

Notes

Malaysian Indians and Their Mass Media

by

John A. LENT*

Making up approximately eleven per cent of Malaysia's multiethnic population is an Indian community that made massive migrations to the Southeast Asian peninsula during the latter nineteenth century. They came looking for work and found it as indentured laborers on the rubber estates. They were, for the most part, Tamil speaking, although there were pockets using Punjabi, Malayalam, Telugu and Kanarese. In their new land, they were exploited by the British colonialists; their rebellion against their masters is the commencement of the history of Malaysian Indian mass media.

I Historical Background

Relative to its English, Chinese and Malay press, Malaysia's Indian language newspaper history is brief. It is understandable this would be so; indentured laborers do not have the time to edit and print newspapers. Birch mentioned two Tamil newspapers in the Straits Settlements before 1880; one, *Tangai Snahen*, was published in Singapore between 1876-79.¹⁾ A few others, such as Penang *Cnana Charian Daily News* (1912-13), Singapore *Weekly Sun* (1910) and Penang *Janopakari Daily News* (1914),²⁾ appeared sporadically during the next forty years, but it was the reformist movements of Malayan Indians after 1920 that really sparked a lively journalistic tradition. The immigration of more educated Indians and Ceylonese into Malaya during this period provided the experienced journalists necessary to sustain a press.³⁾ The newspapers they spanned began the gigantic task of upgrading the political, labor, social and intellectual conditions of Malayan Indians. Using South Indian newspapers such as *Viduthalai*, *Hindu* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* as

* School of Communications and Theater, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U. S. A.

1) E. W. Birch. "The Vernacular Press in the Straits," *Journal of Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 4, Dec. 1879, pp. 51-54.

2) Lim Pui Huen. "Newspapers Published in the Malaysian Area," Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1970. Lim listed 27 Indian language newspapers in what are now Malaysian and Singapore during the twentieth century: Tamil, 14 dailies and three weeklies; Punjabi, four dailies and one weekly; Malayalam, one daily and one weekly; unspecified, one daily, one twice weekly and one weekly.

3) Rajeswari Ambalavanar. "Tamil Journalism and the Indian Community in Malaya 1920-1941," *Journal of Tamil Studies*, Oct. 1970, p. 2.

their models, Tamil newspapers in Malaya took up nationalist and reformist causes, campaigning for better immigration policies, working conditions and political rights heretofore denied Malayan Indians.

Spearheading the reformist movements was *Tamilaham*, founded in 1921 by Narasimha Iyengar. In its very first issues, the paper broached the subject of Indian immigration to Malaya, and by its second year, was discouraging Indians from coming to work the plantations. *Tamilaham* lost some of its clout when Iyengar left in 1924 to start *Tamil Nesan*,⁴ a Kuala Lumpur weekly with a definite pro Indian Congress Movement bias.

Among other Tamil crusading periodicals of the pre-World War II era were the organs of the Tamil Reform Association, *Tamil Murasu* (1932), *Jothy* of Singapore, *Reform* (1936) and *Munnetram* (Singapore tri-weekly), and a group of newspapers and journals promoting a Tamil literary revival. The latter included *Tamil Kody*, published in Malacca from 1938 to 1940, and *Tamil Pannai*, a 1941 publication that fostered Tamil language and culture. Quite radical in its push for labor reform was *Jeyamani*, started by a former *Tamil Nesan* editor Subramaniam Iyer, in 1940. It was a predecessor of *Jananayagan*, subsidized by the Malayan Communist Party from 1945 to 1948.⁵

A number of left-wing publications in English and Tamil mushroomed among the Malayan Indians immediately after the war, "spreading anti-colonialist propaganda of an extreme kind."⁶ But most Indian periodicals, e.g., *Tamil Nesan* and *Sangamani*, contented themselves with promoting Tamil nationalism and unity on the basis of culture and language. To survive, they had to moderate their positions, because as Tamil newspapers became more radical in the 1930s, the British authorities in Malaya counteracted with strict press regulations in 1940.

There were also sporadic issues of Malayalam and Punjabi newspapers in Malaya before and immediately after the Japanese occupation. Among the few Malayalam newspapers was *Kerala Bandhu*, published in Singapore from 1938–64, and superseded by *Malaysia Malayadi*. No Malayalam newspaper exists in the nation today. Probably the first Punjabi newspaper was *Pardesi Khalsa Sewak* which appeared intermittently between 1936 and 1961. During the war years it was temporarily replaced by *Azas Hind*. Others were

4) Bought in turn by M. R. N. Malayandi in 1948 and turned over to his son, N. M. Nagappan, in 1968.

5) Still other Indian newspapers published between 1920–48 were: TAMIL: *Malaya Nanban* (Singapore), *Desa Abhimani* (Penang), *Sevika* (Penang), *Shakti* (Penang), *Tamilan* (Ipoh), *India Mithran* (Ipoh), *Bharata Mithran* (Ipoh), *Samudaya Oliyan* (Kuala Lumpur) *Malai Nadu* (Kuala Lumpur), *Tamil Chelvan* (Kuala Lumpur), *Jothy* (Penang), *Bala Bharatam Phoenix*, *Kali Yugam* (Perak), *Udaya Suriyan* (Perak), *Puthu Ulaham* (Ipoh), *Muyarachi* (Ipoh), *Inamani* (Ipoh), *Tolilali* (Kuala Lumpur), *Bothu Jana Pathukaval* (Kuala Lumpur), *Nava Yugam*, *Munnani*, *Seerthirutham*, *Bharatan Nesan* (Singapore), *Tamil Mani* (Singapore), *Puthu Yugam* (Singapore). ENGLISH: Selangor Indian Association *India*, Singapore Indian Association *Indian*, *Indian Pioneer* (Kuala Lumpur), *Indian Daily Mail* (Singapore), *Malayan Ceylonese Chronicle* (Penang).

6) Sinnappah Arasaratnam. *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 113.

Khalsa Malaya Darpan, a Kuala Lumpur weekly of 1940, and *Nawasansar*, a daily lasting from 1950-62. Surviving today is *Malaya Samachar*, a tabloid daily published in Kuala Lumpur.

Resenting the Hindu domination of Indian journalism in Malaya, the Indian Muslim minority initiated the Penang *Desa Nesan* in 1930 to promote Pan Islamism. However, the shortage of Muslim journalists forced the paper to recruit Hindu staff.

The past quarter century has seen a number of shifts in Indian journalism in Malaysia. New immigration laws have dictated against employing Indian nationals and the surviving newspapers are now edited by Malaysian Indians. In the same light, the government, newly emergent from colonialism since 1957, is seeking to develop a national identity and consciousness. Increasingly, Tamil newspapers, like their Chinese and English counterparts, are being implored to broaden their scopes and not just serve the campaigns of the ethnic group.

II Contemporary Media

Malaysian Indians are served by three Tamil and one Punjabi dailies, an assortment of magazines (most of which emanate from India or Singapore), a Tamil section of Radio Malaysia and two television shows weekly. Of course, the fact Indians are bilingual, knowing English or Bahasa Malaysia as well, makes available to them numerous other mass media in those languages.

Printed Media.

All three Tamil dailies—*Tamil Nesan*, *Tamil Malar* and *Tamil Murasu*—are locally owned since Malaysia's recent crackdown on foreign controlled media. *Tamil Murasu*, previously owned by Singaporean interests, offered 55 per cent of its shares to the Malaysian public in 1973; originally a Singapore paper, *Tamil Murasu* opened a Malaysian office in 1968. *Tamil Nesan*, based in Kuala Lumpur from the beginning, has a sole proprietor, N. M. Nagappan. The third daily, *Tamil Malar*, opened its Malaysian office in 1968, although the paper actually dates to 1964 when an assistant editor of *Murasu*, then out on strike, gathered together five other journalists and established the private limited company. Later, *Tamil Malar* was purchased by its present owner, Arumugam Pillai, chairman of the Penang state branch of the Malaysian Indian Congress, a political party.

Combined circulation of the Tamil press is approximately 44,000 daily and 77,000 on Sunday.⁷⁾ However, their claimed circulations tend to be higher: *Tamil Murasu*, 20,000 daily, of which 6,000 are circulated in Singapore; *Tamil Nesan*, 15,000 daily; and *Tamil Malar*, 11,000 in Malaysia, 3,000 in Singapore. Although small compared to other Malaysian national dailies, Indian newspapers have approximately eight readers per copy, according to a Survey Research Malaysia report. Readership has slackened lately because fewer

7) Tai Sing Onn. "Tamil Newspapers," Bernama News Agency dispatch, Dec. 23, 1972.

Indians are learning Tamil in the schools and partly because thousands of Indians have been repatriated when Malaysia announced a new policy on work permits.

There is growing concern among Tamil editors that the nation cannot continue to support three Tamil dailies. As one editor said, "For the paper to pay, we need a daily circulation of 20,000 and that won't be happening in the future. Also, all three papers being sole proprietorships, there is only limited capital and practically no expansion."⁸⁾ And the Tamil press fails to attract advertisers to the extent other language presses of Malaysia do. For example, only 12.5 per cent of *Tamil Nesan's* pages consist of advertisements.

All three newspapers carry eight pages daily; on Sunday, *Tamil Nesan* and *Tamil Malar* have 20 pages, *Tamil Murasu*, 16. Sunday editions report relatively little news, concentrating on features, especially of Indian film stars (a few of whom are in the news because of their political activities), and literary fare. *Tamil Nesan* and *Tamil Murasu*, for example, each devote two of their Sunday pages to film news; *Tamil Malar* presents one full page of film information daily.

News from and about India is emphasized, all three papers maintaining correspondents in India for this purpose. *Tamil Malar* gives over one-fourth of its total pages to news of the mother country. For most of their local news coverage, Tamil papers depend on Malaysian Department of Information handouts and reports from news agencies and other Malaysian newspapers. As with all newspapers, Tamil dailies are extremely careful in their coverage of Malaysian government, going along with the prevailing mood to cooperate with the authorities in meeting national development aims. This forced cooperativeness results from the blanket of legislative pressures, e.g., the required annual licenses and permits and Sedition Act, and covert restraints of a guided press system, which smother the mass media. Self censorship, backed up by regular government guidelines and ministerial speeches of admonishment, is very evident in Indian newspaper offices. Reporters (the few that exist) as a result are not investigating, backgrounding or even reporting; in most cases, they are copying and translating into Tamil government speeches, releases and reports. The composition of the staffs reflect this, the average Tamil paper having two reporters and seven or eight subs editors. Editors admit their papers are not scoop conscious; they would rather wait and translate the stories after they have appeared in the English or Malay newspapers. It is easier that way, and more importantly, safer.

Tamil dailies still attempt to fulfill a role in maintaining an Indian culture, something for which their predecessors vigorously fought. But even this is becoming more difficult as the government steps up its national identity and national consciousness campaigns.

Malaya Samachar, the surviving Punjabi daily, faces the same acute problems. The paper publishes 1,000 copies for Malaysia's 70,000 Punjabis, who more and more prefer the English and Malay press. A typical weekday issue of four pages plays up government policies on the front page, at the request of the authorities, foreign (mostly from India) and

8) Interview, P. Ramachandran, manager, *Tamil Malar*, Oct. 8, 1972.

local news on the inside pages and Punjabi information on marriages, deaths and religious festivals on the back page. The six to eight page Sunday edition carries a few features and literary contributions in addition to the normal news.

The staff of *Malaya Samachar* includes the editor, his assistant and eight compositors, one of the latter a Tamil Indian who sets type without knowing the Punjabi alphabet. Having no paid reporters, the paper depends on translations of the English Language *Straits Times*, releases from the Department of Information and bits of information provided by Sikh priests and volunteer honorary reporters.⁹⁾ Despite these shortcomings, the daily provides a service by preserving the language and translating government policy to the Sikhs. *Malaya Samachar* has taken an occasional stand against the authorities, the most successful of which was its plea that Sikhs not be required to abandon their turbans for helmets while motorbiking.

A Singapore Punjabi newspaper, *Navjivan*, is distributed in Malaysia. It retains a Kuala Lumpur address solely to attract Malaysian advertisers.

The underdeveloped Malaysian magazine industry makes importation of periodicals necessary. Reasonably priced Tamil magazines from India and Singapore, especially those devoted to Indian cinema news and features, are very popular among Malaysian Indians. For example, at one Penang newsstall, there were available 31 different Tamil magazines published in India, 17 English language ones from India and three published in Singapore or Malaysia. The latter were the Tamil language *Theraiyoli*, a Singapore cinema monthly of 10,000 circulation, and *Udhayam*, a Department of Information periodical that reflects Malaysian Indians living in a multi racial setting, and the English/Tamil language *Indian Movie News*, published in Singapore and probably the most popular with a circulation of 40,000.¹⁰⁾ Most Malaysian Indian magazines have not been successful, usually limiting themselves to trade unionism and estate labor problems.¹¹⁾

Electronic Media.

The government owned and operated Radio Television Malaysia provides a national as well as Northern Malaysia radio section in Tamil. The national section broadcasts 92.5 hours weekly in Tamil, slightly less than what is provided the English and Chinese sections, and about half the Malay language total. The regional section, broadcasting out of Penang and Ipoh, makes allowances for certain daily segments of the radio schedule to be in Tamil. Among the most popular Tamil radio shows are "Kalapadam," a comic variety presentation

9) Bachan Kuar Gill. "A General Survey of the Punjabi Press in Malaysia," Paper presented to John A. Lent's Comparative Media Systems course, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Jan. 1974.

10) G. Parimala Devi and N. Nirmala Devi. "A Research Project on the Availability, Penetration and Utilization of Media in a Tamil Community," Paper presented to John A. Lent's Comparative Media Systems course, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Jan. 1974.

11) See Russel Betts. "The Mass Media of Malaya and Singapore As of 1965: A Survey of the Literature," Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1969. Betts mentioned as typical of these periodicals, *Malainandu* and *Sevika*, weeklies designed for estate workers; *Sangamani*, a National Union of Plantation Workers weekly; *Solai*, a Kuala Lumpur monthly, and *Tamil Sakthi*, a Penang general interest weekly. None of them had circulations of over 2,500.

in which government messages are regularly implanted, and a request program.¹²⁾ Sixty-five minutes of radio news in eight different bulletins, or approximately one-eighth of the total, are in Tamil. In the Schools Broadcast Service, Tamil is used in 11 of the 58 weekly programs.

Rediffusion, which transmits over Gold and Silver networks, has very little Tamil programming while the Australian Air Force station at Butterworth offers none at all. It is little wonder that All India Radio and Radio Ceylon draw considerable audiences from among Malaysian Indians.¹³⁾

Television Malaysia has two Indian programs weekly plus one daily Tamil newscast. "Tumpuan Minggu" is a half hour weekly current events show presented on Friday. On Wednesday, from 7 : 21 p.m. to 11 : 03 p.m., a Tamil or Hindi film is shown and has proved to be the most popular television fare for Malaysian Indians. In recent years, there have been complaints from the Indian community that Television Malaysia slights them.

Conclusion

The future looks dismal for Tamil and Punjabi mass media in Malaysia. Editors forecast the death of the newspaper press in less than two decades if the Malaysian government is not more flexible and cooperative. As the national language policy is strengthened, the number of people literate in Tamil drops sharply, thus affecting circulations. With the 1974 guidelines on advertising, emphasizing a portrayal of a Malaysian identity rather than individual ethnic groups, the lifeline of any profitable press will be denied Indian dailies. Indian magazines of a domestic nature have never taken hold and are unlikely to do so in the present atmosphere, and the government controlled electronic media will continue to broadcast to Indians for selfish reasons, rather than for the interests of that group.

12) Devi and Devi, *op. cit.*

13) Betts, *op. cit.*