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“Volunteerism in the Field of Education – Malaysia’s Experience”

1. Although today education in Malaysia is provided largely by the Government and to a lesser extent by the private fee-charging institutions, there was a time during the colonial period when some schools and training establishments were owned and run by voluntary bodies.
2. Most of the voluntary private schools were run by Christian missionaries whose objective was not just to provide education but also to spread the Christian religion. By treaty with the Malay States they may not convert Muslims. They therefore exempted the Malays from classes on the Christian religion. But if the Malays chose to they may attend those classes.
3. As Malays are all Muslims, there were only very few Malay students in the mission-run schools.
4. Schools run by Muslim organisations whether fee paying or not, mostly confined themselves to teaching the Islamic religion only. Even if they wish to teach the same non-religious subjects as the other so-called secular schools, they really could not as they had no teachers qualified to do so.
5. Unfortunately those qualifying only in religion had few opportunities for employment except as religious teachers or religious affairs officials.
6. Another big obstacle to the provision of voluntary education among Muslims was their poverty. Very few among them or their organisations were rich enough to provide free education even on religion. Scholarships were also very few except for those offered by the Colonial Government for education in the Government schools and for tertiary education abroad.
7. Generally speaking voluntarism played hardly any role in education in Malaysia when it was under Colonial rule. Yet the people were very keen to acquire a good education. The rich Chinese and sons of the Ruling families of the Malay States went for higher education abroad on their own or with Government financial support.
8. Malaysia was and is a multiracial country. While the Malays were all Muslims, the Chinese and Indians were either Buddhists or Hindus. There were also a few converts to Christianity among the Chinese and Indians.
9. While the non-Muslims were willing to go to the Christian missionary schools run by the Voluntary Christian organisations very few Malay Muslims sent their children to these schools.

10. The fear of being converted was quite unjustified. No Malay children has ever embraced Christianity throughout the more than 200 years of colonial rule.

11. Still, because so few Malays went to the mission schools, the number of educated Muslims, despite the availability of Government English schools, was small compared to the non-Malays. This was to prove to be a great disadvantage for the Malay Muslims during the colonial era.

12. Not only were they less involved in business but very-very few could enter the profession. The great divide between them and the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians proved very difficult to overcome. In fact it contributed towards racial inequalities and tensions in Malaysia to this day.

13. Education during the colonial period was not compulsory even for vernacular education. There were Malay Primary schools set up by the Government but these were not able to cater for the needs of the Malay population. Education in these vernacular primary schools was free. The level was low so that those completing the primary education could only work as primary schoolteachers or clerks in Government offices.

14. The big European firms refused to employ them as all business was carried out in English. Many of these students joined the police force or worked as manual workers or drivers.

15. The Chinese primary schools used Chinese as teaching medium. One or two of these schools provided secondary education. The schools were owned by the Chinese community and did not receive Government aid.

16. This then was the situation when Malaysia became independent in 1957. As the independence struggle was lead by the few Malays who had had English education with some graduating from universities in England, their first priority was education.

17. There was only one university with faculties concentrated on the arts. Most of the professional disciplines and science were not available.

18. Getting tertiary education involved going to universities in England, Australia, New Zealand and India. Egypt's Al-Azhar was the choice for religious education.

19. The independent Government immediately provided a huge number of scholarships to the universities abroad. Since the Malays were educationally backward as compared to the Chinese and Indians, most of the scholarships were for Malays.

20. The main purpose of the scholarship schemes was to produce officers to replace the British officers in the Government. The Arts graduates joined the administrative service while the professionals filled the jobs left vacant by the British in the medical, health, engineering, agricultural and veterinary services.

21. Despite their educational backwardness the Malays quickly learned the essentials of administration and found no difficulty taking over from the British officers. All of them were English educated and the administration and administrative system actually improved after they took over.

22. But the demand for education and for educated personnel grew rapidly all the time. The independent Government drew up a comprehensive education policy and provided funds for schools from the kindergarten level right up to the university level. More scholarships were provided.

23. Technical faculties were soon able to produce the necessary officers for the increasing demand for technical personnel. Still the country could not meet the demand. While the physical amenities could be provided the staffing proved difficult. And so more scholarships to foreign universities had to be provided.

24. Unable to find enough places in the countries where the medium of instruction was English, students from Malaysia had to learn other European languages and Japanese so as to gain entrance into these non-English foreign universities.

25. The Government made sure that the training and qualifications offered by all foreign universities are of world standard. As more and more private students go abroad, the basic qualification of Malaysian students were also made to conform to world standards.

26. In 1970 the Government decided that the medium of instruction in all Government schools should be in the Malay language instead of English. This posed quite a serious problem particularly at the tertiary levels and post-graduate levels. Nevertheless standards were maintained at the primary and secondary levels. Besides the teaching of the English language was made part of the curriculum from the primary school level.

27. Two problems arose which tended to undermine the educational use of English. Firstly since Malay is the national language and English is not compulsory, Malay students in particular tend to ignore the English language. The second problem is the acquisition of scientific and mathematical knowledge.

28. These two subjects are constantly undergoing rapid development. Tremendous advancements are being made almost everyday as researchers discover new scientific knowledge. Everyday scores of new papers are written about these new discoveries. Almost all of them are written in English. What is worse is that the technical language in these papers require fairly advanced knowledge in the subject in order to understand them.

29. Translating them require three skills. First there must be skill in English, second skill in the Malay language and thirdly knowledge of the subject to be translated, not just in understanding general science but understanding the particular scientific discipline.

30. It is difficult to find many people with these three qualifications. Without good translations the students who do not understand English will not be able to learn the contents of the research paper. The Malaysians would be backward in the new knowledge that is so important to the country.

31. That is why recently the Government decided that science and mathematics would be taught in English.

32. If I may I would like to remind us all that the Muslims were the most advanced people in science, mathematics, medicine, astronomy etc during the early centuries of the Islamic civilisation. They learnt foreign languages in order to acquire knowledge pioneered by these non-Arab speaking people. It should be remembered that the Jahiliah who converted to Islam were so called because they were ignorant and had little knowledge of their own. Yet obeying the injunction of Islam they started searching for knowledge. As a result the Islamic civilisation became noted for the knowledge that its scientists, mathematicians, physicians, astronomers had.

33. Great libraries were built in cities like Cordoba and Baghdad. The Europeans had to learn Arabic in order to gain access to this vast store of knowledge including those pioneered by the Greeks.

34. We know of course that today the Muslims are far behind in these fields of knowledge. And we also know that our Islamic civilisation is no longer as far ahead of the European civilisation as it was during the days of the great Muslim scholars.

35. The reason for this was because in the 15th century of the Christian Era, the Muslims were told, i.e. fatwas were issued which practically condemned knowledge that were not exclusively about Islam. This fatwa was immediately followed by the regression of the Muslims.

36. On the other hand the Europeans learnt Arabic and gained access to the knowledge of the Muslims and to the books in the libraries of Islamic cities. With this knowledge their civilisation advanced rapidly as they went on to research and develop new knowledge.

37. Malaysian educationists knowing about this were determined that as Muslims they must regain the knowledge that had been lost to the Europeans. They want to keep abreast of the new knowledge, especially scientific and mathematical knowledge which the Europeans are discovering.

38. Today in Malaysia the educational emphasis is on science and technology. Special universities are set up which specialises in these subjects. Students are encouraged to take up these subjects instead of the arts.

39. We also stress that knowledge is only worthwhile if it is applied for the betterment of our lives. Knowledge is not a badge that you wear on your chest. It is not worthwhile getting a degree if you do not make use of the knowledge that has been acquired.

40. As you can see we are no longer thinking about volunteerism in education. That was useful and necessary before. But today education is an absolute necessity. And Governments must provide for education as a priority. We cannot wait for people to voluntarily provide education or for students i.e. young people especially to volunteer to study. Education must be compulsory for everyone. There must be lifelong education. Educational institutions must be the responsibility of Governments to provide. The teaching must not be provided by volunteers. Teachers must be trained and well paid.

41. Of course we must not neglect the study of our religion. But the acquisition of knowledge in other fields must not be neglected by Muslim communities either.

42. The Quran indirectly enjoins Muslims to study science, mathematics etc. For example, as Muslims we are enjoined to prepare to defend ourselves. In the days of the Prophet that meant having bows and arrows, war horses and swords and shields. These were the weapons of defence of that age.

43. Today these weapons will not enable us to perform our obligation to the injunction of the Quran to defend ourselves. To defend ourselves we need tanks and warplanes and battleships and guns and ballistic missile and lots more sophisticated weapons. Tying a bomb to our bodies and blowing ourselves up is primitive and will not be sufficient to defend ourselves.

44. We can buy all these weapons of course but our enemies will not sell to us the weapons which can help defeat them. We have to do research, design, test and produce our own weapons of a quality and capacity to successfully defend ourselves against the enemy.

45. To do this we need scientific, mathematical and other knowledge. These are not secular knowledge because we need them to obey the injunctions of the Quran. So the acquisition of this knowledge and the research that we have to do are really meant to enable us to defend ourselves as enjoined by the Quran. It is really a part of fardhu kifayah. We would be sinning if we don't have the knowledge to defend ourselves.

46. In Islam there is no knowledge which is secular. All knowledge including religious knowledge are wajib, compulsory in the fulfillment of our obligations to the ummah.

47. If we understand that learning these are enjoined by Islam, we would be more ready to learn and more importantly we would be more willing to teach them even if we are not paid to do so. In other words we should try to make these knowledge available to Muslims by building schools, training teachers, carry out research and development voluntarily.

48. The rich among us, and Allah knows how much He has enriched us; the rich among us must voluntarily expand their wealth in providing all the facilities for acquiring this knowledge.

49. Many among the rich believe that they should voluntarily give their money only for religious education. They believe they can only gain merit for the afterlife by doing this. But by limiting themselves to financing only religious schools and institutions they are not helping to fulfill the injunction to defend themselves and to live the Muslim way of life.

50. Some Muslim countries are rich and their Governments can afford to provide for the facilities to acquire the knowledge that I had mentioned.

51. But the Muslims all belong to one Ummah, one Muslim community. Whether they are Arabs or Malays or Africans, if they are Muslims they are all our brothers. It is therefore our duty to provide for the poor Muslims not only in our own countries but in other countries as well.

52. I dislike making comparisons but we know that the Christians give freely of their wealth to Christian missions for their schools. More than that they are ready to go to any place in the world, where life may be very uncomfortable, in order to bring not just religious teachings but also other fields of knowledge.

53. The teaching staff in all these mission schools were and are volunteers. They often risk great danger to their lives. Their lives are a continuous series of voluntary sacrifice.

54. We cannot say that Islam does not require such voluntary sacrifices of money and lives in order to equip the poor Muslims with the knowledge they require in order to fulfill their obligation to their religion.

55. Obviously it does and there are many verses in the Quran which enjoins upon us to make sacrifices for our own good and for the ummah. Indeed making sacrifices is one of the most important tenets of Islam. To volunteer is essentially to make sacrifice. And therefore volunteerism is a part of the teachings of Islam.

56. That is why Malaysia has such voluntary organisations as Mercy Malaysia. When Aceh was hit by the tsunami, Malaysian volunteers went to help not only in providing medical and other aid but to rebuild the schools which were destroyed and train the teachers to replace those who had been killed.

57. There are similar voluntary organisations in many Muslim countries and also in the Muslim communities in foreign countries.

58. Unfortunately the education provided is usually in religion and basic sciences.

59. We need the rich Muslims to volunteer to set up universities all over the Muslim world and also in the non-Muslim countries where Muslims have settled down. The universities must provide the so-called secular knowledge though religious knowledge can also be included. They must admit non-Muslims as well.

60. The Malaysian Government has set up the Malaysian International Islamic University where religious knowledge is compulsory to a certain level but all students must study the sciences, engineering, architecture, accountancy etc.

61. Scholarships were offered to foreign Muslims from over 90 countries. But the demand is for more scholarships. Those able to afford should provide scholarships for the poor Muslims in the world.

62. What is needed is a chain of such universities to provide religious and other knowledge to be run by Muslim voluntary bodies. Perhaps some would say that we are copying the Christian missions. But can we say that Allah has given them a monopoly of such organisations and such voluntary activities? Surely not.

63. We have a large number of madrasahs in many Muslim countries including Malaysia. They are almost all very poorly equipped. The method of teaching is archaic and they of course provide education in religion only.

64. There seems to be a belief that sitting on the floor around a teacher in the mosque is one of the sunnah of the Prophet. We have missed the point as we do on the need for defence. What is enjoined by our religion is the acquisition of knowledge, not sitting uncomfortably on the floor around a teacher with dubious qualification. It is the acquisition of knowledge which is important for only with knowledge, both religious and non-religious will we Muslims be able to fulfill our obligations to Islam and the Ummah.

65. We need voluntarism because we cannot always leave things to the Government to fulfill our obligation to religion for ourselves as individuals or as members of the Muslim community, the Ummah. We must admit that voluntarism is lacking among Muslims. Yes we give out zakat but our objective is limited. In this day and age our zakat should be for the good of not just a few around us but for the whole Muslim community in the world.

66. And when zakat and sedekah is for the good of the whole Muslim community it must be regarded as fardhu kifayah. It will absolve the whole Muslim world from failing to obey the injunction of Allah. We will all be freed from the sins of ignoring the well-being of the Muslim Ummah.

67. We must provide mosques in the poor Muslim countries for the Muslims to pray but that alone cannot be enough. We must provide the education that in the end will ensure Muslim capacity to defend themselves not just in war but in other fields as well. If they are educated and better able to compete with the non-Muslims, their faith or iman would be stronger. If they are weak and poor they would either lose faith or they might resort to terrorism and other non-Islamic activities in order to satisfy their anger

68. Insha'allah, with these fulfillment of our obligation in education we may help in the resurrection of the great Muslim civilisation.
