Minorities and Minority Policy in Singapore

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Introduction

Seen from the outside, Singapore society appears to fall fairly neatly into its three major segments: the Chinese majority, the substantial Malay minority and the smaller but very visible Indian community. And tucked on at the end are what are usually called the "others", in particular the Eurasian community. This picture of Singapore has given rise to what is often called the "CIMO" model — "Chinese-Indian-Malay-Other". But on closer analysis, this picture of the society as comprising three or four major blocs, set against one another (not in a confrontational sense, but as contrasting and mutually exclusive entities), becomes more and more inaccurate. Actually, Singapore is a society of minorities: either minorities within the bigger ethnic blocs and often concealed from view by their being lumped together within a single gross category, or minorities actually distinguished from other communities by religion, culture, origin and even occupation.

The Cultural Mosaic

This can be illustrated by looking at examples of these two types. Within the "Chinese" category one major and dominant group, defined by dialect and place of origin, can be easily recognized — the Hokkiens. But even then numerous sub-groups based upon specific town or country of origin occur within the Hokkien group. The same is true of the other large Chinese speech groups — the Teochews, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakkas. Each is internally subdivided into numerous smaller groups differentiated by minor linguistic differences, place from which the first migrants came and questions of cultural detail, such as in cooking, religious or marriage observances. Then there are the smaller dialect groups such as Foochow, Shanghainese, Henghua and Hockchia, and beyond there again the Peranakan or Baba Chinese community, many members of which are basically Malay- and/or English-speaking. When we turn to the South Asian group ("Indians") a rather similar pattern emerges: a Tamil majority, itself divided by place of origin within
Tamil Nadu (or Sri Lanka in the case of the Jaffna Tamils) and religion (the majority are Hindu, but there are substantial numbers of Muslims and Christians), and several significant minorities, either in terms of size (such as the Malabar or Moplah Muslims, the Syrian Christians, Jains, Parsis, Gujaratis, Dawoodi Bohras), and yet other minor groups — Telegu, Kannasese from Mysore, Marwaris, Bengalis, Pakistanis, and Nepalis, for example. The Sri Lanka group, often put in the “Indian” category, is itself subdivided by religion — Buddhist Sinhalese, Hindu Tamils, Muslims and Christians, the latter including groups such as the Dutch and Portuguese Burghers, and by language.

The “Malay” category contains its own numerous minorities — including Orang Laut and Orang Seletar (originally boat- or shore-dwelling semi-nomads), groups of Indonesian origin such as the Minangkabau, Batak, Javanese, Bugis, Boyanese, Peninsular Malays, peoples of Borneo origin and others when classified by ethnicity. Although they are almost entirely Muslim by religion, there are internal divisions — Sunni, Shi’a, Dawoodi Bohras, Khojas, and groups of Indian, Arab and Malaysian origin, as well as heterodox groups such as the Ahmadiyah movement. The “other” category is even more heterogeneous, consisting of communities, often very tiny ones, as diverse as Eurasian, Filipino, Armenian, Jewish, Arab, people of Caucasian descent, and Japanese. It is particularly with reference to these smaller minorities, either “independent” ones or ones within bigger ethnic groups, that we see the principle of occupational differentiation at work, either by specialization of a particular dialect group in a particular trade or by the association of that whole minority with commercial success across a range of trades. We also see here that social differentiation in Singapore is not only the result of such classic sociological factors as class and caste, but more significantly by place of origin, language, religion and culture (Clammer 1977).

Seen then from this perspective, Singapore society is less a group of monolithic ethnic blocs than a mosaic of numerous often fairly small communities living together in the same social space and interacting, or keeping themselves fairly separate, on the basis of their cultural or economic differences. Here we must make an important point: Singapore is an almost totally urbanized society, and those minorities which have achieved significance in the country as a whole, are those who have been able to exploit economic niches in this urban economy. Also significant is the way in which the minorities continue to maintain their identity and integrity through the earlier mentioned factors of origin, culture, language and religion, and also through sociological means such as endogamy or marriage systems in which the in-marrying member of another community adopts the cultural identity of the community married into. Such practices are or were common amongst groups that have or had high status rankings, such as the Arabs and, in the past, the Baba community in which the custom of Chin Choey (in-marrying son-in-law) was not