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## THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHITTY

### COMMUNITY OF MELAKA

*The Chittys or Peranakan Hindu of Melaka (also known as the Melaka Straits-born Hindus) is a hybrid community that emerged from inter-marriages between the Hindu traders and local Malays, Chinese, Javanese and Bataks. This community, domiciled in Melaka, has been around since the reign of the Melaka Sultanate in the early 15th century. Even before the arrival of Parameswara (a Hindu prince from Palembang, Sumatra) in 1401, spice traders (largely Hindus) from India had already visited and traded in Melaka port. Growing trade with the Malay world, especially in Melaka attracted many Indians, especially traders from the Coromandel Coast in India to settle in Melaka. The most unique feature of this community is the extent to which they have assimilated to the culture of the indigenous Malays. In their choice of clothing, spoken language, food and perhaps appearance, they bear resemblance to the Malays and Baba Nyonyas (the Melaka Straits-born Chinese). However, despite the onslaught of Islam and Christianity in the city state, the Chittys have steadfastly remained Hindus. Although they have lost their roots with India and became inarticulate in Tamil (the Indian language), they have held on to their Hindu names and consistently observe customary and religious practices. Despite their long presence in Melaka and active contributions in trade and in the politics of Melaka, the community has been largely ignored by the rest of the society. This article attempts to capture the evolution and transformation of this community from the days of the Melaka Sultanate to the post independence era of modern Malaysia.*

*Keywords: Chitty, Peranakan Hindu, Melaka.*

*Chittys atau Peranakan Hindu Melaka (juga dikenali sebagai orang Hindu kelahiran Selat Melaka) merupakan satu komuniti hybrid yang muncul daripada perkahwinan antara para pedagang Hindu dengan masyarakat tempatan daripada keturunan Melayu, Cina, Jawa dan Batak. Komuniti ini sudah menetap di Melaka sejak zaman Kesultanan Melaka lagi sejak awal kurun ke 15. Malah sebelum ketibaan Parameswara (seorang putera Hindu dari Palembang, Sumatra) pada tahun 1401, para pedagang rempah (kebanyakannya yang beragama Hindu) dari India telah singgah dan berdagang di pelabuhan Melaka. Perkembangan perdagangan di dunia Melayu, terutamanya di Melaka telah menarik para pedagang India daripada pantai Coromandel, India untuk menetap di Melaka. Satu perkara yang unik berkenaan komuniti ini, ialah cara bagaimana mereka telah berasimilasi dengan budaya Melayu. Cara mereka berpakaian, berbahasa, jenis makanan dan penampilan wajah banyak menyerupai orang-orang Melayu dan kaum Baba dan Nyonya (kaum Cina kelahiran Selat Melaka). Bagaimanapun, kedatangan agama Islam dan Kristian di Melaka tidak mengugat agama Hindu yang dianuti oleh komuniti Chitty ini. Komuniti ini tidak mempunyai sebarang hubungan dengan sanak saudara di India dan tidak lagi faham berbahasa Tamil tetapi mereka telah mengekalkan nama-nama Hindu mereka dan mengamalkan amalan adat serta agama Hindu mereka. Walaupun komuniti ini sudah bermastautin di Melaka sejak beberapa kurun lama dan memberi sumbangan besar kepada perdagangan dan politik Melaka namun komuniti ini*

*kurang dikenali dan telah dikesampingkan oleh masyarakat. Artikel ini akan menengahkan evolusi dan transformasi komuniti ini daripada zaman Kesultanan Melaka ke zaman Malaysia moden pasca kemerdekaan.*

*Keywords: Chitty, Peranakan Hindu, Melaka*

## **Introduction**

Most people in Malaysia are totally unaware of the existence of a small ethnic Indian community called the *Chitty* or the Hindu *Peranakan* of Melaka. Compared to their more prominent Chinese counterpart, the *Baba & Nyonyas* of Melaka, the *Chittys* are lesser known to the Malaysian public. The most probable reason is that this community has not been prominent in business and politics unlike their *peranakan* cousins, the *Baba & Nyonyas*. However, in the period of the Melaka sultanate and during the western colonization of Melaka, especially during the Portuguese and Dutch reigns, the *Chittys* played prominent roles in the history of Malacca. However, it is quite unfortunate that many academic writings of the history of Melaka have noticeably left out the post Melaka sultanate period. As such, the role of the *Chittys* in this period has been largely unresearched and less known to other Malaysians. To date there are less than a dozen academic writings that focus on this community. Some academics have even confused them with the Nattukottai *Chettiars*, the affluent money lending caste originally from South India. This situation is really regrettable as the post-Melaka sultanate period provides invaluable source of historical data on the interactions among the locals and with the Western powers.

Another plausible reason for this dementia is perhaps due to excessive preoccupation with the three major divergent groups (the Malays, Chinese and Indian) that formed the structure of national political, economic and social life. This focus has somewhat overshadowed the importance of other ethno-racial marginal groups like the *Chittys* and *Baba & Nyonyas*. In the early days of independence there were many concerns on how multi-ethnicity would work in the Malayan context. It was then felt that the existing ethno-racial cleavages could never be bridged and therefore the political formula of 'cultural pluralism' was adopted to form the foundation of cultural unity and political stability, which in essence suggest the preservation and practice of individual ethnic cultures. This perspective, while enabled the ethnic groups to express their distinctiveness in cultural, religious and verbal activities, also tend to neglect the long standing convergence of ethno-political boundaries amongst ethnic groups that existed for centuries. The feasibility to promote cultural pluralism made the subject of assimilation of the non-Malays into Malay culture and society a politically sensitive subject. As a result, small non-Malay communities that have assimilated into the dominant Malay cultural settings, while retaining significant aspects of their ethnographic racial heritage have been largely ignored except for the passing mention of historians.<sup>1</sup> In view of this scenario, this article wishes to highlight the evolution of the 'almost' forgotten legacy the Melaka *Chittys* community.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Rabeendran, *Ethno-Racial Marginality in West Malaysia: The Case of the Peranakan Hindu Melaka or Malacca Chitty Community*. Lecture, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya, 1976. p.1.

## **The Hindu Peranakan of Melaka**

The *Chittys* of Melaka are also called the Hindu *Peranakan* of Melaka. The term *peranakan* literally suggest speakers of a foreign language. However, *peranakan* also refers to the origins of indigenous people or local born. In the case of Melaka, *peranakan* is specifically used to refer to the ‘assimilated’ *Baba & Nyonya* and the *Chitty* communities that have resided in Melaka for the past five centuries. The *Chittys*, are uniquely assimilated with the indigenous Malay’s socio-cultural fabrics, such as in terms of language, dress, food habits and other aspects of general social conduct. Although manifesting a high degree of assimilation into the local culture, they have remained staunchly loyal to their Hindu faith. In terms of physical appearance and skin complexion, they are identical to Malays, possessing more mongoloid than aquiline features of South Indians. Malay is their sole maternal language although they do speak English. They have no knowledge of Tamil, nor any other Indian language.<sup>2</sup>

## **Indian Trade and Settlement in Early Melaka**

The Indian presence in Southeast Asia dates back to prehistoric times. The intensity in interactions between these regions increased during the Christian era with constant movement traders and priests between the Indian subcontinent and numerous city states of Southeast Asia. The traffic led to the establishment of a cross-cultural link between India and Southeast Asia, and laid the foundation for the growth of several other city states in the region, and paved the way for the ‘Indianization’ of the Malay way of life.<sup>3</sup> Melaka emerged as a prominent city-state in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, benefiting greatly from the trade activities brought by the Indian traders. It rapidly developed into a bustling international port and premier entreport for the Malay Archipelago. It is said that within three years of the formation of Melaka, its inhabitants had risen to around 2000 and to another 6000 within 10 years, and by 1510 the population has risen to around 40-50,000 cosmopolitan polyglot inhabitants. Tome Pires has cited that no fewer than 84 different languages could be heard in the streets of Melaka.<sup>4</sup>

The Indians in Melaka were largely traders or persons connected to trade activities. The core trade activities involve the exchange of staple raw produces collected from many parts of Southeast Asia for manufactured goods of India. Melaka became an important collecting point for produces like species for Southeast Asia and the Chinese coast. It became the distribution centre for Indian articles like the textile and also for the goods from farther west. Indian trade in Melaka flourished, with its trading networks expanding to many parts of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> K.S. Sandhu, “Indian Settlement in Melaka”, in Sandhu, K.S and Wheatley, P (eds.). *Melaka: The Transformation of A Malay Capital c.1400-1980*. vol.2. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983. p.174.

<sup>4</sup> A. Costesão, (ed.). *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires, an account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Melaka and India in 1512-15, and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues, rutter of a voyage in the Red Sea, nautical rules almanack and maps, written and drawn in the East before 1515*. vol.1, London, Hakluyt Society, 1944. p.45; M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian trade and European influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962. p.51. Skeptical of Pires’s data and feels that the number of Gujeratis merchants suggested by Pires is probably on the higher side.

Southeast Asia. Indian goods were fed into the trade streams originating from the Straits to almost every part of Southeast Asia and South China Sea. In addition, the annual arrival of Chinese junks supplied products like brocades, silks, satins, porcelain and copper, which found its way westward in Indian vessels.<sup>5</sup> The trade between India and Melaka brought great fortunes to both sides. It did not only bring great fortunes of the Indian merchants but also enriched the Melaka port. It is said that Indian traders made profits at times as high as 300 percent on their business transaction in Melaka, while increased trade brought vast revenues and incomes to the city by way of trade, levies and presents.<sup>6</sup> Although the Indian merchants called on other Malayan ports on trading voyages and may have resided there during the period of the Melaka Sultanate (1400-1511), the available historical record shows that the only Indian settlement was in Melaka.

In order to facilitate trade in the Melaka port, several *Syahbandars* (harbour masters) were appointed by the Melaka court. In all there were four *Syahbandars*, with each of them taking care the merchants of Gujerat, of Malabar, Cormandel coast, Bengal, Burma and Sumatra, of China and Indochina and one *Syahbandar* for the rest of the Archipelago. It is said that among the *Syahbandars*, the one looking after the merchants from Gujarat is most important. It appears that although the Hindu Indian merchants brought the most amount of trade to Melaka, it was the Muslim Gujaratis (also called the Moors) and Muslim Tamils who had more influence in the Melaka court. The Muslim traders gained ground with the Melaka court through diplomatic marriages, erection of mosques, business acumen and expertise and the knowledge of the languages spoken locally.<sup>7</sup> Their influence is not restricted to matters of port and business activities but it expanded to become a powerful force in politics of the sultanate. They managed to secure high positions, in the likes of Raja Kassim, an ethnic Tamil Muslim who was appointed to the post of *manteri* (minister). Indian Muslim traders also influenced Melaka's foreign policy, they (together with the *mullahs*, *kathis* and Arabs) played important role in persuading the Sultan to strongly act against the Portuguese, when the latter emerged in Melaka port to trade. Fear of the political and missionary activities of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, compelled the Indian Muslim traders to convince the Sultan to wage '*jihad*' war against the infidels,<sup>8</sup> which eventually resulted in the downfall of the sultanate.

The rivalry for trade and influence between the Indian Muslims and Indian Hindus in Melaka intensified in the latter years of the Melaka sultanate. The *Moors* with their political affinity with the Melaka court gained control over trade in the Melaka port. Indian Hindu traders were largely affected by this situation, as a result some more wealthier traders began

<sup>5</sup> Sandhu, 1983. p.180. For the trade with the West, Melaka was chiefly dependent on the intermediary of the of the *Gujerati* port of Cambay, which Pires observed, "Stretch(ed) out two arms; with her right arm she reach(ed) out towards Aden and with the other towards Melaka"; Costesão, *The Suma Oriental*, vol.1, p.45.

<sup>6</sup>Costesão, *The Suma Oriental*, vol.2, p.272.; Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade*, p.36. However the wealth of the city did not extend to the hinterland which remained most wholly undeveloped. There was little value for the interior territory while the marine alluvium which extended some distance inland from the shore was too brackish for rice cultivation. Sandhu, 1983, p.182.

<sup>7</sup>S. Arasaratnam, *Indian in Malaysia and Singapore*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970. p.6; Costesão, *The Suma Oriental*, vol.2, p.241; Barbara Watson Andaya, "The Indian *Saudagar Raja* (The King's Merchant) in traditional Malay courts", *JMBRAS*, vol.51. pt.1 (1978), p.19-24, 30.

<sup>8</sup>Costesão, *The Suma Oriental*, vol.2, p.280, Cf. Wolters (The fall of Srivijaya, p.176), who feels that the Malay world 'had a momentum of its own and that the Malay rulers' 'determination to resist the Portuguese was less a reaction against Christianity than a struggle to maintain their long-established overlordship'.

to divert their activities to other ports in the Archipelago, while many less wealthy traders began to sell their vessels and business interests to the Moor and went into agriculture. During the confrontation with the Portuguese, Indian Hindu traders remained uncommitted, largely attributed to the commercial rivalry with the Indian Muslim traders and perhaps strong religious prejudices against militant Islam. The animosity between these traders is perhaps the possible reason that encouraged Nina Chetu (*Chitty*), than a prominent Tamil Hindu trader to assist the Portuguese during the invasion of Melaka in 1511.

*Chitty* means merchant in Tamil. The *Chittys* of Melaka were originally Tamil Hindu traders who traded in the Melaka port. Even before the inception of the Malacca sultanate by Parameswara (a Hindu prince from Palembang, Sumatra) in 1401, spice traders (largely Hindus) from India had already visited and traded in Melaka. Since then, the Straits of Melaka emerged as the main trading route between the West and East. Merchant ships plying this route often make several stops due to the distance and change in the monsoon seasons, and for this reason Melaka became the ideal location for stopover. Trade in Melaka has been lucrative, and many Hindu traders stayed longer durations to look after their business interests, and as stopover while waiting for the change in the monsoon wind to take them back to the Indian sub-continent. As Malacca became more prominent in the Malay Archipelago, growing number traders including the Hindus from the Corromandel Coast visited its port. As a result, inter-marriages between the Hindu traders and the Malays, Chinese, Javanese and Bataks became more frequent and gave birth to a hybrid community called the *Chittys* of Melaka. This community is also known as the Hindu *Peranakan* or Melaka Straits-born Hindus. There is another controversial theory about the origin of the *Chittys*. It is said that the origin of the *Chittys* can be traced to the Indian conflicts (criminals and anti-British nationalists) who were brought by the British to Melaka from the Andaman islands to operate public projects. After their release, the ex-convicts supposed to have married and settled locally. However, this theory is invalidated by accounts historical evidences from the Malay Annals and Portuguese and later Dutch sources, all of which precedes the arrival of the British in Melaka in 1795.<sup>9</sup>

The Indian merchants who traded in Melaka were both married men and bachelors. Married man usually returned back to their homeland while leaving the bachelors to look after the business. According to Hindu rituals, wife are not allowed to cross seas, and had to be left behind in India. The bachelors, who had to remain for many months in Melaka began to take local girls as their wives. Even married Indian traders maintained two families, one in India and another in Melaka. Gwee Thian Hock in his book "A Nyonya Mosaic" says that many Chinese in the early period had taken the maidens of local Malays and Indian Baba (the *Chittys*) stock as their wives.<sup>10</sup> This shows that intermarriages between the two *peranakan* communities creates a special bond between them, which remained until today. It is interesting to note that a large segment of the *Chitty's* culture and practices are similar to the Malays. Over centuries, this community through socio-cultural assimilation embraced many aspects of the dominant Malay culture, that led to the development of a unique hybrid community. In their choice of clothing, spoken language, food and perhaps appearance, they bear resemblance to the Malays and *Baba Nyonyas* (the Malacca Straits-born Chinese).

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<sup>9</sup>Rabeendran, *Ethno-racial Marginally in West Malaysia*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>Gwee Thian Hock, *A Nyonya Mosaic*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1985.

The language of the *Chitty* is essentially Malay (some called it Bazaar Malay or Baba Malay). They do not speak any Indian languages or dialects. Since they have taken non-Indian wives, their children developed the tendency to speak in their maternal tongue, Malay. Gradually their proficiency in the Tamil language declined and eventually replaced by (only) Malay. The Malay or Bazaar Malay language was widely spoken in the Melaka port, business dealings and transactions were negotiated using this language. It performed the basic function as a 'contact language' to facilitate business communication. It is interesting to note that this version of the Malay language has been used by the *Chittys* as their mother tongue for generations. The *Chitty's* variety of Malay refers to a distinctive form of a Malay Creole.<sup>11</sup>

The *Chittys* have no roots in India. After settling in Melaka, they have gradually severed their relationships with their relatives in India. Out of caste marriages were unacceptable in the conservative caste conscious Indian system; as such their non-Indian wives and children were not taken back to India. With no ties with India, the *Chittys* see Melaka as they native domicile. *Chittys* are staunch followers of the Hindu faith. It is interesting to observe that despite substantive assimilation into the Malay way of life, the *Chittys* managed to preserve their Hindu belief. *Chittys* did not convert to Islam despite being married to Malays. It appears that the onslaught of Islamisation in the Melaka period and later Christianity during the Portuguese and the Dutch did no harm to Hindu followers. This is often reflected as the greatest source of pride by this community. Like most Malaysian Indian, the *Chittys* belongs to the Saivite sect of Hinduism, and they steadfastly observe Hindu religious ceremonies and practices but with a unique blend of the local culture. They maintain traditional Hindu names and faithfully observe religious rites in the temples that they manage in and around their present domicile in the Kampung Tujoh vicinity, in Melaka town.

In early Melaka period, the *Chittys* acquired influence and stature in the Melaka court, they even held high offices like the position of *Syahbandar* (harbour master). This is perhaps the reason why the *Chittys* were not compelled to convert to Islam when marrying Malay women. Their Malay wives embraced Hinduism upon marriage. There are perhaps two other plausible reasons for this scenario, the first, in the initial period of conversion of Parameswara, Islam was probably going through a transitional period and had not taken root in the Melaka society; the second scenario is that there may have been pockets of non-Muslim Malay communities in Melaka. This is highly probable as the Malay Peninsula was a part of the Buddhist Sri Vijaya and the Javanese Hindu Majapahit empires. There must have been enclaves of Hindu and Buddhist communities in the Peninsula at that period.<sup>12</sup>

### **The *Chitty* Community During The Portuguese, Dutch And British Rule**

During the early Portuguese reign of Melaka, the *Chittys* were accorded special privileges. Its leader, Nina Chitty who assisted the Portuguese soldiers in Melaka between 1509-1511 was appointed headman of the *Chitty* community. The Portuguese later appointed him to the post

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<sup>11</sup>M. Ravichandran, "Bahasa Komuniti Chitty Melaka: Tinjauan Sejarah, Persoalan Linguistik, dan Pola Umum." *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa*, Kuala Lumpur. January 1997, p.40-65. *Creole* is a variety of language that originated from a mixture of various languages. The *creole* language consists of words inherited from the parent languages, except for phonetic and semantic shifts. On the other hand, the grammar and words often has original features and may differ substantially from those of the parent languages.

<sup>12</sup>S.S. Dhoraisingham, *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka: Indian Babas and Nyonyas-Chitty Melaka*, Singapore, ISEAS, 2006, p.6.

of *Bendahara*, still a high position, though not of similar significant as during the Melaka sultanate. Nina Chitty is said to an opportunist, he used his position to amass wealth, and was disliked by others especially the Malays in Melaka. Although the position of *Bendahara* is hereditary, Nina Chitty was deposed and said to have committed suicide before the royal appointment to his position came. However, the office of the *Bendahara* seems to have been restored to his family on a later date. The *Chittys* are Tamils of the merchant caste, and it is during this period the Tamils and *Chittys* brought their own domestic servants from India, which includes laundrymen, cooks, and cleaners to work in their household. This paved the way for the creation of various castes amongst the *Chitty* community.

The most authentic account of Indians in the Portuguese period in Melaka was provided by Tome Pires and Godinho de Eredia. The *Indios* (Indian) apparently assisted the Portuguese in locating masonry and lime that were used to reconstruct buildings to be used by Portuguese officials.<sup>13</sup> According to Eredia, the Indian residential settlement in Upeh was known as *Campon Chelim* (Kampung Keling), it extended from the 'Bazaar of the Joas (Javanese) on the beach in a northwesterly direction' and ended 'at the stone bastion.' 'Upeh was the wealthiest and best developed of the suburbs, where foreign merchants, mostly Indian, Chinese and Javanese lived in their respective kampongs.'<sup>14</sup> With the flight of Muslim traders to non-Portuguese ports, Indian traders once again became prominent in the Melaka port. Although some Muslim Gujaratis, Malbari and Bengali returned to Melaka after some time, the majority of Indian merchants in Melaka were Hindus, chiefly the *Kelings* from South India. The *Chittys* and other Hindu merchants had most of the trade now.

The size of Indian population in Melaka during the Portuguese reign is not precisely known. The Portuguese did not really take into account the various communities that domiciled in Melaka. The inhabitants were only distinguished as Christians and non-Christians. According to Eredia there were about 7400 Christians in Melaka and the rest being infidel natives.<sup>15</sup> However, the number of Indians may have been quite substantial in this period, as most Indian Muslim traders would have left Melaka for other non-Portuguese ports. Other Indian traders in Melaka, were also said to have assisted the Portuguese, as they have given slaves on loan and sometimes even money to the Portuguese. On the whole, the Portuguese were not exactly cordial with the people of Melaka. Their conducts in trade and religious crusades alienated not only Muslims but other Asians as well. They tried to exercise control by wresting some of the spice trade from the Indian traders. However, they did not succeed in doing so. In order to monopolize the spice trade, they even went to the extent of persuading many traders to avoid the Straits, besides forcing some of those who are already residents of Melaka to leave for other ports. Such actions brought the Portuguese in conflict with other neighbouring states and later with the Dutch.

Similar to the Portuguese, the Dutch occupation of Melaka in 1641 was primarily aimed at forcing sea trade in selected channels, thus securing control over the spice trade in the Straits of Melaka. The Dutch forced the weak Malay states to do business only with the Dutch East India Company and did their best to direct all merchant ships plying the Straits to Melaka port. They also blocked exports of tin from Perak and Kedah and redirect this commodity to their factories in these states. Indian textiles were only allowed to be traded

<sup>13</sup> J.V. Mills, "Eredia's Description of Malacca and Meridional India, and Cathay", *JMBRAS*, vol.8, pt.1. 1930. p.1-288.

<sup>14</sup> Sandhu, "Indian Settlement in Melaka", p.184.

<sup>15</sup> Mills, "Eredia", p. 19.

through Dutch channels. A higher import duty was levied on all textiles entering Melaka port on non-Dutch ships. These control measures were however not very effective, the Dutch found it extremely difficult to implement the legislation governing trade, as Indian and other non-Dutch ships continues to trade directly with the Malay states. The Dutch, later soften their position and allowed Indian traders into Dutch ports. They realized that Indian trade in Dutch harbours will attracted other traders as well, thus increasing trade and port revenues.

After the fall of the Portuguese, Indian Muslim traders began to strengthen their position in trade in the Melaka Straits. Hindu traders gradually began to lose their business to Muslim traders who seem to be better equipped and had better access to the Malay ports. This situation arose largely due to the growth in Muslim power in India, and in the situation that Hindus can no longer use Muslim ships for trade. The fall of Vijayanagar, the last Hindu kingdom of South India, was perhaps the final blow for Indian commerce and trade. Muslim merchant vessels now dominate the Melaka Straits. It is most likely that the Hindus have found it extremely difficult to compete with their Muslim colleagues, and therefore it is probable that the Hindu traders may have been compelled to sell or rent out their vessels and their remaining port businesses to the Muslims. The Melaka Hindu traders, largely of the Tamil *Chitty* caste gradually turned their attention to agriculture. It was in this period that the Melaka Hindus began to migrate from Kampung Keling (known as Kampung Balanda during the Dutch reign) to the areas now known as Tengkeru, Gajah Berang and Bachang.<sup>16</sup> The *Chittys* also accumulated large tracts of land from the Portuguese and the Dutch between 1511-1824, acquired primarily for religious, commercial and settlement purposes, but however were useful when they went into agriculture. *Chittys* also dabble into unfamiliar craftsmanship, many became goldsmiths and purchase shops in Goldsmith Street (now Jalan Tukang Emas). However, the shortage of gold and the problems in procuring it, led many *Chittys* to abandon the craft after several years. Some wealthier *Chittys* even ventured into brick-kiln business. Governor Balthasar Bort observed that the *Chittys* were not really inclined towards agriculture.<sup>17</sup> His claim was apparently confirmed when the *Chittys* involvement in agriculture diminished during the period of the British rule, especially in the earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when many *Chittys* took up salaried positions in various government agencies. Consequently, no members of the Chitty community are farmers today. Salaried jobs proved to be strong attraction among the *Chittys*, eventually they gave up farming for office jobs. As a result of this, large pieces of land originally for agriculture which was accrued during the Portuguese and Dutch period were no longer in use and were sold. However, the land accrued or donated in the name of Sri Poyyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple, which meant for common use of the community were retained. A good majority of *Chittys* now reside on this temple grounds. The quest for better jobs also compelled some more educated members of the *Chitty* community to migrate to other cities, including Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. As a result, a sizeable segment of the *Chitty* community now resides in Singapore.<sup>18</sup>

The *Chitty* community also received several land grants from the Dutch, one such grant was taken up in 1781 in the name of Thaivanayagan Chitty, the community's headman for the purpose of building a Hindu temple in Goldsmith Street (now Jalan Tukang Emas), which now locates the Sri Poyyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple (SPVM), the oldest Hindu

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<sup>16</sup>K. Narinasamy, "The Melaka Chitties", in Sandhu and Wheatley (eds.), *Melaka: The Transformation of A Malay Capital c.1400-1980*, vol.2. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.240.

<sup>17</sup>J.M. Bremmer, (transl), "Report of Governor Balthasar Bort on Malacca", *JMBRAS*, vol.5 pt.1. 1927. p.51.

<sup>18</sup>Narinasamy, "The Melaka Chitties", p.19.



temple in Malaysia and Singapore. All other land were donated and registered under SPVM temple and managed by the temple committee. As mentioned earlier, the move towards agriculture led the *Chittys* to settle in their present locality in Gajah Berang, while some stayed in the surrounding areas of Tengkeru and Bachang. It is said that Gajah Berang is the mispronounced version of *Kanjipuram*, a South Indian port, where the *Chittys* are said to have originated from. In these new localities, the *Chittys* began to build Indian-styled houses and temples for worship. The houses have verandahs or *thinnaï*, an elevated resting place (about 2-3 feet above ground) at the front portion of the house. Some of these houses survived until 1950s, but many were demolished to make way for newer structures. The *Chittys* also erected several temples, in addition to larger ones like the SPVM and later the Mariamman temple, there were also smaller temples (*koils*) erected in and around the farmland of Gajah Berang vicinity, specifically to appease the spirit of the land. These temples are still being patronized by the *Chittys* and other Hindus.

The real threat to the way of life of the *Chittys* in Melaka came during Napoleonic War where the British temporarily occupied Dutch Melaka from 1795 to 1802 and again until 1818. The British strategy was to destroy the Melaka fort and depopulate its population before Dutch returned to Melaka. To achieve these objectives, British troops under Captain William Farquhar blew up the fort; with only the gateway remain standing (until today). In order to depopulate Melaka, the British offered free passage to Penang to some 20,000 mostly Melaka-born inhabitants. Nevertheless, the people refused and petitioned against evacuation. Raffles, in this 'famous' correspondence to the Governor General of India said that it would be inhumane to transfer this population. The decision was later rescinded and the Melaka population was saved from being uprooted from their homeland.<sup>19</sup>

During the early years of British rule of Melaka, the *Chittys* were no longer connected to any serious business or trading activities, other than farming activities. However the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the community once again reverting to wage labour and commerce, while maintaining their farmland. Many of them joined lower and subordinate ranks of the public service, as clerks, teachers, technicians and unskilled labour. Many present day *Chittys* in Melaka still hold similar job vocation as their forefathers during the British period. Some English educated *Chittys* left for other cities like Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore to take up salaried positions. It is believed that almost half of them migrated to Singapore to assume jobs in the colonial public service and in the private sector; many entered the Singapore police service. Some of them even sold their properties in Melaka to other *Chittys* and to the Chinese, and migrated with their families to Singapore. In Singapore, this community lives in enclaves in various part of the island.<sup>20</sup>

### **The *Chitty* Community in the Post-Independence Period (1957)**

The British began to bring in Indian labourers to Malaya as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century to work in sugar and rubber plantations. In fact in the 1840s, Indians were already featured in the sugar plantations of Province Wellesley. However, it was after Melaka opened its door to rubber plantations that Indian labourers started to come in large numbers. It was recorded that in 1921 there were around 18,851 Indians in Melaka, with 14,000 working in estates and the rest in other parts of Melaka. By 1931, Melaka's Indian populace stood at 23,237, and by the

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<sup>19</sup> Dhoraisingham, *Peranakan Indians*, p.16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.18.

time of independence in 1957 the figures stood at 23,266, and by 1979 it grew to 31,619.<sup>21</sup> The question now is how the *Chitty* community factors into the new population demographics of Melaka. With less than one thousand inhabitants, the *Chittys* seem to have submerged into the greater South Indian population of Melaka. The migration of the *Chittys* from Melaka to other cities, namely Singapore, did not help the situation either, as their numbers in Melaka further dwindled. Initially, the new Indian migrants in Melaka did not have much contact with the *Chittys*, some even shun them for being outcasts of the Indian race. Nonetheless, some interactions between these communities began to take place, especially in matters of temple activities. Several intermarriages between the *Chittys* and other Indians have taken place but the contact between these groups has remained marginal, interacting only on religious matters, and other social affairs to a lesser extent. This lack of contact arose probably due to the exclusive locality of the *Chitty* community, their most *Chitty* families now reside in the area of Kampung Tujoh, and a few other families scattered around the surrounding areas. Due to their long heritage, the *Chittys* emerged as a closely knit community, confining much of the interactions within their community. The non-presence of a shared language has become the main stumbling block for interactions between these groups. The *Chittys* speak only Bazaar Malay while the new Indian immigrants were less conversant in Malay, thus communication between them was only at basic contact level.

The *Chittys* are staunch followers of Hinduism, and they make every effort to observe both religious and customary practices that come along with the faith. They belong to the Saivite sect of Hinduism, similar to the majority of Hindus living in Malaysia. Their religion has remained their main source of unity and identity for centuries, as they fervently stood against the onslaught of the other emerging faiths in the Malay world during the last 500 years. Hindu beliefs, customs and socio-cultural practices are fundamental to the lives of the *Chittys*. They observe very stringently holy days, diet preferences and other prescriptions of the faith more rigorously than other Indians. They do not consume beef, observe vegetarian diet on Fridays and faithfully celebrate Hindu festivals. For the *Chitty* community, the grandest festival is celebrated for the *Amman Thirunal* (a female Hindu goddess), held in May every year at the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in the *Chitty* village in Melaka.<sup>22</sup> The highlight of this festival is the carrying of *kavadi* by the *Chitty* community members as well as other non-*Chittys* and even non-Indian devotees. This week-long celebration also sees the congregation of *Chitty* families from other parts of Malaysia and Singapore. Many *Chittys* residing outside Melaka make it a point to return and participate in this celebration.

The Hindu religion and temples have been the centre of the *Chitty*'s worldview. A substantial, if not all communal activities of the *Chittys* have centred around several temples managed by the community. Their long loyalty to the religion has somewhat ensured the upkeep of the temples and shrines. The oldest and most important of these temples is the SPVM, built on a piece of land granted by the Dutch in 1781 at Jalan Tukang Emas, Melaka. However, due to financial constraints in maintaining many temples, the *Chittys* decided to pass on the management of SPVM to the Nattukottai Chettiar community (a prominent money lending caste). However, the temple still remains the 'prized' property of the *Chitty* community. There are at least nine other temples that are being managed by the *Chittys* in the Gajah Berang and Bachang areas. Among these temples, the Sri Maha Mariamman temple located at the heart of the *Chitty* village performs the main religious and social roles. Most important community events and festivals are usually conducted in this temple, and patronized by *Chittys* and non-*Chittys* (especially the Babas & Nyonyas and other Indians) in

<sup>21</sup> Sandhu, "Indian Settlement in Melaka", p. 195.

<sup>22</sup> Rabeendran, *Ethno-Racial Marginality in West Malaysia*, p. 13.

Melaka, and by those residing outside Melaka. This temple is also popularly known to the locals as 'Datuk Cacar', for the deity (Amman) is believed to cure sufferers of chicken pox. The other two bigger temples are the Kailasanathar and Sri Anggalamman Parameswari temples, both located in close proximity with the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in the *Chitty* village. The rest are smaller shrines located in the farmland which was once cultivated by the *Chittys*.

The Hindus believe that donating their properties in the service of God is a benevolent act. In that spirit, several *Chittys* have donated through the years several pieces of land, registered as properties to the SPVM. At present, the *Chittys* do not own any other land in the Gajah Berang and Bachang areas, other than the land owned by the SPVM temple. Without the temple land, donated by some benevolent *Chittys*, there would not be any land for the community to live and strive. The SPVM temple is managed by a management committee headed by the community's headman, who is directly responsible to all community affairs, especially matters pertaining to the temples. Some elderly members of the community have also been appointed as trustees to oversee the management of some of the community's assets. In the early days, the Indian *panchayat* system was used to manage the affairs of community. The system empowers community leaders to take decisions after consultations, and the decisions need to be respected and adhered by the rest of the community. However, the management committee is also empowered by its by-laws to impose fines and deter violators from participating in the activities of the community. Although this power is seldom used, there have been cases where the committee had employed such methods in order to main the values of the community. Such impositions bring shame to the family(s) concerned, and heads of families usually make every effort to avoid these violations. Nonetheless, these values seem to be deteriorating in the present day context, as some members of the community are now more open in expressing their dissatisfactions with the management committee. As the author had personally observed in a management committee session, members (including the headman) readily engage in heated arguments, usually taking several hours to resolve, conversing both Malay and English, sometimes arguing over trivial matters. There seem to be a generational gap between the older and younger members, however the elder members usually choose to regard such behaviors as modern or perhaps deviant values, and ignore them.<sup>23</sup>

The Hindu caste system classifies its followers into upper, middle, lower and outcaste, a significant feature of almost all Hindu-Indian societies. This caste division undoubtedly reflects on the depth of socio-cultural practices rigidly demarcated along caste lines. Some historians have cited the caste system as being the main reason for the sudden conversion of the Hindu communities in Southeast Asia to Islam in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. In order to break away from the rigid confines of the caste system, many embraced Islam, which does not have such practices. The caste (or *jāti*) system is quite prevalent among the Indians in Melaka, most clearly demonstrated in the pattern of marriage. The search for a suitable partner (for both genders) in most part are arranged by their parents through the networks of known families and friends from within one's own caste group. Inter-caste marriages, especially with lower caste spouses are discouraged and may cause considerable comments, and even remembered by other Indians for many years.<sup>24</sup> In the case of the *Chitty* community, while

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<sup>23</sup>Narinasamy, "Indian Melaka Chitties", p. 243-244.

<sup>24</sup>D. Mearns, "Residence, Religion, Ethnicity and Social Change amongst the Indians of Melaka", in Sandhu, and Wheatley (eds.). *Melaka*. p.216.

the term *Chitty* itself refers to the *jāti* ideology, it metaphorically includes all member of the community. It has been interestingly observed the existence of nine caste divisions among the *Chitty* community, namely the *Chittys*, *Pillays*, *Neiker*, *Rajah*, *Padayachi*, *Mudaliar*, *Pathar*, *Konar* and *Kullen*. The existence of so many *jāti(s)* for such a small community prompts us ask many questions about social demarcation in this community. However, such demarcation should be expected, as the majority of the Indian chiefs would have come from higher castes, and members of other castes in all probability may have come to Melaka in subordinate capacities. The headmen of the community have primarily come from the *Chitty* caste. The *Pillays* seem to come in second after the *Chittys*, and have produced several prominent and educated community leaders, they were even regarded very respectable among Indian Hindus. Although the *Chitty* caste members maintained an upper-class attitude, inter-caste affairs among members of the community has been rather amiable. It should be noted that although there are numerous castes within the community, there are no straightforward discriminations along caste demarcation or a strictly defined high-low system of the caste pecking order.<sup>25</sup> Some castes, like the *Pandaram* and *Reti* are no longer present, perhaps due to intermarriages and migration to other parts of the country. Other lower middle ranking caste like *Konar* appeared recently when their men were recruited as husbands for *Chitty* women, this also reflects on the closeness between the *Chittys* and working class Indian who are not from the lowest caste. There are also intermarriages between *Chittys* and a number of Sri Lankan Tamils and Malayalis. The non-existence of a structured caste discrimination pattern among the *Chittys*, however does not suggest that there is no internalized sense of belonging to a better caste. The *Pillay*, for example is seen as superior caste and during the British period many *Chittys* (who are non-*Pillays*) have taken *Pillay* as their surname, for reason that the British used to call the workers with their caste names, and many preferred to be called *Pillays*. Therefore it is uncertain that all those claiming to be *Pillays* are really of this caste.<sup>26</sup> Most families in the *Chitty* community are interrelated through a network of marriages that spans a few centuries and caste discrimination among them is almost non-visible.

## Current Worldview

Similar to other hybrid communities in other parts of the world, the Melaka *Chittys* are not free from the challenges of modernization and globalization. However, the *Chittys* have been rather successful in cushioning the onslaught of 'change' to their way of life, thus preserving their assimilated culture and traditions from these challengers. In spite of this, transformation is inevitable in the modern Malaysian society, and almost impossible to resist. Some changes are noticeable in certain aspects of the *Chitty* culture, especially in language use, vocation, dress etiquette, mode of conflict resolution, and the nature of their interactions with other communities and institutions. The *Chittys*, being an assimilated culture with centuries long contact with other communities, are perhaps better prepared to embrace these challenges.

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<sup>25</sup>Rabeendran, *Ethno-Racial Marginality in West Malaysia*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup>Narinasamy, "The Melaka Chitties", p.249. The Indian caste system describes the social stratification and social restrictions in the Indian subcontinent, in which social classes are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups, often termed as *jātis* or castes.

A comparative observation between 1996 to 2009 of the *Chittys*' perception of 'self' and their *worldview* reveal interesting findings. First, there are no significant changes of how they see themselves and their role in the wider settings of the Malaysian society. They conscientiously see themselves as a 'heritage' community that needs to be preserved. They see themselves as non-Indian. Despite their interactions with the larger Hindu Indians through religious activities and inter-marriages, the community still perceive themselves distinct from their other Hindu cousins. They find greater affinity with the *Baba & Nyonyas* of Melaka and appreciate their traditional interactions with them. The *Baba & Nyonyas* are regularly invited to participate in social and religious functions, and this is mutually reciprocated by the *Baba & Nyonyas*. The *Chittys* see oneself within the community, but without any clear conception on how they fit into the larger public and nation. Their important pursuit in life, especially for the older generation, is the preservation and promotion of their culture and way of life through language use, and social and religious events. Their mindset still revolves around the 'kampung' (*Chitty* village in Melaka), on matters relating to temple activities, community functions and squabbles, local issues and politics. They see their future within the confines of the village and the surrounding vicinity. Some senior members appear to be reasonably conversant in English, perhaps some underwent English medium schools, but the younger generation (below 25 years) seems to prefer the use of Malay in their communication with their community members and with outsiders. They appear to be pro-establishment and are very proud of their role in the British public service and with the present government. They display a sense of loyalty to government and even submission to the authority. They feel that their future wellbeing is tied closely with their relationship of the present government. In terms of faith, they have been staunch Hindus for centuries, and see themselves and their generations to practice the same faith.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of business and entrepreneurial acumen, the comparative observation suggests no significant changes over 13 years (between 1996 to 2009). Most *Chittys* are still employed in clerical ranks in government agencies and in lower supervisory positions in the private sector, some have set up small scale businesses around Melaka town. Several younger members of the community are studying in colleges and universities. To date no prominent businessmen or leaders or ideas have emerged from this community. Generally, the community lacks business acumen and entrepreneurial knowledge, and clearly there has been no effort to improve this situation either by the *Chittys* themselves or by the authorities. The comparative observation also shows, in terms of global values, the community leaders display lack of awareness and expression to current themes like human rights, climate change and good governance. Their understanding of these issues remained rudimentary.

At present, the community's primary struggle is to get the authorities to recognize them as *Bumiputera* (son of the soil), as they feel that their current socio-economic status will be elevated with the privileges that come together with this title. The status will also accord them the recognition for the contributions of their forefathers in the history of Melaka over five centuries and the distinctiveness of their assimilated culture. However, the community

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<sup>27</sup> M. Ravichandran, "Malacca Chitty Community: Struggle for Identity and Respect" (paper presented at the 3rd SSEASR Conference, Bali, Indonesia, June 3-6, 2009). The paper examines the transformation the Chitty community has undergone since independence (1957), in various aspects of their lives, including language, culture and religion, and their interaction with other communities and institutions. The paper also looks at the extent of their plight and struggle for respect and recognition within Malaysia's ethnically diverse settings.

leaders do acknowledge the lack of coordinated efforts to pursue this matter, and neither has there been any favourable response from the 'Malay' government authority on the matter. The *Chittys* also suffer from historical label as 'traitor' to the Melaka sultanate, as a result of Nina Chitty's (a prominent Hindu trader during the Melaka sultanate) assistance to the Portuguese between 1509-1511. The Portuguese successfully invaded Melaka port and ended the reign of Melaka sultanate in 1511. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that the Hindu traders, at that time, were largely suppressed by Indian Muslim traders who gained prominence with the Melaka court. They lost out in business to the Indian Muslims and later had to abandon trade and take up agriculture. Thus, it makes sense why the Hindu Indian traders behaved in such a manner, it appears to be basic survival strategy. However, history readily shows the phenomenal contributions of Indian traders to trade and commerce in the Melaka Straits and the Malay Archipelago. It is impossible to refute the significant contributions of these traders in charting the course of history of the Malay world.

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