IMAN RESEARCH
SOCIETY • BELIEFS • PERCEPTION

Indian Youths and Democratic Belonging

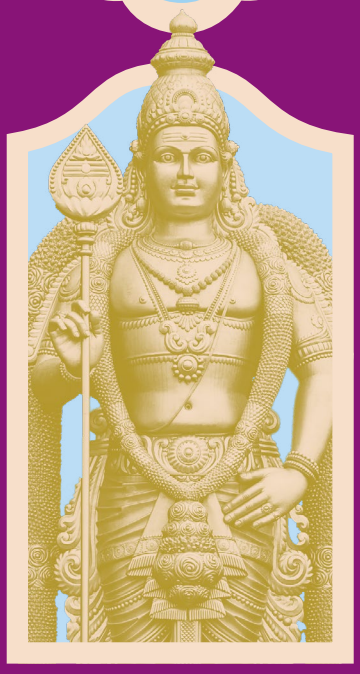
KAMI

ORANG



The Politics of Precarity and Exclusion

JUGA



SINI

Funded by the European Union

Foreword

We would like to thank the IMAN Team—Dina Zaman, Aziff Azuddin, Nadia Lukman, Violet Lee and Liew Liang Hong for their support during the various stages of this project. We also thank Janupriya Yogeswaran for supporting our project post-fieldwork. Thank you to Dr Nicholas Chan and Dr Azmil Tayeb for their comments. This study was made possible through the generous financial support of the European Union.

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Executive summary

Indian youths are an under-mobilised constituency whose concerns have been ignored for too long. Through in-depth interviews with 111 Indian youths, they described discrimination faced, experiences of precarity towards their belonging and being politically sidelined. Kami Orang Sini Juga unpacks the repercussions of leaving these issues unaddressed, namely political alienation and distrust, which will shape the next election and the political landscape of the country. It is time to listen.

Discrimination and exclusion at every turn

From as young as schooling, Indian youths experienced hostility and discrimination from peers and teachers. Socialisation beyond familial circles is hostile and ranges from verbal to physical abuse in rare cases. Many youths normalise educators' discriminatory behaviours due to power dynamics. Tamil primary schools offer temporary safety, but do not remove institutional structures. Additionally, the matriculation system disproportionately affects youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds, making it difficult for them to access educational resources.

In adulthood, Indian youths struggle to secure employment due to a lack of information and networks. They also experience difficulties with the rental market whereby inconsistent standards can lead to outright rejection. Barriers again affect youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds greatly who are unable to secure a room for college or a job opportunity outside their home state. Without legal protections, negative societal perceptions will continue to dictate access and opportunities of Indian youths.

No unity even within the Indian community

There are multiple internal markers of separation through sub-ethnic groups, class, caste, language and religion within the community. Narratives passed down through the generations feed into the divide which Indian youths want to move away from. To build unity, these perceptions which served during the colonial era must come to an end. While youths reject caste and are weakening generationally, it persists through marriage and associations. In an attempt to belong, those who hold on to these divisive identities cause alienation, preventing youths from forging a path towards unity.

Proud to be Malaysian, but are they treated as such?

Youths feel Malaysian first, but this belonging is rooted in anxiety and frustration. From the discrimination faced at every turn, to rifts within the community, there is little they can hold on to. On the East Coast, regional identity offers protection from negative stereotypes associated with the Indian community. Race relations appear to be cordial in personal circles, but can become antagonistic in public spaces, especially when there is a lack of interaction with other Malaysians. Indian youths have strong loyalties to Malaysia, yet they are reminded that they do not belong.

Indian youths want solutions not tokenism or institutional failure

From schooling, to securing housing or jobs, they have been repeatedly failed by institutions. Paired with parental experience and feelings of distrust towards MITRA, which they view as lacking impact and reach, Indian youths are frustrated. Indian youths are able to see through tokenistic representation as a political tactic. They want visible leaders, regardless of ethnicity, who will champion their rights and deliver on their promises. Youths who are not directly tied to a party, do not have strong party affiliations. They are a constituency that could turn the tide and cannot be ignored.

Where do Indian youths turn to?

Some youths rely on safe spaces like dance schools or sports teams outside of the various hostile environments they encounter. These spaces give Indian youths belonging, a positive role model and agency, especially having experienced systemic failure and a lack of support. This is crucial for socioeconomically disadvantaged youths. When this is absent, at-risk youths, specifically young Indian boys are exposed to gang recruitment. This offers them a false sense of safety and belonging, which has a negative impact on their families, communities and wider society.

What can we do?

1. Sensitivity training for teachers and formal reporting channels for racial incidents in schools.
2. The matriculation's quota system should shift to needs-based to target youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds to ensure they have access to education.
3. Anti-discrimination legislation to address employment and renting is needed to ensure transparent hiring processes and protection for prospective renters, respectively.
4. Building on empathy and shared local or regional identity is a way to break ethnic silos when there is no acceptance in the public space.
5. Political parties should bring youths into policy discussions through town halls or youth councils. Involving youths in budgeting, advisory and planning and execution to address local community issues to cultivate agency and a sense of belonging.
6. Building civic education programmes from a young age can help mobilise youths beyond political party networks.
7. Transparency from government agencies with how funds are distributed and allocated, and made accessible in English, Malay and Tamil.
8. Proper channels to address at-risk youths through leveraging existing networks in ensuring they do not fall through the cracks of a broken system.

1 Background and methodology



Following IMAN Research's ***Orang Kita*** study on Malay youths, we sought to expand this to Chinese and Indian youths. Understanding the ethnic fabric and how to pave a pathway towards nation-building can only be outlined if youths of all backgrounds are given a platform. With the Indian youth study specifically, this was crucial given the disproportionate support for the community and various diversities. Indian youth are frustrated; their sentiments are leaning toward disillusionment, and we wanted to understand why and how to fix it. As a voting bloc, they represent the smallest major ethnic group, yet that is no excuse for them to be ignored. In the lead-up to the next elections, the political divisions and uncertainty on the ground are clear. To amplify and champion Indian youths is to give them a voice, something neglected since colonial rule. It is time we change the narrative.

The existing literature on the Indian community frequently centres on colonial-era racialised politics and historical modes of political mobilisation. While these studies document past political efforts by the Indian community and their history, there is a gap surrounding young Malaysian Indian's political participation, aspirations and identity formation. Much of the existing research also focuses on a single location or a smaller sample size.

Building on existing work, we aimed to speak to youths across Peninsular Malaysia to uncover the following:

1. What are the youths' views on political representation and the political system within the Malaysian Indian community and the larger context of Malaysia?
2. How do Malaysian Indian youths' ethnic identities shape their sense of belonging in Malaysia in the current political climate?
3. How has the local education system affected the social and economic mobility of Malaysian Indian youths and helped preserve their culture?

1.1 Methodology

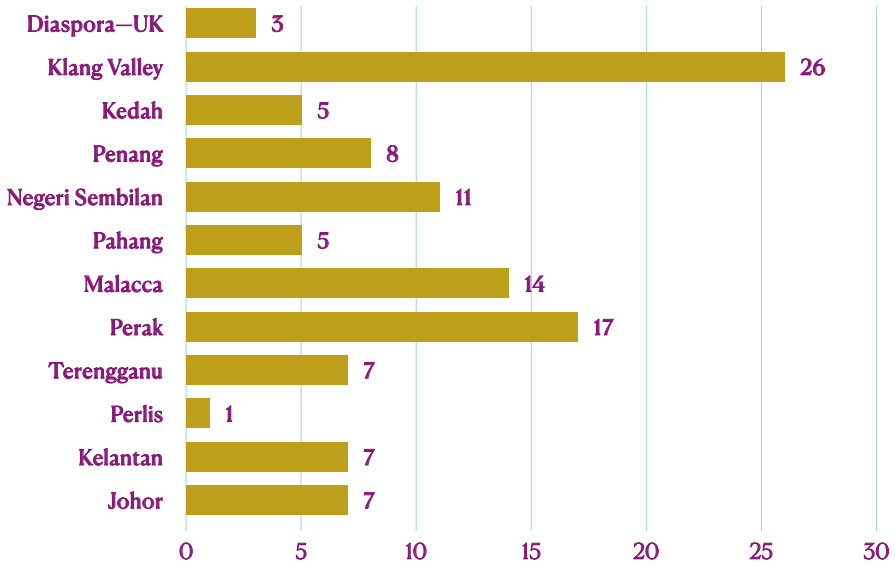
Employing a thematic analysis approach, which relies on data collection and analysis to inform the research, we conducted and analysed in-depth interviews with 111 Malaysian-Indian youths across Peninsular Malaysia. The fieldwork was conducted between August 2025 and April 2026. The term 'Indian' is an umbrella term, including a wide variety of sub-ethnic groups that exist within the community. To ensure our findings reflected youths across the board, we interviewed more than 100 individuals, including Chettis, Chindians, Punjabis, Malayalees, Sindhis, South Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils, Telugus, and mixed participants. We also recruited from different religious backgrounds, such as Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, to ensure a diversity of voices.

Participant distribution by state depended heavily on the area's ethnic demography. Paired with our reliance on local community liaisons to help secure interviewees, this also meant that in certain areas, such as Klang Valley, Perak, Malacca, and Negeri Sembilan, we interviewed a higher proportion of Indian youths. Three interviewees were also part of the Malaysian Indian diaspora, grew up in the Klang Valley, and were based in the United Kingdom at the time of interviewing. Participants were recruited through youth associations on the ground, political party networks, religious and cultural organisations, and an online form which was sent through existing connections.



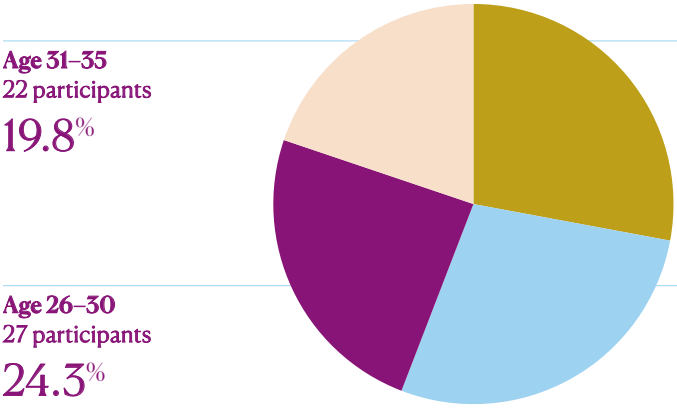
1.2 Demographic profile

Fig 1. Geographical Breakdown of respondents



Participants represented a diverse cross-section of socioeconomic backgrounds and occupational statuses, from pre-university students to working professionals. Youths who are parents were included. While most youths fell between 18 and 35, seven outliers were above 35 but identified as youths or were involved with the youth arm of their organisations. We did not include their data in the primary data set of 111 interviews, but the material provided supplementary data for the study.

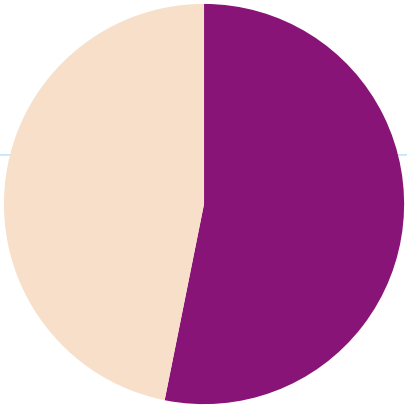
Fig 2. Age group breakdown of youths



Youths also had varying levels of political participation, which we inferred from their responses, and awareness, to ensure we covered a variety of political outlooks. We also spoke to youths from various political parties, including MIC, Puteri UMNO, PAS, DAP, PKR, and PSM.



Fig 3. Gender Ratio of 111 interviewees



Female
52 participants
46.8%

Male
59 participants
53.2%

While we aimed for gender balance, we could not achieve an even split because we often relied on community liaisons to assist with recruitment. The findings are not nationally representative due to the small sample size, but they provide insight into youths' perspectives and how their lived experiences shape their understanding of the Malaysian socio-political landscape. For this reason, we used a qualitative approach to gather rich data that supports youths' claims and helps us understand their views.

Interviews were conducted in English, Bahasa Malaysia, or Tamil, often a combination of languages depending on the interviewee's preference. Sessions ranged from 30 to 120 minutes, depending on interviewees' openness and availability; we conducted both individual and group interviews. To ensure all participants could share, group interviews mostly ranged from two to five people. Separately, a roundtable with Indian youths was conducted to follow up on the study's findings and supplement and further contextualise existing data. This closed-door event encouraged participants to share their personal experiences. Some participants in this roundtable were previously interviewed for the study, while others were included to offer a different perspective.

All interviews were audio-recorded with prior signed consent given by the participants, with the assurance that the data would remain anonymous. This ensured the data could be transcribed for thorough analysis. Sessions were conducted in spaces chosen by interviewees where they felt comfortable, including cafes, dance studios, and their homes.

1.3 Interview questions

We built a series of interview questions to explore whether Malaysian Indian youths feel that they are well-represented in the political realm, to understand their background and how it ties in to their sense of belonging and views on multiculturalism and relationships with other races, and to identify disadvantages in the education system and their access to social mobility. These guiding questions were mainly open-ended, and we also asked follow-up questions based on their responses. The order of the questions was not fixed and varied depending on their responses to ensure a flow to the interview. The questions aimed to address youths' views on democracy and political outlook, how they navigated their identity, views on education, the state of the economy, and community grievances.

1. What are your views on democracy in Malaysia, and are there any changes that you would like to see?
2. How do you keep yourself updated with the current affairs of the country? Who do you discuss current affairs with?
3. What do you think of the political representation (i.e. Cabinet, Parliament, State/Local Council) of Indians in the country?
4. What are the main issues that the Indian community and youths face? Have these issues been addressed?
5. How do you think of yourself as a Malaysian? What do you think of the relationship between the different races and religious groups?
6. What languages do you know and speak? What language is most important to succeed in Malaysia?
7. What stories have you been told about your ancestors and their journey to and life in Malaysia?
8. What are your views on the current education system and vernacular schools? Do you feel there are opportunities in Malaysia to succeed?
9. What do you think of Malaysia's state of economy and government policies?
10. What do you know about the caste system within the Indian community? Did it impact you in any way?

Supplementary questions

Supplementary questions were frequently included to expand on existing lines of inquiry during the session. We added questions during our fieldwork because political developments at the time required further examination.

11. How involved are you in your community and political organisations?
12. Would you consider religion to be an important part of your life? How involved are you in religious, cultural and teaching centres, and places of worship?
13. What was the reason behind learning these languages?
14. Where do you consume your news from? What social media platforms do you use?
15. What do you think of the 'kuil haram' issue?
16. Do you feel there are opportunities in Malaysia to succeed?
17. What does Malaysia mean to you?
18. Do you want to leave Malaysia?

2 The role of institutions and social structures



2.1 Education

Indian youths view education as a vehicle for social mobility. They acknowledge the shortcomings, such as a lack of critical thinking and rote memorisation. Education still has value, something reinforced by their parents. The reality is that the education system is discriminatory. Indian youths detailed the exclusionary social interactions with their peers, state actors such as educators who perpetuate negative ethnic stereotypes, as well as the barriers to educational resources.

In 2021, a *Discrimination in Education Survey* by the Sekolah Semua youth movement, which advocates for anti-discrimination policies in educational institutions, found that 9 in 10 Indian students felt discriminated against because of their ethnicity, based on 2441 responses received nationwide.[1] The survey respondents were 18 years old and above, and 73% of Indian students felt discriminated against by their peers and 74% felt discriminated against by their teachers.[2] Youths must navigate social and power structures that alienate them. Across various stages of life, Indian youths experience social and institutional failure, which this paper examines below.

[15] Jason Wee, Kavina Rajendran, Adnan Yunus, Priscilla Grace Poul, Elisa Shafiqah, Poh Hoh Shan, Celina Wong, Brendan Chew, Adam Danial Muhamad Sukri, Dina Abdullah, "Discrimination in Education: Policy Review", *Architects of Diversity*, July 2022.

[2] Kenneth Tee, "Survey: One in two Malaysians faced discrimination in schools, ethnic Indians had worst experience", *Malay Mail,* 16 September 2021, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/09/16/survey-one-in-two-malaysians-faced-discrimination-in-schools-ethnic-indians/2006075

I. Social discrimination

> *"First of all, I went to an all-girls school for that entire duration. And secondly, I came from an area… that was a more diverse area. So each class had a fifty-fifty split between Malays and non-Malays. So I think I didn't have such a similar issue [racism] as [name] did in the sense that there were so many of us… And we weren't sort of in a similar position."*

Both respondents were the same age and class, had relatively similar upbringings, and attended national schools throughout primary and secondary school. Yet they had vastly different experiences with social discrimination. National schools host students of different backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities. The binary idea that vernacular schools cause division and national schools unite is false. Indian youths can identify the segregation and existence of ingroup-outgroup ethnic silos found in national schools.

Questioning whether it was 'them' or 'us' who were the problem already creates these ingroup-outgroup dynamics. It also begs the question of how these youths are adopting racialised behaviours. Some youths described experiencing racism from a young age, and it is likely learned from their environment through parents and even teachers.

From as early as kindergarten, Indian youths could identify hostilities towards them from their peers and were made to feel alienated—the reminder from their peers of their ethnic identity and the negative baggage that comes with it. From a young age, they are reminded that they do not belong and they are, as such, treated differently.

II. "You budak India ke budak keling?" Unpacking power dynamics in school

Indian youths experienced institutional discrimination from their teachers who, instead of admonishing racial discrimination, often are perpetrators themselves. This Indian youth who went to school in a semi-urban area spoke about the difficulties they faced in securing positions in school, where they were outrightly reminded and made to feel alienated by the very educators meant to empower them:

> *"The teachers would directly tell me, you can come from this interview, but I'll tell you now itself, I will not give you this position... It really made me feel so inferior in that school. I'm really such a nobody here. I cannot do anything. I cannot grow. Even in class... they would still give us [Indians] a hard time... It was so bad that even the Indian teachers in the school would say, 'you should just move out.'"*

This youth also describes how Indian teachers encouraged them to go to a different school, so they could thrive in an environment where they are respected and valued as individuals. This youth has little insulation from the discrimination faced from teachers.

A youth who grew up in a middle-class family explained the dynamics in their school. Among peers, there was the understanding that teachers were hostile to students based on their ethnic groups. The ingroup-outgroup dynamic is evident, but seen in a more sinister narrative which creates further fragmentation within the Indian community and among these youths who grapple with feeling isolated through being Indian, or find ways to cope and merge with the ingroup.

> *"[The] BM teacher came into my class one day, straight up used 'keling'. He said, 'you budak India ke budak keling?'. Yeah, then he pointed at me and said 'kalau you India you baik, kalau keling macam-' then he pointed at other [Indian] students."*

The narrative fed not only to this youth, but to their peers, is that individuals' behaviour must be exemplary; otherwise, it becomes representative of the entire community. 'Keling' is used to fragment the distinctions between the Indian community further, forcing youths to adopt respectability politics and present a front that can then 'repatriate' the image of the Indian community. The role that the teacher plays here in putting forth the argument of good Indian being associated with the 'us' ingroup, and bad Indian being part of the outgroup steers youths towards feelings of isolation. Educators going unpunished is a failure to protect students.

An interviewee described their upbringing as privileged, and spoke about the normalisation of racism. This interviewee experiences numbness and doubt within themselves over comments made by an educator who is reinforcing a belief that they are not good enough because they are Indian:

> *"But it didn't really get to me that much. For reasons which I myself don't fully understand...Sometimes they will say things like 'India bodoh'..."*

This normalisation leads youths not to speak up, to avoid ostracising themselves or facing punishment for reacting. It becomes the status quo. Discrimination continues through the institution. The responsibility does not lie with the student; rather, it lies with the institutions which protect discriminatory behaviour. This also shapes their perception of low external political efficacy, their belief that the system works for them, as will be explored in the Political Awareness and Efficacy section.

One instance involved an intervention. A youth who grew up in Johor, in a middle-class, English-speaking household explained the physical violence that they endured from their peers. This was exacerbated by educators who punished this youth for a fight that was not their fault. Only after realising that this youth's mother was a fellow educator did an apology follow. Here, the immediate generalisation and stereotype of Indians is re-created by the educator who assumes that the fault lies with the Indian youth. Even in this instance, class is not an insulator to systemic inequalities, and intervention only occurred due to the interviewee's parent being an educator themselves:

> *"It was 5 or 6 versus 1. It was a physical fight. I got scolded once the fight ended and blamed, and when the teachers found out they didn't realise at that point that my mom was a teacher, but when they found out then they were like- I remember the teacher apologised for scolding me."*

II. A system designed for failure

The education system itself is a source of frustration for Indian youth. From a lack of resources to limited access through the quota system for matriculation, these grievances came up in our conversations across different states. This systemic issue hinders youths' growth and learning. Regarding language learning, specifically their mother tongue, some youths mentioned a lack of available resources.

> *"For me, I did not learn Tamil in my secondary school. It was just like home-taught. I cannot write or read Tamil. I can only speak... Because in my primary school, I was the only Indian in the whole batch."*

In 2023, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim sought to work with the Ministry of Education to relax the requirements for Tamil to be taught in national secondary schools.[3] As this youth narrates, they can speak the language only because it was taught at home, as it was not offered at school. Cultural and language erosion is partly the fault of the wider community, but it also falls on institutions that fail to cultivate it.

Institutional discrimination is also felt through the quota system, specifically when entering matriculation. After Sijil Persekolahan Malaysia (SPM), many seek matriculation as an avenue to pursue higher education because of their personal financial constraints, as matriculation is subsidised[4] for these students. This can help minimise the financial burden on their parents.

In 2019, former Education Minister Maszlee Malik announced that the student intake for matriculation would increase from 25,000 to 40,000, while retaining the Bumiputera-to-non-Bumiputera quota at a 90:10 split.[5] This quota system for the matriculation programme was first introduced in

[3] Bernama, "PM Anwar Wants Conditions Relaxed For Tamil Classes In Secondary Schools", *Bernama,* (July 22, 2023) https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2208918

[4] "Matriculation Programme (MOE)", *MyGovernment,* (n.d.)https://www.malaysia.gov.my/en/personas/school-leavers/laluan-pendidikan-akademik/matriculation-programme-moe

[5] Jerry Choong, "Minister: 15,000 Spots Added to Matriculation Intake, but 90pc Bumi Quota to Remain," *MalayMail,* April 24, 2019. https://www.malaymail.com/amp/news/malaysia/2019/04/24/minister-15000-spots-added-to-matriculation-intake-but-90pc-bumi-quota-to-r/1746498.

2005.[6] Through our conversations with the youths who have achieved high results, their stories detail the various ways in which they are disadvantaged:

> *"I applied for matriculation but didn't get it, while people with lower grades got in. It was very surprising for me. Even recently, friends of mine who got straight A+ couldn't get into matriculation, while those who are Malay get in easily just because of the quota system."*

In April 2026, the MADANI government promised to uphold the 90% Bumiputera quota system to support disadvantaged youths in those communities, stating that this will bridge the gap between urban elites and youths from rural areas.[7] The excerpt highlights a systemic issue youths have faced for decades. It is a prevalent divider among ethnic groups and has disproportionately affected those from lower income brackets. What is evident is the need to change this. This frustration bleeds into their overall outlook: their voices are not heard, they do not receive sufficient support, and they do not see leaders speak out about reforming the quota system to reflect socioeconomic needs.

The alternative for others is opting for Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM), which is more academically challenging.[8] In a system meant to prepare them for university and the workforce, they already face systemic issues and are sidelined, causing them to lose faith in institutions to support them. A once affirmative action policy has evolved into systematic discrimination of youths across the board.

Providing matriculation spaces for youths based on their families' household income is not a new phenomenon.[9] Numerous calls have been made over the years, including by DAP's P. Ramasamy in 2019 and the Pakatan Harapan coalition.[10] Supporting youths from disadvantaged backgrounds does not take away from Bumiputera admissions to matriculation. Upholding these thresholds gains political power, and youths rejected by institutions meant to support them bear the cost.

Aside from traditional education, there needs to be more emphasis on non-conventional education pathways such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes. The Indian youths we spoke to had access to these programmes. However, these operated in parallel with their traditional university programmes. While some praised the initiative, most youths were unaware of TVET or already distrusted the Malaysian Indian Transformation Unit (MITRA) and its effectiveness.

In July 2026, the Human Resource Ministry promised to raise TVET to an international level,[11] providing credibility and global recognition over the next five years. This would open doors for youths to non-traditional education routes. While pushing non-traditional forms of education is valuable, it appears to be a by-product of keeping Indian youths out of traditional education. The colonial segregation mechanism is at work here, whereby youths who are disenfranchised by the system are pushed towards other avenues, such as TVET, which has yet to achieve international recognition, instead of fixing the issue of matriculation quotas.

[6] Genna Ash, "What's Next for Malaysia'S Controversial Race-based Admissions Quota?," *Study International*, May 17, 2019, https://studyinternational.com/news/whats-next-for-malaysias-controversial-race-based-admissions-quota/.

[7] The Star, "Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has reaffirmed that the 90% Bumiputera admission quota will be maintained," Facebook Video, April 13, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/TheStarOnline/videos/prime-minister-datuk-seri-anwar-ibrahim-has-reaffirmed-that-the-90-bumiputera-ad/1667704384587033/

[8] Minderjeet Kaur, "Matriculation an Easier Path to Public Universities Than STPM, Says Don," *Free Malaysia Today*, April 24, 2019, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/04/24/matriculation-an-easier-path-to-public-universities-than-stpm-says-don.

[9] "Anwar's Sidestepping Ethnic Policies: Not a Way to Gain Ground," *FULCRUM*, August 22, 2023, https://fulcrum.sg/anwars-sidestepping-ethnic-policies-not-a-way-to-gain-ground/.

[10] Opalyn Mok, "Pakatan 'failed to move forward' on Bumi Quota for Matriculation Intake, Says Ramasamy," *Malay Mail*, April 24, 2019, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/04/24/pakatan-failed-to-move-forward-on-bumi-quota-for-matriculation-intake-says/1746554.

[11] Aza Jemima Ahmad, "HR Ministry Launches Five-year Plan to Take Malaysian TVET Global," *NST Online*, July 2, 2026, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/07/1478802/hr-ministry-launches-five-year-plan-take-malaysian-tvet-global.

III. The role of தமிழ் schools

> *"I think Indians would know this, that people like to call us* apunene. *Since kindergarten, I have heard those types of slurs."*

This darker-skinned, mixed-race interviewee described the discrimination experienced at a young age. As established throughout this section, it is not uncommon for Indian youths. Vernacular schools are perceived as divisive institutions that undermine national unity and the development of a socially cohesive society. There have been calls from former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad for the abolishment[12] of them due to the racial divide that is apparent in these schools. The reality is that vernacular schools, specifically Tamil schools, can offer a safety net for Indian youths. Parents, or those planning to have children, point to Tamil schools as a safer option. The Education Ministry plans to train and hire 1,417 Tamil school teachers by 2030, pumping more resources into these schools.[13] While vernacular schools aim to cultivate cultural understanding and language learning for Indian and Chinese students, this also serves a broader purpose, especially for Indian youths.

A youth who grew up in Perak described their childhood of going to Tamil school, a decision their father made. Initially, they describe the efforts of Tamil teachers who do not give up on their students. Here, the state actor takes on the role of an empowering educator. These Tamil teachers are aware of the institutional hurdles. Even this youth who went to Tamil school in Melaka and comes from a background where their parents pushed them academically described their experience at Tamil schools as positive. The educators here are nurturers, preparing these youths for a system that is stacked against them:

> *"...in Tamil school, the Tamil school teachers were very, very passionate... How do I say [this]? They gave their lives to make us study."*

This is an example of institutional actors working to protect their students, albeit from a larger institutional problem. Not correcting discriminatory practices at every turn for many Indian youths is a vital sign of state neglect which extends beyond just their schooling years and matriculation, but even in securing housing and jobs as explored in the next section.

[12] FMT Reporters, "Abolish Vernacular Schools to Reduce Racial Divide, Says Dr M," *Free Malaysia Today*, August 30, 2023, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/08/30/abolish-vernacular-schools-to-reduce-racial-divide-says-dr-m.

[13] Teh Athira Yusof, Chow How Ban, and R. Aravinthan, "300 Teachers Appointed to Tamil Schools," *The Star*, November 29, 2025, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/29/300-teachers-appointed-to-tamil-schools.

2.2 Missed opportunities

Indian youths' experience of institutional and social discrimination does not stop at their education journey. As they enter the workforce, Indian youth continue to experience institutional and social discrimination in two sectors: housing and work opportunities. These forms of discrimination operate through multiple layers of exclusion, including a lack of information about the system itself and outright denial or rejection when they apply for jobs or housing.

The first layer is exclusion from information, where Indian youth themselves were denied access to clear standards or policies, if there were any. In the second layer of exclusion, Indian youth may have faced exclusion in the form of participation, in which most justification of the exclusion was based on racism, embedding the existing prejudice into the Indian youth's enrolment in the workforce.

As Indian youth continue to struggle in addressing all these layers of exclusion, some Indian youth are experiencing 'stuckedness', in which Ghassan Hage, in his book chapter 'Waiting out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality', essentially argues that stuckedness is rooted in existential immobility, the inability of an individual to achieve their expected life trajectories. Further discussion below shows how exclusions in the work and housing sectors, perpetuated by multiple layers of exclusion, contribute to the feeling of stuckedness among Indian youth.



I. The first layer of exclusion
Information as a tool of power

One dimension of this discrimination is the unclear standards or merit used in hiring or housing.

> *"I applied to several jobs, and through MyStep. Every single time when I go there, I'm the only Indian there. They won't choose me. So I was thinking, what's the reason why they are not choosing me? Recently, last week, I went for an interview. He said, you are a strong applicant. I was so positive that I will get the job... But in the end, it goes to another Malay girl who did an internship... So from that point of view, is it just because of being Indian that I'm getting rejected?"*

Her reflection on her failure to secure the job becomes a question of what information she missed in the hiring process that might have affected her chances. She sensed that merit alone was not enough, and it was not limited to her own career. She extended the same observation to her father, a geography teacher whose promotion into senior administrative roles was repeatedly delayed while younger, less experienced Malay colleagues advanced over him:

> *"So even in school, after becoming a teacher, if you look at it, mostly in the higher positions, there were very few Indians... So for a few years, 10 to 15 years, he was just in the GPK HEM stage (and didn't progress further). But there were other Malays who were younger than him. If you look at them, they climb (the ladder) very fast. So even if we are older than them... we are not getting what we should get... So I feel they say that (in) speeches is fair, but I feel that reality is not fair."*

This then brings into question whether most of the excuses for the quota system in employment or housing are an outright act of racism, or a disguise justifying discrimination using the quota system. This is one of the dilemmas faced by workers, specifically for Indian youth, if they intend to fight the discrimination that happened in the system.

Informational ambiguity becomes a hurdle for Indian youth to climb the social mobility ladder, which causes their feeling of stuckedness. The findings show that there is awareness among Indian youth of the institutional and structural discrimination that they experienced, but there is a lack of agency, especially in terms of information or knowledge of the way to deal with such discrimination, leading to them being left in a state of existential immobility.

II. Second layer of exclusion
Outright rejection or denied at entry

> *"So one of my friends from school, a Chinese guy, was working in a computer shop part-time... said to me, 'Oh yeah, the supervisor said if it's my friend, I can hire'... I sold one computer, things were going well and all that, then the supervisor came in at like 2 o'clock in the afternoon... he looks at me, then he brings my friend to the back, and then I lost my job. Just like that. So he came, he paid me, then he said, 'oh, the boss called and he said, actually we shouldn't have hired, we gotta calculate',*

I knew already at that point what was going on... I told my friend, 'You just go and ask why. Once I leave, you go and ask why, I guarantee you, it's racism'.. Then he went and asked after that, and yeah, (the boss said) 'don't hire Indians, because they will steal things.'"

In this example, discrimination was masked with excuses of overhiring. This does not happen only in employment. Outright denial due to racism also widely happened in housing. A systematic quantitative study conducted by Architects of Diversity (AOD) shows that 31.7% of rental advertisements in Klang Valley systematically exclude Indians.[14] Many of our respondents shared experiences of being denied housing.

"...one of my friends, so it's also a Chinese girl and an Indian boyfriend on their profile picture... so they were looking for a house. They went to this agent, that agent, trying to rent a room, a house, always gets rejected. The girl was damn confused... so then she was saying she didn't really get what was going on... So one day the boyfriend said, you just change your WhatsApp profile picture, just change it to her. The next day she got a place."

Such refusal or rejection is due to racism caused by prejudice and stereotypes experienced by the Indian community. Another respondent shared some of the prejudice and stereotypes that further perpetuate the discrimination faced by Indian youth in establishing access to housing.

"...I moved from Kedah to Kuala Lumpur and experienced very direct racial discrimination in the property market...rooted in negative stereotypes of Indians... 'Indians are not good paymasters, Indians are alcoholic'..."

Property owners, what they end up doing is they end up doing sort of, if they get a lot Indian tenant enquiries, then they'll increase the rent, or, you know, make really sort of like, three plus two (deposit terms), I mean, those are fair, but at the same time, restrict a lot of people from getting housing. Yeah, so that's a big problem. All those things are rooted in negative perception of the Indian community, so for sure, I've been affected."

The examples above also show how house owners might subtly reject or deny access to housing. While the AOD study cited above focused on race-based exclusion criteria in rental advertisements, house owners could also use other tactics to discourage certain renters, in this case based on race. House owners who engaged with Indian youth might require higher deposits or increase rent to restrict Indian tenants' access to housing. This practice is similar to the examples given earlier, where the manager used overhiring as an excuse while disguising the real reason for the respondent being fired. The findings here showed that while opportunities, especially in terms of housing and employment, exist, structural and social discrimination becomes the barrier to accessing them, which led to Indian youth being stuck.

[14] Jason Wee "Analysis of online room rental listings reveal majority are racially discriminatory", *Architects of Diversity*, March 12, 2026 https://www.aodmalaysia.org/post/analysis-of-online-room-rental-listings-reveal-majority-are-racially-discriminatory

III. Overcoming the double-layered exclusion

While acknowledging that Indian youth were stuck and remain in a state of existential immobility, respondents were also cautious about painting an entirely negative picture of their future in Malaysia. One respondent was cautious when voicing her opinion on the opportunities available to Indian youth.

> *"There are opportunities in Malaysia, but you have to 'really fight' to grab them."*

This combined outlook may reflect Indian community participation in the workforce. The 2025 Labour Survey Report shows that the unemployment rate among Indian communities is 3.8%, compared to 3.3% for Bumiputera, 2.0% for Chinese, and 4.6% for others.[15] The same report shows that the Indian community recorded a 71.8% labour force participation rate by highest certificate obtained, compared with 70.8% for Bumiputera, 72.4% for Chinese, and 65.5% for Others. The sentiments recorded by Indian youth about the difficulty in securing employment can be seen as a reflection of the higher unemployment rate recorded by Indian communities in comparison to other ethnicities such as the Bumiputera and Chinese in the report. At the same time, the respondents' optimistic approach to acknowledging existing opportunities reflects the high labour force participation rate among Indian communities.

Indian youths' resilience is evident in their developing approaches to overcome the double-layered exclusions they face in accessing housing and employment opportunities. For example, a respondent in Kelantan offered a rare example of institutional practice working in Indian youths' favour, in which quota became a tool of inclusion rather than exclusion of the Indian community from employment.

> *"There are opportunities. In the state government, there are even informal quotas where they prefer to hire an Indian to replace a retiring Indian staff member to maintain representation."*

Elsewhere in the report, the respondents used the term 'quotas' negatively to describe systems that concentrated opportunities among the majority and left Indian youths competing for limited remaining numbers. Here, however, the respondent understood an informal quota as a safeguard against Indian representation disappearing altogether. However, this practice is not official and, as such, meant that, depending on the hiring committee's inclusivity practices, such 'informal quotas' could cease to exist once the committee decided to do so. In fact, there has been similar discussion of increasing non-Malay representation in the public workforce to address the declining number of non-Malays in the civil service. As of 2009, Indian community representation in the civil service was 4.3%, a decrease from 15.7% in 1969-1970.[16]

Indian youth in a Malay-majority state such as Kelantan adapt socially and linguistically to the local Malay environment. This practice is a strategy for the Indian community in a Malay-majority state not only to survive, but also to embed their presence in the state's existing social structure. Such strategies guarantee access, but they do not address the microaggressions Indian youth face in their daily lives.

[15] Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) "Labour Force Survey Report Malaysia 2025", Accessed on the 26th of September 2026 at https://mylabourhub.dosm.gov.my/publication/ain?menu=UGVuZXJiaXRhbg%3D%3D&submenu=UGVuZXJiaXRhbiBET1NN

[16] Lee Hwok Aun, 2023, Diversity in Malaysia's Civil Service: From Venting Old Grouses to Seeking New Grounds, *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue 34.

At the same time, addressing factors such as class and social capital can help Indian youth overcome layers of exclusion. Hence, some participants deliberately reject the victimhood mindset and instead highlight skills, language, and resources as opportunities.

> *"I have complained about it... But then to a certain point: coming back to how I was in school, you just have to take a stance for something like, look, this is what I do. This is how I speak, and you got to accept me for, there's nothing in my contract that has said oh I need to be a certain race I need to speak a certain language to be to serve this position. See sometimes again the resources that have been given to you, you have to make use of whatever is. It's how you make use of it and how you bring it forward."*

This respondent's emphasis on resources was a reflection of his life journey, losing his father at the age of 16, and subsequently failing his SPM. He retook the exams and later secured his first job as a Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) contractor, which he fought for against all odds, as he was initially refused placement due to his race. He acknowledged that structural and social discrimination still exists, and that the exclusion layer remains one of the challenges he has to overcome, but his emphasis on resources has become key to overcoming hurdles in accessing opportunities.

This raises the question of class, as people with higher socioeconomic status are perceived to have more resources to access opportunities. One respondent shared an anecdote about his Malay friend, who was able to represent Malaysia in tennis mainly because of wealth and access to facilities. Another participant highlighted the role of civil society in helping youth not only access these resources but also develop social capital.

> *"So, what happened was, this MINDA was the one that guided all the students. So, starting from Standard 6 until Form 5. So, it's for Indian students. So, what happened technically, whatever care or guidance that the Indian students lacked in their school, they got it out here. That made them focus, to not lose their mind or lose their focus during the secondary. But that's only like 10% of the entire (community). Not everyone. Because they also need funds."*

Such support, especially in terms of exposure to various networks, is important for the Indian youth, not only as a form of exposure and to widen their network, but also to strengthen the bonds among the Indian youth community themselves. The next chapter will further discuss the diversity hidden under the Indian ethnic label used in Malaysia and the fragmentation that comes with it.

3 Identity and belonging



3.1 Fragmentation within the Indian community

I. Sub-Ethnic Groups

'Indian' as a label and category is an inherited category from the colonial authorities as a way of defining Indian ethnicity in relation to Malay and Chinese in Malaya.[17] These broad labels conceal substantial internal diversity, including Tamil, Malayalee, Telugu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Sri Lankan Tamils, Sindhis, among others. These distinctions are shaped by language, regional origin, religion, migration histories and community institutions. Such diversity, concealed by the Indian category in Malaysia, means each sub-ethnic group carries its own cultural practices, histories, and forms of belonging. As one respondent explained:

> *"We, as an Indian community, as a community itself, we have the Tamilians, we have the Telugus, we have the Malayalis, Gujaratis, and so on, so forth. And every ethnicity within this, every sub-ethnic within this main umbrella, they have their own culture, language, and tradition."*

This diversity within the 'Indian' ethnicity in Malaysia was often rarely highlighted. In fact, the existence of these sub-ethnic groups within the Indian ethnic groups in Malaysia is important to be discussed if we want to unpack the intra-ethnic relations thoroughly. For example, Indian migration to Malaya during the British colonial period was not uniform: Tamil labourers formed the largest group, alongside Telugus, Malayalees, Gujaratis, Punjabis, and Sri Lankan Tamils.

[17] Amarjit Kaur, 2001, Sojourners and Settlers: South Indians and Communal Identity in Malaysia, Bates, *Community, Empire and Migration South Asians in Diaspora*, page 185-205, Palgrave Publisher.

[18] Suppiah, U. and Sundara Raja, S. (2017) 'The Indian diaspora in Malaya: Links and divides between the Chettiar business class and working class Indians during the British colonial era', Indian Historical Review, 44(2), pp. 252–269.

II. Fragmentation and social boundaries among Malaysian Indian

Different sub-ethnic groups during those periods were put into different economic roles and sectors such as plantation labour, civil service, security and armed forces, among others, which then produced an unequal position and relationships within the wider Indian population.[18] For example, individuals from Malayalee background were often perceived as the wealthy sub-communities. One respondent mentioned this in his interview.

> *"Malayalee and Tamil, so they will always label a rich one… different races doing that to us. Why is our own community also doing that?"*

The frustration voiced by the respondent is the fact that prejudice and stereotypes against the Indian community in Malaysia are not just about the prejudice and stereotypes being held by other ethnic groups against the Indian community, but also the prejudice and stereotypes that continue to be upheld within the Indian community itself, coming from the diverse background of sub-ethnic groups categorised as Indian in Malaysia. In fact, one respondent recalled that a Tamil individual adopted the surname "Nair" on Facebook, despite having no Malayalee background or ability to speak Malayalam. The respondent understood the decision as an attempt to access the perceived status attached to the name:

> *"We used to know someone who was actually Tamil, but after spending time with us, they changed their Facebook profile name to 'Nair' because they thought it was a status symbol. They weren't Nair at all and didn't speak Malayalam. We asked them why they changed their name, and it was just about the status."*

This sharing is particularly revealing because "Nair" is not simply a Malayalee identifier; it is also a social marker that becomes currency. Sub-ethnic identity can therefore function as social currency; it can be utilised to pursue prestige within the community. Such social currency can exist in many forms, some attached to sub-ethnic identity, others to concepts such as caste and skin colour. In fact, one respondent explained that colourist judgments appeared in routine family conversations, especially amongst older relatives, and that some women in their family remained unmarried partly because of these attitudes:

> *"I had this problem of colourism, so I'm a dark-skinned person. I don't know if it is related to the caste system. Given the Indian community; how they talk about Indian ladies, I have older Indian cousins and it was very obvious, you would actively hear these old people (say) 'she's a bit dark la'… (At) that time I didn't know it was bad but a lot of them weren't married because of that."*

This experience by the respondent suggests that colourism can be reproduced in everyday family speech, where skin tone becomes a criterion through which women's desirability and marriage prospects are assessed. Such comments may be passed off as casual observations or personal preferences; however, cumulatively, they can assign lower social value to darker-skinned individuals. Colourism is no longer about appearance; it can shape a person's self-esteem and access to social acceptance.

III. Indian youth perception on the fragmentation of Malaysian Indians

Discourse on fragmentation of Indian communities by sub-ethnic groups in Malaysia does not mean that preservation of sub-ethnic culture is unimportant. One respondent stressed the importance of preserving them while building common points between each sub-ethnic group:

> *"Every sub-ethnics within this main umbrella they have their own culture, language, tradition. For me, all the culture, all this tradition, must be preserved, must be protected at all costs. But, end of the day, they all find common... similarities among differences, and work as a community."*

For Indian youths, sub-ethnic identity can sustain cultural continuity through language, family networks and religious institutions. But fixed assumptions can also turn these identities into boundaries that weaken community solidarity. When community life is organised primarily around narrow linguistic or status-based affiliations, support networks can become uneven.



3.2 Religion



The relationship between being Indian and being religious in Malaysia is neither automatic nor fixed. Religion in Malaysia is not considered only a private matter. For example, Islam is the religion of the Federation under Article 3 of the Federal Constitution, while Article 160 constitutionally defines a "Malay" as someone who professes Islam, habitually speaks Malay and conforms to Malay customs. For minority communities, religious affiliation does not carry the same constitutional relationship to ethnicity and State recognition. Hinduism may be socially read as "Indian", but it does not define Indianness in the legal manner in which Federal Constitutions help to define Malayness. While religion operates in private spheres, temple demolitions made it a public matter for youths.

For youths who considered religion important, faith was often described less as ritual participation and more as a framework for how one should live. One respondent described religion as a "completely personal system". Religion offered moral boundaries, shaped personal discipline, and helped make sense of adulthood, relationships, and responsibility.

Indian Muslim respondents occupy a distinctive position within the wide Indian community. They are Muslim, like Malaysia's Malay-majority population, and ethnically Indian. This shared religious affiliation does not translate into uncomplicated social and ethnic belonging. Malaysian Indian Muslims' identity is overlapping and sometimes unsettled, navigating between Indian ethnic heritage, Muslim religious affiliation, and wider Malaysian social categories.[19] One Indian Muslim respondent reflected on their readings of Hinduism and Islam and the similarities in how to lead one's life. They also explained how religion had a positive impact:

> *"It [religion] shaped me. Until now, I didn't smoke. I didn't drink.... It's all because religion stopped me."*

This shows how religious agency works, in which religious teachings influence individuals' habits, boundaries and ethical commitment.[20] The freedom to choose and practice restraint makes religion a framework to navigate their own lives.

[19] Koh, K.W. (2018) 'Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese, and Baweanese, by Patrick Pillai', Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia, 174(1), pp. 121–123.

[20] Burchardt, M., & Becker, J. (2023). Subjects of God? Rethinking Religious Agency, Biography, and Masculinity from the Global South. Historical Social Research, 48(4), 131-155.

I. When religion and culture intertwine

Through Hinduism, Thaipusam and Deepavali are historically associated practices with the Tamil-majority Indian community. This does not mean that all Malaysian Indians are Hindu, or strongly religious. Hindu religious practice becomes one of the most recognisable lenses through which 'Indian culture' is seen and discussed. One respondent mentioned festivals and activities organised by the temple, where their father served as president:

> *"Of the Shivan Temple. So, he was the president. So, from a young age, we always grew up going to the temple. We even built our own temple on the estate. So, for festivals, we would take leave to come; we would bring friends to show them around; many of us would do that."*

Such activities enable religious institutions to play a huge role, not only in preserving the community's culture, but also as a symbol of inherited estate history, and the survival of community institutions across generations.

Indian youths are also developing a distinction between being 'culturally Indian' and being religious as they negotiate their Indianness. One respondent drew a much clearer distinction between Punjabi culture and Sikh religious teachings:



"I always separate culture and religion... when you look at Punjabi culture, it's, like, opposing, you know? For instance, in Sikhism, we don't believe in superstitions... But you look at a Punjabi wedding, it's full of these small, small rituals... but that's the beauty... I can say I'm very Punjabi, but I'm not necessarily religious. You can be religious but not cultural; you can be cultured, but not religious."

Here, Punjabi culture includes weddings, rituals, food, and music, whereas Sikhism, by contrast, is understood as a set of religious teachings that may not always align with every Punjabi custom. Religion and culture are multi-faceted. A Tamil respondent explained how they supported church groups and carried ***paal kudam*** (milk pot) during Hindu temple festivals. The particular histories and religious traditions shape the connection between culture and religion.



II. Religious Spaces and Community Belonging
Demolition, Heritage, Recognition

Religious structures, like temples, are community and cultural spaces and historical sites. Participation in religious spaces is not an indicator of religiosity; instead, it shows religious institutions as a third space for Indian youth. For instance, a temple festival can offer a social environment where youths meet friends, participate in performances, and volunteer. A gurdwara can host youth camps, music, service, and intergenerational gatherings. One Telugu respondent made this distinction particularly clearly:

> *"I'm not a religious person. But I am involved in temple activities and all under Telugu Associations... Doing traditional dance, any temple activities, volunteering and all."*

In such settings, participation becomes a way to retain social and cultural connection. Religious participation also creates opportunities to be useful to others, gain recognition and remain connected to a wider Indian community.[21] Shared participation can foster networks of trust and reciprocity.

[21] Norris, P. and Inglehart, R. (2004) 'Religious organizations and social capital', The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, 6(4).

Therefore, the issue of temple demolition, with the significance of religion as a space for community and the intertwined relationship of religion and culture discussed above, greatly impacted the community. Respondents range from outright rejection to conditional acceptance, community-directed responsibility, and political scepticism. For some, temple demolitions become more than just land and legal disputes but are a matter of respect:

> *"My blood boils because indirectly, they are actually insulting our religion. That's something that I can never accept. They are insulting our religion a lot...And I was wondering, all these years, 60 over years of independence, we have no issues with these temples. Why suddenly now, everything, they are picking up everything?"*

Some respondents distinguished long-established temples from newer structures and supported relocation or demolition only after consultation, due process and consideration of the site's history. Legality mattered, but it was not the only consideration. A legally justifiable decision can still be unfair if the temple's history was ignored or the community was not consulted.

A smaller group turned the responsibility to temple committees themselves for never formalising land ownership:

> *"I support our heritage, but temple management is often the problem. Why build a huge temple on land without permission? Leaders need to secure land titles instead of just focusing on festivals and money."*

However, this argument also assumes that obtaining a title was always straightforward. State governments have the authority to allocate land and approve construction zones for places of worship. Religious communities have faced delays and difficulties obtaining planning and zoning approvals for non-Muslim places of worship.[22][23]

With these challenges, some respondents saw temple demolitions as a political issue rather than a religious dispute. The key question was why a temple that had "been there for years" was suddenly framed as a problem, and they suggested the timing pointed to political motives rather than genuine legal concern. Respondents spoke generally about politicians playing the racial or religious card, while others questioned government authorities' actions or the use of provocative language on social media.

However, this does not mean that the Indian community's frustration with the temple demolition and other related land issues is recent. Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) raised temple demolitions as part of its grievances, which contributed to the movement's mobilisation in 2007, alongside estate displacement and dissatisfaction with political representation by MIC.[24] HINDRAF amplified these frustrations to the wider Indian community, representing unresolved concerns about land, citizenship, equality, and whether existing political parties could represent them.



[22] Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2024) DFAT country information report: Malaysia. 24 June. Available at: https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/malaysia-dfat-country-information-report-24-june-2024.pdf

[23] U.S. Department of State (2024) 2023 report on international religious freedom: Malaysia. Office of International Religious Freedom, 26 June. Available at: https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/

[24] Kaur, A. (2018) The Hindu Rights Action Force and the Malaysian Indian Minority after the 2018 General Election in Malaysia. RSIS Working Paper No. 319. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

3.3 Caste

While caste is not seen as relevant to Indian youths, it still shapes family decisions, marriage and community life. Youths must negotiate the boundaries of belonging it creates. In rejecting caste identity, they articulate a more inclusive Malaysian Indian identity. The occupational structure may have weakened, but the relationships reproduced through colonial migration were adapted to marriage preferences and community associations. Caste survives less as a system that determines a young person's occupation, and more as an inherited boundary that can influence who is accepted, who belongs, and which community networks remain available to them.

The caste system was brought over through the kangani system whereby a trusted estate worker appointed by the British recruited relatives, acquaintances and other members from their village networks for employment in Malaya.[25] People from similar local, kinship, and caste backgrounds were concentrated on the same estates. This allowed inherited marriage preferences, community customs and norms to survive even after their original occupational functions weakened. Caste associations are not just remnants of occupational structures. They became networks of social belonging, mutual assistance, marriage connections and access to community resources.

[25] Kaur, A. (2012) 'Labour brokers in migration: Understanding historical and contemporary transnational migration regimes in Malaya/Malaysia', International Review of Social History, 57(S20), pp. 225–252.

[26] Abraham, J. (2024) 'Caste and kinship', in [The Oxford Handbook of Caste (2023], pp. 104–120. Oxford University Press.

I. Marriage: The Visible Marker of Caste

Scholarship on caste and kinship identifies marriage as a central institution in which caste membership, status and social boundaries are reproduced.[26] Caste becomes a vetting mechanism for relationships. This was reflected in the distinction respondents repeatedly made between friendship and marriage. Caste rarely determined whom they could befriend, study or work with, but it could become decisive when a relationship was expected to result in marriage.

Caste operates not as an internal belief, but as a condition imposed through family recognition. Here, the marriage necklace or thali became a proxy marker of caste:

> *"My father doesn't like the caste system, so we don't talk much about it, but my relatives do talk about it… I went and asked my amma about her thali design; my dad scolded me because of it. He told me that people see the thali to know what caste you are from... and that is something our ancestors did and left."*

Thali designs have historically functioned as markers of caste and community, with particular designs associated with groups such as Gounders and Chettiars, alongside the broader Telugu and Malayalee communities, communicating family and community. The object is preserved, but caste literacy has weakened across generations.



II. Caste in politics and community associations

According to youths, caste is not a formally stated rule within political institutions or community associations. They perceived it as operating informally through cultural associations, leadership blocs, patronage networks and decisions about who receives positions, support and access to resources.

One respondent described attending a caste association gathering of 100 people in Melaka that was presented to a visiting public figure as a broader Tamil heritage event instead of a caste association. This suggests that caste associations can remain socially acceptable by presenting their activities through the broader language of Tamil culture and heritage. Caste has not disappeared, but it has become less visible beneath a more inclusive language of cultural preservation. It also suggests that political participation can give caste associations public visibility and legitimacy.

The overlap between caste association, cultural representation and political recognition also shaped how respondents interpreted Malaysian Indian politics. This respondent has negative perceptions, not a fact, of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) due to this dynamic of leadership and caste identities:

> *"MIC has been based on race and caste for 60 years, from Tun Samy Vellu until today. It's often a fight between two castes: Thevar and Gounder. Samy Vellu was Thevar; Subra [Subramaniam Sinniah] was Gounder. After Samy [Vellu] came Palanivel (Gounder), and now Dr Subra [Dr. Subramaniam Sathasivam] (Thevar). These two castes use their positions to run programs for their own, and they are usually well-off."*

Public discussions of caste within MIC exist, but the caste identities assigned to individual leaders can be disputed. The respondent understood the party's leadership contests not simply as ideological or personal rivalries, but as competition between internal community networks, in this instance caste. Media reports provide some support to the respondent's claim, as it establishes that caste formed part of the interpretation of MIC's Leadership contests, however it does not demonstrate that caste alone determined those contests.[27]

[27] The Malay Mail Team. "MIC Past, Present Presidents Engage in War over Vell Paari's Sacking." Malay Mail, July 19, 2013. https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2013/07/19/mic-past-present-presidents-engage-in-war-over-vell-paaris-sacking/497005

The respondent connected this perceived factionalism to the failure of Maika Holdings, the MIC-linked investment vehicle established to pool the savings of Malaysian Indians.[28] The respondent recalled the disappointment in direct terms:

> *"Maika Holdings was a failure. Our grandparents invested their hard-earned money, and after years, they only got back what they put in. If those shares were managed well, they would be a huge asset for the Indian community today."*

This complicates the nostalgia for Samy Vellu encountered in the Engagement in Politics section in this report. Some respondents remembered him as a visible, forceful leader who gave the community a sense of political presence. At the same time, Maika Holdings became a lasting symbol of institutional failure during his leadership. Nostalgia for Samy Vellu is rooted more in the visibility and authority he represented than in a consistently positive assessment of what MIC delivered to the community. The same respondent distanced himself from caste as it creates internal divisions, weakening the community's capacity to pursue shared interests.

A respondent's allegation, not an established pattern, extended the critique of caste in political life to youth organisations specifically, describing how funding and positions can be gatekept along caste lines:

> *"But newer generations we are against... all these stereotypes of one should not get married to lower caste and sort.... even for youth, if you aren't from the 'right' caste, you don't get funding or positions. The non-deserving ones will be getting the opportunities. Some youth organisations are becoming fanatical about it, asking for separate buildings and government support just for their caste. That too they ask for funding from the government, and the government is supporting it too."*

Over the years, MIC's political dominance has declined, and funding meant for the Indian community no longer falls under the party's purview. MITRA, under the Human Resources Ministry, currently administers the fund. This may reduce MIC's direct role as an intermediary; however, it does not necessarily remove informal networks from the process. Community actors may still influence who knows about the programmes, who is encouraged to apply, and who is connected to organisations that can secure support. The respondent raises this possibility, but further evidence is needed to determine whether caste shapes access under the current system.

Respondents saw a contradiction in Malaysian Indian political life: institutions intended to unite the community could also reproduce caste divisions. If viewed together, these accounts point to a wider problem of fragmented representation. Institutions established to represent Malaysian Indians as a collective may also be perceived as operating through narrower party, association and caste networks. The key concern highlighted by the youths in the interviews is that some do not trust community organisations to distribute leadership and resources according to merit and collective need. Caste therefore, to them, matters politically not only as an inherited identity, but also in how they explain exclusion, unequal access and the failure of Indian political institutions to represent the community as a whole.

[28] Maika raised approximately RM106 million, much of it from lower-income Indian shareholders, but its assets had reportedly fallen to between RM30 million and RM40 million by 2000 following weak investments and management failures. See: Kathirasen, A. "Maika, Hindraf and Samy Vellu's Failures & Triumphs." ***Free Malaysia Today***, September 16, 2022. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2022/09/17/maika-hindraf-and-samy-vellus-failures-triumphs.

III. Generational transition

Caste appears to be in a period of generational transition within Malaysian Indian society. Outright rejection is simple, but family constraints and political associations uphold the caste practice.

The interviews also suggest that young people's exposure to caste varies by family, locality, and community networks. One Indian Muslim respondent from Kelantan described growing up with little awareness of caste and encountering it only after moving to Melaka and Kuala Lumpur. Caste awareness depends partly on whether the surrounding family and community institutions continue to recognise and reproduce it.

Emirbayer and Mische's concept of temporal agency helps to explain this transition.[29] Decisions are shaped simultaneously by habits inherited from the past, judgments made in the present, and imagined futures. Indian youths inherit family expectations and social boundaries, evaluate whether to accommodate or resist them in immediate situations and imagine a future Malaysian Indian community in which caste no longer determines identity or belonging. Youths' rejection of caste reflects agency, though their ability to act on the rejection still remains conditioned by family relationships and the social consequences of defying inherited expectations.

[29] Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A. (1998) 'What is agency?', American Journal of Sociology, 103(4), pp. 962–1023.

> *"Most of the B40 people actually belong to the Scheduled caste people... Okay, and those who are into this mafias, to this gang, gangsterism and all that, I actually believe they belong to the lower caste. I'm not sure if their mentality was more like that of their ancestors, generation by generation... we shouldn't be talking caste even in Malaysia"*

These prejudicial generalisations are not evidence. The respondent rejected caste as inappropriate to contemporary Malaysia while reproducing caste hierarchy through assumptions about poverty, behaviour and inherited mentality.

Caste does not necessarily disappear when people stop defending it. Instead, it can become intertwined with judgments about class, housing, education and respectability. This allows inherited hierarchy to survive through socioeconomic status rather than caste. This kind of language appears to mark internal boundaries, as some respondents described people living in Program Perumahan Rakyat flats as socially undesirable. In contrast, others drew distinctions through skin colour and mannerisms, labelling Indians as 'good' or 'bad'. These accounts show that the community draws a boundary that determines who is respectable, acceptable, or worthy of belonging.

Caste is therefore weakening unevenly. It has lost much of its moral legitimacy among youths interviewed, none of whom openly defended caste discrimination. Yet its social influence remains visible where young people depend on family acceptance and where ideas about hierarchy are reproduced through marriage, class and respectability.

3.4 Language & class

The colonial influence of the values subscribed to languages and class is tied into the fabric of the Indian community. The community has two distinct demographics: English-speaking Indians and Tamil-speaking Indians. While youths try to preserve their mother tongue, underlying realities shape how they value language. Indian youths link language to class, and they understand its value through institutions and social structures, unlike previous generations who grew up in mixed estates and neighbourhoods.



I. English: The class commodifier

In colonial-era plantations, English-speaking Sri Lankan Tamils and Malayalees worked as clerks and administrators, whereas South Indian Tamils were indentured labourers. 'Divide and rule' was used through jobs, housing, and language among the sub-ethnic groups. An English-speaking youth who came from a higher socioeconomic background detailed the realities of their family who lived and worked on the estates:

> *"[My grandfather] was a chief clerk in the estate. Both my mom's parents could read and write. Apparently, my maternal grandmother's mother could read and write in three languages, Tamil, Malayalam, and English."*

During a temple visit, a priest asked if I spoke Tamil. His response to my inability to speak Tamil was, "You must be educated". Even though he could communicate in more languages, he still held this colonial understanding of English as a marker of education. This has been further cemented by the job market reflecting the importance of English, and youths have adopted this understanding.[30]

> *"[There] is the stereotype... so it becomes this thing where you're trying so hard as a child to navigate...It's a specific thing because it's our [middle-class English-speaking Indians] privilege and then our cultural; we associate with like, 'oh we are better, we are atas'."*

This Indian youth, from a middle-class family and raised speaking English, uses 'atas' as slang to describe someone from a higher socioeconomic background. Society recognises English-speaking as upper-class, while alienating youths who do not. These youths, who grew up in English-speaking households, described their own perceptions of language within the community and beyond:

> *"[It's] a symptom of just how Indians or, like, the language has been treated or viewed by people outside of the community... like say you walk into a room and you speak in Tamil, you walk into a room, and you speak in English, very different ways...So, like, I feel like it's a trauma thing also. But it's a trauma response. Again, like, associating value to it, I disagree... Don't say that it [Tamil] has no value because it does."*

In colonial times, social mobility for Indians in these estates often depended on the languages they could speak. Here, Tamil speakers were considered less desirable for jobs compared to English or Malay speakers.[31] Tamil schools specifically were used by the British as a tool to bring in labourers to Malaya.[32] Already, there is a negative perception of the schools, with them seen as under-resourced "both in terms of human capital and physical infrastructure".[33]

However, as explored in the previous chapter, the youths we spoke to praised the value Tamil school education can bring beyond culture and language, such as protection from institutional discrimination. The realities, as detailed below, paint a picture of the different values attributed to Tamil as a language beyond the community.

[30] Khairul Firdaus Ne'matullah, Lim Seong Pek, and Siti Aisyah Roslan, "Speaking English in job interviews increases employability opportunities: Malaysian employer's perspectives", *International Journal of Language, Literacy and Translation,* 6, no. 2 (2023), 166-178.

[31] Dashini Jeyathurai, "Labouring Bodies, Labouring Histories: The Malaysian-Indian Estate Girl", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 47, no. 3 (2012): 303–323.

[32] Parameswari Krishnan, J. Hinduja Jayer Raman, and Rohini Krishnan, "A STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF ESTATE TAMIL SCHOOLS IN MALAYA". *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah,* 48, (2020): 173–88.

[33] Carl Vadivella Belle, *Tragic Orphans: Indians in Malaysia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (2015): 364

II. Sociocultural vs economic
The value of languages

Sociocultural value is commonly associated with languages that carry weight in ethnic identity, such as mother tongues like Tamil. Economic value, on the other hand, refers to the languages needed to succeed in Malaysia, based on their own conceptions of success and observations in daily life. These youths pointed to Tamil as a language that brought them closer to understanding their traditions, culture and ethnic identity. However, opportunities for success were limited, especially compared with English, Bahasa Malaysia, and Mandarin, where these languages were valued and emphasised more. The perception is that Tamil cannot provide economic opportunities for youths, but this is partly due to systems that reinforce and create this binary of economic value versus not.

Fig 4. Value of languages
Distinction according to Indian youths when asked what language is most important to succeed in Malaysia

English	International and economic advantage.
	Class commodifier within the Indian community.
	High importance in knowing the language, especially for corporate sector jobs.
	Within the Indian community, colonial understanding carries on.
Bahasa Malaysia	National language, holds patriotic value but also economic value for youths.
	Provides opportunities for youths to succeed.
	High importance in knowing the language, especially for government sector jobs.
	Dialects specifically on the East Coast creates ingroup connections.
Mandarin	Economic value and provides opportunities for youths to succeed
	High importance in knowing the language, especially for corporate sector jobs.
	Provides ingroup connections also on the East Coast.
Tamil	Sociocultural value, lacks economic value.
	For some youths, cultural preservation of languages is vital.
	Value of the language lies in connecting with their identity
	Includes mother tongue as well, but can provide ingroup community.

"[I]f your resume says you have Mandarin, people will look higher."

Youths' perceptions, based on personal experience, place economic importance on knowing Mandarin, in addition to the national language and English, especially for job applications. In 2020, it was reported that the population of Indian primary school students in Chinese schools increased from 1.67% to 2.75% over a decade.[34] Even in a conversation with a group of youths about the four major languages, the language least needed to succeed was Tamil.

"[My teacher said] you have good potential. You can actually do more, you know… Why not you learn Chinese [Mandarin], and you can go to Singapore and do this and all? Then I was like, I laughed at him, 'I know Tamil, I know another language, Tamil. I can't do anything.' 'Go to India,' he said. He made a joke of that."

The lack of external factors that value the language dampens their willingness to learn it, aside from the class factors mentioned above. There is an awareness that speaking Tamil has little weight in the working world.

"[A] Chinese person can live their whole life just talking to Chinese people, just doing business with Chinese people, and just growing their wealth with Chinese people; Indian people literally cannot… trying to do business only with the 6% of the population, and only talk the language of the 6% of the population… I regret not learning Tamil, but not learning Tamil hasn't affected my life economically in any way, right?"

This English-speaking youth demonstrates Tamil's precarity within the Indian community. Any motivation for wanting to learn the language is overridden by the demographics and sub-ethnic distribution which exists within the Indian community. A small population, paired with various languages spoken, means that, according to this youth, Indians can survive in Malaysia without speaking Tamil because it will not affect them economically.

Unlike the role Bahasa Malaysia plays for the Malay community, or Mandarin for the Chinese community, no common language unites the Indian community. While Mandarin itself is not the mother tongue of Malaysian Chinese, rather their dialects, the schooling system, which consolidated teachings into one language, was a unifying factor for the community. During colonial times, there were also Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu schools to support the fragmentation of ethnic groups, paired with a lack of funders within the community: "interest in establishing Tamil schools [which] was not strong among the Indian community."[35] While only Tamil schools have continued operating, that distinction remains in the community.

"It doesn't impact whether you speak Tamil or not because Chinese, there's a lot of Chinese corporate[s], so they prefer Chinese speaking. Malay, it's [the] national language, and English is [the] international language. Tamil is just a language. You just use Tamil to communicate with Tamil Indians only."

Tamil cannot provide an in-group connection with others such as Punjabis or Telegus, for example, so the language has its limitations. Even if they do not know the language, it does not absolve youths of the stereotypes that come with being Indian or a Tamil speaker. Youths' efforts to distance themselves from this are detrimental to the language and to themselves.

[34] Lu Wei Hoong, "Malaysia's Chinese Schools Make Adjustments as They Continue to Draw More Students of Other Races," *The Straits Times*, July 28, 2024, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-s-chinese-schools-make-adjustments-as-they-continue-to-draw-more-students-of-other-races.

[35] Parameswari Krishnan, J. Hinduja Jayer Raman, and Rohini Krishnan, "A STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF ESTATE TAMIL SCHOOLS IN MALAYA". *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah,* 48, (2020): 182.

[35] Parameswari Krishnan, J. Hinduja Jayer Raman, and Rohini Krishnan, "A STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF ESTATE TAMIL SCHOOLS IN MALAYA". *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah,* 48, (2020): 182.

III. Language preservation and belonging

Youths who acknowledge the importance of speaking their mother tongue, or Tamil, find pride in knowing languages as a tie to their identity.

> *"...back then we grew up speaking only Telugu and English at home... when I started working in a company surrounded by Indians and all that, I slowly learned to speak Tamil.....don't forget your roots, so mother tongue is very much important. Okay, your roots define who you are, and never be ashamed of that."*

These languages carry sociocultural value, and we need to change perceptions around them. These languages should be valued rather than relegated as unimportant or unable to support people in the job market. Learning Tamil strengthens ties of belonging to individual communities and the larger Indian community for those whose mother tongue is not Tamil. It is a source of unity and belonging for these youths.

Another value language provides is a sense of belonging. On the East Coast, language transcended class consciousness and helped ethnic minorities survive. Indian youths sit in a more complex landscape to navigate being a minority within a minority. Speaking local dialects and learning Mandarin became social capital for Indian youths who needed to build in-group connections. Language transforms from economic value to social capital. Being able to speak Bahasa Ganu or Kelate is a source of pride for these youths and a marker of being seen as a local. An Indian youth respondent from the East Coast spoke in English throughout our conversations. Later, when they met up with their Chinese friend, they spoke fluent Mandarin, even though both could speak fluent English, Malay, and their local dialect. This choice by the Indian youth interviewee to communicate with an ethnic minority outside the Indian community creates socio-cultural capital and an 'in' to a larger community.

This ingroup advantage is not limited to the East Coast, but becomes more pronounced because of the small Indian population there. Separately, one youth also shared their observations of being able to speak different languages and how, as a minority, that affords you more social capital:

> *"I was at the basketball tournament...there was a Nigerian kid with his dad...[he] spoke fluent Mandarin... I feel that since he knows how to speak Mandarin now, they're more welcoming... They're going to accept him even more... Even though he looks different from the rest of them, he speaks their tongue. So they're more comfortable. You know how when you go to the mamak, you speak Malay, you speak Tamil, the Anna [older brother] or the Thambi [younger brother] ... they're immediately so comfortable with you. Yeah, right? Same thing."*

The need to belong and be accepted is prevalent even through language. The value of languages is fluid and evolves with different situations. Mandarin provides opportunities for these youths, as does English and Bahasa Malaysia. On the East Coast, Mandarin, Bahasa Malaysia, and local dialects serve as in-group tools for socialisation among Indian youths. In some scenarios, class consciousness is flattened altogether, where language offers community ties. Language provides access to community and a sense of belonging that Indian youths are seeking.

3.5 National and regional identity

I. Anxiety, belonging and nationhood

Given the social and institutional discrimination faced by Indian youths, it raises the question of why Malaysian Indian youths feel so strongly about their Malaysian identity and loyalties to the land, unlike what we hypothesised. Despite Malaysian Indian youths feeling anxiety towards belonging in Malaysia, they hold on strongly to their Malaysian identity. There is a lack of unity within the Indian community, which is in part to blame, as this mixed-race Indian youth describes:

> *"I view myself as a Malaysian Indian. Although you know, it's hard for my Indian friends sometimes to see me as an Indian... I still don't speak Tamil. I don't watch Tamil movies"*

The Malaysian identity, for all the precarity that comes with it, is the closest way to fill this gap. As Pietsch and Clark argue, "Political and social rights are distributed unevenly in Malaysia, accentuating Malaysia's differentiated model of citizenship".[36] Indian youths are aware of their economic disadvantages as a community; they are aware of the prejudices that exist surrounding them, yet this deep loyalty and belonging towards Malaysia is evident.

> *"As a Malaysian. I'm really proud... I always say Malaysian first because this is where I belong... Whatever things I talk about the Malaysian Indian community, it's actually for us to live in this nation with dignity."*

[36] Juliet Pietsch & Marshall Clark, "Citizenship rights in Malaysia: the experience of social and institutional discrimination among ethnic minorities", *Citizenship Studies*, 18, no. 3-4 (2014), 312.



This is more than just nationalism. Anxiety, frustration, and longing are intermingled with this sense of belonging to Malaysia. Belonging is seen as the "ultimate mark of living in an integrated community."[37] On the surface, social cohesion exists, but further analysis suggests this alone is not enough to alleviate anxiety about belonging and national identity.

The Malaysian Indian youths we spoke to are descendants of migrants who have lived in Malaysia for generations since the colonial era. Their shared customs and traditions have evolved to reflect generations of living in Malaysia. Wong Ngan Ling & Lau Kui Ling's study on third-generation Malaysian Indians highlights, "Most of the junior respondents are more aware of their ethnic identity formation, but at the same time, their desire to want their children to blend into Malaysian culture" through the schooling system by enrolling them in national schools and being multilingual.[38] Youths feel less connected to their ancestral home than previous generations. One youth even described their experience in India as being a tourist rather than feeling connected to the land.

[38] Wong Ngan Ling & Lau Kui Ling, "Voices of Third Generation Malaysian Indians: Malaysian or Malaysian Indian?" *SARJANA* (2016), 53.

While elitism and economic hurdles persist in their ancestral lands and Malaysia, these youths say Malaysia offers more diversity and greater opportunity for success and social mobility. Generations of intermingling cultures have shaped Malaysian identity. There is give-and-take here, where parts of their ethnic and racial identity are intrinsically tied to their Malaysian identity, and vice versa. 'Indian-ness' is shaped by Malaysia's nationhood. Likewise, Malaysia as a cultural identity cannot exist without Indian ethnic identities.

Belonging does not depend solely on their ancestors' economic contributions. Like the Malaysian Chinese community, past experiences of the community's migration history carry little weight in becoming Malaysian.[39] Across the board, Malaysian-ness is rarely about abandoning their cultural identity in an attempt to assimilate for Indian youths. What happens here is the merging and re-creation of Malaysian identity, one that is fluid and ever-changing. However, forming this identity still proves challenging for Malaysian Indian youths, shaping how they perceive their place in the country.

[39] Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, "'After the break': reconceptualizing ethnicity, national identity and 'Malaysian-Chinese' identities", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37, no. 7, (2014), 1211-1224.

[40] Michael Vatikiotis, "Pluralism Imperiled in Southeast Asia - New Mandala," *New Mandala*, December 18, 2015, https://www.newmandala.org/pluralism-im-periled-in-southeast-asia/.

> *"As a Malaysian, I'm happy. But as an Indian, I'm so sad."*

This encapsulates the cultural anxieties surrounding being Malaysian. There is a desire to be embraced as Malaysians, but their Indian identity, the stereotypes, hurdles and challenges that exist become barriers to this complete acceptance.

> *"[W]hilst I do identify as Malaysian, the reality is that I'm an Indian Malaysian. You do feel like a second-class citizen. You do feel that every time you open your mouth, you are subject to so much scrutiny. And, you know, the response is always like, you know, 'balik India'. Even online. That one I felt. That one I felt."*

When asked how they feel about being Malaysian and if they identified as Malaysian or Indian first, this was their response:

"Definitely Malaysian first. Malaysian Tamil is how I would describe myself. It's a very discreet, niche identity that's unique. I think going out of the country made me realise that even though Malaysia sometimes feels like it doesn't want me or hates me—but I'm also very, very different from Indians like India Indians, so where else can I call home? I have nowhere else to go."

They are loyal, and yet not accepted. Anything that questions this loyalty also increases their precarity of belonging. Colonial history has made Malaysian nationhood hard to understand. As a plural society, Malaysia has continued to fragment through identity politics and a lack of a collective identity of what it means to be Malaysian. While ethnic diversity might be celebrated, "the practical arrangements often involve degrees of inequality and prejudice",[40] which encapsulates the varying degrees of Malaysian-ness which these Indian youths have come to contend with.

[40] Michael Vatikiotis, "Pluralism Imperiled in Southeast Asia - New Mandala," *New Mandala*, December 18, 2015, https://www.newmandala.org/pluralism-imperiled-in-southeast-asia/.

Despite not always wanting to, there are a small group who want to leave Malaysia due to the discrimination faced. Then, some have experienced extreme frustration with their lived experience, and what they hope for is an alternate reality outside Malaysia:

"I am actually planning every day [to leave]... eventually, I will go out, la. Because [being an] Indian in Malaysia is quite hard."

IMAN's *Orang Kita* report found that Malay youths feel closer to their Malay-Muslim identity. The security of their belonging to nationhood allows them to feel secure in their ethnic and religious identity. For Indian youths, their belonging remains in constant precarity. Indian youths aim to form a collective identity because it is lacking in their individual communities and because they want to move away from operating in silos. A Penangite, who is a parent and community organiser, reflected:

"Whenever people complain like 'why it's like this?' or 'Malaysia is not going anywhere' and all these things, still the love for the country is there... So there's this sense of belonging here despite all that's happening, so I think there's still hope. Believing in that and also working towards building a better community..."



II. "Ini bukan India Kelantan"
Understanding the regional identity survival tactics of youths

Among Indian youths on the East Coast, a strong regional identity is rarely seen elsewhere. Like national identity, East Coast Indians navigate a different terrain, reproducing in-group-out-group dynamics in a more polarised way than West Coast Indian youths. This section highlights the survival mechanisms employed by Kelantanese Indians who feel strong ties to their regional identity as an alternative to finding ties to their ethnic identity.

The Indian population on the East Coast is small. In Kelantan, Indians make up 0.3 per cent[41] of the population, and in Terengganu, they make up 0.2 per cent[42] of the population. Local community leaders and those involved in religious organisations also reiterated to us that the community's youth numbers are dwindling, with many choosing to leave their hometowns for better economic and job opportunities. Those who stay run family businesses or create opportunities for themselves by starting their own ventures. The stability and social mobility they have created expose them to various ethnic groups in their hometowns. For their businesses to survive, they need to adapt, and many of these behaviours and choices they make spill over into their personal lives.

The community is small, and with that comes a need to find a larger community among others. East Coast youths demonstrated their ability to create and expand their community circle through strategies adopted through language and behaviour. There is the normalisation of racism, which is evident across Peninsular Malaysia, but on the East Coast the us versus them dynamic is more pronounced throughout the region.

> *"[I]n Kelantan, they don't see us as Indian, Chinese, they don't. They see us Kelantanese. All Kelantan. Kelantan people."*

[41] OpenDOSM, "Kelantan Kawasanku," OpenDOSM, October 31, 2025, https://open.dosm.gov.my/dashboard/kawasanku/Kelantan

[42] OpenDOSM, "Terengganu Kawasanku," OpenDOSM, October 31, 2025, https://open.dosm.gov.my/dashboard/kawasanku/Terengganu.

Indian youths are a minority within a minority on the East Coast, latching onto regional identity as a marker of who they are. Being a Kelantanese is a source of pride, and ethnicity becomes secondary. Here, "they" refers to the Malay Kelantanese community, the state's largest ethnic group. Their acceptance and identity hinge upon the Malay community. Through language, local dialect, and regional belonging, they can connect and be accepted. Sharing food also marks trust and belonging.

This ingroup acceptance also comes with rejecting another group: non-Kelantanese Indians. When asked about the negative perceptions surrounding the Indian community, Kelantanese youths spoke of an incident that went viral whereby they were defended by the Malay community, who were quick to identify the Indians in the video as not from Kelantan. Beyond online, this same defence is afforded to them:

> *"Even when something like that happens, we [do not] need to defend ourselves. The Malay people of Kelantan defend this: 'Ini bukan India Kelantan. Ini India luar.' They are defending us like that."*

In an effort to belong, these Indian youths have ostracised a part of the Indian community. A positive label is tied to being a Kelantanese Indian, whereas outsiders are labelled differently. A study on Kelantan Chinese also reflects similar sentiments: they feel a strong regional sense of belonging and identity formation, in contrast to other Malaysian Chinese outside the region. The authors point to strategic essentialism, state land laws that redefine boundaries, as well as the state-led formation of identity in understanding how Kelantan Chinese navigate this tricky terrain.[43]

[43] Mala Rajo Sathian and Yeok Meng Ngeow, "Essentialising Ethnic and State Identities: Strategic Adaptations of Ethnic Chinese in Kelantan, Malaysia." *Asian Studies Review,* 38, no. 3 (2014), 385–402.

These are practices youths adopted to find common ground and be seen as part of the local community, even through language as explored in the previous section.

> *"I focus on unity. As a minority, I believe it is better to focus on work and family rather than getting involved in political conflicts that might lead to trouble."*

Instead of combating the racism that Indian youths experience on the East Coast, they must blend in. Regional identity shelters them from the negative stereotypes of their Indian identity. Without it, they have looser ties to the land and the regional community. They are left to defend themselves and, in doing so, are ostracised. Overall, youths value a sense of belonging. Indians on the East Coast do pride themselves on their Indian identity; however, regional belonging takes precedence, offering safety and security in ways their ethnic identity does not.

3.6 Relationship with other races

Racial relations in Malaysia are not linear. Cordiality may exist within a person's immediate circle in schools, neighbourhoods, or workplaces. However, discrimination can emerge in these same spaces, including online. Racism is not only expressed openly through hostile behaviour, but can also be embedded in institutions, social norms, and unequal access to opportunities.[44]

[44] Banaji, M.R., Fiske, S.T. and Massey, D.S. (2021) 'Systemic racism: Individuals and interactions, institutions and society', Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications, 6(1), article 82.

> *"Everyone is united, they talk well, they mingle well… So, as far as I am concerned, it's like up to our age, it's still okay… If it comes to that politics side, I mean, [name redacted] see a lot of racism."*

While not present in their daily lives, once race entered the political arena, racism became more visible and relationships that appeared stable in daily life became subject to suspicion, hostility and polarisation.

I. Personal relationships are built through familiarity

The most positive accounts came from respondents with long-standing, regular contact with other communities. They were often rooted in settings where respondents had sustained day-to-day contact across racial lines and are relevant to the contact hypothesis, which argues that contact between groups may reduce prejudice when it occurs regularly and under relatively equal conditions, including through activities.[45]

[45] Bond, J., Dixon, J., Tredoux, C. and Andreouli, E. (2023) 'The contact hypothesis and the virtual revolution: Does face-to-face interaction remain central to improving intergroup relations?'.

A respondent from Kelantan described Malay neighbours as being similar to family:

> *"Most of our neighbours were Malays, and we grew up like relatives. In 30 years, I have never experienced religious or racial tension; we are so close that we share food and water without any second thoughts about religious restrictions."*

This respondent's sharing illustrates how sustained, reciprocal everyday contact can translate into trust. The relationship has been built through long-term familiarity rather than through a formal unity programme.

However, this account should not be treated as representative of all Indian experiences in Kelantan or the East Coast, as explored in the previous section. While there may be genuine trust, cordiality may, in some instances, coexist with unequal power relationships and pressure to conform.

Another respondent from Kelantan spoke about the role that school played in normalising cross-racial interaction:

> *"So, during school time, if you consider my standard, there were only about three Indians. Everyone else was Malay, Chinese; that's how it was. So, we had no problem interacting with them. If you look at other towns, you might see gangs of all Indians, but not here. Here, it would be one Indian and the rest Malays. One Indian, one Chinese, and the rest Malays. That's how we were. So, basically, there was no racism among the teachers or anything. So, it wasn't like, 'they teach them well, but they exclude us.' There was none of that. Everyone was treated equally. So, we didn't face any difficulties."*

In contrast to the discrimination experienced by youths, as highlighted in the opening chapter on institutions, this respondent's schooling experience was not exclusionary. The respondent's experience suggests that interaction becomes easier when it is routine rather than forced. Being surrounded by Malay and Chinese classmates did not lead to isolation. This matters because it shows that personal relationships can remain cordial even when one community is numerically small.

Comparing the East Coast experience with the Klang Valley, personal relationships remain cordial, further supporting the contact hypothesis. One respondent from Klang Valley described having positive relationships with people from different ethnic groups since childhood, and later having close Malay friends at university:

> *"I think it's the university. I had very close Malay friends. We shared dorms. We travelled together. I didn't encounter any specific or blatant racism in my immediate circle or in the setting."*

Positive intergroup contact may reduce prejudice when it is sustained, cooperative and experienced under relatively equal conditions. These relationships were formed across several ordinary settings, rather than through one-off programmes. Their experiences suggest that repeated interaction enabled friendships to develop across racial lines. However, this should not be interpreted as evidence that contact alone removes racism. They could have close Malay and Chinese friends, while also being exposed to racist slurs and tensions in other parts of their social environment.

II. Public spaces bring out tension

Positive personal relationships did not always translate into a broader sense of racial security. Charles and Fuentes-Rohwer's discussion of the racial public sphere is useful here.[46] They argue that a genuinely democratic public sphere requires equality among participants and universal access to public debates. For Indian youths, this means that maintaining close friendships with people from other races may facilitate everyday belonging but may not guarantee equal voice when issues such as discrimination are publicly debated. Youths can be protected from discrimination due to selective friendships in private spheres.

[46] Charles, G.-U. and Fuentes-Rohwer, L. (2015) 'Habermas, the public sphere, and the creation of a racial counterpublic', Michigan Journal of Race & Law, 21(1), pp. 1–20.

One respondent noted that political discussions revealed attitudes not ordinarily visible in social interactions. Their Malay friends did not necessarily express racist views in ordinary conversations. Yet, when political ideology was tested, racial assumptions and prejudices became more apparent. This suggests that interpersonal cordiality may coexist with deeper disagreements over race-based rights, public policy, religion and national identity. The respondent further contrasted public hostility with the cooperation seen in everyday economic and social spaces:

> *"....you go to Pasar Pagi, or you go to Pasar Malam... everyone speaks in Malay, everyone sort of barters, negotiates... there's a sort of spirit of comradeship, and camaraderie, and togetherness, but that's when politics are not tested, and then when you test their politics, then you see the real sort of... the complicated negotiation, as it was."*

They speak the same language, negotiate, buy food and participate in the same local economy. Yet these everyday acts of coexistence do not automatically resolve tensions related to politics, religion or racial entitlement. Racial relationships are cordial in many personal settings but can become strained when made public and politicised.

These cordial relationships are frequently described as warm and respectful, and should not be dismissed as superficial. The interviews contain many examples of cordiality, but fewer examples of friendships being tested by difficult conversations such as racism, discrimination, and other issues. This may indicate that some relationships remain cordial partly because people avoid sensitive issues. It may also reflect a wider strategy of restraint, particularly among minorities, who fear that raising uncomfortable questions may jeopardise acceptance and social harmony.

At the same time, the public sphere can produce a different relationship. Social media, political rhetoric and sensitive racial or religious issues can turn identities that are unremarkable in daily life into sources of tension. This distinction shows that racial relations should not be assessed only through online hostility or political debates. The quieter, more cordial relationships built in everyday life are equally real.



4 Political frustrations and aspirations

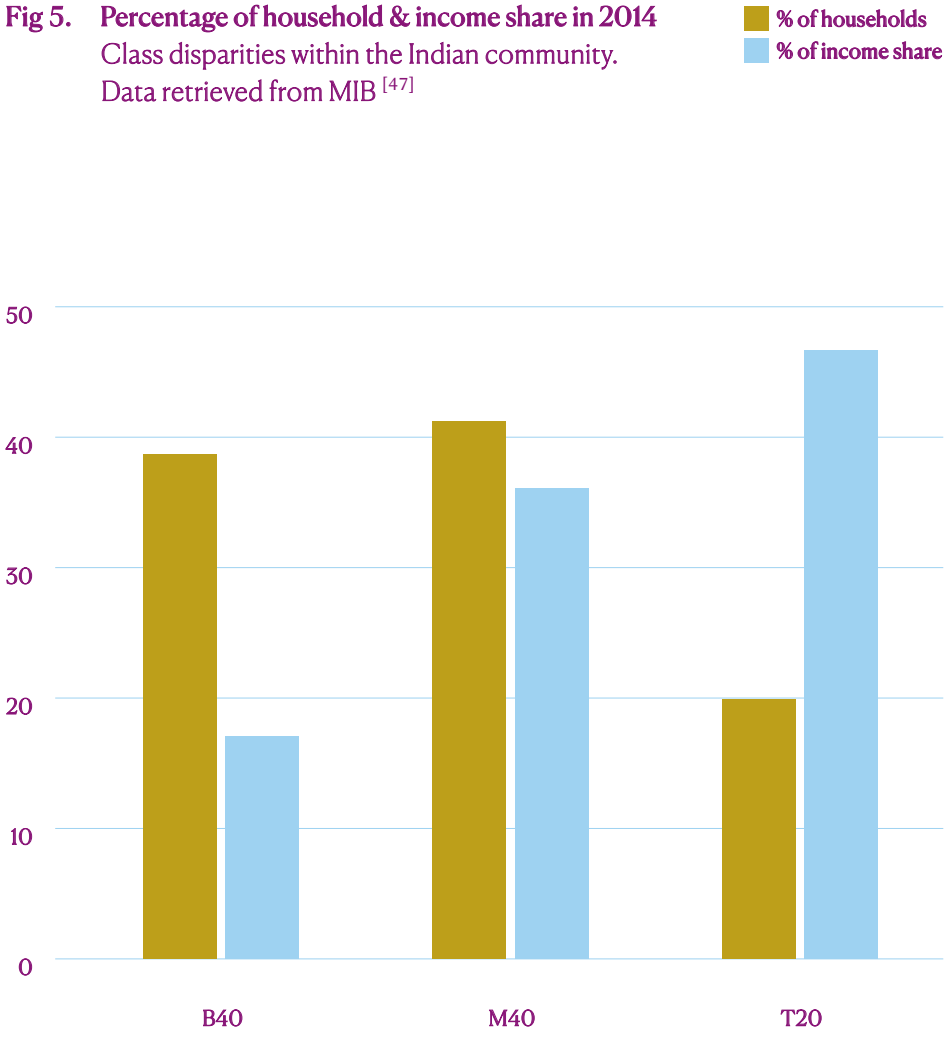


4.1 Unpacking youths' economic anxieties

Institutional and social discrimination exacerbates the Indian youths' experience with the rise in cost of living. A youth in Pahang explained that, before even entering the job market, they were exposed to debt from National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loans, which is worsened by discrimination and difficulty securing a job, as established in the opening chapter on institutions. With a child to support and no fallback option, this youth faces further economic pressure.

Class becomes the basis on which youths navigate economic precarity. The rise in the cost of living is clear, but what differs is how youths are insulated from it. The Malaysian Indian Blueprint (MIB) shows this disparity clearly: the Top 20% of Indian households account for 46.7% of income share, as illustrated in the figure below. Youths from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can distance themselves from economic anxieties through class or family support. Youths living abroad may also notice inflationary pressures when they return home. The distance between their observations and reality is class.

Fig 5. Percentage of household & income share in 2014
Class disparities within the Indian community.
Data retrieved from MIB [47]



[47] Prime Ministers Office "MALAYSIAN INDIAN BLUEPRINT (MIB)," Laman Web Rasmi MITRA, 2017.



Economic growth and foreign direct investment are large-scale initiatives, but everyday people still struggle. The trickle-down effect on youths is not fully felt. Further precarity is exacerbated by institutional discrimination and systemic hindrances. Paired with rental discrimination as outlined in the first chapter, this makes it worse for youths outside of Klang Valley especially.

> *"Many young Indian youth cannot find proper jobs. Their wages are low. They come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. So when you are coming from that background, it's hard for you to really come up in life."*

Business owners feel this impact directly. One youth described a customer not wanting to be served by an Indian; another described customers using terms like 'keling'. If they retaliate, they could lose out on business. This is the reality for Indian youths who are not insulated by class. Economic precarity exists on a spectrum for Indian youths and is exacerbated by both class and ethnicity. A young professional who grew up middle class and now lives away from their family can point to the economic hardships but is not impacted by them:

> *"Because of my education and my current job… And also the fact that I am single, I have no family… I'm in a lucky position where even if the economy is getting worse, I'm still somewhat okay. But I know a lot of other people struggle in this economy. And even my housemates, for some reasons, getting RM400 together every month for rent is a bit of a challenge for them, which is a bit mind-blowing to me. More people are struggling. Economy as a whole, I don't know. They [government] said GDP going up, whatever. But… I see the weakest among us still struggling."*

Youths want to remain in Malaysia and believe in opportunities to succeed. This is overshadowed by the economic precarity, worsened by class and ethnicity:

> *"Eventually, I will go out [of the country]. Because [being an] Indian in Malaysia is quite hard. So actually I want to change that… If I can do it, then… it's like a miracle."*

4.2 Media consumption

Media consumption among Indian youths is less about news outlet preference and more about news spread through social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and, in some instances, Threads. The 2025 Reuters Institute's Digital News Report found that 44% of 18- to 24-year-olds mentioned social media and video networks to be their main news source.[48] This pattern also shows how Indian youth of this generation encounter the world. One respondent, a journalist by profession, said:

> *"I'm mostly on Instagram and Twitter. Instagram mostly, actually. In terms of news, to be honest, I don't regularly open any one specific news outlet… But, yeah, Malaysiakini, Free Malaysia Today, I guess those two are the sites that I usually go to."*

Social media platforms are now the primary way people access news. Even when respondents name a news outlet, they access it via the outlet's social media posts, which are in English. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned Tamil news outlets.

The information consumed on social media includes issues that went viral online, such as social issues, political topics, products, or entertainment. Social media helps people keep track of social issues and political discourse; some also said they avoid getting involved in political discussions online.

> *"It could range from whatever news portals post or any activists making videos or short-form content on these kinds of topics."*

Dependence on social media for news can become dangerous. Social media platforms named by our respondents are not neutral carriers of information, and 'newsfluencers' are not guided by the ethics and rigour of journalism. Social media platforms themselves are designed to capture a person's attention, and the algorithm does this primarily by learning what a person already responds to and feeding them more of it. Only a few respondents said that they practised some form of background research to ensure that the information they received was accurate and impartial.

Recently, The Fourth's documentary, 'Bad Influence', uncovered that numerous marketing agencies and creators readily accept lucrative contracts, sometimes even exceeding a million ringgit, to push biased, racist or politically divisive campaigns.[49] A creative agency director highlighted that the content is deliberately made to look organic so it appears authentic to viewers, and so they will buy the messaging being delivered.[50] The report also highlighted how strategic influencers can push racist content while keeping it as ambiguous as possible to comply with social media companies' and MCMC rules.

[48] Newman, N., Ross Arguedas, A., Robertson, C.T., Nielsen, R.K. and Fletcher, R. (2025) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf

[49] The Fourth (2025) We tried to pay influencer agencies to post racist content. They said yes | BAD INFLUENCE. YouTube video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvRxLNoh3c0

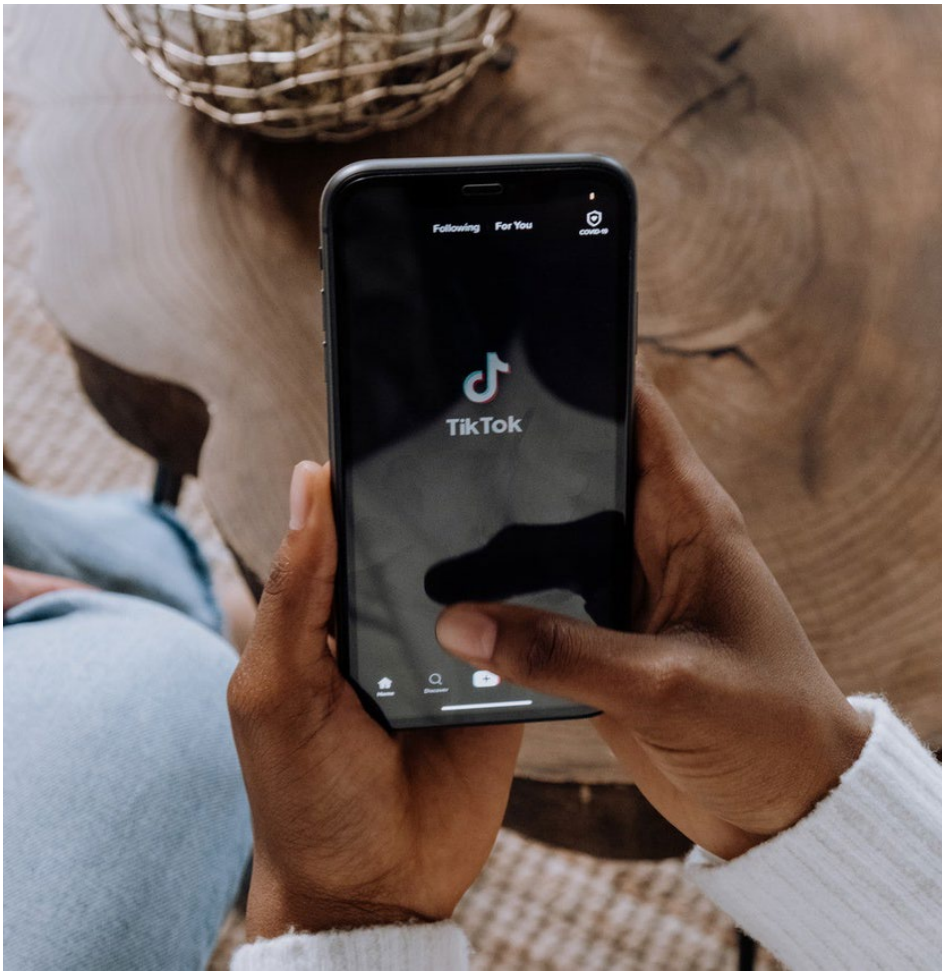
[50] The Fourth Media (2026) It looks more organic, but is it authentic? Not always, according to this creative agency founder… [Instagram Reel]. Instagram. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reels/DbGGZLOBP5t/

As such, one respondent highlighted the contrast between ethnic tension portrayed online and inter-ethnic relationships in the real world.

> *"I see the tension only online. I don't see the tension on the, on the ground, right? I never see the tension on the ground."*

The Relationship with Other Races highlights the difference between private, cordial relationships and online hostility, especially in political discussions. Online hostility does not always reflect respondents' everyday relationships, but that should not lead us to dismiss it as inconsequential. Social media does not simply document racial tension; it magnifies selected moments of conflict, repeats them and presents them as representative of society as a whole. A respondent may never personally encounter open hostility from Malay or Chinese friends, yet still repeatedly see content suggesting that racial conflict is constant and unavoidable.

While such contrasting patterns of ethnic tension only seen online rather than on the ground can be seen as positive, such continuous tension online cannot be ignored. Echo chambers mean individuals are consistently fed information that supports their pre-existing beliefs, so their convictions are repeated rather than challenged. As such, a continuous feed of online tension on social media can lead Indian youth to accept it as reality. If the situation remains unaddressed, it may spill over into real-life inter-ethnic tension sooner or later.



4.3 Political awareness and efficacy

Youths are labelled as politically disengaged and uninterested in the democratic process. We aimed to investigate whether public perception is true. Our findings show that real apathy and unawareness come from systems and those in power, not from Indian youths. We aim to unpack the varying degrees of political awareness among Indian youths and how this influences their political efficacy.

> *"...we want to keep that court alive, right? So, me and my brother, we personally reached out to DBKL, and a contractor came. But just to get a contractor to meet with us... took us five months. Just to get a meeting with him... we had a whole plan laid out, everything, measurements... All he had to do was just implement it... He messed that up. And it took him almost nine months. Nine months! And I gave him the idea."*

This youth worked to repair a community court that was in a hazardous condition, so that there was a safe and positive outlet in their neighbourhood. This youth had high internal political efficacy, the knowledge of what to do and how to go about making this change. Their frustration and ineffectiveness with the system, or in this case one state actor, translates to low external efficacy, the belief that the system will work for them. Most youths we spoke to had low external political efficacy—shaped by their parents, their daily experiences, and their perceptions of the system —and the frustration that followed eroded their internal efficacy as well, so the two fed each other in a downward spiral.

4.4 Sources of political efficacy

I. Parental influence on politics

As established in the earlier chapter on institutions, youths learn a lot about discriminatory structures and institutions in their everyday lives. Youths are also influenced by their parents more than by friends or peers. Political awareness varies, and even at the lower end of the spectrum, political decisions affect their daily lives. Parents play a key role, especially fathers, in shaping their formative understanding of and participation in politics.

> *"Usually, my father and my siblings, they used to talk about politics a lot. Usually, during tea time, they will talk about politics..."*

Parental figures are crucial in shaping a young person's life and "their worldviews [which] constitute informal education on politics."[51] Youths who grow up in households where their parents play a more active role in politics promote political awareness. While they have their own motives for wanting to shape a better future for their communities, many youths attribute their decision to join political parties to parental influence in the parties themselves or to dinner-table discussions.

[51] Su-Hie Ting and Sharifah Sophia Wan Ahmad, "Everyday Interactions and Political Participation of Malaysian Youth," *Journal of Youth Studies* 25, no. 5 (May 7, 2021): 13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1923672

This low external political efficacy among youths, shaped by the belief that nothing will change, turns into withdrawal. The frustration spilled over from their parents, and a lack of agency from political parties in securing the Indian youth demographic, leaves them alienated. Furthermore, the lack of response from systems and actors, as in the first example above, reaffirms low external efficacy. This voter fatigue and the baggage that comes with it is passed down from one generation to the next:

> *"My parents are becoming tired. They are tired of fighting and talking... You can kind of see it. 50 years of just trying to fight for something... And now they've raised kids, they've raised adults, and nothing has changed politically."*

II. Observations on the ground
Indian youths' understanding of MITRA & other initiatives

MITRA set out to work on socioeconomic development initiatives in supporting the growth of the Indian community.[52] Therefore, it was necessary to understand MITRA's impact among Indian youths and how this might affect their political efficacy. The previous iteration of MITRA came under fire for mismanagement of funds meant for the Indian community.[53] Constantly moving MITRA to different ministries[54] and its minimal budget allocation of RM100 million, which remained unchanged for almost a decade[55] were attributed to its ineffectiveness. In May 2026, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced an increase in MITRA's allocation to RM150 million.[56]

Some youths were completely unaware of MITRA and their programmes or initiatives, which ties in to what Human Resource Minister R. Ramanan spoke about, saying there was not enough social media coverage from MITRA recipients, which in turn leads to the community being unaware of these grants available.[57]

> *"I don't know how these guys [MITRA] operate. If I'm being completely honest, I don't know what they do."*

> *"I didn't even know MITRA was a thing..."*

A few Indian youths mentioned the benefits they, their peers, or their family members received from MITRA. There is awareness, and the agency does benefit segments of the Indian community through upskilling, as described by one youth:

> *"Actually, they do provide benefits. One of my relatives got retrenched, and MITRA provided a course... It helped them gain skills and assisted them in searching for new jobs."*

On the other hand, youths have described a negative first-hand experience with the agency, citing its bureaucratic nature as ineffective. This lack of faith in political institutions again translates to low external political efficacy among youths.

> *"MITRA for me are [a] useless thing because I have applied and I have helped people as well to help apply... [nothing] till today, three years already... For some, they've already been seven years been waiting for MITRA."*

Separately, one youth described a second-hand experience with MITRA in which there was an allegation of corruption. For this youth, who was given a negative account of MITRA, their trust in institutions, especially ones meant to uplift the Indian community, is reduced.

> *"Siphon. I've heard second-hand stories from people. They'll straight up say, literally, I had a friend applying for a grant for MITRA for his business startup. And they straight up told him, you give us this much [money]. We are going to approve this, but you just make sure that this is worded in this particular way so that we will get this much. So if you don't word it like this for us to get this much, we are not going to approve it."*

[52] "Background," Laman Web Rasmi MITRA, September 20, 2024, https://www.mitra.gov.my/en/corporate-info/background.

[53] Yiswaree Palansamy, "MP: Mitra Repeating Sedic's Mistakes, Allocating Funds to NGOs Which Do Not Uplift Indian Community," *Malay Mail*, October 22, 2019, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/10/22/mp-mitra-repeating-sedics-mistakes-allocating-funds-to-ngos-which-do-not-up/1802671.

[54] Elill Easwaran, "Mitra Failed Because There Was No Leadership Continuity, Says Chairman," *Free Malaysia Today | FMT*, August 6, 2025, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/08/06/mitra-failed-because-there-was-leadership-continuity-says-chairman.

[55] Kousalya Selvam, "RM100 Million for Mitra Not Enough to Address Indian Community's Challenges, Says DBIM," *Sinar Daily*, October 24, 2024, https://www.sinardaily.my/article/222593/focus/national/rm100-million-for-mitra-not-enough-to-address-indian-communitys-challenges-says-dbim.

[56] Qistina Sallehuddin, "RM150mil Allocated for Mitra in 2026, Says PM Anwar," *The Star*, May 10, 2026, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2026/05/10/pm-anwar-announces-rm50mil-extra-funding-for-mitra-in-2026.

[57] Sarban Singh, "Mitra Aid Recipients Must Share Stories to Raise Awareness of Programme, Says Ramanan," *The Star*, July 7, 2026, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2026/07/07/mitra-aid-recipients-must-share-stories-to-raise-awareness-of-programme-says-ramanan.

Another finding emerged as a quiet phenomenon among a few youths when discussing leaders and initiatives that benefited the Indian community. Tangible economic development and community changes were associated with former Prime Minister Najib Razak through his policies and initiatives. He was a leader who made efforts to propel the Indian community, namely through the MIB, which was published in 2017.

> *"I think Najib was, Najib was better for the Indian community... that Indian blueprint he had... in their manifesto as well, they were pushing for, they were addressing issues with the Indian community, even before. I don't think the current government is...."*

Although this initiative grew out of the Indian community's frustration through the HINDRAF movement in 2007 and took a decade for the MIB to materialise, youths described it as a blueprint with the potential to elevate disenfranchised segments of the Indian community if executed effectively and efficiently. These youths' nostalgia is for a leader who tried to address community problems. For most of these youths, MITRA's ineffectiveness works against them, lowering their external political efficacy.

III. Voting preference

Two separate accounts from East Coast youths described their frustration with the administrations - one with the previous and the other with the current. This contradiction lies in how youths perceive institutions and parties. What they can materialise and see in terms of party efforts becomes their view of who to vote for, as opposed to party loyalty:

> *"We are lucky that the previous [Barisan Nasional] government was a different government. They made Terengganu better compared to this current government [PAS]. This current government [is] not even doing anything. They only think about their own events and whatsoever. They don't come for the growth of the country; there's nothing."*

> *"PAS have helped us a lot. So they have taken care... When my brother needed help, or my parents needed help... or if, let's say, Indians get anything...My parents didn't get anything even though we [have] been here, not once we got anything from them [BN]."*

These youths can identify tangible changes in their lives. Their support is thrown behind parties who will champion the rights of the Indian community, when for so long this has been neglected. Indian youth voters are frustrated, yet political parties simply are not addressing their concerns. They want parties that stand firm on their ideologies, as Pakatan Harapan promised. Youths also want clear messaging and political mileage to produce tangible results and serve their communities.

> *"I voted for Pakatan Harapan... I advocated for it very openly. So, what shaped my decision to vote? I think basically, just like any other thing, the promises that they made in the manifesto and everything. And also the ideologies that the leaders from the party, or the ideologies of the party itself. You know, they are a multicultural party. They are not like a race-based party, which I feel like it's a very good thing. Other than that, when you see that this is actually a better choice than the other opposing parties."*

However, Pakatan Harapan's reformist ideals turned into frustration for many Indian youths, with this same voting bloc now feeling shortchanged. The high external political efficacy has dwindled. What they want to see is a clear departure from previous administrations, and a governing coalition which promised reform:

> *"What has been promised, it's not being fulfilled... We can't ask the existing government [to] reform everything because it is technically, it's a collective government. Everyone has their own interests"*

> *"No party. No one right now. As in the current coalitions that we're going, none of them champion the issues that I'm interested in. Even if they do champion it, it's just I don't trust them. If I had voted in the last election, I would have voted Pakatan Harapan, which was obviously no UMNO. And on the other side, UMNO said no DAP. Now they're best friends, right? But yeah, if it remains like this, I won't vote."*

Another youth explains that their ideal party, which aligns with their views, lacks political momentum. Having a clear party identity and visible efforts is vital in promoting external political efficacy:

> *"I think the closest [party to represent me] is PSM, but... I've always felt like they cannot decide between presenting themselves as an NGO or a political party."*

Unclear boundaries and coalitions alienate voters and reinforce the belief that they lack political capital. Both the internal and external political efficacy here are reduced, as is the case of this youth:

> *"[W]e are regular people. We don't expect to make a difference. We are just part of the machine."*

Individuals are aware of the barriers, but have little motivation to change them. This is especially true for youths who experience low external political efficacy. The quota system going unaddressed, the continued race-based sentiments being played up, fearmongering, and a lack of follow-through on their promises, as well as agencies meant to support the Indian community, have left youths disillusioned.

Much of Indian youths' frustration stems from promises without follow-through. This, in turn, affects their political efficacy. Attributing youths' withdrawal without understanding their spiral in political efficacy is limiting. Understanding the degrees of political efficacy, and how youths have been let down by systems as a community, has shaped Indian youths' political views and voting preferences. They cannot simply be dismissed as uninterested. As James Chai writes in his own research:

> *"Despite their lack of confidence in political knowledge, Malaysian youths are aware of the goings-on in politics and have a reasoned opinion on how things should be. We can assume many things about the youths, but the last thing we should assume is that they are not watching."*[58]

[58] James Chai, 'YOUNG HEARTS AND MINDS: Understanding Malaysian Gen Z's Political Perspectives and Allegiances', *ISEAS*, 2023 (issue 7), 39.

4.5 Engagement with politics

Across Peninsular Malaysia, Indian youths' central demand was not simply for more Indian representatives, but for leadership capable of turning political office into visible, sustained outcomes. They value accountable leaders who follow through on their promises.

Indian youths pointed to a lack of representatives and said they were tired of symbolic representation over quality leaders. While representation matters, it must add value. It does not automatically solve long-standing community issues by introducing representation to appeal to Indian voters. Youths see this as tokenistic. Instead, they want leaders who are visible, capable and willing to act on addressing the institutional challenges highlighted throughout this report.

I. Need for visible Indian representatives

> *"...There are fewer Indian representatives when you look at the quantity. Even if they are doing work, the public doesn't really see the value of it. Maybe because they do it for their own benefit, or perhaps because there is very little publicity. If they aren't publicising their efforts, we simply won't know if they are truly working for the community or not."*

Indian leaders are underrepresented in executive power. Following a Cabinet reshuffle in 2023, V Sivakumar was removed as Human Resources Minister, creating a gap in Tamil-Indian representation in the cabinet.[59] Gobind Singh Deo, a Punjabi Sikh, served as Digital Minister during this period. In December 2025, R. Ramanan's appointment as Minister of Human Resources closed this gap.[60] The number of elected Indian Members of Parliament (MPs) has fluctuated across the past three General Elections (GE): 11 were elected in GE13 in 2013, 15 in GE14 in 2018, and 10 in GE15 in 2022.[61][62]

Invisibility functions as a structural barrier in its own right, independent of how many Indian representatives technically exist. If constituents cannot locate their representatives, that representation offers little practical value regardless of its formal presence. From the answers given by respondents, it is also clear that political representatives are not doing enough to appeal to the youths of the nation.

As with Najib 'nostalgia' in the previous section, there is a nostalgic longing for leaders who are visible and assertive. Samy Vellu, MIC President for 31 years, is an example of this, especially compared to present-day leadership. Nostalgia here masks dissatisfaction with today's low-visibility Indian leadership. As discussed in the Caste section, his tenure saw Maika Holdings fail.

[59] Nagotra, R. and Wong, K.J. (2023) 'Ramasamy laments zero Indian rep in cabinet, Gobind sees no issue', Malaysiakini, 12 December. Available at: https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/689816

[60] The Star (2025) 'Seven ministers, eight deputy ministers sworn in', The Star, 17 December. Available at: https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/12/17/seven-ministers-eight-deputy-ministers-sworn-in

[61] Jayasooria, D. (2018) 'M'sian Indians have voted for multiracial parties to represent them – what's next?', Malaysiakini, 12 May. Available at: https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/424446

[62] Suresh, N. (2022) 'Malaysian Indian Candidates Who Made The Win at GE15', Varnam, 21 November. Available at: https://varnam.my/68751/malaysian-indian-candidates-who-made-the-win-at-ge15/

"When Samy Vellu was around, we got things [opportunities]. I'm not saying I support MIC, but I haven't seen a strong leader like him since. He would fight. Current leaders just argue or stay in the background… People were afraid of Samy Vellu when he spoke. Now, they [Indian Leaders] are just puppets."

An Indian Muslim respondent also pointed to a lack of Indian representatives who do not stand up for the community and their welfare following MIC's decline and the rise of HINDRAF:

"Then, it was HINDRAF. I don't know what party will come next… Where there is a minority, unity is what gives us strength. Without that unity, everybody is being entitled, as they are the leaders fighting against one another for it."

This pattern matches MIC's own documented arc, as its parliamentary seat count has steadily decreased from the 2004 peak. In the current Parliamentary composition, the party only managed to secure a single seat in Dewan Rakyat.[63] This is reflected in respondents' answers, as they no longer view MIC as fighting for the rights of the Indian community as much as its past leadership did, hence its rejection by the grassroots. However, the Johor State Election saw a shift, with MIC winning all four (4) state seats that it contested.[64] As a component of the Barisan Nasional government, MIC also has a stronghold in Johor and political capital in the region, which may explain the win.

[63] New Straits Times (2022) 'GE15: Saravanan retains Tapah', New Straits Times, November 20. Available at: https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2022/11/852800/ge15-saravanan-retains-tapah

[64] Povera, A. (2026) 'MIC wins all four contested seats in Johor election', New Straits Times, 11 July. Available at: https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/07/1486484/mic-wins-all-four-contested-seats-johor-election

II. Frustrations with tokenism

Closely tied to the leadership vacuum is scepticism about whether recent gains in Indian representation reflect genuine empowerment or electorally timed symbolism. Indian youths actively question the appointments of Indian leaders to positions of power that are made only to appeal to the grassroots Indian community ahead of the elections.

A Melaka respondent viewed the 2025 cabinet reshuffle and inclusion of Dato' Sri R. Ramanan as a Minister as a political calculation rather than a genuine effort:

" I feel they reshuffle because they want Indian votes… Because, all these days, there is no thought of reshuffling. Why is it happening now?"

One respondent described tokenism not as a feature of any single government, but as a recurring pattern across administrations, which at times does not allow younger Indian representatives to hold any authority within the leadership line-up:

"I still feel it's very tokenistic because when we look at the broader picture of access to education, housing and jobs. There is still nothing to bring out the Indian youths… Like, I do see some things, like Tulsi Manogaran tries to say that she wants to do this, she wants to do that. But whether or not she's allowed to actually do that, or whether she is actually wanting to do that also is another question for me…"

The same logic applies to the timing of assistance. A respondent described that support and aid become visible around elections or festive occasions like Deepavali or Thaipusam. Seasonal aid functioned as tokenism tied to the calendar; the community received symbolic recognition when votes mattered, while everyday needs and grievances remained insufficiently addressed between elections.

> *"Indians usually only get help during festivals like Deepavali or Thaipusam, often tied to voting. Why not start helping at the beginning of the year instead of waiting for the voting period? … I don't want to see this "voting season" help cycle anymore; it's happening nationwide."*

These accounts point to a community that has quietly abandoned headcount as its measure of political success. Respondents were not asking for more Indian faces in government for its own sake; in fact, several explicitly rejected that framing. They asked what representation is supposed to accomplish once a seat is secured. Respondents highlighted leaders who constantly address community issues without taking action. Youths highlighted the importance of addressing educational barriers and discrimination, rental discrimination, stagnant wages, and access to government support.

To be represented well for them means having a leader who can act without needing permission from the party above them, who is measured by outcomes delivered rather than positions occupied, and whose presence in Cabinet changes something tangible for ordinary Indians. Quality is not secondary; it is increasingly found wanting. This distinction between being present and being empowered sets up a sharper, more ideological rejection found elsewhere in the data. Quality is subjective and highly dependent on the portfolios entrusted to the Minister, who can perform well only if they have access to resources, freedom to influence policy, and support from senior political leaders.

III. Beyond race-based representation

> *"I think the non-Indian politicians are actually representing us better than the Indian politicians."*

This youth points to the frustrations with Indian politicians. Beyond those who want more visible or quality representation, another group abandons it altogether. A minority of youths rejected ethnicity as the basis of political trust and representation.

> *"To be honest, I don't care at all about representation. I think we need to move beyond; the discourse needs to move beyond representation politics. What concerns me most is whether they're actually doing their jobs, and whether they're capable of doing their jobs. Those are the metrics I realise most of the time."*

Youths care about a political representative's ability to solve problems. A Perak respondent shared how a young assemblyperson brought people together from various departments to resolve a decade-long community issue with a faulty bridge.

For these youths, a representative's race says nothing about whether that person will actually act in the community's interest; competence, accountability, and ideology matter more than identity. This is a materially different position from the tokenism critique discussed earlier. Given the frustration with existing leadership and tokenism, youths have moved away from race-based representatives. However, this does not mean that multi-ethnic parties have solved issues within the community. Labels and promises mean nothing without follow-through. Instead, they seek representatives who look out for all Malaysians and can deliver on their promises.

These three distinct positions of youths pushed against headcount, symbolic representation, and seasonal political acts. Indian youths want leaders who are visible, accessible, and will champion their rights even beyond election season.

4.6 Alternative pathways

I. Third spaces and youth agency

Indian youths spoke about the value in having third spaces, especially given the lack of safety through discrimination in school and beyond. In the chapter on institutions, youths detailed experiencing hostile attitudes, racially motivated marginalisation, and slurs used against them from teachers. Unlike Ray Oldenburg's concept of neutral third spaces[65], these third spaces rely on safety and require care and maintenance through financial support and leadership. Indian youths occupy third spaces such as dance schools or sports teams, which provide agency, belonging, and safety. While third spaces matter, they must be paired with agency. Sanna Toiviainen[66] argues that co-agency includes the individual and requires collaboration. The value of cultivating third spaces does not rest solely on youths to find them, but on family and community efforts to secure a materially and emotionally safe environment.

[65] Ray Oldenburg, "The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community", 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, De Capo Press, 1989)

[66] Sanna Toiviainen, "Co-Agency: Reconsidering Agency in Guidance Practice." *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling,* 50, no. 4, (2022), 547–56.

II. Structured safe spaces
Finding community through dance and sports

Toiviainen's (2022) concept of co-agency offers these youths, through third spaces, the ability to challenge existing perceptions and discourse surrounding the community. One of the most impactful examples of this was when we interviewed youths at a dance school. The dance instructor and the studio owner teach a traditional Indian dance called Bharatanatyam. She is also a parental figure, especially for those who lack that, teaching them everyday survival skills and guiding them. Some students cannot fully fund their dance education, and the school provides subsidies so anyone who wants to learn can.

The dance teacher offers discipline, structure, cultural understanding and a safe space. Youths are surrounded by like-minded individuals who share a passion for dance and work toward a common goal by learning new routines or performing at events. It gives youths a sense of purpose and belonging.

> *"For me, it is very beneficial because we get to live and learn everything in one place. We learn Bharatanatyam, Malay dances like Zapin, Joget, Inang, and Piring, and Chinese dances like the umbrella, handkerchief, and fan dances. We learn all multiracial dances, which is quite beneficial. Wherever we go, if people look down on us, assuming we do not know anything, we can prove that we do know. When they ask us, we say yes, and because of the way our madam taught us, we are always prepared."*

The dance school is a rare anomaly that gives youths an understanding of other cultures. It cements their belonging as Malaysian Indian youths. With that knowledge, they can challenge the idea of youths operating in silos and work together to promote the ideals of a multicultural society through the

language of dance. Students turn to her when they face hardships or need advice about their career path. Instilling a sense of self-worth and value in youths can transform their development and life trajectories.

> *"We learn everything here, including cooking from Madam… We also learn music, and recently we started a drum class. People in our community are often surprised to see girls playing the Thappu drums because it is usually seen as something for boys. We want to prove that girls can also carry that weight, as I do not like when people compare what boys and girls have to do."*

The dance school itself is a gendered space, and while there are male students, the dancers are predominantly female. Here, these young women can gather in a safe space and dismantle ideas that limit their capabilities. By learning to play the drums, an activity centred around men, these young students build self-belief and confidence in their abilities. It removes the gendered distinctions, empowering these young women. A positive cycle also develops among these dancers, with older students returning to teach younger students.



Beyond dance schools, sports also help cultivate a safe space. When speaking with youths, this theme emerged more among male respondents, who described sports as a way to find community beyond the Indian community. More than that, however, it also offers an alternative for those who are not academically inclined. These areas also need support and mentorship. It teaches youths about teamwork and gives them a purpose and a goal, just like dance. One youth highlights their perspective here:

> *"Sports has… really helped me fit in when I didn't fit in academic-wise. And I think it's such a shame because when I go to local courts, I see a lot of good talent there. They just never had that outlet. They never had the right facilities, the right people to mentor them. The grassroot programme is not there for certain races, for certain sports."*

Sports allow youths to 'fit in' as described above and provide a sense of belonging. We also spoke to a group of young men who were involved in their own community football, where they gathered every weekend to play. This self-creation of co-agency is a healthy outlet for them. They have kinship and a team, a support network that extends beyond just sports. Dance and sports offer these youths a healthy, safe space. Private initiatives and efforts appear to be providing youths with this safe space. Guidance and mentorship are available, which positively impact their lives. Not all youths are afforded this same opportunity. Those who come from low-income backgrounds are impacted the most by this alienation, pushed to destructive third spaces.



III. Alternative pathways: Gangs

In 2013, the Home Ministry's then secretary-general, Datuk Seri Abdul Rahim Mohamad Radzi, held a press conference revealing the names of organisations linked to criminal activity, along with police estimates showing that 28,926 of the 40,313 active gang members were Indians.[67] This figure, reported over a decade ago, has not been updated, and it does not fully explain how these numbers were obtained. This statistic is also a police classification, not a pervasive trend. The association of Indians and gangs is very often thrown around without understanding the systemic and community neglect that leads youths down this path.

> *"I've gotten stopped at roadblocks for me. I've been asked [by police] whether I had done drugs or pushing drugs."*

> *"I guess I've seen it with the police. I've been stopped numerous times. And you can tell they're looking for something."*

The examples above are from young Indian men who have been stopped and questioned by the police. While there was no further escalation, as established through the report, Indian youths are unfairly discriminated against. For young men specifically, this can have detrimental effects whereby the authorities of the law and its actors target Indian youths, much like gang membership.

Our main reflections and observations come from youths' lived experiences surrounding, but never directly involved in, gangsterism and violence. While we did not speak to youths actively involved in gangs, there was the rare instance of a youth who almost joined one. Accounts from youths reflect the co-agency that exists through gangs and violence. It becomes a symbiotic relationship which is dependent on the disenfranchisement of youths to keep these harmful power structures in place. A study done on sociological factors which push Indian youths into joining gangs shows that they do so as young as 13-21 years old, after dropping out of school or getting involved in gang-related activities at a young age before actual initiation.[68] This study found that youths can have family members involved in crime, a lack of parental support, gang culture in their neighbourhoods, as well as financial difficulties.

[67] *The Editor,* "Highlight: Ministry Reveals Names of Banned Gangs," *The Edge Malaysia*, August 29, 2013, https://theedgemalaysia.com/article/highlight-ministry-reveals-names-banned-gangs-0.

[68] Shankar Durairaja, Geshina Ayu Mat Saat, and Mohammad Rahim Kamaluddin. "Exploring Demography and Sociological Factors Underlying Decisions to Join Gangs among Indians". *Akademika,* 89, no. 1, (2019), 33–43.

Gangs offer youths a job and money, which meant a quicker way towards upward social mobility - something that would take too long through traditional routes or was not accessible to them. One youth describes his own experience here of having been surrounded by gangs from a young age:

> *"My aunt was... she's the only one. I had no male role models to look up to and then eventually my male role models... they'll be like you know wearing this like gold rings and all that, so that was really inspiring for me back then, 'Oh my god, I want to be like that' with luxury cars and all that.... I used to like to be with them in the playgrounds and all that. So I used to look up to them a lot."*

Youths are surrounded by role models that perpetuate a lifestyle of high risk equals high reward. This is appealing to someone who experiences constant marginalisation, a lack of agency, and limited opportunity. Social mobility in gangs works differently, as this youth describes:

> *"You'll be taken care of very well, you'll receive a lot of cash and all that... At first they will ask you to fight... punch someone, like street fights and all that. So that's how you slowly go up. So after street fights and then you go up to help them to collect money... [and then] threatening people and then eventually like operations... and then eventually like a shootout gang members and all that so that's how you slowly but it will start with street fight."*

Impoverished youths are provided a false sense of security through gang membership, community and brotherhood.[69] These youths lack the financial means to provide for themselves or get by through formal or informal work because of institutional barriers or a slow return on investment. With a lack of resources and avenues for social mobility and kinship, many turn to a life of crime and violence.[70] Gangsterism provides an alternative pathway, one that is highly visible for disenfranchised youths to ensure their upward mobility, despite being a high-risk option. Through initiations that require blood sacrifice and a series of loyalty tests, recruited youths must demonstrate their commitment to gain acceptance. As the interviewee explained, gangs are cyclical in nature, requiring new members to come in so that older members are forgotten.

The exploitation of youths and their lack of safe space and sense of belonging is the very foundation on which gangs operate. Indian youths are not drawn to joining gangs; rather, they end up in them through circumstances. A lack of safety and third spaces, role models and financial instability are the realities of youths who go down a path of crime. While our interviewees did not consist of any active or inactive gang members, the reality is that gangs keep youths disenfranchised—youths who fall into this destructive space because of failures in their communities and the state.

[69] Sharon Wilson, Thanaseelan Rajasakran, Santhidran Sinnappan, and Thinavan Periyayya, "A Qualitative Exploration on the Perception of Gangs and Gangsterism in Malaysia: Penerokaan Secara Kualitatif Mengenai Persepsi Terhadap Geng Dan Gangsterisme Di Malaysia", *Sains Insani* 9, no. 2, (2024), 362–376.

[70] Andrew V.Papachristos, David M. Hureau, and Anthony A. Braga. "The Corner and the Crew: The Influence of Geography and Social Networks on Gang Violence", *American Sociological Review,* 78, no. 3, (2013), 417–447.

Recommendations

Our findings show three key areas that need to be addressed: institutional and social discrimination; identity and belonging; and political anxieties and frustrations. Leaving these long-standing problems unaddressed further alienates youths, weakens their sense of belonging, and deepens the political distrust already present among them.

I. Addressing institutional failures

Implementing mandatory sensitivity training for teachers through the Ministry of Education is vital to creating a safe environment. It should also establish a formal channel for youths to report racial incidents in schools. Institutions should not look the other way nor encourage educators who throw around racial slurs and create a hostile environment for youths.

A revamped quota system should shift from ethnicity-based opportunities to a merit- and financial-need-based system. Access to education for youths from low socioeconomic groups should be prioritised across the board. Academic merit and financial support were factors youths prioritised when revisiting the quota system.

Malaysia should introduce a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation covering recruitment, employment, education, housing and access to services. Section 69F of the Employment Act 1955 allows the Director General to address discrimination disputes between employees and employers, but it does not adequately protect job applicants who face discrimination even before employment begins. Protection should therefore extend to vacancy advertisements, shortlisting, interviews, appointments, promotions and contract renewals.

The government should introduce explicit protection against racial discrimination in the private rental market. This protection should prohibit landlords and agents from advertising racial preferences, rejecting applicants solely because of ethnicity, or imposing different rents, deposits and conditions according to race. Government agencies should conduct periodic recruitment and rental-market audits using methods such as anonymised application testing. AOD's research shows the value of systematic data in turning experiences often dismissed as anecdotal into measurable evidence of unequal access.

II. Cultivating a sense of belonging

Bridging the community gap that exists within the Indian community is vital. While understanding and acknowledging the diversity within the Indian community is important, youths want to move toward a more united front. Focusing on shared history and culture, without attaching it to notions of superiority, is a good step in the right direction.

Caste associations should not be allowed to present themselves as representative of Malaysian Indian organisations without disclosing their specific membership basis. Political leaders and government representatives should also conduct due diligence before attending or endorsing association events. Organisations receiving public funds should be required to declare whether their membership or activities are restricted by caste, sub-ethnicity, religion or political affiliation. Public funding should not support programmes that exclude participants on these grounds or provide benefits only to members of an inherited identity group.

Regarding language and class, parents and schools must cultivate a culture that values languages equally. The education system needs to promote language teaching for youths across the board, regardless of ethnic group, to bridge gaps in understanding. Rolling out similar programmes nationwide, such as the Selangor government's Language Discovery Programme, is a step in the right direction to provide free language classes outside school.

Promote cultural spaces where ethnic groups can come together and tackle key issues across communities. This should extend across the different socioeconomic groups and regions, not just limited to urban spaces. Fund and mobilise youths' efforts across states, breaking down silos and negative perceptions. Empathy and understanding are the bedrock of fostering national unity.

III. Giving Indian youths a voice

Raising both internal and external political efficacy among youths is vital. There is a breakdown in trust towards institutions, especially ones meant to empower the Indian community. For instance, there needs to be clear transparency in the allocation and disbursement of funds through MITRA. Fostering internal political efficacy through teaching can only take youths so far if institutional distrust remains. Civic education alongside youth participation in problem-solving is important. Inviting youths to help address local community issues can help mobilise them beyond political party networks.

While existing campaigns and programmes are available, many platforms can be amplified. Social media, if used correctly, can mobilise youths. There needs to be clear guardrails that prevent echo chambers of online hate speech and the promotion of ethnic silos on social media platforms.

Beyond schools, youths need third spaces where they can feel safe. Collaborative public-private sector funding for existing spaces should be available, rather than trying to manufacture safe spaces forcefully. These spaces come from having trustworthy figures within the community who advocate for youths. Sports, dance, art, music and more all have great value for youths also in cultivating a sense of belonging.

For at-risk youths, mentor-mentee programmes that promote second chances are important for those who need a positive role model. Having former gang members rehabilitate youths allows them to directly address and understand youths' concerns, making it easier for youths to trust that they too can have a safer, alternative view of their lives.