

Hindu new religious movements (NRMs) in Malaysia: An Introduction

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Introduction

The majority of Malaysians (60.4%) are Islamic faith. Followed by Buddhists community about 19.2%, Christians about 9.1%, Hindus about 6.3% and the others 2.9% of the population are composed of followers of other faiths including Taoism, Confucianism and Shamanism. Malaysian Indians population are 7.5%, and 81.8% of Indians are practising Hinduism.

Islam is Malaysia's national religion, although article 11 in Malaysian Constitution guarantees freedom of religious worship. This means that the prior status of Islam overshadows all other religions recognized by the government. All Malays are Muslims by birth. Most of the Chinese communities in Malaysia are practicing Buddhism and Taoists, but there is a growing number of Christians among the Chinese and only a minority of Muslims. Among the Indians, majority are Hindus with a small number of Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs. Minority ethnic groups, such as the Portuguese Eurasians and Europeans are mainly Christians; aborigines are animists, Christians, or Muslims.

Contemporary glance at the Hindu religious tradition discloses a proliferation of new religious movements since the advent of Malaysian independence in 1957. Phenomenon of new religious movements is not a new thing in Hinduism's history. There are many religious movements look new in current time but exist since classical Hindu period. In Hindu tradition should be noted that phenomenon of new religious movement itself is not new. In history of Hinduism many religious movements exist in certain period for revival of the

Hindu religion. Most of the new religious movement founded during pre and post British Colonial period in India and Malaya. The rise of new religious movement in India and Western countries bring great influence to Hinduism in Malaysia.

Scope of Studies

In Malaysian contexts there is no specific body or government department to control or supervise non Islam religious movements, so all Hindu temples and Hindu religious movements should be registered at registrar of society. There are more than thousands of registered temples and hundred over movements and its branches in Malaysia. This Hindu movements can be categorized into various categories such as, based on Hindu philosophy, saints, sect, and universal, but this article will focus on three New Religious Movements (NRMs) which are Ananda Marga movement, The International society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and Saiva Siddhanta Church.

Methodology

This article is based on experimental sampling known as a 'snow ball' method from the perspective of Bailey K.D. that is done stage by stage. During the first stage, the researcher had chosen respondents, who had important criteria such as being Hindu priest, and President or Chairman of Hindu organizations. Through these key informants, the researcher went to second stage of respondents who were members of working committees of Hindu organizations. The third group of informants was the members, and devotees of Hindu organisations. The researcher interviewed 60 respondents for sampling throughout Selangor State and Federal Territory (Kuala Lumpur).

Definition of New Religious Movement (NRMs)

In literature of the social sciences there are technical definitions about New Religious Movements (NRMs), alternative religions, sects or cults. The subjects discussed are about existence of god, purpose of life, and life after death. This definition includes a atheistic 'religions' and philosophies such as various forms of Buddhism, and part of the Human Potential movement. Researchers like to use neutral terms, such as new religious movements, NRMs, minority or alternative religion, the media and the general public tend

to employ the word 'cult'. There are well known movements frequently referred to as 'cults' in this more popular sense are the Unification Church (the 'Moonies'), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON / Hare Rama Hare Krishna movement), Scientology, the Rajneesh movement and The Family (once known as the Children of God).

History of Hinduism in Malaysia

About 80 percentages of Indian immigrants to Malaya were Hindus and originated from South India. During the British colonial period in late 18th century and early 19th century, Indians migrated to Malaya as labours and bring along Hindu ritual practices and beliefs with them. Since then the Hindu religious values and belief system have been part of their life style. They practise the rituals and prayers in the temples built by British.

Hinduism is known as an important marginal religion in Malaysia through the influence of Indian immigrant during the British period in the late 18th Century during the acquisition of the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, Singapore) and with the expansion of British rule over the Peninsular Malaya which resulted in the expansion of agriculture and the demand for cheap and submissive labour which continued till Second World War.

After the Second World War, Hindu's practiced Hinduism by building temples in rural and urban areas. Messages on religion and rituals were spread throughout the nation through temples. At the same time saints from various countries especially from India started preaching Hinduism to Hindu's. It started off with a small group of people spreading the practice of Hinduism and this group has grown into big organizations.

The Hindu people of Malaysia are immigrants to Malaya during British Colonial in Malaya. The Indian brought to Malaya as labors, to work in rubber estates as rubber tappers. The temples built by Indian immigrants played an important role to hold religious activities. Hindu temples can be categorized into two categories. The non agamic temple was built by estate owners, the temple built in urban area were semi-agamic temples. These temples were

built according Saiva Agamic text by Sri Lankan Tamils, Chettiars Communities and Tamil merchants.

After Malaysia's independence, article 11 in Malaysian Constitution guarantees freedom of religious worship, it gives freedom to Hindus to practice their religious teaching and also the Hindus start to build new and reconstruct temples. At the same period lot of Hindu Movements formed to protect their identity.

A Brief History and development of Hindu movements in Malaysia

There are many organizations formed due to religious awareness. These organizations can be categorized to two categories which is formed before and after Malaysian independence. Hindu movements which formed before and after independence contribute lot to Hindus religious thoughts. Most of the organizations have different types of objective and purpose according to their needs and members welfare.

At the beginning of British Colonial period there was no Hindu organization accept Hindu temple which function as Hindu Institution. Later, many Hindu missionaries start to spread their mission to Malaya from India and other part of world. The organization formed by the influence of this missionaries is Vivekanada Ashramam which was established on 1904 in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. Other than that, valuable teaching of Swami Rama Krishna also been spread. In 1915 Ramakrishan Missionary started in India and expended to Singapore and Malaysia. This movement spread religious teaching and fame of Ramakrishna. In 1905 Malaya Hindu Council formed to organize Hindu temples andf religious movements. Dr. Vishvalingam established Hindu Youth Society in 1918 at Taiping. In 1923 Sri Lankan Tamils formed sangeetha Sabhas followed by Pure life Society in 1949 by Swami Sathyanatha and divine life society.Mr Ramanatha Chettiyar and Swami by Sathyanantha found Malay Arul Neri Thirukootam in 1955. Anantha Marg is a movement which considers social thinking and spirituality, found by Sri Anantha Moorthy in 1955.

Some efforts have been taken in 1940 and 1950 to gather all Hindus. Hindu Advisory board was formed in 1949 and seeks for problems faced by Hindus from the Hindu representatives. In 1954 Hindu conference was carried out with the help of many parties, as a result of this conference Malaysian Hindu Advisory Board was found. This board is responsible for each and every problem faced by Malaysian Hindu organization.

After Malaysian Independent, because there was no any special organization to solve Hindus problem so, with the help of Malaysian Indian Congress in 1965 Malaysian Hindu Society has established to guide Hindus activities. After independence there was lot of organization was found, some was registered and some was not. The first organization found in Malaysia after independence is Kriya Mahtra Solachi Babaji Yoga Sangam in 1960. In 1964 Ramakrishna Saratha Sangam was found by Ramaswami Srila Sri Parahamsar, this organization teaches Vedic principles to public. Followed by this Malaysian Hindu Priest Society was found in the year 1975, the aim of this organization is to take care the welfare of Hindu priest in Malaysia. Dhyanana Ashramam was established in 1980 by Swami Bhiramanantha to spread spiritual principle of Hinduism to Malaysian Hindus. Other than these organizations there are numerous organization raised such as Malaysia Hindu Dharma Mamandram by Mr. Saathayya in 1982, Agasthiyar Sanmarga Yoga Centre in 1986 by Swami Tharumalingam, Sri Sathya Sai Council in 1983, Malaysian Amirtheswary Society in 2003.

An introduction of ISKCON, Saiva Siddhanta Church and Anandha Marga.

Anandha Marga

Anandha Marga was officially found in 1955 at Bihar, India. This movement was found by Prabath Ranjan Sarkar (Baba) from Jampur, Bihar, India. This movement was found earlier than the date registered officially, it was started by Baba in the year 1921. Anandha marg means 'path of pleasure'. Anandha means pleasure and marg means path. The followers of the Anandha Marga

are practicing meditation, yoga, moral teaching, spiritual gathering and social service.

In 1959 progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT) was introduced by Baba. In 1963, "Education, Relief and Welfare Section" (ERAWS) introduced to provide social service. Through this Anandha Marga starts schools and colleges to help the needy. In 1970 Ananda Marga became international organization when branches opened in Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Anandha Marga came to Malaysia in the year 1968, but only in the 2003 this organization was established officially in Old Klang Road, Kuala Lumpur. Now this organization has many branches throughout the nation. Anandha Marga now spread its wings all over Malaysia.

Saiva Siddhanta Church

Saiva Siddhanta Church was found in Sri Lanka in the year 1947 by Thava Thiru Sivaya Subramaniya Swami(Guru). This organization promoting Saivism by building spiritual character throughout the world by its teaching. This organization is found in Sri Lanka but now has its head quarters in Hawaii, America.

In 1970 Christianity and Islam has influenced Malaysian Hindus to convert their religion, and many Hindus lack of Hindu religious teaching, so Mr. Thiruvagam had a connection with Thava Thiru Sivaya Subramaniya Swami and with his guidance Mr. Thiruvagam decided to spread the teachings throughout Malaysia.

In 1976 Thava Thiru Sivaya Subramaniya Swami (Guru) visits Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, and Europe countries. When he (Guru) came to Malaysia, Mr Thiruvagam meet him personally and deeply involves in the movement. Mr. Thiruvagam gathered his friends which really interested in Saiva Siddhanta and starts to spread Hindu and Saiva Siddhanta teachings through pamphlets and magazines. These materials are in English and from Hawaii Saiva Siddhanta Church. In 1980, Thava Thiru Sivaya Subramaniya Swami(Guru) and his followers visit Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and India. Thava Thiru Sivaya

Subramaniya Swami(Guru) spend three days in Malaysia, and said it is a must to open a branch of Saiva siddhanta Church in Malaysia.

In the process of establishing this organization Mr Thiruvasagam faced a lot of problems because there was different point of views about Saiva Siddhanta among local scholars. Although he faced many problems, Mr. Thiruvasagam continued his missionary by getting religious handout directly from Saiva Siddhanta Church from Hawaii and distribute it to members in Malaysia.

Mr.Thiruvasagam finally decided to establish Malaysia Saiva Siddhanta Mandram with its own principles. In 16th July 1982 Saiva Siddhanta Mandram was registered officially. After some disagreements in between Saiva Siddha Church and Saiva Siddhanta Mandram there is no direct connection between this organizations. But until now there are direct disciples of Saiva Siddhanta Church of Hawaii, but there is no registered organization of this movement in Malaysia and they are functioning through representative selected by head quarters. Once or twice a year there will be religious discussion organized by disciples of Saiva Siddhanta Church members in Malaysia.

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was established in 1966 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Sri Prabhupada). ISKCON has since developed into a worldwide confederation of 10,000 temple devotees and 250,000 congregational devotees. ISKCON is known as the Hare Krishna movement, ISKCON is comprised of more than 350 centers, 60 rural communities, 50 schools and 60 restaurants worldwide. The mission of this nonsectarian, monotheistic movement is to promote the well being of society by teaching the science of Krishna consciousness according to *Bhagavad-gita* and other ancient scriptures. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness was founded by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1966. It belongs to the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, a devotional tradition based on the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita* and *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. The precepts and practices of ISKCON were taught and codified by the 15th century saint and religious reformer Sri

Caitanya Mahaprabhu and his principle associates, the Six Goswamis of Vrindavana.

Sri Caitanya, whom devotees revere as a direct incarnation of Krishna, gave a powerful impetus for a massive *bhakti* (devotional) movement throughout India. Under his direction hundreds of volumes on the philosophy of Krishna consciousness were compiled. Many devotees have followed in the line of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu including, in the 19th century, an outstanding Vaisnava theologian, Bhaktivinoda Thakura who brought Krishna consciousness to a modern audience.

ISKCON Malaysia was established in 1980. Today, there are over 14 registered branches and over 20 active preaching centers nationwide, not including the innumerable number of get-togethers. Most of these centers are managed by congregation devotees who volunteer their time and resources for the service of Lord Krishna.

ISKCON worldwide is managed by the Governing Body Commission comprising of more than 40 elected members. They meet once a year in Sri Mayapur Dham, India, the ISKCON headquarters, for the annual meeting. Members of the GBC are in charge of overseeing preaching activities in different parts of the world. The members are known as Governing Body Commissioners.

The Governing Body Commissioners for Malaysia are His Holiness Jayapataka Swami and His Holiness Prabhavisnu Swami. The Regional Secretary is His Grace Simhesvara Dasa. Each of the branches or Nama Hattas in Malaysia, is managed by a committee comprising of elected members. The centers are financially self-sufficient and manage their affairs independently.

Socio-religious activities of ISKCON, Saiva Siddhanta Church and Anandha Marga.

ISKCON

There are lot of activities are carried out by ISKCON, such as generate funds for operations and activities, by various kinds of fund raising projects. Congregational Preaching Ministry are the department in ISKCON which is responsible to spread the mission of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu to every town and village through innovative and effective means. This is one of the key ministries of SJMKL and most active. Under this ministry are various departments catering to different areas of preaching- University/college preaching is to teach and train students at tertiary level of education. Nama Hatta/Bhakti Vriksa is to establish regular, small gathering in every neighbourhood. Damodara department is to coordinate home programmes during the month of Damodara.

Other than that, there is another department which provides care, assistance and guide to congregation among members, social and domestic life. The areas include job, education, marriage and health. This organization also has special team which conduct and arrange festivals and programmes.

Another important activity carried out by this movement is spiritual counselling system which provides care, guidance and training for every individual devotee so that they can practice Krishna consciousness in a wonderful and conducive atmosphere. The SCS is also considered as backbone of the SJMKL. It is the very foundation on which we are building a harmonious and unified congregation at SJMKL that is spiritual dynamic and enthusiastic. To emphasis about the vegetarianism as a healthy way of life. ISKCON distribute *prasadam* to 400 people weekly. Bhagavad Gita classes are conducted on every early morning at Sri Jagannatha Mandir in Tamil and English.

Saiva Siddhanta Church

The main activity of this movement is to protect, preserve and promote Saivite Hinduism, especially the enlightened monistic Saiva Siddhanta philosophy,

called Advaita Ishvaravada, of the Nandinatha Sampradaya's Kailasa Parampara. Saiva Siddhanta Church nurture their members a rich, rewarding and spiritually fulfilling extended family life based on the traditions and culture of Saivite Hinduism, strengthening family love, inspiring security within the home and encouraging regular religious study and daily *sadhana*, which is spiritual effort. Each year in October or November this movement conducts four days of special worship and seminar activities on the occasion of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami's Mahasamadhi anniversary for devotees and anyone who enjoys Gurudeva's teachings. Pilgrims enjoy *satsangs* with *Bodhinatha* and other *Mathavasis*, and wander the monastery grounds to visit Iraivan Temple and perform *sadhanas*. Inner search is a regular activity that involves traveling with a satguru and his monks on their periodic journeys for personalized instruction in The Master Course. Inner search is not your typical vacation but a travel experience that combines the mystical path of Indian spirituality.

To foster Saivite monasticism among those who qualify, training and caring for those who have dedicated their lives in selfless service to others to God, Goddess and guru, encouraging all monastic to follow and exemplify the strict ideals and disciplines found in their vows.

In Malaysia after Saiva Siddhanta Mandram separated from Saiva Siddhanta Church, the movement started to hold lot of activities to spread Saivism among Malaysian Hindus. There major activity of the movement are religious education which includes religious classes, local and foreign Hindu expertise religious talk and discussion, Tamil language classes, *Thirumurai* classes, Tamil Classical Music classes, and classes on the proper way to worship. Other than that yoga and meditation classes are carried out. Maha Sivarathiri celebration is one of the most important activity hold by this movement. This festival is considered as important because the major deity of Saivism and this organization is Lord Shiva.

World Saiva Conference is a international activity which gathers worldwide Saivism followers to discuss and exchange their point of view about Saivism. Books about saivism will be released on the occasion.

Anandha marga

Anandha Marga Malaysia branches conduct activities such as meditation classes, yoga classes, and group prayers. Yoga classes are conducted on every Saturday, this yoga class is carried out for the well being of the members. The other activities are reciting hymns and mantras or singing devotional songs. This class is on every Saturday for their members only.

Other than that higher level meditation classes only for the members, and for non members simple meditation called Dharma Chakaram taught. There are few cosmic dances called Kaisiki and Thandava been taught for enlightenment and spiritual upliftment. Other than that, there are several activities carried out throughout the year such as free yoga campaign, spiritual campaign, Baba's birthday celebration, and Holi festival, Ponggal Celebration, social activities and some other activities to fulfill local needs. Classes are held to teach fasting (*Upavasa*) methods, these classes are usually on Friday to Sunday.

Social activities such as free English classes are carried out to help school children to learn English. Other than that, blood donation campaign, and cleaning the surrounding area are the major activities to help the public.

Social Impact of NRMs among the members

The new religious movements researched by the researcher in Malaysia were originated from three different countries such as ISKCON from New York, America, Saiva Siddhanta Church founded in Sri Lanka and established its headquarters in Hawaii, and Anandha Marga from Bihar, India. All the three movements discussed in this article have its head quarters out side of Malaysia. Most of the activities of the New Religious Movement in Malaysia controlled and supervised by the Head quarters. Each any every activities

carried out by the movement in Malaysia should be based on principle and objective of the movement's head quarters.

Even though branches of the new religious movements registered under Registrar of Society in Malaysia, the movements tend to fulfill the head quarters objective and aim. Most of the activities are suitable and relevant to the head quarters needs. There are only a small number of activities suits the local needs. In Malaysia only non Muslims are involving in the new religious movements such as Indians and Chinese community.

ISKCON and Saiva Siddhanta Church have its own tradition by create its own identity. For example the followers of Saiva Siddhanta Church should change their name according Saivisme deities names such as Mahadevan, Parvathi, Sivasubramaniya and extra. By doing this a special identity formed to differentiate the members of the movement from others.

ISKCON and Anandha Marga are originated from Hinduism but the followers refuse the truth by saying that they are new religious movement. For example Anandha Marga is using Hindu principles and teachings but they considered their organization as universal based spiritual movement. ISKCON is a Vaishnavism based movement where Bhagavath Gita is used as reference but only Lord Krishna is considered as supreme god although there are 9 other incarnations of Maha Vishnu and other sect of Hinduisme are not accept.

Although these NRMs spread through western countries the teaching can easily reach the members those from urban and rural part of the country. The success of the NRMs in Malaysia is able to convey the teaching and principle of the movement easily to English illiterate. Other than that there was great influence among members from urban, especially among non Indian such as Chinese. The teaching of the NRMs also influenced the members life style, for example members of ISKCON became orthodox and follow vegetarianism as their diet.

The followers of ISKCON and Saiva Siddhanta Church have deep understand about their teaching, this make them not practicing caste system in their life. The deep involvement of members in the movements make them sacrifice their whole life to become the monks of the movements and contribute to religious, social needs of members and non members and spread the teachings of the movement.

Some other members involves deeply in the movements, for example spends all their free time in the centers of the movement to help the movement achieve their objective.

Conclusion

The NRMs in Malaysia were well established and has contributed a lot to the public. There are numerous branches opened in short period throughout the country that shows the loyalty of the followers. Other than that, there are followers of certain NRMs

The members of the NRMs adopt the teaching and principles of movements in their life. The teaching became part and parcel of their life style.

The NRMs became leading example for other Hindu organizations in the country through the effectiveness of the teaching and the activities carried out. NRMs spreads knowledge and awareness about religious philosophy of their movement based on Hinduism among their members in Malaysia. These movements give great impact among their members to understanding the philosophy and teaching of the movements.

Other than that the movements contributes to reduce social ills among Indian youngsters.

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