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ETHNICITY, INEQUALITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA: THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS*

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INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom among certain sections of sociologists has it that the children of the disadvantaged, the poor and the minorities do poorly in schools largely because of the inequitable distribution of resources for education. Therefore, a formal compensatory public education policy with a bias towards these children can better serve these underprivileged groups. Better educational credentials obtained by such children will result in better paying jobs that will lift these handicapped groups out of poverty and eventually move them up the social ladder. Thus, success in education, particularly in academic and professional education will lead to improvement in life chances. Entry into the more desirable and prestigious occupations in all modern societies is increasingly becoming closed to those who do not have the appropriate educational credentials, as there is a 'tightening bond' between years of education, jobs and income (Tyler, 1977:35). In the long run, therefore, an equitable educational achievement will work towards a more equitable distribution of income, wealth and status in society as a whole.

This macro-level theoretical contention has had and continues to have a profound influence on public policy makers in many developed and developing countries, including Peninsular Malaysia (Thurow, 1977:325-335). Since independence in 1957, for the Malay dominated policy makers in Peninsular Malaysia, the idea that education can produce greater social equity has become the cornerstone of their redistributive strategy. At the macro-level they have deliberately conceived and implemented a highly controversial strategy to increase substantially the educational opportunities of the bumiputras to enable them to achieve better educational credentials. It is contended
that increasingly 'tightening bond' between education and jobs will not only make them more eligible for the fast growing job opportunities but with a rigorously discriminatory policy provide more and more bumiputras in the rapidly expanding economy with better paid jobs. This is largely because, as in other developing countries, the level of incomes earned in Malaysia often varies directly with the level of academic credentials. It is also justified on the grounds of promoting national unity by reducing economic disparities between the ethnic groups. However, as this article will demonstrate the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is striking. This is largely because there are various tensions and contradictions between the political desire for equality in educational opportunity and the sociological fact of inequality of educational opportunity. In addition, data collected by the Government on issues of this kind are kept out of the public domain because of the sensitive nature of the subject. As a result, any researcher working in this area has to depend on published data, most of which are incomplete and scattered in various government and other published documents. The present study is an attempt to put together the available data and see the sociological implications of higher education policy in a multi-ethnic and stratified society, both in terms of national unity and the distributional aspects of educational opportunity, employment and social mobility.

THE ISSUE

Peninsular Malaysia in 1986 had an estimated population of just over 13 million: 55% Malays and other "indigenous" people; 34% Chinese; 10% Indians; 1% "Others" (SriLankans, Eurasians and other...
communities) (Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 1986:7). Superimposed on this multi-ethnic Malaysian society is a diversity of languages, religions and cultures. This multi-ethnic society on the eve of political independence in 1957 was further polarized by geographical location and by economic and occupational activities. The numerically and politically dominant Malays were largely rural based and basically peasant cultivators or small-holders cultivating uneconomic farm holdings and thus earning relatively low incomes. The majority of the Chinese on the other hand, lived (and still live) in urban areas and were relatively better paid as wholesale and retail traders, petty traders, skilled and semi-skilled artisans, professionals, wage-labourers and vegetable farmers (and in recent years as manufacturers and entrepreneurs).

The pyramidal colonial educational system in the period 1786-1957 had created a grave imbalance in the distribution of opportunities for education. The majority of Malays received only an elementary education in the Malay medium, and in some instances Islamic religious education in Arabic. Not surprisingly, this education excluded them from the lower echelons of the colonial administrative and technical service and the predominantly European-owned and managed plantation and tin mining industries. It also kept the bulk of them from gaining access to the English medium and British oriented elitist secondary and tertiary education system. In any event the exclusive English medium education that was provided by the colonial government and the Christian missions was restrictive as only a small section of the population that was literate in English could gain entry. The education system was also a predominantly urban phenomenon designed to create and nurture a colonial elite (Loh Fook
This group, imbued with Western concepts of liberalism and style of life, was nurtured to remain loyal to the colonial government.

The policy obviously benefited the upper and middle classes of the numerically preponderant urban Chinese, the middle-class Indians and elements of the feudal Malay class. These groups were either of direct or indirect use to the expanding colonial educational, administrative and allied services and the rapidly growing trading houses and plantations. The latter were largely owned and managed by the British and supported by a predominantly Chinese compradore class. Although the Malays formed the majority of the population, their low educational credentials did not allow them to participate in adequate numbers in the growing and expanding occupational structure of both the public and private sectors. The vernacular education that the colonial government provided for the Malays equipped them only with the elementary skills of numeracy and literacy, locking them into the low income generating rural economy. Not surprisingly, therefore, on the eve of internal self-government in 1955 and independence in 1957 there was a wide disparity in income, close coincidence between ethnic identity and occupation, income distribution, and geographical location between Malays and non-Malays.

A small group of Malays, predominantly from a feudal background, who had obtained an English medium education from such institution as the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, and subsequently had acquired a diploma at Raffles College, Singapore, and a degree from its successor, the University of Malaya when it was established in Singapore in 1949, or at a British or developed Commonwealth country university, were able to ensure a niche for themselves in the colonial
bureaucracy. Many of them were later to involve themselves in the post-war Malay nationalist movement, particularly in the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the predominant Malay political party as well as the senior and dominant member and power base of the country's current National Front government. Most of these English-educated Malays found themselves at the helm of Malay society when the country achieved self-government, followed by independence. This Malay ruling class was quick to realize that the imbalances between the Malay and non-Malay communities would not long remain unchallenged by the Malays particularly with a Westminster type of parliamentary government and an overwhelming number of the country's parliamentary and state constituencies weighted in favour of the numerically preponderant Malay rural population. Thus the Malay ruling class envisaged that through an institutionalized national socio-economic development policy and strategy they could encourage and assist the underprivileged rural Malays to play a greater role in the administrative and economic life of the country. In other words, the priority target in the country's developmental planning was an avowed commitment to eradicate poverty among the rural Malays and ironically at the same time to prop up a Malay middleclass, in income, occupational status and wealth. This could be done only through educated and trained Malay personnel who could be a crucial ingredient for efficient growth and effective government. This strategy, it was envisaged, would not only redress the prevailing economic imbalance between the Malay and non-Malay communities but also ultimately abolish rural poverty and in the process, the rural-urban imbalance. All this was expected to help the country to move towards a more egalitarian and just multi-ethnic nation.
A massive countrywide rural development programme to accelerate the modernization process and the diversification of the agricultural sector was conceived and pursued within the framework and context of the country's five year plans which were purported to be a laissez-faire economic policy. This policy was aimed to channel additional resources to the needy rural peasants and was thus expected to raise their productivity and income and eventually their overall well-being. It was accompanied by the rapid provision of universal primary and secondary education accompanied by the democratization of education. This considerably enhanced the access to educational opportunity to all children particularly for the needy Malay children from the rural areas. In statistical terms the total enrolment in all the assisted schools rose from 394,142 in 1947 to 1,014,193 in 1957, to 1,729,713 in 1967 (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 1968:27).

In addition, in order to enable them in both rural and urban areas to 'catch up' with non-Malays, Malays were provided with special remedies under Article 153 of the country's 1957 Constitution. Through this constitutional provision the Malays were ensured the reservation of such a proportion as might be deemed reasonable in the public service, scholarships and similar educational and training privileges. An additional provision was incorporated into Section 47 of the University of Malaya Constitution which, inter alia, provides that "...students who had been awarded Federal or State scholarships or other similar financial assistance from public funds for University degree courses, shall not be refused admission if they satisfy such requirements" (University of Malaya, 1969:34). These discriminatory provisions were incorporated to enable the Malays to be provided with
greater access to education and therefore better opportunities for employment and commercial activities in the country's rapidly growing bureaucratic and professional services as well as commercial and manufacturing sectors.

Employment opportunities were further stimulated by the rapid Malayanization of the bureaucracy. To stimulate and facilitate Malay participation in commerce and industry, a statutory body called the Rural and Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) was established. Under RIDA, a Training Centre was established to educate and train Malay professionals and businessmen. This Centre was up-graded to the MARA Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1967. Though controversial, the incorporation of privileges into the country's and the university's constitutions was defended as a moral necessity by the Malay leadership.

The above policy of preferential treatment or ethnic discrimination accompanied by an investment in higher education to benefit the special needs of the Malays was accepted, or at least acquiesced to, by the leaders of the non-bumiputra communities as a necessary political strategy. However, no clear cut criteria were laid down to determine who among the Malays were economically and educationally backward and therefore eligible for preferential treatment. In other words, in spite of marked social and educational inequalities between the ruling Malay class and the mass of the Malay population, the preferential treatment policy both in education and economic activity took no notice of social class divisions and contradictions among the Malays as a social category. Thus this preferential treatment was to benefit the Malays as a community neglecting the existing intra-ethnic socio-economic inequality among
the Malays, particularly between the ruling class and the bulk of the rural population.

The developmental programmes within the framework of the five-year plans when implemented did enable the country to achieve high economic growth. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average 5.8% per annum during 1957-70 (Rao, 1976). In addition, in spite of a 3% annual growth of population, the per capita income rose from Ringgit 806 to Ringgit 1080, an increase of 30% (Malaysia, 1971b:16). However, these impressive figures did not help to alleviate Malay rural poverty. In 1970 the agricultural sector had the greatest incidence of poverty, and the majority of those engaged in this sector were Malays (68%), compared with the Chinese (21%) (Young, Bussink and Hassan, 1980:31). According to official estimates, about 49.3% of all households in Peninsular Malaysia in 1970 received incomes below the poverty line, which in the same year was officially defined as equivalent to Malaysian Ringgit 33 per capita per month or Ringgit 396 per annum (Jomo and Ishak, 1987:8). In contrast, in the key sectors of the modern economy, which generated most of the wealth, the Chinese were over-represented (66%), whereas the Malays held only 26% (Young, Bussink and Hassan, 1980:3). Neither did it bring about any significant change in occupational structure in the professional levels or in ownership and control in the economy in favour of the Malay community. Instead, it brought about occupational and economic benefits to the high-income groups in both rural and urban areas, helping to create a new elite both among the Malays and the non-Malays. Among the Malays a large bureaucratic elite and among the non-Malays a growing professional elite were both widely separated from the mass of workers and the rural populace.