

Forging Paths to Freedom: India and Malaysia and Their Freedom Struggles

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It was for the first time ever, that the anniversary year of independence of both Malaysia and India was commemorated in August 2017 by the India-Malaysia Heritage Group at the Netaji SubashChandra Bose Indian Cultural Centre, Kuala Lumpur. For Malaysia it was the 60th year of Independence, whereas for India it was the 70th anniversary of Independence.

This ten year gap is interesting for a reason, as it calls to mind a similar gap of ten years between 1857 in India and 1867 in Malaya. What was this gap all about? In India the Sepoy Mutiny broke out in 1857, leading to the eventual dismantling of the English East India Company. As for Malaya, 1867 was a year of agitation amongst the business elites in the Straits Settlements, leading to a corresponding end of the English East India Company in Malaya. The Colonial Office in London assumed the reins of power in both these countries.

It is interesting to note that Malaya attained its independence in the centennial year of the Sepoy Mutiny.

Again interestingly, even before Malaya became involved with her own independence struggle, it played a direct role in the movement to free India from colonial rule under the military command of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

Even after the tragic death of Netaji, the spirit

of freedom stirred in the hearts and minds of the people in Malaya. Nehru's visit of 1946 rekindled the nationalist fervor. The only difference was that this time around he did not ask the Indians to liberate India, but to take an active part in local politics and find a niche for themselves in the political destiny of Malaya.

It may be said of the situation in Malaya that, having lost the jewel in the crown in 1947, the British could easily be persuaded to relinquish any other colonial possessions. They gave up Burma, Ceylon and had no great desire to hold on to Malaya that was seething with anticolonial sentiment unleashed by the Japanese inter-regnum in the war years.

It can therefore be said that Indian nationalists won independence not just for India, but for all other colonized countries as well. Malaya became independent ten years later, and within the next two or three decades, all other colonies and protectorate were able to join the comity of free nations.

BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE

A comparison between the Independence movements in both countries cannot ignore the themes of peace and violence.

The philosophy of Satyagraha and non-

violence was India's gift to the world. And yet paradoxically, India had to experience a most bloody transition to independence. The apostle of peace and non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, was himself assassinated in January 1948 as a result of communal politics.

The murderous clashes between Hindus and Muslims which began in 1946 raged unabated through the period of Independence and thereafter.

A different scenario prevailed in Malaya, which experienced a peaceful transition to independence, with the violence of the communist movement kept at bay. The agitation linked to Malayan independence pales in comparison to the scale of violence that accompanied the Indian independence movement.

Take the example of the infamous massacre known in history as the JallianwallahBagh Park Incident of 1919. Bullet counts on the scene revealed that a total of 1,650 rounds had been fired. Official figures accounted for 379 dead and 1,137 wounded. The British consistently downplayed the numbers,

which is not to be unexpected. There was no violence of this scale in Malaya.

There were no imprisonments of the scale that was witnessed in India. A single event like the Quit India Movement of 1942, for instance, led to the incarceration of a significant number of nationalists including Gandhi and Nehru. In Malaya, by contrast, the leader of the independence movement, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had to persuade the British to arrest him, which Gerald Templar, the British High Commissioner to Malaya, refused to do.

The actual day of independence was marked by violence in India, in contrast to the peaceful transition of power in Malaya.

Of the scenario in India the New York Times noted that, "while the ceremonies marking this major historic event were taking place communal strife continued to cast a grim shadow over [the] future."

There were some who believed that the date set for independence was inauspicious for India. According to a report in the New York Times, "a peculiarly Hindu thing that the West might



mistakenly underestimate in importance — was the fact that astrologers, on whom millions of Hindus place great dependence in all matters discovered an inauspicious mating of the stars on Aug. 15.”

According to official records, at least 15 million people were uprooted and more than one million perished. These figures have remained consistent in most narratives of the Partition. The hardest hit were the Sikhs, both in the number of deaths and loss of territory. This tragedy still rankles in the minds of the Sikhs who have created a museum in Amritsar similar to the Holocaust museums and memorials in various parts of the world.

The stars may have been justifiably ominous.

is reported to have said “What is there to celebrate? I see nothing but rivers of death.”

Tunku in contrast had this to say: “If I am credited with nothing more, I can at least thank God that I was able to lead our country along the path of independence, and beyond, without one drop of blood being shed.”

In India, the violence that was unleashed continued unabated even after Independence. For instance, to consolidate its borders, the brute power of the Indian police and army had to be deployed in 1948 to corral the princely state of Hyderabad into the Indian Union, resulting in the sacrifice of thousands of lives.

More importantly, the dispute over the region

India's last Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten announced partition plan for India on 3 June 1947. The Indian Independence Act of 18 July 1947 created two dominions, i.e the Indian Union and Pakistan. While Pakistan became an independent country on 14 August 1947, India became independent one day later, on 15 August.

Over the decades following the partition, the hastily drawn borders between India and Pakistan has resulted in violent religious and territorial disputes through which hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives.

In the case of Malaya, the date of Independence was fixed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the future Prime Minister, after consulting a religious scholar cum astrologer. He was none other than the grandfather of our erstwhile Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He told Tunku that 31st December was most auspicious, and if he were to miss the date, then he would have to wait two more years for the next most auspicious date.

Strangely, Gandhi was absent at the Independence Day celebrations in New Delhi. He

of Kashmir has remained the centre of conflict between India and Pakistan for more than 70 years.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW NATION STATES

Neither Malaya nor India had unified national borders as we know it today prior to the colonial situation. In Malaya, the various states with the exception of Malacca, Penang and Singapore were under the domination of the respective rulers who regarded themselves as Kings in their own right. There was no sense of national identity amongst the Malays as we know it today, and the subjects of one state regarded those from the other states with suspicion. The first attempt to federate the states came in 1896 when the four Malay States of Perak,

Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were federated.

It was only in 1948, in preparation for independence that the Federation of Malaya Agreement was signed between the British and the Rulers of the various States. For the first time ever, all the various states were federated with a common Parliament known as the Federal Legislative Council. A unified nation known as the Federation of Malaya came to exist for the first time in the history of British Malaya.

The same was true of India which has never been the unified political expression that we know of today. The empire of the Mauryas did not extend to the South beyond Mysore. The Empire of the Guptas effectively ruled only the North. The Empire at the time of Akbar extended only up to the Deccan, and even under Aurangzeb the Moghul empire could not bring the lands of the South under its control. Under the British, no less than two-fifths of the land remained under the Princes.

It is largely due to territorial consolidation under British rule that a single nation state, exercising full sovereignty over the present borders, had emerged in both India and Malaya.

PARTITION VERSUS MERGER

If Independence resulted in partition for India, it brought about territorial expansion for Malaya.

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In the case of Malaya, independence paved way for the creation of a new nation known as Malaysia, which included the new territories of Singapore, Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak. The establishment of Malaysia in 1963 was the

culmination of a long-held objective of the British government, articulated as early as 2 April 1955 by Malcolm MacDonald. The reason for merger was largely to contain the communist threat in the region and to balance the demographic composition of the population in favour of the indigenous population of Malaya. Singapore's exit from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 contributed further to the numerical strength of the indigenous population.

ROYALTY

If independence strengthened the position of the royalty in Malaysia, the freedom movement had an opposite effect on the royalty in India.

The respect and regard which Malaysians show our King and Sultans may seem strange to Indians who have treated their maharajas differently.

There were hundreds of rulers in India, and some 541 Princely states, as compared with only 9 rulers in Malaya who were symbolic heads in 9 States.

The sovereign princes of India, who had represented the tradition of Indian monarchy for over 2,000 years voluntarily handed over their territories, accepting financial settlement and retiring into private life.

In Malaya, attempts to abolish the royalty met with strong resistance from the Malays who identified the royalty with Malay identity and predominance. The rulers in India were not actively involved in the freedom movement, unlike the rulers in Malaya who were, by contrast, an important part of the freedom movement. In fact UMNO the main political party that fought for Malayan Independence was officially launched at the Grand Palace in Johore Bahru. Again the Father of Malayan Independence was a Prince from the Kedah royal household, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who led the country to its freedom.

Unlike the case of India, the position of the royalty was strengthened in Malaya at the time of

independence. The institutions of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the Conference of Rulers were created and strengthened in the Constitution. In India, it is the President who is the Head of State.

In Malaya the royalty had the support of the masses, whereas in India, there was a clear disconnect between the royalty and the independence movement.

As mentioned, the royalty in Malaysia was perceived as a symbol of Malay identity and pride in the country. This symbolic value of the royalty was propped up by the British to legitimize their political presence in the states. The British had moral and legal obligations towards the rulers unlike the case in India.

FEDERATION

If Malaya had to adopt a federal system of government, it was only to retain the status of the rulers in their respective states; and if India had to

adopt federalism, it was only to accommodate and bring the various regional states on board to form a new nation.

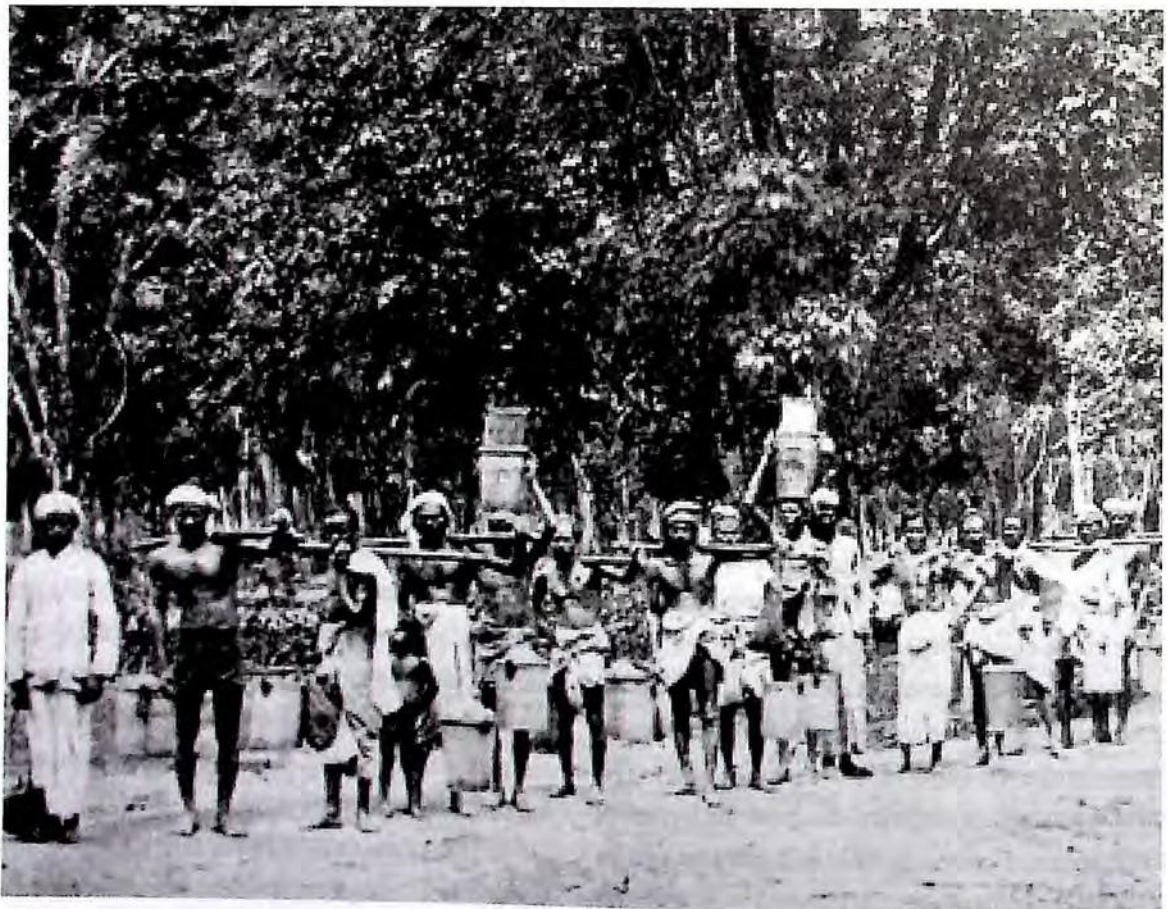
The concept of federalism in both instances was a compromise between the need to create a new nation and the need to accommodate regional and other interests.

Both Malaysia and India are federations, each with a federal constitution.

CONSTITUTION

When the British left Malaya, they ensured that a Federal Constitution was in place.

This was not the case in India, where the Constitution was drafted only after independence. The Constituent Assembly which drafted the Constitution was made up entirely of Indians representing all sections of Indian society. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a Dalit in modern parlance, chaired the drafting committee which



published the draft constitution. It was only on 26th January 1950 that the Constitution took effect.

In Malaya, the Constitution was drafted by a Commission of Jurists headed by Lord Reid of Britain. Interestingly, Justice Malik, former Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court was a Member of the Commission.

Although it has been said that the Indian Constitution influenced the drafting of the Malayan Constitution, there were differences. The Indian Constitution has a preamble, unlike the Constitution of Malaysia.

Although the early draft of the Constitution was close to the Indian model in emphasizing secularism, the political pressure exercised by the dominant Malay party with the connivance of a Reid Commission member from Pakistan ensured that Islam would be the official religion of the land. It is to be noted that the Pakistani member of the Commission had been deeply involved with Sir Ivor Jennings in drafting the Constitution of Pakistan. He pushed through the idea that Islam should be the official religion of the land, thus injecting religion into the form and content of national governance.

Both Constitutions have incorporated affirmative action policies to help the disadvantaged sections of the population. In the case of India, the disadvantaged sections constitute the scheduled castes who are in the minority, whereas in the case of Malaysia, the disadvantaged are in the majority, namely the Malays (and subsequently incorporating the native population of the new territories of Borneo).

FOREIGN POLICY

After independence, both India and Malaysia joined the Commonwealth of Nations. In the case of Malaysia, the decision to join the Commonwealth was part of the Independence Agreement, whereas in the case of India, the decision was made only in 1949.

In Malaya there was a strong pro-British and

anti-Communist sentiment following independence. Malaya found it necessary to retain British civil servants long after independence. This was said to have reflected Tunku's pragmatism and anglophile leanings.

In the case of India, despite Nehru's anglophile ways, a policy of non-alignment was pursued, a term coined by India's foreign minister Krishna Menon.

RENAISSANCE

It has been said that the Indian independence movement like those in many parts of the colonized world generated a renaissance of sorts linked to visionaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Vinoba Bhave and other great leaders. The framers of India's Constitution were strongly influenced by such visionaries. Poets and writers such as Subramania Bharati, Muhammad Iqbal, Josh Malihabadi, Mohammad Ali Jouhar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Kazi Nazrul Islam used literature, poetry and speeches as tools for creating political awareness. Feminists such as Sarojini Naidu and Begum Rokeya promoted the emancipation of Indian women and their participation in national politics. B. R. Ambedkar championed the cause of the disadvantaged sections of Indian society within the larger self-rule movement.

In Malaysia the freedom movement was kept alive by thinkers like Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Dato' Onn Jaafar, Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, Zaaba and Ahmad Boestamam. The British in Malaya wanted the independence movement to bring on board the different races in the country, an ideal pursued by leaders like Tan Cheng Lock, Dato Onn Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Today, we face the common challenge of reviving the spirit of independence in our respective countries based on ideals such as unity, inclusiveness, compassion and justice regardless of race, caste, religion, ethnicity or language affiliation. ●●