Pioneering efforts in Education in Kuala Lumpur from 1875 till 1900

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The period 1875-1900 is chosen purely from the point of view of the development of Kuala Lumpur as directly related to its population growth.

This rapid expansion of population was as follows:

1875 — 2,000
1880 — 4,000
1890 — 20,000
1895 — 25,000
1900 — 30,000

In 1875, the ruler of Selangor was Sultan Abdul Samad, J. G. Davidson was the British Resident and Yap Ah Loy was Captain China in Kuala Lumpur. The capital of the state was moved from Klang to Kuala Lumpur in 1880.

In 1882, a Koran class was held in one of the houses on the left bank of the Gombak River for Malay children who lived in the area. Children from Kampong Rawa situated in Java Street (the area between the present Mountbatten Road and Malay Street) also attended the Koran class for about 3 or 4 hours daily.

An elderly Chinese miner who was educated in China and too old to work in the mines, taught Chinese children near Yap Ah Loy’s Garden House using the

Kampong Rawa, an extension of Malay Street, in about 1890.
Hakka dialect. Five subjects were taught, namely:

- San tsu chin — 3-word sentence.
- Pai Chia Sin — 100 surnames.
- Chen Ts Wen — Essay of 1,000 words, each character being a different one.
- Sen tong tz — Poems, nursery rhymes written by a genius.
- Choo Suan — Accounting, using the abacus.

In 1880, Tamil was taught in the home of Doraisamy Pillay situated in Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman near the present Bilal Restaurant.

The Government built a school in High Street near Yap Ah Loy’s Garden House costing $550.00 and began its first session in January, 1885 with eleven pupils, some of whom had earlier attended the class in one of the Chinese houses. The attendance had risen to thirty by 1886. There was some disagreement among the Chinese residents about the use of the Hakka dialect as a medium of instruction. By 1890 the attendance had fallen to 18.

In 1890, Rev. Frederick Haines established a “Government English School” in Malay Street. In 1892 the school had 40 pupils of whom 25 were Chinese, 3 Tamil, 2 Malay, 2 Singalese and 6 Eurasian. The Headmaster was G. W. Hepponstill.

The Koran class near Gombak river was absorbed into the first Malay School which was on the site of the present building housing the Technical Division of the Ministry of Education. There were eleven pupils: the Raja Muda of Selangor, who later became Sultan Sulaiman Shah, eight sons of Rajas, one of whom was the son of Raja Laut, and two sons of Sheikhs.

His Highness Sultan Abdul Samad in a letter dated 31st August, 1893 to the Governor of the Straits Settlements Sir Cecil C. Smith wrote, “the exertions of those who have had charge of the various Districts of my country, and the first measures of my illustrious friend, have resulted in the establishment of Malay Schools under Government teachers in every village; thus the children of my people are instructed for their welfare in this world and the future administration is strengthened”.

The moving spirits for better education were Sultan Abdul Samad, Yap Kwan Seng, (Captain China), his friend Loke Yew and Thamboosamy Pillay. There was a balance of $3,188.00 collected in 1887 on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee. The British Resident Mr. Treacher promised $5,000.00 from government funds. Sultan Abdul Samad and the three sponsors each gave $1,000.00. The foundation stone was laid by Mrs. Treacher on 14th August, 1893. Because of its connection with the Jubilee Fund the school was called the “Victoria Institution”. 102 pupils including the pupils from Malay Street and the Malay School in Gombak moved into the new buildings in High Street (later used for the Technical College and now the Panggong Derama), on 30th July, 1894.

The school hours were from 9.00 a.m. till 3.45 p.m. Some of the pupils used to come by train from Klang, Tanjong Malim and Seremban. In 1874 scholarships from the Malay to the English School were introduced. And in 1887 any boy who passed Standard IV in the Malay School could get a free place in an English School. In 1893 a Federal Inspector of Schools was appointed.

When the Inspector of Schools Mr. Haines opened the Malay Vernacular School in Bandar, he found that the premises were lent by H. H. the Raja Muda and it was furnished with equipment at His Highness’ expense. Mr. Haines found 52 boys present out of 53. The boys were well dressed and took great interest in their work. There is no doubt that Sultan Abdul Samad, the Raja Muda and Raja Laut were very concerned about education and were always keen and willing to give any assistance in order to provide schooling for the children.

The first Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus was opened in Kuala Lumpur in 1899. The sisters, who had vainly searched for a house all day, at last, about seven o’clock at night, were offered a building which stood in the midst of a large garden on the Ampang Road. This was the country house of a Chinese lady who rented it to the sisters at $45/- per month. Owing to the number of orphans left by Tamil labourers who died during the construction...
of the railway lines at Kajang, the Convent became so crowded and infected with sickness that the Lady Superior was obliged to look around for another house. After a great many difficulties, chief of which was want of funds, had been overcome, the present building, which was then known as the Victoria Hotel was bought from a rich Indian, Doraisamy.

The existing Methodist Boys’ School in Kuala Lumpur was preceded by a small Anglo-Tamil School, which was opened by Dr. Kensett on July 6, 1897, in a small shop-house in Batu Road. There were only 3 boys present at the opening but two years later the roll contained 37 names. The present school was formally opened on August 21, 1905 by Mr. H. Conway Belfield, the British Resident.

The Malay Vernacular School in Setapak was established in 1893. At first parents were not too happy about secular education but gradually they began to recognise the good work of the Malay School. On Speech Day 22nd December, 1896 at the Victoria Institution, the Resident Mr. Rodger said, “In a recent despatch the Secretary of State drew special attention to the advisability of offering scholarships to promising Malay boys from the vernacular schools. We English are the trustees of the Malays and we must do our best to develop their application and industry”. Mr. Haines, the Inspector of Schools said, “In a word, the Victoria Institution is popular. Teaching is imparted in the pleasantest way possible. Boys are not forced into unnatural grooves but have every chance of shining in the subjects they are fitted for”.

It was recorded that “Education is receiving special attention throughout the State at the present time and the schools are frequently visited by the Inspector of Schools and by the Visiting Teacher, which would appear to be the only satisfactory way of keeping them up to the mark and rendering them thoroughly effective and ensuring that the expenditure sanctioned by the government is utilised to its fullest extent”.

It is hoped that this cursory glimpse of early education in Kuala Lumpur will initiate a more intensive study of the history of education in the State of Selangor not entirely based on past written records but after details are scrutinised and re-assessed after patient and painstaking interviews with old residents between the ages of 70 and 90 in order that a correct perspective is obtained. Now that Malaysia is an independent sovereign nation, all our efforts must contribute towards the establishment of a national identity.