

PRINT: ISSN 0971-8923 ONLINE: ISSN 2456-6756

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Interdisciplinary Reflection of Contemporary Society

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PRINT: ISSN 0971-8923 ONLINE: ISSN 2456-6756

J Soc Sci, 25(1-2-3): 135-146 (2010)

DOI: 10.31901/24566756.2010/25.1-3.12

Understanding Indian Religious Practice in Malaysia

Savinder Kaur Gill and Nirmala Devi Gopal*

Department of Criminology University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

*E-mail: <savinder.gill@gmail.com>, *<gopal@ukzn.ac.za>*

KEYWORDS Religion. Indian. Punjabi. Sikh. Malaysia

ABSTRACT Religion is a binding factor for People of Indian Origin (PIO) residing in Malaysia and may well be so for Indians in other parts of the world. There is a ferociously upheld perception within the Malaysian Indian community that switching religions is tantamount to discarding one's identity, the ultimate betrayal of the ancestral lineage. One ceases to be Indian once one embraces Islam. One ceases to be Punjabi once one practices Buddhism or Christianity. Switching religions is taboo amongst the PIO and is a cause for expulsion from the basic family unit and ultimately, the cultural group altogether. Generation after generation of PIOs guard the religions they were born into., to maintain first and foremost, as they believe, the religion itself, second, family ties; third, the gene pool of a particular Indian sub-group and fourth, the larger identity which is linked to survival as a cultural group in a predominantly Muslim country. This inherent fear so ingrained in Indian families is explored in this paper through the analysis of perceptions and personal histories of selected PIO's born and bred in Muslim dominated Malaysia. A persistent trend is observed of PIOs, stifled by the Indian community's iron-like grip on its members, whereby they tend to shed their Indian identity once the birth religion is abandoned. Reasons for such changes in cultural behaviour and its impacts on the individual as well as the Malaysian Indian community are a core focus. This paper is about identity maintenance among Punjab Sikhs living in Malaysia.