

Dynamics of Social Integration among the Indian Migrant Community in Sabah

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Abstract

This study explores the practice of interethnic marriage between the Indian community and local ethnic groups in Sabah within the historical context of migration under the administration of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC). Employing a historical methodology, the research traces the phased and systematic migration of Indians to Sabah and examines its impact on the region's social structure. This migration gave rise to a significant phenomenon of social integration, as evidenced by the emergence of mixed Indian-local ethnic communities. These intermarriages reflect a process of assimilation between majority and minority ethnic groups, contributing to the social dynamics of Sabah. The paper is structured into three main sections: the first discusses the background and early migration of Indians to Sabah under the BNBCC; the second identifies key factors that encouraged interethnic marriages between Indians and local communities; and the third analyses the impact of such marriages on the formation of hybrid identities. Understanding the history of Indian migration is crucial in examining the broader process of social integration involving the Indian community in Sabah.

Keywords: Migration, Interethnic Marriage, Social Integration, Indian Community, Local Ethnic Groups in Sabah

Introduction

The Indian community constitutes one of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. However, their position and socio-cultural dynamics in the state of Sabah display a pattern that differs markedly from that of Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah, the Indian population represents a minority group, especially when compared to dominant indigenous ethnic groups such as the Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, and Murut. Despite their relatively small percentage of the total population, the presence of the Indian community remains significant in the formation, development, and continuity of Sabah's uniquely pluralistic society.

The study of this topic is critical for several reasons. First, it unveils a distinctive dimension of multicultural interaction and integration that has been relatively underexplored in Malaysian sociological literature. While interethnic dynamics in Peninsular Malaysia have received sustained academic attention, the specific experiences of minority groups in Sabah particularly the Indian community have not been adequately examined. Second, the phenomenon of interethnic marriage between Indian migrants and indigenous ethnicities provides fertile ground for understanding how inclusive identities are negotiated in the intimate domain of family life, and how these identities then radiate outward to influence broader societal frameworks. Third, this inquiry responds to the nation's ongoing challenge to forge sustainable social unity in the face of increasing cultural diversification.

By illuminating the socio-historical process of integration through marital unions, the study offers practical implications for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, it underscores the relevance of grassroots relationships in shaping inclusive governance and cohesion strategies. For academics, it contributes novel insights to debates on cultural hybridity, postcolonial migration, and ethnic relations in East Malaysia. For local communities, particularly mixed-heritage families, it affirms their lived realities as meaningful social contributors in a multicultural landscape. For NGOs and cultural advocates, it strengthens the narrative that tolerance and shared values are achievable through everyday interactions and familial bonds. The effectiveness of this study lies in its potential to bridge theoretical frameworks and real-world implications in the context of Malaysian nation-building.

Broadly categorized as non-Bumiputera, most members of this community are descendants of immigrants who migrated to the region for a variety of reasons, particularly economic and political. The migration of Indians to Sabah did not occur in isolation but was shaped by multiple structural and global forces. A major impetus was economic hardship, which compelled many to leave the Indian subcontinent in response to poverty, social stratification, and colonial pressures. In addition, the British colonial administration's open-door policy implemented through its corporate arm, the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC), actively facilitated the entry of foreign labourers from India, China, and Bangladesh into North Borneo (Ranjit Singh, 1991). This wave of migration, which intensified towards the end of the 19th century, catalysed various forms of interaction between Indian migrants and local communities, thereby reshaping Sabah's social landscape.

One of the most discernible outcomes of such interaction is the phenomenon of interethnic marriage, which sociologically constitutes a form of social amalgamation. This phenomenon is not novel within the Malaysian historical context. As early as the era of the Melaka Sultanate in the 15th and 16th centuries, intermarriage has been documented as a strategic instrument for forging diplomatic and social ties among diverse ethnic groups. In Sabah, intermarriage assumes a more nuanced dimension whereby members of the Indian minority form familial ties with local indigenous groups such as the Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, and Murut. These unions have given rise to hybrid communities that serve as tangible evidence of cultural adaptation and social integration within a multiethnic society.

From a sociological standpoint, interethnic marriage is often regarded as one of the most effective mechanisms for bridging the divide between distinct ethnic groups. According to Kim and Leavit (2012), intermarriage is defined as a marital union that transcends

differences in ethnicity, race, or religion. Within the context of Malaysia's plural society, such marriages function as a medium of reconciliation, a conduit for intercultural communication, and an agent of social integration that contributes to long-term interethnic stability. This process of social amalgamation not only reflects the merging of cultural practices but also facilitates the emergence of new, inclusive identities founded on mutual respect and shared values.

Intermarriage between Indians and indigenous communities in Sabah also exemplifies a dynamic process of structural adaptation, wherein the values, norms, and customs of both parties are harmoniously negotiated within the family unit. The result is a social structure that is not only culturally enriched but also marked by a high degree of ethnic openness and tolerance. In this regard, interethnic marriage is not merely a personal or familial affair, but a broader sociological indicator of Sabah's success as a functioning multicultural society.

In sum, the integration facilitated through interethnic marriage between the Indian community and local ethnic groups in Sabah should be understood as a complex and meaningful socio-historical process. It demonstrates the capacity of minority communities to adapt within a new cultural milieu, while also affirming that interethnic relationships can yield a more inclusive and progressive social order. As such, this phenomenon warrants further scholarly attention and recognition, particularly in the context of nation-building and the pursuit of sustainable national unity.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored migration and ethnic integration in Malaysia, yet most have concentrated on Peninsular Malaysia. According to Sandhu (1969), Indian migration to Malaya in the 19th and early 20th centuries was largely driven by British colonial policies aimed at sourcing cheap labour for the plantation sector. In the context of Sabah, Ranjit Singh (1991) highlighted that British immigration policies similarly facilitated the influx of Indian workers into North Borneo.

The phenomenon of interethnic marriage has a long-standing presence in the socio-cultural history of the Malay Archipelago. Abdullah (2003) noted that intermarriage historically functioned as a vital instrument in diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations between ethnic groups. In the contemporary context, interethnic marriages are increasingly seen as symbols of integration and social acceptance within multi-ethnic societies (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, 2006). However, in-depth research specifically examining how such marriages contribute to the formation of new social identities among minority communities such as the Indian population in Sabah remains limited.

The phenomenon of interethnic marriage between the Indian community and indigenous groups in Sabah has drawn scholarly attention to the dynamics of social integration in the state. A study by Mohd Juhar Harun (2019) emphasised that interethnic marriages not only reflect cultural assimilation but also play a significant role in the construction of unique social identities among individuals and communities involved. This process involves the merging of cultural elements, language, and values from both ethnic groups, ultimately giving rise to hybrid identities that symbolise harmony and intercultural tolerance.

Additionally, research by Sharifah Darmia Sharif Adam (2019) highlighted that interethnic marriage in Sabah functions as an essential mechanism for fostering harmonious ethnic relations. This practice encourages deeper social interaction between ethnic groups, enhances mutual understanding, and reduces ethnic prejudices. Through such marriages, individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds are provided opportunities to share life experiences, traditions, and values, thereby strengthening social networks and promoting integration within the broader community.

A more recent study by Rosdiana Onga and Suraya Sintang (2023) revealed that intermarriages between Datu men from the Sulu Archipelago and Idahan women in Lahad Datu have contributed to the reinforcement of Islamic identity among coastal communities in eastern Sabah. The offspring of these unions possess kinship ties to the Sulu Sultanate, which in turn enhances their political and social standing within local society. This case illustrates how interethnic marriages can lead to the formation of complex and dynamic ethnic identities, shaped by historical, religious, and political factors.

Taken collectively, these studies underscore that interethnic marriages in Sabah are not merely social phenomena indicative of ethnic integration but also play a critical role in shaping complex and evolving social identities. The process involves active interaction between diverse cultural, linguistic, and value systems, ultimately leading to the emergence of hybrid identities that embody the spirit of harmony and tolerance within Sabah's multi-ethnic society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining historical methods, document analysis, and fieldwork through interviews. This approach is selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the migration process, social dynamics, and the impact of interethnic marriages on social integration between the Indian community and local ethnic groups in Sabah.

Research Design

The research is exploratory and descriptive in nature, aimed at exploring the historical migration patterns and the social interactions between the Indian community and indigenous ethnic groups. The study integrates both primary and secondary sources to provide a more comprehensive and accurate representation of the phenomena under investigation.

Data Collection Methods

Document and Archival Analysis

Historical data is obtained through the analysis of official documents such as the annual reports of the British North Borneo Chartered Company, colonial administrative records, journal articles, and previous academic publications. Key sources include manuscripts from the Sabah State Archives and the Tun Fuad Stephens Library.

Interviews

Interviews are conducted with selected informants comprising:

- i. Individuals of Indian and indigenous descent resulting from interethnic marriages
- ii. Local historians and academic researchers

These interviews aim to uncover personal experiences related to identity, social acceptance, and the integration process in their daily lives.

Findings and Discussion

The Early Formation of the Indian Diaspora in British North Borneo (1881–1942)

The early migration of the Indian community to Sabah, then known as British North Borneo, began with the establishment and administration of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) in 1881. The BNBCC was granted authority by the British Government to govern the territory for economic interests and the geopolitical strategy of the British Empire in Southeast Asia. This administration lasted until 1942, when it was interrupted by the Japanese military occupation during World War II. Following the Japanese surrender, the BNBCC, burdened by financial constraints and a loss of administrative legitimacy, relinquished control of North Borneo to the British Colonial Office on 15 July 1946, thereby making it a Crown Colony. Sabah later became part of the Federation of Malaysia alongside Malaya, Sarawak, and Singapore on 16 September 1963.

Throughout the BNBCC administration, migration from various ethnic backgrounds including Chinese, Indian, and Pathan communities—was actively encouraged as part of the colonial development strategy. Within this context, the Indian community in Sabah can be broadly classified into three categories:

1. Those who migrated directly from India to British North Borneo.
2. Those who moved from Peninsular Malaysia; and
3. Individuals born and raised in Sabah.

This migration, which began in the late 19th century, was driven by multiple factors such as socio-economic disparities in India, employment opportunities abroad, and the British open-door policy that actively recruited foreign labour to meet the needs of the colonial workforce (D.S. Ranjit Singh, 2003).

Historically, Indian migration to the Malay Archipelago was not a new phenomenon, having existed as early as the 14th century, with Indians participating as traders, mercenaries, and labourers across various economic sectors. However, migration to British North Borneo gained significant momentum during the British colonial period, when the demand for skilled labour increased sharply. In Sabah, Indian migrants particularly Punjabi Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, and Pathans played a pivotal role, especially in the areas of security and administration. This is evidenced by the formation of the British North Borneo Armed Constabulary (BNBAC) in 1882, which recruited Indian personnel to fill military and policing roles (Sarjit S., 2008).

Although large-scale Indian migration occurred around 1882, historical records indicate that Indian presence in the region dates to 1868. For instance, figures such as Bhagat Singh Sandhu from Punjab were believed to have worked in the coal mining sector in Labuan. The British held the Sikh community in high regard, particularly for their discipline and military reputation, which made them a preferred group for strategic appointments. Their participation in expeditions such as the Puroh Expedition (1883), the Kawang Amok (1885), and the Padas-Ulu Kimanis Expedition (1888) underscores the significant role of this community in consolidating colonial authority (Tabret, 1998).

Unlike the migration pattern to Peninsular Malaysia, which was largely associated with plantation labour, Indian migration to Sabah was more closely linked to colonial needs in administration, security, and infrastructure development (Azharudin Mohamed, 2003; D.S. Ranjit Singh, 1993). This reflects a colonial strategy adapted to local contexts and helps explain the distinct trajectory of cultural integration in Sabah, which differs markedly from that of Peninsular Malaysia.

Post-Colonial Developments and the Social Dynamics of the Indian Community in Sabah

Following the end of the British North Borneo Chartered Company's administration and the formal establishment of Sabah as a British Crown Colony in 1946, the Indian community continued to play an important role in the post-colonial development of the territory. This role evolved further when Sabah became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. While the Indian population remained a minority, their presence was visible in various sectors, including public administration, healthcare, education, and business.

Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, where the Indian community had already formed a large and cohesive diaspora with strong political representation and cultural institutions, the Indian community in Sabah remained small and dispersed. Consequently, their integration into local society took on a different trajectory, often characterised by high levels of interethnic interaction, especially through intermarriage with indigenous groups such as the Kadazandusun, Bajau, and Murut.

In the post-independence era, the Indian community in Sabah faced several challenges and adaptation processes. As non-Bumiputera minorities with relatively limited political representation, they often relied on communal networks and professional qualifications to sustain their livelihoods and social status. However, their relatively small numbers and their geographic dispersion also created opportunities for deeper social integration with local communities particularly through interethnic marriages, which became a significant feature of the Indian experience in Sabah.

These marriages fostered the emergence of hybrid identities, blending Indian cultural heritage with indigenous traditions, languages, and religious practices. This hybridisation process also reflected a form of bottom-up social integration, driven not by state policy but by everyday interactions and familial bonds. The Indian community's openness to cultural exchange and their adaptability were key factors that enabled their relatively smooth integration into Sabah's multiethnic landscape.

In addition to interethnic marriage, religion also played a role in shaping identity and social networks. While many Indian migrants retained their Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim religious practices, some converted to Christianity or Islam through marriage or community influence, further facilitating social cohesion with the local population. In this sense, the Indian diaspora in Sabah represents a unique case of diasporic adaptation that deviates from the more rigid communal boundaries often observed in Peninsular Malaysia.

In summary, the post-colonial development of the Indian community in Sabah illustrates a nuanced and dynamic process of cultural negotiation, interethnic exchange, and identity formation. Despite their minority status, the Indian population has contributed

meaningfully to the social and cultural fabric of Sabah, offering an alternative model of diaspora integration that is deeply embedded in local realities.

Theoretical Analysis: Migration and Social Perspectives

The phenomenon of Indian migration to Sabah can be analysed through various theoretical frameworks. Everett Lee's Push-Pull Theory (1966) posits that migration occurs because of push factors from the country of origin, such as poverty and social unrest and pull factors from the destination country, including employment opportunities and political stability. In this context, the socio-economic pressures in India, coupled with British colonial labour recruitment policies in North Borneo, constituted the primary drivers for the migration of Indian communities to the region.

From a sociological standpoint, the migration of the Indian community involved not only a physical relocation but also a complex process of cultural adaptation and social identity formation. As Fredrik Barth (1969) argued, ethnic identity is not a fixed or immutable entity, but rather the product of ongoing social interactions and culturally articulated boundaries. In the context of Sabah, Indian migrants had to navigate interethnic relations with local communities while adapting to new social norms and structures, all the while maintaining elements of their original cultural identity.

Furthermore, the Transnationalism Theory (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 1994) provides a critical framework for understanding how Indian migrants maintained economic, social, and cultural ties with their homeland even after settling in Sabah. This sustained connectivity has led to the emergence of hybrid identities, characterised by dual loyalties and cultural syncretism whereby Indian cultural values are preserved alongside the adaptation of local norms. Such hybridisation underscores a dynamic form of integration that reflects both continuity and transformation in migrant identity.

In sum, the migration of the Indian community to Sabah under the British North Borneo Chartered Company was not merely utilitarian in nature serving the labour demands of a colonial economy but also catalytic in fostering profound social transformation. The active presence of the Indian community, particularly in the fields of security and administration, contributed significantly to the political stability and early development of Sabah. Simultaneously, the interactions between Indian migrants and indigenous groups created a unique space for cultural convergence and mutual adaptation, positioning Sabah as a microcosm of Malaysia's plural society. These theoretical lenses thus offer deeper insight into the social dynamics at play and underscore the need for continued scholarly exploration of such intersections in future research.

Intermarriage and the Social Integration Process of the Indian Community in Sabah

Intermarriage and Cultural Assimilation

The phenomenon of intermarriage between Indians and local ethnic groups in Sabah reflects complex social interactions, where cultural, religious, and normative similarities play a significant role in accelerating the process of assimilation. Religious commonality, particularly between Indian Muslim communities and local Muslim groups, acts as a major catalyst for social integration. According to Gordon's (1964) assimilation theory, intermarriage is a

primary medium for narrowing ethnic and cultural divides, enabling the formation of new social identities that incorporate elements from both cultural backgrounds.

In addition to religious and cultural affinities, economic and social factors also facilitate assimilation through intermarriage. Alba and Nee (2003) argue that intermarriage not only strengthens social relationships but also enhances access to economic resources and broader social networks, elevating the social standing of couples and their offspring. Suraya Sintang (2024) supports this perspective, revealing that 80% of respondents in Kota Kinabalu have families of mixed ethnicity and religion, indicating a high level of tolerance and social harmony. This trend aligns with Berry's (1997) interculturalism concept, which emphasizes the importance of cultural dialogue in fostering unity in multi-ethnic societies.

However, intermarriage may also reflect a form of "cultural power asymmetry," where dominant cultures may overshadow minority traditions, leading to the loss of original identities. In this regard, Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" provides a theoretical lens to understand how individuals navigate and construct hybrid identities that are distinct from traditional affiliations. While this space opens opportunities for cultural negotiation, it also presents challenges in preserving heritage while forging new social identities.

Gender Imbalance in Early Migration

Early Indian migration to North Borneo was predominantly male, corresponding to the labour demands in administrative and military sectors under British colonial rule. Cultural and religious norms within Hindu Indian society further restricted female migration, resulting in significant gender imbalance (Moorthy, 2009). Consequently, many Indian men married local women as a strategy for social adaptation in the new environment.

Mohd Juhar Harun (2019) observed that this gender imbalance not only shaped the social structure of the Indian community in Sabah but also facilitated wider cultural integration through the institution of intermarriage. The feminist migration approach by Mahler and Pessar (2006) explains that such gendered patterns of migration present both challenges and opportunities in cultural preservation and social identity formation for couples and their descendants.

Nevertheless, this situation may also generate gender-based inequalities, where local women who marry migrant men face issues concerning inheritance rights, children's education, and social status. Thus, further research is required to examine the long-term social and psychological implications of migration and intermarriage on this demographic.

Permanent Settlement Decisions in North Borneo

Although initial migration was intended to be temporary, many Indian migrants eventually chose to permanently settle in Sabah. Factors such as economic stability, political unrest in the homeland, better socio-economic opportunities, and cultural acceptance by local communities were central to this decision (Koentjaraningrat, 1981; Sintang, 2011).

This phenomenon can be explained through the Segmented Assimilation Theory proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993), which posits that immigrant integration does not follow a uniform path but is shaped by specific socio-economic and contextual variables. As a result, the Indian

community in Sabah developed diverse patterns of cultural and social adaptation. Furthermore, the inclusive immigration policies of the Sabah state government, in contrast to those in other regions, accelerated the integration process (Azharudin Mohamed, 2003).

However, political dynamics in Sabah, particularly those surrounding the distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous status have created complex challenges to social integration. Hence, segmented assimilation theory must be adapted to account for ethnic power structures and local policies that may either facilitate or hinder integration.

Identity Implications of Inter-marriage

Inter-marriage has led to the formation of hybrid identities that are complex and dynamic. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybrid identity helps explain how individuals born from interethnic unions combine elements of both cultures, forming new, distinct identities that often function as cultural bridges in multi-ethnic societies.

Kibria (2008), in her study of children from mixed marriages in Malaysia, found that they often play a unifying role in social interactions, fostering dialogue across ethnic boundaries. Maya Khemlani David (2020) further asserts that religious conversion within inter-marriage contexts facilitates cultural assimilation and the emergence of shared identities. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory also sheds light on how individual identities are shaped through social interactions and group affiliations.

Nonetheless, identity conflicts may arise when issues of cultural, linguistic, or religious dominance surface particularly among second and third generations. Social discrimination and stereotyping can lead to psychosocial pressures and feelings of marginalization among hybrid-identity individuals. Thus, inclusive approaches in education and social policy are necessary to ensure the well-being and social acceptance of this group.

Religious and Cultural Change

Inter-marriage also brings significant changes in religious and cultural practices. The dominance of a particular religion within a relationship often determines the religious and cultural norms observed by the couple. A historical example is the marriage of Sarban Singh (a Punjabi Sikh) and Satya from Kinarut, who converted to Sikhism illustrating how religious and cultural shifts become part of the broader cultural adaptation process (Sarjit S., 2002).

This phenomenon aligns with Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation, where individuals adapt to dominant cultural norms to enhance social integration and shared identity. It can also be interpreted as a form of religious syncretism (Fenton, 2012), in which elements of multiple religious and cultural traditions are blended into a more inclusive lifestyle.

However, such transitions may also provoke identity conflicts, particularly when there is pressure from the original community to adhere strictly to traditional religious norms. Bruinessen (1994) emphasizes the importance of understanding religious negotiation within the broader context of identity politics and socio-cultural power dynamics especially in diverse societies such as Sabah.

Conclusion

The arrival of the Indian community in North Borneo, now known as Sabah, reflects a migration pattern that significantly differs from that of migration to Peninsular Malaya. This migration was not merely driven by labour demands under the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) administration, but was also influenced by a variety of social, economic, security, and cultural factors elements essential for understanding the dynamics of Indian migration to this region. The Indian community, particularly those of Sikh, Pathan, Punjabi Muslim, and Tamil descent, played a pivotal role in the early development of North Borneo, especially in the sectors of security, administration, and trade. Their assimilation with local communities through the institution of intermarriage gave rise to a peranakan generation that embodies hybrid identities a cultural synergy shaped by parental heritage while adapting to the dominant local norms and customs. Although the Indian population in Sabah is not as large as other communities such as the Chinese or Bumiputera groups, their contributions to the social and economic history of the state are substantial and should not be overlooked. They constitute an integral component of Sabah's early social structure and have served as cultural intermediaries, contributing to the formation of a plural society that underpins Malaysia's national development. Nevertheless, in-depth research on the historical migration of the Indian community to North Borneo remains underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse. Therefore, further investigation is crucial to deepen our holistic understanding of their migration experiences, social adaptation processes, and cultural heritage. Such efforts are essential in ensuring an inclusive and accurate historical record one that recognises the diverse ethnic groups that shape the narrative of Malaysian nation-building. In this regard, continued writing and research on the early migration of Indians to Sabah should be regarded as a critical element in the nation's historical narrative. It opens space for broader dialogue on social integration and the formation of national identity within Malaysia's multicultural context an essential foundation for unity and harmony in contemporary Malaysia.

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