



Thursday 3 January 2013

The Burghers

I first came across this word from a birth certificate belonging to my mother when my father gave the document to me at my uncle Pak Din's house in KL. For the first time too I saw her mother's name and nationality. My grandmother's nationality was written as "Ceylon Burgher". Not knowing what "Burgher" meant, I asked my dad whether she was a burger seller! He said it was a non Malay group. Not understanding what it meant, I asked him why he gave me the document along with other birth and death certificates. He said to keep them. I asked him "For what?" He didn't reply but went to read the newspaper in the living-room.

24 years on, I only have an electronic copy of my mother's birth certificate. I don't know where the original hardcopy is. I must have either misplaced or thrown out the other documents. They were really old documents and I didn't know what to do with them. I last saw the documents stacked among my old books and photo albums. I don't have them anymore. But the word "Burgher" haunts me as I never knew these people.

I remember asking a colleague in physiology, Assoc Prof Roland Sirisinghe, and he told me who these people were. I was still blank. He then gave me 2 book titles to read that would help me. I couldn't get hold of the books he mentioned as the libraries didn't have them.

When 2 Sri Lankan lady lecturers came to my department to see me, I had the opportunity to talk to them and I asked them what they knew of the Burghers. According to their accounts, Burghers were Dutch and Ceylon mix, and they held a high profile in the country. I asked them why but I never understood what they had explained to me.

I then searched the Internet about Malay cricket in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and I came across a tiny old document that had something about the Burghers. I also read the Wikipedia write-up about the Burghers. Now I know a bit about them. I may have written another post about them somewhere else.

Who are the Burghers?

When the Dutch East India Company came to Ceylon, the white Dutch males married to the Ceylonese local ladies. The offspring is a Burgher. It so turns out that the Burgher takes on the European frame (with big bodies) and they also have fair to tan complexion. Eye colour-wise, they have blue, green or brown irises.

Burgher names are either Dutch (original) or Portuguese (to evade being persecuted by the British) when the British took over Ceylon. As to race, the Burghers have German or Jewish names.

In Malaysia, the Burghers are on the west coast, mainly in Seremban and KL. In Khoo Salma Nasution's book *More than Merchants* (pages 28-30), they were also in Penang. From names in Facebook, I guess there are also Burghers in Singapore and Australia today.

What happened to the Burghers?

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Over time, and with outmarriages of the first Burgher offspring, the Burgher community has blended into the major communities. Today, they look just like me and you, and it is hard to tell a Burgher just from looks alone. One really has to dig for the family tree and family history, and then come to a conclusion as to what type of Burgher a person is.

The only interest I have in Burghers is when we look at heart disease among the founder generation in early Malaya and Malaysia today. Despite being held high in society where they originated, the Burghers suffered from 2 things, heart disease and blood disorders (high viscosity). Mental retardation was a feature in some families. I don't know why this was so and have never researched it.

I don't know the size of today's Burgher community in Malaysia and elsewhere. Even if they can be found, they would be a mixed breed and either resembling Indians, Malays or Eurasians. They are usually mistakenly lumped as Orang Serani or some other Indian or Malay mix. Burghers usually marry Burghers and the offspring looks Indian or in between. I don't think the Burgher features were sustained in mixed marriages which are a commonplace today. Today's Burgher would be about 10th generation or so. The language used at home is English. The food consumed is mainly Indian or Malay, some Chinese, and often continental, depending on local influences. Lifespan-wise, they live to about early 70s and death is due to heart disease.



This my late mother's family in 1953. The Burghers are in dresses and the Malays are wearing *kain sarong*. The boy is Danish-Chinese mix and not a Burgher.



Posted by Faridah at 12:35
Labels: *Burgher*

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