

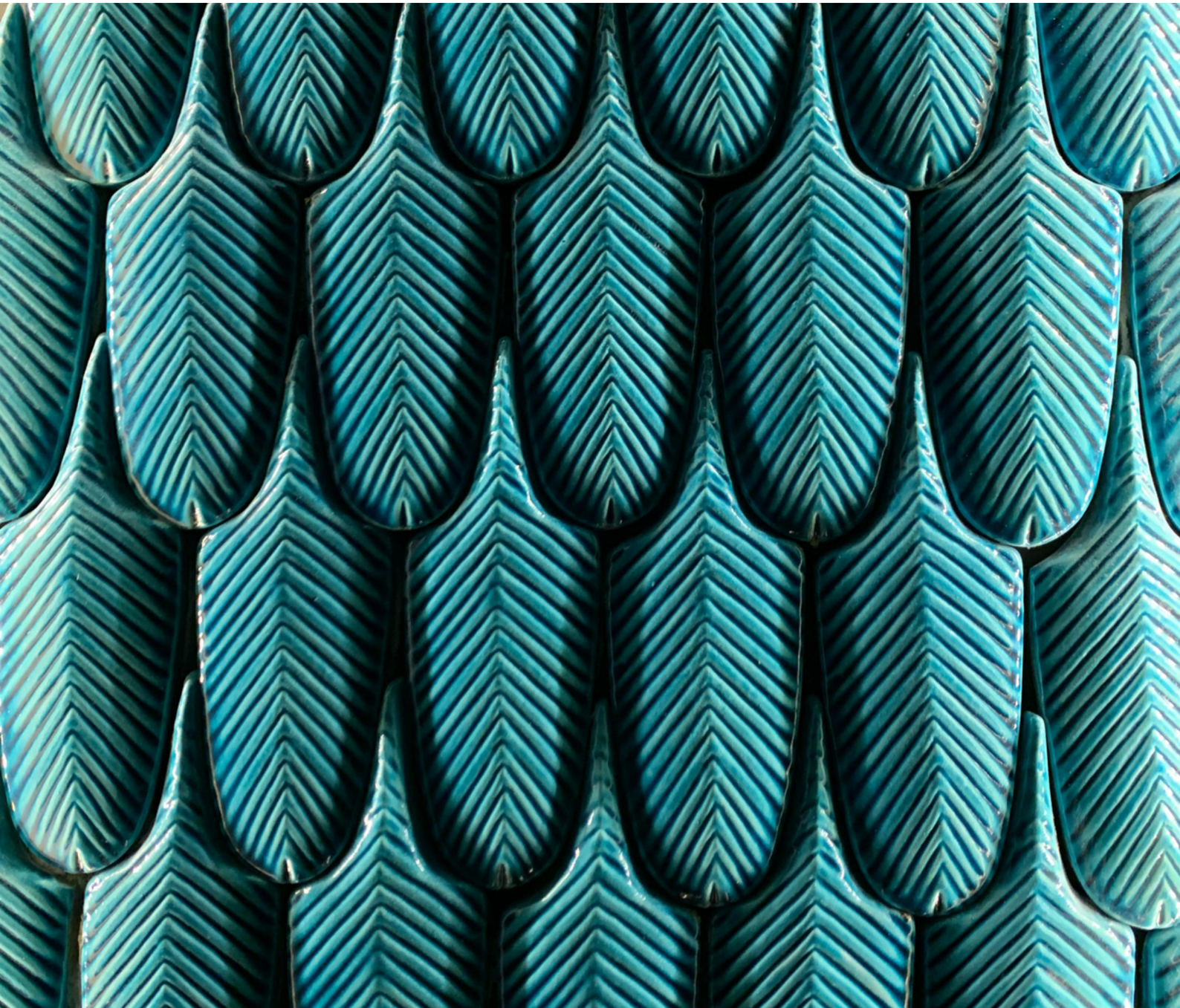
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iR Brief

The Value of Safe Spaces

Indian Youths and Belonging

Shaleen Surendra



The Value of Safe Spaces: Indian Youths and Belonging

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Belonging and identity are topics that I have been grappling with recently when it comes to Indian youths. More importantly, how does a community find brotherhood and kinship in an environment where they are so often reminded they are not welcome? Over the last few months, I have had the privilege of interviewing Indian youth across peninsular Malaysia as part of IMAN's study, *Kami Orang Sini Juga*, which aims to shed light on the struggles, frustrations, and hopes of the Indian community's youth. Across the board, what is evident is the importance of having spaces where Indian youths can safely exist among other ethnic groups and never feel the need to hide or erase parts of themselves in order to fit in. But what happens when we take away this safe space?

The absence of safe spaces leads youths to seek a false sense of security. Speaking to Malaysian Indian youths, it is clear that having a sense of belonging and identity is crucial to their development and in shaping who they are. Many spoke of the strong family and community support they received from a young age, which served as a pillar propelling them towards success. While some youths came from privileged backgrounds, even those who did not detailed the importance of having this vital support system in pushing them towards social mobility.

Education, specifically, has become a driver of success for many Indian youths. However, the reality is that there are many hurdles that Malaysian Indian youths face, such as racial discrimination in schools from their peers and teachers, and even institutional barriers that prevent them from getting access to educational opportunities. For youths who do not have this safe space to turn to, this can lead them down a dangerous path: a destructive third space.

With the absence of safe spaces in schools, a variety of pathways open up for youths. While some go down a path that provides support and belonging, paving the way for a constructive third space, others do not because there is no safe space at all. It is here that destructive and violent spaces occupy what should be the domain of safety, disguising themselves as a viable option, filling in a gap where institutions have failed these youths.

The circumstances which lead youths down either path are something that I will also explore. It is important to understand that youths who are already at a disadvantage are more susceptible to falling into this destructive third space due to institutional and societal failings. Through this brief, the disadvantageous institutional systems and behaviours in place will be explored, along with their repercussions.

The poverty cycle trap: Disparities within the Malaysian Indian community

First, the many complexities of the Malaysian Indian community need to be unpacked, as it is multi-faceted in its own right. Under the umbrella term 'Indian', there are many sub-ethnic groups such as Malayalees, South Indian Tamils, Telegus, Punjabis, Sri Lankan Tamils and more. Looking more closely at the community, there is also a great disparity between Indians who are well off and those who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Class and wealth disparities are evident within the community, but are rarely addressed when considering it as a whole.

Colonial structures that employed divide-and-rule even within the Indian community had long-lasting effects. The financial advantages were not afforded to all Indians, many of whom end up being stuck in a cycle of poverty. Through the employment of Indians in estates, the British made it a point to segregate Indians according to their ethnic group and allocate them to certain jobs¹. For example, Sri Lankan Tamils and Malayalees were 'rewarded' for their ability to speak English and given administrative posts in these estates, whereas South Indian Tamils were made to work under them as indentured labourers.

Despite being classed as Indians, there were distinct differences in how they were treated and the opportunities available to them. These advantages during colonial times have set up class and ethnic structures which still persist today, as they allowed for some Indians to be more established following Malaysia's independence.

Therefore, throwaway expressions like 'all Indians are well-to-do' or 'Indians are all doctors and lawyers' can be harmful to the wider community and diminish the distinct class differences. Even in terms of financial mobility, data from the Malaysian Indian Blueprint showed that '38% of Malaysian Indian children born to parents at the bottom income quintile remain in the same income class as their parents'². There are still parts

¹ Parameswari Krishnan, J. Hinduja Jayar Raman, Rohini Krishnan, "A Study On The History Of Estate Tamil Schools In Malaya", *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah* 48, (2024): 173–188.

² Prime Ministers Office, *Malaysian Indian Blueprint* (Malaysia, 2017)

https://sevai.my/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/210417v1_MIB-English-PDF.pdf

of the Indian community that are very heavily disadvantaged, much to do with their race and, of course, class; some in part are the lingering effects from colonial times and the lack of intervention after.

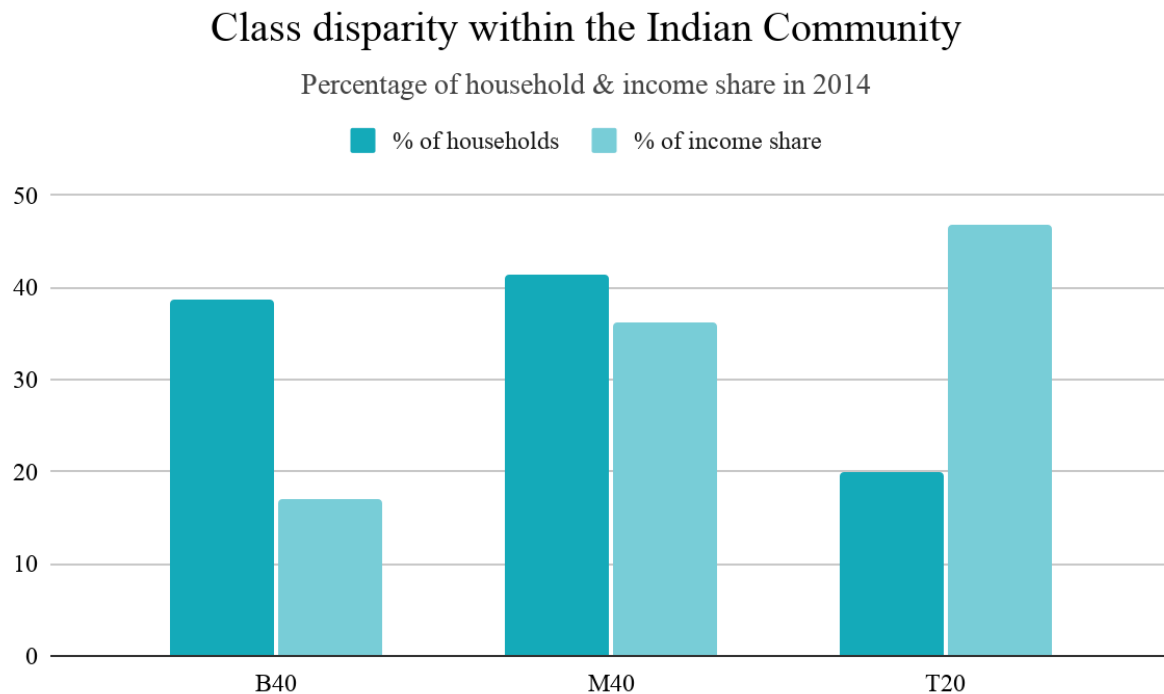


Figure 1: Class Disparities within the Malaysian Indian community. Data retrieved from the Malaysian Indian Blueprint

Indian youths are aware of class disparity. Their solution for moving up as a community is education. This is the one thing that all the Indian youths I spoke to agreed on, regardless of ethnic group or class. Education is a vehicle for social mobility. While on paper the idea that hard work and good grades equal success holds, the reality is very different.

For some Malaysian Indian youths, the education system has failed to be a vehicle of social mobility, leaving them trapped in a generational poverty cycle. Instead, schools become spaces where the young Indians experience discrimination on a multitude of levels. Interviewing Malaysian Indian youths across West Malaysia and hearing their stories makes it clear that they do not view schools as safe spaces for socialisation.

Racial discrimination in school: 'Budak India ke budak keling?'

Schools become hostile spaces, instead of providing the foundation for nation-building and for creating citizens with empathy and an understanding of one another. National schools offer an opportunity for students from different backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities to mingle. However, speaking to Indian youths, this segregation of races, which vernacular schools often take the hit for³, is also found in national schools. People of the same race stick together, and within the Indian community, there are further factions of English speakers versus Tamil speakers, for example.

Youths have described this to be the case with students who transfer from Tamil schools to national secondary schools or SMK, where Indian youths are often from those within their own communities in an attempt to fit in. These students transfer to non-vernacular secondary schools and struggle to keep up due to language barriers, having to learn complex topics at such a young age in a completely different language.

Speaking to Indian youths, many detailed their own experiences with students from Tamil schools, or with those who had moved from them and initially struggled to adapt to a different environment. While students who do not meet the minimum requirements for Bahasa Malaysia are offered a bridging year or a removal class (Kelas Peralihan), they often feel discouraged. The reality for these students is that they can grasp complicated concepts, just in a different language.

Furthermore, when moving to SMK, attempts by Tamil school students to mingle with other students, including Indian students, prove challenging. This issue is prevalent in the Tamil-English divide, and it is a mindset of survival that many middle-class Indians have adopted to assimilate and find their safe space.

The concept of respectability politics⁴ is adopted by middle-class Indians to create a clear distinction between 'us', the palatable Indian, and 'them', the Indian plagued by negative stereotypes. This unintentional othering of the self starts at a very young age as a way to shield themselves from the harmful perceptions of Indians perpetuated by society, as detailed by this respondent:

³ FMT Reporter, "Abolish vernacular schools to reduce racial divide, says Dr M", *Free Malaysia Today*, 30 August 2023, [hcreatingttps://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/08/30/abolish-vernacular-schools-to-reduce-racial-divide-says-dr-m](https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/08/30/abolish-vernacular-schools-to-reduce-racial-divide-says-dr-m)

⁴ Alicia Wallace, "Everyday Respectability Politics", *Big Think*, 31 March 2016, <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/everyday-respectability-politics/>

“So the guy [student from Tamil school] came, he started talking to me in Tamil, I understood him perfectly, and my response was, I don't understand, would you talk to me in English or Malay? And I understood him perfectly, you know, and I think that is a problem, like, that is a huge problem, but that was how insecure I was with myself.”

This need to protect themselves from further discrimination unintentionally further isolates a group of Indian youths. There are also some fortunate youths who have gone through their schooling life unscathed and unmarred by discrimination. For others, they have experienced racial discrimination, both verbal and, in rare cases, physical abuse. These altercations stem from existing racial tensions and stereotypes about the community, which trickle down from one generation to the next.

When children grow up in homes where they are taught to be afraid or avoid a person because of their race, this can have detrimental effects on socialisation. In 2021, a *Discrimination in Education Survey*⁵ showed that 9 in 10 Indian students felt discriminated against due to their ethnicity. An alarming 73% of these students felt discriminated against by their peers. In a conversation that I had with an Indian youth, they detailed a racially targeted incident that took place when they were 8 years old:

“It was 5 or 6 versus 1. It was a physical fight. I got scolded once the fight ended and blamed, and when the teachers found out, they didn't realise at that point that my mom was a teacher, but when they found out, then they were like- I remember the teacher apologised for scolding me.”

It is not just from students but, more worryingly, from teachers too. From the same survey⁶ done in 2021, the data showed that 74% of Indian students experienced discrimination from their teachers. Youths that I spoke to explained the tensions that exist between teachers and students who target Indian students and use racial stereotypes to correct their behaviour. This reinforces feelings of isolation among Indian youths and ostracises them even more. In one instance, a respondent described an interaction they had with a teacher:

⁵ Kenneth Tee, “Survey: One in two Malaysians faced discrimination in schools, ethnic Indians had worst experience”, *Malay Mail*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/09/16/survey-one-in-two-malaysians-faced-discrimination-in-schools-ethnic-indians/2006075>

⁶ Bernie Yeo, “Take ‘discontinuing’ discrimination in Malaysia seriously, Gov’t told”, *FOCUS Malaysia*, 17 September 2021, <https://focusmalaysia.my/take-discontinuing-discrimination-in-malaysia-seriously-govt-told/>

“[The] BM teacher came into my class one day, straight up used ‘keling’. He said, ‘You budak India ke budak keling?’ Yeah, then he pointed at me and said ‘kalau you India you baik, kalau keling macam-’ then he pointed at other [Indian] students.”

This sowing of divisions at a young age is harmful and, unfortunately, normalised among youths. In the example above, it is clear that this is also meant to create divisions between Indians - those who are good and those who are described to be ‘keling’, inadvertently referring to Indians of a low socioeconomic class or from the estates.

Youths are taught socialisation through a racial lens and carry this outlook with them during their formative years by a teacher who is continuing to perpetuate harmful narratives about the Indian community. There is now a clear distinction set by someone part of the institution as to who is a ‘good Indian’ versus a ‘bad Indian’.

These markers presented by the teacher become the default option for how Indian youths can operate and how other youths can identify behaviour that becomes inherently tied to the Indian ethnicity. Unfortunately, this was not the only instance in which Indian youths detailed to me the harsh realities of their schooling. This is not just a failure to protect students, but a wider issue of how institutions and the state have allowed this harmful behaviour and marginalisation of Indian students to carry on.

In an environment meant to nurture, what youths experience is hostility and heightened ethnic tensions. Being hyper aware of race, many youths detailed how they normalised these discriminatory attitudes, seeing it as something that just came as part and parcel with being a Malaysian Indian.

What are we actually teaching youths? What kind of society are we creating? One that practices discrimination and normalises it to the point that youths force themselves to change and accept these realities. The lack of safe spaces in schools here is evident for many Indian youths. They have shifted their mindset to focus on education itself as the driver of social mobility and opportunities for success in Malaysia. However, the reality for many youths without the financial resources is very different.

Institutional discrimination: Meritocracy is a myth

The discrimination that youths face extends even to the institutional level. Students are discriminated against due to the quota systems in place. In 2022, more than 200 Indian students were denied entry into matriculation despite achieving straight A's for their final national examinations, the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)⁷. A young respondent explained that, despite achieving excellent results, she was assigned her 10th choice for matriculation. The realities of her family's economic situation prevented her from attending private school, forcing her to give up on her dream career.

By denying young Malaysians opportunities to enter into their preferred programmes despite achieving excellent results, youths are taught that hard work goes unrewarded. Youths from financially advantaged backgrounds can rely on their parents for support to fund their education. However, those who don't have this support have to either take the STPM, which is very challenging, or settle for a spot in a matriculation programme offered to them, changing the whole trajectory of their careers.

“When I wanted to apply for foundation in law, I couldn't. I couldn't even get to apply. If I want to, I have to pay money, and it's expensive... That day I went to the shop and... the Malay girl she was telling 'I also got UPU results. I went, and I got asasi undang-undang, foundation in law. And I asked 'oh that's great, how many A's you got? Straight A's ke? 'Bukan 4A's je.' I got 6As, and a few A+'s.”

Talking to these youths, they are aware that meritocracy does not exist in Malaysia. The illusion of such a thing has been shattered by a system that does not reward hard work. It is at this juncture, when a safe space is absent, and youths are disillusioned with the system that really shapes their lives. Indian youths have told us that the narrative their parents fed them from a young age is that working much harder is vital to succeed in Malaysia. These youths grew up in environments where their parents pushed them academically so they could succeed despite institutional barriers.

⁷ Varshita, “Matriculation Intake; More Than 200 Straight-A's Indian Students Fail To Get Matriculation Programme”, *Varnam*, 27 July 2022, <https://varnam.my/63427/matriculation-intake-more-than-200-straight-as-indian-students-fail-to-get-matriculation-programme/>

“We were very sad because, as you know, parents are very strict. We have to study, study, study. So we literally put a lot of effort there. The youngsters who are students- because being a student is not easy... we have that expectation that I’ll get a better university instead of going private, waste money this and that. For example, I already have straight A’s. I can get a full scholarship, automatically government university, right? But why we don’t get? That’s the main big question.”

Another youth described coming from a B40 family, but she has strong family and community support and is actively involved in her church group. During our fieldwork, I also met with a dance teacher who runs a school teaching Bharatnatyam, a traditional Indian dance. More than that, she is a parental figure, especially for those who lack that, teaching them everyday survival skills and acts as a guide for these young students.

This is especially crucial for students who do not have that support at home or experience racism and discrimination in their everyday lives, which ostracises them. When you speak to her students, you can see what a pivotal role she plays in their lives and how vital strong community support is, especially given the lack of safe spaces in schools. The school offers a place where they can be open about their culture through dance and artistic expression, channelling their emotions in a healthy outlet.

Here, they are sheltered from the harsh realities of the world, surrounded by like-minded individuals who share a passion for dance and work towards a goal together, whether through learning a new routine or performing at an event. It gives them a sense of purpose and belonging, which some may not be afforded elsewhere.

Beyond that, the students turn to her when they face hardships or need advice with their career path. This dance teacher understands and nurtures their talents. It is crucial to instil in them a sense of worth and value, encouraging them to be ambitious and to know that they are capable of contributing positively to society.

This gives them a sense of community and belonging, especially for those who were not provided with this in school. Implementing a model like this for all youth can completely transform their development and life trajectories. The dance school is a form of protection for them, a safe space from the racism they experience in schools, and a way to express themselves artistically, learn more about their culture and life, and mingle with other young students. But what about youths who do not have access to this?

The destructive third space and its implications

Some youths do not have the privilege of having support from their families and communities. Paired with being marginalised in school by their teachers and peers, a lack of access to educational resources due to failings of the state and being unable to seek protection through safe spaces like dance schools or sports teams, this pushes youths to the fringes. The absence of a safe space leaves youths in a vulnerable position, a result of the failings of institutions and the state meant to protect them.

In an attempt to belong and find their community, this destructive third space is presented to these youths as a viable option. Gang membership specifically fills this void, leaving youths otherwise constantly excluded from public and private spaces. The youths we spoke to, who came from low-income backgrounds, said they were sheltered from much of this, while the few who described almost going down this path said they were, too.

Gang members would actively seek them out by waiting outside the schools, identifying young boys who were discarded by the system. They offered them a job and money, which meant a quicker way towards upward social mobility - something that would take too long through traditional routes or was not accessible to them.

In 2020, it was reported that 13% of primary school dropouts are Malaysian Indian youths⁸, specifically those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and neighbourhoods. Students from B40 communities very often do not receive adequate support from their families and communities. Even when they do, there are barriers within the education system.

Youths who also struggle to have role models they can look up to or healthy outlets that can push them towards upward social mobility are the ones most susceptible to being lured down a path of crime⁹. Compared to their wealthier peers, many do not have the skills, financial support or networks to succeed in urban job markets. Having a head start in a system that already hinders a person can be a big motivator for success.

⁸ Revathi Durai, "Young Indians Are Dropping Out Of Schools; What Can We Do To Address It?", *Varnam*, 23 October 2020, <https://varnam.my/32447/young-indians-are-dropping-out-of-schools-what-can-we-do-to-address-it/>

⁹ Dashran Yohan, host, *Beyond The Ballot Box*, "RMK13: Why Malaysian Indians Are Still Left Behind", BFM, 22 July 2025, 41 min., 12 sec., <https://www.bfm.my/content/podcast/rmk13-why-malaysian-indians-are-still-left-behind>

Impoverished youths are provided a false sense of security through gang membership, community and brotherhood, and a sense of belonging which they could not get from the absence of safe spaces in schools and in their personal lives. In some cases, youths who lack the financial means to provide for themselves and cannot rely on external support cannot get by through formal or informal work, due to institutional hindrances or a slow return on investment.

With a lack of resources and avenues for social mobility, many turn to a life of crime and violence. This can range from street fights to robbery to drug dealing. Gangsterism provides an alternative pathway, one that is highly visible for disenfranchised youths to ensure their upward mobility, despite being a high-risk option. This alternative pathway is destructive and dangerous, but it fills a void that formal institutions and structures cannot, such as in financial and social mobility.

“There are young kids who are very courageous... They have their ranks, their regimes... You’ll be taken care of very well, you’ll receive a lot of cash and all that.”

This youth described what life would be like for those who joined gangs. This false sense of security, safety and protection is a key driver for disenfranchised youths to get involved and go down this destructive path. In these situations, the trade-off between a sense of belonging and community and their very lives is stark. Despite being the smallest major ethnic group, an alarming 71.75% of gang members nationwide are Indians¹⁰, according to data from the Malaysian Indian Blueprint.

Gangs thrive on young, eager members to join them and fill in the ranks due to the costly nature of the work, which is their very lives. The exploitation of youths and their lack of safe space and sense of belonging is the very foundation on which gangs operate. During the fieldwork, youths in Seremban detailed the rise in crime and how the place was “becoming like KL”, a place riddled with violence and a lack of safety. How do we protect all our youth? How do we ensure that this destructive path is never made available to them?

¹⁰ Sharon Wilson, Thanaseelan Rajasakran, Santhidran Sinnappan & Thinavan Periyayya, “A Qualitative Exploration on the Perception of Gangs and Gangsterism in Malaysia: Penerokaan Secara Kualitatif mengenai Persepsi Terhadap Geng dan Gangsterisme di Malaysia”, *Sains Insani* 9, no. 2 (2024): 362–376. <https://doi.org/10.33102/sainsinsani.vol9no2.673>

Creating a safe space for Indian youths

Youths need to grow up in environments where they are valued and feel safe. For starters, having educators and leaders who fuel ethnic tensions and resentment among youths cannot continue. Indian youth should not have to bear the burdens of the state's failings. Sensitivity training in schools for both teachers and students is vital here to create a safe environment where young people can understand and communicate across their differences in a healthy way. Institutions should not turn a blind eye and encourage educators who throw around racial slurs and create a hostile environment for youths.


Institutional and social discriminatory practices have to become a relic of the past. Holding on to policies and mindsets that cultivate hostility only leads to the alienation of Indian youths. The quota system is a prime example of this, which needs to be eradicated to ensure equity for youths regardless of ethnic background. Separately, language barriers for students from Tamil schools should be addressed with additional resources throughout their schooling to bridge the gap before they start SMK.

Additionally, providing community centres and spaces where youths who have gone down a path of crime can rebuild their confidence and feel assured that they do belong and have a space to express themselves is necessary. It is especially important to ensure they know they have that opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives.

One youth I spoke to, who is involved in programmes for disadvantaged youth, detailed how many youths in this predicament do not feel entitled to these programmes. Why? Probably because they have been told as such their whole lives. Beyond that, more funding for third spaces is needed in low-income communities so that youth from all class backgrounds have access to sports, dance, music, or art. Youths need to be invited in, not pushed out of safe spaces.

When we start looking at people beyond a racialised lens, this offers more opportunities for us to understand that we are all Malaysians and if a community has been left behind, then we all are left behind. Youths must have a sense of belonging and worth instilled in them from a young age. Teachers and parents play an important role here in creating a generation of youths whose first instinct is not to stereotype or view the world through a negative, racialised lens.

Once youths have this safe space in school and beyond, they can navigate their lives differently and create a healthy, positive impact. Doing this alone could curb any desire to seek a sense of belonging and a false sense of safety in the destructive third space.

Education *is* a vehicle for social mobility, but only if the institutional structures in place enable it. This small change can have positive ripple effects on the lives of Malaysian Indian youths for generations to come. Without this change, we will continue pushing Malaysian Indian youths towards a destructive third space riddled with anger and violence in an attempt to belong. 

Shaleen Surendra is a researcher with experience in public affairs and communications. She has worked on projects related to Malaysian cinema, independent films, post-colonialism, identity, and the securitisation of migrants and refugees. She's passionate about the cultural arts and theatre, and enjoys writing fiction in her spare time.

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