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CHAPTER NINE

STRATEGIES OF INDIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA: IMAGININGS OF BELONGING TO A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

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> One way for me to gain access to a world beyond the nationalistic and ethnically based Malaysia is by embracing the knowledge-society that the government itself is trying to promote. No country can survive by promoting only one ethnic group. Also, the government has a problem with their policy, because who are the major players on the Asian scene? It is India and China – two countries that Malaysia's minorities come from. So is there any room for traditional and ethnic-minded Malaysians outside Malaysia? The answer is no.

The point of view of the Indian (ethnic Indian) university student, Selvarajan, exemplifies the direction of several ethnic Indian students' social navigation as a push toward becoming part of an imagined global community. In the course of this article, I will explore the experiences of Indian students at a public university in western Malaysia and discuss their chances and strategies of navigating in a globalised world. Through an analysis of the students' conditions of life, social backgrounds, and cultural mechanisms of in- and exclusion, I seek knowledge of factors that contribute to social becoming and participation in a gradually more globalised world. The basis for this article is four months' field work, and the main informants are students from the Indian community, who constitute a part of the smallest of the three main ethnic groups in the country. Additionally, during the field work, I observed and interviewed students of the two other main ethnic groups: the Chinese and the Malays.

The Indian community in Malaysia is subjected to a high level of discrimination in socio-political areas like education, economy, housing and distribution of land. The Indian community is in this sense representative of the effects state dominance can have on a minority, and as such being victims of social exclusion and marginalisation. Nevertheless, as we will see, some members of the Indian community *do* transcend their marginalised position as constituting part of the minority of Indian students at a Malaysian public university. The Indian students see their future chances in

connection to using their academic life style and imagined possibilities in the age of globalisation as a path to become a part of a transnational global community, as opposed to many Malays who have ethnicity and nationality as their main points of identification.

In the first section of the article, I will introduce my methodological approach briefly, whereupon I will discuss the theoretical debate on social imagination. In the second part of the article, I will introduce the reader to the Indian students' socio-political position within Malaysia. The third section of the article will give a short introduction to the connotations of globalisation in the context of this study, after which I will discuss the Indian students' strategy of "globalising" themselves with a focus on one specific aspect of their navigation, namely a strategy of mastering the English language as a path to becoming "a global citizen".

Methodological Approach

The main informants in this research are university students from all three ethnic groups, and the majority of informants are Indians from different Indian sub-ethnic groups. The Indian students are all either Hindu or Christian, and all the Hindu students are according to their own statements from low or "medium-low" castes. All interviewed students are between eighteen and twenty-five years of age.

Apart from extensive observation during the field research, I conducted formal interviews, focus group interviews, and semi-structured interviews. As a field's social structures are seen and understood on a more subtle level than solely through results of quantitative methods, I have in my approach emphasised the unsaid and subtle aspects of social life. Observing informants in as many different ways as possible gives access to understanding local silences, figures of speech and actions. As mentioned, the students were from many different walks of life, castes and sub-ethnic groups, and, to a certain degree, it would be the anthropologist's "violence" to categorise the field and informants into distinct groups. Furthermore, generalisation will never be able to provide a full picture of the subtleties in a field, as Richard Jenkins (2002, 32) says:

> Generalisation involves classifying together aspects of the human world and using the categories generated to make sense of that world. Sociological categorisation, like any other, involves establishing comparative relationships of similarity and difference between observable phenomena specific instances of general categories. Sociological general categories are, however, what Weber called 'ideal types', which do not necessarily correspond to the facts of any particular observable reality.

Nevertheless, to be able to draw any cumulative conclusions, however generalised these may be, I have used the official Malaysian categorisation as Indian, Chinese and Malay to define the students, even though I am aware that they are all individuals with individual belief systems and many different social strategies within each group. Examples of this variety and crossing of boundaries are a young student who is both a devout Muslim and homosexual, and the group of students in one of the campus cafeterias eating a shared meal of Indian, Chinese and Malay food while speaking a melange of several languages with a bit of English mixed into it.

Let us first take a look at the socio-political circumstances of the Indian community in Malaysia.

The Socio-Political Scene in Malaysia

Several factors must be taken into account when understanding the current position of the ethnic Indians in Malaysia: for example, domestic conditions, the educational level of the family, and ability and desire to blend with other ethnic groups. Furthermore, many have internalised a view of themselves as a stigmatised minority without any possibilities of change, which contributes crucially to many Indians' social circumstances.

The population in Malaysia consists of three main ethnic groups of about sixty per cent Malays, thirty per cent Chinese and ten per cent Indians (Malaysia 2011). The Indians and Chinese were largely imported to the region from the beginning of the 19th century by the British as manual labour to work in mining, industry and agriculture (Amrith 2009; Syed 2008).

The government is promoting the country as the 'Land of Harmony', a country where all share the same cultural identity. In many ways, however, it seems to be a land of fractions without significant solidarity across ethnicity and religion. A significant reason for this disharmony is often linked to the *New Economic Policy* (NEP) (Malaysia 2013). NEP is a series of policies, which were introduced in the 1970s in order to promote the weak economic socio-capital of the Malay majority. The overall position of the Indian community weakened when NEP was introduced, which caused changes in all social areas including education, economy and the allocation of land (Arumugam 2008).

A Malay sense of identity is of a later date gaining momentum during a widespread Islamic awakening in the 1970s. Being Malay is a widely contested notion, and the positions range from claims to being a pure "race" to being a humdrum of different interbred ethnicities. A Malay professor at the university explains the latter understanding of the Malays like this:

Most Malays are either indigenous and aborigines in the historical sense or from mixed marriages. Being Malay is a consciousness. Racially there is no Malay race. There is no Malaysian or Malay culture; Malays have even taken Arab culture.

Even though most of the Malay students say it does not carry any meaning for them to belong to a certain ethnic group, several of them stress that the Malays are the most "Malaysian". This fits well with a general view of Malays both by themselves and by Malaysians in general as being the most "Malaysian" in spite of the government's rhetoric, which stresses that all parts of the population are equal Malaysian citizens. This paradox is seen as a genuine problem, especially among the Indians and Chinese:

> We cannot afford to have tongue-in-the-cheek talk in politics. Though we come from different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds, we are all Malaysians. Any attempt to create inequalities and differences among us must be condemned by all and sundry. No single race must be made to feel less Malaysian compared to the others. (Ponmugam 2008: 97)

A further paradox in the attempt to construct a country with one cultural sense of identity is a rhetorical distinction between the ethnic groups. For example, instead of labelling everyone simply as Malaysian, identity cards classify people into ethnic groups. Thus, all Malaysian descendants from the former British India as "Indians" regardless of sub-ethnicity and religion (Malaysia 2001). The open differential treatment according to one's ethnic and socio-political position frustrates many of the Indian students. It also manifests itself in stereotypes and as a widespread distrust between ethnic groups. This stereotyping assigns Indians with a position in the bottom of the unofficial social hierarchy (Kuppusamy 2008).

The positive affirmation of the Malay majority also manifests in the academic life, as an Indian-Malaysian journalist points out: "The government in its quest to fulfil the Malay quota at any cost, is prepared to be rather generous when it comes to passing underperforming Malay students. As a result, deserving non-Malay students are denied entry into local universities. This is an annual affair." (Ponmugam 2008: 88).

In spite of the fact that many universities have been established in the last ten to fifteen years, there is not a single Indian chancellor or dean in any of them, and almost no Indians have been appointed as the head of faculties and administrative units of universities (Ibid., 25). The exact ethnic division

of academic employees is not accessible to the public under Malaysia's *Official Secrets Act*, but one study (Kim 2001, 188) shows that more than 65 per cent of all employees at the universities are Malays, and the assessment is that the tendency to mostly employ Malays is rising.

During the field work I gradually became aware of the politics of difference and how regional, ethnic, and religious differences are being imagined in the construction of the Malaysians' identities. Arjun Appadurai (2000) argues that in former colonised countries – like Malaysia – there often lies a drawback because different ethnic groups neither have a common cultural or national identification, nor do they enjoy equal rights within the nation. The geographic boundaries of these nations are often more or less randomly drawn up, and conflicts because of ethnic identity and differences are therefore often predominant. He raises this criticism of nation-states as he points out the problems, which ethnic differences create. The differences are often created by the nation-state itself because of a preoccupation with dividing the population into categories: "In the preoccupation with the control, classification, and surveillance of its subjects, the nation-state has often created, revitalized, or fractured ethnic identities that were previously fluid or negotiable." (Appadurai 2000, 162).

As we have seen, the great distrust between the ethnic groups is seen in all aspects of life in Malaysia, including among the students at the university. Let us take a closer look at the students' navigation under these circumstances as opposed to the government's agendas.

Globalised Identities and the Ethno-National Nation-state

Strategies for succeeding in the age of globalisation are a main part of the Indian students' social navigation. This view is applicable to a view by a professor at the university, who sees a major distinguishing factor between Malay and non-Malay students as students from non-Malay families being more globally open-minded. As seen in the following remark by the Malay student, Osman, there certainly seems to be a significant difference between the Indian and Malay students, as the latter to a larger degree are oriented toward the nation-state:

> *Malaysia is my home. The government has given me an education so I should use it to serve my country. Many go abroad but I do not want to be part of the brain-drain. Several Indian students, on the contrary, seem to have a clear understanding of their social navigation as linked to a global understanding. They often speak of themselves as individuals without chances to stay in a country, where they are forced to compete on unequal terms with a Malay majority that is given preferential treatment.*

The Malaysian government seems to have an ambivalent attitude to globalisation and the Indian students' embracing of global tendencies. On the one hand, the government wants Malaysia to be a part of globalisation as illustrated by its efforts to create a knowledge economy, and on the other hand, the government seems to have a fear that globalisation will change hitherto traditional conceptions of ethnicity and the nation-state. The Malaysian born professor of education, Fazal Rizvi, sees the Malaysian government as feeling ambivalence toward globalisation in the educational sector because of a fear that the youth will be influenced by western countries and adopt cultural and political ideas that are "alien" to Malaysian society. On the other hand, he says, the students do contribute with knowledge, competence and international contacts, which the government feels the country needs (Rizvi 2000, 213). The transition into a globalised Malaysia may not come easily, because traditional national policies may not be ready to accept new global demands. As Carmen Luke (2001) points out, societies that enhance political, educational and academic differences on grounds of ethnic difference do not go well with a new globalised era. Becoming part of a global community and embracing the possibilities they imagine globalisation providing, is a strategy for almost all the Indian students I have spoken with. To a large degree, they view being part of a global community as their only path to success and personal fulfilment as opposed to staying in a country where they feel marginalised, as we see in Manu's comment:

> *The way forward for Malaysia and Indians in Malaysia is not against globalisation, but rather to embrace it and be a part of it. I love Malaysia – it is where I was born, but I cannot have local Malaysian standards as my only view of seeing things. If I have that, I will surely never transcend the conditions of Indians in this country. Maybe to be a global citizen or something like that or something to do with the globalised society is the way to go.*

Manu has a sense of belonging to Malaysia, but primarily as a kindred place where he was born and where his family lives. In the spirit of Manu, Appadurai (2000) argues that globalisation means that the boundaries between the global and the national and ethnicity are changing. A positive side of this is that new transnational elites constantly have the chance to assert themselves on a transnational arena:

> Although modern ethnicity is in a sense culturalist and intimately linked to the practices of the nation-state, it is also worth noting that an important group of culturalist movements is today

transnational, given that many mobilised national ethnicities, because of international migration, operate beyond the confines of a single nation-state. These transnational culturalist movements are intimately connected with what I refer to as diasporic public spheres. (Appadurai 2000, 147)

Appadurai is of the opinion that the world we live in has become global and transnational in ways no studies of international politics have been able to anticipate. The mechanism in these transnational processes is a changed view of status from the local to the global, where people from all walks of life, cultures, and ethnicities have a chance of making themselves heard. In this way globalisation has created major changes in relation to economy and class structures, because the emergence of cosmopolitan elites challenges existing conceptions of the role of nation-state, cultural mechanisms and hierarchies. Manu and the Indian students have a desire to belong to this global community, and they use their education as a steppingstone to make use of the opportunities offered by globalisation as a way to overcome their current situation in Malaysia, and to become a "global citizen". The term "global citizen" is widely used among the Indian students to express both a belief in globalised opportunities and, as Sheena says, to distance themselves from being "held hostage" by the nation-state as loyal Malaysians. Zygmunt Bauman's theory about a new non-national generation may in this sense be used to understand the Indian students. He argues that well educated individuals among an ethnic minority will always attempt to disengage themselves from factors like ethnicity and nationality. Bauman (2000, 95) sees that an alternative for these individuals is to overcome marginalisation in a national context by becoming full global citizens. In spite of the Indian students' feelings of being stigmatised within the nation-state, education is seen as a social barrier-breaking factor, which not necessarily is aimed at a future outside the territorial and national boundaries of Malaysia. Some of them do not necessarily want to leave Malaysia. Many students say that they would like to stay in Malaysia and work and live in a 'global environment' in Malaysia. According to Jonathan Friedman (1998), the age of globalisation has led to a multitude of cultural political strategies, which point towards a cultural liberation from the nation-state's homogenising power. He argues that the great challenge in the age of globalisation is that it creates both globalised and localised identities. A global citizen, therefore, is not necessarily someone who travels the world, but a person who is able to navigate between local and globalised identifications (Friedman 1998, 6). Indian students, therefore, can be regarded as well-educated and globalised minded actors with a strategy either to be part of the transnational elite or to stay in Malaysia if they wish and not because it is their only possibility.

Social Imaginings and the Global Citizen

If Indian students' desires are fulfilled, they will become part of the global elite. However, theories of global elites in the age of globalisation are criticised as having a rigid and overtly positive view of the people's possibilities to act as agents in the world. Several scholars argue that globalisation will not benefit the weakest and that the world is "flat" only for the well-educated and for those who already have the cultural capital to navigate (Bauman 2000; Friedman 1998; Tsing 2000). They stress that globalisation cannot be viewed as a phenomenon that has positive consequences for everyone; instead, it has different consequences according to one's personal identifications. Globalisation can be viewed as a path to great mobility for the world's actors, but this is only the case for the two social extremes (Musa 2002) – the well-educated and the unskilled workers: "The levelling effect of globalization means that an uneducated American will fare as badly as an illiterate Indonesian, but at the same time, a skilful Indian programmer can compete equally with his American counterpart." (Ibid.,142).

Several Indian students consider the opportunities in the age of globalisation as their main path to social transformation, and they can be viewed as representatives of the above mentioned "levelling effect". Considering that they hail mainly from rural working class families, it is evident why they have a strong drive to distance themselves from the "downtrodden" actors in the era of globalisation.

The Indian students' social imagination is largely connected to their strategy and belief in education as a path to becoming a part of globalisation's opportunities and a "global" citizen. Appadurai (2000) speaks of imagination as a general feature of the human mind. He argues that imaginations of other places and possibilities especially are a feature of the modern globalised individual:

> Ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives. More people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born: this is the wellspring of the increased rates of migration at every level of social, national and global life. (Appadurai 2000, 6)

In Appadurai's conception, the social imaginary has, during the last couple of decades, developed into a social fact, partly because of a gradually more globalised world. The imaginary has become a way of creating a connection between social relations and the rapidly changing world around us. In this sense, the imaginary is an expression of what is considered normal for a new group of people, whom the Indian students represent. Appadurai argues that a new group of transnational and transcultural students and academics has emerged. They often and willingly move around change jobs and acquire a new education, depending on the financial, social, and educational opportunities. This is a group of people for whom imaginings of education and mobility play essential roles:

> This new diaspora represents elites for whom an education plays a pivotal role in their identity formation. As mobile groups, it is they who are able to imagine the nation and its links to the outside world in radically new ways. With formative international experiences, they are able to look at the world as dynamic and multicultural. This is so because they operate within a hybridised space and are equally comfortable in more than one cultural site. Their identity is intercultural with multiple cultural defining points. They typify a new global generation. (Rizvi 2000, 223)

Both Appadurai's (2000) and Rizvi's (ibid.) ideas can be well applied to the Indian students, because their imaginings form the basis for a social negotiation, where exact plans for the future and strategies of social becoming in a globalised world play a pivotal role. The Indian students' dynamic social negotiation may be understood through seeing the world as communities in a continuous motion, where defined patterns of behaviour are constantly being changed and challenged: "The social imaginary (...) allows us to anticipate, position and act in relation to a world that is constantly approaching and engaging us, rather than merely being subject to our command or a solidified surface of enactment." (Vigh 2009, 100).

The Indian students view the Malaysia's official venture into becoming a knowledge economy as a path for themselves to gain social acceptance. They are focussed on attaining university degrees and acquiring academic competences as tools to obtain the abilities and knowledge required by the knowledge economy. As Musa (2002, 235) points out, knowledge-economies focus on knowledge as a capital that is at least as influential as economic capital: "Globalization is driven essentially by knowledge, the new economy is appropriately called the K (for knowledge)-economy. Knowledge is the important ingredient of the new economy, and also its measure. Knowledge has replaced the economists' 'factors of production' – land, labour, and capital – as the chief economic resource."

Similarly, the Indian students see their own knowledge as a way to gain competence to compete on equal terms as members of a globalised society. Of course, the Indian students' globalisation strategy will not necessarily lead to a happy and successful personal life, as Rizvi (2000, 209) points out: "The global movement of people also raises complex issues about identity and authenticity, not only for those who go abroad but also for those who remain behind. Globalization has not eradicated the problems of alienation, displacement, and uncertainty, it has simply redefined them in a context of deterritorialisation."

Nevertheless, the students see globalisation as a path to a better standard of living. One way of attaining their desire to become part of a larger global community is a wish and hard work towards learning fluent English, as I will discuss next.

English as the Global Language

Lingual signals are a major part of the Indian students' strategy and imagining of "becoming globalised". As the Indian student Rani points out, there is a significant connection between social class, caste, and language. She tells me that the lower social classes in rural areas often attend Indian-language mother-tongued schools whereas children from the higher social classes often attend private schools where they are being taught in Malaysian and English. Rani presents herself as belonging to a "medium-low caste". In the first years of her schooling, she went to an Indian language school but changed later to a private school when the family was able to afford it. Her family speaks both English and the Indian language, Telugu, but she says that her generation emphasises English, and that her generation no longer speaks Indian languages like Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu with each other. This hybridity expressed through the language use represents a situation where different aspects of identity manifest in different spheres of life. Another student, Raman, who is from a low caste and of Tamil origin, also agrees that his generation distances themselves from Indian languages in favour of English, which is considered "the global language":

> *There are many dialects and languages and the mother tongue depends on the individual. Those who can accept the common Malaysian language are Malaysians according to the government, but English is the predominant new and most up-to-date language according to ethnic groups [Indians and Chinese]. The formal language is Malaysian, but English is the language I mostly use, especially after I entered university. We can use English everywhere around the globe, even in India and even in urban areas in China.*

Rani and Raman are very conscious about which signals the use of different languages is sending. Though they see English as the global language as opposed to speaking Indian languages, they do not necessarily for that reason view themselves as less "Indian". Also Mahendran is very reflective about his generation's lingual signals. He considers that the status of Malaysia as a former colony is moving along an inescapable path toward globalisation. According to him, this movement is obvious due to the extensive use of English in middle class homes and because of other cultural expressions:

> *It is seen by the much higher sale figures of English language newspapers, and the prevalence of western popular culture. Moreover, many young middle-class Indians do not read Indian books and many no longer know how to write in Indian languages.*

Mahendran connects English with globalisation and being a global citizenship and he is convinced that his generation is more conscious of globalisation than earlier generations. Kim (2001, 201) who has carried out research at universities in Asia, also connects the rapidly advancing use of English with globalisation:

> English is now being reconsidered as the principal medium of academic discourse and it is thus internationalising the university and the academic profession in Malaysia. In addition to the use of English, the common strategies to meet the demand of internationalisation and globalization in these three postcolonial East Asian countries (South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore) are privatisation, corporatisation, and international academic networking, mobility and exchange.

The Indian students have different opinions on whether English should be one of the main languages at universities in Malaysia, but they all agree that the lack of English language skills would have a negative effect on their future career opportunities. As Aram (who is Indian) says:

> *Lingual polarisation in society is definitely going to harm the progress of the country. How are we going to produce students who can speak intelligible English if we forgo the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English? We do not need English medium*

schools as such, but we must have teaching of science and mathematics in English for the betterment of future grades because a decade from now we will be a multilingual society.

Malaysian university students' poor language skills is widely viewed as problematic:
The problem with our public universities is that with Malay being the medium of instruction, students have low English proficiency. There are limited number of books and reference materials in Malay, meaning that the students' intellectual horison is necessarily limited. Their reading list is extremely short, and students rarely venture beyond the few prescribed texts. (Musa 2003: 103)
Rajan, an Indian teacher at the university is of the same opinion that English is the "global" language because it is the primary language in IT, the financial area, and international academia and research. He points out that English is the main language of the two major competitors in Malaysia's geographic proximity – Australia and Singapore, and therefore it is not sensible for Malaysia to cultivate only the Malaysian language.
Not all ethnic Indians, however, are equally enthusiastic about the spread of English, and some have voiced a concern. For example, the Indian-Malaysian journalist Ponmugam (2008) argues that the tendency to give the Tamil language a lower priority means that the ethnic group associated with this language will face a change. He thinks that the Tamils ought to become conscious about this; otherwise, they could lose their self-esteem and identity as Tamils:

> We have debased our lifestyle the same way we have debased our mother tongue. The Tamil that we have among us today is adulterated with English and Sanskrit; and our world view is in a similar state of confusion, for we are unable to categorically draw the line between right and wrong. We as a community seem to have no common stand or policy agreed upon by all and sundry. No doubt we are regressing. Our thoughtlife and our life are in a state of disorder and hence, intellectually and culturally, we are a lost generation. We do not seem to have something of our own. We are busy looking around us at the others: Chinese, Malays and Europeans for inspiration and ideas. (Ponmugam 2008, 39)

Ponmugam sees the decline of the Indians in Malaysia as related to their lack of identification with their language as opposed to the Malays' enthusiasm for their language. Furthermore, he sees the decline in comparison to the other large minority, the Chinese, who identify strongly with Chinese languages – and not least, because Chinese gradually is becoming an increasingly global language

(Benton and Gomez 2003). Chinese student, Joann, stresses that the Chinese are protective of their languages and that Chinese now is and always has been a global language.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed ethnic Indian students' reflections on their position at a public university in Malaysia. I have taken a close look at their narratives and imaginations and seen them as representatives of cultural practices of personal transformation and navigation. The situation for the Indian community is characterised by a high level of social marginalisation in areas like education and economy. This is predominantly because of the Malay-dominated government's resolution to introduce policies that are constructed with the specific aim to enhance the socio-political standing of the Malay majority in the country.

I argue that the Indian students' imaginings are based on a wish to become a part of a larger global community as opposed to the Malay majority who largely seem to have ethnicity and nationality as their main identifications. The Indian students' youth culture is detached from ideas of nationality and ethnicity, and a university education is seen as a major path towards social becoming in a globalised world. Their navigation demonstrates a deliberate intent on appearing "global" in a community where their role as academics could help them to attain their goals. My observations and conversations with the Indian students highlight their experiences and imaginations of their position as university students with a high level of cultural and social capital, and with a future position as "modern" and "global" citizens.

They move towards their goal by becoming actors in a national or global knowledge society by using the skills they have obtained through studies resulting in detraditionalisation as they are largely forsaking Indian traditions and languages. A focus on the use of English as a strategy to embrace globalisation is one particular aspect of this leap away from tradition. Several Indian students voice the opinion that Indian languages are becoming extinct among the young generation gradually because they are considered obsolete and "non-modern". This development is seen as a contrast to the intent of the Malay majority to speak Malay and several Malay students' low proficiency in English. This is, on the one hand, seen by many as a disadvantage both for the Malays and for the public universities in Malaysia. On the other hand, it is seen as a major strength for the Indian students, because English is largely considered to be "the global language", though some ethnic Indian voiced fears of the loss of ethnic pride and identity.

I have compared Indian students who have "global" points of identification to Malay students who mainly have ethnic and national references as points of identification which raises the question whether Malay students will suffer a setback because of their national and ethnic identifications. Or will these Malay identifications become a strength compared to the Indian students who lack ethno-national identifications as a sense of security? One can see the Indian students as the globalisation's winners compared to Malays. But will the Indian students' strategies actually bring them towards their imagined future as part of a larger global society?

However, not all people in Malaysia have means of seeking their fortune through education, and they must remain in stigmatised roles defined by negative stereotypes. Indians, Chinese and Malays who remain on the plantations, in the rural areas and in the urban slums do not have an access to cultural, social or economic capital and still only speak the language of their own ethnic groups – they are poor and isolated without the access to the possibilities in a globalised world and the new universities that are mushrooming in Malaysia. What will happen to these people who will not necessarily feel the positive consequences of globalisation in spite of the governments' strive toward a globalised society?

I have sought to cast light on how institutions and structures influence people's chances, life strategies, and social navigation. This article also contributes to the debate on how socio-political exclusion and nation-states' discourses and categorisation of individuals can be overcome through personal transformation and educational strategies both on a global and national level. Furthermore, this article contributes to demonstrating how members of minorities can be seen as actors who are able to dispel both ethnic and national identifications, in favour of becoming a proactive part of a globalised era.

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