

BOOK REVIEWS

Chai Hon-Chan. *Education and Nation-Building in Plural Societies: The West Malaysian Experience*. Australian National University, Monograph no. 6, 1977. Pp. 115.

Adequacies and Inadequacies of Educational Policy as an Instrument in Nation Building: A Review Article

The trials and tribulations of newly independent countries as they navigate through the complexities of the modern world towards full nationhood have aroused great interest among social scientists, who see in these countries excellent case studies for theory building or examples for other countries similarly placed to follow.

Education often becomes the main focus in national policy and is used as one of the key instruments in the arduous task of nation-building. Conventional wisdom, not entirely unfounded to be sure, has placed educational institutions in the centre of the scheme of things as the one sure panacea for all social and economic ills that confront many independent countries and the one sure foundation that can guarantee the successful building of a new sense of nationhood out of chaotic diversities that old colonial masters have bequeathed to these countries. Whether education can in fact achieve the objectives of nation-building, a concept which has seldom been defined precisely, depends on how education is used to achieve the desired objectives and whether policies pertaining to other sectors of life are consistent with education policies.

West Malaysia, although not identical to other newly independent countries in the problems that need to be solved before full nationhood can be attained, is similar to other such countries in that it has a multiplicity of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groupings and a legacy of colonial educational policies that served to split the groupings rather than to unite.

British Malaya, as West Malaysia was then called, had not one system of education but a number of parallel systems, each with its own language of instruction, its own curriculum, and its own loyalty orientations. The Malays, the main ethnic group in Malaya, were generally regarded by the British as the natives of the country. They were given privileges denied to others. Their school system was given some measure of British support. For the average Malay pupil in a Malay medium school, his education terminated at the end of elementary school. It was a truncated system that left the Malays hopelessly backward in education.

The second largest ethnic group in British Malaya was the Chinese. Not considered natives of the land, they were left to their own devices in the education of their children. They had to build and finance their own schools,

and not unexpectedly, their orientation was not towards the land where they resided but towards China. The Tamils, the smallest of the ethnic groups in Malaya, like the Chinese, did not receive British support for their schools.

To add to the confusion, the British built and financed schools using English as the medium of instruction to produce sufficient numbers of local people to occupy the lower ranks of the British administration. As these schools were located in the urban areas where there was a higher concentration of ethnic Chinese, this historical accident was to give the Chinese a head-start in educational attainment over the Malays. In time, the English schools had its full complement of primary, secondary, and tertiary schools, thereby giving those who enrolled in them the opportunities that were denied to those enrolled in Malay, Chinese, or Tamil schools.

The wide disparity of education attainment of the ethnic groups, especially between the Malays and the Chinese, at the eve of independence and the two decades after independence, coupled with the alleged economic backwardness of the Malays, has become the cornerstone of political action by the main ruling Malay party, UMNO, to rectify the neglect of the ethnic Malays under British rule. In brief, the stage is set for a long and sustained policy to uplift the Malays educationally and economically till parity is achieved with the other main ethnic group, the Chinese.

Dr. Chai's monograph is a story of the effort of the Malay-dominated government of West Malaysia to achieve this parity. Whether the success of nation-building depends upon the success of achieving parity in educational and economic matters among ethnic groups is in fact a debatable point.

Nation-building through the achievement of status parity among the Malays and Chinese is by no means an uncomplicated matter. Dr. Chai identifies and details the complex problems of ethnicity, language, and religion. He highlights the dichotomy of ethnic groupings and their primordial loyalties against a backdrop of political and economic power split along ethnic lines.

Politically, the Malays are stronger than the Chinese as they are in full control of both the federal and state governments. The Chinese, however, have much of the economic wherewithal. This phenomenon is perhaps unique to the West Malaysian experience and sets the stage for the policies, both economic and social, which emerge after the post-war years. These policies deliberately seek, and have sought, to widen the economic and social opportunities of the Malays through the educational route. More schools were set up to accommodate the increasing clamour of the Malays for secondary and tertiary education, seen by the political leadership as the only viable upward avenue, under government sponsorship, for Malay social mobility.

The data presented in the monograph indicate that in the immediate

post-war years the Malays on the average were more backward than the Chinese in both educational and economic terms. A policy of deliberate discrimination in favour of the Malays seems a reasonable and desirable response to a situation in which members of the ethnic group which holds political power is in a disadvantaged position. Government leaders defended the policy and premised their argument on the assumption that wide disparity of educational attainment and economic wealth between the Malays and the Chinese constituted a threat to the task and success of nation-building. The disadvantaged group, the Malays, must be helped to reach a level of development where its members can compete on equal terms with the other ethnic groups, namely, the Chinese. When this stage will be reached is, however, a moot point.

Through government sponsorship, the Malays by 1975 were enrolled in tertiary institutions of education in numbers that far exceeded their proportional representation in the population. The question is whether the Government will now provide equal opportunities for higher education for all ethnic groups now that the Malays have achieved more than parity in educational terms with the other ethnic groups. So far dissent and dissatisfaction have not found overt expression in any dramatic way. Will the continuation of the Malay sponsorship policy put the nation-building effort in jeopardy? Events have a dynamics of their own. Once set in motion, they gather momentum and any attempts to arrest and alter the direction of the flow may be met with resistance by the group which benefits from those events, particularly if it also possesses political clout. Both the benefits and the risks of a government sponsored mobility programme are real. This point has been stressed in Dr. Chai's monograph. The alleged tension generated by such a policy is predicted to have adverse results in nation-building, especially when the non-Malay section of the population finds its education opportunities shrinking with the passing of the years.

Whether the pro-Malay sponsorship programme is successful or not would depend on who is making the judgement. The programme benefits one ethnic group, but whether the benefits outweigh the cost is debatable. Some of the costs have been mentioned. These are the alienation of the other ethnic groups (both the Chinese and the Indians) and the relaxation of admission criteria into the universities, as well as the use of ascriptive rather than universalistic criteria for school places and scholarships.

Evidence of the level and intensity of alienation is not presented as fully as expected in the book, although such evidence would enable one to judge the costs of the Government's sponsorship policy in the context of nation-building. The 1969 riots are an indication of racial tensions but a more comprehensive study of the costs of an ethnically biased policy has yet to be carried out. What the Government and the people of West Malaysia would be

interested in would be some valid indicator of a nett gain or loss consequent upon pursuing different alternative policies in nation-building.

The other issue extensively discussed in the book is language. This must inevitably emerge in a country which has two large ethnic blocs — the Malay and the Chinese. Superimposed on these two local languages is English, the language of the old colonial administration and of the international commercial world. Language policy decisions are always fraught with danger and often threaten to tear a new nation asunder. Policy decisions in favour of one or the other language tend to generate fear, tension, and civil disorder, as has been seen in India and Sri Lanka.

Dr. Chai's monograph brings out clearly the series of events and steps which led to the adoption of Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) as the main medium of instruction in West Malaysia's schools. One cannot help but feel that the transformation of schools using different languages — Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, and English — into a national type school using Bahasa Malaysia has been astutely executed in graduated steps. This has minimized large-scale protest and violent resistance. The concession to the non-Malays, which has perhaps muted resistance to a large extent, pertains to the teaching of other languages — Mandarin, Tamil, and English — as the second language.

The astuteness of this move is obvious. The linguistic and cultural identity of the non-Malays is not threatened with extinction but merely relegated to a less important role, a sacrifice necessary for nation-building or so it has been argued. Loyalty to the nation is equated with the willingness to accept Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction in schools and at a later date in the universities. It is a concession the non-Malays have to make as a symbolic gesture of their loyalty to the country which sustains them.

At the individual level there may well be dissatisfaction, resentment, and alienation; but at the national level there appears to be general acceptance of the inevitable. The benefits of a single language serving as the *lingua franca* in a country with a multiplicity of ethnic groups are obvious, but the costs of such a policy have yet to be calculated. Language and loyalty may be hopelessly confounded. The common assumption that a common language is *sine qua non* for national unity and loyalty has been accepted without question. A common language facilitates communication and obviates misunderstanding. It is an asset in nation-building, at least in the sense that language issues do not cloud and complicate social and economic issues.

But the question whether the achievement of a common language at some sacrifice of the languages of other ethnic groups would *ipso facto* bring about national loyalty and unity is problematic. No one can predict what the outcome will be. The field of policy analysis is still in its infancy. Not all the parameters within which policies operate can be included in one single comprehensive paradigm, and the conclusions drawn in Dr. Chai's mono-

graph can at best be suggestive rather than definitive.

Ethnic disparity, whether it be educational or in occupational attainment, is highly visible and compels attention and action, especially when the disadvantaged group has the political power to bring about changes in favour of the disadvantaged group. This is in fact what has happened in West Malaysia. But the focus on ethnic disparity clouds the more fundamental issue of intra-ethnic disparity in wealth and educational attainment. This point has been poignantly discussed in Dr. Chai's monograph, and rightly so.

Poverty and its consequent disabilities within each ethnic group receive scant attention compared with inter-ethnic disparity. If successful nation-building is predicated upon reducing the disparity between ethnic groups, how much more crucial it is for national viability to reduce intra-ethnic disparity. Politically, it is perhaps more attractive to focus attention on inter-ethnic disparity, given the ethnic composition in West Malaysia and the need to win the support of ethnic Malays away from other competing Malay political parties such as those with an Islamic programme of reform. It makes political sense, but the over-politicization of the Malay populace contains within it certain seeds of risks that cannot be ignored. The complexities of tension management in West Malaysia in order to maintain some semblance of stability for social and economic development in nation-building become self-evident in Dr. Chai's scholarly exposition of the problems encountered and the solutions attempted.

In spite of the multiplicity of problems which come to the fore and new ones generated consequent upon deliberate government policies favouring one ethnic group, Dr. Chai ends his analysis on a hopeful note. According to him, "The education process will undoubtedly widen the scope for cultural integration and possibly strengthen the bases of national unity." The Malays will accept the non-Malays as equal political partners only if the Malays achieve economic parity with the non-Malays, namely, the Chinese. Dr. Chai, therefore, stresses the importance of economic development and income redistribution as urgent tasks to be given priority in order to accelerate mutual acceptance and allay intra-ethnic suspicion, both of which are paramount psychological pre-conditions in the building of a viable nation.

Dr. Chai's monograph is the first detailed and systematic study of the West Malaysia education scene in the context of nation-building. In a sense, it is a critique of the policies pursued and the consequences attendant upon those policies. Throughout, discussions of events, problems, and solutions are carried on at two levels: reference to specifics, and the abstraction of specifics into generalizations. It is an invaluable book for the insights provided and the suggestions for avoiding certain pitfalls in the task of nation-building.

Studies which seek to illuminate national development and nation-building provide cumulative knowledge from which "laws" (for lack of a better word) may be derived. Such "laws" are useful guides for policy-makers in new nations but they have to be used intelligently in the light of subtle and not-so-subtle differences between nations. The task of nation-building does not conform to any "iron laws". Prediction of outcomes attendant upon the adoption of any policy cannot be precise. In nation-building, the parameters cannot always be accurately identified, and even if accurate identification is possible, it is difficult to enter them into a neat equation. In short, insights are helpful in avoiding serious errors, but much still depends on the capacity of the political leaders to "feel" the situation.

S.P. Eng
Institute of Education,
Singapore