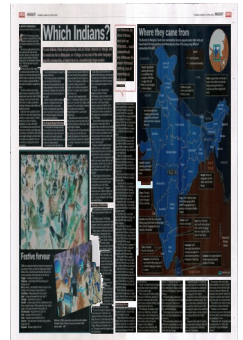


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Which Indians?

To non-Indians, there are just Indians. Ask an 'Indian' what he is, though, and he would say he's a Malayalee, or a Telegu, or any one of the other language-specific communities, of which there is a bewilderingly large number.

By **MARTIN VENGADESAN**
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A YOUNG Sikh man and a young Ceylonese woman fell in love. They courted secretly for years until they finally decided that they wished to marry.

The nervous couple parted to return home and break the news to their respective families, and were greeted, amidst much gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair, by the identical chastisement: "Why lah you have to go and marry an Indian!"

Now that particular little nugget may be an urban legend, but there is some validity to the assertion that many of the different Indian communities view themselves as having a separate identity of their own that should be recognised by others.

This view is held not just in India, which is home to many of the world's religions and boasts more than 20 official languages, but also all over the world where there are Indian communities, including in Malaysia where Indians are a significant minority.

Surely that view is justified, for after all, who in his right mind expects homogeneity in a region of nearly 1.5 billion people (if you factor in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal)?

But as Indians move away from traditions (some of which, some might argue, are poisonous ones) like the caste system and arranged marriages, just how much of the Indian sub-continent's rich and varied history is being lost to current generations?

Two recent developments brought this question to the fore.

The first was a *faux pas* committed by newly elected Perak Menteri Besar Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin who last Sunday mistakenly referred to the Sikh community as Bengali, when indeed the community has its roots in Punjab (see map, right).

Another was the almost bewildering confluence of religious festivals that occurred over the last two weeks – Vaisakhi, Poila Boishakh, Ugadi, Vishu, and the Tamil New Year also coincided with Thailand's Songkran festival and other regional celebrations.

The Punjabi/Bengali difference

As I attempted a thorough investigation into this vast realm, I soon became overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of the various Indic peoples (generally divided into the northern Indo-Aryan and southern Dravidian groups).

For example, I learnt that there are Punjabis who don't practice Sikhism but who come from the same geographical region and speak the same language as the Sikhs. These Punjabis are Hindus, so one cannot factually say that to be Punjabi and to be Sikh are synonymous. And there are Punjabis who are Muslim and Christian, too.

Malaysia Hindu Sangam president Datuk A. Vaithilingam explains that confusion over the specific race, religion, and language of the various Indian communities is nothing new, and that the Punjabi/Bengali error is a particularly common one.

"Many Malaysians make that mistake. This has been an error that dates back to the British colonial era when many Sikhs were brought to Malaya.

"Through some form of miscommunication, perhaps because the Sikhs came through the Bengali port of Calcutta, this incorrect title has continued to be applied."

A variety of responses to the issue have emerged.

Khalsa Dharmic Jatha Gurdwara vice-president Baljit Singh was very displeased: "That utterance (by the MB) has made the Sikhs a laughing stock of other communities," he was quoted as saying in *The Star* on Tuesday.

Dr Sarjit S. Gill, Universiti Putra Malaysia's professor of Social Anthropology, adopts an altogether different stance, though: "I view the MB's statement as a blessing in disguise because I welcome the debate. I don't think we should blame him. Firstly, we should blame ourselves, especially the Sikh organisations and *gurdwaras* (temples) in Malaysia.

"I have attended many seminars and programmes conducted by Sikhs in Malaysia where non-Sikhs are not invited to join in simply because we do not want 'others' to know our problems. So how can we get upset if we are a closed community and other groups don't understand us well enough?"

However, network engineer Nirmal Singh feels that our nation's political leaders should make more of an effort to understand the various communities.

"I am used to this sort of ignorance, but while I have seen it among children and young adults, I didn't expect a political leader to make such a gaffe. There is a huge difference between Punjabis and Bengalis."

Nirmal Singh does admit, however, that he himself is not very well-versed in the differences between other Indian communities such as the Tamils, Malayalees, Telugus, etc: "I suppose because we have a different religion we expect others to understand the differences." (Tamils, Malayalees, and Telugus are usually Hindus.)

The same, yet different?

Such confusion is probably aided and abetted by the plethora of Indian festivals.

The Hindu Sangam's Vaithilingam explains that festivals are one of the best examples of both the commonalities and differences between Indian communities.

"Many regions of India have their own unique festivals, although often they might be linked. Telugus celebrate Ugadi according to the lunar calendar whereas Tamils follow the solar calendar. Songkran and many similar festivals in Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka occur at around the same time because they followed the Singhalese New Year (which is based on the lunar calendar)."

Dr Krishanan Maniam, an associate professor in Universiti Malaya's (UM) Department of Indian Studies, explains that the community's representation in Malaysia differs vastly from that in India.

"It's true that Indians in Malaysia come from various parts of India but a vast majority of them are from the south of India, (the state of) Tamil Nadu specifically. You also have significant numbers of Telegus, Malayalees, Kannadas, and so on." (See map for where these people come from within India.)

»To those who do follow tradition, there are few differences... each community will very often have its unique traditional clothing, ways of preparing food, and so on

DR S. KUMARAN

Because, historically Tamils formed a majority among Malian Indians, they soon became linguistically dominant among the South Indian communities: "Even though (the so-called Indians) brought many languages to the country, in Malaysia, Tamil became the lingua franca among the South Indians. This meant that Telegu-speaking families, for example, eventually became more fluent in Tamil!"

Prof N. Kanthasamy is also with UM's Indian Studies department, feels that while the differences between the various Indian communities should be studied and appreciated, they should not be over-emphasised.

"I think in a more progressive Malaysia we should overcome our differences and think of ourselves as Malaysians first. If we warp on these traditional factors too much we are back to square one."

Still he does concede that the study of Indian history reveals many fascinating common points.

"If you look at history, you will see why the differences can be confusing. In India itself, during the Chola dynasty, which lasted many centuries (from the 9th to 12th century) the whole of Southern India was under one rule.

"During this time, Tamil language became dominant, and it is the root language from which other South Indian languages sprang."

In fact, there are a few Tamil words like *kapal* (shitali (string), and *raja* (king) that have influenced the Malay language!

"Since that time," claims Prof Kanthasamy, "there have been numerous separations and unifications of (states in) southern India, and it was only as recently as the 1950s that the States became split along the lines of language.

"From that, you have the emergence of the Telugu-, Kannada and Malayalee-speaking states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala respectively).

"When people from these peoples came to Malaysia in the waves under the British, these groups were all classified as Indian, with no such distinction.

Aside from sheer numbers, another reason that Tamils are their language may seem dominant in Malaysia is that the Telegu, Malayalee and Punjabi language schools that existed until the late 1970s eventually closed down, Prof Kanthasamy explains

"These communities scattered, and there wasn't enough enrolment in their schools, whereas the Tamils have had the numbers to keep their schools going."

Maintaining identities

Dr S. Kumaran, an Indian Studies department expert, is that the "dilution" of tradition is inevitable

"Unlike Indians in India, Malaysian Indians are not always well-schooled in tradition. In most cases we cannot identify each other's community visually, and so we rely on language and even that

can be mixed up.

"And let's not forget that even at home, many Indians choose to speak English over their mother tongue."

"Still, to those who do follow tradition, there are true differences, especially in India. Each community will very often have its unique traditional clothing, ways of preparing food, and so on.

"The Malayalees, for example, might tie their saris differently, cook certain dishes unique to their community, and celebrate, say, Onam, but, again, some of these traditions don't survive very strongly in modern Malaysia."

Even names don't necessarily offer much of a clue about a person's roots

anymore: "In Malaysia we have left behind the culture of using clan names like Rao and Naidu for Telegus, and Nair and Menon for Malayalees," explains Dr Krishnan.

As Malaysia's Indian society moves away from traditionalist mores that still hold sway in parts of India, we can expect a further blurring of communal lines, says Prof Kanthasamy.

"Intermarriage across communities is another factor that is breaking down such barriers."

"While you do have certain staunch traditionalists, many Indians are marrying outside their community and, often, outside their race," he says.

"Arranged marriages are on the way out, and people tend to choose their own partners, perhaps based on educational and economic background more than race, language or even religion."

So why then is there a need to focus on what makes us culturally unique? That there is some need is underlined by the irate mail that is quick to arrive at *The Star* whenever someone from outside the communities makes a mistake and glosses everyone with the same "Indian" brush.

"Economic factors might be a reason that communities in Malaysia might still want to emphasise their differences," muses Prof Kanthasamy.

"For example, while many Indian Tamils originally came here in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century as indentured labourers, the Malayalees and Ceylonese Tamils were brought in to perform more 'educated', white collar jobs, such as clerical work.

"Thus, there may be a desire to maintain that socio-economic distinction.

"Nowadays, as the communities become more prosperous, they may also feel more confident about exploring and safe-guarding their roots.

"I believe even Astro has played a part in arousing interest as it offers programmes for Telegu and Malayalee speakers."

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Festive fervour

THERE are hundreds of festivals celebrated throughout the sub-continent. These are some that Malaysians might be familiar with, as South Asian communities living in this country mark them. Dates indicated are for this year.

Ponggal – Tamil harvest festival (Jan 14)

Thaipusam – South Indian festival honouring Lord Muruga (Jan 23)

Holi (pic above) – North Indian “festival of colours” celebrating the first full moon of spring (March 22)

Gudi Padwa – Maharashtrian New Year (April 6)

Ugadi – Telugu and Kannada New Year (April 7)

Puthandu – Tamil New Year (April 13)

Vaisakhi – Commemorates both the establishment of the Khalsa (collective body of Sikhs baptised by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699) and the harvest festival (April 14)

Poila Boishakh – Bengali New Year (April 14)

Vishu – Malayalee New Year (April 14)

Onam – Malayalee harvest festival (Sept 12)

Navaratri – Nine-day festival commemorating goddess Durga (Sept 29)

Deepavali – Festival of Lights (Oct 28)



Members of Sikh communities around the world celebrate Vaisakhi in April. In Paris, they put on a show of their warrior skills. – AFP

Where they came from

The diversity of Malaysia's South Asian communities becomes apparent when their roots are traced back to the sub-continent. And these are just a few of the many, many different communities that exist.



Legend

- State boundary
- International boundary

