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Published in:
Trauma, Memory and Transformation

Publication date:
2014

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):
Svensson, C. F. (2014). I am more than an ethnicity: Resilience and Experiences of Trauma among Indian University Students in Malaysia. In S. Bong (Ed.), *Trauma, Memory and Transformation: Southeast Asian Experiences* Strategic Information Research Development Centre.

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Svensson, C. F. (2014) I am more than an ethnicity: Resilience and Experiences of Trauma in Malaysia. In Bong, Sharon (ed.) *Trauma, Memory and Transformation: Southeast Asian Experiences.* Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

Chapter 6

'I am more than an ethnicity': Resilience and Experiences of Trauma among Indian University Students

Christian Franklin Svensson

This chapter elaborates on experiences among ethnic Indian university students in light of the social and political position of the Indian ethnic community in Malaysia. Based on a total of four months field research in 2008 and 2010, the discussion investigates why Indian students at a public university consciously attempt to transform their life situation in order to gain personal realisation in the era of globalisation. Indian students as a social group are particularly prone to trauma in their current situation, as individuals lacking a sense of full citizenship. Strategies of transformation based on education take several different forms. I argue that Indian students construct identifications from belonging to communities of practice rather than from religion, ethnicity and nationality, and that these constructions occur because of the necessity of distancing themselves from exclusionary processes.

By examining the students' responses and narratives in overcoming trauma faced by the Indian community, I attempt to contribute to current research by charting individuals' categorisations, values, experiences and expectations of the future, both locally and globally. My aim is to gather insights into the students' experiences and imaginings. And an important aspect of this is to examine social ties and cultural membership in relation to their interaction with their surroundings. The understanding of social mechanisms is constantly changing and, in this sense, field research is important in bringing traumatised individuals' voices into hearing range in recognition of their citizenship. Additionally, a significant area of research in youth studies focuses on youth education for migrational purposes, and on the networks and global cultures that occur in relation to this social mobility (Dolby and Rizvi, 2008).

After a brief note on the ethnographic context in the field work, the first part of this chapter will introduce the sociopolitical context with a discussion of the Indian students' social position in the light of nation-state construction, stereotyping and marginalisation. This provides a basis for understanding their experiences in navigating the social field and their imaginings in being part of a larger globalised community. Their reflections play a significant role in the process of social transformation as a response to trauma, and the latter part of the chapter takes a closer look at these experiences and the students' resilience seen as social navigation and social mobility. Finally, the students' social mobility seen as resilience (Bonanno and Mancini, 2008) will lead to a short discussion of the students as hybrid individuals who are able to consciously navigate a socioeconomic and ethnically grounded base for overcoming trauma.

Context of ethnographic field work

In light of the sensitive topic addressed here, and because of the political climate in Malaysia and the often inflammatory issue of both official and informal discrimination, the university is kept anonymous and the informants' names are referred to by pseudonyms. The choice of preserving the anonymity of the university and confidentiality of the interviewees reflects a strong apprehension among most of the informants when participating in the interviews.

Apart from several informal conversations and casual meetings, the interviews were formal semi-structured and focus group interviews: 15 with Indian students, 10 with Malays, eight with Chinese students, and two with lecturers at the university. Additionally I conducted several interviews with Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds who were not students. The recruiting of interviewees was not only based on ethnic criteria but also a wide educational spectrum. The first couple of interviewees were recruited through the network of one of the professors at the university whom I first interviewed. Through snowballing these interviewees recommended other students, who might be interested in participating in the study. Apart from this approach, I spent a lot of time observing students on campus, which often led to an approach where I would introduce myself and ask students if they would care to take part in an interview. In other cases this would lead to engaging in an informal conversation.

In order to elaborate on the sociopolitical situation of the Indian community, I find it

fruitful to a certain degree to draw parallels with the narratives of Malay students and, to a lesser extent, Chinese students. Though my focus is on Indian students, it is not my intention to justify one social strategy over another because we must see each expression of navigation in its own right and context. Similarly, it is not my intention to draw generalisations on account of whole communities based on ethnic background. As this discussion concentrates on Malaysians from different ethnic groups, I use the official national terms of Chinese, Indian and Malay. Thus when using these terms, in all instances, I am referring to nationalised Malaysians.

Using the concept of trauma necessitates a definition or at least a narrowing down of how the concept is understood. Definitions of trauma are often related to acute events. However, in this context the Indian community has been subjected to trauma in a larger sociohistorical sense which is why I draw on Cathy Caruth (1995: 4–5) who defines trauma as 'a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events'. The circumstances of the students featured in this research are social constructions which have been formed by both historical events and ongoing political agendas, and I argue that these circumstances may be seen as trauma. As Caruth stresses: 'The traumatised carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptoms of a history, that they cannot entirely possess' (*Ibid.*). In applying this to the subject of my study, I see the students as individuals who are subjected to a set of sociohistorical circumstances over which they have had no influence. In spite of becoming mere symptoms of a history they have, instead, a large desire to overcome these traumatic events.

Construction and contesting of the Nation State

In order to give a background for understanding the connection between trauma and the students' navigation, I begin by discussing the sociopolitical climate and background of Malaysia. First, let us take a look at the sociopolitical position of the Indian community in order to form a basis for understanding the mechanisms the students wish to distance themselves from and how they regard and manage the relationship to the Malay majority and the construction of the nation state.

Malaysia consists of a very diverse population of about 67 per cent Bumiputeras (literally, 'sons of the soil' which primarily includes Malays and indigenous peoples), 25 per cent Chinese and 7 per cent Indians (Malaysia, 2011: 5). All Malays are by

definition Muslims; most Indians are Hindu and to a lesser degree Muslim or Christian; the majority of the Chinese follow Confucianism, Taoism or Buddhism, and to a lesser degree Christianity. Islam is Malaysia's state religion though the Federal Constitution states that there is freedom of worship. Islamic *shari'ah* law, which partially applies to Malaysian Muslims, states that it is illegal for any Muslims to convert to other religions. The term Malay is in the Constitution is described as any person who is born and resides in Malaysia, speaks the Malay language, is a Muslim and follows Malay traditions. Malay is therefore a politically and religiously defined construction and is often used interchangeably with Bumiputeras, who also include indigenous groups, though many such indigenous people are Christians.

The majority of Indian families have been in Malaysia for at least five generations, since they were brought by the colonial administration from British India to work primarily in plantation agriculture (Amrith, 2009; Syed, 2008; Tate, 2008). The state defines all descendants from the former British India as 'Indian' (Malaysia, 2011), but the complex composition of the Indian community makes it difficult to fit them into the official category because of factors like linguistic and ethnic diversity, religion, caste, geographic origin and the number of generations each family has been in the country. Naturally, in addition to this, there are innumerable grey zones and marriages across ethnicity and religion.

According to Fazal Rizvi (2000: 213), the Malaysian government is ambivalent towards globalisation in the educational area because they fear that young people will be influenced by Western values and will thus adopt cultural and political ideas that are 'foreign' to Malaysian values and the nation state. On the other hand, the government wants Malaysia to be part of globalisation processes, for example, for students to contribute knowledge, skills and international contacts which the government sees as necessary for the country's development. In this line of discussion, Carmen Luke (2001) argues that societies that maintain political, educational and academic differences on the basis of racial differences do not blend well with the logic of the globalised age. We can consider the words of Arjun Appadurai (1996: 19) and see the Malaysian government's strategies for constructing an ethnonational Malaysia as contested: 'I have come to be convinced that the nation-state, as a complex modern form, is on its last legs. Nation-states, as units in a complex interactive system, are not very likely to be the long-term arbiters of the

relationship between globality and modernity'. New nations and sociocultural places can be seen as replacing nation states as we know them (Rizvi, 2000). The Indian students' imagination of belonging to global communities, in either a local or a global context, may be seen as examples of this. In other words, they are becoming less isolated and merely local. In the next section, we examine more closely these paradoxes between the global and the local, and how these place the students within an ethnic-based sociopolitical situation in a nation-state context.

Ethnonational Paradoxes

There is a widespread lack of confidence in the government's agendas among the students from different ethnic groups. Indians often feel a sense of not being included as equal citizens because Malays often are seen as the most 'Malaysian'. This notion has to a certain extent been internalised among the students, as Aisha, who is Malay, says: 'Malays feel more attached with the country and the real Malaysians are the Malays'. This notion is prevalent both because of a tendency that Malay values often are regarded as equivalent to 'Malaysian' values and because many Malays seem to have points of identification that closely mesh between nation, religion and ethnicity. The Malay student Mari clearly exemplifies this widespread point of view: 'Actually, I think Malays are most Malaysian. The Malays were here first and it is also seen in the name of the country – Malay and Malaysia'. Mari's comment reflects an interpretation of the relationship to the nation state which is defined along clearly demarcated ethnonational lines.

The construction of a Malaysian nation state for all citizens regardless of ethnic background is not an easy project. This is clearly exemplified among the Indian students at the university as there are very few examples of a sense of nationality, in spite of the government's many efforts to change attitudes. As Mahendran, who is Indian, says: 'When Malaysians are abroad they are Malaysians, and when they are at home they are ethnic groups'. As such, the Indian students have other identifications other than purely along ethnic or national lines. An example of this is how the Indian students seldom describe themselves solely as Malaysian or Indian but rather identify with an imagined global and 'modern' community or with other students regardless of ethnic background. Here we can use Thomas Hylland Eriksen's (2002) fluid understanding of identity which opens up the possibility of identifications across

ethnic differences. He adds that the nation state does not always succeed in placing all citizens under one national identity – not even the ethnic majority.

A further reflection on the Indian students' sense of trauma is that they have a clear notion of how the Indian community and other ethnic categories in Malaysia have been represented through time. In spite of this, they seem to have a notion of being able to construct their own future and how they are able to influence dynamics of mobility and identity. In the words of Stuart Hall (1996: 4) this is presented as 'what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves'. Satesh is a good example of how the students will often first mention their official ethnic group and then immediately mention and signal that they would rather discuss issues of social mobility like life on campus and academic goals:

> Well, I am Indian, which means I officially am a certain kind of person as long as I stay in Malaysia. This is very sad for me. I work hard because I am more than an ethnicity. I work hard to show that others also can be more than an ethnic group. I work hard to be what I want to be. Not what Malaysia wants me to be.

I later spoke to Satesh again and read aloud to him what he had said. At the second interview he elaborated on his thoughts: 'Why should I be a second-rate person? I am sick and tired of being a second-rate person. It makes me sad, but mostly I get very sad and especially mad!'

Schisms between different governments' intentions and actual conditions are often seen in multicultural societies. One solution to overcome this dilemma in the Malaysian context, as Jayanath Appudurai and David Dass point out, is that the government ought to begin accepting Indian problems as Malaysian problems in the same way as Malay problems are seen as national ones. They stress that the country no longer can afford to stereotype social problems as unique to one ethnic group: 'In truth, the apparent "Indian" problems are indeed Malaysian problems. Problems of the underclass whatever their ethnicity are Malaysian problems' (Appudurai and Dass, 2008: 27). The next section will take a closer look at these interpersonal ethnic difficulties in constructing a nation state for all citizens.

'I have Malay friends, but they are only face-to-face friends'

At many levels of social and political life, the Malaysian students seem to be divided. They practise their religions at different places and religious eating habits often make

it difficult ethnic groups to sit at the same table. When one sees these conditions delimiting cross-ethnic interaction, it does not seem surprising that the students at the university do not often meet with each other across ethnic boundaries. To further elaborate on this dilemma in the Malaysian society, several Chinese students feel the same way as the Indians about their exclusion within the Malaysian society, here expressed through the words of a Chinese student, Ang:

> I do not think about being Chinese too much, but everyone knows that Chinese are more innovative and hardworking than Malays, so I am glad to be Chinese. It is a mental thing – blood, family and heritage. I will marry anyone but Chinese feel threatened because the Malay population is rapidly growing so they fight to stay Chinese.

I was often witness to the many stereotypes ethnic groups have about each other: Indians are criminals, poor, alcoholics and unreliable; Malays are self-asserting, snobbish, lazy and do not have a common cultural heritage; the Chinese are rich, immoral and have a devious way of doing business. On the other hand, I also often witnessed the positive stereotypes that the ethnic groups have of themselves: Indians are open-minded and family oriented; Malays are the true Malaysians, ambitious and religious; Chinese are modern, rich and intelligent. These expressions, of course, are clearly discriminating and narrow-minded but nevertheless they serve to show the tongue-in-cheek stereotypes, which I was very surprised often to encounter among both uneducated as well as well-educated people of any ethnic background. This mutual ethnic intolerance is further reflected in Carmen Luke's fieldwork at different universities. She shows that the social and political environment both in and outside universities since the 1950s and 1960s has become increasingly intolerant. Luke argues that a major reason for the shift is that the young generation of Malay university students have never lived with cultural and ethnic differences and thus are less tolerant than earlier generations (Luke, 2001: 201). Another reason may very well be sociohistoric tendencies to create a nation state along ethnic and religious lines. As Farish Noor (2004: 3) points out: 'Malaysia's history has become a highly contested discursive terrain where the struggle to define Malay history and Malayness itself is fought'.

Experiences of Trauma, Exclusion and Hierarchy

Malaysia's past as a British colony plays an obvious role in what the Indian community currently looks like, and the historical lack of quality education is an important part in the major social problems that the Indian community today faces. Most poor Indian children on the estates in the rural areas during colonisation attended vernacular schools. Therefore they had no access to proper schooling and secondary education (Tate 2008: 162).

Because the Malays were economically and politically falling behind, especially compared to the Chinese, the government in the 1970s introduced quota systems and the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Malaysia, 2013). This policy's aim is to enhance the Malay position in financial, political and educational areas and thus to remove social imbalances between the ethnic communities. Being included in the NEP has many advantages, like receiving bank and government loans with favourable terms and being accepted at educational institutions. An ethnically-based quota system is widely seen as the primary reason why many Indian young people are excluded from tertiary education: 'The Indians get very dissatisfied because many of them feel they have been marginalised, and that their community lags behind in the economy as well in education, and their share equity is very low compared to their population' (Syed, 2008: 90). Dr Rajan, a [anonymised] lecturer at the university, describes the consequences of the quota system and the differential treatment of the less well-off young Chinese and Indians as follows:

> Many non-Malay grade A students are denied their choice of university education. So they feel excluded and obliged to look for greener pastures. Most at university are Malays because of the quota. Very few are Chinese and Indian and a few Singhs [Sikhs].

If this is the case, then it seems a shame because many suitable students will not be able to enter universities and thus contribute to enhancing the general public academic and educational system. Another point is that 'most wealthy Chinese and Indian families send their kids to overseas universities'. As Dr. Rajan reflects, many well-qualified young Indians with excellent marks are not accepted into public universities because of the NEP but are forced to attend private universities. Probably because of this situation, there seems to be a tendency for many Indians to regard university as an

elite education, because of the difficulty for Indians to gain access to tertiary education. In the opinion of Manu:

> The Indians use university as a stepping stone to a more elite career than the Malays. The Indians in university often have received the highest marks in their primary and secondary education, as opposed to many Malays who gain access to university because of the NEP. This makes Indians more ambitious because they have to try harder.

Private universities are widely seen as much better than the public ones. The problem is that they are much more expensive which naturally entails the majority of the population being excluded from attending them.

During the last 10 to 15 years several new universities have opened up in Malaysia. In spite of this, none has an Indian dean and the number of Indian heads of faculties and administrative departments is almost nil (Ponmugam, 2008: 25). Additionally, Dr. Rajan sees a gradual but distinct change in the ethnic composition of students. He follows up by stressing his own reaction to his working conditions: 'Incidentally, I do not see a future with a tolerable standard of living if I quit my work at the university. This is why I still work there in spite of the unsatisfactory political and academic conditions'.

The government is aware of the ethnic tensions in the academic community and among students. Ang mentions several initiatives on behalf of the government to create dialogue between the students in public universities. The aim of the compulsory ethnic relations course (ERC) is one such initiative and the aim is for the students to complete a project across ethnic backgrounds in order to bridge gaps and stereotyping. Ang, however, has this remark:

> If there primarily are Malay students in university then it is difficult to see the value of ethnic relation in the course, no? But if there are open-minded and dedicated teachers like my teacher, there can be a chance of exchanging ideas where sensitive subjects are [also] discussed. I think so. If not, even ethnic relations course at university can work.

Ang's opinions stresses that the good intentions behind the ERC will remain "empty words" if the course is not followed up and taken seriously both on an official and everyday level, which is a problem her Malay ethnic relations course teacher sees among several of his Malay colleagues. The ethnic wounds among the students, which quite surprisingly for me are spoken of openly, are an expression of the insight that

trauma based on ethnic problems abound in the country. Trauma seems to be a concept to which each ethnic group subscribes to, though with different historical and sociopolitical reasons and arguments.

Indians are often seen as the lowest stratum in a Malaysian ethnic hierarchy. As Rani (who is Indian) says:

> After ethnic riots in 1969 Malaysians are less united and there is a racial hierarchy in Malaysia now. The hierarchy consists of Malays at the top. Then the indigenous people [orang asli], who are officially seen as part of the Malays, but in reality this is not so. Then there are the Chinese, after them the Indians and at the very bottom we have the immigrant workers.

Satesh (who is Indian) further elaborates and expresses his view on the situation:

> Many Indians from my parents' generation in Malaysia have reached O or A level but have not been able to continue because they are not included in the NEP and they have no money, so they are forced to work as labourers or on plantations. In this way the Indian community lacks well-educated employees with a degree. For me, this means, I cannot use my degree in the Indian community because there are very few jobs left that require a degree. I would not mind getting a government job but this is not possible in the direction Malaysia is going now. So, Indians will always stay in the bottom of society.

For the Indian students, ethnicity and ethnic categories form a basis for a sense of exclusion in the social field. Characteristically, they, perhaps to avoid being stigmatised in my eyes, often speak of alternative non-ethnic identifications like academic plans or plans for the future. Most Indian students seem decidedly uncertain as to how to answer questions about their own ethnicity. This can be seen as an essential explanation as to why they, as a part of their navigation, identify with the idea of a larger and global academic community. Rani says that she does not attach importance to which ethnic category she belongs to: 'It does not really carry meaning for me to be Indian. The most significant meaning for me to be an Indian is when [I was] born, I was put in the "Indian" group in Malaysia. The birth certificate follows the father's ethnic group'. As Rani expresses it, the immediate answer many Indian students give when speaking of ethnicity, is which ethnic group they officially are categorised in. Hari is another good example of most Indian students' less rigid

understanding of ethnicity as a defining factor. Though he stresses the importance of seeing himself as Indian, it apparently is not a crucial point of identification as he does not regard ethnic identification as part of being a 'modern' participant in a global world: 'You know, only identifying with a certain race is not part of a new world. This is true for the rural Indians and also for most Malays. But do not tell anyone that I have said that'. The unofficial hierarchy is often mentioned in the conversations with students when referring to Indians' skin colour. The skin colour of Indians is often darker than that of both Malays and Chinese, and several students mention that in Malaysia, one has a lower status the darker one's skin colour is. One example is Subra, a Tamil Indian, who says: 'No doubt Indians are discriminated because of their skin. Even Tamils [who often have very dark skin colour] are most discriminated'. Subra is convinced that the consequences of the exclusionary policies will equal a permanent placement at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Discrimination based on physical appearances must certainly be an extremely traumatic experience and the trauma of discrimination because of skin colour arguably places several of the Indian students in a double state of trauma.

The sociopolitical and ethnic marginalisation as expressed by the Indian students makes it difficult for them to obtain higher positions which may be seen in the low number of Indians employed by the state (Ponmugam, 2008: 14). Appudurai and Dass (2008) argue that, because of immigrant workers, especially from Bangladesh and Indonesia, Indian Malaysians are often forced to remain poor and unemployed on plantations or forced to move to the cities where they have no guarantee of a secure future. Appudurai and Dass point out, that Indians are therefore gradually losing out on social negotiations and social and economic security. This issue may go a long way to exemplify the symptoms of the trauma faced by the Indian students.

Resilience and Imaginings of Social Mobility

Social mobility as resilience is a recurring theme in my conversations with the students. As Vijay puts it: 'In this country I am an Indian Malaysian but to the rest world I am an MSc. If I am good at doing my work, then that is the most important [point]. An employer will firstly look at my qualifications. My social mobility and my MSc is my way of not being just an Indian Malaysian from Ipoh [a major city in peninsular Malaysia]'. In order to try to understand Vijay's reflections on his strategies of social mobility, we may employ Arjun Appadurai's theory on navigation.

He speaks of three categories of flows of mobility and migration: diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror and diasporas of despair (Appadurai, 1996: 6). The three categories refer to the diverse motivations to move around in the era of globalisation. The diaspora of hope is a term that is used to define individuals who are moving around in the world of their own free will and accord. Of the three categories, individuals in this category have the most resources and in Pierre Bourdieu's (2008) sense of capital, this group often has both the educational and social capital to make use of. The Indian students can be seen as being in both the first and third category. However, even though they are forced to navigate for exclusionary reasons, both their imaginations and proactive strategies, combined with the fact that they actually are students at an internationally acknowledged tertiary educational institution, primarily makes them part of diasporas of hope. Through diasporas of hope the young Indians are actors creating connections to larger global dynamics as a strategy in trying to change their own social status by navigating and moving toward a globalised future. In this regard, Dolby and Rizvi argue that there is an increasing number of young people who move for educational purposes and that their identities are also formed by navigation:

> Even those youth who do not literally move throughout the world or a geographic region, are undoubtedly caught up in the continual circulation of global culture, through the media, movies, fashion, the Internet – their identities are now inextricably linked to the currents of modernity that flow across the world at the speed of a mouse click (Dolby and Rizvi, 2008: 5).

One of the most significant features among these modern, highly social and geographically fluid young people is that they often play an active part in their own social mobility. Dolby and Rizvi draw our attention to Paul Willis (1990) who reminds us that we must take the worlds of youth seriously because their movements produce the 'terrain of the future'. An attempt to understand these tendencies leads us to thoughts of identity construction and individualisation in the sense of having: 'not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our routes' (Hall, 1996: 4).

One of these routes is the imagining of being individualised participants in the era of globalisation, as Subra reflects upon: 'I try to fit in, in Malaysia, but as an Indian in this country it is very difficult. The Malays seem to have taken over everything, even the sense of nationality and being Malaysian. Instead I want to be an international student or somehow use my education to my own advantage'. An interesting point in

Subra's and several others' reflections is that the Indian students do not necessarily see being globalised solely in connection with being employed in the Western world. Because of globalisation, they rather see themselves as individuals in a non-place without a specific definition or belonging to a specific physical or geographical place. They regard globalisation in their lived realities as related to coming to terms with traditional values like language and clothing. The Indian students all wear Western-style clothing, and are, as Appadurai says, becoming globalised through a localisation of global tendencies: 'The very displacement that is the root of their problems is also the engine of their dreams of wealth, respectability, and autonomy. Thus, pasts in these constructed lives are as important as futures, and the more we unravel these pasts the closer we approach worlds that are less and less cosmopolitan, more and more local'(1996: 63). In other words, Indian students are globalised in the context of cultural values and characteristics that are specific to Malaysia. However, most of the ones I have spoken with seem primarily to identify with the academic world and university peers. This finds its expression in a larger picture, where the daily life and attitudes of young Indian students are becoming global, as opposed to local when seeking identity in an imagined larger academic community as opposed to in a local ethnonational community.

It is appropriate to understand the students' proactive response to trauma, in the concept of adaptive flexibility, which is defined as 'the capacity to shape and modify one's behaviour to meet the demands of a given stressor event. Practically speaking, then, flexibility is a personality resource that helps bolster resilience to aversive events' (Bonanno and Mancini, 2008: 372). Adaptive flexibility may in this context be regarded as the Indian students' resilience as response to trauma. Empirical research captures four prototypical responses to trauma: chronic dysfunction, recovery, resilience and delayed reactions (*Ibid.*: 370). Because of their proactive approach and imaginings of their future, the concept of 'adaptive flexibility' isas a response to trauma or resilience that best encompasses the strategies undertaken by students. George Bonanno and Anthony Mancini (*Ibid.*: 371) emphasise that people who show resilience to traumatic events are not necessarily unaffected by being disturbed or showing stress symptoms, but they are, however and at least, merely able to continue their lives with a proactive response to the traumatic circumstances.

Hybridity and Individualisation

Instead of seeing the students as having either global or local identifications, emphasising a notion of hybrid identities is one way of understanding their cultural negotiations. The Indian students may very well be termed as hybrid individuals because of their multiple identifications, which are used in their navigation to become part of a global academic community. In the words of Homi Bhabha (1994: 248): 'It is from this hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational as the translational – that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project'. Bhabha's theorising on hybridity seems to fit well with the situation of the Indian students as simultaneously being intellectuals and citizens in a postcolonial nation. Hybridised young people are in this sense able to navigate between global and local in a way which makes them able to make use of several cultural codes and thus are able to make multiple worlds meet. It is argued that there is generally a tendency to underestimate the ability of hybridised youth to navigate in a complex cultural society but as long as there is a sense of personal identity – as there seems to be among a majority of the Indian students – it is not necessary for them to have a main primary cultural identification in order to survive mentally (Rizvi, 2000; Hall, 1996).

In addition to seeing the Indian students' navigation as expressions of hybridised individuals who attempt to navigate in the diaspora of hope, we can see them as actors of individualisation in Thomas Ziehe's (1992) understanding of the term. Individualisation is symbolically expressed through modes of life, opinions and everyday decisions, and an individualised actor is thus able to distinguish between self, membership of communities and cultural tradition, and existing conventions. It is an ability to navigate when being dictated by outside hegemonic positions, and Ziehe (1992: 131) understands individualisation as a frame in which decisions are made and as an expression of conscious choices and rejection of different forms of memberships. He does not consider individualisation as a decidedly bad thing, rather, it is an unavoidable tendency and he stresses that individualisation is not necessarily opposed to notions of belonging to a larger community, as we can see exemplified by Jami (who is Indian):

> Though I do not exclusively see myself as having one identity as Malaysian, Malaysia is still my country. This is where I come from and also where I will always return to. But this does not mean that I cannot decide for myself what to do, even if this means working abroad for a while or for most of my life.

Ziehe understands individualisation as an expectation and a tool to interact in society which gives an opportunity to live one's own life. This fits well with the words of Jami whose personal background and tradition seems to be less important, in favour of his resilience to trauma as expectations of 'finding your own life': 'My life is my own. [I] don't care about what this or that politician says, or what this or that religious leader says. My life is now and only I can decide for myself'. Jami is quite serious when stating these last words but nevertheless at the end of his remark adds 'I hope' with a sense of humour, when he refers to the often hegemonic actions and stereotypes in the sociopolitical climate.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to elaborate on experiences of trauma and responses to trauma among ethnic Indian university students in Malaysia. As we have seen, the social field in which the Indian students navigate is formed by a degree of trauma shaped by political, economic and ethnic differential treatment. The Indian students make up an interesting group, because they seem to be in a process of transcending the sociopolitical situation of the ethnic Indian community. This illuminates how they, in spite of the marginalisation, make use of both formulated and unconscious strategies in their navigation.

Societal positions, generational changes, access to education, economic development and a sense of being excluded have an influence on how Indian students navigate and position themselves within the nation state, and which strategies of resilience they use in their social becoming. We must, however, be aware of not generalising the findings in the research to a national level. The findings here are based on students at one university and they may not necessarily reflect the trauma or resilience of students from the Indian community in other regional areas in the country. Nevertheless, I believe that the findings may very well reflect a theme of trauma among a larger part of the Indian community.

The national policy along ethnic differentiating lines is not recognised as legitimate among a large part of the students, and there seems to be a lack of confidence in official actions. Among these, a majority of Indian students distance themselves from ethnonational identifications in favour of imagining themselves as part of a larger academic community. This seems to be a very obvious and apparent choice simply because of the lack of strategies with regards to gaining a position in an

ethnonational-based nation state. On the other hand, the strategy of identifying with ethnicity and nation on behalf of many Malays seems equally obvious because of its connotations of always having a country and people to relate to and always being able to return to. The Indian students can be seen as global winners as opposed to many Malay students, who use ethnicity to navigate within the boundaries of the nation state. The Malay students, on the other hand, can be seen as winners within the national boundaries as long as ethnicity and national identifications still have more say than 'global' identifications. In any case, a sensible future path in the age of globalisation may be to encourage many overlapping and hybrid communities across ethnicity, instead of navigating from notions of exclusion and difference, both within and across nation-state boundaries.

One objective of this chapter is to contribute to a more differentiated debate on ethnic minorities – in both national and global contexts – as groups that do not necessarily identify with ethnic, national or religious points of identification. A status as 'ethnic minority' in a national context is not always equal to powerlessness, as the Indian students exemplify. I have here attempted to show that members of an ethnic minority clearly can be seen as individualised and hybridised and thus be a proactive part of global diasporas of hope.

We must bear in mind that for the majority of Indians – as is the case for any ethnic group – in Malaysia, the possibility of being part of a university campus is not present, and it never will be. These people are left behind to navigate other paths in life that will frequently turn out to be much less profitable. It is worth considering what will happen to these marginalised diasporas all over the world, whose immediate futures seem to be carved by trauma and often ethnically-based marginalisation. Additionally, it might be interesting to ask what will happen in a society and nation when one group of young people has life strategies with globalisation as the point of reference while another group navigates with ethnonational-based belonging as a significant value. Only time will tell whether or not the Indian students will succeed in their resilience to trauma and live out their imaginings of social transformation, but a global tendency indicates that ethnonational discrimination may be compensated for by a high degree of personal drive and ambition.

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