, R. *The Tamils of Sri Lankan Origin in the History of West Malaysia, 1885–1965.* Ph.D. Thesis, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1986.

Rajanayagam, D.H. "The Tamilians in Malaysia – Problems of Culture and Political Identity. *Journal of Tamil Studies,* Vol. 25, June 1984, pp. 1–28.

Ramachandra, G.P. *The Indian Independence Movement in Malaya, 1942–45.* M.A. Thesis, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1970.

Raynor, J. *The Middle Class.* London, Longmans Green and Co., 1969.

Roff, W.R. *The Origins of Malay Nationalism.* Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1967.

Ryan, K.S. *Pollution in Practice: Ritual, Structure and Change in Tamil Sri Lanka.* Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, Cornell, 1980.

Stenson, M. *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia.* Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1980.

Wertheim, W.F. *East-West Parallels.* The Hague, W. Van Hoeve Ltd., 1964.

c) **Associational Records and Publication**

Malayan Ceylonese Association Silver Jubilee Souvenir, Jaffna, 1962.

Malayan Indian Congress Annual Report, Kuala Lumpur, 1953–54.

Memorandum in Connection with the Proposed Decennial Census of Population in British Malaya, 1940.

Selangor Ceylon Tamils Association Platinum Jubilee Souvenir, Kuala Lumpur, 1972.

d) **Newspapers**

Indian Daily Mail, 1946 – 1951.

Jananayakam, 1947.

Malay Mail, 1946 – 1948.

Malay Tribune, 1947.

Sunday Times, 1953.

Tamil Nesan, 1946 – 1948.

The Indian, 1937.