

ETHNICITY, COMMUNAL RELATIONS, AND EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Each Malaysian community has its religion, language, customs, and practices, and most Malaysians identify themselves and others on communal lines. This has been a source of impediment to the creation of national consciousness. But perhaps the most disturbing development of post-independence era, in terms of national unity, has been the resurgence of chauvinistic Malay nationalism. There has been a growing tendency among Malays to assert their superior claims in the country and to deny the existence of non-Malays. In the name of national unification they strive to impose their culture, language, and religion on minorities. Non-Malays have experienced their deep dissatisfaction with the measures adopted for the advancement of Malaynization. They wish to preserve cultural variety and insist that multi-lingualism should be the national policy and that education should be truly national, not Malay-dominated.³¹

At present there are no visible signs of an amicable solution to the communal problem of Malaysia and

the attitudes of the extremists only tend to compound the difficulty. It is extremely unlikely that communal integration would emerge in the foreseeable future and any immediate expectation of it is quixotic fancy. What is possible is that after the extremists are convinced of the futility of internecine confrontation and of the inevitability of coexistence, the moderates would prevail in initiating the process of accommodation. But so long as the Malays persevere in their goal of ascendancy, the non-Malays would remain nervous and would offer resistance to what they perceive to be their suppression.³²

Ethnicity and Education in Malaysia

Evidence of formal education in ancient Malaysia is not available. But it is not unreasonable to surmise that the primitive tribes gave practical instruction to their children in fishing, trapping, and farming. In the Buddhist kingdoms of Langkasuka and Sri Vijaya education was probably associated with the monasteries and comprised mostly Buddhist scriptures.

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Later in the Hindu empire of Majapahit temples were the seats of learning and Hindu scriptures formed the curriculum. Subsequently Malaysia came under the influence of Islam and children were taught verses from Quran in Arabic in mosques. It was not until after the advent of the British rule and the immigration of the Chinese and Indians that schools with distinct ethnic bias began to be established and the rudiments of formal education in the western sense began to be imparted. During the British rule four types of schools emerged: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and English schools.

Malay Schools

The teaching of Quran in Arabic formed the foundation of Malay schools. These schools were attended exclusively by Malay children. The curriculum primarily included Islamic religious instructions and the Malay language. In conformity with its pro-Malay policy the colonial government initially financed the Malay schools partially. Later with full financial support these schools were transformed into government Malay schools.³³ The major thrust of the British policy was to promote primary Malay education, not English education, so that the Malay youth be not alienated from the Malay language and culture. A significant exception to this policy was the provision of education of the English public school type for the Malay aristocracy.³⁴

Chinese Schools

The colonial government felt no responsibility for the education of the Chinese and made no provision for it. Left to themselves, the Chinese established their own schools on the pattern of their mother land and continued their own traditions and culture. They recruited teachers most-

ly from China who kept the Chinese nationalism alive in Malaysia. These schools drew their inspiration from China, followed Chinese curriculum, taught through Chinese language (Kuo-Yu), and adopted Chinese ideology. In response to the Chinese Revolution of 1911 they acquired revolutionary outlook and in essence became instruments of a foreign power. To all intents and purposes they were Chinese schools on Malaysian soil.³⁵

Being alarmed by the seditious nature of operation and the anti-national tendencies of the Chinese schools, the government passed the Registration of Schools Ordinance of 1920 to supervise them closely. In 1935 the government offered them monetary aid if they would agree to meet the standards of the Education Department. However, most Chinese schools preferred to maintain their independence and decided not to accept the government aid.³⁶

Indian Schools

The education of Indians was closely associated with the development of plantations in Malaysia. The Labor Ordinance of 1923 required estate owners to provide schools if their workers had ten or more children of school-age (7-14). The government gave a small annual **per capita** grant on the basis of examination results and average attendance. The medium of instruction was Tamil, the mother tongue of the children. Because of ill-qualified and low-paid teacher, part-time students, and meager facilities, these schools provided education of very poor quality.³⁷

English Schools

There were two types of English schools. The "free" schools and grant-in-aid schools. The "free" schools were established by local efforts, enjoyed the patronage of the govern-

ment, and charged fees. They were called "free" because they were open to all children regardless of race, color, or creed. Because of financial difficulties these schools were later taken over by the government and became public-supported institutions.³⁸

The grant-in-aid schools were established and maintained by missionary and charitable societies with a certain amount of government aid. The London Missionary Society, the American Methodist Mission, and Roman Catholic Mission were the most active organizations.³⁹ In return for the government aid the mission schools conformed to the standards of the Education Department, although the government had always maintained a close supervision over their religious activities. These schools were open to children of all races and creeds and they emphasized Christian education.⁴⁰ By and large the English schools provide western-oriented education through the medium of English language. These schools were located in urban centers and their primary purpose during the colonial period was to train a few local people for clerical services and for junior positions in administrative and professional services.⁴¹

The teacher training also followed the ethnic pattern of the schools. Consequently there were separate teacher training programs for Malay, Chinese, Indian, and English schools.⁴²

Thus ethnic factor influenced the educational development at all levels in Malaysia during the British rule. In conformity with the political philosophy of the period, the colonial government did not consider provision of education as its legitimate function, and did not regard education as an instrument for national development. It looked upon it as a welfare service, more or less left it to the private voluntary bodies such as missionary societies or public-spirited in-

dividuals to provide English, Chinese and Indian education, gave little financial aid in some instances, and exercised minimum control.⁴³ The only exception was the vernacular education for the Malays which the government undertook to provide itself. The government recognized Malays as the natives of Malaysia, considered them as the weaker segment of the society, and therefore felt morally obligated to protect and promote their interests.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the Chinese and Indians were considered immigrants having no claims on Malaysia. They were judged as progressive and competitive groups and were left to themselves to look after their own interests including education. The system of education tended to widen the gulf separating the various communities.⁴⁵

Non-Malays, Chinese, in particular, are educationally advanced whereas the Malays have been traditionally backward. Probably the bountiful nature and ease of life offered no challenge to the Malays for survival and no incentive for cultural advancement.⁴⁶ In the value system of the Chinese, on the other hand, education has always occupied a prominent place, and they brought along with them their educational traditions from their homeland. The government policy of **laissez-faire** allowed them the freedom to pursue their educational activities unhindered. Also, superior educational facilities generally have been available in urban centers where mostly non-Malays, especially Chinese, are concentrated. The result has been that the Chinese have been ahead of the other communities in education.⁴⁷

The strong sense of cultural separateness displayed by the non-Malay, especially the Chinese, may in large part be attributed to the **laissez-faire** policy of the colonial government toward education in the 1910's and 1930's. The government

permitted the operation of schools on ethnic lines instead of laying the foundation of a national system of education for all races using English as the medium of instruction. In fact, during this period no effort was made to formulate and enforce a unified policy designed to incorporate local orientation in education.⁴⁸ The government did not supervise the curriculum, methods of teaching, training of teachers or their recruitment. Consequently it was normal for Chinese schools to recruit their teachers from China, to provide Chinese education, and to reflect Chinese ideology. Since the schools did not need financial support from the government, they developed a completely independent attitude which has persisted in varying degrees to the present day.⁴⁹

By the middle of the twentieth century there had developed in Malaysia not an educational system but a motley of schools unrelated to and independent of each other, by and large governed by ethnic considerations. They worked satisfactorily so long as the communities had no interaction with one another and the administration of the country was under the control of the British colonial government. But with the rise of nationalism, beginning of freedom movement, growth of communal consciousness, and realization of the importance of education and medium of instruction in schools which have generated intense racial tensions in Malaysia.

After the World War II it became apparent that Britain would withdraw its control from its colonies and grant them independence. The racial situation in Malaysia was extremely volatile and portended dangerous consequences at the termination of the British rule. Unification of the three main ethnic groups—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—was the most urgent task that awaited the national leaders soon after their assumption of the

reins of the self-government. A common single educational system for all children of the country was considered to be the most important instrument for the development of national consciousness. A number of committees and commissions were appointed to examine the educational problem and to evolve a formula that would harmonize the racial differences and unify the nation. Among the noteworthy ones were the Central Advisory Committee on Education (1949), the Barnes Committee (1950), Fenn-Wu Committee (1951), the Razak Committee (1956), and Reid Commission (1957). These bodies produced voluminous reports containing numerous plans to evolve a national system of education.⁵⁰

Pursuant to its pro-Malay policy, the British colonial government transferred the political power to the Malays before withdrawing from the country in 1957. In the initial stage of its self-government Malaysia was fortunate to have had Malay leaders of the Alliance Party who were moderate, liberal, enlightened, and truly nationalistic in their perspective. They sought to unify the nation by accommodating the legitimate aspirations of the other ethnic groups and promised to preserve and sustain the growth of the languages and cultures of the non-Malay races. They also pledged to establish Malay as the national language and as the main medium of instruction in schools in due course.⁵¹

These views were embodied in the recommendations of the Razak Committee Report (1956) which in turn were incorporated in the Education Ordinance of 1957. This Education Ordinance was the first attempt to introduce a national system of education with the following policy statement:

The education policy of the Federation is to establish a national sys-

tem of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic, and political development as a nation, with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country whilst preserving the growth of the language and culture of the people other than Malays living in the country.⁵²

Subsequently, there has been a drastic departure from this policy which has caused extreme dissatisfaction among the non-Malays and has contributed to racial tensions in the country.

In 1969 the government announced the policy of making Malay as the main medium of instruction at all levels of education by 1985. It aimed to establish a single multi-racial school system with a common language (Malay), common curriculum, and common public examinations.⁵³ English will be retained as a compulsory second language in all schools and Chinese and Tamil primary schools will still continue, but their pupils will have to become proficient in Malay to compete at the secondary and higher educational levels.⁵⁴

Educationally, the policy of making Malay the sole medium of instruction is disadvantageous to all pupils whose native tongue is not Malay. Their failure rate in the Malay language examinations (a compulsory requirement for advancement to secondary and higher education) is extremely high, resulting in a wastage of academically-talented non-Malays. Malays have to be only bilingual whereas non-Malays have to learn three languages, which imposes additional academic burden on the latter. Finally, although a language of considerable richness and antiquity, Malay is not considered adequate for the nuances and technicalities of the modern world.⁵⁵

Like primary and secondary educa-

tion, higher education has also been a source of racial friction in Malaysia. The non-Malays have viewed the university education and proficiency in English language as means to get into professions and the coveted and relatively well-paid civil service jobs. The Malays, educationally backward, have never been able to acquire higher education in numbers commensurate with their proportion in the population and have regarded university as the preserve for the non-Malays who are more skilled in English. They have considered this as a weakness of Malay culture and language and have resented it.⁵⁶

With the independence of Malaysia political power passed into the hands of Malays who now control the government. This has created a division of political and economic power between Malays and Chinese. Education is viewed as the means to foster in the Malay community the financial and technical skills traditionally lacking. Consequently Malays are now the sole recipients of all educational advantages: free primary and secondary education and a monopoly of grants for further education.⁵⁷

Access to higher education is closely guarded by the government and racial consideration, not merit, determines admission. Consequently a large number of qualified non-Malays are denied admission whereas Malays of lesser qualifications are encouraged to proceed to university. This policy has led to a kind of apartheid at upper levels which in turn has aggravated race relations and has made a mockery of integration.⁵⁸ For example, at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, the non-Malay students are fee-paying, urban in origin, and English-speaking; the Malays are on scholarships, rural, and speak their mother tongue, Malay. The majority of Malay students major in Islamic and Malay studies, the non-Malay students

mostly concentrate in science and technology.⁵⁹ Thus the home backgrounds and academic programs of Malay and non-Malay students offer virtually no opportunity for any meaningful social interaction. Besides, the discriminatory treatment meted to the non-Malays can only engender bitterness in them toward their Malay counterparts.

Malay is being introduced steadily as the medium of instruction with the expectation that by 1985 all courses at the university level will be taught in the national language. This will hinder the overseas higher education of non-Malay students in English-speaking countries where they have been traditionally going. From the purely racial standpoint, the outcome of this policy would be comforting to the Malays, but from the national standpoint it would hardly be advantageous. The non-Malays express their resentment privately since public questioning of the national language policy is a seditious offence punishable by heavy fines and long-term imprisonment.⁶⁰

Malay students are imbued with "we-are-the-masters-now" attitude which encourages them to display arrogance in their behavior. In order to achieve racial balance, the Yang-di-Pertuan Agong, Malaysia's elected king, has been authorized by the constitution to reserve university places for Malays. The immediate result has been that the universities are turning out poorly trained Malay graduates. Yet, the employers are coerced to employ them, especially in upper echelon jobs.⁶¹

Malay dominated government controls the educational activities of the non-Malays. During 1968 and 1969 the government rejected a proposal made by Chinese leaders to establish Merdeka University using Chinese as the language of instruction on the

ground that it would encourage disharmony among the communities. In July 1969 a regulation was issued making it an offence to form, to contribute to, or to collect money for, any higher educational institution without the approval of the minister of education.⁶²

This has had the effect of rescinding the Article 152 (1) in the constitution which states:

No person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (other than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language; and nothing in this clause shall prejudice the right of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the Federation.⁶³

Attempts to correct the educational imbalance between the Malays and non-Malays through the national language policy and "special privileges" for Malays in the constitution have created a climate of insecurity and frustration among the non-Malays. The racial violence of May 13, 1969, is attributed largely to political maneuvering of the language-educational issue prior to the 1969 national elections.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has a distinctly multi-racial population, and each community has a completely different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic background. These communities compose significant proportions and are to stay in the country. Therefore the most urgent need of the society is communal harmony.

The Malay-controlled government is determined to "restructure" the society and correct its present "racial economic disparities" and create "a Malay commercial and industrial com-

munity." It is also convinced that its policy of multi-racial education through Malay as the medium of instruction would promote national unity.⁶⁵ However, attempts to restructure the society thus far through the transformation of the educational system have tended to heighten rather than diminish the potential for conflict.⁶⁶

The current policies to restructure the educational and economic systems seem to have emerged not out of concern for the national interest but out of expedient adaptations to political crises. They lack the credibility necessary for affective loyalty of the non-Malays who constitute a significant segment of the population. They are a source of considerable anxiety and resentment among them.⁶⁷ In the face of extensive Malaynization program, they fear extinction of their culture, identity, and language. In their view, country's racial fragmentation is worsening.⁶⁸ While it is just to provide additional help to cultivate the weaker

19*Ibid.*

20*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

21Manning Nash, "Ethnicity, Centrality, and Education in Pasir Mas, Kelantan". *Comparative Educational Review*, Vol. 16 (February, 1972). p. 15.

22K. J. Ratanam, *Communalism and The Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965, p. 14.

23Milton J. Esman, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-22.

24*Ibid.*

25*Ibid.*

26*Ibid.*, p. 23.

27K. J. Ratnam, *op. cit.*, pp. 117.

28*Ibid.*, 123-126.

29*Ibid.*, pp. 126-136.

30Milton J. Esman, *op. cit.*, pp.

segments of the society, it is inhuman and nationally suicidal to deliberately retard the progressive elements.

In view of the deep cultural divisions that prevail in the society, it would be impossible to eradicate racial plurality within any reasonable period of time.⁶⁹ Nor should it be attempted or even considered desirable. Ethnic variety adds color and richness to the society and complements the strengths and weakness of its constituent groups. Besides, the mark of a civilized society is not the extermination or suppression of its minorities but their accommodation and unrestricted advancement. From the standpoint of national interest, the only rational policy available to a plural society to manage its affairs is that of accommodation and compromise in which all constituent elements have a sense of satisfaction and none feels that its legitimate aspirations are being arbitrarily and oppressingly thwarted.

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31K. J. Ratnam, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

32*Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

33B. Simandjuntak, *Malayan Federalism, 1945-1963* (Kuala Lumpur; Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 193.

34Philip Loh, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

35*Ibid.*

36*Ibid.*

37*Ibid.*

38Francis Wong Hoy Kee and Ee Tiang Hong, *Education in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books Asia Ltd., 1971), p. 13.

39Francis Wong Hoy Kee and Gwee Yee Hean, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

40Francis Wong, "The Christian Missions and Education in Malaysia and Singapore," **Teacher Education in**

New Countries. Vol. 12 (November, 1971), p. 146.

41 Charles Hirschman, "Educational Patterns in Colonial Malaya," **Comparative Education Review**. Vol. 16 (October, 1972), p. 489.

42 Francis Wong Hoy Kee and Gwee Yee Hean, **op. cit.**, pp. 12-14.

43 Charles Hirschman, **op. cit.** p. 500.

44 Philip Loh, **op. cit.**, p. 357.

45 Eng Kiat Koh, **op. cit.**, p. 144.

46 Philip Loh, **op. cit.**, p. 357.

47 Milton J. Esman, **op. cit.** p. 22

48 Wong Hoy Kee, "The Development of a National Language in Indonesia and Malaysia," **Comparative Education**, Vol. 7 (November, 1971) p. 78.

49 K. J. Ratnam, **op. cit.**, pp. 135-136.

50 B. Simandjuntak, **op. cit.**, pp. 194-204.

51 **ibid.**, p. 202.

52 P. Navaratnarajah, "Education in Malaysia," **New Era**, Vol. 50 (July-August, 1969), p. 176.

53 John W. Henderson and others, **op. cit.** p. 167

54 Pat Barr, "At Rice Boots Level," **Times (London) Educational Supplement**, No. 3176, (April 16, 1976). p. 25.

55 **ibid.**

56 B. Simandjuntak, **op. cit.**, pp. 209-210.

57 Richard Greenough and Rado Klose, "Learning to be Malaysians," **Times (London) Educational Supplement**, No. 2995, (October 20, 1972.) p. 78.

58 James Morgan, "Tenuous Balance Between the Races," **Times (London) Educational Supplement**. No. 2946, (November 5, 1971), p. 17.

59 **ibid.**

60 **ibid.**

61 **ibid.**

62 John W. Henderson and others, **op. cit.**, pp. 187-188.

53 Y. C. Yen and Y. H. Gwee, "Primary and Mass Education in Malaysia," **World Year Book of Education** (London: Evans Brothers, 1965), p. 409.

64 Paul Pederson, "Possibilities for Violence in Malaysia," **Current History** Vol. 61, (December, 1971). p. 340.

65 Pat Barr, **op. cit.**

66 Paul Pederson, **op. cit.**

67 **ibid.**, p. 367.

68 Richard Greenough and Rado Klose, **op. cit.**

69 K. J. Ratnam, **op. cit.**; p. 213.

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