

## **THE TAMIL EXPERIENCE IN BRITISH MALAYA: PLANTATION VERSES MISSIONARY SCHOOLS, 1951-1957<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Through this analysis, one will come to discern the continuing marginalization of the Tamil community in British and post-colonial Malaya/Malaysia through answering the question of: “Why is the Tamil community still left behind in Malaysia’s socio-economic framework?” This will be achieved through the explanation of identity formation, religion, missionary and plantation educational systems, the role of English language attainment, and interactions between Tamils and more prosperous Indian groups. The intertwinement of these frameworks contributes to the further marginalization of the Tamil community; marginalization from the colonial era to the contemporary period will enter full circle. Through comprehension of the roots of Tamil marginalization, as seen through the colonial era, one can propose solutions to educational access for the community today.

**Key Words:** *Tamil, diaspora, marginalization, education, Malaysia, colonial, post-colonial*

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**Introduction:** Education is the single most important factor influencing the socio-economic, cultural and ethical growth and development of a community. The same must hold true for the Indian community in Malaysia. The majority of Malaysian children in the National and Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> This is a shortened version of the author’s 2015 double MA/MSc dissertation for Columbia University and the London School of Economics titled, *Satu Malaysia?: Missionary Schools and the Roots of Tamil Marginalization in the Malaysian Education System, 1951-1957*. **Note:** Satu Malaysia (One Malaysia in English) is a political campaign started by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak in 2010. It calls for the country to emphasize ethnic harmony, national unity, and sound governance. It is utilized to promote notions of equality within and outside the nation. These views can be contradicted through analysis of economic, political, and social entities and relationships between the various ethnic groups during the colonial era to contemporary era.

school systems are benefiting from the government's educational programmes. However, this does not appear to be the case with the Indian children from both the National and Tamil school systems.<sup>2</sup>

One marker of potential success for any given community is education. It is no secret that through education, an individual can better oneself, their community, and overall society. In terms of educational and economic opportunities, the affirmative action policies succeeding the 1969 ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur<sup>3</sup> have benefited the Malay community immensely. Comprehensively, despite the odds against them, the Chinese community has remained advantaged in the economic sector as well. Monetary advantages assist the Chinese community when they must study abroad or pay higher tuition fees for domestic higher education. As R. Santhiram and Cynthia Joseph<sup>4</sup> exhibit, Malaysia's Tamil community has received the brunt of these affirmative action policies, thus becoming further marginalized in Malaysian society. The appropriation of blame for Tamil marginalization, however, does not only dwell within the realm of the contemporary era. To a large extent, Tamil marginalization within the educational system of Malaysia was contextualized during the colonial era.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Tamil marginalization has been an ongoing process with deep roots from the advent of the community's migration to becoming a settled and permanent Malayan/Malaysian<sup>6</sup> minority group.

This work seeks to consolidate the framework of education and marginalization as seen through the experience of the Tamil community in British Malaya from 1951-1957. By discussing the political context and ethnic relations of the 1950s in Malaya, a conversation about missionary schools on the peninsula will be enrolled. The next section will analyze the intersection of British missionaries and their role in educating the Chinese and Tamil communities. One significant question asks: Were the Tamils left on the back-burner of the education system of missionary schools? By looking at the role of language and religion, this section will evaluate the place of Tamils in these missionary schools. Finally one can look to the influence that the British colonial

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<sup>2</sup> R. Santhiram, *Education of Minorities: The Case of Indians in Malaysia*, (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: CHILD, 1999), p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Kia Soong Kua, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969*, (Selangor: Suaram, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Santhiram, *Education of Minorities*; Cynthia Joseph, "It is So Unfair Here...It is So Biased: Negotiating the Politics of Ethnic Identification in Ways of Being Malaysian Schoolgirls," *Asian Journal* 7:1 (2006), pp. 53-73. ; Cynthia Joseph, "Negotiating discourses of gender, ethnicity and schooling: ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls in Malaysia," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 14:1 (2006), pp. 35-53.

<sup>5</sup> The colonial era spans from the early nineteenth century to 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Malayan is the term applied for all inhabitants of British Malaya, while Malaysian, is utilized to describe the citizens of contemporary independent Malaysia.

plantation system had on the Tamil community and compare this to the missionary school experience.

The investigation of missionary education in British Malaya is essential to formulating a timeline of Tamil marginalization in the nation during the colonial to post-colonial era. Understanding the plight of the community during the contemporary era can be analyzed through its colonial past. Historians, anthropologists, other social scientists, as well as, lawmakers, government officials, activists, and non-governmental organizations like CHILD<sup>7</sup>, can utilize this comprehension in promoting the stories of the overlooked Tamil community. This in turn will help build not only the Tamil community and bring them out of poverty, but also, Malaysian society overall. Contemporary Malaysia often places spotlight on larger political and socio-economic issues pertaining to ethnic relations between the Malay and Chinese communities. Narratives concerning the marginalization of the Tamil community in the country are usually proclaimed to be “Tamil problems.” Hence, the ills found within the community are written off as a problem of the Tamil community. This account furthers the marginalization of the community because it suppresses change for the community within the larger context of Malaysian society overall. By giving a historical examination of the Tamils and the education systems of British colonial Malaya, analysis can be drawn on how marginalization developed within the community and how the roots of marginalization still affect the community today. The hierarchies placed on the various communities during the colonial era can still be felt to this day in contemporary Malaysia showcasing that issues pertaining to the Tamil community are not just “Tamil problems” but societal problems.

Historians and social scientists such as Andrew C. Willford, Thomas Sowell, Lian Kwen Fee, Susan Ellen Ackerman, and Ravindra K. Jain<sup>8</sup> shed light on the historical relevance of the Tamil and/or broader Indian community in colonial and contemporary Malaysia. Issues such as

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<sup>7</sup> CHILD is a Tamil-Malaysian NGO which was formed in the 1990s to promote educational programs for young Tamil school children. On the website it states, “CHILD conducts Preschool, RAW (Reading and Writing), SLP (Slow Learners), CITS (Comprehensive Integrated Tamil School) and CARE (Post Primary) programmes.” For more information visit: <http://www.child.org.my/>

<sup>8</sup> Susan Ellen Ackerman, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).; Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).; Kwen Fee Lian, “The Political and Economic Marginalization of Tamils in Malaysia,” *Asian Studies Review* 26:3 (2002), pp. 309-329.; Thomas Sowell, *Migrations and Cultures: a world view*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996).; Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity & the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006). **Note:** These works come from a range of social science discourse. For instance, Lian Kwen Fee is a sociologist; Thomas Sowell is an economist and Andrew C. Willford is an anthropologist.

migration, identity formation in terms of religion, culture, language, and educational access are all discussed. Other issues examined are economic placement within colonial and post-colonial society and political marginalization based on ethnicity.

The anthropologist Willford, for instance, discusses identity formation in relation to Hinduism in contemporary Malaysia. Through a brief analysis of interactions between working class Tamils (descendants of plantation workers) and middle class Indians (Tamils and others), Willford makes a statement concerning Tamil working class displacement from Malaysian society at large. Through the engulfment of Hinduism, these Tamils purport the entrapment of a marginalized “cage of freedom.” From the fallout of the 1969 ethnic riots, the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971 promoted and still promotes the “equalizing” balance of the various ethnic communities in Malaysia through economic retribution and educational access. Yet the Indian community, specifically the Tamils, receive the disadvantages of the NEP, which goes unnoticed by the larger political entities of Malaysia. Drawing from the colonial era and the intersection of religion as a marker of identity formation (i.e.-the tension of Malays recognition, or lack of, concerning Hinduism on their own cultural history), Willford analyzes how the Tamil community seeks to break free of stereotyping and marginalization yet also remains trapped in its cycle. Another anthropologist, Ackerman, also alludes to this intersection between religion, Tamil identity formation, and broader marginalization. Unlike Willford, Ackerman and other authors of the edited volume, draw on the revival of not only Hinduism but also Christianity and “Chinese religions” such as Buddhism and Confucianism. These revivals are in correlation with the rising Islamization of the Malay majority. Through religion, the various ethnic groups, particularly the minorities, seek to gain a voice within the hierarchical framework of Malaysian society.

The economist Sowell gives a thorough history of Tamil migration to the region during the colonial era. Overviewing the indentureship period, Sowell views the sources of Tamil marginalization in British Malaya and contemporary Malaysia. He notes the contrast between the Indian community in Malaysia to the communities found in East Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific such as Fiji. In the latter regions, the Indian communities have prospered; the most common story of South Asian migration across the globe. However, in Malaysia, various Indian communities’ stories are just the opposite. One thing is for certain, whether prosperous or not, the Indian communities across the globe face stereotyping, scapegoating, and marginalization since they are seen as outsiders to the broader communities in which they inhabit. Similar notions in Western nations can be utilized to comprehend this marginalization when statements such as “They are taking away our jobs!” or “They make all the money in the country!” are applied by the majority population. The sociologist, Fee, also emphasizes these notions in his discussion of the political and economic marginalization of the Tamils in Malaysia; while Jain gives insight into the experience of the Tamil community on plantations by discussing the

economic, social, cultural, and educational connotations surrounding the plantation and all aspects of Tamil life.

For the purposes of this investigation, missionary annual reports, colonial documents, and census documents from SOAS-University of London, the British Library, and the Institute of Education will be utilized for emphasis. Official colonial documents from the British Library discuss the layout for the controversial Malayan Union of 1946 which established notions of citizenship in the British colony. Though it was disassembled in 1948, the initial framework surrounding Malayan citizenship would play a role in identity formation and affirmative action policies of later decades. Annual reports on missionary work and mission schools from SOAS-University of London and the Institute of Education, discuss the work of Protestant mission workers in peninsular British Malaya. The documents from SOAS-University of London, which discuss the years 1951-1957, showcase mission work during the tail-end of the British colonial era. Thus, these documents purport an enhanced effort amongst mission workers to foster religious education among the minority ethnic groups of Malaya, namely the Chinese and Indian communities. They also advertise that missions were grappling with the future hand-over of the colony into Malayan hands and the affects this would have on their ministries. The documents from the Institute of Education refer to British schools post-independence and will be consulted to inform but will not be cited.

These documents are rich in information pertaining to the various targeted Chinese communities in British Malaya with little insistence given to the Indian communities. It is hinted at throughout the documents that the various Chinese communities were more willing to convert due to their desire to obtain English education. English, to them, would come in handy in the years prior to independence, as well as, once independence was achieved. Education in Chinese and English would enable identity formation on their own terms, while also giving them a sound footing on a language which would help them in terms of education and economics in the years to come. The Indian, specifically Tamil, community does not receive this attention, however. Why is this so? Why did missionaries pay less attention to the Tamil community? This work seeks to make an original investigative contribution to open discussion regarding missionaries and their lack of attention to the marginalized group.

Through this analysis, one will come to discern the continuing marginalization of the Tamil community in British and post-colonial Malaya/Malaysia through answering the question of: "Why is the Tamil community still left behind in Malaysia's socio-economic framework?" This will be achieved through the explanation of identity formation, religion, missionary and plantation educational systems, the role of English language attainment, and interactions between Tamils and more prosperous Indian groups. The intertwining of these frameworks contributes to the further marginalization of the Tamil community; marginalization from the colonial era to the contemporary period will enter full circle. Through comprehension of the roots of Tamil

marginalization, as seen through the colonial era, one can propose solutions to educational access for the community today.

**The Political Background, Ethnic Relations, and Missionary Schools:** Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country in which the government has adopted strong affirmative action policies with the purpose of restricting the socio-economic positions of its ethnic groups. Bumiputera (Malays and Indigenous) are the largest ethnic group, comprising 67.3% of the total population. Chinese and Indian residents represent 24.5% and 7.2% of the total population, respectively. Currently, the Malaysian government gives preferential treatment in education, employment, and ownership to its majority ethnic group: Bumiputera.<sup>9</sup> In education, for example, such policies include scholarships, educational subsidies and loans, quotas, and exclusive admission to specific educational institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Affirmative action policies in a variety of countries<sup>11</sup> call for the socio-economic improvement of disadvantaged groups in a given nation. Usually minority groups are associated with these policies since the frameworks of institutionalized discrimination have contributed to their overall detriments within a given society. In contemporary Malaysia the case of affirmative action policies is just the opposite. It is the majority Malay community that benefits from favorable economic and educational policies. Notions of the majority being depleted of opportunities in Malaysia are at the core of affirmative action. In many ways these policies have failed since many lower income Malays still do not reap the benefits of this system. The vast majority of Malays that gain are of the upper and middle class.<sup>12</sup> Thus many Malays of the lower class still do not have access to the benefits of the system creating tension towards the further marginalized minority groups: the Chinese and Indian communities.

The legacy of these affirmative action policies stem from the political context, as well as, ethnic relation structure of the 1950s in Malaya. Tensions between the majority and minorities have

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<sup>9</sup> Husaina Banu Kenayathulla, "Ethical Issues in the Malaysian Education System," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2014), pp. 1-15 (p. 1). **Note:** The author gives her own brief of the term Bumiputera in her notes. Bumiputera means "sons of the soil." It is a political term given to ethnic Malays, who share cultural, linguistic, and religious commonalities with Indonesian Malays (from the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan). Indigenous groups such as the Orang Asli (original people or aboriginal) of the peninsula and others of Sabah and Sarawak are also given this term.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* **Note:** The author cites the works of: C. Joseph, *The education of diverse student populations: Ethnicities and education in Malaysia: Difference, inclusions and exclusions*, (Netherlands: Springer, 2008).; and S. Pong, "Access to education in Peninsular Malaysia: Ethnicity, social class and gender," *Information Analyses*, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Western nations such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada come to mind concerning affirmative action policies that encourage uplifting disadvantaged minorities. Other examples are India and Nepal.

<sup>12</sup> Kenayathulla, "Ethical Issues in the Malaysian Education System."

been in motion since the advent of the colonial era when the British imported Indian and Chinese indentured servants from the late nineteenth century through early twentieth century. The political context can be analyzed from the controversial 1946 Malayan Union (MU) which in turn influenced the politics of declining colonial rule in British Malaya.

The MU of 1946 was a direct result of the end of World War II. The successor to British Malaya, the MU, set to unify the Straits Settlements<sup>13</sup>, the Federated Malay States<sup>14</sup>, and the Unfederated Malay States<sup>15</sup> under a consolidated government, showcasing the onset of the 1950s political context. The MU is often considered controversial due to the short time that the British government went about obtaining approval from Malay sultans. Within the span of a month, approval from all nine sultans<sup>16</sup> was gathered. British officials threatened to blame the sultans for collaborating with the Japanese during the Occupation<sup>17</sup>. This accusation would enable the British to dethrone said sultans, thus, the sultans approved of the MU reluctantly which still stripped them considerably of their power.<sup>18</sup> Another aspect of the MU which influenced the ethnic relations of the 1950s surrounded the concept of citizenship. In regards to a citizenship policy, the MU stated:

The policy of His Majesty's Government is to promote a broad based citizenship which will include, without discrimination of race or creed, all who can establish a claim, by reason of birth or a suitable period of residence, to belong to the country. It is proposed, therefore, to create by Order in Council a Malayan Union Citizenship. The following persons will acquire Malayan Union Citizenship: (a) persons born in the territory of the Union or of the Colony of Singapore; (b) persons who at the date on which the Order in Council becomes operative have been ordinarily resident in those territories for ten years out of the preceding fifteen. (In calculating the fifteen years' period, the period of Japanese occupation will be disregarded.)...Those acquiring Malayan Union citizenship otherwise than by birth will be required to affirm allegiance to the Malayan Union.<sup>19</sup>

Citizenship would be granted to all ethnic groups in British Malaysia. Thus Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous groups, Eurasians, and Europeans all had equal footing in regards to citizenship policies.

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<sup>13</sup> Singapore, Penang, and Malacca.

<sup>14</sup> Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang.

<sup>15</sup> Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu. **Note:** Footnotes 13-15 are taken from: *Indians in Malaya: Status and duties of Governor*. Coll 108/211, General of Malayan Union of Singapore, File 74: British Library. London, UK.

<sup>16</sup> Nine states have sultans: the former Federated and Unfederated states.

<sup>17</sup> Japanese Occupation of British Malaya took place during WWII.

<sup>18</sup> Omar Affrin, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay concepts of democracy and community, 1945-1950*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1933), cited in Kenichi Goto, *Tensions of Empire: Japan and Southeast Asia in the Colonial and Postcolonial World*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> *Malayan Union and Singapore: Statement of Policy on Future Constitution*. MSS. Eur.D., 1946, File 545, Document 41: British Library. London, UK.

APPENDIX.  
MALAY, CHINESE AND INDIAN POPULATION OF MALAYA.

1931 CENSUS

	Area Sq.Ms	Malays	% of Total	Chinese	% of Total	Indians	% of Total
Singapore	217	71,177	12.5	421,821	74.3	51,019	9.0
Penang	388	118,832	33.1	176,518	49.0	58,020	16.1
Malacca	720	95,307	51.0	65,179	34.9	23,238	12.4
<b>SEMI-INDIAN SETTLEMENTS</b>	1,325	285,316	25.6	663,518	59.6	132,277	11.9
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Perak	7,983	272,546	35.6	325,527	42.5	159,152	20.8
Selangor	3,156	122,868	23.1	241,351	45.3	155,924	29.2
Negeri Sembilan	2,550	87,195	37.3	92,371	39.5	50,100	21.4
Pahang	14,000	111,122	61.7	52,291	29.0	14,820	8.2
<b>FEDERATED MALAY STATES</b>	27,689	593,731	34.7	711,540	41.5	379,996	22.2
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Johore	7,500	234,422	46.4	215,076	41.4	51,038	10.1
Kedah	3,800	286,262	66.6	78,415	18.2	50,824	12.0
Perlis	316	39,831	80.9	6,500	13.2	966	2.0
Kelantan	5,870	330,774	91.2	17,612	4.9	6,752	1.9
Trengganu	6,000	164,564	91.5	13,254	7.4	1,371	0.8
<b>UNFEDERATED MALAY STATES</b>	23,486	1,055,853	69.2	330,857	21.7	110,951	7.3

Figure 1. Census Document from 1931

As seen from Figure 1, the census document from 1931 shows the population of the three main ethnic groups in British Malaya. In Singapore, Penang, Perak, Selangor, and Negri Sembilan, the Chinese were in the majority of the overall population; while Indian communities had the smallest numbers. These numbers would remain similar during the 1940s hinting to the fact that the large number of Chinese would worry the Malay majority, especially during the period of the MU, since citizenship meant that minority groups would permanently become a part of the socio-cultural structure of Malayan society. They would have to be considered in larger questions encompassing economic, educational, and political aspects of identity formation and nation-state building. These concerns carried to the Federation of Malaya in 1948<sup>21</sup>, as well as, into the 1950s-1960s when British Malaya was at the end of the colonial era and the advent of independence. These concerns parallel the history of ethnic relations and its concentration on the tensions between the Malays and Chinese.

<sup>20</sup> *Indians in Malaya: Status and duties of Governor*. Coll 108/211, General of Malayan Union of Singapore, File 74: British Library. London, UK.

<sup>21</sup> The Federation of Malaya of 1948-1963 replaced the Malayan Union of 1946-1948. Due to Malay nationalist opposition to the diminished power of the Malay sultans, the British restored symbolic power to them through the Federation.



This was the state of politics and ethnic relations during the increased missionary work of 1951-1957. The educational work of Protestant Missions such as Synod<sup>22</sup> directly correlates to ethnic relations between the majority and minorities. Since emphasis surrounded and still surrounds the Malay and Chinese ethnicities, missionaries focused their attention on the Chinese since they had access to them.<sup>23</sup> A report by the Presbyterian Synod Church from 1956 alludes to ethnic relations stating:

A report on a field should begin with a picture of the background against which the life of the Church is lived. In the Federation of Malaya from the pinpricks of Communist terrorist activity, the people were quietly looking forward to Independence Day (fixed for August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957) and presenting their views on the constitution of the new Malaya to the Constitutional Commission set up by the Government. A great many Chinese look forward to independence with uneasiness, and would say that the present quiet may be the quiet before the storm. One hopes that the fact that the Chinese and Malays are nearly the same in number in the Federation and so anything like civil war would be disastrous will compel the two races to preserve good relations between each other.<sup>24</sup>

The statements of Synod Church showcase “who is who” in the hierarchical sphere of British Malaysia, as well as, concerns surrounding communism and the Chinese. The absence of a mention concerning the Indian communities speak volumes in terms of educational goals of British missionaries, showcasing clues enveloping inattention to Tamils and the ongoing marginalization of the group. This evidence suggests that the Tamils would ultimately be left on the back-burner of the education systems of missionary schools within the grander political and ethnic relations context. They were the least significant to the maintenance of colonial rule prior to independence and former mother-daughter country relations after. The balance had to be maintained between Malay and Chinese groups rather than Tamils who were often confined to the networks of plantation life.

Were the Tamils left on the back-burner of the missionary education system of 1951-1957 in British Malaya? In the development of an answer concerning this question, one has to look towards missionaries and their role in educating the minority groups on the peninsula, as well as, interactions between missionaries and individual minorities. Based on the larger political connotations and ethnic relations context of the 1950s, British missionaries had better access to the Chinese. Freedom of interaction, as well as, eagerness on the part of the Chinese to convert to Christianity, for the benefits of English education, enabled both British missionaries and Chinese minority groups to form interpersonal relationships. What about the Tamil Indian minority? The

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<sup>22</sup> *Annual Reports from the Mission Fields*. PCE-Box 14, Presbyterian Church of England, FMC Archive Series, Box 14; Files 1-12: Annual Field Reports 1948-1960. SOAS University, London, UK

<sup>23</sup> In order for the British to maintain colonial control over British Malaya they were required to leave the Malay population within the realm of Malay sultans and Islamic religious influence.

<sup>24</sup> *Annual Reports from the Mission Fields*. PCE-Box 14, Presbyterian Church of England, FMC Archive Series, Box 14; Files 8, Annual Report 1956/15, page 3. SOAS University, London, UK

realm of plantation society played a major factor in British missionaries' efforts to educate the Tamil community. Rather than the relative freedom that some Chinese communities experienced during the colonial era, Tamil indentured servants were confined to a restrictive system of the plantation. British missionaries maintained a relationship of non-interference with colonial plantation owners to "keep the peace." This maintenance would facilitate cooperation between missionaries and other colonial authorities so that missionary efforts could run smoothly within the background of pre-independence Malaya.

The isolationism of the plantation must be more thoroughly examined to understand the lack of effort taken up by British missionaries when focusing on the Tamil community, which is in contrast to how they approached the Chinese minorities. Selvakumaran implies this with his discussion of the plantation system, marginalization, and Tamil basic needs in Malayan/Malaysian society by stating:

In the case of immigrant workers and their families, such a tendency towards discrimination is heightened by their location in plantations and mines in remote and isolated parts of the country where socialization and cultural institutions are unavailable. In Sahli's view, cultural marginalization becomes a concrete reality, engendering a dramatic situation in which the marginalized segments of the population, unable to gain access to the technical progress of the country as a whole...find themselves ostracized from the benefits of cultural progress too (Sahli, 1981: 498).<sup>25</sup>

The Tamils were ostracized from the benefits of British missionary education due to the lack of interest surrounding Tamil marginalization by society at large.<sup>26</sup> Since British missionaries were still within the domain of the colonial system, they took part in the neglect of the Tamil community.

Non-interference concerning the relationship between plantation owners and missionaries, as well as, the preservation of the Tamil labor supply contributed to the absence of British missionaries' contributions to educating the Tamil minority. In British Malaya, the plantation system, like others found around the world during the colonial era, included psychological elements of coercion and control between owners and workers. Ramachandran quotes Wolf by stating:

Whenever the plantation has arisen, whether it was imported from the outside, it has destroyed antecedent cultural norms and imposed its own dictates, sometimes by persuasion, sometimes by compulsion, yet

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<sup>25</sup> Ramachandran Selvakumaran, *Indian Plantation Labour in Malaysia*, (Kuala Lumpur: S. Abdul Majeed & Co, 1994), p. 6. Note: The author cites: Zoubir Sahli, "The phenomenon of marginalization in underdeveloped rural communities," *Third World Quarterly*, 3:3 (1981), pp. 489-498.

<sup>26</sup> Society at large refers to British colonial society during 1951-1957. It is hard for minority groups to have solidarity for the benefits of the colonial system when all groups are marginalized to some extent during the colonial era. After independence, this comes to refer to the majority and other minority groups, including other Indian groups, who are still within the process of identity formation and nation-state building in post-independent Malaysia.

always in conflict with the cultural definitions of the affected population. The plantation, therefore is also an instrument of force, wielded to create and maintain a class-structure of workers and owners, connected hierarchically by a staff-line of overseers and manager.<sup>27</sup>

Those in power on the plantation from the highest position of owner to the manager and staff-line overseer had a tight grip on the conditions of the Tamil community, who made up the vast majority of plantation workers.<sup>28</sup> Illiteracy and isolation was the key to keeping Tamils within the confines of the plantation. Thus, British missionaries were not encouraged nor did they seek to educate this community; in contrast to the various Chinese communities in British Malaya. Notions of the plantation, in regards to Tamil workers, were a relationship of semi-slavery or slavery<sup>29</sup> as compared to slavery in the Americas. Just like the plantation owners of the American South and the Caribbean, plantation owners in British Malaya did not want adequate and decent education for their workers since this would lead to literacy, demands, or workers moving off the plantation all together. The processes of marginalization were connected through the power dynamics of owners and the control they had over the Tamil community. This example demonstrates both the neglect and the lack of interest on the part of British missionaries since those who wanted to could not gain access to the community. Some missionaries, also being part of the colonial system, could have been indifferent to the Tamil community since the community (though not completely absent) was not at the forefront of ethnic relations and politics of 1950s pre-independence Malaya.

Plantation systems engulfed Tamil workers within the framework of a “cycle of poverty.” While the Chinese showcased agency within the British missionary educational system, Tamils appeared to be disinterested. British missionaries sought out the Chinese community with conversion and education efforts, but the Chinese were also direct agents, seeking English education and quickly and willingly converting to Christianity. The Indians, specifically Tamils, seemed unresponsive and shrouded within Hinduism. One would think Tamils would seek out conversion due to the oppression of *adi dravida*.<sup>30</sup> However, the isolation of the plantation, colonial ideas surrounding Tamil workers (which British missionaries partook in), and the

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<sup>27</sup> Selvakumaran, *Indian Plantation Labour in Malaysia*. **Note:** The author cites- Eric Wolf, “Specific Aspects of the Plantation System in the New World,” in Eric Wolf (ed.), *The Plantation System of the New World* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1959), p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> Other South Indians such as the Telugu community (originally from Andhra Pradesh in southeastern India) and the Malayalee community (originally from Kerala in southwestern India) also made up the labor force of the plantation system- sometimes as managers and a small minority as workers.

<sup>29</sup> Selvakumaran, *Indian Plantation Labour in Malaysia*. **Note:** References to: Sidney Mintz, “Canamelar: The Subculture of a Rural Sugar Proletariat,” in Julian Steward (ed.), *The People of Puerto Rico*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).; and –“The Folk-Urban Continuum and the Rural Proletarian Community,” *American Journal of Sociology* 59 (2) 1953, pp. 136-143.

<sup>30</sup> The Tamil term for the Untouchable caste or Dalit.

conservation of a semi-slave labor supply, resulted in a mirage of unresponsiveness on the part of Tamils and inattention to the community by missionaries.

Returning to the emphasis of marginalization of the Tamil community within the structure of British missionary schools, attention must be given to the role of language, religion, and identity formation amongst the minority groups of British Malaya to fully understand the intersection between the plantation system and missionary school experience. Language and identity formation went hand in hand with conversion efforts performed by British missionaries in regards to the Chinese community. British missions such as Synod indirectly influenced Chinese identity formation in a pre-independent British Malaya through the allowance of Chinese and English churches and schools. From Synod's Annual Report of 1956 it states:

The main events in the life of the Church in the year under review are Education. The opening of the Presbn.<sup>31</sup> Boys' School Science Block for the Chinese High School. The donation of 10 or more acres of land at the 13<sup>th</sup> MS (equals milestone) on the road from Singapore city to Johore Bahru by Mr. Lee Kong Chian.<sup>32</sup>

The mention of "the Chinese High School" shows the growth of the British missionary educational system regarding the Chinese community. The dedication and agency of the Chinese community can also be analyzed from this same document with the following statement:

English-speaking Church work. -This work will figure in the reports of most of our missionaries. Perhaps all that need to be added is that at a meeting of the Synod Executive in the year the following resolutions were passed:- 1) that in congregations where there are English Services, committees should be able to manage their business. 2) that Synod should approve the formation of membership rolls for them, with the proviso that each place has different needs and courses for development. 3) that Synod, after consultation with the session of each mother church involved, appoint interim-moderators for the English work in each place.<sup>33</sup>

Though this discussion concerns the English work of the church rather than the school system, it does foreshadow the same type of concerns surrounding the emphasis on English language in missionary schools. The importance of English directly shaped identity formation of the Chinese community since identity formation went hand in hand with British missionary work.

The intersection of the three aspects of language, identity, and religion became beneficial to the Chinese. What about the Tamil community? Indians are mentioned sparingly throughout the Synod documents. One example where the Indian community is mentioned includes an Annual Report from 1954 from J.S. Henderson which states:

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<sup>31</sup> Presbyterian.

<sup>32</sup> *Annual Reports from the Mission Fields*. PCE-Box 14, Presbyterian Church of England, FMC Archive Series, Box 14; Files 8, Annual Report 1956/15. SOAS University, London, UK.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Educational work in the form of the English School has also afforded a valuable outlet of service to the Community. The demand for an English education proved so great that in January a second class of children was admitted, bringing the total enrolment to eighty-five, of whom five were Malay, one English, and the remainder Chinese and Indian in almost equal numbers; the boys and girls were roughly in the ration of two to one. A School Board of Managers, with Chinese, English, and Indian members, representing Synod's Education Committee, the Kulai local Town Council, and the neighbouring estates, was formed in July, and negotiations with the Government continue for a suitable piece of land within the perimeter fence on which [a] permanent school building may be erected.<sup>34</sup>

J.S. Henderson's report shows the mention of Indians but it is in brief. The remainder of the documents of the section returns to the heavy priority of the Chinese congregation and schools since that is the missionaries' biggest conversion base. The demand of English amongst the congregation, mainly Chinese members, shows the great desire that the community had in obtaining English which in turn points to the agency that the community had in missionary efforts. The bid for land to build a permanent school building exhibits the investment that British missionaries and the Chinese had together.

The lack of mention regarding the Tamil community demonstrates notions of non-interference, upkeep of the labor supply, and interexchange of language, identity formation, and religion of the various minority groups. Plantation life disabled educational growth due to the psychological confines of the system. Different forms of marginalization developed on the plantation during the colonial system which British missionaries were definitely part of. Selvakumaran illustrates this with a diagram here:

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<sup>34</sup> *Annual Reports from the Mission Fields*. PCE-Box 14, Presbyterian Church of England, FMC Archive Series, Box 14; Files 6, Annual Reports 1954-Malaya: Report from J.S. Henderson, pp. 3-4. SOAS University, London, UK.

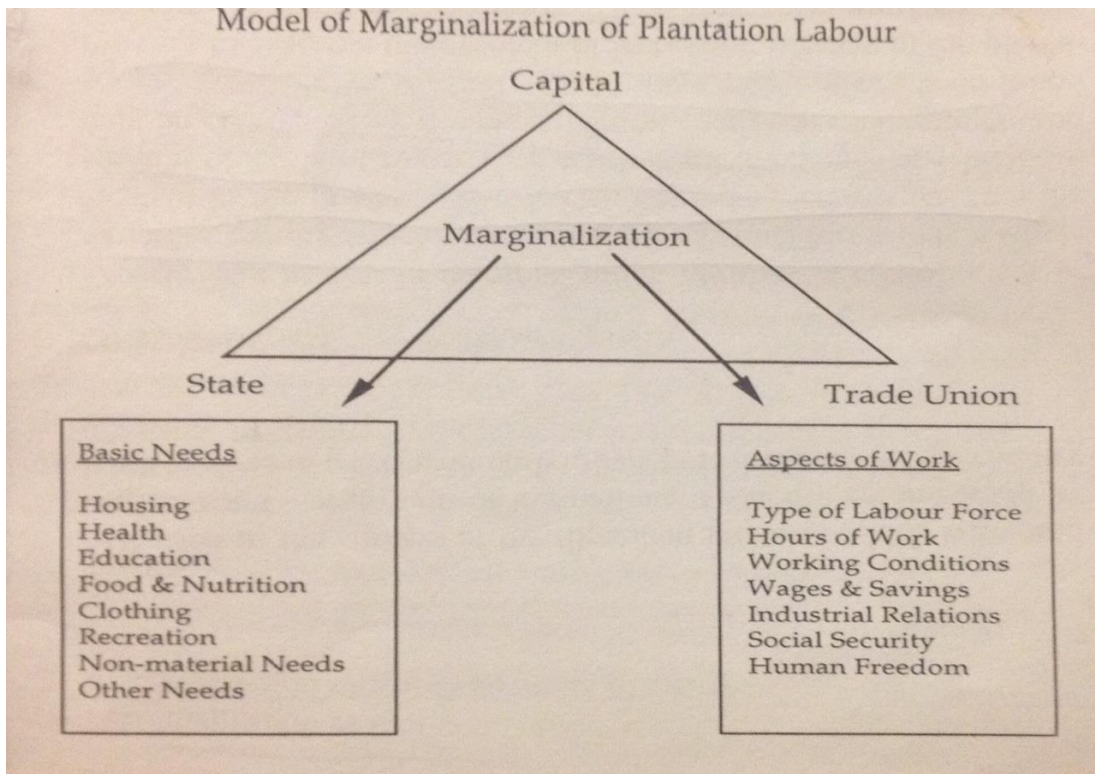


Figure 2. Model of Marginalization of Plantation Labour.

The oppression of the Tamil community and the blockage of their basic needs, one being education, directly correlated and still correlates to the stagnation of the Tamil community in the British Malayan/independent Malaysian educational system. Whereas British missionaries played a role in the progression of Chinese education and identity formation, plantation owners barred the Tamil community from advancement since advancement would not suit the maintenance of the plantation.

**Conclusion:** “Education is the single most important factor influencing the socio-economic, cultural and ethical growth and development of a community.”<sup>36</sup> With this proclamation, Santhiram showcases that education and the growth of the nation-state go hand in hand. During the colonial era, missionaries sought to develop ethnic relations between themselves as colonizers and minority groups as the colonized. However, by focusing on some communities over others, they were maintaining control and order based on divide-and-rule strategies. With the advent of independence, this focus would influence the continuing divide between the various ethnic groups of the peninsula. The Tamil community is continuously marginalized due

<sup>35</sup> Selvakumaran, *Indian Plantation Labour in Malaysia*, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> R. Santhiram, *Education of Minorities*, p. xi.

to the opposing attitudes amongst the various ethnic groups, even other Indians. As Santhiram goes on:

...the better placed Indians have done precious little to further the cause of their less privileged brethren. There are ad hoc groups, NGOs', trade unions and political movements clamoring to help them. But there has never been any united, cohesive approach to addressing the most important, urgent and pressing basic need of the children of the working class-EDUCATION.<sup>37</sup>

Just as plantation schools and missionaries directly and indirectly forsake the basic need of education for the Tamil community, so to do contemporary approaches within Malaysia forget the community's basic need of education.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. xii.

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