

C A G E O F F R E E D O M

Tamil Identity and the Ethnic
Fetish in Malaysia

Andrew C. Willford

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To Vasantha

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Abbreviations

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)
AMCJA	All Malayan Council of Joint Action
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
CIAM	Central Indian Association of Malaya
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
GNP	gross national product
IIL	Indian Independence League
IMP	Independence of Malaya Party
INA	Indian National Army
IPF	Indian Progressive Front
ISA	Internal Security Act
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MPAJA	Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLFCS	National Land Finance Cooperative Society
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party)
PMFTU	Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party)
PSM	Parti Socialist Malaysia (Malaysian Socialist Party)

RKM	Ramakrishna Mission
RTM	Radio Television Malaysia
TFA	Temple of Fine Arts
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

Acknowledgments

This journey began with a miscue. I traveled to Malaysia to begin a Fulbright He Fellowship in the summer of 1992. After finding an academic adviser at the University of Malaya and completing the Fulbright orientation program, I thought I was about to embark on a productive year of dissertation research. But it was not to be. I was informed that my project, being on a “religious revival,” was “sensitive.” Much to my disappointment, my research visa was not approved. Though I appealed, my dissertation research was redirected to India, at least temporarily.

After six months of fieldwork and language training with a private tutor in Bangalore, I returned to the United States and decided to pursue more training in Tamil at the University of California at Berkeley. After spending over a year there, and seriously contemplating writing a dissertation combining my work in Bangalore with some modest fieldwork I had begun in the Bay Area on Hindu temples and ashrams and more generally among South Asian immigrants, I finally heard in the spring of 1994 that my appeal for a research visa in Malaysia was being reconsidered. With renewed hope, I applied for funding, and on being awarded a small grant embarked on what I thought would be six months of fieldwork in Malaysia. While there, I found out that another grant had been awarded, thus allowing me to conduct fieldwork for about eighteen months. When the funding was exhausted, I took a job at a private college in Kuala Lumpur, supporting myself for another year-plus of fieldwork, allowing me thirty months of uninterrupted work. Short follow-up trips in 1997 and 2001 supplemented this. What had started off as frustrated bad fortune had in the end been a serendipitous journey that not only made me more determined to work in Malaysia but also enriched that experience through the comparative lens of Bangalore, travels in Tamil Nadu, and work in the

Bay Area. As it turned out, I was now better prepared to embark on a study of Tamil and Hindu revivalism in Malaysia.

The dissertation, naturally, ended up focusing on Malaysia. But there was a lengthy comparative section on the politics of Hindu and Tamil identity in Bangalore. For this book, I present a somewhat streamlined ethnography drawn from the Malaysian material.

Throughout this long and winding road, I had the unflagging support of my doctoral committee at the University of California at San Diego. Suzanne Brenner and Freddy Bailey were outstanding and dedicated teachers, not to mention good friends. Without their tireless and meticulous guidance, I would have endlessly stumbled. The rest of my committee, Christena Turner, Richard Madsen, and Tanya Luhrmann, were also extremely helpful and encouraging. Michael Meeker, too, always knew just what to say to get me thinking productively and in new directions. I also learned much from Ted Schwartz, Mel Spiro, John Borneman, Joel Robbins, Jim Holston, and Bob Levy. My colleagues Joe Masco and Joao Vargas were a source of friendship and inspiration at crucial but different stages in graduate school.

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