

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN
THAILAND, MALAYA AND SINGAPORE

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Summary

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The study establishes that Malaysia and Singapore have been strongly shaped by British influence, while Thailand has been little influenced by the west; yet all three have the common problem of large undeveloped rural areas, unemployment in the cities exploited by the communists and racial tensions.

All three countries see education as a means of developing nationalism and have committed themselves to free primary education, but only Malaysia and Singapore can afford to maintain and expand it.

Though at different stages of development all three countries have similar problems directly inherited from the west and education systems modelled on western lines, though Thailand is more closely linked with the traditional approach.

None has developed a system of education with local roots.

Report

Several visits to South East Asia, a spell as a British Council education officer in Thailand concerned with both teaching and administration, and a growing awareness that South East Asia was fast becoming one of the most challenging areas of the Third World led initially to a general interest in the region and later to a more specific interest in the role education has played and is playing in the national development of certain countries - most notably Thailand, Malaya and Singapore. My reasons for selecting these countries for study are partly emotional and partly academic. Emotionally I have a personal interest in and acquaintance with them; academically they seem to represent a microcosm of so many of the problems of the developing countries and their problems. They have ancient traditions, cultures and religions mitigating against change and progress along secular lines. They are multi-racial (Thailand the least so) and in the case of Malaya and Singapore, multi-lingual. They are bedevilled by the growing wealth and development of urban areas at the expense of rural areas. Certain rural areas are particularly underdeveloped because the communications network and investments have been concentrated on the ports and cities. They suffer from a population growth averaging over 3% per annum and subsequently

have a large percentage of school age. They are bound up with conflicting ideologies of westernization, democracy, communism. At the same time they are desirous of modernization and economic development and of creating a sense of national unity. The education system is one of the major weapons used to foster such developments.

The approach of my thesis is partly historical, partly comparative education and partly a discussion of the problems of development, especially in the context of South East Asia. Throughout is an attempt to assess the contribution, both negative and positive, of the Western impact on the region. By choosing one country that was never colonised (Thailand) and a neighbouring country that was very much a part of the British Empire and is today a member of the Commonwealth (now divided into Malaysia and Singapore) I hoped to be able to examine the assertion that the Europeans exploited the region and created few lasting benefits - except perhaps that of economic progress. By pursuing a historical and comparative approach it seemed inevitable that some of my thinking should have been influenced by Kandel and his views on nationalism and by Hans and Mallinson and their views on national character. However, quite by accident though also logically, I devised a particular approach and diagrammatic schema very reminiscent of Bereday and Holmes.

The first main section is concerned with the problems of under-developed and developing societies, especially the specific educational problems of South East Asia. The second section analyses the geographical, social and religious factors that have shaped the growth of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore; the historical and political developments; and the present economic situation. Section 3 discusses the impact of the West on South East Asia - the motives for expansion and the social, political and economic changes that have resulted. Section 4 analyses the growth of the education systems of the three countries, shows how they have been modified, and, in discussing the present systems, tries to bring out some of the problems. Section 5 discusses the likenesses and differences between the three countries, brings together some of the common problems facing them, and on a comparative basis shows how the respective governments are tackling them. The final section summarises my findings.

My argument is that although the West brought benefits to South East Asia (political stability, law and order - on Western lines, the basis of economic growth, improved health facilities etc.,) it not only failed to develop the human resources but created far reaching problems (e.g. plural societies, urbanization, uneven economic development, language problems, the breakdown of existing religious and social structures) without providing adequate means to tackle them. By destroying the traditional pattern of education with its close links with the local community and by importing an alien formal school system the West has further increased these problems because in the modern world countries are trying to use this education system as a weapon to bring about national development. This applies especially to the three countries in question, yet it is precisely because the education system, as at present being used, is alien that it is in danger of increasing further rather than solving the problems. It does not have its roots in the community and it is irrelevant to thousands of children. The growth of education is, I believe, following a wrong path and there needs to be a fundamental reassessment of its role and purpose in modern society. Unesco, political leaders brought up in the Western tradition, and aid agencies are all guilty of perpetuating these problems because they see them in Western terms and they see solutions in Western terms. Changes

and innovations - and there are plenty of them: comprehensive schools in Thailand and Malaysia, curricular innovations, modern science techniques, planning - fail to be fundamental enough since they are largely an extension of Western schooling. Modernization does not necessarily mean Westernization, as has been proved by Japan, but it does mean a change in attitudes. These attitudes are not necessarily beneficial if competition replaces cooperation, selfishness replaces community help, academic work destroys respect for manual work, secularisation swamps any religious or moral approach to life. But this seems to be precisely what the formal school system aims at doing. In times past traditional schools - the Buddhist monastic schools, the Koranic schools, the Chinese writing schools - for all their faults were closely linked with the community and the kind of work that would be done in the future. They aimed at training the whole man for life, and at preparing him for work in the community. Only by trying to blend this kind of approach with modern methods, by linking the school and community more closely together so that children actually learn things with their parents or do a variety of jobs as part of the school curriculum, by cutting out much of the irrelevant and unnecessary and by fostering both ambition and community spirit can these countries hope to progress economically without at the same time worsening the standards of life and making the same mistakes as the West.

Of the three countries Thailand, until recently has been the least influenced by the West. Its geographic position, together with the astute leadership of the Chakri kings of the nineteenth century helped preserve its independence so that it became a buffer state between the British in Burma and Malaya and the French in Indo-China rather than a colony. It did however lose some of its territory east of the Mekong to the French and in the south to the British. European advisers were brought in to help modernise the economy, especially the export of timber and rice, Royal princes and all the monarchs since 1910 have received part of their education abroad. The result has been that Western influence has been subtly absorbed and modified but not imposed. The 1932 coup d'etat which replaced autocratic rule with a constitutional monarchy was inspired by men educated in the West. During World War II Thailand sided with Japan, thereby avoiding excessive war damage, but since the war it has been firmly in the anti-communist camp and has been strongly influenced by US military and financial aid. Its education system, traditionally based on the Buddhist monasteries as far back as the Thirteenth century was modified in the nineteenth century by king Chulalongkorn under the influence of missionaries but it was not destroyed. Even today 50% of the country's primary schools are situated in monasteries. There have been Western importations in the shape of élite schools and in recent years moves have been made towards developing a more comprehensive system along American and Canadian lines.

Malaysia and Singapore have been very strongly shaped by British influence. Their great economic developments especially of the tin and rubber industries and the development of Singapore as the greatest entrepot port in South East Asia are a result of British investments. Yet there are other aspects. The rapid population growth came about as much from uncontrolled immigration of Chinese and Indians as from a rise in the birthrate of Malays. The education system introduced by the British completely destroyed the existing Koranic schools. Malay vernacular (primary only) and English medium schools were provided by the government or missionaries. The Chinese and Indians had to fend for themselves - until the 1920s when grants were first made to them. The result has been a complex system of different language streams, with those educated in English

and Chinese benefitting most. Not until after World War II were the Malays given a fair chance. Unfortunately, therefore, in spite of economic advances racial barriers have been increased by a divisive education system, and while the rural Malays in their kampongs have benefitted only marginally from these advances the immigrant communities have benefitted considerably.

What common problems are there? There are developed and underdeveloped areas in all three countries, especially the north east and northern hill areas of Thailand and the east coast region of Malaya. They are the most difficult areas to help because of their distance from the central administration. Being the least developed areas it is difficult to persuade teachers and doctors to serve there, though both governments of Malaysia and Thailand have schemes for "sending" teachers and doctors to these areas. These regions would have been the most backward, anyway, either because of climate or other geographical features. Their position was made worse by the development of cities and communications networks that focussed on them or on ports to suit European patterns of trade.

With the exception of Bangkok the South East Asian city is a European phenomenon and the development of Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and in recent times, Bangkok, can be attributed to European influence because they were either the seats of government or ports providing outlets for raw materials. Today problems of urbanization are common throughout the Third World. In these three countries they pose specific difficulties. Not only have they and do they develop at the expense of the rest of the country but they use up an unfair proportion of the national resources. It is in the cities that the greatest racial tensions build up because Chinese and Indians tend to be the predominant urban dwellers and at the same time successful businessmen, both factors that have annoyed the Thais and the Malays. Facilities and opportunities in the cities are undoubtedly better than in the rural areas, and they act as a magnet to those seeking better opportunities. But many have neither the training nor the aptitude for city life with the result that unemployment follows. Unemployment, especially in Singapore, has been a major problem which has been all too readily exploited by the Communists. Since the end of the Emergency in Malaya there have been underlying fears of the communists in the region. Nanyang university was riddled with them for a time and clashes between police and guerillas are all too common on the Thail/Malay border. Lip service is frequently paid to using the education system more positively to provide for manpower needs and thus avoiding unemployment and to use it to fight communist propaganda. Attempts at the latter will be worthless unless job opportunities are available. So far only Singapore has begun to tackle the problem seriously, with its emphasis on technical education, though the Malaysian comprehensive school is a step in the right direction.

Compared with India, Pakistan and Indonesia the population growth has not yet got out of hand but it does have definite educational implications. Singapore's Second Development Plan is based on the assumption of 46-50% of the population being under 14, Malaya's planning is on the basis of 44%, and Thailand's on 43% being under 14. All three countries were signatories of the Unesco projections that have come to be known as the Karachi Plan, providing 7 years of free primary education by 1980. This has already been achieved in Malaysia and Singapore. In Thailand the majority of children still have only four years of schooling. At this stage only Malaysia and Singapore can afford to expand primary education and only Singapore has a sound population policy. Thailand believes it is underpopulated and the Malaysian government is afraid of imposing restrictions in case the Chinese

outnumber the Malays. No country sees primary education as complete in itself: it is a preparation for secondary education, but if secondary education is not readily available it is misdirected.

In recent years population growth has highlighted other problems most notably malnutrition, disease, ignorance - problems common to all developing countries. These have been increasingly reflected in the educational problems of wastage and dropouts: several reports into wastage carried out in the 1960s revealed strong social and health problems as among the main causes. Educational development must therefore go hand in hand with social improvements, though all too frequently the latter conflict with the inertia of Buddhism or Islam. However, wastage and dropouts are apparently as strongly influenced by educational factors as by social ones. Lack of interest stems from irrelevant courses, lack of materials, overcrowding, bad teaching, repetition, but chiefly from the school being unrelated to the needs or hopes of the local community. Attitudes to wastage vary among the three countries. Malaysia has tackled it by providing automatic promotion through primary school into the third year of secondary school. Singapore makes provision for the retention of 10%. Thailand is trying automatic promotion on an experimental basis in a few schools. None have really tried to relate the school to the community in a meaningful way.

All three countries see their education system as a means of developing nationalism. Since independence (1957) Malaya has been trying to weld together the different races into a single Malaysian nation. Singapore has been doing much the same, though the urgency has only been there since her expulsion from Malaysia in 1965. Thailand has not had the same problem but the schools are used to enforce Chinese assimilation. Similar methods are used. The curriculum, syllabus and textbooks are nationally orientated in all three countries and examinations reinforce their content. Only in language policy is there a real difference. In Thailand, Thai is the sole medium of instruction. In Malaysia four languages are permitted at primary level - English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil - but only the national language, Malay, is permitted at secondary level and more recently at university level. In Singapore all four languages are permitted throughout the school system. Only at university level is there a specialisation in either English or Chinese. Recent developments include the comprehensive secondary school in Malaya with its multi-racial and common curriculum bias, and the integrated schools in Singapore which bring different language streams under one roof.

All three countries are at different stages of development. They are confronted with similar problems, many directly inherited from the West. All have education systems modelled on western lines, though the Thai one is still most closely linked with the traditional approach. All are beginning to question the purpose of education and have prepared educational plans trying to relate education to the manpower needs of their countries. So far, however, educational development has consisted merely of expanding and modifying the existing pattern. It has not involved an attempt to link school and society more closely so that it does have local roots.