The Indian Provision Shop: A Note

S. VELOO*, B.A. (Hons.)

It is now a common practice in discerning circles to describe Malaysia as a developing country with a vibrant, expanding, economy. The signs for this are everywhere, in particular, in the hectic pace of the nation's urbanisation. Housing estates, some with exotic names, keep mushrooming especially around the capital cities and the larger urban centres. In Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of the nation, condominiums and apartments, again some with colourful and exotic names derived (for some unknown reason) from Greek words and mythology, continues to spring up mostly in posh residential areas. The face of the nation, especially in the metropolitan and urban areas, is being changed at a rate previously unimaginable and even inconceivable. The older generations, trapped in the nostalgia of the proverbial "good old days", find the changes that have taken place unnerving. Some unable to cope, have been compelled to trace their roots and take refuge in their "kampung".

Consumerism, in view of the rapid urbanisation, that has taken place, is the new lifestyle. To cater for the new craze, supermarkets and mini markets have sprung up well stocked with an almost endless variety of goods required for daily consumption and use. There are even twenty four-hour convenience stores manned round the clock organised and managed on techniques based upon "user-friendly" principles pioneered (as all such things are) by American marketing gurus. While the range of goods in these "user-friendly" convenience stores is limited, they are well patronised, especially by the young at heart who have plenty of time and (no doubt) money to burn. These convenience stores, especially the Seven-Eleven chain, are patronised by these energetic and intrepid acolytes even in the small or wee hours of the morning, often after a hard day's night in the disco joints.

One fact, now almost forgotten, in the midst of all the changes that have taken place is the virtual elimination of the Indian provision shop which a few decades ago was such an important feature of urban life. In those days, when supermarkets and mini markets were yet to make their inroads into urban life and dominate a good part of it, it was the Indian provision shop that supplied most of the consumer needs of urban people. Without it much of life would have become tiresome even to those who belonged to the rich or affluent classes.

The Indian provision shop, even in its halecyon days, occupied a two-storey shophouse of pre-Second World War vintage. It opened into a covered five-foot way

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* Bekas Pegawai Tadbir Diplomatik & Ahli Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Awam
and was built with a larger or broad frontage. Its interior was spacious, a large doorway opening into a small area from which a two-tiered staircase provided access to the upper storey. This small area also provided storage space for the goods sold in the provision shop, the most important being large stacks of sugar, flour and rice packed in gunny and specially woven flour sacks.

At the back was a small space for dining purposes, a toilet, often the bucket type and a bathroom which was no more than a covered space with a tap fitted above a concrete tub. One lifted the water collected in the concrete to bathe, crouching next to the concrete tub for the purpose, monkey-like. One also washed clothes in the bathroom spreading the material to be washed on the concrete wall and squashing it with one’s bare hands after spreading soap over it with a small bar of soap. At the back through a brick wall a small door provided access into the backyard. The backyard opened into the backlane which provided access to motor vehicles and for municipal workers, especially those who came once in two days to remove the rubber buckets from the laterine and to replace it with a new, freshly-cleaned, bucket. Some of the provisions sold in the provision shop were also brought into the provision shop through this door.

Upstairs, at the back, set against the wall, was the usual type of bathroom: a closed enclosure with a door which provided access into the bathroom. A concrete tub below a tap set against the wall contained the water used for purposes of bathing, ablution and washing clothes. Three or four lines of wire stuck at each end by iron nails comprised the clothes lines for drying up the clothes washed in the bathroom. There was also a bit of empty space in between, uncovered in most cases, which could be used for a wide variety of purposes. Children could play in this area on cool, moon-lit, nights. On most Sunday, in the noon under the blazing, sun one could use it to get gingelly oil rubbed wearing a towel and sitting on a stool, the prelude to a good, old-fashioned, oil bath. At night, when the weather was cool and fine, the older women used the space chewing betel leaves, gossiping or telling stories especially from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to the younger ones of both sexes who listened to everything that was said with wild-eyed wonder.

The rest of the upper level was made up of a large hall and a number of rooms, the minimum being one large room and two smaller rooms. Sometimes more rooms were created to accommodate more people. The roof sloped at a steep angle so that there was a large space immediately below the sloping roof-structure for air-circulation. This was usually augmented by long-stemmed ceiling fans stuck to the broad roof-beams from the inside. The central hall normally carried a patch of linoleum, in the centre of which there usually was a small round table. Set against this round table at convenient angles were four low-bottomed easy chairs. A low-level settee set against one of the walls, but opening into the centre, provided more space for seating or for purposes of relaxation. This “sitting room set”, as they were called, were often of a dirty battered type anchored (if this is the right word) on an equally battered linoleum, carpets being virtually not in fashion in those days. The walls were not painted and in most cases were encrusted with dirt. High up dangling from the rafters that held the roof were cobwebs which in the dingy light at night looked eerie and mysterious.
The largest room was often set against that part of the upper floor where the windows opened on to the main street or road below. The windows were elongated structures with two doors opening on to the inside. Some had wooden barriers erected at the lower portion to act as security barriers. Grills were virtually unknown in those days. Small lights set against the walls provided light, which could be switched on and off through switches screwed into the walls at convenient points. There was usually a fan, the stem of it screwed firmly on to one of the large beams holding up the roof structure. The high roof structure, as in the rest of the upper floor, provided ventilation and ample space for air circulation. The walls of this room, in the same manner as the walls of the interior of the structure, were often covered in grime, the paint work peeling off all over in hundreds of tiny patches.

This was what in modern day parlance the master bedroom where the proprietor of the provision shop slept or relaxed whenever he had the times to do so. If he was a family man, the upper floor was wholly occupied by the family and since in those days the joint family system was very much in vogue there were also any number of sundry relatives who occupied the available space. In most cases, under such conditions, the whole of the upper floor was a veritable menagerie of elders, young people, children and even babies. In such a mixed group, grand mothers and mothers-in-law, registered a strong presence. There was a lot of movement, much chewing of betel leaves and almost endless chatter.

But not in all such cases could one find the upper floor being occupied by such a menagerie, replete with naked children and red-lipped betel chewing elders. Where the proprietor of the provision shop kept his family in India, visiting it at least once a year, the upper floor would have been partitioned and sub-tenanted, the proprietor occupying a small room upstairs. A part of the upstairs would also be used as a store to stock up goods, often of the lighter variety, meant for the provision shop downstairs. Under such conditions, it was not uncommon for some of the workers, especially the younger ones, to sleep in the midst of these light-weighted goods.

The provision shop on the ground floor was often divided into two halves with a small aisle running in between the two. This aisle provided the channel for movement, not only for the proprietor and his workers but also the customers of whom, generally, there were two types: those who constituted the regular clientele who had a monthly account in the provision shop and those who came in accidentally looking for a particular item of grocery or merchandise in a random manner. For both categories of customers the aisle provided access right up to the back portion: they could flit about freely looking for what they wanted and even checking upon what was put out on display before they decided upon whether to effect a purchase or not. If the customer was an “important” client, whether actual or potential, the proprietor often hung about showing great deference and attempting to register a favourable impact on the person concerned. In modern day parlance, the proprietor would easily qualify to be user-friendly!

In almost every Indian provision shop there was, as one entered from the front, a show-case on the right-hand side displaying a wide range of office stationery and related items. This show-case, a wide bottomed type made of glass mounted on a wood frame, served three main purposes. First, it was decorative in a functional sort
of way. Second, it contained office stationery and related items for sale, what could be considered as “quality” products measure in terms of the types and contents involved. Third, and probably the most important, it acted as a barrier for immediately behind it sat the proprietor at a small table on which on the left hand corner was mounted a small cash register. On the right hand side of the table, often in an unsightly mass, were a number of hard-cover ledgers, a half dried up ink pot and an old fashioned pen handle with a ‘C’ nib stuck to it.

This was the “cockpit” from which the proprietor as the “pilot” managed his provision shop. It was the most strategic point in the entire provision shop in that it controlled the entry and exit points at one and the same time. The proprietor could also keep a continous vigil on what was going on in the provision shop, ensure that the workers were attentive to the requirements of the customers and that all goods handed out to customers were properly billed and accounted for so that he could charge the amount purchased for and return them any change after cashing in their money. If credit had been given out, especially to the regular clients, the proprietor ensured that proper entries were made in the right ledger books. If the workers were not busy with customers the proprietor ensured that they did not waste their time idling away but that they were busily occupied attending to the multitude of chores which running a provision shop in Indian-style entailed.

The left-hand side, as one entered the provision shop from the front, was what one would call the grocery section. In this section a wide range of grocery items were put on display in a wide variety of forms to not only attract customers but also induce them to purchase. The chief items in the range of goods out on display in this section (if it can be called a “section”) were rice, sugar, flour and salt: what one might call or define as the “basic” items of sustenance. To these basic items of sustenance. To these basic items one could add charcoal, kerosene and cooking oil, especially coconut oil. The kerosene and coconut oil were sold out of the tins which contained them, pumped into bottles from specially-made pumps which drew the kerosene or coconut oil from the tins which contained them and funnelled them into the bottles through a small funnel on one side of the pump immediately below the top.

The rice and sugar were displayed for sale in the provision shop in gunny sacks. The gunny sacks were filled to the brim with the rice and sugar, the top portion being rolled down, in which the rice and sugar formed a neat, well-structured cone revealing their colour and texture. Thus filled and packed the gunny sacks were mounted on their bottom and placed in a neat row. The same thing was done to the flour although in this case a smaller-sized white wheat flour sack was used with appropriate letters to indicate the source of flour and its brand. The letters in black or blue of a light texture often appeared in an arc or circle with the trade mark or brand mark emblazoned under the arc or inside the circle. The rice, sugar and flour displayed and offered for sale were of many varieties. Thus, in the case of rice alone, there was the parboiled variety followed by refined varieties, the most important of which came from Burma and Siam (now Thailand). There were also the “pulut” varieties, ranged from the thick, sharp-pointed types, to the chocolate, smaller, varieties. Sugar was also displayed and offered for sale in this variegated manner
starting at one end of the scale from brown sugar to white sugar, to white sugar, granulated and fine-textured.

No Indian provision shop was complete without the large variety of spices used by Indians in preparing their food and curries. The first on the list were the indispensable red dried chillies. These, normally imported from India, for which purpose the Indian ship “S.S. Rajula” which plied between Port Klang and Nagappattinam in Tamil Nadu was eminently suitable, Coriander seed, another vital and indispensable spice in preparing Indian curries and soups, was also imported from India and displayed for sale in the same manner. Onions, both large and small, also came from India and were put up for sale in wooden boxes alongside white garlic and potatoes. The reason why gunny sacks were not used, as in the case, for instance of red dried chillies, was that air was needed for the onions and potatoes to “breathe” and last longer in a relatively fresh condition.

Salt formed and indispensable item. The salt offered for sale constituted two distinct varieties: the large grained and the small, fine-textured type. The large grained variety was usually displayed in a wooden box in which the salt was piled up in a large heap, the top portion of which was shaped into a cone. The large wooden box which held the salt was pock-marked with holes so that the grains of salt in the box could breathe and not easily melt away. Even then the wooden box when looked at from the outside possessed a distinct “wet” look reinforcing the fact that a certain degree of melting of the salt was inevitable due to exposure of the salt to outside heat. The second variety of the salt that was sold was displayed in the same way and the wooden box from which it was displayed possessed the same “wet” look as the larger, granulated, variety.

Two other items, basic and indispensable, were coconuts and tumerind. The coconut, all husked except for a triangular tuft at the top, often mistaken by the ignorant to be a handle were normally put on display in a heap in a corner out in front of the provision shop. To the Hindus the coconut, in addition to being edible, is a sacred fruit which forms an important part of most Hindu rituals and religious ceremonies. The coconut is considered to be symbolic of the Hindu god of destruction, Siva, who in addition to two eyes possesses a third eye in the centre of his forehead. This is the eye of “gnana” or knowledge and Siva is compelled to open it as, for instance, in a mighty cosmic conflict with the “asuras” or demons it emits a powerful destructive beam of fire turning everything into ash. According Hindus believes these three “eyes” that appear on the coconut as it narrows at the top require to be hidden. And so a small triangular piece of husk is left on top hiding the three “eyes”, neatly chiselled to look like a small cone. In Indian provision shops this pile of coconuts was a prominent and almost a ubiquitous item on display which rendered the provision shops unique.

Tumerind is a *sine qua non* among the condiments to make Indian curries. Tumerind not only flavours the curry but that it also adds to the texture and taste of the curry. Curry, prepared according to the manner as dictated to by the great curry masters, can keep for even more than a day, the taste in the prosess acquiring a mellow quality and a certain richness in the texture. It is claimed that it is the tumerind in the curry that lends this quality unique in many ways, to the curry,
especially if it is fish curry. The tumerind was sold in small quantities dug out with a special wooden ladle from a large heap mounted on a wooden box. The heap, normally well cast and smothened on all sides to make it look clean and fresh, was set up along with the other items put up for sale in such a manner that it was within easy reach of the vendor and buyers alike.

No Indian provision shop was worthy of its name if it did not stock-up large varieties of the pulses which formed such an indispensable requirement of the Indian diet, neatly and regularly assuaging the sensitivities of the Indian plate, if not the stomach. The most important of these was dhall. There were many varieties of dhall, all imported from India, ranging from the larger yellow type to the smaller red-coloured variety. There were also many types of peas, most of which were also imported from India. The most popular among the varieties of peas sold were green peas and black peas. The green peas in addition to making curries, were also used as offering, after having been boiled or steamed and mixed with coconut and sugar, during prayers either at home or in the temple. The black peas were additives indispensable for making “tosai” or “idili”, the two most popular South Indian items of snack, especially in the morning and in the evening. All the pulses and peas were sold straight out of gunny sacks in which they were heaped up in cones.

One of the most vital functions which the Indian provision shop performed was to stock and offer for sale an almost endless variety of spices that to the Indians who patronised it proved the principle that variety is the spices were all imported from India. They were critical to Indian cuisine invented and developed over many centuries not only from all over India but also derived from the cooking and blending techniques originated in countries from across India’s vast borders, what has now come to be known in a clear and succinct from as “the Islamic crescent”. To this must be added the tear-drop island of Sri Lanka, off the southern tip of India, at one time and even now, famed for its spices: aromatic and tantalising to the taste buds.

Some of the spices that belonged to this category included cinnamon, pepper (black and white), coriander seeds, cardamom, mustard seeds, cloves, dry ginger, capsicum, fennel seeds, poppy seeds, nutmeg, suku cumin powder, anise seed, tumeric and marjoram leaves. Almonds, resins, jaggery, conflowers and garlic also belonged to this range although they did not by a strict interpretation of the term qualify to be spices as such. All these items were put up for display and sale from small sacks for which purpose the sacks were mounted on wooden boxes and the top roofed down to reveal the product for sale which rose out of these sacks in the form of a cone. In some larger provision shops a special wooden counter was used, the counter containing a large flat base which carried a large number of identical compartments, each of which contained a specific type of spice offered for sale. In many provision shop this was the centre-piece colourful, variegated and, nit least important, aromatic. Many Indian provision shops enjoyed a large clientele who were regular customers because of the ample and diversified spread of this “spice counter”.

The secret of success of the Indian provision shop, in its halcyon days, was derived from the quick turnover of the products or merchandise offered for sale. The
items that qualified as quick-turnover items were those required for daily consumption. And so it was not uncommon to find the Indian provision shop stocked with these items of daily consumption starting at one end of the spectrum (as it were) with rice and going the whole range of daily needs ending up at the other end with spices both colourful and aromatic, including even nondescript types.

Great emphasis was placed in the marketing strategy applied in those items so that there was a quick daily turnover of goods on one side and money on the other. Because of this marketing strategy which was applied in all Indian provision shops without an exception tinned items also played a prominent role. One of the most common tinned items was condensed milk, particularly of the milkmaid brand. Next to condensed milk, sardines formed a popular tinned items. The brand that was found to be most common was the cockrel brand after which the sardine brand ranked in importance. There were many sizes, small as well as large: the large ones being flat in shape and almost invariably the sardine brand. Tinned biscuits also featured high on the list of these tinned items. Biscuits were sold in large tins, almost the kerosene size, and these were almost without an exception locally manufactured varieties. They were in those days the products of the local Biscuit King: Khong Guan. To the brand conscious, the Indian provision shop stocked Marie biscuits and Cream Crackers manufactured by Huntley and Palmers in Reading in the United Kingdom.

Other than groceries and grocery-related items, the Indian provision shop also sold what in modern day parlance would be described as household items. These often covered a wide variety, all depending upon what the owner or proprietor considered to be saleable on a short term basis. These items, because of the need to be disposed of quickly to turn the capital invested around faster and to even spin it around many times within a short time-span, had to be items of daily use. The Indian provision shop on this basis also sold such items as soap. But the soap sold was often a long bar, the most famous brand at one time being the “Sunlight”. This was kept stocked on a shelf and was sold in entire bars or in any portion thereof, cut with an iron knife as required by customers. While the “Sunlight” soap was used largely for washing such as clothes or even the floor of one’s house there were other brands used for more sophisticated purposes. In this connection “Lifebuoy” soap was a popular brand used for bathing purposes. It was mildly anti-septic with a certain aroma about it.

Other than soaps two items, now fast fading from the scene were popular and tended to render the Indian provision shop distinctive in character. These were wooden clogs and paper umbrellas. The wooden clogs were of three specified sizes: large, medium and small. They were cut out of a particular type of wood with a rubber or semi-rubber material as strap to hold the toes. The straps came out in many colours, red being the most popular. At a time when the Japanese had not invaded the market, the wooden clog was the most popular informal footwear about the house especially in the kitchen or bathroom. No household was free without it: there were sizes even for small children. Sometimes the entire family could be seen clattering down a street shod (if “shod” is the right word) in wooden clogs.

It is inevitable that in a hot wet climate such as that which applied throughout the country that there should be a dire need for umbrellas. The need for umbrellas
was fulfilled by a type that was made up of thick waterproof paper and bamboo handle. This type of umbrella originated in Japan but later was replicated in Hong Kong and China. The thick waterproof paper was invariably green in colour but once in a blue moon, as it were, it was also made of blue, a form of starch or glue. The umbrella not only could withstand the heat of the noon day sun but it effectively provided protection (especially to the head) against the rain. It was, therefore, popular and every household possessed at least one or two or even more. In the Indian provision shop these umbrellas were important items for sale. Invariably, they were hung from their handles in a row or in a cluster in front of the provision shop or in a corner at the front.

Some Indian provision shops even sold some popular types of fruits, mango being a common item. The mango was useful not only because it could be eaten raw (when ripe) but that it could be made into a sweet from of pickles to be eaten along with rice either at lunch or dinner time or both. The mangoes were usually stored in a cardboard box and displayed along with the rice and other items usually in the front portion of the provision shop where they never failed to catch the prying eyes of the prospective buyer. Next to mangoes most Indian provision shops sold bananas. But the bananas were hung, like the umbrellas, in front of the provision shop in a bunch. They were sold in combs or in individual pieces, the require number being wrenched out of the bunch. Sometimes the owner or proprietor may offer a few gratis to a regular customer to make him happy, specially after he had settled his monthly account. This was a show of gratitude on the part of the owner proprietor, an exercise (in an old-fashioned way, no doubt) in public relations.

The owners or proprietors of Indian provision shops were in almost all cases Indian, that is Tamil Hindus or Tamil Muslims. They were Tamil educated to the extent that they spoke and wrote Tamil. In most cases they still retained their Indian roots although were the Tamil Hindu was concerned his family could have become localised and even lived in the upper part of the double storey shophouse from which the provision shop business was transacted. They invariably wore the Indian dhoti or sarong and a short sleeved or long sleeved shirt, which flowed over their large bellies and covered entirely the upper portion of the dhoti or sarong falling well below the waist.

The Indian Tamil Hindu proclaimed his real identity to all and sundry by the lining of holy ash on his forehead marked in the centre by a red dot. The Tamil Muslim wore a weather-beaten songkok but his most distinctive trade mark (if it can be called as such) was the “Islamic” beard that he wore. The beard was neatly manicured to cover both sides of the face. At the bottom, covering the chin entirely, it was cut into forming a square which adorned the moustache above, neatly trimmed. Both the Tamil Hindu and Tamil Muslim owners or proprietors wore a heavy Indian-manufactured scent or perfume. The Tamil Muslim owner or proprietor wore his heavy perfume in a handkerchief rolled and kept at the back of his neck under the back collar. In both cases, where public relations were concerned, they almost invariably exuded a genial air: they believed in strong customer-relationships.

The workers in Indian provision shops were without exception Tamil or, in the case of the owner or proprietor being a Muslim Tamil, Muslim Tamils. These
workers ranged in age from school drop-outs to elderly types who had their families in India or whose families had abandoned them on account of one reason or another. Many of these were illiterate or at best only semi-illiterate. Invariably, they possessed no formal training as provision shop workers, having picked up what little expertise that they commanded while doing the job. They were paid a small salary but food and accommodation were free. From the fifties onwards they came under the Employees Provident Fund scheme and they and their employers contributed to the Employees Provident Fund. In most Indian provision shops the list of the employees contributing to the Employees Provident Fund was prominently displayed on the wall behind the cash register where the owner or proprietor habitually sat along with the framed certificate which authorised him to conduct his provision shop business.

The Indian provision shop, now fast fading from the scene, was started and operated almost by instinct. No market surveys or feasibility studies, as we now know them, were ever conducted. The owner or proprietor started the provision shop business inspired invariably by instinct. And it is by instinct that it was run, the owner or proprietor finesse it on the basis of the experience gained on the ground, as it were. There was no attempt ever to promote the business through effective marketing strategies. Advertisement of the provision shop business through the mass media or in any other form was virtually unknown. It was as if the Indian provision shop served a basic need and it was in fulfilling this basic need that it survived and even made money for its owner or proprietor.

The owner or proprietor of the Indian provision shop attempted to promote his business in a less expensive way, that is, by being genial or contriving to be genial. In modern day parlance he was "user friendly". He attempted to convert every new customer into a regular customer. He had his eyes always peeled for walk-in customers because it was in these walk-in types that he saw the potential to acquire new regular customers on whom or in fulfilling whose requirements for groceries and related items that his business depended. To the regular veterans he granted credit facilities up to the value of one month's requirements.

For this purpose the customers was issued with a cheap pocket-sized notebook in which the date and the amount of credit granted was recorded. A larger hard-cover ledger carried the running totals of all the customers who enjoyed similar credit facilities granted to them on the basis of the goodwill subsisting between the owner or proprietor and the "regulars". The small pocket-sized note book technique allowed even children to go to the Indian provision shop and buy the items required in between the larger end-of-the-month or mid-month purchases, invariably the prime duty of the housewife or the husband. At the end of the month or on pay day the account was settled while purchases for the following month were made and an appropriate entry effected in the pocket-sized note book and the large hard cover ledger containing the running totals of the entire army of regular veterans enjoying the credit facilities extended to them by the owner or proprietor of the provision shop.

In their halcyon days the Indian provision shop played a vital role in the retail business especially in the sale of groceries, spices and a limited range of household items required for daily use. In the large urban centres and the towns up and down, all over the country, they formed an important landmark generating much in the form of
local economic activity as suppliers and vendors of what was required for daily consumption and daily use. They also added colour to the local scene in that their signboards advertising their business placed above the ground floor was large and colourful. They proclaimed with a certain degree of aggressiveness what they were and what kind of business they conducted. Invariably, the name of the owner or proprietor formed the core of the name of the business conducted as, for instance, “A.N. GOVINDASAMY PILLAY & SONS” or “M.M. PACKEER MASTHAN & SONS”. Not only that they proclaimed to be “General Merchants” but they were also “Estate Suppliers” and “Commission Agents”. Some, as an after thought, were also “Contractors” while almost invariably all were “Importers” and “Exporters”. Thus the range of business activities advertised in the signboards tended to stun the unwary public and certainly mesmerise the uninitiated and, in particular, the ignorant.

The Indian provision shop, now on the verge of extinction in many parts of the country, put out a strong and colourful appeal in their signboards testifying to their power and thrust in terms of their range of business activities. It was a form of sex appeal in garish colours for there was a strong admixture of basic colours. Deep within, while a certain dingy atmosphere prevailed, the dinginess was to an extent tampered by the geniality of the owner or proprietor and in his commitment to service and provide even credit to those accepted by him as regular patrons. Operated by instinct, the Indian provision shop symbolised the pioneering spirit and the hardiness of its owner or proprietor. Very soon, considering the pace at which the nation is being modernise, the Indian provision shop, would have become extinct, a relic of the past with hardly a vestige to prove its once proud and glorious role in the grocery business of the nation.