

# Cultural identity and national integration

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Comment by **K. Arumugam**

**CAN** we see better national integration if Tamil and Chinese medium primary schools are abolished? The Education Minister is of the view that national primary schools have to be the anchor for national integration, by making the national schools as "the school of choice" for all Malaysians.

Fifty years of independence have produced a nation which still can boast a thriving multiracial environment without bomb blasts and threats to human security. At the same time, we recognise the deteriorating race relations, undercurrents of religious intolerance, discrimination and feelings of marginalisation. Thanks to the socio-economic development and the rapid growth that we went through, there is enough food for the stomach. Now we are looking at food for thought.

National integration is a thorny issue. Much as we want it, we just do

not seem to get it right. The children of our nation are growing to become more divisive racially and religiously. Our harmonious living is becoming mere advertisement material.

To address the issue we often choose education. The most simplistic solution, so it seems, is to start the process from young. To get all the children enrolled in a single medium school and systematically dismantle Tamil, Chinese and religious primary schools.

At present more than 90% or about 650,000 Chinese children attend Chinese medium schools, the Chinese education movement Dong Jiao Zong reports. Some 50% or about 100,000 Tamil children attend Tamil schools, according to official figures. In national schools there are about 110,000 Tamil children, 50,000 Chinese children and about 2.2 million Malay children. A frequently quoted statistic is that at present there are about 100,000 non-Chinese children, the majority of whom

are Malays, enrolled in the Chinese schools.

Now we are looking at solving the national integration problem by shifting about 550,000 Chinese children from Chinese primary schools and about 100,000 Tamil children from Tamil schools to national schools. Will just a shift of 650,000 young children forming less than 3% of our 24 million population foster national integration?

We need to start somewhere, but choosing the primary school system as the key to social integration may backfire. The vernacular system of education may be just one insignificant factor in national integration. The central factors lie in our socio-political environment that is driving a wedge in our daily experiences. Political relations based on race and religion, ethnocentric development policies, the domination of a single race in the civil administration and the decision-making process, discrimination in the name of

race and religion, religious intolerance and feelings of marginalisation and insecurity are some of the major factors that we try not to discuss.

Drawing some inference from the past is useful. More than 50% of Tamil children attended national schools in the last three decades. Even today we see them as isolated groups in secondary schools and elsewhere. There is no grouping among Tamils that can feel nationally integrated.

Sometimes, we feel happier rejoicing in the life that we experienced in the yesteryears. In the seventies, even though I was Tamil school educated, during my secondary school days, I visited more Malay friends in their kampongs to feast on the rambutan tress than my children now. Many of us would readily agree that we enjoyed better feelings of togetherness then.

Now, parents in droves are looking for vernacular education. In fact the current phenomenon is one of a kneejerk reaction that many want mother tongue education at primary level to preserve their identity. This feeling is getting stronger with the middle class Indians who once shunned the Tamil medium in the past.

The reasons are simple. An immense sense of insecurity overwhelms our everyday lives, because of one unwelcome incident after the other. The worsening race relations require remedies.

The choice cannot lie with just looking at primary education. It is also important to look at the pedagogical benefits of mother tongue education. The 2003 Unesco position paper on

education authoritatively states that learners learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual education approaches. Researchers are looking at education as the wholesome development of a child's potential.

We have lived with tremendous respect for each other. Our diverse value systems survived trying moments and as we are becoming more matured. Our policies and acceptance of our differences must become our strengths and outweigh divisive weaknesses. Mother tongue-based primary education is fast gaining acceptance as a tool for securing socio-cultural security of in a multicultural environment. When a child losses his language and culture, how can he have the self-construct and dignity to respect the language and culture of others?

Perhaps, the following quote from UNDP's Human Development Report 2004 would sum up the point. "Struggles over identity can also lead to regressive and xenophobic policies that retard human development. They can encourage a retreat to conservatism and a rejection of change, closing off the infusion of ideas and of people who bring cosmopolitan values and the knowledge and skills that advance development. Cultural diversity is here to stay - and to grow. States need to find ways of forging national unity amid this diversity."

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