

Respectability Politics

The Impact of the Palatable
Indian

Shaleen Surendra



Respectability Politics and the Impact of the Palatable Indian

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In my previous brief, *The Value of Safe Spaces: Indian Youths and Belonging*,¹ I wrote about the external factors affecting the Malaysian Indian community. This covered social and institutional discrimination, and the value of having safe spaces for youths, especially for those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. I also wrote about the 'Palatable Indian', a term that captures behaviours adopted by certain upper-middle-class Indians to assimilate and appease the wider social context of ethnic relations in Malaysia, while also presenting an alternative to what it means to be Indian. Through the concept of 'respectability politics', this is a way of shedding negative stereotypes that plague the community. This focuses on presenting an alternative to the racial stereotypes surrounding a community, namely through acting in a respectable manner². This was evident during interviews with Indian youths as part of IMAN's *Kami Orang Sini Juga* project, which aimed to understand the community's socio-political aspirations and frustrations, how they view identity and nation-building, and their concerns. Through a series of in-depth interviews with Indian youths across Peninsular Malaysia, I observed this underlying issue amid the myriad problems they faced.

The Indian community is diverse, but riddled with division. It includes a variety of sub-ethnic groups such as Chettis, Malayalees, Telegus, Punjabis, Sindhis, South Indian Tamils, and Sri Lankan Tamils, to name a few. The distinctions run not only along sub-ethnic lines, but also along class, language, and colourism. Indian youths from different backgrounds also identified this. The community has gotten so good at operating in silos that many Indian youths do not just feel excluded by other ethnic minorities, but within the Indian community too. This fragmentation and exclusion have meant that some sub-ethnic communities become more insular and adopt a 'look out for each other' mentality, whereby the radius of 'us' becomes increasingly smaller. However, to properly understand how the Palatable Indian is created and its impact, we need to understand what respectability politics even is and trace our steps back to colonial Malaya.

¹ Shaleen Surendra, "The Value of Safe Spaces: Indian Youths and Belonging", Brief (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, IMAN Research, March 2026), 4. https://imanresearch.com/uploads/IMAN_Brief_Issue1_Mar2026.pdf

² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Understanding respectability politics

The ‘politics of respectability’, a term coined by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her work *Righteous Discontent* (1993), documents and examines Black American women’s movement in the Black Baptist Church between 1880 and 1920 and their efforts to confront racial stereotypes associated with the community. Higginbotham highlights the politics of respectability as a way of combating racial stereotypes towards the Black community; it “emphasize[s] reform of individual behaviour and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations”³. Since its publication, academics and thinkers within the community have debated whether respectability politics is truly the way to uplift and mobilise a community toward socioeconomic freedom.

Respectability politics is evident in today’s sociopolitical landscape. It operates on the idea that “self-care and self-correction are framed as strategies to lift the black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy”⁴. Today, it navigates race and class relations, pushing the idea that, through the politics of respectability, one has to be self-sufficient in getting oneself up the socioeconomic ladder, ignoring the institutional and structural forces that do not support Black, working-class communities. The problem that lies for minority groups is the social implications towards others when there are those who act out. As Glenn Loury describes, “[w]hen an individual behaves in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes—through lawlessness, irresponsibility, or public disorder—he does not merely diminish his own standing. He imposes reputational costs on others who share his group identity.”⁵ This unfair expectation placed on the community is in part why elites and those within the Black community strive to present themselves in a respectable manner.

³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

⁴ Fredrick C. Harris, “The Rise of Respectability Politics”, *Dissent Magazine*. Winter 2014, <https://dissentmagazine.org/article/the-rise-of-respectability-politics/>.

⁵ Glenn Loury, “Respectability Politics and the Moral Ecology of Freedom”, *Freedom Frequency: Hoover Institution*. 1 April 2026, <https://www.thefreedomfrequency.org/p/respectability-politics-and-the-moral>

Much of this movement is entrenched in the idea of presenting black Americans in relation to white America, and being palatable. It relies on the community to “govern themselves”⁶. Black elites represent the class of Black Americans who have attempted to repatriate the image of Black people in America in relation to whiteness, subverting racial stereotypes and negative perceptions about the community. In doing so, it creates a clear distinction within the community whereby “it reinforces within-group stratification to juxtapose a respectable us against a shameful other”⁷.

The ideal picture of what it means to be Black against the backdrop of white American culture means being constantly self-policing and dissociating themselves from negative perceptions of the community. As academic Christopher Lebron details his own experiences of being a Black American, he explains the duality in which he exists: one that listens to his rap music loudly and gets stares, and the other who is extremely accomplished in his field⁸. He presents the following case for navigating how ethnic minorities, in his case himself, are seen:

“So, am I the that’s-what’s-wrong-with-black-people pariah or the that-goes-to-show-you-what-a-lot-of-hard-work-can-get-you-racism-be-damned exemplar? Am I respectable, or not? Some black elites believe I should care what you think. I don’t.”⁹

This clarity is learned over the years, through his own experiences. While Malaysian Indian youths acknowledged their own struggles with toeing this line, for them as well, it has come after years of trying to distance themselves to avoid negative association with the Indian community. Some, as Christopher Lebron describes, could care less. They have come out the other end and embraced their authentic self and their Indian-ness. Then, of course, there are those who have not.

⁶ Glenn Loury, “Respectability Politics and the Moral Ecology of Freedom”, *Freedom Frequency* | Hoover Institution. 1 April 2026, <https://www.thefreedomfrequency.org/p/respectability-politics-and-the-moral>

⁷ Mikaela Pitcan, Alice E Marwick, and Danah Boyd, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23, no. 3 (2018): 163–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy008>.

⁸ Christopher Lebron, “I’m Fine How I Am”, *Boston Review*, 25 September 2015, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/chris-lebron-response-randall-kennedy-respectability-politics/>.

⁹ Christopher Lebron, “I’m Fine How I Am”, *Boston Review*, 25 September 2015, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/chris-lebron-response-randall-kennedy-respectability-politics/>.

A brief history of the Indian community

Indians, a term used by colonial rulers to encapsulate a myriad of sub-ethnic groups from the South Asian continent, were brought over to Malaya during colonial rule to work in rubber plantations. Here, there was a distinct division of ethnic groups and occupations. English-speaking Sri Lankan Tamils and Malayalees were rewarded with higher positions, such as administrators and clerks, on these estates, whereas South Indian Tamils were brought in as indentured labourers. Separately, Punjabis were involved in the police force. This distinction of ethnic backgrounds with occupation was a strategic move adopted during colonial times whereby 'divide and rule' was not just used to keep the various ethnic groups in Malaya apart, but also the sub-ethnic groups within the Indian community. It wasn't just jobs; it extended to separate housing and quarters for labourers on the rubber estates compared to administrators.

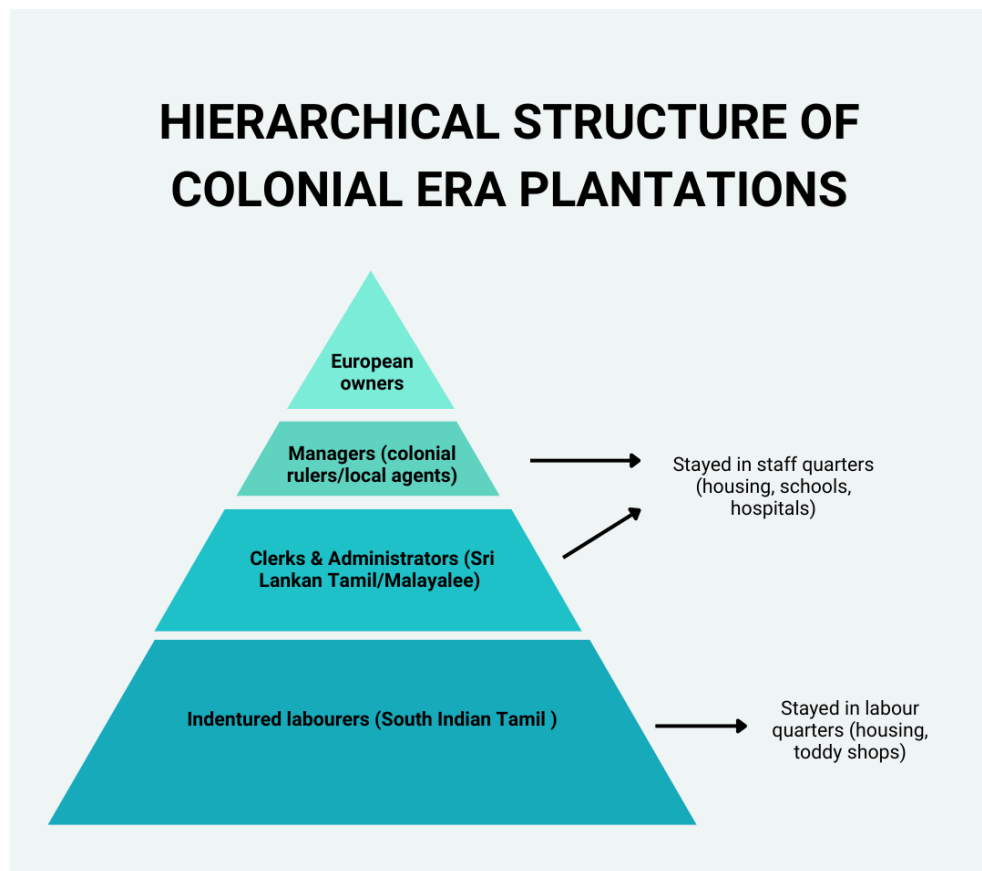


Figure 1: Hierarchical structure of colonial era plantations¹⁰

¹⁰ Parameswari Krishnan, J. Hinduja Jayer Raman, and Rohini Krishnan, "A STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF ESTATE TAMIL SCHOOLS IN MALAYA", *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah*, no. 48 (2020): 173–188.

These actions made it apparent that while their fellow South Asian brothers might look like them, not everyone was afforded the same facilities. In these spaces, “[v]iolent punishment of workers was not uncommon, and caste-based rules were strictly enforced”¹¹ by administrators, creating a hostile backdrop for the community and clear distinctions. This fragmentation prevented community mobilisation and created a dynamic in which caste, class, language, and ethnicity became a bedrock of distinction within the Indian community. One that still has lingering effects today. The reality is that even post-Independence, sub-ethnic groups like the South Indian Tamils who primarily worked in the estates were left disenfranchised. While there are socioeconomic disparities across all sub-ethnic and ethnic groups in Malaysia, the reality is that some communities were left in precarious positions even in Independent Malaysia.

How this manifests, then, is that beyond British rule, in the workforce, Sri Lankan Tamils and Malayalees were well established in political administrations during the height of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) influence under the Barisan Nasional coalition government¹². Families that benefited from colonial advantages had a leg up in securing further opportunities and connections in post-colonial Malaysia. This contrasts with many South Indian Tamils who were confined to estates and had their schooling, lives and temples cemented in the estates¹³. Their livelihoods were dependent on the land, and it created a cyclical structure of keeping South Indian Tamils dependent on the estates whereby they were ‘trapped’ during colonial times.

Jeyathurai (2012) goes into detail about what life was like for those living in the estates, saying, “[e]state teachers had little, if any, training. In addition, students who attended these schools were at a distinct disadvantage because the medium of instruction was typically Tamil. Even when they did complete some kind of course of study in Tamil, they were less desirable job candidates in comparison to their counterparts, who were fluent in English and/or Malay.”¹⁴ Language again plays a pivotal role in creating distinct identities that separate estate labourers from administrators. English became not only an ethnic modifier within the community, but a class one too.

¹¹ Andrew C. Wilford, *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice: History and Recognition in Malaysia's Plantations*, (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 22.

¹² Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, “The Contemporary Indian Political Elite in Malaysia”, in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 237-265.

¹³ Sivagami Arokiam and Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja, “Path Dependent Development of Indian Plantation Labourers in Malaysia: Unfolding the Historical Events in Understanding their Socioeconomic Problems”, *Institutions and Economies* 11, no. 4 (2019): 79–102.

¹⁴ Dashini Jeyathurai, “Labouring Bodies, Labouring Histories: The Malaysian-Indian Estate Girl”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47 no. 3 (2012): 303–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412450703>.

An interview with a former rubber estate worker conducted by Plantation.Life¹⁵ details the ways in which they were kept within the confines of the estate and made to work there despite having opportunities to leave. Their houses were not theirs to own and could be taken away the minute they stepped away from working on the estate, also displacing their families. Aside from housing dependency and potential displacement, alcohol, specifically toddy, which is made by fermenting coconut sap, was easily available on plantations. This was weaponised to maintain labourers' subservience. Carl Belle's (2015) work details the realities of toddy shops and how they were used to keep workers disenfranchised and financially, emotionally, and biologically dependent on plantation work. Belle writes, "toddy shops were a cheap and convenient means of maintaining social control over the labour force and that the government, which levied a forty per cent tax on all toddy sales".¹⁶ Toddy remained in close proximity to labourers and brought in money for the estate management. The money these labourers received from their wages was then pumped back into the very estates where toddy was sold. It was a cycle of dependence and disenfranchisement.

When the estates were divided and cleared to make way for the industrialisation and development of Malaysia, many Indians were displaced, creating a population of urban poor who could not adapt to the demands of job markets here and left without ample support¹⁷. Political parties like MIC and their leader at the time, Tun Sambathan, failed to "advance or defend the economic position of the Indian community"¹⁸. Given the advantages some communities and sub-ethnic groups had during colonial rule and their spillover into independence, they were able to advance themselves socioeconomically. Although it should be acknowledged that there is still a group reeling from these effects, having been left behind in Malaysia's development¹⁹.

¹⁵ Plantation Life (@plantation.life), "The workers in the plantation were kept in such condition that they won't dream beyond the estate borders," Instagram [video], 19 July 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMSVbsITCgR/>

¹⁶ Carl Vadivella Belle, *Tragic Orphans: Indians in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), 124.

¹⁷ Revathi Durai, "Ever Wondered on the Fate of Indian Rubber Estate Workers From Putrajaya?," *Varnam Malaysia*, 3 December 2020, <https://varnam.my/35098/ever-wondered-on-the-fate-of-indian-rubber-estate-workers-from-putrajaya/>.

¹⁸ Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, "The Contemporary Indian Political Elite in Malaysia", in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 238.

¹⁹ Anantha Raman Govindasamy, "Indians and Rural Displacement: Exclusion from Region Building in Malaysia", *Asian Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 1, (2010), 90-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185371003669387>.

These factors created an underclass within the Indian community, one that has been disenfranchised and unable to come up in society due to the institutional barriers and an immense lack of support for them, be it through the system itself, their communities or family life. Thus, “undesirable social consequences emerged, such as an increase in crime rates and gangsterism”,²⁰ which has inadvertently led to an unfair assessment of the community as a whole. The subjugation of Indians as gangsters or criminals is then broadly applied to the whole community, creating tensions even within. As one interviewee expressed their frustrations about negative stereotypes surrounding the community, blaming the community for their own image:

“Who are the ones who make that though? We are the ones, right? Correct or not? We are the ones. So we cannot blame other races, but other races must educate themselves not to be racist... they [Indians] don't think about it, they don't care. If they have that sense of belonging, for example, I'm Indian, I need to show off in a proud way.”

While these external factors created tensions and separation within the community during colonial and post-colonial times, these divides have persisted. Speaking to youths who come from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, they too have identified the divide within the Indian community which desperately needs to be repaired. Beyond class, Indian youths use strategies shaped by their circumstances to combat negative stereotypes. This also involves practising the politics of respectability.

²⁰ Sharon Wilson, Thanaseelan Rajasakran, Santhidran Sinnappan, and 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): 362–76. <https://doi.org/10.33102/sainsinsani.vol9no2.673>.

The Politics of Respectability and Resentment: The Malaysian Indian case

While racial structures between the United States and Malaysia are vastly different, the behaviours adopted by the disenfranchised ethnic groups are transferable in both cases. Colonial legacies have fragmented the community, creating clear distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. Regardless of whether individuals choose to label themselves as acting in accordance with it, the reality is that for some Indian youths, their childhood has consisted of this exemplary attitude of what it means to be Indian. Looking deeper, of course, respectability politics operates through sub-ethnic groups, class, and colourism, which are so entrenched in the community.

Respectability politics allows for clear lines to be demarcated. Within the context of the Indian community, this looks like the palatable, ideal ethnic Indian versus the problematic, troublemaking Indian gangster. It relies on Indian elites to uphold these different versions of what it means to be Indian in order for the distinction to even exist. It is also the belief that by following the example of elites, those who are deemed 'unrespectable' or, in the case of Indians, 'karat' can now reimagine their narratives. While this is ideal, it does not account for the social and structural barriers limiting working-class Indians. It is a never-ending cycle which further alienates segments of the community and denies Malaysian Indians the opportunity to find common ground.

This is supplemented by the politics of resentment, which further defines the 'us' versus 'them' dynamics that persist within the community. Economic and social problems plaguing the community are essentially redirected from government policy failures and social inaction towards communities and citizens. Class contempt becomes pronounced towards those who are unable to succeed. Anger is then redirected towards individuals within the community, and the inability to succeed becomes centred on the individual. Again, existing distinctions are weaponised, and fragmentation deepens.

The examples of negative perceptions surrounding the Indian community are such: the alcoholic, the gangster, the criminal, 'karat'. These are some of the harmful narratives associated with the Indian community. When a community is so deeply stigmatised, it is hard to see the person beyond the labels tied to them. A racialised lens becomes the default mode in which Malaysians operate, and assumptions are made based on ethnicity, skin tone, and language. The Indian community also adopts this inward prejudicial lens towards each other. An interviewee who grew up in a middle-class, English speaking household, detailed that in their interactions in school with other ethnic groups, they would position themselves to create a distinction of what it means to be Indian:

"... I would always try to position myself as someone who was not like those Tamil school students... And the reason is because, again, it's not excusable, but I was a kid. I don't think people should be internally racist, but I think the thing is, when everybody around you- when it comes to, let's say Indians, their starting point of perception is negative. And so you realise that at a young age."

Youths learn this alienation from external environments through social settings and in school from both their peers and adults. From such a young age, this perception is that Tamil school students are associated with a lower socioeconomic class, rooted in estate life. There is the underlying resentment here too of the estate Indian, whose very existence is a reminder of colonial struggles and the lack of support for this community.

While respectability politics argues that much of our overcorrecting behaviour is to increase the chances of social mobility, the reality is that some Indians inadvertently adopt this mindset to distance themselves from the negative connotations. There is shame intertwined with resentment in how Indians view one another, in order to seem more willing to assimilate and denounce parts of their identity. Class and social differences within the Indian community add another dimension. Respectability politics can only operate through systemic class distinctions within an already fragmented community. What should morph into community anger takes the shape of class resentment of those who are unable to make a name for themselves and 'tarnish' the reputation of the few who have assimilated with those among the upper echelons.

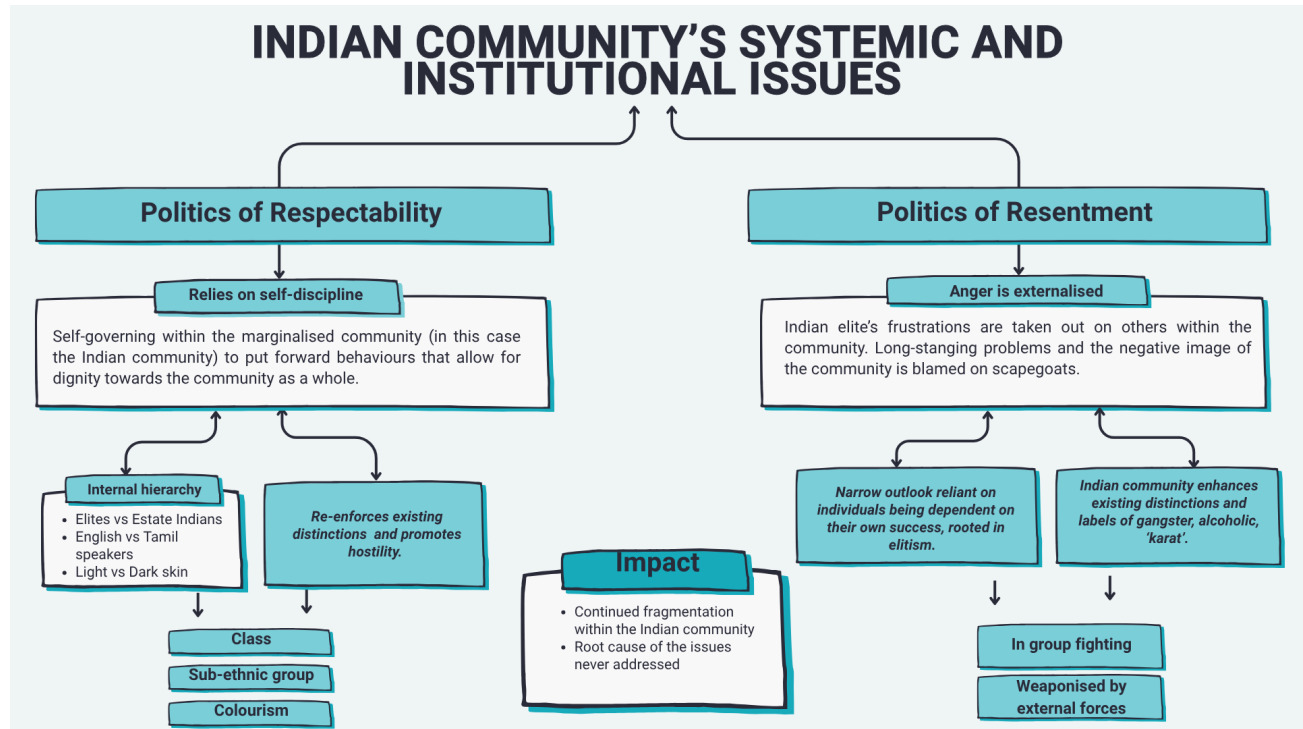


Figure 2: The Indian Community's Systemic and Institutional Issues

During our fieldwork, someone pointed out that all the Indians they know are well-to-do. As history shows, some have also faced enormous structural hurdles. This narrative from someone outside the community that all Indians are well-to-do is an example meant to undercut those of a lower socioeconomic class or those deemed 'not respectable' as incapable of self-correcting or pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. It shifts the blame from institutions and policies that hinder the community onto the individual.

The difficulties in organising around class are in part due to the economic and mindset shift in Malaysia from labourers and workers to more service sector-oriented.²¹ Identities are formed differently, pushing a more individual mentality within the community. There are structural hindrances that hold the community back, but by focusing on the individual instead of the wider community, it allows for Indian elites to operate in circles which exclude Indians of other social classes. Viewing society through such a racialised lens removes acknowledgement of class being the core issue which affects Malaysians across the board. With the Indian community, sub-ethnic groups and socioeconomic class are often intertwined and thought of as a collective.

²¹Audi Ali and Amita Sevellaraja, "Why Is It Difficult to Organise Around Class in Malaysia?," *New Naratif*, 19 August 2021, <https://newnaratif.com/why-is-it-difficult-to-organise-around-class-in-malaysia/>.

During discussions with Indian youths, they acknowledged this individual mentality, which is so entrenched in the community, an every-man-for-himself mentality in part due to the limited opportunities available to them. While class can be a barrier to this, the individual mentality is a survival mechanism for others, one that has taken root from a young age through the quota system for example:

“There’s 50 of you gunning for one spot. Why would I want the 49 of you to get it when I can get it?”

A Tamil person can either be Sri Lankan Tamil or South Indian Tamil. As mapped out previously, understanding the community's historical context reveals an immense divide in how well-off the communities were post-independence. Then, there is the perception of what it means to be Indian. Much of this is tied to the estate labourer, who was of South Indian Tamil origin and represented negatively.

While many have moved beyond the estates, there is no consideration for how this portion of the community has been left behind or treated. This has created an urban poor population of Indians who have been displaced and forgotten²². Rather than acknowledge the institutional issues that have created a class of Indians who are left behind, the Indian community has inadvertently alienated people within their community through adopting the politics of respectability and resentment of looking down on them. Through acting in a way that distinguishes themselves from the other, which in question here is the disenfranchised, Tamil-speaking Indian. This deep-rooted fragmentation still lingers on through how we view one another.

²² Minderjeet Kaur, “Santiago: Indians No Longer in Estates but Form Part of Urban Poor,” *Free Malaysia Today*, 3 December 2017, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/12/04/santiago-indians-no-longer-in-estates-but-form-part-of-urban-poor>.

The language divide and markers of class

Speaking to youths and the wider Indian community, it is common to associate success with Sri Lankan Tamils and Malayalees. It would be wrong to generalise that entire sub-ethnic groups have achieved success. However, for most, colonial-era advantages meant their families were better off. This was through access to education, better housing and opportunities in the estates. This also meant they spoke, read, and wrote in English, which was rewarded during colonial times and has been passed down through generations, resulting in the erosion of their mother tongue for some youths.

The economic value of the language slowly began to dissipate over the generations, in part because English took precedence over Tamil. There has been a shift of those who used to speak English as a second language to it now becoming their mother tongue, which is being carried across the generations²³. Along with that is also the perception and value of English. Speaking to those on the ground, there is a sentiment among some within the Indian community even now that speaking English and not being able to speak Tamil is seen as a marker of being 'educated'. It is a colonial relic that continues to haunt the community, creating a warped view of how we see ourselves.

What this creates then is a distinction through language of being of a higher social class and 'less Indian'. Youths described how some made conscious choices to distance themselves from being seen as too Indian, similar to the example above. For instance, one youth mentioned how behaving in a respectable manner can help repatriate the Indian name and community. Youths are not doing this maliciously; rather, it becomes part of the internal community strategy to gain respect for Indians whereby they enforce the politics of respectability in their lives. It consists of subtle ways to create this separation and self-othering of Indians.

²³ Kavitha Sathiah, Veeramohan Veeraputhran, and Manimangai Mani. "Language Choice among Malaysian-Indians in Speech Repertoire of Tamil and English Language," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 15, no. 2 (2025): 146-159, <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i2/24588>.

A version that is respectable and positive, and so far removed from the negative stereotypes. When asked about these perspectives surrounding the community, one youth who comes from a middle-class background mentioned:

“Because I think that’s why you’re trying to prove a point, right? You are not this problematic group. Even though we make these jokes between us Indians as well, if it’s outside of our own people we become very defensive when we hear these kinds of things, so that’s why when you want to put your identity forward, you put your race first. It’s kind of like trying to get brownie points for the Indians, right?”

It is not just about repairing the community's image by trying to make Indians seem palatable. It is undoing the ‘damage’ to how the Indian community is viewed due to the fault of others within the community. As the interviewee points out, “you’re trying to prove a point”, which in this case is to the wider Malaysian society that Indians can assimilate, and we are not all gangsters and criminals. While there is longing for more nuance in how the community is perceived, there is also a deep need to attach to an identity label that they can feel secure in.

The Indian community is already so precariously fragmented. For some youths, the next option is to align with a palatable view of Indians so they can find an in-group around being Malaysian. These youths need to belong, but it comes at others' expense. It is detrimental to the well-being of those on the receiving end of this resentment. It creates a distinction and further fragmentation in the community.

Through self-othering and minimising their Indian ethnic identities to appear more docile and less like a ‘gangster’ or ‘alcoholic’, it does not actually address the pertinent issues which remain within the Indian community. Respectability politics itself is a tireless, endless effort. It constantly tries to uphold a positive, clean image of the self because it mirrors the community as a whole. Indian youths who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to gravitate towards this mentality. It requires giving up parts of their identity, ostracising segments of the community to help with reframing the Indian community’s identity as a whole, in order to be accepted by other ethnic groups.

In social and institutional settings, this is the narrative that is covertly pushed to youths whereby their ethnicity is used to construct a negative identity of the entire community, once again solidifying the act of one individual and making generalisations across the board:

“... in my secondary school, there's one, two teachers a few times like, 'mana-mana pergi India suka cakap la' she'll say this. And that moment, it's like really in front of other races, other ethnic students. I really feel embarrassed, you know.”

Having those in roles supporting the institution and state who uphold these values creates a chasm within these youths. Some cope with this through overcorrecting their behaviours to change the narrative of what it means to be Indian. This is an enormous weight to place on the shoulders of young people, who decide how to present themselves to wider Malaysian society so they too will not be ostracised or treated differently by their peers. It reinforces the stereotypes of Indians behaving a certain way, rarely seen in a positive light and entrenched in disdain. These feelings of shame and resentment of the self are brought about when they see how others react to distinguishing markers of being Indian, as this one youth describes:

“Even I'm ashamed to bring my mother to my school because my mother used to put [a] big pottu. They used to tease me, like keling, keling, because of the pottu. So always, when [there is a] PIBG [Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru] meeting, I ask my mother to stay home, don't come, because they will tease me.”

The distinction between us versus them of what it means to be Indian also takes on another dimension - skin colour. Colourism is something that affects Indians not just as an external factor, but also plays a part in the fragmentation of the Indian community. There are common themes of those who are darker-skinned receiving unwarranted remarks or being treated differently. This is not uncommon, and those involved in the discussion acknowledged the added challenges of being a dark-skinned Indian in Malaysia.

The prejudices are twofold, and it is almost as if having darker skin cements these assumptions about being gangsters or dangerous. One interviewee described their experience being a darker-skinned Chindian as such:

"I think Indians would know this, that people like to call us Apunene. Since kindergarten, I have heard those types of slurs. Then when I reached Standard 1, that's where things get to the next level where everyone is Chinese and you're the only one excluded, even though you can speak and write and all, of course there is that... How do I describe it? The black sheep out of all the white sheep. So growing up, I can say I got bullied for my skin colour a lot."

This perception of how Indians are treated for their skin colour is apparent in lighter-skinned Indians too, who receive the opposite treatment and are often thought of as anything but Indian. Skin colour becomes a determinant for how they are treated, as this other Chindian interviewee points out, also never having experienced racism or discrimination in their lives:

"People will usually automatically, first thing they will assume is they won't assume I'm Chindian. The first thing they will assume is either Serani or Malay. Serani or Malay, because if I'm speaking English, then everything oh Serani. But if I'm speaking Malay, then they'll think I'm Malay. Then only later on they'll think, oh, Chindian. Then it but usually it's the first impression if a stranger sees me is usually one of these - Eurasian or Malay. So maybe that also influences how they treat me."

The distinction in how these two Chindian youths were treated is evident. As the second excerpt shows, being fair-skinned gives them currency to exist without being discriminated against. It allows them to avoid being seen as a threat or made to feel different. It is also the idea that being light-skinned, regardless of being mixed race, is seen as a positive and associated with being 'safe' or not dangerous.

Speaking to Indian youths who employed the politics of respectability, they spoke of their actions to separate them from other Indians or “Tamil school students” as the example above. So many of these harmful narratives surrounding Indians are associated with skin colour as well. Dark-skinned Indians are called “botol kicap” by their peers, as described by one interviewee's personal experience in their neighbourhood. The stigma of negative stereotypes and being dark-skinned plagues them and is an additional burden that Indians need to navigate through in order to appear more palatable and civilised.

There is a false bubble of protection that is offered through being lighter-skinned, which is reinforced by the Indian community itself. Again, these prejudices and beliefs associate being darker-skinned with being problematic. One youth who grew up in an upper-class household, described how even within the Indian community, terminology to create a distinction among Indians through association of skin colour is also used:

“But I think just from a colourism perspective, so my mom is quite fair, my dad is quite dark. I'm closer in shade to my father. So I'd get certain family members when I was younger, they would... sometimes call me Karat and stuff like that... And within our own community, I found a lot of the fairer people would call a lot of the darker people Karat.”

This is an example that reiterates the fragmentation that exists within the Indian community and efforts to distinguish themselves, which feed into the negative stereotypes that essentially affect the community as a whole. The privilege of class can never fully insulate Indians here, and they will forever be at war trying to contend with the varying ways to be respectable. Something as unchanging as skin colour becomes the factor that undercuts Indians yet is simultaneously reinforced by the community. Fair skin is associated with elitism, palatability, and non-threateningness. Darker-skinned Indians are relegated to being seen as gangsters, ‘karat’ or essentially estate Indians who are so deeply disadvantaged and forgotten, yet are ridiculed and made an example of by their own community and wider Malaysian society of what to avoid.

These Indians exist in a paradox whereby, in an effort to subvert any kind of stereotypes, they are reinforcing them. There is resentment surrounding the existing image of the Indian community and the need to behave in a respectable manner to change that. The example above describes the lived experience of an Indian youth who comes from an affluent class background, yet suffers at the very hands of elite Indians who pride themselves on being seen as respectable.

Skin colour becomes a site of contention and can be a way to reimagine and redefine what it means to be Indian by moving away from these narratives. Instead, respectability politics demands conformity and self-correction. This is reinforced by the colonial imagination of painting darker-skinned Indians as less than or inferior to the elite, fair-skinned Indian, and is rooted in the problem of practising respectability politics and fragmentation within the Indian community as a whole.

Respectability politics can be a weapon for challenging stereotypes, but the ways in which these strategies are deployed, which are rooted in resentment of the self, have the opposite effect in the case of the Indian community. Within the Indian community, there are factors of class, sub-ethnic group and colourism which are not grounds to unite. It shames parts of the community to bolster the other. In doing so, the elite Indian is now well-assimilated and operates with a false clear conscience that they have become accepted and supposedly exist in a country free of stereotypes.

Adopting behaviours relating to respectability politics merely provides an illusion and leaves the reality of the Indian community unchecked. Class barriers are so deeply entrenched, but moving away from this and the individual mentality that the Indian community has adopted for far too long needs to change. If we continue down this path, the Indian community will remain fragmented. The false self-soothing narratives of elites who adopt respectability politics to shelter themselves from the harm surrounding the community are not sustainable. Rather, it is akin to placing a Band-Aid over a bullet wound and hoping for the bleeding within the Indian community to stop. 

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