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A TALK ON " THE MALAYS OF THE 1970'S" BY INCHE MOHD. GHAZALI ISMAIL, POLITICAL SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, TO THE VISITING STUDENTS OF THE CHAPMAN COLLEGE FLOATING UNIVERSITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE ON MONDAY, 16TH MARCH, 1970 AT 4.00 P.M.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Before proceeding ~~to~~ the subject of my talk "The Malays of the 1970's" let me this afternoon bid you welcome to Singapore and at the same time allow me to wish you all a most pleasant stay during your visit to this island, *Republic*.

The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, I understand, recommended me to you as an authority on the subject of the Malays, but I must hasten to assure you that this estimation is certainly an exaggeration in as far as I am concerned because I feel that the authority on any subject is as yet to be. Things are never the same in time, although they would appear to be so, and certainly I would agree with the great Greek philosopher Democritus when he said that things were in a state of constant flux and that they kept on changing in the course of time. What was said yesterday could prove to be obsolete to-day and what I have to say about the Malays this afternoon might become out-dated to-morrow. At any rate, Ladies & Gentlemen, let me crave your indulgence for the next hour or so and hope that you will give me your attention, not necessarily undivided, but all the same, I would need your critical appreciation as to what I have to say about my people - their past, their present and their future aspirations in this country.

In 1819 when this island was acquired by Sir Stamford Raffles on behalf of the East India Company from the Sultan of Johore, it ^{was} generally believed that there were fewer than two hundred people on the island. In 1824, when the first census was taken, there were then approximately 4,600 Malays and 3,300 Chinese but from 1836 onwards, the Chinese as an ethnic group began to outnumber the indigenous Malays, reinforced as they were by Javanese, Boyanese and Bugis immigrants from Indonesia. To-day the population of the island approaches the 2,000,000 mark and of this ^{number} at

least three-quarters are Chinese while the rest are made up of Malays, Indians, Europeans and others, the Malays forming the largest of the minority groups. Be this as it may, you will realise in the course of your stay here, if you ~~had~~ ^{have} not already known of this before in your own reading, that Singapore, as a political entity is made up of a conglomeration of diverse cultural, racial, religious and ethnic elements - a result of the contingencies of history and over which we had no direct control. This lack of racial, cultural and religious homogeneity should not mislead you into believing that our society is fragmented and that such diversities of the cultural and political landscape are inimical towards the formation of a nation. On the contrary, these very diversities have forced upon us the realisation that we are all in this together - that we live together in peace and harmony or we perish together. It should not come as a surprise to you that though the population of the island is multi-racial and should therefore be expected to face all the troubles and problems of such a society, there ~~had~~ ^{have} never been any differences of opinion in the ~~past~~ ^{past} that ~~had~~ ^{have} not been peacefully settled.

I have been told that when two differing social organisations are brought into contact with each other, voluntarily or otherwise, certain influences would spread from one to the other and the stronger of any two of such social groups would tend to exert its influence on its weaker counterpart. The stronger social unit has less difficulty in containing any changes that may occur within its ranks whereas the weaker group is at a disadvantage in that the influences of the stronger society would usually create or pave the way for a conflict of values within the ranks of the weaker one. This acculturation is a phenomenon that should not be strange to you but if you have observed the ways of our people as perceptively as you could, you would have seen that this acculturation, if it takes place at all, is superficial and is insignificant. Peripheral acculturation does not generate any serious conflict of values within the ranks of the Malays, though perhaps we do find differences of opinions being expressed between the younger set and the older groups of Malays but it is interesting to note that these differences have never assumed such violent proportions as to generate a revolution in thinking among the Malays. This is not to indicate

of course, that the Malays are afraid to think, but it does perhaps show that they like to do so only within the framework of the law rather than outside it.

Before proceeding further, it will, I hope, not be out of place if I mentioned another phenomenon, which I think is unique anywhere in this world. I spoke just now about acculturation but I should also mention that in certain circumstances, two or more cultures might be equally balanced, in a manner of speaking, and each possesses certain basic and inherent qualities and strength and therefore, as I had mentioned earlier, contacts are only possible at peripheral points. Such, I think, is what is happening to both Malay and Chinese cultures here and the unique phenomenon that I am referring to is precisely this that between the Chinese and the Malays and between those two and other racial groups in this state, there exists a certain willingness to live together - a kind of symbiosis which leads to the mutual advantage of all the racial groups concerned. You will observe that we here, do not live in cultural isolation from each other, nor yet in cultural integration with each other, but in a symbiotically cultural social synthesis or more appropriately, we tolerate each other's differences and we live, guided by a simple philosophy - live and let live. We hope to keep things this way for a long time to come and I think I am not making an understatement if I say that we Malays do not easily knuckle under any philosophy that extols the ~~riches~~^{virtues} of one race at the expense of another.

Let me now proceed, as briefly as I can, to give you some account of the historical, social, religious and cultural as well as the economic background of the Malays. It is of course not possible for me to cover such large grounds with any measure of comprehensiveness, but I do hope that you would, at the end of it all, have a fairer perspective when you view the Malays against a back-drop of the complexities of the South-east Asian setting.

The Historical Background

Malay histories do exist, but they unfortunately give very little information on events before the beginning of the fifteenth century. Anyway, we know that the South East Asia had been in some kind of commercial contacts with China and the major trading ports of the Indian Ocean and we know that as a result of these interactions, a political and cultural

pattern with distinctive features began to emerge and to assume the forms that became familiar to the Europeans when they first came to this region in the sixteenth century. At about the same time that Chinese cultural influences began to penetrate southwards, South-east Asia was beginning to establish contacts with regions that lay across the Indian Ocean and Indian influences began to take root among the peoples of South-east Asia and much later, these influences began to supplant almost all Chinese cultural influences in these areas. The penetration of Indian cultural life into South-east Asia has been the subject of controversy ^{among} ~~between~~ various scholars and is still so, as far as I know, but what is interesting to note is that, Indian culture has profound and lasting influence on the life of the peoples of these regions, though it did not completely eradicate the indigenous cultural life of South-east Asia. In the course of time, arising out of this amalgam of Indian and South-east Asian cultures, a new cultural synthesis began to emerge and though superficially Indian, it became something quite different from what is to be seen in India proper to-day.

Indianised forms of political organisations became established in South-east Asia, and though these forms have changed somewhat in the due processes of time, their essential characteristics still remain, as we can see in the political institutions of the Malay sultanates in the Federation of Malaysia now, and in Singapore not too long ago.

In the sixteenth century, which marked the arrival of western influence on the local scene, Malacca emerged as the most prominent of the Malay States. Portuguese rule in turn gave way to Dutch rule and finally the British began to establish their political and cultural hegemony which ended only in 1957 with the establishment of the Federation of Malaya. In 1963, the Federation of Malaysia, with Singapore forming an integral political unit, was formed but in 1965, Singapore was detached from the Malaysian Federation and ~~the~~ became independent in August of that year.

The Social, Cultural and Religious structure of Malay Society

Whenever we refer to the social and cultural structure of the Malays, we are doing so only in reference to the modern Malays. It is not possible for me to treat all aspects

of the cultural and social life of the Malays but I will try to dwell on those facets that are of current interest and form the subject of discussion among the Malays themselves. When we speak of culture, in so far as the Malays are concerned, we cannot do so in isolation. Malay culture and Malay social life cannot be divorced from the Muslim religion, which is the religion of the Malays and which forms the basis of Malay beliefs. The Islamic religion is ^apivotal in that it provides the Malays with the frame of reference of their evaluation of what they see. It influences their attitudes and plays perhaps, the most dominant role in their lives. Another important aspect is the language and to the Malays, the success or failure of making their language accepted as the National Language is equated with their survival or disappearance as an ethnic group. In Singapore to-day Malay is the National Language while at the same time it is also one of the four official languages used.

Besides Islam and the language, another important aspect of Malay cultural life is the "adat" or customs. Adat is a way of life. It is traditional and could be said, in spite of the onslaught of economic forces, to be all-embracing in its ramifications and to break the "adat", for a Malay is almost tantamount to sacrilege. They hold to their "adat" so seriously that they would prefer to let their children perish rather than their "adat". At the end of my talk afterwards, I would appreciate it if you would ask me on any aspect of Malay "adat" appertaining to birth, death, marriage, superstitions and so on. This would facilitate discussion which I hope would lead you to a deeper understanding of the Malays, as I think, it would be very difficult for me to describe to you what Malay beliefs are that lead to the observance of certain ceremonial rites when they bury their dead, plant their padi, launch their boats and appease invisible spirits or when they marry their sons and daughters and shave off the hair of their children. Various attacks in the past have been made on certain obsolete aspects, by modern standards of Malay adat, and these are still going on now. The citadel of Malay adat seemed to have withstood these onslaughts but at least one Malay writer has expressed the opinion that the structure is being undermined by the impact of economic forces.

The Malays could be said to be culturally homogeneous as they all speak the Malay Language, follow the same Religion,

namely Islam, possess their own customs and beliefs and as far as their political consciousness goes, they are aware of the fact that they belong to a rather sizeable community - something like 120,000,000 spread throughout the islands of South-east Asia. This awareness of belonging to a large group of people possessing ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious affinities have enabled the Malays, perhaps to enjoy a sense of security, even though you know, and I know and they know that they are economically depressed as a community. I must, however, hasten to assure you that being thus economically disadvantaged has not ~~led~~ the Malays to neglect this important question. Many western visitors, particularly the so-called experts on South-east Asian affairs, have attributed this economic backwardness to the fact that the Malays, in contrast with the Chinese, are bad businessmen and that they are more prone to easy and graceful living. They are indifferent to wealth and are rather averse to ~~hard~~ ^{hard} and consistent labour. This could be true of the Malays of some 40 years ago, but to-day they are keenly aware of the innumerable advantages ~~that~~ are to be accrued from a more favourable diffusion of the public wealth. They realise the meaning of a well-balanced education and the need for them and their children to have the tools of knowledge and the acquisition of the necessary skills to enable them to compete in the open with the other communities in the labour market. The Malays to-day could be found in the ranks of the skilled and semi-skilled workers in almost all fields of administration as well as in the public sectors of industry and commerce.

The Malays were animists before they became influenced by Hinduism and Islam. As animists, everything, both animate and inanimate, has a *semangat* (soul) or *penunggu* (guardian spirit). For example, the Malay weapon, the Keris, being made of steel, is supposed to possess certain magical qualities which have been infused into it by the guardian spirit of iron to whom homage had previously been paid through the observance of prescribed rites by the makers of the Keris. The padi has its own "*semangat*" and if the padi that is to be used for the following year's sowing is to retain its life-force, the ears of the padi have to be cut with a special reaping knife known as the "*tuai*". This consists of a wooden framework shaped like an arc and in the outer centre of which is inserted a blade. The underlying idea in this is that when the *tuai* is used to cut the ears of the padi, the blade, being concealed, is therefore not seen by the padi grains and consequently the *semangat* is not lost through fright at the

sight of the steel blade. Animistic beliefs prevail even to this day but its elements are being subtly blended into Islam. The Muslim Malay of to-day, would recite verses from the Koran at such ceremonies, when his ancestors would utter magic words at such rituals. I read once, how in Kuala Lumpur, the ^{Malaysian} ~~Malayan~~ Capital, thousands of people visited a recently - discovered spring the water of which was supposed to possess miracle cures. Only it turned out that this particular magic spring turned out to be a burst water main!

The animist Malay found it quite simple to accept Hinduism and Islamic mysticism because he himself had his own repertoire of spirits. Hindu incantations were used in Malay rituals and ^{the} Sanskrit ~~the~~ word "puja" is one that is constantly used to mean the utterance of a pawang or an expert in any art believed to have the need for the use of magic. In Kelantan to-day, the annual festival of "puja pantai" on the beach, attracts thousands of visitors. The ceremony marks the opening of the fishing season after the north-east monsoon. It invokes the help of the guardian spirits of the sea for a better catch during the forthcoming season and for greater safety for the fishermen.

Islam is the principal religion of the preponderant majority of the Malays. It became so by the 15th century and to-day it has assumed greater significance, at least in Malaysia, where it is the state religion and the King is in theory head of the Islamic religion. The modern Malay displays a variety of attitudes towards his religion and such attitudes are more or less fortuitous depending as they are on the type of education that a particular Malay has. The English-educated would appear to find intellectual pleasure in discussing the various aspects of Islam while his Malay-educated or Arabic-educated counterpart would be more rigid in his observance of the tenets of Islam. Generally, however, it is a very rare thing to find an apostate among the Malays, for, no matter what his educational backgrounds may be, he is essentially a religious man and to him, the pilgrimage to the Holy city of Mecca, is something that he looks forward to with love and reverence.

Malay nationalism could be said to be a post-war phenomenon even though nationalism had become a motivating and unifying factor before the outbreak of the Pacific war. The

Indonesian national struggle had strong emotional attractions for the Malays but Malay nationalism crystallised into definite forms when the concept of the Malayan Union was imposed upon them by the British immediately after the conclusion of the Pacific war. It became the immediate cause which unified the Malays under the leadership of the late Dato Onn. This was much to the surprise of the British who had always thought of the Malays as a docile and contented people. Malay political awakening stimulated the growth of the Malay Language and it was the need to send across political ideas to the people that gave an added impetus to the use of the Malay Language.

The modern Malay finds himself at the centre of many cross-currents. He is subjected to the influences of modern Islamic reformation which pulls him in one direction while yet the forces of orthodoxy restrains him and keeps him rooted to the ways of the traditionalist. Modern education challenges his old way of life, his customs and his beliefs. The subsistence economy that he has been familiar with all his life is being undermined by the necessity to sell his produce in a money economy. The Malays feel a sense of insecurity because of their economic backwardness and realise at the same time that political fanaticism or religious intolerance has no place in the context of a multi-racial society. They see their advancement in co-operation with the non-Malays. ~~The desire for economic development that could lead to economic parity with the non-Malays is higher on the list of Government priority projects both here and in the Federation of Malaya.~~ It is hoped that in the course of time, the Malays will succeed in creating new ties and alignments and that they will think in terms of class rather than in racial and religious terms.

Thank you.
