

30/09/1998

A mammoth task to create a reading society

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MALAYSIA has a society that can read but does not. There have been only two nationwide reading surveys conducted - in 1984 and 1996 - and both yielded depressing results.

The 1996 survey, conducted by the National Library, shows that reading is perhaps the last item on the "things to do" list of Malaysians.

According to the findings, Malaysians - with a 93 per cent literacy rate - read only two books per year and spend only an average of 30 minutes reading the newspapers per week.

This serves as an eye-opener to the authorities that much needs to be done to make Malaysia a reading society.

It is also stated that Malaysians read the most between the ages of 10 and 24, and that, too, mainly for the purpose of passing examinations.

In the 1993 survey, it was discovered that Malaysians spent only RM13 a year on books.

National Library director-general Datin Mariam Abdul Kadir says that besides being depressing, the survey was also revealing.

"It showed that all those who can read do not read and if they do read at all, they do not read for serious information."

It is difficult to pinpoint the root of the problem, says Mariam.

"I believe Malaysians are not readers because it is just not in their nature to seek information. They are used to being spoonfed," says Mariam.

The reasons "not interested" and "no free time" hog the top of the chart for "main reasons for not reading".

It is obvious that the ongoing reading campaign which was first launched in 1980, with 1988 declared as the Year of the Reader, has had no lasting effect on Malaysians in general.

Mariam, however, says that there has been an improvement.

"In the 1984 survey, people read only half a page or so annually and years later in 1996, we find that they read two books annually. An improvement but still not something to shout about."

Other reading campaigns such as those held by institutions and schools are often launched on a big scale with politicians officiating, only to die with a whimper after the first two days or so.

Teachers have lamented that elaborate launchings of such campaigns are only a waste of time, energy and money, since the main reasons for students not reading outside their textbooks are not given any thought.

Teachers say they have no choice but to insist that children concentrate on textbooks.

"If they do not pass their examinations, then we would be blamed," says one teacher, declining to be identified.

Director of the Shah Alam Library, Datin Paduka Shahaneem Hanoum, says the habit of reading for knowledge should be cultivated through the education system.

"Students should not read because they are going to be tested. Young people should be given more room to be creative in getting information."

Shahaneem says when they read to seek information, they should be rewarded and encouraged - not tested.

"They must be guided to want to read, to have an inquiring mind and to enjoy seeking information. They must want to do it on their own."

To elaborate, she uses the similitude of "hunger and eating" for "thirst for knowledge and reading". Shahaneem says that if you have always been

forced to eat, you will not eat if left on your own, even if you are hungry.

"You will rot and die and that is exactly what the mind will do if you do not constantly want to seek information," says Shahaneem.

Thus, an exam-oriented education system is a hindrance to the creation of a wider-reading habit among the younger generation.

The latest reading-habit launch was done in a different setting. Instead of a nationwide reading campaign, a "National Book Fund" was launched by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It is also not a "reading campaign" per se but a "literacy campaign".

Here, literacy means not just being able to read but also having reproduction skills, such as being able to write.

Mariam says the launching of the fund by the Prime Minister is a big boost to the reading campaign as Dr Mahathir himself is an avid and serious reader.

The fund is for setting up rural libraries and reading centres, a factor that sets it apart from the other campaigns.

According to the 1996 survey, "looking at general influences on reading ability it has been found that factors like having a special area in the household for studying, having a home library, owning encyclopaedias, household members with reading habit and awareness of libraries, book shops and book rental shops do have positive links with the reading ability and reading practice of household members".

Both librarians agree that the reading habit starts at home.

Mariam says there is a widening gap between reading ability and reading practice as Malaysians grow older.

The group after the age of 25 have the lowest reading ability and practice.

"We should focus on the 25-40 age group as many are young parents.

"They are raising the next generation and if they do not read, the children will not read. This vicious circle already exists and we have to break it if we are to progress as a society," says Mariam.

Personal factors which influence reading ability and reading practice include being read to when young, receipt of books as presents, being taken regularly to book shops and libraries and being encouraged to read during leisure time.

Mariam says parents - even when they themselves do not read - desire their children to have the reading habit.

"But then again, how many parents actually make going to the library or book shops a family outing?" asks Mariam.

Shahaneem says that it is not that the public does not know of the existence of libraries in their neighbourhoods.

"In a preliminary survey conducted by the Shah Alam Library, 85.3 per cent of the respondents say they know there is a library in their neighbourhood but only 40.7 per cent have ever stepped into a library," she says.

Shahaneem believes that librarians have done their part and that the ball is now in the court of the public.

Excuses of "no time", "not interested", "too much red tape" and "hassles in public libraries" are just that - excuses.

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