

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

“ASIA IN MALAYSIA FORUM” BY
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25 SEPTEMBER 2003

The phrase “Asia in Malaysia Forum” raises many eyebrows. Size-wise and population wise, Malaysia is a midget. It seems incongruous that one should speak of “Asia in Malaysia”. The phrase of course could be interpreted to mean “the study of Asia in Malaysia”. Intention-wise, that is true. But it is more than that. It expresses a situation which Malaysians themselves are not very aware of, that is, that Malaysia can be deemed to be ‘Asia in miniature’ or as the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism puts it: “Malaysia Truly Asia” for the simple reason that so much of the religious and cultural components of numerous parts of the Asian continent are found here.

Migration in the past greatly contributed to this. People from so many parts of Asia came here (almost 90 languages were spoken during the days of the Melaka Sultanate in the 15th Century) over a few centuries. Many remained contributing to the development of an intricate plural society. Generally, Malaysia’s population has usually been said to comprise Malays, Chinese and Indians. The three largest ethnic political parties in the country - UMNO, MCA, and MIC - (all three of which were founded in the 1940s, forming an Alliance in late 1954), have withstood the test of time.

However, Malaysia’s plural society is more complex than this. It is unique. There are numerous ethnic and sub-ethnic groups here. The large majority, as J.S. Furnivall would put it, mix, but only a minority combine. Still, the process of assimilation and integration steadily progresses. Many continue to subscribe to their traditional religions; a

large number, in more recent years, have since embraced Christianity, Buddhism or Islam.

Even Afghans (mainly Pathans) are not unknown here. The earliest Pathans to arrive were probably traders. Later, they were among the Sepoys who served here. There are also descendants of the Gurkhas/ Nepalese whose reputation as soldiers is unrivalled. The most numerous settlers to have come to the Peninsular in the past were those from what is now called Indonesia. They included Javanese (east, central and west), Minangkabau, Acehnese, Mandaling, Batak, Kerinci, Bangkahulu, Batu Bahara, Kampa, Rawa, Bugis, Banjar, Bawean, and other smaller groups.

Most of the Chinese came from Southeast China. But there are Kongsai (they once formed the backbone of the famous Kinta Valley Home Guards) and Shanghainese (businessmen *par excellence*) here too, and the Hakka of course are made up of several groups who had even earlier moved down to southeast China from the area of the Yellow River, before subsequently migrating overseas. Practically, all the various Chinese territorial-dialect associations have survived to this day.

Indians in the distant past brought Hinduism and Buddhism. The Malay language is full of Sanskrit words. By the 15th century, Indian Muslims began to make their presence felt. They were the most important of the merchants operating along the Straits of Malacca. The Kalinga preceded the Chuliah. The Tamils began to arrive with the emergence of sugarcane estates in the 1830s. With the growth of rubber plantations, their number increased by leaps and bounds.

The Tamils also came from Jaffna in Ceylon (now in Sri Lanka). A smaller number of Singhalese arrived with the establishment of British administration. Some of them were clerks; they were also the pioneer construction workers when the railway track was being laid between Port Weld and Taiping. The Indian community here today include Malayalis and Malabaris as well as Telegus and Bengalis. The Punjabis, like the Pathans, once members of the Indian Sepoys, came just before the beginning of British administration.

Japanese businessmen were already here in the late 19th century. The Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board was kept busy monitoring the activities of Japanese prostitutes. A larger number of Japanese arrived with the growth of the rubber sector. Their estates were found largely in Negeri Sembilan and Melaka. Negeri Sembilan was the only Malay state before WW II with a Japan Club (at Jalan Temiang). By the end of World War I, the Japanese had begun mining iron at Batu Pahat and this enterprise spread to Terengganu and Kelantan.

The Japanese occupied the country between late 1941 and August 1945. Thereafter, their population dwindled drastically but they returned when industrialisation in this country began to outstrip the production of tin and rubber. Industrialisation also brought the Koreans, beginning from the “eighties”. Some of them were here during the Occupation years as members of the Japanese army. It is not known how big their number was, probably smaller than that of the Taiwanese because some of the older generation of Malaysians remember “Hokkien-speaking Japanese soldiers”. Hokkien is widely spoken in Taiwan.

The history of Malaysia’s plural society has yet to be rigorously written. But because of the multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups now living close to one another, Malaysia is ideal for the study of ethnic and inter-religious relationships. Admittedly, the plural nature of the society has given rise to problems especially since World War II and ethnic riots were not unknown. But such disturbances did not cause long-term instability. At the same time, houses of worship of many religions have been located close to one to another, sometimes for over a century, without any conflict.

But the establishment of the “Asia in Malaysia Forum” is not primarily to study Malaysia’s plural society. It is aimed at making greater sense of what is meant by “Asia”; a term too often taken for granted. Asia is a Western construct. It has long been an accepted geographical entity (incidentally its southernmost tip is at Tanjong Piai in Johor)

made up of very advanced countries and very poorly developed countries. Poverty is one of Asia's most serious problems which hitherto have defied solution. It is also the cause of the relatively low standard of education prevailing even in the 21st century.

Among those who are poor and have had a low level of education, there is little awareness of the existence of fellow Asians in areas outside their own. Except for politicians and civil servants, business and academic communities, most Asians are too poor to travel to other Asian countries. Theirs is a world shaped strictly by their own immediate environment, cultural as well as physical. But many groups have converged on Malaysia in more recent times - Indonesians, Filipinos, Myanmarese, Sri Lankans, Nepalese (mostly Bengalis), and Vietnamese.

There is no common Asian language even though the major religions, all of which originated in the Asian continent, have penetrated many parts of Asia. But there are ethnic Buddhist temples just as there are ethnic Christian churches. Generally for Asia, English is the *lingua franca* of international relations.

Given the situation where poverty and a low level of education are pervasive, it cannot be expected that Asia's majority will find it easy to get to know one another well. Scholars will still have to play the main role of explaining the ABC's of Asia to those whose main preoccupation is not research and writing. But to be able to play that role, scholars must make serious attempts to know Asian societies. Asian culture is both mystical and intellectual. It has to be felt as well as rationalised. It cannot be expected, of course, that a particular scholar will be able to acquire intimate knowledge of so many parts of Asia, but those who are interested in Asia as a whole need to have a fairly accurate macro-comprehension of the continent.

The problem with scholarship in the humanities and humanities-related disciplines today is that it has become an intellectual game where too frequently intellectual calisthenics occupy centre stage. There is a marked tendency to form exclusive clubs by the invention of

jargons and methodologies of which the objective is not to enlighten but to build fences. Scholarly publications therefore are read by very few - only members of a particular club and their disciples. While scholars are quick to accuse politicians of cronyism, they themselves could be guilty of the same practice.

As a result, scholarship can become contrived, and the whole idea of the pursuit of truth sometimes is cast aside on the grounds that truth is unattainable.

The main objective for the establishment of the "Asia in Malaysia Forum" is to enable frequent dialogues and discussions to take place which will help to inform rather than to blinker. It is interested in both scholarly perceptions as well as the views of the man/woman-in-the-street. It will have no gender bias. Participation will not be confined to scholars. Indeed, efforts will be made to bring people of all professions together. Those who have hands-on experience, especially members of the foreign community present in Malaysia, will be particularly welcomed. Similarly, it will aim at bringing together senior and younger citizens. Young scholars especially, should be groomed. They urgently need to abandon the follow-the-piper mentality.

Scholars interested in Asia ought to be sensitive to the fact that common expressions such as "Asian values", "Asian family systems" and "Asian forms of democracy", etc., are based on assumptions rather than material evidence. General similarities undoubtedly exist, besides differences. These differences are usually seen to be more significant because differences rather than common denominators are often the cause of upheavals.

Dialogues and discussions are inadequate. Ideas which emerge from talks and seminars ought to be disseminated and all those who are able to write will be encouraged to write. The Forum will publish occasional papers as well as monographs to try to disseminate information and ideas about Asia. More important still, the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue has inaugurated a journal called KATHA (Dialogue) which

will focus on discussions concerning Asia but without neglecting Asia's relations with the rest of the world.

At the same time, it is hoped that foreign scholars will find it useful to visit the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue where the Forum is housed to exchange ideas with local scholars or Asian scholars resident in Malaysia, and also to use Malaysia as a launching pad to get to know Asia more intimately. The younger foreign scholars in particular would be able to obtain valuable guidance in their study of the larger Asian continent rather than specific parts of it.

There is no necessity for scholarship to be esoteric and ostentatious. The main purpose of scholarship should be to enlighten. Besides being eager to win Nobel prizes in the not too distant future, it should be remembered that Nobel prizes are given not just for science and technology. Malaysian should not forget to appreciate the totality of human existence in which scientific inventions are intended to serve humankind, not *vice versa*. Science alone, for example, cannot contribute to peace at any level. It cannot help to cement the relationships among humans. To achieve societal cohesion and harmony, it is unavoidable that attempts should be made persistently to disseminate positive values among people. The task is onerous and success difficult to attain, but nothing ventured nothing gained.

It may be argued that discourses and dialogues on Asia are no longer uncommon even if the tendency hitherto is to concentrate on distinct parts of Asia rather than its totality. But, since the end of the Cold War, interest in Asia is prompted largely by mainly economic motives alone, which tend to lead to a distortion of the image of the Asian majority who are more and more deemed to be important primarily because they have to be factored into the cost of production as well as marketing strategies.

Usually, a university has the function of helping to provide a country's manpower needs. But that is a role which can also be played by polytechnics and trade schools. A university above all should be

concerned with the development of ideas which can be applied at the practical level, for without the pure there can be no applied. Ideation in whatever discipline cannot take place in a vacuum. Therein lies the importance of empirical data and research which the Forum intends to initiate and compile as the Centre's database.

So much was said of Asia before 1997 - that the 21st Century would be the Asian Century. Asia today is confronted by numerous problems. Intra-national dissensions in many countries are, in most cases, more real than external threats. To obtain an accurate understanding of Asia's complex problems and potentials, instead of just focusing on economic reports relating to GNP growth or decline, is the principal reason for the existence of this Forum and journal. If nothing else it will, in a modest way, help to provide opportunities for people from various Asian and non-Asian countries, to meet and exchange ideas.