

Dr M's remarks on Tamil, Mandarin gravely misplaced
Malaysiakini.com
January 29, 2011

This is not the first time that former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has said it and it probably won't be the last.

Mahathir thinks that no nation in the world allows its citizens to be instructed in schools in a language other than the national language. His latest outburst is currently stirring controversy anew in cyberspace.

It's true that Tamil is the medium of instruction in several hundred primary schools in Malaysia and Mandarin in many primary and secondary schools.

There should be Tamil secondary schools as well but apparently the community has been unable to get its act together on this.

Tamil schools are in Malaysia it's because the colonial British, in line with international law and even before the United Nations Charter, accepted that a people are best educated in their own mother tongue.

Besides, there was the colonial problem of turning out "even better rubber tappers". Hence, the advent of Chinese schools as well, but for different reasons.

There were even Khalsa schools for the Punjabi-speaking Sikhs. Perhaps these schools are still around. At one time, the Khalsa school buses were a noticeable feature in many towns.

Bahasa as common language

Still, their language can be offered at all levels - UPSR, PMR, SPM - as is the case today with Kadazandusun and Iban. The latter two languages are works in progress.

Patently, it would be better for a 1Malaysia, if all of us spoke Bahasa Malaysia outside our homes, places of worship, vernacular newspapers and vernacular schools if the last can't be done away.

Instead, Mandarin is today the language of commerce in Malaysia at the retail level and English both the language of higher business and higher education. In the marketplace, bahasa pasar (bazaar Malay) reigns.

The failure of Bahasa Malaysia is in fact largely a reflection of the failure of our politics.

It's also a failure of Bahasa Malaysia to emerge as the national language in practice, in education and business, as well as in the Federal Constitution. The Federal Constitution still mentions that Bahasa Melayu is the national language and this is a misnomer.

Encapsulating Bahasa's history

Bahasa Melayu - the Johore-Rhio version -- is not Bahasa Malaysia. Bahasa Malaysia has Bahasa Melayu as the foundation and superimposed on this are words from other local

dialects and languages - including Tamil, Chinese and Punjabi - and topped up by English.

This is the task that Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka has been engaged in since the advent of independence.

However, the covers of school textbook books were changed in recent years to read Bahasa Melayu and not Bahasa Malaysia although the contents are in the latter language.

The changeover took place after Ghaffar Baba, as deputy prime minister, thundered once too many times that Bahasa Melayu and not Bahasa Malaysia was the national language.

He went on to claim that Bahasa Melayu - Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa (language is the soul of the nation) - is synonymous with the Malay community, Malay nationalism and Malaysia.

Bahasa, Jiwa and Bangsa are pure Sanskrit words and there's nothing "Malay" about them.

Bahasa Melayu, which first emerged in Cambodia as a dialect, went on to become the trading and missionary language and the lingua franca of the islands in Southeast Asia with the advent of Hinduism and Buddhism which heavily infused Sanskrit and Pali - a Sanskrit dialect - respectively into Bahasa Melayu.

Hence, the emergence of Bahasa Malaysia as the de facto national language of Malaysia is in recognition of the history of the language and the region.

It's the same history that has allowed for the accommodation of Tamil, Punjabi, Chinese, English, Kadazandusun, Iban and other dialects and languages.

Forbid mother tongue murder

No one in the country should be allowed to kill the mother tongue of any group under any pretext or guise whatsoever. The Federal Constitution expressly forbids it.

Still, the fact remains that Bahasa Malaysia does not have the place of respect that it deserves in the hearts of all Malaysians, the Malays included, except perhaps in Sabah.

This anomaly can be resolved if the Federal Constitution is amended to recognize that Bahasa Malaysia is the national language of the country.

This will enable the people to identify with Bahasa Malaysia as their language and not the language of the Malays "and therefore something to be very much avoided". Malaysian nationalism would come into play.

With official recognition for Bahasa Malaysia, no one should flog the term Malay nationalism except within the confines of a community government. The same would hold true for the Dusuns and Dayaks which are both nations within a nation.

It's wishful thinking that Tamil and Chinese would wither away in time. Both languages are here to stay.

Again, there's no excuse for all Malaysians not to speak in Bahasa Malaysia outside the confines of our homes, places of worship, vernacular schools and vernacular newspapers.

The workings of acculturation

In the Philippines, the people speak in Filipino which has Tagalog as the foundation, superimposed with words from local dialects and languages, Spanish and English.

In Indonesia, the people speak Bahasa Indonesia which has Bahasa Melayu as the foundation, superimposed with words from local dialects and languages, Dutch and English.

Today, out of ten words in a sentence of so-called Bahasa Indonesia, all ten would probably be English. That's a language being sensitive to its surroundings in order to be dynamic or risk ending up being a dead one like thousands of others in the world.

In Malaysia, there's no telling when a start will be made with Bahasa Malaysia in line with the 1Malaysia theme being flogged so much by the ruling Barisan Nasional administration.

Mahathir, (right) meanwhile, was being anything but noble with his remarks. In line with the politics of Umno, he's more given to twisting and turning every issue in Malaysia into a racial issue to scare the Malays into circling the wagons and uniting under one political platform.

Narrow politics of this kind facilitates the rejection of the brightest and best leading the way for all of us. It also denies the vast majority fair access and a fair share of opportunities available in this country.

This is in order to allow a handful to continue to lord it over the others in a remake of the caste system i.e. confining the vast majority to a specific economic function at the bottom of the proverbial dung heap and in the process stripping them of their humanity.

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