Marginalized Minorities in Malaysia? A Case Study of a Demolished Estate Hindu Temple in Penang

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In the literature, Malaysian Indians, as minorities, are marginalized and discriminated against, while their agency is either conspicuously lacking or one-dimensional. As a result, the mainstream discourse concerning Malaysian Indians is discursive and renders them subordinate. I argue that despite the marginalization and discrimination, grassroots Malaysian Indian Hindus are not powerless. With a case study of a demolished estate Hindu temple in Penang, I unpack their agential compliance and lack of confrontation when the state government destroyed their community temple. Their agential responses reflect their diverse political and social experiences as minorities and the myriad ways of interpreting the political rivalry between the ruling federal and opposition-led state government. Analysis of the case study is derived from ethnography and in-depth interviews with the estate Hindus.

Keywords: Hindu Temple Demolition; Hindus; Malaysia; Penang; Religious Minority

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INTRODUCTION

Changes in the political status quo of Malaysia during the last two decades have proven that there are limitations to the existing literature about Malaysian Indians as minorities. More importantly, the erosion of political dynamics has brought to surface the contour of power relations at the grassroots levels – this is, between the government and minority groups. This article aims to address the absence of such complex and complicit power relations in the mainstream discourse. I argue that the existing mainstream discourse, which has been consistently rendering Malaysian Indians, especially the Hindus, as subordinate and powerless, is problematic. With a case study of a demolished estate Hindu temple in Penang, I demonstrate Malaysian Indians in diverse and changing social and political realities from individual to group associations and communal representations.

This case study also challenges the discursive notion that the demolition of Hindu temples in Malaysia is mainly caused by the predominantly Malay Muslim ruling government as the perpetrator. The demolished estate temple was located on land belonging to the state government of Penang. At the time, Penang was governed by the opposition political alliance, *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR). PR was a coalition formed by the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP), *People's Justice Party* (PKR), and

the *Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party* (PAS) on 1 April 2008, after the 12th General Election. DAP and PKR are multi-racial political parties, and PAS is an Islamic political party. The state was one of the five states that PR won over during their unprecedented political victory in the 2008 general election.[1] The election was popularly known within Malaysia as a political tsunami, as it was the first time in its history that the ruling alliance, the predominantly Malay Muslim *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition, had come close to losing an election to their opposition counterparts. Many scholars argue that the mass rally by Malaysian Indian Hindus in November 2007 was an important contributing factor towards the result of the 2008 general elections. The impetus for the rally was precisely the continuous demolition of Hindu temples by the ruling government (Noor, 2008), and the rally is seen to be a major factor in rattling the political status quo of the country, which was reflected in the results of the 2008 general election (Noor, 2008). More importantly, the opposition political parties had shown their public support to the Hindu leaders and the rally, and that show of support had won them a substantial amount of electoral votes from the Malaysian public (Mokhtar, 2008, p. 96). The political victory of the PR in Penang may lead to an assumption that Hindu temples in that state, especially those located on privately owned lands, were safer from demolition than Hindu temples in states governed by the BN. But the following case shows a contrasting view.

The primary focus of this article is the response of the estate Hindus when the authorities announced their intention and subsequently demolished their community temple. By presenting their responses, I will demonstrate a dimension of complexity in the issue of the demolition of Hindu temples as derived from the agency of grassroots Hindu minorities directly. My analysis includes ethnographic data related to their sentiments when the temple was demolished and 'relocated' – this is, their recounts of the process of negotiation with the authorities, and of the demolition and relocation day, as well as their sentiments about the temporary temple that the authorities helped to establish for housing the murtis. This case study suggests a deep understanding of the agential roles of Malaysian minorities, as the estate Hindus conform while indirectly demonstrating their objection and scepticism towards the authorities. Their responses demonstrate a subjective embrace of the attributes of being members of the religious minority. Understanding their agential roles complicates the mainstream discourse that presents Malaysian Indian Hindus as powerless to the dominance of the authorities. As I further demonstrate in the analysis, their subjective embrace had enabled them to make civic and political claims on the national community (Mahmood, 2012, p. 438).

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

I anchor my argument in a case study of a demolished Hindu temple in Penang, Malaysia. 'Demolition' in this article is defined as tearing down of a building structure. However, this case study demonstrates that the process of demolition is often

1 The coalition was dissolved officially on 16 June 2015 due to insurmountable friction, especially between PAS and DAP. Subsequently, DAP and PKR joined the Pakatan Harapan coalition with *Malaysian United Indigenous Party* (BERSATU) and *National Trust Party* (AMANAH) on 22 September 2015. During fieldwork for this study (between 2013 and 2014), the state government of Penang was led by the PR coalition with the chief minister from DAP.

complicated, intertwined with political rivalry between the ruling and opposition political parties at both the state and national levels and the specificity of Malaysian Hindus' reputation as a marginalized and discriminated minority. Due to the heavy politicking between the ruling and opposition political parties over this issue, the term demolition often entails a de facto necessity of relocating the temple, and it is often decided after a public negotiation between the management committee of the temple and the authorities, which could be national or state government agencies, or local municipalities. As the relocation is decided and agreed upon, the case of demolition is known as 'relocation' of the temple.

However, as I will demonstrate in this case study, the relocation does not proceed conventionally. Indeed, the relocation of Hindu temples is nothing new. In India, for example, the relocation of a Hindu temple is an auspicious event, which entails identification of a new location, followed by a ground-breaking ceremony, and then, after the completion of the new temple structure and the shifting of the murtis from the former temple building into the new one, by a consecration ceremony. The demolition of the estate Hindu temple in Penang demonstrates that the 'relocation' took place before authorities had identified a new location and constructed a new temple building. The murtis of the temple were instead housed in a temporary, simple-structured building.

This case study stems from a series of more extensive studies of Hindu temples in Penang, which I have conducted since 2011. My first direct encounter with the demolition of Hindu temples came through a mapping exercise commissioned by the *Penang Hindu Endowment Board*. During this mapping exercise, I visited over two hundred Hindu temples, wayside and family shrines, and demolished Hindu temples and shrines. Three years later, in 2014, I revisited some of these temples for my PhD dissertation. On my first day of revisiting, I was surprised to find that this estate temple had been demolished (see Figure 1), although data obtained from the previous mapping exercise clearly showed that the land on which the temple was located belonged to the Penang state government. I also recalled that the temple committee stressed that the authorities had allowed rebuilding the temple on the land.

Figure 1. The demolished estate temple. *This was my first sight of the demolished temple during the first day of revisiting*. (Photo taken during fieldwork).

I subsequently chose this temple as a case study after obtaining the consent of the management committee. This case study is derived from ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with members of the management committee and estate Hindus.[2] Throughout this study, pseudonyms are used in place of real names to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Ethnographic data is obtained from field observations and informal conversations with the estate Hindus when I visited their housing area located about three hundred meters away from the temple. I visited the estate and the housing areas continuously for a period of three months. The conversations took place outside and inside their homes, which attracted the curiosity of other neighbours, who often joined in the discussions.

At the outset of the fieldwork, there were tensions and contradictions in the temple committee and the estate Hindus' responses. On the one hand, the management committee explained the inevitability of complying with the state government for demolishing the temple. On the other hand, many members of the estate Hindu community expressed their disagreement and discontentment for their community temple to be destroyed before a new location was identified for rebuilding, as the state government had promised. Furthermore, the management committee and some members of the estate Hindus stressed that they did not protest and conformed to the arrangement by the state government. However, some other members of the estate Hindus were able to narrate the incident of their protest during the day when the officials bulldozed their community.

Besides the contradictory claims, a statement of 'What to do?' was often echoed in the interviews with the estate Hindus. I argue that the rhetorical question indicates an agential response that is embedded in the lived experience of patron-client relationships between the authorities and the estate Hindus. Literature discerning political transactionalism has shown how patron-client relationships between the authorities and the people are widely manifested in Southeast Asia (Scott, 1972; Simandjuntak, 2012; van Klinken & Berenschot, 2014). In Malaysia, even the seemingly rigid and orthodox PAS is found to negotiate the party's moral compass to woo political support from the youth (Müller, 2015). This negotiation indicates the influence of informal power relations embedded in the dependencies within patron-client relationships. Scott (1972, p. 92) argues that informal patron-client relations are powerful enough to undermine the formal institution of authority. Such informal power relations are vividly narrated by the estate Hindus, as they compared the change of state government from the ruling BN to the opposition PR. This case study also illuminates the complex interconnections of patron-client power relations between politicians and grassroots and social structure, which contributes to the literature of how the concept of democracy is shaped from the bottom up (Simandjuntak, 2012; van Klinken & Berenschot, 2014).

The fieldwork took place after the estate Hindus had waited for about 18 months. Since the demolition in June 2014, the estate Hindus had waited for the state government's arrangement of a new land for rebuilding the temple. A participant, Magesan (56 years old, retired; personal communication, 17 October 2016) said:

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2 Members of the management committee consisted of residents living at the estate. They are distinguished from other estate Hindus by their position in the temple committee.

> He [the second deputy Chief Minister of Malaysia] said two years. In two years, the state government will rebuild for us . . . But now, we don't know where he is, if he wins the next general election, then we are probably fine. But what if he loses?

Such compliance imbued with scepticism was the general sentiment among research participants, both the management committee and the estate Hindus. However, I argue that their sentiments require a nuanced unpacking. Furthermore, the frictions between the management committee and estate Hindus who opposed their decision to comply with the state government indicate another layer of complexity to their responses. I further argue that their diverse responses and sentiments indicate their agency concerning the demolition of their community temple.

Many studies have been conducted focusing on the agency of minorities and subordinated groups. For instance, Scott (1990) insists that "the powerless have . . . a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce a hegemonic appearance" (p. xii). He argues that the conspiracy is to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful (Scott, 1990, p. xii). One possible strategic pose is the submission to a hegemonic relationship with the authorities. Mahmood (2012) argues that the agential submission of minorities and subordinate groups is institutionalized in the evolution of their political and social situations as contextually shaped strategies. The context includes national and international regulations that shape the notion of "freedom" and "unfreedom" of religious minorities (Mahmood, 2012, p. 412). As a religious minority, their social and political realities are indexical of the problematic space their identities occupy as distinct from the nation (Mahmood, 2012, p. 439). Fundamentally, these studies stress a notion of power as constructive and not repressive (Asad, 2009, p. 17). Participants in this study demonstrated their constructive creativity and pragmatism in manoeuvring their way through hegemonic relationships with the government and in their public transcript. Scott (1990, p. 2) conceptualized the term "public transcript" as "action that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship", including non-speech acts and expressions. In the following, I will demonstrate how the management committee and estate Hindus both affirmed and naturalized the power of the dominant elites differently (cf. Scott, 1990, p. 18) and the difference in their self-interest in conspiring to reinforce a hegemonic appearance (cf. Scott, 1990, p. xii). I also structurally unpack the effectiveness of their agential submission as a manipulating instrument of their oppression and as a means to assert religious freedom collectively as a minority (cf. Mahmood, 2011, p. 7).

ITERATING THE PAST AND SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE OF THE TEMPLE

The demolition of Hindu temples in Malaysia cannot be explained through an overarching discourse; rather, one must consider historical, political, social, and personal orientations. Therefore, the arrival of Indian migrants to Malaya and the temple establishment during the colonial period remains relevant for the participants of this case study. However, the interpretation must also consider how participants narrate and highlight this history and how they make their discrimination legible in terms of the mainstream discourse on religious rights and freedom.

According to participants, the European planters built the temple at the estate in the 19th century. After independence, the estate changed hands, and the *Penang Development Corporation* (PDC) – an agency of the Penang state government – bought it over in 2001. PDC identified a new location closer to the quarters of the estate Hindus for constructing a new temple. Nevertheless, the land identified for the new site still belonged to the PDC. Such history of relocation demonstrates how a Hindu temple built for the Hindu labourers in the estate had been susceptible to demolition over time regardless of their century-old cultural legacy. Although it might be correct to state that the European planters built the temple for the labourers, the management committee did not have any documentation concerning the historical accuracy of the temple's construction. Instead, the legacy of the temple was inherited through oral history. For example, 58-year-old Muthu (a former member of the management committee for the temple) said:

> My father and I were born here. I got married and had my children here. I used to stay with my parents over there before we moved to this house. We have stayed in this house since 1978. I started going to the temple since I was five years old.

Such inherited oral history linking the temple to its colonial past has two crucial implications worth dissecting here. Firstly, the inherited legacy of the temple establishes a continuity of the colonial discourse that victimizes Malaysian Indians as a marginalized and powerless minority. Especially with racially-based politics taking shape in Malaysia after independence, and the nationalism and Islamization movements that caused a series of race-based conflicts, scholars have often found that the conditions of working-class Indians have barely improved. Indian Hindu leaders have claimed that "Indians in Malaysia, who have lived in Malaysia for up to five generations in many cases, find *ourselves* hemmed in and blocked by a racist and religious extremist Malaysian government" (Gill & Gopal, 2010, p. 137, emphasis by the author). Therefore, in order to fend for their culture and the sovereignty of their religion, "Malaysian Indians have become more introverted and, to some extent, paranoid about race-religious relations" (Gill & Gopal, 2010, p. 139).

Presumably, in the political context of Penang after 2008, such discourse of Malay Muslim dominance may not seem to apply, as the opposition alliance, the PR, had governed the state. Nevertheless, some participants claim to have experienced similar discrimination even from the PR-led state government. Mani, a 60-year-old born and bred on the estate, recalled:

> During the time of the BN, the *Datuk* [who is also a member of parliament] said, this is my place and my people cannot be evicted, not until we have found a new place for the people, then we will ask them to relocate. But now with these new people taking over, I don't know what will happen to us.[3] (personal communication, 14 September 2019)

3 *Datuk* is a honorary title conferred by Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (King of Malaysia) – a reward of recognition for an individual's great contribution to the nation.

Indeed, state governments in Malaysia have exclusive authority over land allocation to construct houses of worship and cemeteries. Mani compared the previous (BN) and current (PR) state governments to highlight that the PR-led state government is obliged to allocate a new place for them to rebuild their community temple and remain at the location permanently. Mani emphasized how the *Datuk* claimed the temple and the community as “his people” and “his place”, indicating that the previous leadership had respected their religious needs and freedom, while the PR-led state government did not. During the interview, his wife Sita, a 60-year-old housewife, asked me:

> Sis, let me ask you, why they [the state government] don’t disturb that new Malay village over there. They have all gotten a house from the government. The government constructed terrace houses with stories for the Malays. After they completed the construction, then they asked the people to move in. We, the Tamil. Why Ramasamy [the second deputy chief minister of Penang] gave them four thousand ringgits, but he never gave us that?[4] (Personal communication, 16 September 2019)

As a religious minority, Malaysian Hindus have often been discriminated against and marginalized by the development policy of the BN-led government that favors the Malay Muslim majority (Lee, 1988; Ramanathan, 1995; Willford, 2015). Hence, Sita’s statement of being discriminated against as a non-Malay and non-Muslim by the PR-led state government of Penang falls outside this mainstream discourse. Considering the political rivalry between the PR and BN, both Sita’s and Mani’s responses show how they practically evaluated the political situation and exercised modalities of agency.

The second implication is that, in line with Sandhu (1969, p. 233), the old Tamil saying “*kovil illa uril kuti irrukka vendam*” (lit., “do not live in a town where there is no temple”) appears to have been observed by the Indian Hindu laborers. For them, temples helped establish a sense of locality through the worship of their village deities (Prorok, 2015, p. 267). Within the temple realm, the laborers could feel at home and overcome their labor tedium (Arasaratnam, 1979, pp. 66-67; Khoo, 2009, p. 23 & 25; Sandhu, 1969, p. 233). European planters realized that they could use the significance of temples to encourage the influx of more Indian labourers to work in Malaya (Arasaratnam, 1993/2006; Kent, 2005, p. 30; Prorok, 2015; Sinha, 2011, p. 84). As a result, the numbers of Hindu temples increased in parallel to the increasing number of Indian Hindu migrants to Malaya. It is noteworthy that these Hindu laborers intended to return to their home countries upon fulfilling their labor contracts. As most of them were temporary residents, Hindu temples built for them were also temporary and unregistered (Kaur, 2012; Lal, 2006; Sandhu, 1969, p. 185).

Over time, even though many of the descendants of Indian laborers decided to reside in Malaya (Chanderbali, 2008, p. 34), most of them continued to work as estate and plantation workers. Concomitantly, Hindu temples, which were initially

4 P. Ramasamy has been the first Indian appointed for Penang’s second deputy chief minister since 2008. By having two deputies – the first deputy being Mohammad Fairus Khairuddin – the then chief minister opined that Penangnites would be effectively represented in politics across three major races.

temporary, also became enrooted on the lands. It was financially impossible for these Hindu laborers to obtain land titles or grants (Lal, 2006), as most of them remained in poverty due to low salaries. Indian laborers were known as "cheap and reliable" (Polak, 1941, p. 88) and were amenable to low wages and better adjusted to the low standard of living (Sandhu, 1969, p. 57). As the landownerships changed hands after independence, these temples became illegal structures. Most estate Hindus are descendants of the Hindu migrants who have lived in the estate for at least three generations. Although they remained in the estate, occupations among the Hindus diversified. While some worked in the estates, many of them had elementary jobs or were unemployed, making it impossible for them to acquire the land for the temple. Nonetheless, given the chain of equivalences, participants suggested that the government redress the lack of land ownership with their history of living in the estate for two or more generations.

Besides the historical context, participants also stressed that the sacredness of the temple deities should be of primary concern because the deities had been with the estate Hindus for generations. The long-term *arcannai* relationship between the deity and the estate Hindus made the former location a strategic sacred ground. *Arcannai* is a reciprocal relationship initiated by the worshippers towards the deity to seek divine intervention for crises, move towards different levels of life-cycle, and express gratitude for divine blessings and interventions (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1976, p. 195). Through *arcannai*, worshippers establish a personal relationship with the deity, which further animates their belief that the deity is a living being. In this case, one of the participants claimed that, before the demolition, he had heard the sound of anklets at night, signifying that the deity was patrolling their quarter warding off evil spirits. He stopped hearing it after the demolition of the temple. He believed that the demolition had disturbed the manifestation of the divinity of the deities. Magesan (personal communication, 16 September 2019) explained:

> When the temple was at the corner, she protected all the people. During the mornings, before we go to work, and after work, we would pass by the temple, and she would cover (protect) us. Whatever ought to come, she would cover. Now the temple is no longer there. They took everything and put it there. They just transferred everything there, how could they simply transfer the temple like that?

The participants' narratives about the temple and its sacred place also suggested their insecurity about the temple's future. Their indication that the deities desired the temple to remain further indicated that the mundane ownership of the land was rendered secondary. Instead, estate Hindus believed that the demolition had agitated the deities. "She is not like any other deities . . . she would not be so forgiving anymore" (Magesan, personal communication, 16 September 2019). Or, as another participant exclaimed, "If you lie to her, she will cut off your tongue" (personal communication, 18 September 2019). Such threats further indicate a sense of insecurity among participants that the state government will not uphold the agreement to provide new land for rebuilding the temple.

Agential Submission and Objection of the Estate Hindus

Participants' responses revealed tensions between those who supported and those who opposed the conformity of the temple committee with the government in the demolition of their community temple. Their accounts of the demolition and relocation processes were contradicting and ambiguous. More importantly, since the demolition of the temple, the estate Hindus had not confronted the government. Instead, they chose to wait even though they had not received news about any proposal of a new land where they could rebuild the temple. This section demonstrates that their seemingly idle waiting was not the whole story. Their lack of confrontational approach is a necessary and pragmatic resignation, which, as Scott (2008, p. 329) argues, does not equate the inevitable with the just. Instead, similar to Scott (2008, p. 304), their docile appearance often underlies innumerable and anonymous acts of resistance. I further contend that they calibrated their responses to the rationality of the changed state government of Penang after the 2008 general election. Their rationality brought to surface the prevailing patron-client relationships that are fundamental for most Malaysian politicians to maintain their powerful positions. Scott (1972) and Simandjuntak (2012) have noted how general elections in Malaysia and Southeast Asia often improved the bargaining power of the clients (the voters) by giving them the capacity to choose their patron (the political party candidates). In this section, I demonstrate the rationality of the estate Hindus from their narrations of the negligence of the state government after demolishing their community temple.

Forty-eight-year-old Pavalan was a member of the management committee. He admitted that they had been aware that the discontentment of the estate Hindus grew with the approaching two-year deadline given by the state government. Nevertheless, he was adamant that the temple committee had made the right decision to conform to the state government's arrangement for demolishing the temple. Despite his obstinate belief in their decision, as he later revealed in the interview, their conformance did not necessarily translate into submission to the state government:

> You [the state government] want to do development? Never mind, you are the state [government], you want to acquire the land, and all, it is government land. Must acquire, this I agree. But you must fulfil whatever you said to the people. If this is not done, I will be the first person to face the state government and strike over here. (personal communication, 10 September 2019)

Pavalan had been thinking about a contingency plan if the state government did not keep its promise. The threat of organizing a strike indicated that he was aware of how the protest would attract media attention and public interest about the temple. This would then enable the BN coalition to allege that the PR was discriminating against grassroots Indian Hindus.

Nonetheless, other members of the estate Hindus claimed that they had indeed protested on the day the temple was demolished:

> The police came with the chairman and Ramasamy, and they demolished the temple. All . . . they pushed . . . pushed . . . pushed . . . all destroyed. All the heads

> of the statues [attached to the structure of the temple] were destroyed . . . the temple was destroyed . . . the Malay villagers came and asked us, 'Why they do this to your temple, they should give a place, build a temple, then you move'. (Magesan, personal communication, 14 September 2019)

Magesan's dramatic recount implied that the assumed conformance of the management committee with the state government was a sell-out of their community temple. Besides, his mention of the Malay villagers as witnesses to the demolition was significant in suggesting that even they, as outsiders, recognized the importance of the temple for the estate Hindus, but the state government did not. Such an account of the demolition was surprising, as Pavalan did not mention any dramatic protest by the community. Moreover, when I asked Muthu about the protest, he not only denied it but also opined that it was strategic and pragmatic to conform with the arrangement by the state government:

> Those who don't know politics, they talked and made noise about the issue, they don't know that is useless . . . The government has already taken over the land; we should not disturb. We ask that the government give us a place, and we will stay quiet. The government thinks that they can do anything. Don't interrupt. The government will give houses and temple. No need to protest. Politics are their business. They have a different intention. It is their problem. (personal communication, 1 October 2019)

Muthu did not only think that protest or any form of confrontation was counterproductive. The tactic of conformance for Muthu was to let the state government demolish their community temple and gazette new land for the temple to be relocated permanently. Indeed, his response also implied that there was a possibility that the state government would not uphold the agreement of new land:

> I have my theory...if we want to know what would happen to us, we have to wait until the year 2017 for the next general election. When we are about to vote, only then we would know what kind of houses and where would they build these houses for us. Now, the state government will only tell us different stories. (personal communication, 1 October 2016)

Muthu's theory implied a prevailing patron-client relationship that underlies the power relations between local politicians and the grassroots. With the next general election around the corner, his logic of conformance indicated that it is still necessary for the performance of powerlessness in the seemingly hegemonic power relations with the state government. Staging a protest would backfire. Instead, submission and conformance would benefit their situation by not providing reasons for the state government to overturn the agreement with them. Nonetheless, this did not mean that Muthu equated the inevitable with the just: He emphasized that submissiveness did not equate to unwavering support for Ramasamy and the PR-led state government. Stressing that submission was an act of necessity to safeguard the temple from permanent destruction, Muthu recounted the day when the convoy of state government

representatives had made the announcement, and he had stood up and asked the deputy chief minister:

> “Professor [Ramasamy], now you have one more year to sit in the position [as the second deputy chief minister]. But when the next election comes, you might contest in another place, what will happen to this place?” He [Ramasamy] got mad and said, “You can’t say such a thing.” And left [the matter] just like that. (personal communication, 1 October 2019)

There was a smile on Muthu’s face as he recalled how Ramasamy was agitated by his rhetorical question. Muthu believed that, at that moment, Ramasamy understood his euphemistic question, which implied that Ramasamy’s position as the second deputy chief minister might change during the next general election due to a lack of popularity and support. With the presence of government representatives and members of estate Hindus, Muthu’s question implied a subtle and indirect warning that the PR needed to treat the relocation of their community temple with caution. Ramasamy needed grassroots support, such as the estate community, to secure his position in Penang's state government and his position as the second deputy chief minister. The possibility of not obtaining substantial electoral ballot supports may prompt the state government, as patron, to meet at least the minimum standard of exchange with its client, the estate Hindus (cf. Scott, 1972).

Nonetheless, not all estate Hindus showed such subtlety as in the counter-hegemonic tactics demonstrated by Muthu. Sita, who alleged that the PR-led state government was marginalizing them as an estate community, warned: “I speak the truth from my heart. I am not afraid. Ramasamy should be afraid of us” (personal communication, 16 September 2019). Sita’s remark stresses the importance of their support for Ramasamy to maintain his political position. Her husband, Mani, followed: “They [DAP] will lose five hundred to one thousand voters here” (personal communication, 16 September 2019). By highlighting the votes that the PR would lose, he further demonstrated the valuable currency of their ballots for the next general election.

Besides Pavalan and Muthu, I met Bala (60 years old) – another member of the management committee – who responded: “What can we do? They [the state government] also don’t like us [the managing committee]” (personal communication, 5 October 2019). He claimed that the demolition and subsequent delay in allocating a new piece of land were because of this dislike. The reason for the disapproval was the political affiliation of the management committee with the BN coalition: “Last time we were all JKKK for the BN government” (Bala, personal communication, 5 October 2019). After DAP’s victory in Penang, members of the management committee left their positions and joined the *Federal Village Security and Development Committee* (JKKP), established by the BN federal government as a counterpart to the *Village Security and Development Committee* (JKKK) at the state level. After the general election in 2008, the federal minister of rural and regional development encouraged the JKKK members to resign from their positions, promising them that they would receive an allowance from the federal government after their resignations. As many of the previous JKKK members left, the PR state government appointed a new

village committee, resulting in two different sets of village committees (Loh, 2010, p. 134). Such a patron-client system has been prevalent in Malaysian politics since the colonial period (Hazis, 2015, p. 11). As Andrew C. Willford (2002, p. 256) points out, working-class Indians were often forced to turn to their elected representatives to seek guarantees for their cultural and social spaces. Bala further explained that the patronage relationship with the government was necessary as they were politically under-represented minorities. Nonetheless, by revealing his JKKP membership, Bala suggested that the patron-client relationship was mutually beneficial:

> Sometimes we are invited by UMNO people to attend the meetings of JKKP. If we go to their meetings, they will give us fifty ringgits. They will ask us what they can do to help the community. We will tell them what kind of help we want from them and what the DAP has done to help the community.[5] (personal communication, 18 September 2019)

Bala's affiliation with BN was a surprising discovery, especially knowing that Pavalan worked for the PR-led state government. This implies that the management committee was involved in a patron-client relationship with both political parties. Simultaneously, two forms of patron-client relationships, traditional and modern, as coined by Simandjuntak (2012), were ongoing between the management committee and the government (both federal and state). This explains their different attitudes. For Bala, his practical evaluative response was to show submission: "[Now] they [the state government] are all DAP people . . . That's why now we can't do anything" (personal communication, 18 September 2019). His portrayal of powerlessness implied that they were marginalized due to the lack of a patronage relationship with the new PR-led state government. As a result, Bala claimed that it was difficult for the management committee to protect the temple from demolition. Bala's expression of powerlessness was also to demonstrate that they could not prevent the discontentment of the local Hindus. When the local Hindus who opposed the demolition learned that I intended to interview the management committee, they discouraged me: "No need to interview them. You won't find them. They will run if they know that you interview them about the temple" (Mani, personal communication, 18 September 2019). It did take me several visits to meet with Bala and obtain his consent for a brief interview. His wife's remark accompanied his submission response: "They (the estate Hindus) all don't like us now".

The committee's affiliations with both PR and BN proved to be helpful during later developments of the case. Pavalan later revealed that he had obtained a message from the Ministry of Education, a federal government agency led by BN. The news said that the state government of Penang had proposed to close down the estate Tamil primary school that was located next to their demolished community temple. Their affiliation with BN had allowed the management committee to obtain the message before a decision was made. "I am not sure if the state government of Penang know about this", Pavalan exclaimed and was determined to get an answer:

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5 The *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO) was the leading political party of the BN alliance until 2018. Many members of the party held key positions in the Malaysian government. Hence, as demonstrated by the participant, the party was often referred to as the Malaysian government, especially prior to 2018.

> Maybe next week I will make an appointment with Professor Ramasamy… because this means something is wrong… he promised everything… the land, and the temple also will have a temple, school, and housing project… Suddenly we heard this issue. This is very sad news. (personal communication, 1 October 2019)

The news of the demolition of the Tamil school was, indeed, alarming for the management committee. Pavalan appeared to have easier access to speak to Ramasamy directly. The effectiveness of their affiliations became more evident when the committee sought media attention on the matter of the school. A news report stated that the estate Hindus would not let the state government demolish the school without putting up a fight and also demanded proper compensation for a new location and the cost of rebuilding the school before demolition, and the report cited on the news that Ramasamy responded through a Tamil daily newspaper that the school was in no danger of destruction and relocation (The Star Online, 2016a). However, the mainstream media reported the possible relocation of the school again. The report focused on the First Deputy Education Minister, *Datuk* P. Kamalanathan, who was quoted saying that the PDC should identify a new location, one that is agreeable to the estate community before moving the school (The Star Online, 2016b). Kamalanathan was a member of the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC)[6] and a member of the parliament in Selangor. As it appeared, he delivered his speech in a ceremony to hand over the BN government's MYR 400,000 aid to the school (The Star Online,2016b). Kamalanathan's intervention on this matter reveals the constant political interest in the relocation of the estate community.

The discontentment of the estate Hindus who opposed the demolition of the community temple was felt and seen in their deserted temporary shelter for housing the murtis (see Figure 2). During my fieldwork, I had found the temporary temple to be closed most of the time. Only occasionally would a priest be seen at the temple conducting prayers alone at night. This priest was a volunteer as the previous one had resigned, and now he would only open the temple if he got off work early. Mani recalled that on the day when they had to transfer the murtis from the old temple to the new temporary shelter, no one from the community wanted to help: "I went to carry the statues (of the deities) to the new place. No one wanted to go. Only Siva and I were there" (personal communication, 14 September 2019). The volunteer priest was also aware of the refusal of the estate Hindus to visit the temporary temple: "After the temple has moved here, the community said it is too far. But their houses are just nearby; they refuse to come" (personal communication, 10 October 2019).

The refusal to use the site as a temporary replacement was an indirect act of insubordination, which was made clear by the estate Hindus: "Nobody wants to go to that temple. During prayer time, only a small number of people attends the prayers" (Sita, personal communication, 18 September 2019). Magesan also spoke of his refusal to visit the new temple: "I have not gone to the temple because my heart is burning with anger. They [the management committee and the state government] broke the

6 The *Malaysian Indian Congress* is a political party (established in 1946) that was supposed to represent Malaysian Indians and formed a coalition with the Alliance, and then with the BN, in establishing the Malaysian government (from 1957 until 2018).

Figure 2. Murtis housed in the temporary shelter. *These murtis were housed in this shelter for over 18 months and few had come for worship after the demolition.* (Photo taken during fieldwork).

temple and put it there" (personal communication, 14 September 2019). Although Mani had helped to relocate the murtis into the temporary temple, he described the place as *macam pondok lembu kandang* (lit., "just like a cattle barn"; see Figure 3). Such a description blatantly expressed his disgust with the arrangement of the temporary temple despite his devotion to the deities.

The desertion of the temporary temple was an expression of the estate Hindus' denial of the temporary temple. Their actions were practical in evaluating the ongoing uncertainty of the future of the temple. They were also aware that their discontent did not warrant outright confrontation with the state government and that the sight of the abandoned temple appeared as a longer-lasting momentum compared to ad hoc open protests. The state government and the temple's management committee could not prevent such a quiet act of routine practical resistance that occurred on a daily basis (cf. Scott, 2008, p. 322).

The responses of the estate Hindus, including the management committee, demonstrated how they safeguarded their community temple from permanent demolition in various ways and different contexts. Although their actions may appear subservient and docile on the surface, their actions reflected varying manoeuvrability, inventiveness, and reflective choices. More importantly, as the desertion of the temple by the estate Hindus suggests, they exercised full control over their beliefs and interpretations. The state government and the temple committee could not control their social lives entirely, even as the estate Hindus chose to maintain their subordiante roles (Scott, 2008, p. 329).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I analysed the agential responses of the estate Hindus and the management committee to a demolished estate Hindu temple in Penang. The fieldwork took place 18 months after the demolition, as the murtis of the deity were housed

Figure 3. The temporary shelter for the murtis. *This temporary shelter was built with help from the state government*. (Photo taken during fieldwork).

in a temporary, simple shelter while the estate Hindus waited for news concerning relocation. As demonstrated, participants' responses suggest their awareness of their longstanding representation as marginalised and discriminated minorities in Malaysia. They also responded based on the context of political rivalry between BN and PR and their realisation of how the demolition had positioned them between BN (which had governed the state previously) and PR (the current state government). Their responses demonstrated how they could interweave the past, when BN was governing Penang, with the future in which their community temple would be rebuilt and serve the community.

Indeed, the estate Hindus did not deny their minority status. They showed their subordination through submissive conforming and indirect protest by deserting the temple. However, their explanations, rationality, and justifications demonstrate diversity imbued with complexity and contradiction. It is also worth stressing that although they had expressed helplessness, discontent, grief, and a sense of betrayal, the estate Hindus had also made clear that their responses were not equal with subordination or disempowerment. Instead, they chose to comply on different levels, considering their current political and social realities.

This analysis of the agency of estate Hindus proposes a shift in the epistemological understanding of grassroots working-class Malaysian Indians. With this case study, I suggest that, as minorities, grassroots Malaysian Indians can contextualise their political and social realities as active respondents. Their agential responses are intertwined with their colonial past and presently-felt fears that their community temple might become permanently destroyed in the future. This case study underscores the paramount of contextualising agency and complicating the diverse political and social realities of Malaysian Hindu minorities by accounting for their thoughts, experiences, and actions. My analysis accentuates their agentic capacities in reconstructing the past, understanding the present, and defining the future by locating the responses of the estate Hindus in Penang within their different political and social contexts.

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