Ethnicity and Ethnic Perception of Indians

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Abstract: Problem statement: The discourse of ethnicity, race dominance and Islamization has dominated Malaysian politics since 1957, after several centuries of colonial rule. Although the country has achieved admirable socio-economic progress, the ethnic Indians situation has somewhat remained backward compared to the Malay and Chinese communities. The objective of this article is to examine how ethnic Indians recognize their ethnic identity based on self perception of ethnic status and social upliftment and self assessment of the values of globalization that affect their thinking and opinions. **Approach:** The study employs a qualitative analysis of the data derived through open and close-ended questions posted on several social media forums (face book twitter and emails) frequented by ethnic Indians. **Results:** The findings reveal that there was increased dissatisfaction among ethnic Indians regarding the status of their ethnicity and aspects of their social upliftment within the Malaysian polity. The analysis on how they perceive the values of globalization shows increased appreciation of values such as human rights, cultural rights, human security, freedom and right for social upliftment, but at the same time the analysis illustrates high level of discontentment on the actual achievements of these values. **Conclusion:** Therefore this study concludes that the recent socioeconomic and value changes have influenced how ethnic Indian perceives their ethnicity in the context of a multiethnic mix. Future studies into Indian ethnicity may explore aspects such as the changing ethnic worldviews, affects of human mobility and social ethnic conflicts.

Key words: Ethnic relations, ethnic Indians, ethnic perception, social upliftment

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic studies deal with interdisciplinary study of radicalized peoples in the world in relation to ethnicity. The post-Second World War period witnessed the emergence of numerous ethnic tensions and conflicts throughout the world, some even exacerbating to protracted violence conflicts over several decades. In the Malaysian context, ethnicity or plural society were shaped intentionally by the British to ensure the efficacy of their 'divide and rule' policy which was put in place much earlier than 1957, when Malaya became a nation-state (Lim *et al*., 2009). This trend continued when 'cultural pluralism' was adopted as the social model for the newly independent Malaya. This model was chosen based on the realization that the socio-economic and geographical divide among the three major races, namely the indigenous Muslim-Malays, ethnic Chinese and Indians, was just too wide for any kind of meaningful integration model to be successfully applied. This situation further exacerbated with the ethnic riots on 13th May 1969 (Lim *et al*., 2009). Subsequently, in its aftermath, blaming economic disparity as the root cause of the riots, the ethnic Malay-led government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP). The policy promoted the Malays-first affirmative action plan that benefited the Malays in many ways but categorically left out others, especially the economically backward Indians. Decades of neglect has resulted in many Indians feeling that their welfare and rights have been infringed by the dominant majority. Despite being founder partners of the country and having being involved in commodity and service driven economy for many decades, the Indians never

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really succeeded in elevating their economic status. Based on this backdrop, substantial scholarly work on the subject of ethnicity in Malaysia has been based on the perspectives of race-based integration, majority-minority discourses and economic development. Nevertheless, departing from tradition, this study has attempted to examine how ethnic Indians recognize their own ethnic identity based on self perception of their ethnic status and social upliftment and self assessment of the values of globalization that affect their thinking and opinions. This threefold objective attempts to decipher the broader picture of Indian ethnicity, as seen by them in an increasingly globalised world and within an asymmetrical multiethnic framework.

The role of ethnicity as an inclusive phenomenon in the development of nation-state has been widely studied worldwide, more so in regions where there exist ethnic conflicts and plural societies. Ethnicity generally refers to a group of people whose members identify with each other through common heritage, often consisting of common language, culture, shared religion and ideology that stresses common ancestry. The emergence of ethnic conflicts in regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet (in China), Acheh (in Indonesia) and Tamils (in Sri Lanka) have generated wide research interests among political and security analysts in the study of ethnicity, especially from a constructivist point of view. In the case of Malaysia, the discourse of ethnicity generally falls in the area of 'majority-minority relations'-because it is usually related to issues pertaining to 'development or the lack of development' and usually carries 'national interests and citizen status' ramifications. It can be argued that a major quandary of the modern state is the relationship between minority rights and nation building, which at the origin have been closely related to one and another. Thus, seen in the context of nation building process, the issue has been related to what some scholars call, the 'politics of population' -an issue that also makes the distinction between majority and minority communities in the modern state (Icduygu *et al*., 2008). It was this nation-building process which gradually transformed 'a society from the form of a Gesellschaft, or functional existence, to a Gemeinschaft organization, or a homogeneous community' (Bloom, 1993).

As such, creating a true reconciliation between the nation and the state, between political and ethno-cultural borders, has come to be regarded as the ideal social formation of our modern times (Oommen, 1997). Not surprisingly therefore, the nation-building process in various parts of the world went hand in hand with the elimination of 'undesirable' others who remained outside the mainstream identification category (Connor, 1972). Put differently, the Westphalian principle of nation-state formation also means the delegitimization of sub-national identities and loyalties. One tool that has become a dimension of eliminating the 'others' is migration-an instrument with an integral role in nation-state formation (Preece, 1998). Other scholars like (Sen 1999) argue that development approaches must be based on the processes of 'expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' and how the 'relative weights of different types of freedoms' affect social progress (Sen, 1999; Moorthy *et al*., 2011). Expanding on Sen.'s argument, I argue that minority communities, essentially economically deprived ones, require 'the removal of unfreedoms (defined as the lack of freedoms).'

However, Rodolfo Apthorpe and Krahl (1986) argue that Sen neglected to address the state generated forms of ethnic 'unfreedoms', which he describes it as a paradigmatic blind spot' in conventional ethnic studies. Stavenhagen has proposed an ethno development argument that emphasizes on policies that respect and legitimize the rights of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples to determine their own political, economic and cultural trajectory (Apthorpe and Krahl, 1986; Hettne, 1990; Clarke, 2001). Ethno development strategy, then, can be conceptualized as development strategy appropriate for ethnic minority groups and where possible, generated from the ethnic minority group themselves. In contrast to (Sen, 1999) switch his units of analyses away from the state, albeit still emphasizing the importance of its role in eliminating 'unfreedoms' and focuses on how development strategies can be employed towards multiethnic configurations within the state. Since Stavenhagen examined the nature and characteristics of conflict between ethnic groups in the process of development, ethno development strategy can be viewed as a conflict resolution strategy for ethnic conflict (Apthorpe and Krahl, 1986).

While each of these approaches has their own strengths to be applied as research framework, they fall short to be termed universal. This article has argued that there is a gap in the literature especially in dealing with Asian communities. The divergent colonial histories, experiences of war and peace, primordial awareness, shared knowledge and the general sense of affinity attributed to being a member of a particular ethnicity makes it impossible to propose a general framework of analysis. In the case of Malaysia, while the ethno development model can be used as a base framework, other parameters such as historical narratives, ethnic dominance or 'feudalism' and Islamisation, which form the integral rubric of ethnicity dynamics, must be

incorporated in the analysis. Therefore the objective of this article is to examine how ethnic Indians recognize their ethnic identity based on (i) self perception of ethnic status, (ii) self perception of social upliftment and (iii) self assessment of the values of globalisation that affect their thinking and opinions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of study area: This is an explorative study on Indian ethnicity based on self assessments. Therefore, this study is restricted to only ethnic Indians in Malaysia, who are social media forum users, above the 20 years age group. Since the medium of interaction for this study is English, speakers of other languages like Malay and Tamil have been categorically omitted from participating. This is unavoidable as most social media forums regularly participated by Indians uses English for interaction. The scope covered in the study is restricted to issues regarding own ethnicity, social upliftment and values of globalization only-the reason being that the study only wanted to capture the pattern of change in perception regarding ethnicity as a result of the inculcation of new values.

Data collection and analysis: The study employs a qualitative analysis on the feedback received from a range of questions regarding three aspects of ethnicity posted on several social media forums for a period of 45 days. Some 33 questions were posed, soliciting feedback regarding ethnic perception, social upliftment and the affects of the values of globalization. When specific terminology or jargons were introduced in the questions, explanations and classifications were provided to facilitate understanding. The study employed a snow balling strategy to solicit as many responses as possible-some 100 responses were received and analyzed. The feedback received was then collated into categories based on the pattern that emerges for the analysis, i.e., through a bottom-up approach. The data is then analyzed and discussed based on these categories.

RESULTS

The feedback received from the questionnaires was collated into two sections. This first discusses the perception on ethnicity and social upliftment based on open and close-ended questions posed to the respondents in the survey. The second section reveals the findings of respondents' self assessment of a set of twelve values illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Self assessment on the statement of values

| Statement of values | Categories (in percentage) | | | |
	Unaware of such values	Does not affect my thinking / opinion	Marginally affect my thinking / opinion	Affects my thinking/ opinion
Everyone is free and we should all be treated in the same way	-	-	-	100
Everyone is equal despite differences in skin colour, sex, religion and language.	-	-	-	100
Everyone has the right to be treated equally by the law.	-	-	-	100
Everyone has the right to social security and to opportunities to develop their skills.	-	-	-	100
Everyone must respect the rights of others, the community and public property.	-	-	-	100
Everyone has the right to share in their community's cultural life		12	25	63
The state/government has the responsibility to ensure the security of the people (personal, social, economy, political and environmental security)	15	15	32	27
The state/government has the responsibility to ensure that policies which are put in place benefit the people (human-centred policies) and not centred on national interests alone.	11	15	34	40
When national/regime interests comes in conflict with human/society interests – than human interest must prevails.	5	13	25	57
Freedom of thought and expression are essential to social media – authorities should not intervene, but they can participate	5	12	18	65
have every right for progress and upliftment and nobody should deny me those rights.	-	-	23	77
I have every right to express my ethnicity without fear of repression and indignation.	7	10	24	59

It is interesting to note that in the first 5 statements of values; on freedom, fair treatment, equality in law, rights for social security and opportunities and the respect for the rights of others-all respondents agree that these values affected their thinking and opinion. In all other statements (except statement 7) there were high percentages of 'marginal affect' and 'affect' categories. The lowest score was for statement 7 (on state/government's responsibility to ensure the security of the people. In this statement, only 59% respondents said that their thinking and opinion have been 'marginal affected' and 'affected'. The tabulation of the findings is illustrated in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Ethnicity: The analysis reveals that all respondents said that ethnicity is important to them and feels conscious of their ethnicity, mainly for the two main reasons: (i) For cultural reason of being affiliated with important civilization and belief systems and (ii) For recognizing themselves as distinctive from other races in a multiethnic setting. The analysis revealed that aspects of language, adherence of customs and practices and the sanctity of religion and places of worship are important aspects of ethnicity. Some 65% of the respondents also said that they felt discriminated against, in work place, for reasons of their ethnicity. These perceptions come from certain practices and procedures in work place that isolate and discourage them from certain actions or inactions. Aspects such as promotions, salary hike, opportunity for training and development, unfair appraisal processes and the existence of 'glass ceiling' were among the reasons cited.

Regarding interactions in public spheres, the analysis shows that 85% respondents said that they do not feel discriminated for reasons of their ethnicity when interacting in public places like government departments, schools, hospitals, malls and restaurants. However, another 15% respondents said that they have experienced discrimination when dealing with specific government departments like the immigration, police and the hospitals. On the question whether their ethnicity affected them either 'positively or negatively' their career progress-some 75% respondents responded negatively. The reasons provided suggest that in certain work settings in government and private sector, their Indian ethnicity has been a contributory factor for discrimination. However, it is interesting to note that only 3% of the respondents said that they felt discriminated against in social interactions with colleagues and neighbours. As such, one could argue that ethnic discrimination in Malaysia is institution-based.

Regarding the use of the social media, the analysis shows that 70% of the respondents indicated that they discuss issues related to ethnicity in the social media platforms, namely face book, blogs and through emails. The reasons given were (i) Information of various types and from various sources could be exchanged with greater speed and frequencies, (ii) Opinions and viewpoints can be more freely expressed and exchange and (iii) Due to its anonymity and non-surveillance feature. On the question whether information traded over the social media influenced their thinking and opinions regarding ethnicity, some 65% respondents agreed that it has affected them. Among the four major issues (in order of importance) discussed in the social media were (i) Activities, (ii) Entertainment and games, (iii) Ethnicity and religion and (iv) World issues.

Social upliftment: To a question how they would describe the social and development situation of Indians in Malaysia twenty years ago, some 73% respondents said that they are 'still backward' in economic progress and 27% respondents said that the community have experienced 'marginal improvement.' There are no responses indicating that the Indian community's socioeconomic levels have improved. The Indians' economic backwardness was further exacerbated in the late 1980's and early 1990's when plantations slowly gave way to industrialization and the remaining plantation scene was replaced by immigrant Indonesian labourers. As a result, many Indians left the plantations to seek employment and domicile in urban areas. However with no proper skills or access to retraining, many of them ended up as menial workers-a scene which is clearly evident today when one walks through government or private establishments. The increase in actual cost of living and coupled with the fragmentation of estates has resulted in more than 1200 plantation workers losing their jobs between 1971 and 1975. This period also registered an increase of one percent in the number of Indians living below the poverty line (Tate, 2008; Moorthy and Selvadurai, 2010).

Regarding the 'current' Indian social and development situation, only 34% respondents said the community is 'still backward' and another 66% respondents said that the condition has 'improved'. This analysis indicated that the general perception has been that the Indians' social and development conditions have improved over the last 20 years. However, it should be noted that no respondents said that the Indian conditions have 'improved significantly.' As such, it can be argued that despite a general perception of

improvement as a result of the country's overall progress, these improvements are far from significant to suggest any kind of substantial progress among the Indians. On the question regarding the role of stakeholders in addressing Indian related issues, some 85% of respondents feel that the Indian situation has resulted from systemic neglect especially from the authorities. They feel that upliftment from the present conundrums can only come about with governmental initiatives coupled with concerted efforts from the civil society and religious entities. It is therefore argued that the Indian community is still largely dependent of the government for their upliftment.

Values of globalization: A set of twelve values were proposed for self assessment by the respondents. This includes values such as human rights, justice, equity, communal respect, dignity and government responsibility, regime interests Vs. human interests, social media and social upliftment. The tabulation of the findings is illustrated in Table 1.

Human rights: The first five statements refer to several aspects of human rights, which include (i) freedom, (ii) equal treatment, (ii) equality before law, (iv) social security and the right for development and (v) the right for respect. The figure in Table 1 reveals that all respondents agree that these values have affected their thinking and opinions. This analysis also shows that respondents are aware of their rights as humans, similar to the rights expounded by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This declaration expounds that what every human being needs to live a healthy and fulfilled life and to participate fully in society. This spirit is reflected in three characteristics- (i) Universal (which apply to everyone equally), (ii) Inalienable (cannot be removed from people) and (iii) Indivisible (they are interconnected-thus failure to protect one right may cause the abuse of other rights) (HRW, 1995). Over the last several decades, there has been increased awareness world over regarding human rights, especially in the aftermath of the brutality of the Second World War.

Cultural rights: It is a part of human rights that aims at assuring the enjoyment of culture and its components in conditions of equality, human dignity and non-discrimination. They are rights related to themes such as language, cultural and artistic production, participation in cultural life, cultural heritage, intellectual property rights, author's rights, minorities and access to culture, among others (Cultural Rights,

2005).The analysis reveals that 63% of respondents agree that this value has affected their thinking and opinions, while another 25% say that it has 'marginally' affected their thoughts. As such, cultural right has been deemed very important by the respondents. It noteworthy that 12% of respondents said that this value do not affect their thinking. One probable reason for this perception is that the process of enculturalisation through education and social interactions over several decades has somewhat diluted the recognition for cultural affinity.

Human security: It is a new movement in international relations that pushes for intense promotion and greater respect for human life in all spheres of human endeavours. It suggests that the concept of security should be expanded to cover aspects like economic security, food security, environmental security, personal security, community security, political security and health security (Baranovich and Moorthy, 2010). Regarding government's responsibility to provide security of the people (personal, social, economy, political and environmental security-item 7), the analysis shows that 27% of respondents said that this value affect their thinking, with another 32% being affected marginally. This awareness on human security increased after the release of the UNDP Report on Human Development in 1994 that have further elaborated the categories within human security. However, it is also interesting note that 15% of respondents were unaware of the existence of this value-it is very likely that these respondents may still construe security purely from the national security angle. Similarly, with regards to item 8-the value regarding human centered policies, some 74% respondents have indicated that this value fully and marginally affected their thinking. This high percentage shows that respondents have heighten awareness of the current push for greater 'human security' initiatives by the international community. This awareness further manifested on item 9 (on the statement that human and society interests should take precedent to national interests). The 83% score has indicated that respondents overwhelmingly feel that human security should be the primary concern and responsibility of the state.

Freedom of thought and expression: This refers to the freedom of an individual to hold or consider a fact, viewpoint, or thought, independent of others' viewpoints. This right is considered an important part of the human rights law. The analysis reveals that 65% of the respondents said that this value affected their

thinking, with another 18% being affected marginally. In concert with the other aspects of human rights mentioned earlier, respondents feel that such freedom is the necessary and rudimentary expression of human rights. However, the data also shows that 12% remained unaffected by this value, with another 5% respondents totally unaware of this value. For this, one could argue that the greater economic development and social mobility enjoyed by most Malaysian in the last 20 years, have made the expression of freedom more elusive.

Social upliftment: On the statement that social upliftment is an inalienable right of all and nobody should deny it (item 11), 77% responded that this value fully affected them, with another 23% being marginally affected. This high percentage indicated that all respondents strongly feel that social upliftment is an absolute right of humans and nobody or no systems should obstruct any person from achieving the upliftment that he/she desires. The study argues that decades of institutionalized discrimination have resulted in such a strong stance in favour of this value. The subsequent item 12 which expounds the right to express ethnicity without fear of repression and indignation, has further strengthened the previous statement, with 59% responded that this value fully affected them and with another 24% being marginally affected. However, it should be noted that 10% of the respondents said that this value does not affect them, with another 7% were unaware of such a value. This shows that, if reflected in a bigger spectrum, some portion of ethnic Indians is less concerned about the expression of their ethnicity. The literature regarding immigrant communities also suggests similar findings-centuries of assimilation dilute the need to express ethnic characteristics.

CONCLUSION

There is an increased level of awareness among ethnic Indians on the need to express of their ethnic identities. The study also shows that there is heighten dissatisfaction regarding the status of their ethnicity and aspects of their social upliftment – with a majority of them citing governmental neglect as the main cause of the problem. There is also an increase in the awareness and appreciation of values of globalization, with a high level of discontentment on the actual achievements of these values. It can be implied that relative deprivation of socioeconomic inducements have increased the level discontentment of ethnic Indians and the values

expounded by globalisation has influenced their reasoning regarding their ethnicity and their future in the multiethnic society. Future studies may expand the corpus of knowledge on Indian ethnicity in areas such as the changing ethnic worldviews, affects of human mobility and social ethnic conflicts.

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