

REPRESENTATION OF A MINORITY COMMUNITY IN A MALAYSIAN TAMIL DAILY

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ABSTRACT

The media plays an important role in shaping attitudes of people but at the same time, the media represents what occurs at ground level. This study examines the coverage of news stories in one Malaysian Tamil daily i.e., *Malaysian Namban* in August 2007, October 2007 and November 2007. This period encompasses the period just before and during the first month of the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) movement. Hindraf is a fairly new coalition of 30 Hindu Non-Governmental organizations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in multiracial Malaysia. The Tamils comprise 90% of the Malaysian Indian population and members of Hindraf are mainly Tamils. The Malaysian Indian population makes up 7% of the total population of the country and is considered a minority in the country. With a view to determining how the Malaysian Indian community, mainly the Tamils are perceived by the media in multilingual, multiracial Malaysia a content analysis of one Tamil daily was conducted to determine the type of news stories reported during this period.

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Introduction

In Malaysia, there are over 30 newspapers and tabloids published mainly in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil (<http://www.warc.com/LandingPages/Data/NewspaperTrends/PDF/Malaysia.pdf>). The print journalism in Peninsula Malaysia is mainly dominated by the English newspapers i.e. *New Straits Times*, *The Star* and *The Sun*, Malay newspapers i.e. *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*; Chinese newspapers i.e. *Sin Chew Daily*, *China Press*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Guang Ming Daily News* and Tamil newspapers i.e. *Tamil Nesan*, *Malaysian Nanban* and *Makkal Osai*.

This study examines how one Tamil daily newspaper i.e. *Malaysian Nanban* portrays news stories on Malaysians of Indian descent in general. According to Appudurai & Dass, (2008):

Approximately 50 percent of Malaysian Indians children go to Tamil schools for their primary education. The majority are from lower income homes (p 25).

Many Indian parents in order to gain economic mileage/empowerment have opted to send their children to Malay or English medium schools (Appudurai & Dass (2008) and Tate (2008)). Those who are educated in the English or Malay medium are unable to even recognize the Tamil alphabets as little emphasis is given in national schools to study the Tamil language. According to Lent, A.J. (1974) the readership of Tamil newspapers among Indians has fallen because fewer Indians are going to Tamil schools or learning Tamil in schools. As such, it can be concluded that the news stories featured in *Malaysian Nanban* reflect the interest of the lower-middle class.

Background: to the protest march

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual society. The population as of February 2007 was 26.6 million consisting of 62% Malays, 24% Chinese, 8% Indians, with other minorities and indigenous peoples (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia>). The Malaysian Indian population makes up 8% of the population of the country and the community is considered a minority.

HINDRAF is a coalition of 30 Hindu Non-Governmental organizations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in multiracial Malaysia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia>). *HINDRAF* members are mainly Tamils and the Tamils comprise 90% of the Malaysian Indian population. The Hindu Rights Actions Force (*HINDRAF*) has been declared an illegal organization from Wednesday, October 15th, 2008 by Malaysia Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia>).

On 25th November, 2007, Indians-who make up less than 8% of Malaysia's population of about 26.6 million – led a protest march through the city of Kuala Lumpur in the first large ethnically motivated street demonstration since 1969. The Indians announced a mainly symbolic \$4 trillion class-action lawsuit against the British government, the country's former colonial ruler, for bringing them as indentured labourers to the region, "exploiting them for 150 years," and then allowing them to be marginalized in postcolonial Malaysia (Fuller, 2008).

Agenda- Setting theory

The theoretical framework provided by the agenda setting serves as the basis for discussion of how the Malaysian Indian community is perceived by the media. The agenda-setting theory examines the media's effect on the perceived importance of issues held by the public. In other words it refers to the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind (Yuksel, 2003).

According to Gharparde, 1986 (cited in Emily Eoff, 2002) agenda-setting theory is a relational concept that specifies a transfer of salience from agenda primers (media) to agenda adopters (consumers). Agenda setting stems the formation of public opinions. Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) state that the idea behind agenda-setting is simple: the media by featuring some issues more prominently and some issues less prominently and still other issues not at all, gives readers a sense of what issues are important or salient to a community.

An important concept in agenda-setting theory is the framing of news. Framing defines how a certain piece of media content is packaged so it will influence a particular interpretation (<http://www.uky.edu/drlane/captone/mass/agenda.htm>). According to Conrad & Markens (2001):

Media frames often determine what "news" becomes and how it is reported. Frames become the central organizing idea to selectively represent certain aspects of the stories and accentuate some information while excluding others. Through everyday news work – selecting what to report, locating and quoting expert commentary, and organizing and presenting the news – news organizations provide an important piece of the public discourse. Different frames can lead to different stories (p 375-376).

Typically, the networks frame issues in either episodic or thematic terms. According to Iyengar & Simon (1993):

The episodic frame depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events – a homeless person, an unemployed worker, a victim of racial discrimination, the bombing of an airliner, an attempted murder, and so on. Visually, episodic reports make for “good pictures”. The thematic news frame, in contrast, places public issues in some general or abstract context. The thematic news frame typically takes the form of a “takeout” or “backgrounder” report directed at general outcome or conditions and frequently features “talking heads (p 359-370).

Research questions

The following research questions were examined:

- How are Tamils represented in a Malaysian Tamil newspaper?
- What sorts of news stories were given importance
- Were there recurring themes?
- How did the media define the significance/importance of the protest march by *HINDRAF* in terms of:
 1. section in the newspaper where the reports appears
 2. number of news items related to the protest march as compared to items on other issues
 3. the use of letterheads
 4. the size of fonts
 5. the size of the report
 6. use of photographs to support the report
 7. the period of prolonged reporting
 8. presentation of the news stories (in a thematic frame, half episodic and half thematic frame or episodic frames?).

Methodology

There are three main daily Tamil newspapers in Malaysia i.e. *Tamil Nesan*, *Malaysian Nanban* and *Makkal Osai*. These three newspapers do vary to some extent in the way they select and present news. Generally, the Tamil newspapers are owned by politicians or their loyal supporters aligned to a ruling party (<http://www.geocities.com/sounvx/general.htm>).

Tamil Nesan is the oldest newspaper and is known to be pro-government¹. Furthermore, *Tamil Nesan* is owned by Dato' Seri S. Samy Vellu, who is the President of Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) which is a Malaysian political party and a component party of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN).² *Malaysian Nanban* which started 21 years ago³ is also known to be pro-government⁴ and was started by supporters of MIC Deputy President S. Subramaniam.

¹ (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDQ/is_2008_April_21/ai_n25365114).

² (http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1061&Itemid=178).

³ <http://www.indianmalaysian.com/sound/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=42>

⁴ (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDQ/is_2008_April_21/ai_n25365114)

In contrast, *Makkal Osai* is a relatively a new newspaper, launched in 2005. This paper gives prominence to the Makkal Sakthi (people's power) movement which sprang to life following the Nov 25 protest march organised by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)⁵. *Makkal Osai* is also known to be an outspoken newspaper that criticizes the current government strongly.⁶

Of the three newspapers the *Malaysian Nanban* is the leading newspaper. As for its circulation (<http://www.geocities.com/sounvx/general.htm>) see Table 1. As the National language policy in the country was strengthened, the number of people literate in Tamil dropped sharply, and this affected the circulation of Tamil newspapers (Lent, A.J, 1974).

Table 1: Falling readership in '000

Newspaper	1998	2000	Var
Malaysian Nanban	155	174	+12.3
Tamil Nesan	136	101	-25.7

Source: AC Nielsen Mid Year Media Index, Sept 1999 & 2000

For the purpose of this study, the *Malaysian Nanban* was chosen due to its high readership. It is also deemed to be more impartial in comparison to the other two Tamil newspapers. This judgment of impartiality was based on the reading of all three newspapers by four coders i.e. two of the authors and two research assistants, interviews with the readers of these newspapers (a small group of 10) and according to the website⁷ *Malaysian Nanban* gained popularity due to its critical views on issues concerning the Indian community and MIC's president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu.

The *Malaysian Nanban* basically covers news related to general news on Malaysia including politics (5 pages), world news (1 page), news about Sri Lanka (1 page), news of India (2 pages), cinema news (1 ½ pages), TV programmes (½ page), letters to editors (½ page), sports (2 pages) and advertisements (1 page) on a weekday⁸. The weekend edition carries features on short stories, student's corner, general health, women's corner, poetry corner, literature, entertainment and news and astrology, which are mainly foreign-based. For the purpose of the study, only news stories that carry news of Malaysian Indians was considered. News stories mentioning India and Indians in India or Sri Lanka were excluded.

The news coverage of Malaysian Indians was explored through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of content. The quantitative method was used to measure the duration and frequency of the news reported and a qualitative analysis was used to interpret the viewpoints presented in the articles.

⁵ (<http://www.makz.com/2008/04/16/makkal-osai-banned/>).

⁶ (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDQ/is_2008_April_21/ai_n25365114).

⁷ <http://www.indianmalaysian.com/sound/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=42>

⁸ This is based on an approximate estimate as the sections and the numbers of pages allocated vary from day to day.

The search for the stories was conducted manually. Every issue of the *Malaysian Namban* for the months of August, October and November 2007 was examined. The news stories were coded by four coders, who were familiar with the technique of content analysis. First, each story was scanned and if the story was on Malaysian Indians it was marked.

The most important indicators of coverage content are, of course, themes or topics, since they reflect what the editors perceive as newsworthy about a group (Ma & Hildebrandt, 1993). These news stories were coded into themes to see if there was an emergence of certain themes. To minimize subjectivity, the coders made their judgment only on the literal meaning of each story. The themes that the four coders deemed similar were politics, social, religious, education and economics.

The study also examined the coverage of news stories in the context of the protest march by HINDRAF from October to November 2007. This period encompasses the period just before and during the month of the protest march. The news stories of the protest march were examined to determine how the media defined the importance of the march.

One of the limitations of this study was that the *Malaysian Namban's* office only keeps hardcopies of the newspapers for a current year, due to the high storage cost. Moreover, they do not have the electronic facilities to keep past copies digitally. Past copies of the *Malaysian Namban* newspapers were obtained from the library in the University of Malaya but the library had newspapers missing for some days each month⁹.

Results

A total of 65 copies were analysed. The 65 copies contained a total of 717 news stories on Malaysian Indians (see Table 2).

Table 2: Total number of news stories on Malaysian Indians

News stories of the Malaysian Indians	N observed
August 2007	297
October 2007	259
November 2007	161
Total	717

⁹ There were missing newspapers in each month; in August 2007, 8 newspapers were missing: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 11th, 12th, 29th, and 30th, in October 2007, 5 newspapers were missing: 1st, 11th, 12th, 14th and 23rd and in November 2007, 14 newspapers were missing: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 9th, 10th, 12th, 15th, 17th, 18th, 26th and 30th.

The findings revealed that specific themes emerged and there was 90% agreement among the four coders on these themes. They were politics, social, religious, education and economics (see Table 3).

Table 3: Total number of news stories according to themes.

Main Themes	N observed in August 2007	N observed in October 2007	N observed in November 2007
Politics	63	45	51
Social	162	137	80
Religious	18	14	7
Education	46	45	16
Economics	8	18	7
Total	297	259	161

Each main theme was sorted into subthemes to see the type of topics that made news within the theme (see Table 4).

Table 4: Total number of news stories observed according to the subthemes.

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Sub themes	Sub themes	Sub Themes	Sub themes	Sub Themes	Sub themes	Sub themes
Political ¹⁰	Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)	United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)	HINDRAF	People's Justice Party (PKR)	Indian Progressive Front (IPF) & People's Progressive Party (PPP)	Others		
Social	Crime	Tragic incidents	Accidents	Amenities issues	Culture	Communal matters	Financial assistance needed	Other issues
Religious	Demolition of temples	Construction/ Renovation of temple	Prayers	Festivals	Others issues			
Education	Funding/ Construction of Tamil Schools	Closure/ Demolishment Of Tamil Schools	Workshops / Talks	Individual/ General Achievement	Events	Tamil School	Tamil Language	Other Issues
Economics	Work /Business Opportunities	Others						

There were some themes that overlapped with other themes, especially the political theme. In such cases the coders classified the news stories based on only one theme. The

¹⁰ Refers to the various political parties in Malaysia

focus of the news stories was taken into consideration when overlapping of themes occurred. There was 95% consistency in the emergence of main theme and sub-themes.

The centre of the media attention was the political theme; these news stories basically were about politicians, political campaigns, position tussle or other occurrences in the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party which is a Malaysian political party; forming of alliances among the Indian political parties and HINDRAF's demands. This may be because the 12th general election in Malaysia was held on 8th March, 2008.

The sub-themes that were most prominent can be summarized as follows (see also Table 5):

- news on MIC : updates on the daily going on in the party and stories of its members, statements by the president defending the party as the only party that truly defends and fights for the rights of Malaysian Indians and also refuting claims by HINDRAF that MIC had done nothing to help the Malaysian Indians; position tussle among its members and forming of alliances with other political parties i.e. Indian Progressive Front (IPF) and People's Progressive Party (PPP)
- News on United Malays National Organization (UMMO- a major political party)): statement issued by the Prime Minister and ruling party Barisan Nasional (BN) on Malaysian Indians and their struggle for economic empowerment and religious issues focusing specifically on the demolition of temples in the country.
- People's Justice Party (PKR): an opposition party led by the former ex-deputy prime minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his statements sympathizing with the struggles of Malaysian Indians.
- Indian Progressive Front (IPF) & People's Progressive Party (PPP): statements made by two other political parties i.e. IPF on the proposed alliance with MIC and PPP and the squabbles among the members of PPP and MIC.
- Others: formation of another political party by Mr .Nalla, who was Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's former aide.

Table 5: Political:-Sub-themes

Political Theme	MIC	UMNO	HINDRAF	PKR	IPF & PPP	Others
August 2007	39	7	3	3	5	6
October 2007	18	3	4	2	12	4
November 2007	12	9	22	1	4	3

The next attention-grabbing theme that was the focus of the newspapers was the social theme. The social theme carried news stories which mainly focussed on crime, accidents and other tragic incidents.

Daily there was news items on crimes- either murder or robbery. News stories on suicide, sudden death and accidents resulting in death were also common. These stories were featured prominently on the front and second page/s.

Communal matters or issues faced by Malaysian Indians, such as the problems faced by the Malaysian Indians due to lost identity cards, difficulty in obtaining birth certificates and citizenship also featured. Even though these issues are important and require urgent attention such news was only sporadically mentioned and not followed up or given much importance.

The focus of the subthemes was:

- Crime: reports appear daily. News on murder, robbery/theft and Sujatha’s (a famous local actress) murder trials featured. Murders occurred within families. Other crimes often reported are robbery/theft, drugs/gangsterism, rape and sexual abuse, assault and motorcar theft.
- Tragic Incidents: the news mainly revolved around sudden death, unexplained death or suicide.
- Accidents: every other day there was at least one accident case reported.
- Culture: news on cultural performances and *saree* competitions, launching of music albums or showing of Tamil movies and *Deepavali* open houses also featured.
- Communal Matters: complaints about the lack of good educational TV programmes, the need to educate and improve the financial status of Malaysian Indians, the role of the Tamil newspaper in educating Malaysian Indians, difficulties faced by widows in raising their children, the need for announcements in public places like the airport to be in Tamil and the need for free legal advice.
- Amenities issues: Facilities or services provided by the government for the use of the general public. The main highlight was the unsatisfactory service in government hospitals resulting in death due to negligence or delayed treatment¹¹. Lack of housing and proper water services was another complaint.
- Requests for personal financial assistance: requests were made for financial aid for medical treatment or compensation due to losses because of floods or fire.
- Other issues: basically revolve around recognition given to individuals who were achievers or donated blood; health information (only 4 articles in the three months), exhibitions held, plight of the victims of loan sharks, fraud cases and annual dinners.

The details of the frequency of occurrence are shown in Table 6

Table 6: Social –sub themes

Social theme	Crime	Tragic Incidents	Accidents	Communal Matters	Amenities Issues	Financial Assistance needed	Culture	Other Issues

¹¹ News stories were based on statements made by the families members of the victim

August 2007	81	17	19	8	4	2	9	22
October 2007	68	14	11	5	7	5	19	8
November 2007	44	15	3	3	1	5	7	2

The religious issues revolve around the demolition of temples, construction or renovation of temples, various festivals and prayers.

A summary of sub-themes follows:

- Demolition of temples: Various temples in Malaysia had been demolished by the state government as the temples were built on illegal land or without a permit¹². This was condemned by the Malaysian Hindu Association and HINDRAF
- Festivals: Mention was made of the various festivals held in the temples in Malaysia.
- Construction/Renovation of temples: Focused on the rebuilding of temples due to poor condition.
- Prayers: Special prayers that are held in temples.
- Other issues: donation given to temples by individuals or associations, spreading of the wrong concept of the religion and facilities for the handicapped to be provided in temples.

The details of frequency of occurrence are shown below in Table 7

Table 7: Religious -sub themes

Religious Themes	Demolition of temples	Construction/Renovation of temple	Prayers	Festivals	Others
August 2007	2	3	2	5	6
October 2007	3	1	1	8	1
November 2007	3	2	-	-	2

The next theme is education; which mainly featured stories on the closure/demolishment of Tamil schools and the condition of Tamil schools. The closure of Tamil schools resulted in many social activists highlighting the lack of support from the Indian community itself and the seriousness of the issue.

A summarized list of sub-themes follows:

¹² News stories based on the statement made by those involved in the temple issue

- Funding/construction of Tamil schools: donations to Tamil schools that needed to be rebuilt and also donations in kind such as sports equipment and computers.
- Closure/demolishment of Tamil schools: demolishment of Tamil schools due to the fact the buildings were not safe or were facing the threat of being closed down.
- Workshops and Talks: workshops, seminars, motivational camps for students, free religious classes, training for graduates and talks on self-improvement
- Tamil Schools: generally the problems faced by Tamil schools i.e. the importance of the preservation of Tamil schools, the support of the Indian community towards Indian studies and the need for more Tamil schools.
- Tamil Language: issues related to change in the grammar and need for Tamil school teachers to master the language.
- Individual/General achievement: Individuals were recognised for their academic and sports excellence.
- Events: speech and essay competitions in schools
- Other Issues: the lack of Indian student enrolment in polytechnics, dissatisfaction of parents with the Tamil school management, the need for students to understand the importance of exams and the importance of education and religion in ensuring the success of students.

The details of rate of recurrences are shown in Table No 8

Table No 8: Educational – sub themes

Educational Themes	Funding/ Construction of Tamil Schools	Closure/ Demolishment Of Tamil Schools	Workshops /Talks	Individual/ General Achievement	Events	Tamil School	Tamil Language	Other Issues
August 2007	4	6	9	8	4	1	6	8
October 2007	8	5	5	1	10	9	2	5
November 2007	3	-	1	5	2	3	-	2

Very little was discussed on economics. The subthemes relating to this field were:

- Work/Business prospects: opportunities to open shops, temporary stalls, business workshops, micro-credit for small business run by Indians and loans for Indians entrepreneurs
- Other issues: motivational camps for Indian entrepreneurs, various trade/association meetings.

The details of frequency of occurrence are shown in Table No 9

Table 9 – Economics – sub themes

Economics	Work /Business opportunities	Others
August 2007	5	3
October 2007	11	6

November 2007	4	3
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In the context of the protest march by Hindraf, 26 news stories were featured (see Table 10). The protest march was held on the 25th of November 2007 and news stories of the protest march were mainly featured in that month. The findings were limited due to the fact that 14 newspapers were missing in the month of November especially the 26th and 30th, the days following the protest march.

Table 10: Total number of news stories on HINDRAF

Political Theme	MIC	UMNO	HINDRAF	PKR	IPF & PPP	Others
October 2007	18	3	4	2	12	4
November 2007	12	9	22	1	4	3

MIC -Malaysian Indian Congress

UMNO- United Malays National Organization

HINDRAF- Hindu Rights Action Force

PKR- People’s Justice Party

IPF & PPP- Indian Progressive Front & People’s Progressive Party

These 26 news stories were then analysed to see if they were presented in thematic frames, half episodic and half thematic frames or episodic frames (see Table 11). Most of the news stories on the protest march were presented in an episodic frame. Episodic frames are frames that are presented on an issue “in terms of a single event or individual” (Todd, 2006, p 5). The news stories featured were mainly about the plight of the demonstrators, who were accused of taking part in an illegal march which led to a mass arrest, court proceedings and arrangements for their release. There were also pictures and news stories of police denials regarding entering a Hindu temple and the demonstrators’ claims that they did not enter or destroy the property of the said temple¹³. Visually, episodic reports make for “good pictures” (Iyengar & Simon, 1993 p 369)) thus, creating the public awareness and concern for issues reported by news stories (Gewijzigd, 2003).

Table 11: Frequency of the frames of news stories

	N observed in	N observed in
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¹³ News stories of the dispute was reported based on reports made by those involved

	October 2007	November 2007
Episodic frame	1	11
Thematic frames	3	8
Half episodic and half thematic frames		3

In contrast, thematic frames are frames that present an issue in a social or historical context, encourage social action in audience members because they see the problem “as having a social cause” and therefore support social solutions (Todd, 2006). The news stories on the protest march were featured as a political gathering, HINDRAF representation of the rights of Malaysian Indians, the dissatisfaction of the Indian community, the Indian community’s fight for what is rightfully theirs and statements by the supporters of HINDRAF that the protest march was a peaceful demonstration meant to highlight the grievances of the Malaysian Indians.

Half-episodic and half-thematic frames mainly involved news stories of individuals encounters with the police in relation to the protest march, the Malaysian Bar Council’s statement of the way the protest march had been handled by the police and the release of the main advisors of HINDRAF.

The protest march was given much importance and was on both the first and the last page of the newspaper. Coloured photos were used to highlight the importance of the news stories, and large letterheads and attractive coloured fonts were used. The sizes of the news stories covered at least ¼ pages of the newspapers and from the 26th till the 30th both the front and back pages of the newspaper were dominated by news stories of the protest march (see Table 12).

Table 12: Significance/importance of the protest march by *HINDRAF* in terms of:

	Section reported	Letterheads and fonts	Size of the report	Colour Photographs
21/11	Front page	Medium	¼ page	1
24/11	Front page	Medium	¼ page	4
25/11	Front, fourth and fifth page	Medium	½ page	1
26/11				
27/11	Front, third and back page	Big	3 full pages	20
28/11	Front and third page	Big	½ page on front page and ½ page on third page	5
29/11	Front and back page	Big	½ page in front and full page on the back	7
30/11				

Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicate that the *Malaysian Nanban* in its coverage of the everyday life of Malaysian Indians seem to center around five main themes only and these include crime, tragic events and accidents. By emphasizing or frequently mentioning these issues which seems to be the focal piece of the newspaper, the paper increases the salience of these issues for the reading public.

Issues that gain importance in public perception are generally those issues that the media determine to be important (David & Pavlik, 2003). In the case of the *Malaysian Nanban*, the public agenda is set by the media, in terms of the amount of importance that is given to a news story. Political and social themes have been featured more prominently than other themes, and this sets the agenda of what is deemed important for the Malaysian Indian community. The selection of stories that are highlighted and featured in the social theme tells the readers what is happening within the Malaysian Indian community and therefore sets the agenda for the social theme.

Events related to the Indian community that was constructive or optimistic, were not highlighted, an emphasis on such events would have presented a more positive picture of the Indian community. By emphasizing negative issues, a negative image of Malaysian Indians is presented. This picking and choosing of themes and activities “establishes the salience of issues or images in the minds of the public” (Littlejohn 1992 cited in Akpabio, 2005, p 174).

The newspaper considers political news newsworthy as it informs the public of the political situation of the country. The Tamil newspapers are preoccupied with MIC's leadership tussle, but from time to time they do highlight the Malaysian Indian's concerns (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia_Nanban). This may also be due to the fact that the 12th general election was due on the 8th of March, 2008 and *HINDRAF* was planning its protest march on the 25th November 2007. The protest march was to indicate that Malaysian Indians were marginalized.

Are the needs of Malaysian Indians taken care of by the political party representing them? Of particular importance to Malaysian Indians is the continuing development of leaders who can speak for their interests in a variety of areas and work effectively to increase their participation in the national mainstream. This is important as Malaysian Indians have little political clout (Appudurai & Dass, 2008). Tate (2008) states that the MIC under the leadership of Dato' Seri S. Samy Vellu, the President of the MIC, brought little or no improvement to Malaysian Indians and the living and working conditions of both rural estate workers and the urban proletariat had deteriorated further.

According to Appudurai & Dass (2008):

there is a widely held perception that the Malaysian Indian community is beset with problems ranging from high rates of crime, gangsterism, substance (especially alcohol) abuse, and whole host of dysfunctional behaviours. It is also reported that Indians form the largest group of suicide victims (p 26).

Former Deputy Minister for Women, Family and Community Development, and Deputy President of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Dato' G. Palanivel, in a press release on July 23, 2006 said that 30-35 Malaysian Indians per 100,000 committed or attempted to commit suicide annually as compared to 10-12 Malaysians per 100,000 (<http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1043361>).

Such a dismal picture of Malaysian Indians presented by both academics and politicians is clearly mirrored in the social themes i.e. crime, tragic events and accidents were considered newsworthy. The social issues mentioned in the papers appear to reflect the reality of the lives of the Malaysian Indians as seen in the focus on murder, robbery/theft, drugs/ gangsterism, suicide, sudden death and death due to road accidents. Such stories were given prominence in the first and second pages of the newspaper. It should be pointed out that the majority of the children and grandchildren of Malaysian Indian rubber tappers remain poor, are poorly educated and are overrepresented in menial jobs (Fuller, 2008).

Such a dismal picture of the community is supported by historian and sociologist Desmond Tate (2008) who says that the presence of a rootless class Indians in urban squatters have come to be associated in the public mind with an upsurge of violence and crime. The alarming rate of increase in violent crimes involving the Indian youths have been reported in the media almost daily (The Star, August 17th, 2008). According to Malaysia Human Rights Commission's Datuk N. Sivasubramaniam most of the Indian youths who left their studies halfway were involved in criminal activities and there had been cases of frustrated youths who turned to crime as they were unable to get jobs even though they had the necessary qualifications (The Star, August 8th, 2008).

Another interesting factor is that religious issues were not highlighted as a source of cultural information although notices of festivals and prayers were mentioned. Even economic topics, which play an important role in any community, were minimally featured. The focus appeared to be more on financial assistance and opportunities for small scale business. This is supported by the website¹⁴ as not much business news about the Indian community is reported in Tamil newspapers.

The news stories of the protest march were given importance and took up much prime newspaper space i.e. the front and the back page of the newspaper. The increase in the coverage of the news stories of the protest march sets the salience of the particular issue. This is evident as from the 26th November, 2007 there was a dramatic increase in the stories of the protest march, and a decrease of other political stories. The use of coloured photos, big letterheads and attractive coloured fonts and the size of news stories focused the reader's attention towards the protest march. What readers perceive as big issues of the day are those issues that the press focusses on (see David & Pavlik, 2003).

Framing research explores how media frames an issue or a problem and how this affects people's understanding of that issue (Yuksel, 2003). The news stories on protest march were presented in an episodic frame, in terms of concrete instances or specific events.

¹⁴ http://lookattrue.wordpress.com/2008/08/02/malaysia_tamil_newspaper_increased_to_rm130

The news stories mainly highlighted the plight of the demonstrators, who were accused of taking part in an illegal march which led to a mass arrest, court proceedings and the arrangement of the release of those accused. Episodic frames tend to place the social responsibility on the individual or the event presented in the news (Todd, 2006). The episodic frames tend to minimize the reader's feelings of obligation or social responsibility towards the protest march, making it the responsibility of the people involved in the protest march. Moreover, visually, episodic reports make for "good pictures" (Iyengar & Simon, 1993).

It would seem that the plight of the Malaysian Indian community revolves around demanding justice from the government on various issues and also seeking financial, medical or educational funds. Basically it appears from the coverage in the media that the community faces serious social problems. These featured issues may be a manifestation of a real problem that requires a long-term solution (Appudurai & Dass, 2008).

Given that these news stories mirror events within the Indian community, it is clear that the community experiences many problems and can be deemed a marginalized community. The Tamil press reflects the ills and grievances of the community and highlights the social problems it faces. This study might contribute to the understanding of minority issues and perhaps such a reading of the news which but reflects reality can help a government realize the issues that face the community and take pre-emptive action to resolve problems faced by the community.

Caveat

The findings of this research cannot be generalized as the focus is the representation of Malaysian Indians in only one newspaper i.e. the *Malaysian Nanban*. Moreover, 27 copies of the newspaper could not be considered in this analysis. In addition, the time frame used for the study may not have been long enough to determine a balanced representation of the Malaysian Indians by *Malaysian Nanban*. As there is limited material in this area, references and supporting materials included various websites on Malaysian Indians that may require authentication. Hopefully, future research could compare how the community is represented in the three major Tamil newspapers in Malaysia so as to obtain a balanced representation of the status quo of Malaysian Indians.

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