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MOST Malaysians – including members of the specially appointed government committee to review the history curriculum – may not be aware of the deep roots of the current controversy on the narrow religious and ethno-nationalistic approach that has come to dominate history education in the country. The following essay provides information on two studies that have examined the roots of the contestation on history education, especially with regard to the history curriculum developed for schools and the assigned textbooks. (1)

Santhiram's work: Textbooks that divide

The earliest academic study on the subject was undertaken by Dr R. Santhiram. The study published in 1997 is a pioneering attempt at examining the extent to which the educational system – as exemplified in the curriculum and textbooks – was reflective of a multiracial and multicultural society. (2) Focusing on selected lower secondary school textbooks and using quantitative content analysis and qualitative strategies, the paper's general conclusion was that while some textbooks provided curriculum content appropriate for a multicultural society, others had concentrated heavily on majority race identity. (3)

Santhiram's study covered four subject areas – English Language, Bahasa Malaysia, Moral Education and History – and his findings on all of them are useful. However, his conclusions on the history component are of special interest because of their relevance to the situation today. This is what he had to write about the assigned textbook, *KBSM Sejarah Tingkatan 2*, authored by Zainal Abidin Abdul Wahid, Khoo Kay Kim, Muhammad Yusof Ibrahim and D.S. Ranjit Singh (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1989). (4)

Santhiram noted:

To be sure, the focus here is on Malaysian national history. The main players on the political scene are Malay rulers and the indigenous people and the history focuses on their responses to western incursions and domination. As such, a major part of the History textbook highlights these matters. The text deals mainly with political issues and to a certain extent provoke pupils to think about the weaknesses of the Malay states that led to British intervention.

Topics on economic development, growth of towns, development of infrastructure and development of education tend to give an overview of historical continuity and progress with a very strong Malay bias. However, it is important to mention here that evidence of stereotyping mentioned in some earlier works on the analysis of textbook material seem to have been corrected in this book (Mukherjee et al., 1984). The contention then was that the history textbooks as a whole focused primarily on one ethnic group – the Malays – at the expense of other ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Superficial coverage was given to the historical background and sociocultural aspects of non-indigenous groups. Instances of stereotyping of the races and misleading statements on non-indigenous ethnic groups were recorded in that research. These and other shortcomings were cited as a hindrance to the promotion of national unity (pp.16-32).

In relation to the crucial educational objective as defined by the Ministry of Education of inculcating and nurturing national consciousness through fostering common ideals, values, aspirations and loyalties in order to mould national unity and national identity in a multi-ethnic society, Santhiram expressed disappointment with the book's contents. According to him:

In this book, topics that give an understanding of the origins of the multiracial society and their contributions are dealt with very peripherally, though Chinese involvement in tin disputes is dealt with within the context of internecine disputes of the Malay nobility.

Circumstances of Chinese and Indian migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are not adequately explained. The only reference to Indian involvement in the rubber industry is a three-sentence acknowledgement which goes like this: "European planters preferred to use Indian labour" (p.127) and "Indian labour was brought in to work in rubber

estates. Many Indians settled in this country in the 1910s and 1920s" (p.128). There is a page devoted to the development of Tamil schools which reinforces the fact that these schools are for the poor Indians (p.173) and a three-paragraph reference to Indian political activities (p.210).

In his conclusion on the history curriculum and textbook, Santhiram had this to say:

Recognition of the evolution of the plural society and the contribution of non-indigenous communities in Malaysia has to be reexamined with a view to providing a balanced account... . One cannot wish away the realities of the past by ignoring them. Surely, Malay nationalistic fervour has to be highlighted to instill a sense of belonging to the nation. But a sense of belonging has to be promoted among all ethnic groups.

He further noted:

The non-Malays have come to play an important role in Malaysian affairs in the past 100 years. Their contribution has to be acknowledged and highlighted, instead of making only footnote references to their presence. It has to be stressed that the Chinese and Indians are not detachable appendages but integral constituents of the Malaysian society. How can a people develop a sense of common historical experience and a sense of belonging to the nation if they feel alienated and marginalised and no recognition is made to their participation in the life of the country?

Cheah's work: Ethno-nationalist victory in rewriting history

Santhiram's study approached the subject of the national curriculum and textbooks from the discipline of education. Another scholar, Cheah Boon Kheng, approached the subject from the discipline of history.

Writing in the *American Asian Review* in 2003 (5), Cheah noted that "History, ethnicity and nation-building are not only related issues, but also controversial and sensitive ones in the politics of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society." In his study, unlike Santhiram who used the technique of content analysis of textbooks to arrive at his findings, Cheah relied on a selection of primary and secondary materials to arrive at his findings and conclusions. He also delved further into the country's political history to trace the developments that have influenced history writing.

According to Cheah, government policy aimed at making Malay history as the basis of national history and Malay culture as the basis of national culture followed the decisions adopted by

several Malay groups at a National Culture Congress in 1971. Another key milestone took place in 1987 when the then Minister for Education, Anwar Ibrahim, instructed that the school history curriculum be revised to make it explicitly clear that the present day Malay political primacy was based on Malay history and on the premise that Malays were “the original inhabitants” and that their position could not be challenged.

Cheah also noted that in spite of Malay political dominance, other indigenous ethnic groups have tried to ensure that their communities' own historical roles were not obliterated. His study provides examples of attempts during the past 40 years by various individuals and groups to contest the Malay-centric and politically biased history. These attempts included that of the country's founding father and first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman who complained that a book used as a text book for the schools “was obviously an attempt to put party politics above the historical facts” and “did not give proper emphasis to the important incidents and events [including his own role] which led to independence.” (6) According to Cheah, in the foreword to the Tunku's own memoirs, *Looking Back*

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the father of the country's independence wrote:

One academic writer did write a book in Malay on Malaysia's Independence, a work which was actually distributed to schools for our boys and girls to read, but the author had completely omitted to associate me with events leading to Independence.”

Other attempts at contestation of the official version of the country's history emerging from Malay ethno-nationalist pressure included complaints by Sabah and Sarawak representatives at a national curriculum committee meeting in 1987 that Malaysian history textbooks tended to be “too peninsula-biased” and that “to foster national integration, West Malaysians should also

learn the histories of Sarawak and Sabah.”

More prolonged resistance to the official rewriting of Malaysia's history, according to Cheah, has come from the Chinese community. This resistance – which continues in a weakened form today - has been waged especially in response to attempts by Malay politicians and authorities to deny the crucial role of Kapitan Yap Ah Loy as Kuala Lumpur's leading founder. Other topics of contestation include key political events such as the constitutional provisions for Malays and non-Malays prior to independence in 1957 and the portrayal of the Japanese occupation period in Malaysian history.

With reference to the latter topic, Cheah has argued that the case of Malaysian textbooks that relate to Malaysia's official memory of the Second World War “is somewhat similar to the Japanese government's amnesia about Japan's wartime atrocities during the Second World War.” In his view, the latest Malaysian history textbook (1992) reflects the government's stand on the Japanese occupation of the country. It is tied up with Malaysia's internal and international politics. Malay political primacy requires an agenda to highlight Malay wartime roles and experiences over that of other communities, and to accord recognition to Japan's wartime support of Malay nationalist aspirations.

The task ahead in reviewing ‘official’ history

The guidance from Santhiram's and Cheah's work – though written some years ago – are important to bear in mind in relation to the current controversy over the history curriculum and textbooks as well as the parallel controversy over *Interlok*, the assigned exam text for the literature component in the Bahasa Melayu compulsory pass subject.

Santhiram is of the view that in a textbook-driven curriculum environment like Malaysia's, it is imperative that clear guidelines be given to textbook writers to incorporate elements of material that will help foster images and forms that will shape experiences positively in terms of national unity goals. Careful thought has to be given to the area of textbook writing so that the content does not work against nationally declared goals and aspirations. But guidelines are not enough especially if the interpreters and implementers of the guidelines are drawn from one racial group and when representatives from other racial groups are added on, their roles are mainly to provide the fig leaf of legitimacy and cover up for biased and ethno-centric products.

Cheah's conclusion was blunter and appears – for now – to be prophetic in discerning future developments. He noted that “the struggle for equal historical space and place by ethnic minorities in Malaysia has been argued on the basis of multiculturalism, i.e., the idea that different, disadvantaged minorities and cultural groups in society have equally valid perspectives on historical truth.”

Whilst recognizing that it is necessary “to empower these groups in the face of the dominant concept of historical truth held by the ruling ethnic group”, he realistically noted that “if the grounds used to prefer one vision or one interpretation of the past over another are political and if the persuasiveness of a historical interpretation is simply a matter of the power of its advocates within society and within the historical profession, then it does not follow at all that

history is necessarily a democratic, fair or tolerant enterprise.”

Reflecting his pessimism, Cheah concluded that “[t]he controversies over Malaysian history textbooks have focused largely over the issue of national history textbooks being easily indoctrinated or manipulated by the ruling ethnic group, or by state-commissioned historians for mainly political interests – usually in the interests of ethno-nationalism, in favour of the majority ethnic group, the Malays, over the others.”

It is evident that the struggle for a democratic, fair and representative history in Malaysia will be a long and protracted one with the odds stacked in favour of the ruling establishment and their well rewarded apologists.

Now that another opportunity has emerged in the recent decision to review the history curriculum, it is imperative that Malaysians from all communities rouse themselves from their stupor and come together to correct past wrongs. Working to ensure that the full complexity and richness of our history – rather than a caricature of our past – is reflected in the curriculum and textbooks has to be a collective and multiracial responsibility if it is to have any hope of success.

Footnote:

¹ *The book, Glimpses of Malaysian history, was a collection of essays by Malaysian historians and was edited by Zainal Abidin bin Wahid and published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.*

² *See R. Santhiram, "Curriculum Materials for National Integration in Malaysia – Match or Mismatch", Asia Pacific Journal of Education Volume 17, Issue 2, 1997, pp.7-18*

³ *For his analysis, Santhiram posed two questions to provide a general direction for analysing the curriculum materials. They were as follows: 1) To what extent do these textbooks help promote the development of national unity among the various races with specific reference to the Indians? 2) To what extent do these textbooks provide suitable role models for the minority ethnic groups, especially the Indians, to emulate?*

Based on these two questions, the analysis concentrated on visual presentation, focus and themes in the stories and passages and the depth of treatment given to racial, cultural and religious diversity. Conspicuous stereotyping and omissions which would reinforce the identification of race with occupations and promote prejudice were also noted and assessment was also made of positive values and attitudes that were inculcated.

⁴ *All four authors involved in writing this book came from academia with the first two being professors of History at Malaysian universities, and the other two, lecturers in local universities.*

⁵ *Cheah Boon Kheng, "Ethnicity, Politics and History Textbook Controversies in Malaysia", Vol. XXI, No.4, Winter, 2003, pp.229-52.*