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Sanskritization and Indian Ethnicity in Malaysia

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M. N. SRINIVAS (1952) first introduced the concept of 'Sanskritization' for describing cultural and social change among the Coorgs of South India. More specifically, the term was used to explain the integration of Coorgs into Indian society through their adoption of various Sanskrit-based beliefs and practices. It also referred to caste mobility, a process whereby the Coorgs attempted to raise their caste status by observing various rules of behavior as defined in Sanskritic scriptures and practiced by Brahmins. In elaborating this concept, Srinivas (1956, 1967) has sought to extend it to Indian society as a whole, focusing particularly on the problem of caste relations. He has emphasized that the extent of Sanskritization among the *jātis* of a region depends upon the character of the locally dominant caste. The latter provides an immediate model for the lower castes to emulate. In generalizing this concept, Srinivas has also attempted to assess the compatibility (and to some degree, conflict) between Sanskritization and Westernization.

Overall, Sanskritization as a descriptive concept has provided some insights into changes in contemporary Indian society, but it is somewhat limited as an analytical tool for complex historical material. This is precisely the problem raised by Carroll (1977) who questioned the limitations inherent in the use of the concept for studying various aspects of Indian social history. In her example of the Indian temperance movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she argued that agitations for teetotalism had very little to do with Sanskritic Hinduism but more with the influence of English temperance advocates upon the attitudes of young, English-educated Indians. Similarly, some ethnographers have found the concept to be too contrived and cumbersome in their analyses of village Hinduism. Sharma (1970), for instance, has expressed dissatisfaction with the Sanskritic/non-Sanskritic dichotomy since it fragments a villager's religious experiences into rigid categories. It forces the investigator to

remove his objects of study from their social context of meaning and purpose. An even more serious criticism has been made by Staal (1963) who noted that the use of the term often entails an assumption of proportional Sanskrit influence. Yet, Sanskritization sometimes connotes a decrease of Sanskrit material, as in the use of vernaculars in some so-called Sanskritizing Hindu sects (cf. Cohn 1955). Or, what is often treated by anthropologists as non-Sanskritic, such as spirit possession, may actually have roots in the Sanskritic tradition. In other words, Sanskritization cannot be literally accepted as a concomitant of what is known as the 'Great Tradition,' since the origins of the latter 'lie in numerous little traditions, widespread throughout Indian history and geography' (Staal 1963: 267).

The thrust of these criticisms has been directed mainly at the ambiguity and looseness of the term, suggesting that it can do no more than mislead an investigator into studying false problems. These criticisms are valid only if we treat Sanskritization as the essential key to understanding various aspects of change in Indian society, i.e. the concept is used at the expense of others. However, the utility of the concept can be maintained for two reasons. Firstly, the concept can be used heuristically to provide a broad perspective on specific problems but requires the aid of other concepts or ideas in executing a more complete analysis. Secondly, the concept has been applied largely to Indian society within the subcontinent. This implies that the utility of the concept is constrained by the realities of caste complexities in India. Even Srinivas (1956: 496) has admitted that the Brahminical model of Sanskritization is not widespread throughout India; it depends on which caste is dominant in a particular region in India. But when we apply the concept to immigrant Indian societies outside the subcontinent, it may take on a different perspective, especially if the problem of caste relations becomes subordinate to the issue of majority-minority relations in an ethnically plural society. Sanskritization in this instance may assume functions vastly different from those in India.

In this essay, we wish to explore the emerging functions of Sanskritization within the context of Indian identity formation in contemporary Malaysia. The term will be used not so much as a precise measure of Sanskrit material but as a depiction of Indians who aspire to upgrade their socio-religious status. For this reason, it is necessary to clarify the characteristics of Sanskritic Hinduism as an indication of what the process of Sanskritization entails. Ideally speaking, Sanskritic Hinduism is characterized by a large body of sacred literature such as the *Vēdas*, *Upaniṣads* and *Āgamas*. Sanskritic rituals are normally prescribed and

performed by Brahminical priests or those who claim high ritual status. Vegetarianism and teetotalism are often treated as two distinguishing characteristics of a Sanskritized individual even though he may not be fully literate in Sanskrit. On the other hand, non-Sanskritic Hinduism is more akin to the religious practices of villagers who do not subscribe to a scriptural tradition. Many of their beliefs and practices are passed on through an oral tradition. Furthermore, non-Sanskritic rituals are invariably performed by non-Brahmin priests. These working definitions suggest that Sanskritization involves a process of transformation, not only in the ritual sphere but also in life-style and beliefs. The model of All-India Hinduism (Srinivas 1968: 149) with its Sanskritic foundation forms a vital reference point for all Indian status aspirants. In the following pages, we will examine the extent of this transformation among Malaysian Indians.

Caste, Regionalism and Religion

The process of Sanskritization among Malaysian Indians cannot be properly understood unless we first examine the implications of Indian ethnic diversity in Malaysia. Heterogeneity in the Malaysian Indian community is characterized by differences in caste, regional origins and religious affiliations. There are slightly more than one million Indians in West or Peninsular Malaysia, and they comprise about ten percent of the country's population.¹ The South Indian Tamils form the majority, constituting about 81 percent of the Indian community in Peninsular Malaysia. The other Indians are grouped as follows: North Indians (7.7% comprising mainly Bengalis, Gujaratis, Punjabis and Sindhis), Malayalis (4.5%), Telugus (3.2%), Ceylonese or Sri Lankan Tamils (2.6%), and Pakistanis (1%).² It is not necessary to repeat here the patterns of Indian immigration to the Malay peninsula at the turn of the century, as this has been adequately discussed elsewhere (see Sandhu 1969 and Arasaratnam 1970), but suffice it to say that a large proportion

¹ The rest of the population is: 55.3% Malays, 33.8% Chinese and 0.7% Others (Aborigines, Eurasians, Europeans) [*1980 General Report of the Population Census of Malaysia*, vol. 1]. All Malays are Muslims by birth; Chinese are mainly Buddhists and Taoists, with some Christians and Muslims; Eurasians are mainly Christians; and the aborigines are largely animists, with some Christians and Muslims.

² These statistical breakdowns were obtained from the *1970 General Report of the Population Census of Malaysia*. Detailed information on Indian subethnic groups surveyed in the 1980 census is as yet unavailable.

of the immigrants arrived as indentured laborers. Many of them were South Indian Tamils who worked in the colonial plantations and railways in the west coast states of Malaya. Other Indians who were not recruited as laborers, especially the North Indians and the Ceylonese Tamils, found jobs as professionals and opened businesses in the west coast towns. The socioeconomic gaps between Indians of different regional origins have reinforced subethnic loyalties and perceptions. Many Malayalis, Ceylonese Tamils and North Indians were better educated than the South Indian Tamil and Telugu laborers, thereby having greater access to high positions and income. These socioeconomic differences have yet to undergo radical transformation despite the increased movement of plantation laborers into the cities since the country's independence in 1957. They continue to influence subethnic perceptions and interactions. The South Indian Tamil 'coolie' is often stereotyped by other Indians as inferior, illiterate, drunk and subservient, while Malayalis and Ceylonese Tamils are usually considered to be haughty and selfish.

Regional differences are further sustained by the presence of various subethnic organizations such as the All Malaysia Malayali Association, the Andhra Association, All Malaysia Ceylonese Shaivite Association, etc. Each of these organizations promotes regional unity through various social welfare programs for its members and the celebration of particular festivals such as the Malayali sponsored Onam festival. Although none of these organizations have explicit political links, they are nevertheless potential bases for political mobilization. Political rivalry between regional groups is also recurrent in the Malaysian Indian community, especially between the South Indian and Ceylonese Tamils. For example, in the 1930s the South Indians strongly opposed the appointment of Ceylonese as Indian representatives in the state and federal councils because the former were concerned that the latter would use their position to advance their interests. This conflict became more intense following the formation of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in 1946 (see Stenson 1980 and Ampalavanar 1981).

Besides regional identifications, Malaysian Indians also categorize themselves into different castes. The caste system imported by the early immigrants, while continuing to exert influence on Indian social life, has undergone many changes over the years. Broadly speaking, Malaysian Indians may be grouped into Brahmins, non-Brahmins and *Ādi Drāvidas* (Untouchables). But the relative absence of Brahmin domination among Malaysian Indians has resulted in the emergence of a two-tiered caste system, with the non-Brahmins as 'high' caste (*uyarntajāti*) and the

Ādi Drāvidas as 'low' caste (*tāntajāti*).³ Among the Indian Tamil majority in Malaysia, the higher castes comprise the *Vellālar*, *Vanniyar*, *Kavunṭar*, *Nādār*, *Kallar*, *Muthurājāh*, *Cettiṅgar* and *Mudaliyār*. These are largely landowning and trading castes in South India. The lower castes are the *Ambaṭṭar*, *Vaṅṅār*, *Paṛaiyar*, *Paḷḷar* and *Chakkiliyar* who are barbers, washermen, agricultural laborers and leather workers, respectively (Rajakrishnan 1979: 93).⁴ The hierarchical positions of these subcastes are recognized and articulated through the practice of caste endogamy and membership in caste associations.

There are now in Malaysia at least 53 registered caste associations with the oldest (a barber caste association, the *Maruttuvar Saṅgam*) founded in Penang about 80 years ago, and the Selangor and Federal Territory *Mudaliyār* Association formed as recently as 1977 (Rajakrishnan 1979: 178). Many of these associations are urban-based but with substantial rural membership. The founders, many of whom are Tamil school teachers, are concerned not only with protecting caste interests but also with advancing caste status on an organized basis. However, unlike their Indian counterparts the Malaysian caste associations lack the resources and opportunities to participate directly in national level politics. But within the Malaysian Indian community caste loyalties continue to play an important role in MIC politics. Even as recently as 1977, two rivals for the MIC post of deputy president resorted to caste issues to win votes, one relying on *Kavunṭar* support and the other on *Mukkullattōr* backing. Caste conflicts in Malaysia tend to revolve around the question of ritual purity and its consequences. Until 1935 the rules of untouchability and commensality were strictly observed that resulted in the prohibition of the lower castes from worshipping in temples controlled by the higher castes. Members of the lower castes worshipped in their own temples dedicated mainly to village deities such as *Munīśvaran* and *Muniyāṅṅi*. In 1935 and after, many āgamic temples opened their doors to the lower castes, as a result of the temple entry movements in India (Arasaratnam 1970: 168). However, the higher castes still prohibit the lower castes from direct participation in temple affairs such as running for administrative positions or cooking for temple feasts. These caste disputes have resulted in several cases of physical violence.

³ Very few Brahmins emigrated to the Malaysian peninsula. Most of the immigrants were from the lower and middle ranking castes. There are less than 200 Brahmin families in Malaysia today. Most of them are *Smarta* Brahmins with the caste name *Iyer* and the rest are *Śrī Vaiṣṇavas* called *Iyengars*.

⁴ To date, no research has been published on caste among the Malayalis, Telugus, Ceylon Tamils and North Indians in Malaysia.

Despite these restrictions, the caste system in post-independence Malaysia has undergone significant changes. One of these is the breakdown of prescribed interaction across caste groupings. This has occurred largely because of the mediation of other ethnic groups in the social life of Malaysian Indians, particularly in the rapidly expanding urban areas. The presence of non-Indians provides alternative fields of social transactions that preclude caste considerations. Thus, interactional criteria (especially in commensality) that are essential to caste ranking in India can no longer be applied rigidly in the Malaysian context.

Finally, statistics from the 1970 census show that more than 80 percent of Malaysian Indians are Hindus; less than 9 percent and 7 percent are Christians and Muslims respectively. Only a minority of about 3 percent claim to be Sikhs and Jains. Given the overwhelmingly large number of Hindus in the Malaysian Indian community, one would expect Hinduism to provide the major vehicle of Indian integration across caste and regional lines. But Hinduism is not a united religion. Firstly, most of the Tamil-speaking Hindus in Malaysia are Śaivites, worshipping principally *Śiva* and associated deities. Worship of Vaiṣṇavite deities (i.e. *Viṣṇu* and his incarnations) is more prominent among the Telugus, Malayalis and the North Indians, although Rajoo (1975: 29) had discovered several temples dedicated to *Viṣṇu*, *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* in Perak and Selangor states that are frequented by Tamil Śaivites. Even shrines dedicated to Vaiṣṇavite deities can be found within the compounds of some Śaivite temples, implying that the Śaivism/Vaiṣṇavism division is not always strictly observed.⁵ Secondly, village deities seem to have wider appeal among the Tamil-speaking Hindus than the scriptural deities. Indeed, Rajoo (1975: 20-4) has indicated that the worship of scriptural deities, such as *Śiva* and *Gaṇēśa*, is confined mainly to orthodox Hindus living in the urban areas. But again, the dichotomy between village and scriptural deities cannot be strictly maintained. Although the rituals associated with village and scriptural deities are usually distinguishable, it is not uncommon for the former to be upgraded through the ritual acquisition of scriptural attributes.

Indian ethnic diversity as described above implies that on one level of

⁵ However, the Śaivism/Vaiṣṇavism division can be more complex than expected. For example, at the *Sundararāja Perumaḷ* temple (a Vaiṣṇavite temple) in Klang, about 15 km from Kuala Lumpur, separate shrines exist for *Śiva*, *Gaṇēśa* and *Subrahmanya* (all Śaivite deities). But the temple priest (a Vaiṣṇavite *Paṭṭar*) refuses to perform *pūjās* before the Śaivite deities, leaving this chore to a specially appointed *Smarta* Brahmin priest.

analysis the basis of Indian unity is precarious, undermined by the cross-cutting loyalties of caste, regionalism and religion. Even the MIC, generally assumed to be the political representative of the Malaysian Indian community, is rife with factionalism that often reflects the ethnic diversity sketched above.⁶ Yet, on another level of analysis the minority status of Malaysian Indians constitutes an important reason for their efforts to minimize subethnic differences, as they compete with the Malays and Chinese for limited resources. In contemporary Malaysian politics, the year 1969 is often regarded as a watershed in ethnic conflict. The riots that occurred in May of that year resulted largely from Malay fear of Chinese political domination following the latter's enormous gains in the 1969 national elections (see von Vorys 1975). The crisis of May 13th, 1969 claimed many lives and set in motion a new pattern of power arrangement between the Malays, Chinese and Indians. This pattern was realized in the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), aimed in principle at eliminating poverty but in practice at promoting Malay social mobility. The impact of the NEP on the Indian community has been quite deleterious. Unlike the economically self-reliant Chinese, the Indians face much difficulty in bearing the brunt of these changes given their marginal position in the country's economy. This is well reflected in the national statistics for education and unemployment. In 1975, Indians accounted for only 6.2% and 4.9% of the total places in the upper secondary and tertiary institutions of learning, respectively. The percentage of unemployment among Indians was 12.2% in 1975, compared to 7.2% and 6.9% among the Chinese and Malays, respectively (Thillainathan 1979: 18). Indian deprivation in these two areas has not been satisfactorily resolved by the MIC which wields little power in the Malay-dominated government. Under these circumstances of reduced social opportunities, Indian minority status is further accentuated. Many Indians are compelled to think of their problems in terms of their national ethnic status rather than their subgroup affiliations. Politically, the organization of Indian unity has yet to be achieved, but symbolically it is gaining stronger expression through an emphasis on Indian cultural and religious uniformity, as in the national celebration of *Tīpāvalī*.⁷ It is through the

⁶ The MIC is dominated by South Indian Tamil Hindus and is occasionally referred to as a 'party of *dhotis*, the *dhoti* being the wrap around white cloth widely worn by Tamils.

⁷ Traditionally, *Tīpāvalī* is celebrated to commemorate the defeat of the demon king, *Narakācūran* by *Kṛṣṇa*. Among all the Hindu festivals, *Tīpāvalī* is one of the few celebrated by all sections of the Malaysian Indian community. However, some South Indians have taken a stand against the festival on the grounds that it represents Aryan domination of

manipulation of religious and cultural symbols that Malaysian Indians are able to project images suggesting communal solidarity. The ideal of the 'Great Tradition' in Indian culture, however vague, forms an object of pride for many Malaysian Indians, thereby providing a model of cultural and religious behavior that reaffirms communal bonds. The process of Sanskritization reflects the pursuit of this ideal and is presently discernible as an expression of Indian ethnicity in various religious and social activities that we will now describe.

Shrine and Temple Worship

The most conspicuous aspect of Hindu social life is the devotees' participation in daily and special *pūjās* (religious services) conducted at shrines and temples throughout Malaysia. Aveling (1978), in her study of Hindu temples on Penang island in north Malaysia, had arbitrarily classified them into four types—'cathedrals,' community temples, caste temples and crisis shrines. We will use this classification as a convenient means for describing ritual change in temples in Kuala Lumpur (the capital) and its satellite town, Petaling Jaya.

It is difficult to make a clear distinction between 'cathedrals' and caste temples, at least in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. Many cathedral-like Hindu temples are controlled by particular caste and regional groups, e.g. *Śrī Tanṭāyutapāṇi* temple in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur is run by the *Ceṭṭiyars* and the *Kandasvāmi* temple in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur is under Ceylonese Tamil control. But both temples are open to the public. Other large Hindu temples are controlled by committees comprising individuals with varying caste/regional backgrounds, e.g. the *Śrī Mahā Māriyamman* temple, considered the wealthiest in Malaysia, is run by a *dēvastānam* (board or committee) of mainly urban trading and artisan castes, with the predominance of the *Mukkulattōr* caste. Temples that cater exclusively to particular castes or regional groups are rare in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, although these groups may form an *upayam* on special occasions, i.e. contribute to the performance of a special *pūjā* that is attended only by caste/regional group members. All large urban temples in Malaysia are dedicated to the higher deities such

the Dravidians. Nevertheless, *Tīpāvali* represents a nationally gazetted Indian holiday, just as Chinese New Year and the Malay-Muslims' Hari Raya Puasa are ethnically oriented public holidays in Malaysia. Some recent attempts to gazette *Taipūsam*, another Hindu festival, as a national holiday were unsuccessful. However, *Taipūsam* is a public holiday only in the states of Selangor and Penang.

as *Śiva*, *Śakti*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Subrahmanya*. The proper worship of these deities requires the appropriate performance of rituals that only trained priests know.⁸ These priests are called *kurukkaḷ*, many of whom claim to be Brahmins and are hired on contract from South India. Some temples employ local *Smarta* Brahmins as priests, but they are traditionally domestic priests (*purōhita*) who have not received *dīkṣa* (initiation) to conduct temple rituals. Nevertheless, they are accepted in this role because of the limited number of trained Hindu priests in the country. These large urban temples may be considered the repositories of Sanskritic ritual knowledge guarded jealously by the few *kurukkaḷ* and Brahmin priests.

Community temples are smaller in size and are usually constructed of wood, unlike the larger concrete 'cathedrals.' Most of them are dedicated to *Kāli*, *Māriyamman*, *Muṇiśvaraṇ* and *Muṇiyāṇi*. They are found throughout Kuala Lumpur, serving the needs of Hindus in particular areas, although a famous temple may attract devotees from other areas and towns. Many community temples were first established as crisis shrines, nestled under large trees thought to be sacred or located strategically on some street corner where miraculous events have allegedly occurred. These shrines are attended by devotees of different castes and ethnic backgrounds, seeking cures and various requests from the deities who dwell there. As more and more people are attracted to them, committees may form to raise money to turn the shrines into community temples, some of which may eventually become cathedral-like in structure. A typical example of such transformation is the *Marattāṇṭavar* temple in Maran, Pahang state, which has become a national pilgrimage center for *Subrahmanya* devotees. The legend of this temple dates from 1908 when it was alleged that an Indian worker from the Public Works Department attempted to cut down a tree, only to be thrown several feet from it. He saw blood flowing out of the cut made on the tree and soon the news spread to other Indians. Hindus interpreted the event as auspicious and erected a shrine there in honor of *Subrahmanya*. The shrine has since become a large temple. A more recent case involves a cobra (*nāga*) shrine, originally located near a busy street in Kuala Lumpur. The shrine was built in 1972 after two brothers discovered a cobra lair near their tea stall. The shrine attracted many Indian and Chinese supplicants with problems ranging from ill health to

⁸ The authoritative texts that are used in the performance of temple rituals are the *āgamas*, traditionally divided into the *Śakta Āgamas*, *Pāñcaratra Āgamas* and *Saiva Āgamas*. Most of these texts are in Sanskrit (some in the *Grantha* script) with Tamil translations and commentaries (Diehl 1956: 43ff).

childlessness. Nine years later, urban development forced devotees to move the shrine to a new site in Petaling Jaya, about 10 km away. Not long after the shrine was torn down, the new building project came to a halt as a result of mechanical failures in the construction equipment. The Chinese workers interpreted this delay as having been caused by supernatural forces and readily agreed to build a new temple to placate the disturbed *nāga* spirit. The temple dedicated to the *nāga* was completed in December 1981 and was consecrated in a two-day ceremony by three *Smarta* Brahmin priests hired for the occasion. It now functions as a community temple in Petaling Jaya.

Community temples are transformed into 'cathedrals' either by the efforts of the local devotees or by government intervention. The *Śivan* temple on Gasing Hill in Petaling Jaya is a good example of the former process. It was founded as a shrine in the 1960s by an Indian Tamil who is now in his sixties. He had been a shopkeeper in Port Dickson (about 60 km south of Kuala Lumpur), but for some undisclosed reasons found his way to Gasing Hill and spent several years meditating under a neem tree. His multiple visions of *Śiva* led him to establish a shrine around the neem tree, soon patronized by Hindus living in the area. The devotees formed a committee, collected donations and turned the shrine into a community temple. But the founder-priest, a fiercely independent man, resisted the committee members (mostly middle class Tamils) and drove them out. The temple attracted many Chinese devotees, being located in an area dominated by Chinese, who began contributing money and material to expanding it into an elaborate structure. The new temple was completed in 1982 but the consecration ceremony has not been conducted since the priest is not a *kurukkal* or *Smarta* Brahmin. In the latter case, the *Śrī Munīśvaran* temple in Kampung Pandan, Kuala Lumpur is in the process of being rebuilt into a quarter million dollar structure, with government aid amounting to M\$35,000. This temple was originally a shrine in the 1940s, erected by an Indian Tamil municipal worker who was also its priest. In the 1960s, the shrine was expanded into a community temple administered by a committee with high level connections to the MIC. The committee also turned the temple into a welfare center for poor Indians living in Kampung Pandan. By using their influence in the MIC, some committee members were able to secure land allocation and financial assistance from the government for temple expansion. It is anticipated that the new *Śrī Munīśvaran* temple will be the first extravagant 'cathedral' in Kuala Lumpur dedicated to a minor male deity in the Hindu pantheon.

The priests who serve in the community temples are usually the non-

Brahmin *paṇṭāram*. They are generally believed to have originated from the Ramnad, Madurai and Coimbatore districts in Tamilnad (Rajoo 1975: 56). Unlike the *kurukkaḷs* and *Smarta* Brahmins, the *paṇṭāram* priest is a non-vegetarian and has limited knowledge of āgamic rituals. However, those who are employed to assist the Brahmin priests in the larger temples have ample opportunities to acquire ritual knowledge from their superiors. Even those without such opportunities can still learn *stōtras* (Sanskrit verses) from easily available handbooks which they chant in temple rituals. Smaller temples and shrines tend to employ *pūjāris* whose ritual knowledge is even more limited than that of the *paṇṭāram*. *Pūjāris* are not caste priests but are usually individuals of low socioeconomic status. Many of them are employed on an ad hoc basis and may even serve as a part-time spirit medium and temple keeper.

Most of the large urban temples have been sanctified in elaborate ceremonies that involve the performance of intricate rituals and the chanting of Sanskrit *mantras*. These ceremonies called *Aṣṭa Paṇṭana kumbāpiṣēkam* and *Maṅṭalāpiṣēkam* may last as long as 45 days and are usually presided by a Brahmin or *kurukkaḷ* priest. Once consecrated a temple is recognized by the worshippers as sacrosanct, with higher status than a temple where such ceremonies have not been performed. Daily *pūjās* in a consecrated temple are expected to be conducted according to āgamic rules by a trained priest who is able to recite Sanskrit *mantras* and occasionally *Tēvāram* or *Tīruvācakam* (Śaivite devotional hymns). The high cost of these elaborate rituals implies that only large temples with adequate financial support can afford to maintain such a level of sacrosanctity. However, this pattern of ritual exclusiveness is gradually changing as more and more community temples and shrines patronized by well-to-do worshippers have been transformed into 'cathedrals' over the years. These changes reflect on the whole the ritual refurbishment that often accompanies the improved socioeconomic standing of a group of worshippers. Generally, a community temple undergoing ritual transformation is observed to maintain a level of purity by terminating animal sacrifices or by performing them away from the sanctum sanctorum if such demands still persist. The frequency of séances conducted by a *pūjāri* in trance may be reduced. All these changes are evident at the *Pūvanēśvarī Kāḷiyammaṅ* temple in Petaling Jaya where animal sacrifices are still made before the dark image of *Chāmuṅṭīśvari* (another form of *Kāḷī*), housed in a shrine located at six meters away from the main hall. The priest, who rarely performs séances, is in the process of raising money to turn his wooden, cement-floored temple into a more elaborate structure. An even more dramatic change has occurred

at the *Śrī Muṇiśvaran* temple in Kampung Pandan. In 1974 a group of Hindus representing at least thirty *Muṇiśvaran* temples throughout Malaysia held a conference and decided that *Muṇiśvaran* was indeed a manifestation of *Śiva*. The conference participants jointly agreed that all *Muṇiśvaran* temples should prohibit animal sacrifices and alcoholic offerings and should recognize *Śivārāttiri* (a fast observed in Śaivite temples) as a major temple festival.

These developments in the elevation of temple status are paralleled by large-scale ritual emulations among non-Brahmin priests who are eager to acquire prestige through learning āgamic techniques and Sanskrit *mantras*. A hierarchy of ritual imitation is generally observed among these priests. A *paṇṭāram* working under a *kurukkaḷ* or Brahmin priest may learn some of the latter's ritual performances and utilizes them when he becomes an independent priest. A *pūjāri* on the other hand is more likely to imitate a *paṇṭāram* to whom he has easier access than to a Brahmin or *kurukkaḷ* priest. This is because most Brahmin and *kurukkaḷ* priests will not condescend to employing *pūjāris* as assistants. Even Brahmin priests tend to rely on other Brahmin priests of higher learning, especially those from the *Accāriyār* subcaste, for advanced instructions in ritual techniques (Aveling 1978: 175). An individual who has acquired rudimentary ritual knowledge may command enough respect from worshippers—many of whom are unaware of the nuances in complex rituals—to function as a priest in a community temple. In addition to the prestige gained, a priest who has acquired more ritual knowledge can increase his earning capacity as an experienced ritual technician. Ritual emulation has also been observed among a group of religious functionaries whose role differs from that of the temple priests. These are the spirit mediums whom we will next describe.

Spirit Mediumship

Spirit mediumship among the Tamil Hindus in Malaysia is known as *cāmiyāttal* (god dancing) or *cāmi varavalaittuk kēttal* (requesting the deity to appear through a person). Hindu mediums are consulted by clients of different class and caste (and including non-Indians) who face problems that may range from taking an examination to sorcery. Most mediums are part-time practitioners, holding a regular job in the day time and conducting séances in the evenings. Some are caretakers of small temples or shrines. Few mediums charge a specific sum of money for their services, generally accepting whatever is paid by their clients. These

individuals become mediums either by succeeding their mentors or by supernatural intervention such as receiving divine instructions in a dream. Most of them operate within the premises of a small temple but some have converted part of their homes into shrine-complexes for worship and consultation.

Mediums may be possessed by Sanskritic or non-Sanskritic deities, but it is the ceremonial pattern of the séance that provides a clue to understanding their status aspirations. As has been noted by Babb (1974: 40), most mediums conduct séances whenever possible in the manner of a priest officiating at a temple *pūjā*. The temple routines that mediums recreate may not be perfect imitations, but nevertheless suggest their concern for seeking common grounds with the 'higher' Sanskritic practices. Moreover, the temple rituals preceding a séance provide a context for legitimating the act of possession. We will describe two cases of Hindu mediumship to illustrate the status functions of these rituals.

The first case concerns a female Tamil medium in her twenties who conducts her séances in a small temple dedicated to *Kālī* in Kuala Lumpur. The medium comes from a working class background and suffered from epilepsy in her childhood. She stopped going to school at age fifteen and became a medium after experiencing a vision of *Kālī* from whom she allegedly received *aruḷ* (grace). Her reputation as an effective medium spread quickly and she soon acquired a large clientele which included Chinese, Malays and Sikhs. With the contributions of her clients, she was able to expand her shrine into a small temple. A typical séance at the *Kālī* temple starts at six in the evening. At the ringing of the temple bell, the clients stand up while the *pūjāri* performs offerings of flowers and sweet rice and waves lighted camphor before the images of *Gaṇēśa*, *Kālī*, *Subrahmanya* and *Muṇīśvaran*. At the end of the *pūjā*, lighted camphor, sandal paste, saffron powder and sacred ash are offered to the clients. The medium makes her appearance in a white robe an hour later. She normally goes into trance at the temple entrance and is led by her assistants to a *Muṇīśvaran* shrine in the back. There an assistant slaughters a chicken and collects the blood in a mug which is drunk by her. This act signifies possession by *Kālī* since blood is believed to be the deity's favourite offering. She proceeds to the main shrine where the *pūjāri* pours three vessels of water over her, after which she is garlanded and ankleted and receives a whip in her hands. The ritual ends with the medium assuming the postures of *Śakti*, *Śiva*, *Gaṇēśa*, *Murukan* and *Kṛṣṇa* before distributing sacred ash to her clients. She then moves to thē

temple center, away from the main shrine to begin consultations with individual clients.

The second case involves a male medium in his thirties who is a high caste Malayali and works in a hotel as an assistant manager. The medium, who has been conducting séances since he was a teenager, usually sees his clients in the evening at his home in suburban Petaling Jaya. Being a vehicle for *Śakti*, he has built an elaborate shrine for the deity in his courtyard. A separate shrine for *Śiva* is maintained in an upstairs room in his house. A typical séance begins with a short *pūjā* in the *Śiva* shrine room where the medium chants *mantras* and sprinkles flower petals at the images. He then proceeds to the *Śakti* shrine where incense is burned and more *mantras* recited. He rings a bell and breaks coconuts in front of the *Śakti* shrine. Lighted camphor, sacred ash, *kuṅkum* (a red substance) and sweet rice are offered to the clients. When the *pūjā* ends, the medium sits facing the shrine and inhales deeply until he is in a trance, whereupon he knocks his head against the shrine door, ringing the bells hung on it. As his breathing stabilizes he runs his hands through his hair, signalling the descent of *Śakti* into his body. He is then ready for consultation.

These brief descriptions of Hindu mediumship show that although the ritual performances may not adhere strictly to a prescribed āgamic order, they contain elements that are derived from temple worship. The waving of lights, the various items of offerings, the ringing of bells, the breaking of coconuts (an important Śaivite symbol), and the distribution of sacred ash are all familiar aspects of a temple *pūjā*, performed to increase the efficacy of the séance and to assert the high ritual status of the medium. However, some aspects of these *pūjās* are non-āgamic as in the case of blood consumption by the *Kālī* medium. Even then, her status may not be adversely affected since the sacrifice is performed away from the main shrine and not in full view of the audience. The pouring of water, considered a form of anointment, and the acts of garlanding and ankleting, considered forms of tribute, testify to the medium's claim of high ritual status. Not all Hindu mediums necessarily re-enact temple *pūjās*, but there is a tendency among them to display their status whenever the opportunity arises. Rajoo (1975: 230) has mentioned the case of a woman who was expelled from a séance by the medium who thought she was having her menstrual period. Assuming that this pollution rule is understood and observed by most Hindu women, a medium is unlikely to take such drastic action unless motivated by other reasons such as an explicit assertion of his or her ritual status. Despite these efforts at ritual emulation, spirit mediumship generally commands

little respect from the more orthodox Hindus. Thus, it is not uncommon for mediumship to become a peripheral activity in a shrine or temple that is being transformed into an āgamic 'cathedral.' It may even cease altogether on the advice of a temple committee that is concerned with its newly acquired āgamic status.

Neo-Hindu Organizations and Reform Movements

Changes in the ritual sphere have been complemented by the growth of various Hindu organizations that have attempted to increase scriptural literacy and devotional activities throughout the peninsula. Not all these organizations derive their inspiration from the Sanskritic tradition. Many emphasize the South Indian (particularly Tamil) roots of devotionalism. The urban origins of these organizations, especially in Kuala Lumpur, can be traced to their sponsorship by mainly middle class Indian and Ceylonese Tamils. Sustained contact with the Indian subcontinent in the form of visits by itinerant ascetics and Hindu scholars has contributed to the spiritual growth of these organizations. Even before the second world war such religious liaisons had existed, but it was in the 1950s that these contacts were intensified. To understand these post-war developments, we need to examine the groundwork that was laid before and immediately after the war.

The Hindu organizations that were established prior to 1940 generally suffered from factionalism and administrative disputes (Ara-saratnam 1970: 165). Although most of them were influenced by social and religious developments in South India, none came under the control of a local umbrella body. Thus, the activities of these organizations were highly dispersed and uncoordinated. However, the arrival of E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, the leader of the Dravidian movement in Madras, in Malaya in 1929 produced some integrative effects on these groups. The arousal of Tamil nationalist sentiments by Ramasamy Naicker's brief visit resulted in the formation of the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) in 1931. Although the TRA was not a religious movement, its anti-Brahminical and anti-Sanskritic stance provided an implicit model for the promotion of *Śaiva Siddhānta*, the South Indian school of Hinduism.⁹ In their efforts to project an image of modernity, the

⁹ The chief works of the Siddhāntic tradition are the 28 *Śaiva Āgamas*, the hymns of the Śaivite saints and the philosophical works of later thinkers in South India. It differs from the Vēdāntic tradition which largely follows the teachings espoused in the *Upaniṣads* that form the concluding portions of the *Vēdas*. In addition, *Vēdānta* emphasizes the non-

members of the TRA attempted to disseminate reformist ideas concerning the practice of Hinduism. One of their main targets for reform in 1938 was the baroque act of penance performed by *kāvadi* bearers and fire walkers at certain Hindu festivals. Ironically, the TRA's advocacy for the removal of these ceremonial forms, considered backward and savage, did not conflict with the constraints in bloodletting in Sanskritic rituals. The crusade against animal sacrifices and human mutilations in Hindu rituals was renewed with increased vigor after the war. TRA members made strenuous efforts to influence the government to ban these practices but failed because popular Hindu opinion was against them (Arasaratnam 1970: 174). The impact of the TRA on Malayan Hinduism was not significant, but even as it faded into obscurity after the war its numerous successors quickly established niches in the Indian community to maintain the momentum of Tamil revivalism.

The Malayan Tamil Pannai (MTP) was one of the more active literary and cultural bodies that sought to keep alive Tamil causes in the immediate post-war years. Founded in 1948 in Kuala Lumpur by a Tamil from Melaka and a Tamil lawyer from Madras, its major activities revolved around the organization of Tamil language and literary classes and the public exhibition of Tamil arts. Although the MTP was not explicitly religious in its orientation, it nevertheless promoted the devotional and mystical writings of South Indian poets such as Subrahmanya Bharati (Palaniappan 1966). By 1956 the MTP was a dying organization, like other Tamil cultural groups, as it was no longer sustained by the waning nationalism in Tamilnad. The gradual Malayanization of all sectors in the country after the war increased local Indian awareness that their futures would not be determined by the politics of Tamilnad. Despite the eventual demise of the MTP and similar groups, their impact on local Indian politics was more than symbolic, for the Tamil leadership of the MIC, consolidated after 1954, was somewhat influenced by the nationalistic fervor of these groups. On the religious front, these revivalist activities inspired a program of learning and worship based on *Śaiva Siddhānta* that rivalled other schools of Hindu philosophy. Thus, in the period stretching from the 1930s to the early 1950s, the Sanskritic tradition in Malayan Hinduism was overshadowed by a religious trend that stressed the glories of the Dravidian South.

This trend was perpetuated from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s by

dualistic aspects of the Supreme Being, while *Śaiva Siddhānta* assumes that the self is of the same essence as *Śiva* (believed to be the Supreme Reality) but not identical therewith (Mahadevan 1956: 140-70).

urban Tamils in three separate organizations, the most prominent being the *Arul Nerit Tiruk Kūṭṭam* (ANTK) which was established in 1954 by a group of middle class Indian and Ceylonese Tamils. The founders had been students of Ramanathan Chettiyar, a South Indian Tamil who had migrated to Malaya in 1947. He was professionally a moneylender but in private a scholar in *Śaiva Siddhānta* philosophy. He had also been active in the *Śaiva Mahājana Saṅgam*, a Śaivite organization in Madras, before his departure to Malaya. In his spare time he was invited by the local Tamils to organize religious classes, retreats and devotional group meetings. Those unfamiliar with *Śaiva Siddhānta* teachings were soon introduced to scriptural texts such as *Śiva Jñāna Bhōtam*, *Periya Purānam* and the devotional hymns of the Śaivite saints. For his contribution to Śaivite learning in Malaya, Ramanathan was conferred the title *Śaivaṣ Periyār* (great Śaivite scholar) by his admirers who continued his work in the ANTK. In 1962 another similar organization, the *Tiruvarul Tava Neri Maṅgam* (TTNM), was established by an Indian civil servant. Unlike the ANTK members who concentrated their work among the middle class Indians, TTNM organized religious classes and devotional meetings largely for lower class urban Indians. The TTNM members believed strongly that lower class Indian youths were most susceptible to proselytization by other religions and therefore required immediate attention in order to prevent mass conversions. Some members of the TTNM separated to form the *Appar Tiru Neri Kalakam* (ATNK) in the mid-1960s, but they were essentially doing the same work as the TTNM. The three organizations were based in Kuala Lumpur but only the ANTK had sufficient resources to spread its influence to other major towns in Malaysia. Despite their socioeconomic differences, all three organizations pursued the common goal of imparting *Śaiva Siddhānta* teachings in the Tamil vernacular.

The parochial approach to Hindu revivalism as represented by these three organizations began to change direction as a larger and more powerful organization emerged in the mid-1960s to consolidate Hindu interests on a national level. This was the Malaysian Hindu Saṅgam (MHS) which was formed in 1965 by a group of Indian professionals, civil servants, teachers and businessmen. Their initial concern about the state of Malaysian Hinduism paralleled that of the earlier reform and later revivalist movements. MHS members utilized religious education as their main weapon against the declining interest in Hinduism among Indian youths and what they perceived as the excessive practice of gory sacrifices and vow fulfillments. Unlike the TRA and its successor, the Dravidian Association, the MHS is not anti-Brahminical and anti-

Sanskritic in its outlook. Rather, it has encouraged the dissemination of both Vēdantic and Siddhāntic teachings. By the 1970s the MHS had enlarged its program to include religious instruction for plantation workers in the rural areas, as well as special religious training for Tamil school teachers and *paṅtāram* priests. Mail order courses on Hinduism were available to interested individuals who could not attend classes. In order to accomplish their objectives, the MHS leaders not only recruited religious scholars from India but also arranged for local Indians to be trained there. The MHS formed a close alliance with the Divine Life Society branch in Kuala Lumpur whose head, an ordained monk, was a highly respected figure in the Hindu community. The monk conducted classes on Vēdantic philosophy on behalf of the MHS and even cooperated with MHS members in planning reform programs, e.g. in 1975 he and several MHS members carried model *kāvadis* containing only vessels of milk at the *Taipūsam* festival in stark contrast to other penitents who performed various acts of self-mortification.¹⁰ By 1982 the membership of the MHS was estimated at 1365 individuals, 324 temples and 34 associations, most of them (about 45 percent) being concentrated in Selangor state and the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area.¹¹ It had also established ten state councils and fourteen district branches throughout Malaysia. The impact of the MHS on Malaysian Hinduism over the last fifteen years has been considerable. Not only has it been recognized by many Indians as the major vehicle for the continuity of the Hindu tradition, but also as the national representative of Hindu interests by the federal government. Today, the MHS is consulted by the immigration department on matters regarding visa permits for Hindu priests, sculptors and musicians from the subcontinent. It is also represented in various government bodies such as the National Unity Board, the Malaysian Inter-Religious Council and the Marriage Tribunals.

The changes in Malaysian Hinduism since the 1960s suggest that the MHS has been partially instrumental in reintroducing the Sanskritic

¹⁰ *Taipūsam* is considered an important festival among Tamil-speaking Hindus in Malaysia. It is celebrated in temples dedicated to *Subrahmanya* during the Tamil month of *Tai* (January–February). This festival is celebrated on a grand scale at the *Subrahmanya* temple in Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur and a similar temple at the Penang waterfalls. The three-day celebration usually attracts hundreds of devotees who bear *kāvadis* in fulfillment of vows made to *Subrahmanya*. *Kāvadis* are wooden or metal arches borne on the shoulders of the penitents whose bodies are usually pierced with skewers and hooks.

¹¹ Malaysian Hindu Saṅgam, *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts*, October 1982, pp. 9–11.

tradition that was submerged during the years of Tamil revivalism. Although the MHS promotes Siddhāntic philosophy in the Tamil vernacular, it has not rejected the propagation of Vēdantic texts. Because it adopts an assimilatory approach to these Hindu schools of thought, the MHS can be considered to a certain extent as an agent of Sanskritization. On the other hand, numerous smaller Hindu groups that offer religious fulfillment within a modified Sanskritic framework have become popular over the last ten years. These groups are largely products of the Hindu Renaissance (Bharati 1970)¹² and had first achieved renown in the West before being re-exported to the East. Transcendental Meditation, Divine Light Mission, International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, Self-Realization Fellowship and the Satya Sai Baba movement have all established bases in the Kuala Lumpur area. Compared with the Vēdantic societies founded in the pre- and post-war years (such as the Vivekananda Society, Ramakrishna Mission, Divine Life Society, Pure Life Society, Gītā Ashram), these neo-Hindu organizations have jointly attracted an even larger following of middle class Indians and Chinese who participate regularly in mass meditation and devotional singing. A whole spate of *bhakti* activities has developed within the context of these changes, a development that we will next describe.

Trends in Urban *Bhakti*

Bhaktimārga or the devotional path to salvation as a system of Hindu thought and action is traceable to the Vēdic scriptures, but only gained widespread popularity during the medieval period in India. In this century, it has developed into a specific form of religious expression that is irrevocably linked to the *bhajan* gathering and the South Indian arts of *bharatanāṭyam* and *karnāṭaka saṅgīdham* (see Singer 1972: 158–85). In Kuala Lumpur today, the *bhajan* comprises the central activity of many neo-Hindu organizations. First introduced by Ramanathan Chettiyar in Kuala Lumpur over thirty years ago as a form of devotional group singing, the *bhajan* has spread to Hindu communities in various Malaysian towns and cities. The MHS played an important role in

¹² Bharati (1970: 269) contends that 'there is a decisively *anti*-Sanskritic trend among the apologists' of the Hindu Renaissance since they do not study Sanskrit and discourage others from doing so. This is a moot point because the study of Sanskrit can be easily distinguished from an adherence to Sanskritic scriptures or practices. We adopt a less extreme position in saying that neo-Hindu groups tend to preach a reinterpreted (and perhaps, romanticized) form of Sanskritic Hinduism.

establishing this form of congregational worship, particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Tamil version of the *bhajan* is known as *kuṭṭup pirārttaṇai*. It differs from the *bhajan* only in content but not in form. While the *bhajan*, which is based largely on the Vēdantic tradition, emphasizes the chanting of Sanskrit *mantras* and *stōtras*, participants in the *kuṭṭup pirārttaṇai* generally sing hymns composed by the Tamil Śaivite saints (the *Nāyanmārs*). Less importance is given to the chanting of *nāmāvalis* (necklace of names) in the *kuṭṭup pirārttaṇai* than in the *bhajan*. The order of these devotional gatherings follows more or less a fixed pattern. Most meetings begin with a short meditation accompanied by the repetition of the cosmic chant *Aum*. This is followed by the singing of hymns, performed with the harmonium, cymbals and various instruments. Vēdantic groups such as the Divine Life Society use Sanskritic hymnals called *Bhajanāñjali*, while the Siddhāntic groups such as the TTNM use Tamil hymnals called *pirārttaṇaiṅ pāmālai*. The next phase involves scriptural readings with the Vēdantic groups using the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Upaniṣads* and other Sanskritic texts, and the Siddhāntic groups using the works of the Śaivite saints. The meeting usually ends with the waving of lights before the lithograph of a guru or deity (*āratti*), a song of dedication (*mañkaḷam*) and the ceremonial consumption of food offerings (*prasādam*). These meetings are held weekly or monthly in private homes or public halls and are usually attended by middle class Hindus. A typical gathering may comprise anywhere from fifteen to thirty individuals, but a visiting *svāmi* or religious dignitary may attract a larger crowd.

The popularity of urban *bhajans* increased in the mid-1970s largely as a result of the Satya Sai Baba movement. Satya Sai Baba, the bushy haired healer-saint of Andhra Pradesh (South India) emerged as an internationally recognized guru only about a decade ago (see White 1972, Swallow 1982). Prior to that he was a minor religious figure who attracted merely a handful of devotees in Kuala Lumpur. But by 1980 Satya Sai Baba had become a household name and at least seven Sai Baba centers have been established in the Kuala Lumpur area, each conducting its own *bhajans* (Lee 1982). The interesting development during this period of *bhajan* enthusiasm is the large influx of Chinese devotees into the Satya Sai Baba movement. These devotees, many of whom have travelled to India to receive their guru's *dārṣan* (blessings by sight), have learned to sing in Tamil and Sanskrit and are even running their own *bhajan* groups. Like their Indian counterparts, many Chinese devotees treat the *bhajan* as a readily accessible means of salvation that does not require complex ritual knowledge. Unlike the passive worship-

per in temple *pūjās*, the *bhajan* participant plays an active role in singing and meditation, thus exercising more control and enjoying more satisfaction in worship as claimed by many informants. Aside from the *bhajan*, the emphasis on *bhaktimārga* is also evident in the rapid spread of the South Indian classical dance (*bharatanāṭyam*) and music (*karnāṭaka saṅgīdham*) among urban middle class Indians.¹³ Originally a form of temple dancing, *bharatanāṭyam* survived the anti-dance campaigns of early twentieth-century reformists who were outraged by its alleged association with prostitution (Singer 1972: 172). After the war, it was revived and made respectable by several professional dancers in Tamilnad. *Karnāṭaka saṅgīdham*, on the other hand, did not suffer the same controversies as its dance counterpart but developed into a distinct South Indian art form by the sixteenth century. In Malaysia today, these classical arts are disseminated through several dance schools, music associations and individual instructors. Many of the teachers were trained at leading music and dance academies in Tamilnad. Some of these schools were formed before independence, such as the *Saṅgīdha Apivirutti Sabhā*, but many mushroomed in the mid-1960s to the 1970s in response to the increasing demand for such instruction. Hundreds of middle class Indian children, some even as young as five years, are attending these schools which have become highly profitable businesses. In addition, there are regular visits by well-known South Indian performers who often play to packed houses throughout Malaysia.

The mass media has also revolutionized the transmission of *bhakti*. Unlike *bhajans* and the performing arts, this type of *bhakti* is vicariously experienced through movies, radio and newspapers. *Bhakti* movies that are imported from South India have great appeal to the Hindu public. The themes of these films are based mostly on Sanskritic scriptures and sometimes set against a modern background. The local radio station broadcasts *bhakti* programs regularly and many Indian record shops are doing a brisk business taping *bhakti* soundtracks for a growing number of customers. These developments in Malaysian urban *bhakti* resemble closely those in Madras described by Singer (1972). The proximity of South India to the Malaysian peninsula suggests that Malaysian Hinduism is within the radius of *bhakti* influences stemming from the subcontinent. The *bhakti* phenomenon among urban Malaysian Indians is thus easily sustained by these cultural conduits from Tamilnad.

¹³ Singer (1972: 174, 183) asserts that even though both art forms originated in South India, their connections with Sanskrit are discernible in their basic structures.

Sanskritization, Class and Indian Ethnicity

Our data suggest that Sanskritization in Malaysian Hinduism is neither unilinear in development nor even in spread. Rather, the changes we have described must be considered in terms of specific sociological and historical conditions that have affected Indian ethnicity in contemporary Malaysia. As we have pointed out earlier, Malaysian Indians do not comprise a homogeneous group and the idea of Indian ethnicity cannot be treated in a monolithic sense. Structurally, Malaysian Indians may see themselves as an ethnic group in contrast to the numerically dominant Malays and Chinese. But in everyday social interaction Malaysian Indians tend to differentiate among themselves according to various social categories. Thus, the idea of Sanskritization as an integrative factor does not necessarily work on all levels of analysis. Within a macro-perspective Sanskritization seemingly provides a point of convergence for all Indians concerned, but at a micro-level the process becomes less clearcut. Given the complexities of this problem, we will first examine the particularities of Sanskritization before framing them in the broader Malaysian context.

One of the more significant particularities focuses on a class distinction in the two main forms of Sanskritization described earlier. Generally speaking, the trend toward āgamic rituals in Hindu temples and shrines can be attributed largely to the efforts of lower class (though not necessarily lower caste) Indians, while neo-Hindu organizations and reform movements have been spearheaded mainly by middle class Indians. However, this distinction cannot be strictly maintained. Lower class Indians are able to upgrade their community temples and shrines only when their economic status improves, or if upper and middle class Indians are willing to contribute funds to temple renovation. In the latter case, the more affluent Indians may become involved only if they perceive commensurate rewards in wielding control and prestige through a temple committee. This pattern of temple development also depends on the receptivity of the priest and worshippers to middle class intervention. Where such intervention is seen as desirable, as in the case of the *Śri Munīśvaraṇ* temple, the process of āgamization is likely to proceed with relative smoothness. However, class conflicts are likely to stall such developments, as in the case of the *Śivan* temple. In other words, the process of temple āgamization suggests an implicit compromise between the middle and lower class Indians on matters pertaining to the distribution of power and prestige in temple politics. While lower class worshippers may often rely on middle class resources

to satisfy their aspiration for āgamic status, this relationship is not evident in the neo-Hindu organizations and reform movements. These organizations and movements are almost exclusively middle class in membership. Lower class Indians tend to shy away from them, being unable to identify with the goals and practices of these groups. For instance, Satya Sai Baba has attracted many middle class followers and is often perceived by lower class Indians as a rich man's godman. On the other hand, some of these organizations such as the MHS and the TTNM have made attempts to influence the religious literacy of lower class Hindus. Thus, there are close class interactions in these two forms of Sanskritization despite general differences in their class origins.

Sanskritization in Malaysia is also distinctly an urban phenomenon. This characteristic reveals an important aspect of social change involving interaction between Indians and other ethnic groups. Even in the 1920s and 1930s, many Indians were concerned with their image in the eyes of the other ethnic groups (Arasaratnam 1970: 173). The reformers of that period agitated for changes in Hindu practices which they had perceived as detrimental to Indian dignity. Rapid urbanization after the war has brought more Indians into contact with the Malays and Chinese. It can be assumed that within the context of increased ethnic interaction, Indian concern with their self-esteem has also intensified proportionately. The widespread upgrading of Hindu temples and attempts at spreading religious literacy may be considered as part of a general effort at improving the Indian ethnic image. Many Indians involved in these activities also seek the political sponsorship of the MIC for establishing respectability within and without their community. The Indian middle class is in many ways more apprehensive about the status of their community since they are concentrated in the urban areas and hold occupations that require more ethnic interaction than the rural Indians who are isolated on rubber and palm oil plantations. It is also the urban middle class Indians who have taken the initiative in introducing the Hindu scriptures to their working class counterparts in the rural areas. These urbanites maintain contact with various religious centers in India, thus assuming the role of intermediaries between innovations on the subcontinent and local needs. Because of their strong links with Tamilnad, the potential for arousing Tamil identity is always present as an alternative to Sanskritization, as attested by the Tamil revival of the 1950s. However, an important prerequisite for participation in a Tamil revival is an understanding of the Tamil language. Since many middle class Indians in the present generation are

English educated,¹⁴ it is more likely that they will be attracted to the Sanskritic scriptures—many of which have been translated into English—than the Tamil Śaivite texts which are largely available in the vernacular.

Although the urban middle class Indians have been responsible for many changes in Hinduism over the last fifty years, a cohesive leadership has yet to be established. In the pre-war years various Hindu organizations were involved separately in religious reform but none emerged as a nationally influential body. The Tamil Reform Association—though principally a non-religious organization—has probably come closest to achieving that end, but it quickly disintegrated after the war leaving no strong legacy for its successors to follow. In the present period however, the Malaysian Hindu Saṅgam has attempted to exert its influence over almost all the Hindu temples and organizations throughout Malaysia, but it has yet to receive full recognition as a national representative of Hinduism. Firstly, it faces strong opposition and competition from the *Śrī Mahā Māriyamman Dēvastānam*, a wealthy Hindu body composed largely of working class Indians who control three major temples in Kuala Lumpur, which is also seeking to gain such recognition. Secondly, many temples and organizations which are members of the MHS are not under its direct control, thus enjoying sufficient autonomy to run their own programs of religious activities. Nevertheless, the MHS is gradually consolidating its power by establishing close links with the Malaysian government, a respectable Hindu order (the *Saṅkarāccāriya Math*) in Kanchipuram, South India, and a large section of the urban Indian middle class in Malaysia. But until it emerges as a central Hindu body capable of implementing religious policies at a national level, Malaysian Hinduism will remain fragmented and diffused in its development.

Without the centralizing function of a national Hindu body, the spread of Sanskritic scriptures and practices is likely to be erratic and uncoordinated. The relative independence of many Hindu temples and organizations implies that they are not limited to adopting a Sanskritic formula in their activities. Individuals and organizations steeped in the Tamil Śaivite tradition may prefer to select *Śaiva Siddhānta* as their model of religious learning and practice. Even the Malaysian Hindu Saṅgam is not exclusively a Sanskritic organization. But despite the presence of

¹⁴ We are referring to Malaysian Indians who attended English-medium primary and secondary schools in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the early 1970s, all instructions in the government schools are given in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. English is only taught as a separate subject.

Tamil Śaivism as a formidable alternative to Sanskritic Hinduism, many Malaysian Hindus continue to use Sanskritic sources of knowledge (such as the *Upaniṣads* and *Bhagavad Gītā*) and devotional expression (such as the *bhajan*) for religious inspiration. In other words, Sanskritic Hinduism continues to provide an important basis for the articulation of Indian ethnicity. This trend of development has grown stronger in the years following the political events of May 1969. The implementation of the New Economic Policy in the 1970s, favoring Malay socioeconomic mobility, has added to the insecurity experienced by the Malaysian Indian community. In the urban areas where socioeconomic competition is most intense, Indians not only have to contend with Malay political sponsorship but also with the interests of the well-entrenched Chinese. In addition, the recent increase in Christian and Islamic proselytization in the urban areas has aroused the concern of many Hindus over the problem of mass conversions. At the social and political level, Indians face great difficulties in meeting these threats because of their minority status and the fragmentation of their community along caste, class and regional lines. However, symbolically, Sanskritic Hinduism and Tamil Śaivism are important parameters for the delineation of Indian ethnicity. The dominance of the English educated middle class in contemporary Hindu affairs suggests that the Sanskritic trend will continue to prevail. But until these religious symbols are successfully integrated with social and political actions, Hinduism will merely remain an ephemeral vessel of Malaysian Indian unity. The Malaysian Hindu Saṅgam is potentially capable of transforming its symbolic front into a political vehicle for Indian interests but its evolution in this direction has yet to be attained.

Conclusion

Sanskritization as analyzed in the Malaysian context differs greatly from the Indian case in both structure and process. The main reason is that caste does not comprise a dominant social force in the Malaysian Indian community. Caste continues to play an important role in some aspects of Indian social life (e.g. marriage), but its effect on social mobility is relatively insignificant since it is not a major organizational principle in the larger Malaysian society. For this reason, Sanskritization is not a necessary concomitant of Indian social mobility in Malaysia, unlike the case in India as argued by Srinivas. Because Sanskritic Hinduism represents a great tradition in Indian civilization,

it offers Malaysian Indians a range of teachings and practices from which they can claim a sense of ethnic pride. The participation of non-Indians (especially the Chinese) in Hindu events, such as the *bhajan*, is frequently treated by Malaysian Indians as an external validation for the greatness of their ethnic heritage. The Tamil-educated Indians in Malaysia tend to adhere more closely to the southern Śaivite tradition than to the Sanskritic tradition of North India. However, the modified Sanskritic philosophy espoused by many neo-Hindu organizations has attracted many English-educated middle class Indians. As long as these Indians have sufficient resources to influence the development of Hinduism, the future of the Sanskritic tradition will not diminish but will continue to function as a meaningful symbol of Indian ethnicity in Malaysia.

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