



Indianness in Malaysia: Between Racialized Representations and the Cultural Politics of Popular Music

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ABSTRACT. Perspectives based on race or essentialized notions of ethnicity have had remarkable resilience in the study of Malaysia despite their rather dubious use. Undoubtedly, a racialized polity has arisen as a result of the preferential treatment given to those classified under the nativistic politico-legal category *Bumiputera* (indigene). Boundaries are nevertheless more permeable than often admitted by politicians. By turning to the case of Indian Malaysians, I explore how the dominance of racialized perspectives in public discourse in Malaysia renders inconsequential if not invisible the rich and complex interaction between different ethnic groups. I show how dominant representations of Indian Malaysians obscure the significant and distinctive efforts of popular musicians. The state, opposition politicians, and nongovernment organizations tend to represent Indians as a singularly disempowered minority. This concurrence of views affirms the racialized political and social order and diminishes the potential alternatives, if not the challenges, posed by transethnic, hybrid, and other forms of cultural politics. The complexity of Indianness and, indeed, of Malaysian society resists racialized perspectives. This becomes especially clear when we turn to the cultural politics of popular music in Peninsular Malaysia. Young musicians produce work in the genres of rock, hip-hop, reggae, and so forth in Tamil—the most commonly spoken language of Indian origin—as well as in other Malaysian languages. An admixture of rebellion and commercial drive colors their efforts as they capitalize on the enabling aspects of globalization while trying to curb its damaging consequences. As a result of their exposure to—if not familiarity with—different cultures and languages, and through contact, exchange and partnership with musicians of other ethnic backgrounds, Indian Malaysians have forged a distinct musical identity.

KEYWORDS. ethnicity race identity cultural politics popular music Indianness Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Perspectives based on race or essentialized notions of ethnicity have had remarkable resilience in the study of Malaysia despite their rather

dubious use in deepening our understanding of social and cultural life. Nearly three decades ago, Judith Nagata cautioned against such perspectives when she underscored the dynamic character of ethnic identity:

One of the broader messages of this book ... is ... how ephemeral, volatile, and changing the expression of ethnicity can be. Far from being the enduring, immutable, and ancient ... the shape and span of ethnic communities are often shown to be remarkably responsive to the demands and exigencies of a wider set of social conditions. Even within the relatively small territory that is the Malay peninsula and within the short space of approximately one hundred years, the “ethnic” variations are impressive. (Nagata 1979, 252)

Her message has gone largely unheeded as much scholarship in the social sciences produced within and outside Malaysia in the last three decades is shaped by or takes for granted essentialized formulations of ethnicity (Mandal 2004). Social and cultural developments in the country have thus been reduced to an immutable notion of “race,” which is mostly pertinent in the sphere of party politics where its fictional sameness or “rational absurdity”—to borrow from Gilroy (2000, 14)—is realized through much cultural, organizational, and financial mobilization. Although race is a prominent feature of Malaysian society and may not be confined to party politics alone, it does not shape every aspect of life.

In this article, I explore how the dominance of racialized perspectives in public discourse in Malaysia renders inconsequential if not invisible the rich and complex interaction between different ethnic groups. Specifically, I show how dominant representations of Indian Malaysians obscure the significant and distinctive efforts of popular musicians. The state, opposition politicians, and nongovernment organizations tend to represent Indians as a singularly disempowered minority. Although the different advocates of this position are often at odds with each other, they concur when it comes to lamenting the state of the Indians.

This concurrence of views affirms the racialized political and social order and diminishes the potential alternatives, if not the challenges, posed by transethnic, hybrid, and other forms of cultural politics. By cultural politics, I mean both the attribution of politics to elements of culture, as well as taking cultural acts to be significant and transformative forces of a different character from traditional notions of politics, like party politics, elections and so forth. Kahn (1998) offers an exemplary selection of the theoretical and substantive questions that can be subsumed under cultural politics. Given the prevalence of race politics in Malaysia,

especially in electoral politics and the public sector, a cultural politics perspective helps to render meaningful the cultural contact and exchange that are otherwise regarded as marginal if not invisible.

In the pages to follow, I show how the complexity of Indianness and indeed Malaysian society as a whole resists racialized perspectives. Undoubtedly, a fragmented polity has arisen as a result of the preferential treatment given to those classified under the nativistic politico-legal category *Bumiputera* (indigene), within which Malays are numerically and politically dominant. Racialized boundaries are nevertheless more permeable than is often admitted.

The permeability becomes especially clear when we turn to the cultural politics of popular music in Peninsular Malaysia (neither the present critique of race nor the focus on Indians would apply to the states of Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo). Young musicians produce work in the genres of rock, hip-hop, reggae, and so forth in Tamil—the most commonly spoken language of Indian origin—and other Malaysian languages. Their work is in keeping with popular music production that has crossed ethnic boundaries in Malaysia since the 1970s (Lockard 1998, 235-56).

By focusing on Indian Malaysians, this article addresses one of the “three major races” typically identified by the state: the “Malays,” “Chinese,” and “Indians,” in order of numerical and political significance. These race categories are problematic because the three groups are highly differentiated internally and the reliance on numerical strength is not necessarily a measure of a group’s importance. At the same time, a host of different ethnic groups are uniformly regarded as “Others,” namely, the *Orang Asli* (indigenous people), Kadazan, Iban, Bajau, Murut, Dayak and so forth, as well as those of mixed ancestry (such as those categorized “Eurasian,” an amalgam of the words “European” and “Asian”). These groups have not been as politically and historically marginal as the hierarchical categorization or their slim numbers imply.

In the following pages, I explore the terrain of Indian identity by locating it in the social landscape of the peninsula rather than the official categories. By doing so, the shape that emerges of the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity is a far cry from what is rendered through the lens of race. While I view “race” as an essentialized and largely state-driven category, I regard “ethnicity” to be the outcome of the dynamic interplay of particular historical, cultural, and linguistic processes. Unlike the seemingly immutable character and rigid boundaries of race, I consider ethnic identities to be contiguous or overlapping terrains in the social

landscape. Given the critique of race undertaken and the limits of my research, my examination of popular music focuses on how the musicians see their work in relation to Malaysia's cultural diversity rather than the quality of the sound, lyrics, and musical production.

"Indian" is used throughout the text in order to stay true to conventional usage in Malaysia. While asserting the constructedness of the category, I use the term in its conventional manner as it exerts a palpable influence in this form. Although Tamil identity figures importantly in contemporary party political and public discourse, hence also in this article, Indians constitute an assortment of ethnic groups—including castes—in Malaysia. Assertions of Tamil identity are significant in themselves but may not always be separable from the politically and socially relevant category "Indian." As I use the term in the following pages, I convey essentializations, specific attributes, everyday notions, and nuanced understandings and thereby problematize the category. In this manner, I hope to reflect in scholarly terms an ambiguity about the term that many Malaysians negotiate with ease in everyday life. I consider the complexity and nuances of the social landscape of Indianness in the following part, before turning to the question of representation and cultural politics respectively.

THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF INDIANNESS

It is helpful to begin by finding out a little more about how the state categorizes and enumerates different groups in the population as a whole. Although the National Census of 2000 offers figures for four categories—Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian, and Others—it lists under "Ethnic Groups in Detail" sixty-seven different categories, including an additional "Others," presumably consisting of groups whose identity is unknown or whose numbers are relatively few. Going by the simplified categories used officially, in 2005 there were more than 16 million Bumiputera, 6.2 million Chinese, 1.8 million Indians, and 320,000 Others out of a population of 24.4 million citizens in total (*Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006*, 238). Of this total, 66 percent were Bumiputera, 25.3 percent Chinese, 7.5 percent Indian, and 1.3 percent Others. These figures do not include the 2.4 million foreign citizens (predominantly migrant workers) who amount to a sizeable 8.9 percent of the total population of the country.

Indians in Malaysia are as socially diverse as Chinese, Malay, and other communities. Indian identity is nevertheless associated with the culture of the Hindu Tamil-speaking people whose origins lie in southern

India and who constitute the majority ethnic Indian community. In everyday terms, therefore, “Indian” refers to physical characteristics associated with Tamil Malaysians, which usually include a dark complexion. Those of lighter skin would typically be called “*Hindustan*” or even “*Pakistan*” in Malay or “North Indian” in English. People slip in and out of these commonplace labels, however, as they subsume individuals of a variety of complexions in reality. Furthermore, a few other categories pose problems within the social terrain of “Indians,” namely Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims (the majority in the culturally differentiated group of Indian Muslims, which includes Malayalis, Gujaratis, Punjabis, and so forth). With variations in usage and accent, Sri Lankan Tamils (Hindus and Christians), Indian Tamils (mostly Hindu but including Christians), and most Indian Muslims speak Tamil.

Indian Muslims are worth considering a little more to provide a sense of the variation in the Tamil terrain. With a long history in the country, Indian Muslim communities, typically traders, have profoundly shaped the culture of important urban centers. Penang is a good example. Having long intermarried and shared cultural spaces with Malays, Indian Muslims constitute a hybrid identity on this island. The racialization of public life, especially after 1970, has nevertheless encouraged them to eschew the hybrid and choose between Indian or Malay identity. A member of the community observes that “the identity of Indian Muslims changed from Indian Muslim to Indian when they joined MIC [Malaysian Indian Congress] and became Indian Muslim again when they formed KIMMA (Kesatuan India Muslim Malaya [the Indian Muslim Union of Malaya]) and finally changed to Malay when they join [sic] UMNO [the United Malays National Organisation]” (Derrick and Kasturi Dewi 2001).

Many of the diverse ethnolinguistic groups that are categorized as Indian express their particular cultural identities in the public sphere through variety shows, fund-raising events, educational and religious gatherings, and other activities, at times involving individuals and groups from India. Indian Malaysians on occasion participate in projects that are national in scale. Noteworthy are a Tamil Hindu and an Indian Muslim effort, respectively.

M. Thambirajah and some forty other students at the University of Malaya founded in 1982 the Sri Murugan Centre (SMC) or the Centre for Social and Cultural Advancement of Malaysian Indians in order to cater to the educational needs of Indians who earn a low income. Initially, four centers were established for the purpose. Combining educational

counseling for parents and after-school training, the SMC established a good track record in helping students to improve their academic standing. In 2001, the organization put in place plans to open some of their centers up to all Malaysians without regard to ethnicity (*The Sun* 2001a). When it celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2007, the SMC ran a couple of hundred centers nationwide and could claim to have assisted a few hundred thousand students (Suparmaniam 2007).

On quite another plane, the Association of Muslim Restaurateurs of Malaysia supplied food and drink for the *Pancawarna Malaysia* (Colors of Malaysia) celebration in 2002. Held for the first time, the event was publicized as Malaysia's "open house," a replication in grand scale of the feasts many families prepare at home for friends and relatives on cultural holidays. One hundred thousand people of different ethnic groups congregated in the capital Kuala Lumpur for the joint celebration of Christmas, *Hari Raya* (the festive day at the end of the Muslim fasting month) and the New Year in an effort to encourage national integration. Jamarul Khan Kadir, the association's president, reported that RM 300,000 (USD 79,000 at the time) was spent by the group to provide 50,000 portions of *nasi biryani* (an Indian Muslim specialty rice preparation) and 120,000 cups of *teh tarik* (frothy tea) (*Berpuluh ribu hadir* 2002). The association gained much recognition from both the state and members of the public. Public expressions of cultural identity constitute a politics of its own that I shall explore further in the third part of this article. At this juncture, let us consider the rather widespread portrayals of Indians as the underclass of Malaysia.

REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIANS AS DISEMPOWERED

The disparate class and cultural backgrounds of migrants from India, enlisted to uneven social and economic occupations in British Malaya, left a lasting historical legacy. Malayali, Bengali, Gujarati, Sindhi, and other Indian migrants often arrived to professionally or financially more lucrative positions than Tamils and hence have been much more upwardly mobile. Scholars have long noted the poor conditions of life and work on cash crop plantations where Tamil-speaking people have historically dominated the workforce (Stenson 1980). From the late 1990s until the present, however, the "plight of Indians" has become the focal point of public discussion in a new light.

Politicians and social activists have argued that Indians have been left out while the Chinese and Malays have been justly rewarded by Malaysia's economic success. Statistics as well as numerous commentaries and analyses from a wide range of voices have appeared to prove this point (Nadarajah 2000; Oorjitham 2001; Lian 2002; CPPS 2006). Members of Indian communities have notably and variously represented Indians as marginalized, dispossessed, and forgotten. Leaders have emerged in various capacities to speak on behalf of this group. M.G. Pandithan, the president of the political party Indian Progressive Front and founder of the Dalit International Organisation, champions the working class, poor and low caste. *Dalit* is the term used by groups marginalized by caste practices in India to refer to themselves. P. Ramasamy, a political scientist and the international secretary of the Democratic Action Party, declares that "racial ideology and the everyday practices of racism have virtually made it impossible for Indians to lead decent lives in the country" (2001). Echoing other critics of the state, Ramasamy characterizes Malaysia as a racist society.

In the wake of the rising concern over the welfare of Indians, in October 2000, the Cabinet Committee on Social Ills accepted a proposal by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the largest Indian member of the ruling coalition of ethnic parties Barisan Nasional (National Front), to resolve the problems facing Indian communities. The proposal included an allocation of RM 20 million (USD 5.3 million at the time) for use over five years. The committee was given figures that indicated "that 63% of those arrested under the Emergency Ordinance [allowing for detentions without trial] were Indians" (*The Star* 2000). Furthermore, "Indians made up 41% of vagrants and beggars, child abusers (20%) and juvenile delinquents (14%)."

The social reform movement Aliran (an abbreviation of Aliran Kesedaran Negara or the National Consciousness Movement) dedicated an issue of its monthly magazine to the following subject: "The Plight of Indian Malaysians: Hype and Reality." The lead article by Martin Jalleh portrays the oppressed condition of Indians through a mixture of critical readings of state policy as well as the very same state's race-based social statistics (Jalleh 2000). Numbers that appeared in the MIC report to the Cabinet and repeated on numerous occasion in the media, then again in Internet websites and discussions, find themselves reproduced in Jalleh's article in the form of a table with the heading "The Indian Malaysian."

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* became a reference for Malaysian psychologist M. Mahadevan in 2000 when he was interviewed as part of a broad-based inquiry by the press into the "marginalization of Indians." Referring to a commonly held perception of double standards in education practiced against "non-Malays," he says the following: "When a [non-Malay] student who sees his siblings slogging away to do well in an examination, only to be denied entry into a local institution, he would probably opt for an easier way to make it in life," implying criminal activity (Angela and Mohd. Ibrahim 2000). "Local Oliver Twists," he adds, lurk around to recruit the young "into a world of crime."

Others suggest that the present condition of the Tamil-speaking working classes and poor is more complex. Abraham posits that the migration of one-time plantation workers to urban areas has not had uniformly negative implications. His own research in Penang shows how plantation workers have successfully involved themselves in diverse economic activities in the small township adjacent to their one-time employer (2001, 20). In 1998-1999, Jain (2000) followed up on his research on Indian communities conducted more than three decades earlier (in 1962-1963) to consider not only those still living in plantations or squatting in urban areas but also those who found economic opportunities in suburban and urban areas. Jain paints the prospects of life and work in Indian communities far less pessimistically, suggesting that many found economic and socioeconomic mobility, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. He arrives at this conclusion without denying the historically oppressive conditions on the plantations suffered, in particular, by low-caste Tamils.

While the substantial elimination of plantations in the 1990s has become synonymous with "the plight of Indians," Jain observes how the same was liberating for many. Over the decades, Indians of various classes have advanced their social status through education and economic opportunities, to be notable participants in the public life of the country. This may explain, at least in part, the existence of a high number of Indian professionals. Of the total number of registered professionals in 2005, Indians constituted 27 percent of the doctors, 18 percent of the dentists, 25 percent of the veterinary surgeons, and 24 percent of the lawyers nationwide (*Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006*, 335). At roughly 10 percent, professionals nevertheless constitute a smaller percentage of the overall Indian working population itself (Jayasooria 2002). Notably, many Indian professionals would have been born into historically wealthier

ethnic groups in the first place. Tamils of low-income backgrounds, nevertheless, would not be rare among professionals today.

The mobilization of empathy and assistance around the deplorable “plight of the Indians” replicates the racializing logic of the state. A grossly simplified description of Indian communities makes the problems suffered by them specific to them rather than shared by low-income groups as a whole, and affirms the dominant discourse of racial sameness. Following this all too cursory examination of the trope of disempowerment, the next part of this article turns to the cultural politics of the Indian terrain and significant departures from the prevailing racialization that have emerged.

CULTURAL POLITICS

The boundaries of ethnicity and culture in the arts as well as popular culture in Malaysia are often permeable. In these areas, the significant feature of identity construction is not necessarily the number of supporters and fans mustered as much as the permeability in itself for it signifies the absence of rigidly enforced boundaries. Permeability aside, Malaysians have crossed boundaries outright and formed transethnic solidarities (Mandal 2004).

It is worth considering some illustrations of popular artists—musicians in this instance—who have captivated ethnically diverse audiences over the past four decades. A household name in the 1970s, the Indian singer Sarangapanie performed in both Tamil and Malay. He was back in the spotlight in 2000, when at the age of fifty-eight, he recorded an album in Malay that he described “as a special tribute to my fans, especially my Malay fans who stood by me in the past” (Bhavani 2000). D.J. Dave made a name for himself in the 1970s and 1980s singing in Malay and English besides developing a style influenced by Hindustani film music. The Alleycats, the rock group started in 1969 by the siblings David and Loganathan Arumugam, became one of the few popular culture icons with a genuinely national reach by the 1980s. The death in 2007 of Loganathan as he was popularly known led to rare tributes and mourning in the mass media (especially the radio stations). The Alleycats sang in Malay, English, and Tamil. Its first album in Malay (1978) was co-produced by the accomplished Malay musician M. Nasir who also wrote the lyrics of many of the group’s most memorable songs in this language. Younger Indian musicians, as the following exploration indicates, are taking music in new directions and in a different political economy.

Given the vastness of the subject, the cultural politics examined below is mostly of the period from the late 1990s to the early 2000s and limited to a small selection of musicians and related developments in radio and television. The increasing significance of private enterprise in the music and broadcasting industries, in keeping with the state's emphasis on the development of the private sector since the late 1980s, constitutes both a hurdle as well as a catalyst to the young performers. Notably, newly formed private companies such as THR (formerly Time Highway Radio) and ntv7 (NatSeven TV) are clearly driven by market imperatives. They have also tended to be a little more relaxed about the content of their programs in what is generally a politically and morally restrictive public sphere. State-controlled Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) is less market oriented and also widely perceived to be conservative and behind the times. With this brief background of industry developments in mind, I now turn to popular music and broadcasting.

Popular Music

Many groups have emerged in recent years who lead a self-proclaimed struggle to advance a new brand of Indian and Tamil music, without necessarily seeing vast distinctions between the two identities. "Within the evolving parameters of Malaysian Indian music," according to the music writer Nantha Kumar (1999b), "there is a tussle between forging ahead with our own brand of music and preserving the rich music legacy of India." For a long time, he adds, "music for the Indian community here is that which is imported from Bollywood [referring to Bombay—Mumbai today—as the capital of the Hindustani (or Hindi) film industry] on a wider scale while classicism was represented by carnatic [sic] (classical music of south India) and its related Hindustani tunes." New groups emerged in the 1990s that broke the path for a local brand of Tamil rock. Around a dozen groups, mostly based in the environs of the Kuala Lumpur, are signed up with the handful of Malaysian producers of Tamil music. Against the tide of Bollywood productions, these groups have brought to the fore a distinctive music rooted in folk traditions (Kumar 2005, 41).

The Keys, pioneers of the new Tamil music, produced an album in 1996 that rests on the single drumbeat characteristic of southern Indian folk music. The group was formed by six young men related to each other by blood from the small town of Kuala Lipis in Pahang. From humble beginnings and with little support, they sold more than

seventy-eight thousand copies of their album (as of 1999) when ten thousand was enough to be well regarded. The initial success of The Keys was phenomenal as a result, even more so when it was achieved without “radio airplay, aggressive promotion and publicity” (Kumar 1999b). RTM’s Radio Six, the sole Tamil-language radio station before the arrival in 2001 of the THR program *raaga* (the “melodic pattern” in Indian music), banned the popular title track because the lyrics were deemed crude.

The group Kashmir Stone was formed in 1997. Following in the footsteps of The Keys, the trio released a Tamil rock album titled *Maangga Thoppu* (Mango Orchard), which sold seven thousand copies in the first four months (Chandran 1999). The group’s manager Muralitharan B. claims that it enjoyed the adulation of Indian as well as Malay fans, attributing the latter to a musical style similar to Malay rock. At times, the group mixed Malay and English in their mostly Tamil lyrics.

Promoted as the “first female Tamil group in the universe,” The Girls produced their first album *Manasukul* (In the Heart) in 2001. Made up of three Malay and two Indian women, the Malaysian quintet appeared to have been inspired by the example set by the British group Spice Girls in more than one way. First, The Girls was formed following a national search for vocalists. Second, members of the group are said to possess the attributes groovy, intelligent, rugged, loud, and sexy, respectively. The group’s name is apparently an acronym formed from these attributes. Described as “the product of a calculated marketing plan,” the group was set to produce a Malay-language version, given the “encouraging response” to their album (*Asiaweek* 2001).

Turning to solo performers, Sasidharan Naidu, otherwise known as Sasi the Don, released his first album in 2001 and championed local music in both Tamil and English, with a keen eye on both the Malaysian and the global markets. Noting that his music stands apart from the tendency among local performers to do poor imitations of Tamil film lyrics from India, Sasi believes his album could “be sold in any country outside Malaysia which has a Tamil-speaking community” (Indra Sathiabalan 2001d). Furthermore, he claims that his music is different because it unites a younger generation divided along social and economic lines. The bilingualism of his lyrics is important, he observes, because “the richer people use English more commonly while the poorer people tend to speak Tamil more” (Indra Sathiabalan 2001d). Proud of his Indian heritage and enjoying fans who are Malay and Indian, Sasi added to the complaints about Radio Six by admitting his disappointment with

the radio station for not airing his songs. He reports that his songs have been found questionable by the station not because of the content but for his unconventional use of the Tamil language (Vengadesan 2002). Both his diction and blending of different languages was found unacceptable.

Sasi laments the segregation along linguistic and cultural lines in the music industry. As a Tamil-language performer he believes his position is marginal in the face of the Malay and Chinese markets and he has had to fight to make a breakthrough. He observes of his music as follows: “My music is universal ... it appeals not just to fans of Tamil pop [and] many feel that it’s got a world music concept [with] Malay, Chinese, Indian, Western and Latin musical styles in [it]” (Vengadesan 2002). Sasi’s fortunes improved following an invitation to perform at the launch of THR’s Tamil-language program *raaga*. In 2001, he received the Malaysian Indian Music Industry Award for the Best Solo Artist and by January 2002 his album had sold more than twelve thousand copies. In 2006, he recorded his fourth album, this time with the international recording company Sony BMG.

Looking to advance a mix of techno, rap, and hip-hop locally, Subash Manokaran Nair—his name indicating Malayali descent—put out two albums. An electrical engineer by training, he is like Sasi in a few ways. Subash wishes to break away from existing trends in order to “create a different sound from other local acts in the market.” In addition, he shares Sasi’s desire to reach audiences beyond his own ethnic group. Subash notes in this regard that his album *Ranggie* (Naughty), released in 2001, “has a more international flavour ... [n]ot only will the Indians enjoy it, so will the other races” (Indra Sathiabalan 2001a). The biggest musical influence on him has been his mother, a Carnatic singer from Kerala, India, who wrote all the lyrics for *Ranggie*. Educated in a Chinese school, Subash is fluent in Mandarin and harbors plans to record in this language in the future. Should he do so, he would follow in the footsteps of Raju Kumara, an Indian singer who has made a name for himself in the Chinese Malaysian music industry by singing in the Chinese dialect Hokkien (Yap 1997).

Groups like The Keys and others as well as solo performers have struggled to advance their music in a marketplace that is both heavily dominated by the tracks of Hindi films, and hindered by the conservatism of Radio Six. Not only does this radio station often regard as crude the work of the new groups, it questions the diction and construction of the Tamil used. Nearly all the emerging Indian musicians reject such interference and control, as well as the tendency of local performers to

model themselves after their counterparts in India. Bucking the established trend is apparently profitable too. The group Lock-Up released an album in 1999 during Deepavali, the Hindu Festival of Lights, when the market is typically flooded with soundtrack albums of films from India (Kumar 2000, 38). Their risky move returned a major success as they sold around one hundred thousand copies of the album in Malaysia and Singapore (Lock-Up's market extends to southern India as well).

Young Indian musicians are driven by the desire for change in the local music industry. They advance particular genres like rock, reggae, techno, rap, hip-hop, and so forth, often grounded in their Tamil folk roots, thereby localizing global trends. Some, like The Keys, were inspired to pursue their music, determined "by the feats of Malay bands in the early '90s" (Kumar 1999a). Their Indian identity is evidently formed in the Malaysian landscape. Many combine their talents with an eye to tapping markets for profit if not survival, or both. With survival in mind, many persist in other professions while pursuing their love for music. Their success as musicians (and financially) is still overshadowed by the market for film soundtracks from India.

Although the emerging musicians are steeped in Tamil, Indian, and other traditions in the Malaysian landscape, there is also a marked borderlessness if not internationalism in both their musical and personal outlook as performers. It is thus not surprising that albums bearing "a distinct Malaysian mark have been shipped to over twenty out of the forty Tamil language markets around the globe" (Kumar 2005, 42). With an idea of the Indian terrain in the popular music scene, it is helpful now to turn to radio broadcasting.

Radio Broadcasting

Far from the popular perception that radio has declined in popularity, a survey done in 2000 indicates that at least nine out of ten adults on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia tune in, with an average listener staying with his or her favorite station for two and a half hours per day (Vijian 2001). It comes as no surprise then that sixteen private stations have been established nationwide since 1995, complementing the offerings of more than twenty public stations.

THR was launched in 1994 as Time Highway Radio, the first privately owned operation of its kind in the country.¹ In January 2002, THR.fm was announced, thereby allowing the radio station to retain its popular initials, though in slightly modified form. The change was to

indicate its independence from its previous major stakeholder, the Time Group. Describing the station's new corporate image and programming, THR's Chief Operating Officer Abdul Aziz Hamdan noted that the Bollywood superstars Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai were booked to launch a new broadcasting complex at the center of Kuala Lumpur in 2002 (Zieman 2002). In keeping with its new image, Abdul Aziz added that the station's initials "could stand for Tamil Hindi Radio, The Hype Radio or The Highway Radio." In April 2005, THR was acquired by Astro, Malaysia's leading provider of satellite television transmission.

When THR revamped its programming in April 2001, the station pioneered trendy new shows in four languages (Malay, Cantonese, Tamil, and English) directed at the young, and free of the linguistic and cultural conservatism of RTM. Upon assuming a new image in 2002, the Cantonese and English segments were discontinued, apparently because they did not enjoy the demand evident for programming in Malay and Tamil. The confidence with which the restructuring proceeded reflected the commercial success of the radio station.

In early 2002, THR had more than 1.76 million listeners, located primarily in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Perak, the states that together account for 81 percent of the audience, while the remaining were distributed across the other west coast states. The station appealed mostly to the young, with over 70 percent of its listeners between fifteen to thirty years old. In 2004, THR nearly doubled its popularity when it commanded 3.1 million listeners (Astro 2005). The following year, it "retained its position as the nation's second most-listened-to station as well as the top Indian language network" (Astro 2006, 40).

The Tamil-language program *raaga* was introduced in the 2001 revamp for three hours a day initially and solely dedicated to music. Less than a year after its launch, *raaga* constituted 40 percent of THR's airtime, which amounted to ten hours a day. Nine disc jockeys conducted a variety of shows. One offered dialogues with listeners on current issues, others were concerned with women, mothers and children, and the youth, respectively, while another held interviews with performers, apart from programs dedicated to music. Listeners of *raaga* were 91 percent Indian, 6 percent Malay, and 3 percent of other ethnic groups. Sixty-six percent of Indian radio listeners in general tuned in to the program. The program's success would seem to validate the claim made barely three months after its start: "When THR's *Raaga* [sic] came on air, the urban Indian youths were ecstatic—here, at last, was something they could

relate to and enjoy” (Indra Sathiabalan 2001e). Given the kind of institutional support radio stations can provide for the music industry, in less than a year THR had a proven track record in improving the exposure of Tamil performers, leading at least in the case of Sasi the Don to considerable success (Indra Sathiabalan 2001b).

The Malay-language program *Gegar* (“to rock” in colloquial English), introduced at the same time as *raaga*, occupied the 60 percent airtime originally allotted by offering a range of different shows, with an expanded slot for its long-running and most popular segment: *Hindi Power*. Following the 2001 revamp this segment was scheduled for two hours from 10 a.m. to noon daily. Early in 2002, the program was scheduled nightly from 8 p.m. to 12 a.m. from Saturday to Wednesday. *Hindi Power* thus occupied about 70 percent of prime airtime a week. The program’s popularity has grown over time. By June 2007, *Hindi Power* aired from 8 p.m. to 12 a.m. seven nights a week, which constituted 22 percent of *Gegar*’s total content and all of its prime-time slots.

The ethnic breakdown of listeners changes when it comes to *Hindi Power*. Indian listeners are by far the majority in the case of *raaga* as are Malays in the case of *Gegar*. While the former still constitute the majority in the case of *Hindi Power*, a significantly greater number of Malays tune in. Early in 2002, 66 percent of Indians, 32 percent of Malays, and 2 percent of other groups listened to the program. The film music and culture of India slips easily into the local idiom, retaining little of a sense of its foreignness. Callers from Perlis to Singapore banter in Malay and at times Hindi, offer their thoughts on stars and songs, and display a passion for the music.

Hindi Power has been hosted by the lively, witty, and multilingual Andy Hakim since its early days. Andy, as he is popularly known, plays both contemporary and classic Hindi film soundtracks. Much Hindi, some Tamil, and at times English punctuate his rapid-fire performance in Malay. He has a grasp of Hindi, which he puts to good use by translating into Malay the titles and lyrics of soundtracks while explaining subtleties in meaning. No less is his knowledge of the storylines, stars, gossip, and the highs and lows of the Bollywood film industry. Besides the huge number of fans of Hindi music across ethnic groups, a good part of the show’s success lies in Andy Hakim’s talent. He flirts, humors, and impresses his listeners all at once while his callers return the favor generously.

But for a brief stint in television, Andy Hakim has consistently maintained a high standard as a radio host and won acclaim for his

professionalism. In 2002, he was voted the most popular radio announcer in an annual award granted to popular stars sponsored by the local Malay-language newspaper *Berita Harian*. Five years later, *Hindi Power* is co-hosted by Andy Hakim along with Gina and Suzana, two young women with their own appeal for the thousands of listeners who tune in every night.

Besides radio broadcasts of Hindi music, films and dramas in Hindi and Tamil are a regular feature of television, on both the free and the subscription-based services. Those who can afford to pay for a subscription to the satellite broadcaster Astro may watch on the channel *Vaanavil* (Rainbow)—as well as others—many more films and shows in Tamil, besides those in Hindi, Malayalam, and Telugu.

The Tamil film industry based in India, sometimes called Kollywood after its location in Kodambakkam in Chennai city, has an important market in Malaysia, given that Tamils constitute the majority of the country's ethnic Indians. It should be noted, however, that Tamils are the primary but not exclusive viewers of Tamil films in Malaysia.

Hindi popular culture nevertheless dominates the landscape and overlaps different ethnic terrains, given that it has behind it one of the largest film industries of the world. The Malay subtitles of Bollywood films make them accessible not only to ethnic Malays but also to Tamils and other Malaysians, as speakers of Hindustani are but few in the country.² Given Bollywood's meaningful presence to Indians, Malays, and others in the landscape, it is worth considering further its local character and ramifications.

Bollywood

Bollywood has become a global phenomenon in the new millennium, having gained in Europe and the United States the popularity it already had in dozens of countries from Morocco to Indonesia. Malaysia is no exception. While there are countless fans of Bollywood films and music, there are nevertheless noteworthy detractors.

More than a few popular Hindi films were aired on the private television stations ntv7 and TV3 in conjunction with Hari Raya festivities at the end of 2000. Instructively, the pronounced increase in Hindi content drew the ire of bodies representing Muslims and Hindus, respectively. In February 2001, the Islamic religious authority—the Council of Mufti—called for the reduction of Bollywood film content on television (Kam 2001). Its spokesman Harussani Zakaria claimed that the films contributed to the moral decadence of Muslims. Among other things,

the Council was concerned with the portrayal of Hindu rituals in the films. At about the same time, the Malaysian Hindu Youth Council called on the television networks RTM and TV3 (privately owned) not to highlight Hindi movies but instead expand the Tamil content, given that “the Malaysian Indian community mainly consists of Tamils” (James 2001). Later in the month, TV3 announced that it planned to cut down Hindi programming as it was “sensitive to issues that affect national interest” (*The Sun* 2001). Its vice executive chairman, Abdul Rahman Maidin, nevertheless, observed in self-defense that the “station could not ignore viewers’ demand.”

The protest was met with counterarguments from film practitioners. Producer Rohani Abdul Rahman, for instance, argued that Bollywood films have the potential of strengthening family ties as they “bring viewers to a fantasy world of wonderful sceneries and beautiful songs ... based on Asian culture” (Kam 2001). K.G. Murthee, managing director of Five Star Trading, the largest Hindi film distributor and therefore not a disinterested party in this matter, added that the films conveyed positive images of love and family. Indra Sathiabalan (2001c) believes that the claims of *demam Bollywood* (Bollywood fever) “getting a tad out of hand” were made “with some justification.” She adds, if you did not know any better, “you’d think it was Deepavali once more!” The airing of Hindi films gave the occasion so much of an “Indian” character that it felt like Deepavali to her. She notes that “Bollywood has become a huge craze among many Malays and even Chinese.”

For several different parties, the increased Hindi content was simply the result of the popularity of Bollywood films. In a statement in its defense, ntv7 states that it

strives to provide the best and most popular shows to viewers ... Rather than having a repeat of Malay movies for [Hari] Raya, ntv7 decided on showing the most current and well-received films for the enjoyment of the whole family ... It is without doubt that we have a huge following for Hindi films, and a big majority of the audience is made up of Malay viewers. (Indra Sathiabalan 2001c)

The same imperative, popular demand, led to TV3’s decision to air the films. Indra Sathiabalan, hoping for better Malay-language films to be aired on Hari Raya, nevertheless concludes that the “TV stations, like it or not, are just catering to the needs of the market, which at the moment is mad about Hindi films” (2001c).

CONCLUSION

Indianness in Malaysia is contested. On the one hand, the notion of the “disempowered Indian” has gained wide currency. Despite their differences, politicians of the ruling coalition and the opposition as well as social activists end up united in representing Indians as a group whose marginalization and poverty is especially marked from others. When the representation of Indianness is so reduced in complexity, the grossly simplified outcome only facilitates the prevailing racialization. Battle lines can therefore be drawn between racially identified oppressor and victim, with the state—often presumed to be Malay—as the former, and Indians as the latter. The particular suffering, grievances, and oppression experienced by working-class Tamil or other groups are thereby relegated to the margins by syndromes of racial blight. When Indian disempowerment is added to the perceived threats to the Malay and Chinese “races,” respectively (prevailing sentiments also), the threesome’s narratives of distress become a vortex of public attention. The voices of Orang Asli or others who experience the same, if not worse, go unheard.

On the other hand, Indianness resists simple racialized perspectives. The admixture of rebellion and commercial drive that colors, perhaps by necessity, the movement for change in Indian Malaysian music is revealing. Calls to reject the linguistic and social conservatism of state institutions emerge repeatedly in the voices of musicians and others involved in the popular music industry. Their adversary in this instance is not a racialized “Other” but conservative and authoritarian groups in the establishment, often Indian themselves. It is significant in this regard that new trends in Malay music and broadcasting also face intransigence and rejection from state-controlled broadcasting operations. For instance, a retired regional director of RTM refused to entertain what he regards as the “ungrammatical and terribly mixed patois of Malay” spoken by some young disc jockeys (Vijian 2001).

Malays, Chinese, and others are prominent among the fans of Hindi popular culture, at once enriching and complicating Indianness in the Malaysian context. On the one hand, programs like *Hindi Power* represent a space that may be valuably shared across ethnic groups. On the other hand, fears of the negative influence of Hindi popular culture have been sufficient to provoke strongly defensive reactions from conservative religious bodies. Furthermore, the enthusiasm of ethnically diverse Malaysians for things Hindi, ironically, works against the growth of local Indian popular music.

For Indian Malaysian musicians, the increasingly globalized political economy both constrains and liberates. When they break new ground in music, one of the biggest hurdles they face is Indian with a Hindi inflection, namely the dominance of imported Hindi film music in the Malaysian market. The enormous success of the radio program *Hindi Power* is testament not only to the widespread appreciation of the imported music but the localization of its aesthetics. The Hindi film capital Bollywood is as much a bane to local musicians as is the conservatism of state-controlled institutions in Malaysia. Indian musicians in this country have had to struggle indeed to achieve the recognition that they have today.

At the same time, globalization offers opportunities to those musicians whose works appeal to audiences beyond the country's borders, thereby inspiring bigger ambitions than conceivable in the past. Present circumstances, it would appear, affirm the musicians' established practice of drawing from their own cultural roots as they can make a mark in the global market only by producing distinctive work. There is added incentive, therefore, for the cultivation of an Indian Malaysian brand in their creative work, especially one distinct from the music industry based in India. As a result of their exposure to—if not familiarity with—different cultures and languages, and through contact, exchange and partnership with musicians of other ethnic backgrounds, Indian Malaysians have indeed forged a distinct musical identity. In the face of the powerful culture industry of Bollywood at its doorstep, the homegrown Indian beat rises to the challenge. ❀

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nevertheless solely responsible for any remaining errors in the substance and argument of this article.

NOTES

1. Much of the history and information on THR in this section was drawn from its old website (<http://www.thr.fm/default.htm>), which is no longer accessible at the time of writing in June 2007. Its new website (<http://www.thr.fm/>) no longer carries press statements, market surveys, and other information relevant to this article.
2. A rough estimate would be fifty thousand based on the population of Punjabis whose language is closest to Hindustani and assuming many still speak the language.

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