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Book Review

Tragic Orphans: Indians in Malaysia, Carl Vadivella Belle, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015, p.491.

Carl has amazingly provided a good account of the Indians' progress in Malaya and Malaysia through his voluminous book containing sixteen chapters. This book provides a good account of the Indians' development to date starting from the early periods of the Malay Peninsula to a deep analysis of the Indian plantation labour brought by the British. He then discusses the political regime and institutions and their consequences in the way that Indians have progressed to today.

The first four chapters discuss the early history of the Malay Peninsula that provides insights as well as the needed background information on how Indians have been brought into the country. Along the way, Carl discussed the institutional arrangements that shaped the socio-economic conditions of the Indians, especially the ethnic compartmentalization in colonial Malaya. The argument goes beyond that of claiming that ethnical separatism is a consequence of occupational specialization but that it is a direct consequence of deliberate racial policies adopted by the British. He highlighted how the theory of "race" played a major role in shaping the social as well as economic life of the Indians. It is interesting to note that the term "race" first appeared in the censuses in 1891 and by 1901, the term 'nationalities' had turned to 'race'. These chapters provide rich information on the institutional memory in understanding the future progress of the Indians in Malaya and Malaysia.

Chapter 5, 6 and 7 provide good historical accounts of the Indian labourer migration to Malaya and the ideology upon which the Indians were administrated on. Specifically, Chapter 6 discusses the Kangany system as a form of migration recruitment system and how the system was subjected to abuse especially when it was wrongly used by the mandors who limited the mobility of the labourers. During this period, the Indian labourers were found to suffer from a wide range of social problems and this has left an unexpected notion in the mindset of the officials and planters about the Indian workforce. In Carl's own words, "They arrived as coolies, and in many people's eyes they are itinerant coolies still" (pp. 128). While most discussions about the Indians in this society evolved on the plantation workers, Carl, in Chapter 8 discusses the other Indian immigration class, highlighting the heterogeneous formation of the Indian society in Malaya. This also contributed to fragmentation in the Indian society and that has not helped at all to uplift the

status of the Indians in society at large. The early Indian political development which is termed as more of class and ethnicity-based is discussed in Chapter 9 which also continues the discussion on Japanese invasion and policies as well as highlighting the influence brought by Subhas Chandra Bose to the Indians in Malaya as well as on the reforms and repression during 1945-48 in Chapter 10 and 11 respectively. Consequently, Carl illustrated the Indians' struggle before and after independence, most notably the problems of the Indians which remain even till today and the political and other institutional settings that attempt to uplift the status of the Indians.

During Mahathir's era, Carl clearly illustrated the growing power through the expansion of the public sectors and privatization programs which provided the avenues for the reallocation of resources to meet the goals of the New Economic Policy (NEP) but benefitting the bumiputeras by ensuring their participation in the country's economy projects. In other words, during a fast growing era, the benefits of the growth did not benefit all equally. While the Malays have been benefiting from the government's patronage (even though not all belong in the poor class category), and the Chinese have the ability to draw wealth from their significant participations in businesses, the Indians have been largely ignored in society. Institutional support and assistance to the poor Indians have been largely neglected. The real monthly wages have been decreasing while opportunities in the private as well as public sectors are also limited. This has resulted in rural-urban migration among the Indians, unfortunately, without much improvement in the economic standing and a limited intergenerational social mobility. Despite the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party recommending various suggestions to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Indians, specifically in the various Malaysia Plans, the weak position of the party has not been able to fruitfully bring about policy changes. Other institutional settings such as the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) as well as MICs projects such as Syarikat Kerjasama Nesa Pelabagai (NESA), MIC Unit Trust, Koperasi Belia Majujaya (MAJU), Maika Holdings and Maju Institute for Education Development (MIED) have not brought any significant changes to the Indians. Issues of leadership and cash flow problems have been the main limiting factors in making these institutions and programs deliver their intended goals. As a whole, the industrialization process brought by Mahathir has not benefited the poor Indians especially the Indian plantation workers. During the Badawi period, again, little is seen to support the poor Indians which ultimately led to frustration and the rise of Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF). The discussion continues on in Najib's leadership as the Prime Minister highlights the Indian issues and the political movements.

As a whole, this book provides good evolutionary perspectives of the Indian plantation workers' outlook within the different political regimes. And it shows clearly that little is done to uplift the status of the Indians in society leading to various social illnesses among them. Institutional failures are rampant even within the party, MIC, who is supposed to champion the Indian society's socio-economic status. The reason lies in that the party is weakly positioned within the Barisan National (BN) coalition and has little or no say in matters relating to the Indian poor. Sincere institutional reforms under significant leadership are required to transform the lives of the poor Indians in specific and the poor Malaysians at large. Planning agencies who are supposed to oversee balanced development and an inclusion of all societies have to get more information on the acute problems of the poor Indians in order to make any significant impact to uplift their standing in society. Indeed, they have to move ahead rather than just provide piecemeal handouts or short term programs to make significant transformations in the lives of the poor Indians.

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