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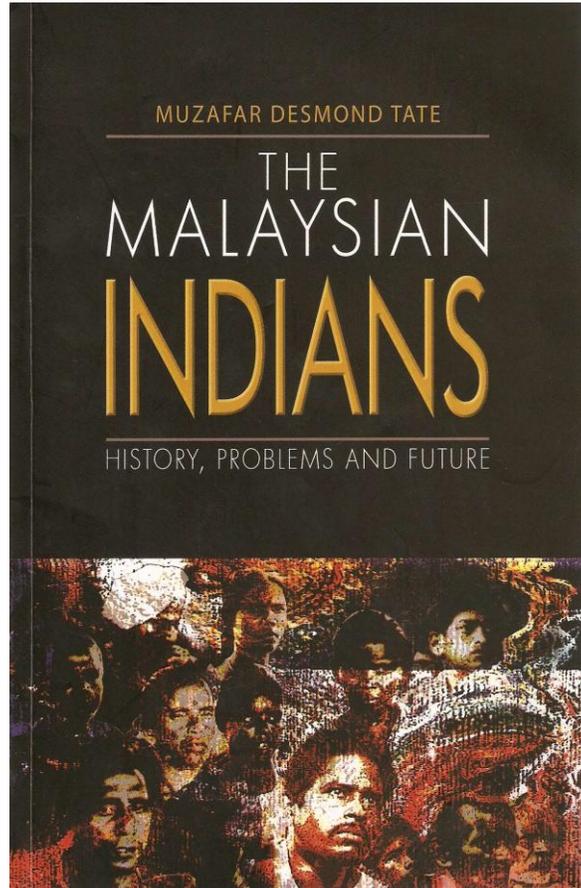
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A Review of Muzafar Desmond Tate's
The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future

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A Book for Every Indian Library

The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future by Muzafar Desmond Tate is a book that every library in India must have. The sponsor and general editor of this book, G. A. Dass David, deserves our appreciation and gratitude for being instrumental in getting this book of Muzafar Desmond Tate posthumously published. The book is published by Strategic Information and Research Centre, Selangor, Malaysia, sird@streamyx.com.

Indians in India and elsewhere as well as the India Government and political parties in India must recognize an important fact: Malaysian Indians ‘constitute the largest Indian community to be found in any country in the world outside the Indian subcontinent itself’ (p. 1).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

283

9: 5 May 2009

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Also, ‘the coherence of the Indian Malaysians is not based on ethnicity or even on a particular religion, but on their “Indian-ness”, a cultural affinity which provides them with their common identity as felt by themselves and as seen by others’. (p. 1). This fact brings with it many problems to the actual operation of this “identity” in every walk of life for the Indian community.

Gandhi and Indian Diaspora

Interest in the conditions of Indian Diaspora is widely noticed in Indian thinking, literature and politics throughout the Colonial and Post-Independence periods in India.

Gandhi’s entry into national politics was solely on the basis of his abiding interest in improving the conditions of the Indian Diaspora and, through this interest, fighting for the oppressed and the segregated people throughout the world. His first foray into Indian national politics came about when, “In the Calcutta Congress of 1901 (the seventeenth Congress since the inception of this National Organization in 1885), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi moved a resolution as a petitioner on behalf of the British Indian population in South Africa.”

Unfortunately, Gandhi’s championing the cause of the Indian Diaspora was not adequate enough to ensure him a seat in the Subjects Committee of AICC in 1916:

Gandhi could not get elected to the Subjects Committee of the AICC in 1916 Lucknow Congress, when he was treated as a candidate of the Moderates pitted against the candidates of the Nationalist group led by Tilak. It was Tilak who, recognizing the great contributions Gandhi had made towards Indian cause in South Africa, declared him elected to the Subjects Committee (Sitaramayya 1935). (Thirumalai, 2005 Early Gandhi and the Language Policy of The Indian National Congress <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2005/earlygandhi1.html>)

Gandhi’s Plight – A Symptom of Indian Attitude

This incident was a sign of events and processes to come; it truly reflects the form and function of the Indian Diaspora even today in Indian politics and the policies of the Government of India. We all need to note, however, that there are always limitations to kinds of support that India can extend to a population of another sovereign nation, even if that population is historically related to her in many ways.

The story of Malaysian Indians continues to be a fascinating story, sometimes causing great concerns but often great celebration for their perseverance against all odds.

Structure of the Book

The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future is divided into three parts with 20 well written and well documented chapters.

Part I Malaysian Indians in Gestation, 1900-1945

1. A Question of Identify
2. The Tamil Connection
3. The Other Indians (from North and South)
4. Doing Their Own Thing: Sikh Affairs, 1874-1941
5. Tamil Renaissance
6. The Particularism of the Middle Classes
7. Indian Labour and the Great Depression
8. The Role of the CIAM
9. Grassroots Alternatives: The Social Reform Movement
10. Interregnum

Part II Adjusting to Reality, 1945-1957

11. Malayan Indians at the Crossroads
12. Post-war Malayan Indian Political Organizations
13. The Quest for Leadership
14. The Triumph of the Communal Principle

Part III A Half-Century of Independence

15. The Era of the Tunku, 1957-1970
16. Razak and Hussein Onn: The New Course, 1971-1981
17. The Voice of Dissent
18. The Mahathir Years, 1981-2003
19. Language and Education (Part 1)
20. Language and Education (Part 2)

Indian Mosaic in Malaysia

Migration of Indians to the Malay Peninsula began a thousand years ago. There are historical evidences to support this position. This early migration resulted in several civilizational changes both for the migrant community and the dominant Malay community.

However, large scale migration of Indians from the subcontinent began under the British Colonial rule. Indians did work hard and contributed to the agriculture and plantation economy of Malaya.

Most remained landless and there have always been a yearning to replicate their ancestral village in the settlements they occupied. Family and caste temples for village gods and goddesses became a significant part of their life in Malaya. They came from communities, especially among the Tamils, which truly represented the Dravidian substratum of the Indian civilization.

Festivals and celebrations, spousal exchanges, and so many other material, spiritual, social and cultural artifacts were preserved. This remarkable continuity was possible under the Colonial rule, even as they continued to reel under lack of literacy, lack of alternative employment opportunities, lack of opportunities for education that would prepare them to compete with other ethnic groups.

Changes for the Better, But a Long Way to Go

Malaysian Indians do recognize that things have changed for the better, but they also argue that these changes and opportunities to grow and preserve are not adequate enough and not commensurate with their rightful place as citizens of Malaysia.

Complex Situation

Some excerpts from the book given below point to some aspects of current situation relating to Malaysian Indians. As the book was written earlier than the recent emergence of groups such as HINDRAF, there is no reference to the most recent developments within the Malaysian Indian community (mostly among the Tamils and other south Indian groups) resorting to impressive political activism.

Indian Malaysians are deeply concerned about the present status and future prospects of their community. There is a general feeling that the community as a whole is losing ground in the country economically, socially and politically, and that it is becoming steadily marginalized. There is also, rightly or wrongly, a general feeling that the community has not been effectively served by its leaders. (p. 179)

There does not, for instance, seem to be any fundamental difference between the status, composition and prospects of the Indian Malaysian community on the eve of independence in 1957 and as it was some 40 years later at the beginning of the new millennium. The community remains divided, as it always has been, between a small, relatively affluent middle class on the one hand, and on the other a proletariat that accounts for by far the greater number of Indians in the country who hover on the borders of poverty. At the same time, the great social and cultural gulf that has kept the great South Indian (mainly Tamil) majority apart from the other Indian ethnic groups (mainly North Indian) in the country still yawns as prominently as ever. (p. 179)

Similarly, the problems of endemic hardcore poverty endured by plantation labourers in the 1950s still existed at the end of the century, aggravated by the unceasing process of fragmentation and sale of

estates by large commercial enterprises that differed only in ownership but not in name or attitudes. (p. 179)

Meanwhile, Tamil chauvinism and official indifference continue to hamper attempts to rid the children of the poor of the stultifying handicaps faced by Tamil-medium primary schools. The Ministry of Education's initiative announced in 2002 to make English the medium of instruction for Science and Maths in all schools worked out yet once again (unwittingly or not) unfavourably for Tamil-medium primary schools in practice because the Ministry limited the supply of the necessary equipment and teaching aids to schools with over 150 students, prompting a public protest on the matter by Samy Vellu. On the other hand, larger schools were not welcome either because this invariably resulted in the new centres being too far away for many estate residents. Meanwhile, the numbers of Tamil primary school students who managed to score sufficiently well in order to continue their education remained dismally small. (p. 180)

The poverty syndrome of the estates is still present, but it is generally on the wane as the younger folk leave the estates for the cities and the elders live on in the twilight of their years, impervious to the changes taking place around them as contract labour takes over their traditional livelihood and as the agricultural economy continues to modernize and change its character. However, the problem of the rural areas, reflected in the steady increase in gangsterism, drug addiction and other forms of crime, has transmuted itself to the squatter areas and slums of the towns where it festers and grows with formidable virulence. There it has become an increasingly serious problem that already involves a disproportionate number of Indian youth. (p. 181)

It is becoming increasingly obvious that these social problems can only be overcome by a concerted national effort that is not based on race. The Indian community's socio-economic problems can never be overcome within the present communal mould of Malaysian politics. (p. 181)

Malaysian Indians Are Just Like the Indians in India!

Malaysian Indians are just like the Indians in India. With widely prevalent social, cultural, economic, religious and ethnic diversity, they hold on to such differences vehemently and have difficulty in coming together. Non-Tamils, mostly the so-called “north Indian” groups, seem to expect that the model of Indian “unity” with Hindi as the dominant feature should be implemented wherever there is Indian Diaspora. On the other hand, Tamil Diaspora looks more

toward retaining their Tamil identity within the Indian label. Often, it so looks that the policy makers in New Delhi also seem to hold the former “Indian” view. Each Indian Diaspora situation requires a different approach and this need for flexibility is not recognized in the pronouncements of “Indian” leadership and policy framers, it appears.

Problems faced by Malaysian Indians are genuine, but they have begun to emerge out of their helplessness to organize themselves into a vocal group, demanding their rights. But such demands will not take them to economic prosperity automatically. Emergence of the middle class is faster in non-Tamil Indian communities, comparatively speaking. However, middle class attitudes along with the obsession with the TV serials and movies may not really focus on the problems Malaysian Indians face.

View the Present Problems as an Opportunity for Education and Business

What is important is to view the prevailing difficult political situation as an opportunity to educate their children in disciplines that have a market demand even within Malaysia, and organize co-operatives in trades and modern businesses more effectively than ever so that the community will become more self-sufficient and prosper. The model provided by the emergence of the Nadar community among the Tamils in Tamilnadu in the 20th century is a good example to emulate. But then Tamils, the numerically dominant section among the Indian community, should get united in some manner for economic pursuits, instead of getting more divided on the basis of caste, class and even religion.

The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future is written with empathy for Malaysian Indians but it carefully avoids emotional involvement and bias. It is a descriptive study with an extraordinarily perceptive analysis.

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