

05/05/2004

What `Bangsa?'

Reviewed by U-En Ng  
FIVE MEN & FIVE IDEAS  
By Hng Hung Yong  
Pelanduk Publications  
RM39.90, pp171

NATIONAL identity is the glue that holds the political fabric of our society together. It implies a commonness to our hopes and goals that goes beyond lesser distinctions like culture, race, even religion.

Without that identity the word "Malaysian" is as arbitrary and meaningless a tag as "Blaarg", its only function being to pigeon-hole a lot of people for the purpose of, say, an encyclopaedia entry.

Most nations (as opposed to "states") establish themselves over the course of centuries - even millennia. For example, that diverse people called the French are identifiable today as French precisely because they've been French for at least 11 centuries.

The Chinese have been Chinese for around 4,000 years. Malaysians have been Malaysians for 46 years and a bit - not a very subtle hint.

While we've had an unprecedented run of economic luck over the last two decades, the symptoms of a national decline (the divisions among ethnic communities) have become clear since the 1997 financial meltdown.

Hng Hung Yong believes that this decline must be reversed, lest racial divisions grow deeper to the point that our hopes for a united, yet diverse Malaysian nation will be irretrievably lost.

His Five Men & Five Ideas traces the history of our struggle to establish a nation, beginning with a very readable social history of the peninsula from the 1400s to the era of British colonialism, and ending with an assessment of our post-independence nation-building policies.

He argues that our modern multicultural society - and the problems multiculturalism entails - owes its genesis to British labour needs: The large numbers of Chinese and Indian workers imported under colonial rule did not assimilate.

Indeed, the British pursued an active policy of keeping the communities separate. They reinforced cultural differences in education (separate schools for Malays) as well as in employment.

"Most Malays lived in rural areas and their traditional economic occupation was subsistence farming. In the British scheme of things, the role assigned to the Malays in the economy was to grow food, while the British and immigrant Chinese concentrated on the twin pillars of the modern economy, rubber and tin."

Colonial rule, Hng writes, focused on maintaining divisions among the communities as a means of preserving the regime's stability.

"It discouraged engagement between the Malays and the non-Malays, and ensured that there was no concerted attempt at self-rule.

"There was nothing benign about colonial rule. Its purpose was specific: to exploit the resources of the land for the benefit of the colonising nation."

Hng's economic reading of imperialism follows the orthodox line established by John Hobson; while some might argue that this line might have been strengthened by a little circumspection, Hng's analysis of the results of imperialism in Malaya are fairly sound:

Whatever social benefits the British created for us (e.g. our legal system and our civil service) colonial rule left us divided at a

fundamental level and we've been working towards healing that division ever since.

Hng's analysis of the present (and our recent past) is somewhat more unorthodox.

He examines the legacy of five Umno presidents from the perspective of their work towards establishing a national identity, from Datuk Onn Jaafar's battle against the Malayan Union to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's internationalist idea of Malaysian identity.

Hng pulls a few punches but where he doesn't, the gloves come off and much merit lies in his ability to express clearly what many of us might merely think about, for example:

"Our university campuses are now well-known for being highly polarised along ethnic lines. They have become showcases of some of the worst expressions of racial polarisation in our midst.

"It is a sad comment on the state of these institutions that however successful they may be in passing out thousands of graduates every year, they have failed to fulfil their first and basic function, which is citizenship building."

Even if one will dispute Hng's idea of what a university's primary function ought to be, few can object to his warnings of a society which divisions show every sign of growing.

This line of thought leads him to question the very foundations on which modern Malaysian society has been built:

"What is the real record of affirmative action?" he asks. "The Government has failed to give a full and comprehensive accounting of the performance of the programme over the last one generation.

"[...] Not only did Mahathir confirm that the NEP wealth ownership targets for the Malays have not been reached. He also confirmed that the Government has not been able to impart to the Malays the capacity to acquire and manage wealth."

Affirmative action, he argues, might have helped reduce the economic imbalance between the races. Ideologically, however, instead of uniting the Malays and the non-Malays, the programme has effectively alienated the two communities from each other.

If it is to be retained, Hng believes affirmative action must reclaim its moral legitimacy. This should include a higher level of transparent professional management as well as a "nationalisation" of its objectives (as opposed to its being a specifically Malay programme now).

A few surprises lie in wait in his final chapter. Hng condemns "some policymakers" for what he describes as "a frightening absence of commitment to the building of a nation" but he expresses a quiet optimism about the administration of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He correctly identifies public ethics as a primary policy issue today and predicts that building a united "Bangsa Malaysia" will be the new Prime Minister's biggest challenge.

Hng's book should appeal broadly to those interested in Malaysia's social history as well as those curious about the various national ideologies that have ruled us in their day.

While one might sometimes find oneself disagreeing with him, few can ignore his urging us to begin the urgent, perhaps dangerous task of self-definition.

(END)