

# KARYAWAN

PROFESSIONALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

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# MADRASAHS AT THE CROSSROADS





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■ From the Editor's Desk

# Madrasahs at the Crossroads

THE FOCUS of this Karyawan issue is education – both religious and secular.

For religious education, we take a closer look at the madrasah issue – something which has captured the attention of the Malay/Muslim community for some time. For the “secular”, the focus is on ability-driven education, or ADE, which was the subject of an annual seminar by AMP recently. Whether it is the madrasahs or ADE, both are close to the hearts of the community. Indeed, education, it is hoped, will become a community obsession.

First, why ADE.

This was the theme of AMP’s recent annual seminar, Community in Review (CIR). The CIR is a flagship project of AMP. Every year, the association reviews the community’s progress in the previous year. This year, we chose ADE to underscore the crucial role that education plays in determining the future of the community. We present six articles ranging from what ADE means to how the community should prepare for the years ahead. The article by Farhan Ali and Hidayah Amin looks at a new area that the authors argue should be the subject of attention in the future. We recommend that you not miss this piece.

We also take this opportunity to congratulate Farhan for his First Class Honours from the National University of Singapore – and wish him all success in his PhD pursuit with Harvard University. His achievement in education speaks volumes of the very subject that we are focusing on in this issue of Karyawan.

We have however decided to make madrasah education the cover story for this issue. The reason is obvious.

It is one of the hotly-debated topics in the community. Since last year, the madrasah issue resurfaced as a major question, resurrecting a critical topic for the community in the 1990s. Indeed, this year, primary six madrasah students for the first time will sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). This has never happened before. The 2008 PSLE must surely go down as a watershed in the history of madrasah education in Singapore as it undergoes reform. What does the future hold for madrasah education in Singapore?

We present three articles on this subject. The cover story follows from a closed-door roundtable discussion organised by AMP and RIMA, the research arm of the association, in April. Without identifying the participants, we feel we ought to reflect the ongoing discussion within the community on this major issue. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the search for the ideal state for our madrasahs.

We also extracted from a chapter in the 1990 journal of the ground-breaking First National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals which touched on the future of madrasahs in Singapore. To complete the package, we have a commentary on the madrasah question in Singapore – looking at the past, present and future.

We hope you will find this issue of great interest.

**Yang Razali Kassim**  
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Sharifah Maisharah looks at what challenges lie ahead for Malay/Muslim organisations in helping to improve the academic performance of students.



**ABILITY-DRIVEN EDUCATION: A Community in Review** **13**

by *Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib*

The recent Community in Review seminar organised by AMP and RIMA looked at what the ability-driven education paradigm meant for Malay/Muslim students. Mohamed Irwan captures the key highlights of the seminar.



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by *Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib*

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**ABILITY-DRIVEN EDUCATION :**  
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by *Jumaat Masdawood*

The ability-driven paradigm has been the topic *du jour* in the academic circles. Jumaat looks at what this new paradigm is and how the community can contribute to ensure students benefit from it.

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by *Yang Razali Kassim*

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The First National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals in 1990 called for the madrasah system to be restructured. An excerpt of the proposal is featured here.

**MAKING SENSE**



**NIKAH GANTUNG:**  
**A 'Halal' Alternative to 'Unlawful' Dating?** **31**

by *Hasanul Arifin*

When religion and love collide, is a suspended marriage contract or *nikah gantung* the way out? Is this practice on the rise among Malay/Muslim youths in Singapore?

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**THE ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY BY R. H TAWNEY** **35**

Review by *Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib*

The Acquisitive Society by R. H Tawney is one of his most provocative and influential works. It suggests that acquisitiveness in a society is often the pursuit of personal gain rather than for a social good.



# THE FORGOTTEN INFANT:

## Pre-natal Health and the Future of the Community

3

*Farhan Ali and Hidayah Amin*

***What role does pre-natal health play in determining the future of the community? How does it affect the academic performance of students?***

**BIOLOGY IS** not always a result of fate. Environmental factors do have a hand at colouring an infant's life canvas. There have been enormous amounts of research which point towards the impact of health and nutrition in pre-natal and post-natal care on subsequent neuro-cognitive outcomes in children and adolescents. The impact of health, specifically pre-natal and infant care, on education outcomes in the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore has largely been neglected. It is perhaps timely to re-examine our assumptions, discard past rationales and think of progressive strategies that can shed light on this.

### **Current Approaches and Questionable Assumptions**

Numerous approaches in the past decade or so have tried to address the issue of underachievement of the Malay/Muslim

community in education. Despite the laudable effort, data from the Ministry of Education (2007) shows that the community is still lagging in key indicators of academic achievement such as subject passes and admission into tertiary institutions. There may be several reasons why current approaches are not showing the desired results. First, they do not look into the relationship between 'cause and effect'. An approach that is based solely on the correlation between two factors (e.g. parental motivation and child's academic achievement) may not work since it may not be clear which is causing which. Only long-term and sustained research such as longitudinal studies can address the issue. Second, the current wisdom is that underachievement in a specific domain is caused by lack of skills or confidence in that area. This approach is problematic because

the underachievement of Malay/Muslim students cuts across many subjects and domains of knowledge in basic education. This speaks to a cause beyond any specific subject. Also, empirical data from the Ministry of Education (2007) show that Malay performance in Mathematics has dipped over the past decade. This might suggest that subject-specific interventions to the tune of millions of dollars worth of tuition in Mathematics and workshops by various self-help groups have not worked. More math kits for more Malay students is a questionable strategy.

### The Abandoned Link

An area that has been largely neglected by the community is the impact of pre-natal factors and infant care on outcomes, especially cognitive and educational outcomes. A number of strong reasons support our belief that this is one area that should guide future strategies for the community.

4 First, 'cause and effect' is clear here. Only issues in natal care (such as anaemia or lack of blood haemoglobin due to iron deficiency in pregnancy, infant birth weight, etc.) can affect subsequent outcomes (e.g. childhood cognitive outcomes) and not the other way round. Second, concrete evidence points towards impact of early investments, particularly during pregnancy and infancy, on adolescent health and cognitive outcomes. Recently, the Nobel Prize laureate, James Heckman, presented a model of early investment in human capital in which investments even before birth in terms of health have very strong multiplier effects later in life.

Large-scale studies have shown that low birth weight infants are more likely to lag behind their healthy peers in cognitive and educational outcomes. For example, in one study based on a large British sample published in 2001 in the British Medical Journal, low birth weight children have cognitive scores lower than the average of healthy birth weight children. This effect starts at age of eight and persists even until adulthood. Such an effect has also been found in Singapore.

***“Large-scale studies have shown that low birth weight infants are more likely to lag behind their healthy peers in cognitive and educational outcomes.”***

### Profile of Malay Mothers

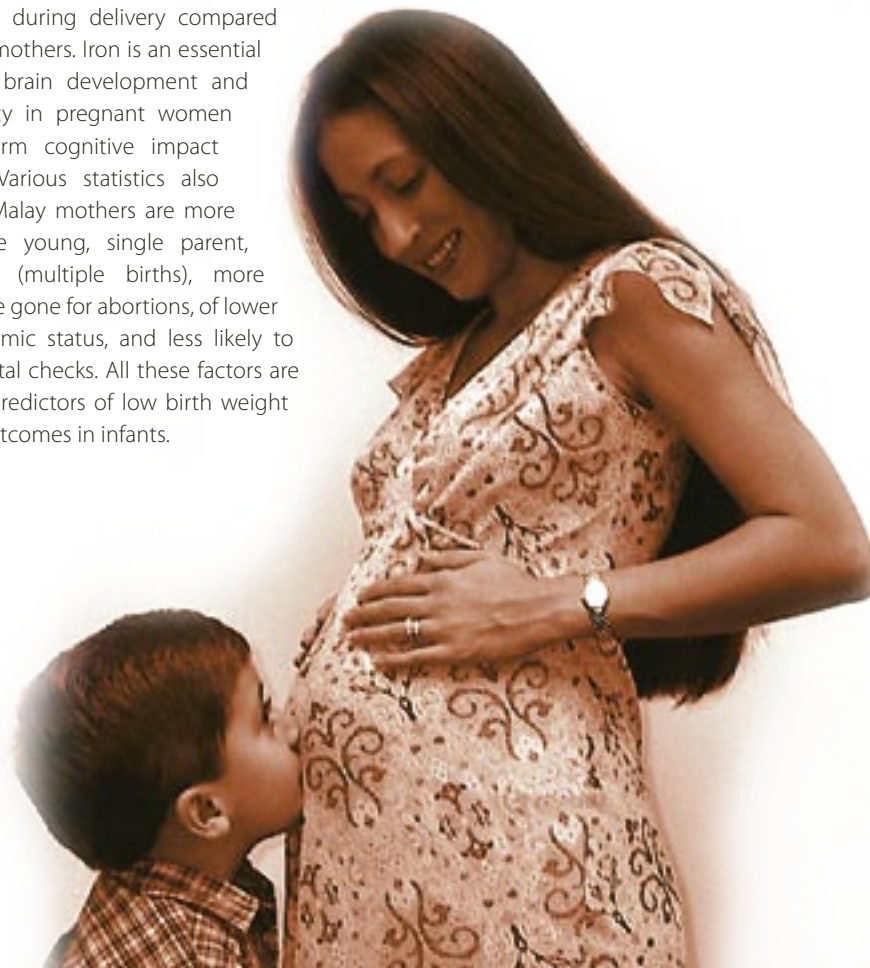
In the 1980s, studies have shown that 8.5 % of Malay babies born were low in birth weight, a figure above the national average of 6.9%. The figure in the next decade did not improve, hovering at 8%, worse than in several developing countries during the late 1990s period, as reported by UNICEF in 1998. Alarming, in at least one study conducted in the 1990s, one-fifth of all pregnant Malay women were found to be anaemic. This figure is no better than figures in some developing countries including in Africa.

In the same study, Malay mothers formed the majority of anaemic pregnant women in Singapore and were 95% more likely to lack iron during delivery compared to Chinese mothers. Iron is an essential nutrient in brain development and its deficiency in pregnant women has long-term cognitive impact in babies. Various statistics also show that Malay mothers are more likely to be young, single parent, multiparous (multiple births), more likely to have gone for abortions, of lower socio-economic status, and less likely to have pre-natal checks. All these factors are significant predictors of low birth weight and poor outcomes in infants.

One study in 2004 also found that the low socio-economic status of fathers has an adverse impact on infant birth weight. Divorce, which is on the rise in the community, is another risk factor for various adverse infant indicators such as low birth weight and pre-term delivery. Such factors, which are characteristic of the community, warrant greater attention as the effects on infant outcomes will linger for years to come.

### Current Health Care Model

We can be complacent and argue that the health care system in Singapore is advanced enough that such statistics will improve with time and can be overlooked for now. This argument is fallacious on many counts. The Singapore health care system is indeed advanced and is superior at dealing with acute health situations (e.g. deadly childhood diseases). However, the current dominant medical model may be helpless against more behaviourally- and sociologically-based risks outlined above. These risk factors – such as teen marriages and low socio-economic status – go beyond the medical model.





***“Our main aim in this article is to raise awareness in the community that pre-natal care and infant health are very important factors for subsequent cognitive and educational outcomes in children. The opportunity cost of ignoring this issue is immense given how our infants will one day lead the community.”***



Many of these factors are also not visible in the community (e.g. blood haemoglobin levels), making the issue particularly vulnerable to such a complacent mentality. As an analogy, despite Singapore's highly developed healthcare system, our society is increasingly facing a myopia epidemic with half of all children suffering from short-sightedness due to various environmental and behavioural factors. Similarly, it can be argued that unless awareness is raised and the effects mitigated, the Malay/Muslim community may be facing an infant health epidemic.

#### **Some Feasible Strategies**

It is thus imperative that the community addresses such an issue of health and education, particularly during pregnancy and infancy. Some of the risk factors – such as teen pregnancy, divorce, low socio-economic status – are complex and may be difficult to eradicate. However, there may still be feasible strategies to mitigate the impact of those risks.

A comprehensive health programme especially for young couples should be implemented so as to reduce the likelihood of poor infant outcomes, such as low birth

weight and iron deficiency. In particular, current counselling programmes for teen couples and young unmarried mothers must include compliance to a rigorous pre-natal health screening. The other target group for pre-natal and infant health would be those from the lower socio-economic class. Cereals and other iron-building food can be disbursed, for example, to lower-income Malay/Muslim families with pregnant mothers or infants and toddlers.

Divorce, a factor for poorer infant outcomes, as noted earlier, is on the rise in the community. Although addressing the cause of divorce is important, complementary efforts to mitigate the impact of divorce are necessary too. However, any such efforts should go beyond helping already-born children of divorced parents. These efforts should also aim to reduce the impact of divorce on the yet-to-be-born children who are at greater risk of adverse health and cognitive outcomes. Self-help groups should partner the state in ensuring not only greater awareness of the issue of health but also better compliance especially among those who are at risk in the community. More research should also be encouraged in the areas of health and education.

#### **Biology is not our destiny**

We are not the destiny of our biology; we can indeed alter certain components of that biology. In fact, much of what has been articulated and argued here are of environmental origins that impact our community's biology and health, and are therefore remediable.

Our main aim in this article is to raise awareness in the community that pre-natal care and infant health are very important factors for subsequent cognitive and educational outcomes in children. The opportunity cost of ignoring this issue is immense given how our infants will one day lead the community. As with every tree whose strength lies in its roots, our future lies with our young. And perhaps this time, we do not forget them.

*Farhan Ali is a postgraduate student of biology at Harvard University. Hidayah Amin is a Fulbright Scholar whose humanitarian expeditions brought her up close and personal with the ill and helpless. Both are members of the Board of Management of Young AMP.*



# Kesihatan Pra-natal dan Masa Depan Masyarakat Melayu / Islam

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Farhan Ali dan Hidayah Amin

**BIOLOGI BUKANLAH** sesuatu yang bergantung hanya kepada takdir semata-mata. Faktor-faktor persekitaran sering memainkan peranan penting dalam mempengaruhi kehidupan seseorang bayi. Pelbagai kajian yang telah dijalankan menunjukkan bahawa kesihatan ibu-ibu mengandung serta penjagaan bayi selepas kelahiran mempunyai kesan langsung terhadap kecerdasan mereka apabila meningkat dewasa.

### Beberapa Andaian yang Meragukan

Semenjak beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, beberapa pendekatan telah diambil untuk menangani masalah kurang upaya di kalangan anak-anak Melayu/Islam. Namun, usaha-usaha giat tersebut tidak menampakkan banyak hasil. Butiran yang dikeluarkan oleh Kementerian Pelajaran (2007) menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar ini masih lagi ketinggalan dari segi

pencapaian akademik mereka samada dari segi jumlah mata pelajaran lulus atau kemasukan ke institusi pendidikan tinggi.

Terdapat beberapa sebab mengapa usaha-usaha giat tersebut tidak membuahkan hasil. Pertama, pertalian di antara 'sebab dan kesan' (*cause and effect*) tidak diambil kira. Pendekatan yang hanya bersandarkan pertalian dua faktor (contoh: motivasi ibu bapa dan pencapaian pendidikan anak-anak) kurang berkesan kerana tidak dapat diputuskan faktor manakah yang lebih ketara atau yang lebih mempengaruhi satu-satu situasi. Hanya penyelidikan yang berterusan dan memakan masa yang lama boleh menentukan 'sebab dan kesan' sesuatu fenomena.

Kedua, telah menjadi kepercayaan ramai bahawa kelakonan yang lemah di dalam satu-satu bidang adalah disebabkan oleh

kurangnya bakat atau keyakinan di dalam bidang tersebut. Pendekatan ini tidak tepat kerana kelemahan para pelajar Melayu/Islam tidak berpaksikan kepada mata pelajaran-mata pelajaran tertentu sahaja bahkan mencakupi kesemua bidang mata pelajaran asas yang lain.

Hasil pantauan Kementerian Pelajaran (2007) menunjukkan bahawa kelakonan pelajar Melayu dalam mata pelajaran ini semakin menurun dalam masa sedekad yang lalu. Ini mungkin menandakan bahawa bantuan jutaandolar untuk mata pelajaran Matematik, samada dalam bentuk kelas tambahan atau bengkel kerja yang dikendalikan oleh pelbagai pertubuhan bantu diri tidak mencapai hasrat yang diinginkan. Oleh itu jika tumpuan hanya diberikan kepada bantuan seperti mana disebutkan di atas, keupayaan anak Melayu untuk terus maju dalam mata pelajaran Matematik amatlah diragui.



### Faktor yang diabaikan

Kepentingan menjaga kesihatan kandungan dan penjagaan susulan bayi selalu diabaikan oleh masyarakat setempat. Ia memberi kesan langsung terhadap pencapaian pendidikan seseorang bayi apabila mereka dewasa kelak. Beberapa alasan kukuh diberikan di bawah untuk menyokong dapatan ini serta membantu masyarakat mengorak langkah membendung masalah kelemahan mata pelajaran di kalangan anak-anak kita.

Pertama, perkaitan di antara 'sebab dan kesan' adalah nyata. Isu-isu penjagaan kesihatan waktu hamil seperti 'anaemia' atau kurang kandungan haemoglobin (sel darah merah yang membawa oksigen dan zat besi) dan berat bayi yang kurang sewaktu dilahirkan mempengaruhi perkembangan mental bayi.

Kedua, terdapat banyak bukti kukuh yang menunjukkan bahawa kesan positif ke atas perkembangan minda seseorang manusia berkait rapat dengan hasil penjagaan kesihatan yang baik pada peringkat awal terutamanya di peringkat kandungan dan bayi. James Heckman, seorang pemenang hadiah Nobel, telah mengemukakan pelbagai dapatan dan model yang mengaitkan keputusan positif hasil dari penjagaan di peringkat kandungan yang sempurna. Beliau mengaitkan penjagaan kesihatan yang baik ini sebagai pelaburan yang berupaya menghasilkan seorang manusia yang berjaya di masa hidupnya.

Kajian menyeluruh juga telah menunjukkan bahawa bayi yang dilahirkan dengan berat badan yang kurang lebih terkebelakang di dalam pencapaian akademik mereka jika dibandingkan dengan rakan mereka yang lebih sihat. Ini telah dibuktikan melalui satu kajian yang dijalankan terhadap penduduk Britain seperti mana yang diterbit di dalam Jurnal Perubatan Britain pada tahun 2001. Kajian tersebut mendedahkan bayi-bayi yang dilahirkan dengan berat badan yang kurang mendapat markah lebih rendah semasa diuji jika dibandingkan dengan rakan-rakan mereka yang lain yang lebih sihat. Kesan negatif ini mula menunjukkan tanda seawal usia lapan tahun dan berterusan sehingga

mencecah usia dewasa. Fenomena ini juga berlaku di Singapura.

### Profil Ibu-Ibu Melayu

Pada tahun-tahun 1980an, kajian menunjukkan 8.5 peratus bayi Melayu dilahirkan dengan berat badan yang rendah. Peratusan ini jauh lebih tinggi dari peratusan kebangsaan. Dapatan tahun-tahun 1990an juga tidak menunjukkan banyak perubahan, dan berada di sekitar 8 peratus. Perangkaan

***Kesimpulannya, masalah kesihatan di kalangan bayi masyarakat Melayu/Islam akan terus meruncing melainkan kesedaran dipertingkatkan dan pada masa yang sama, kesan-kesan masalah tersebut terus dikurangkan.***

ini jauh lebih tinggi dari kebanyakan negara-negara membangun seperti yang dilaporkan oleh UNICEF pada tahun 1998. Malahan, hasil dapatan satu kajian pada 1990an menunjukkan satu perlima dari wanita Melayu yang mengandung didapati menghadapi 'anaemia' dan kurang kandungan zat besi. Angka ini tidak banyak berbeza dengan perangkaan di negara-negara membangun pada waktu itu, termasuk Afrika.

Dalam kajian yang sama, ibu-ibu berbangsa Melayu dan kurang khasiat ini membentuk kelompok terbesar dari kalangan mereka yang mengandung di Singapura. Kemungkinan mereka menghadapi kekurangan zat besi semasa melahirkan adalah 95 peratus lebih tinggi dari ibu-ibu berbangsa Cina.

Zat besi merupakan bahan utama di dalam pembentukan dan perkembangan otak. Kurangnya elemen ini boleh mengakibatkan kesan jangka panjang negatif terhadap bayi. Mengikut data yang dikumpul, ibu-ibu berbangsa Melayu biasanya berusia muda, ibu tunggal, pernah melalui pengguguran, mempunyai kedudukan



sosio-ekonomi yang rendah serta tidak menitikberatkan pemeriksaan kesihatan semasa mengandung. Kesemua faktor ini menjurus kepada penyebab utama bayi-bayi dilahirkan dengan berat badan yang rendah dan kurang upaya mental.

Malah, satu lagi kajian pada tahun 2004 menunjukkan kedudukan sosio-ekonomi seseorang bapa mempunyai kesan langsung terhadap kesihatan dan berat bayi sewaktu dilahirkan. Penceraian yang tinggi di kalangan bangsa Melayu juga merupakan antara penyebab utama kepada masalah ini. Oleh itu, perhatian serius haruslah diberi terhadap situasi-situasi di atas yang begitu sinonim dengan masyarakat Melayu kerana ianya memberi kesan negatif yang berpanjangan terhadap pembesaran dan perkembangan anggota masyarakatnya.

### Model Penjagaan Kesihatan Masa Kini

Dengan khidmat jagaan kesihatan yang maju di Singapura sekarang, kita mungkin bersikap sambil lewa dan menyangka bahawa situasi pincang yang dinyatakan di atas akan bertambah baik dengan sendirinya. Tetapi keadaan sebenar adalah sebaliknya. Kita harus sedar bahawa khidmat jagaan kesihatan di sini bertindak balas dengan baik di dalam menangani isu-isu kesihatan yang kritikal (seperti: penyakit yang boleh membawa maut kepada kanak-kanak). Namun model penjagaan kesihatan yang ada sekarang ini tidak berupaya untuk menghadapi situasi yang berpolakan tabiat dan perilaku sosial satu-satu masyarakat seperti yang telah dinyatakan di atas. Faktor-faktor berisiko seperti pernikahan pada usia muda dan status sosio-ekonomi yang rendah, melampaui model jagaan kesihatan yang sedia ada. Malahan, risiko-risiko seperti paras haemoglobin yang rendah, merupakan masalah yang tidak nyata yang membuatkan masyarakat kita kurang peka terhadapnya.

Satu analogi yang boleh diberikan sebagai penerangan ialah masalah kabur

penglihatan yang begitu meruncing di kalangan kanak-kanak setempat. Walaupun kaedah penjagaan kesihatan di sini amat maju, disebabkan oleh pelbagai tabiat hidup dan pengaruh persekitaran, separuh dari jumlah kanak-kanak di Singapura terjejas penglihatan mereka. Kesimpulannya, masalah kesihatan di kalangan bayi masyarakat Melayu/Islam akan terus meruncing melainkan kesedaran dipertingkatkan dan pada masa yang sama, kesan-kesan masalah tersebut terus dikurangkan.

### Langkah-langkah Susulan

Untuk menangani masalah ini, pendidikan yang secukupnya amatlah perlu. Menjadi kewajipan bagi masyarakat Melayu/Islam memberi penekanan terhadap masalah kesihatan waktu hamil dan terhadap bayi-bayi (selepas kelahiran). Tidak dinafikan bahawa faktor-faktor utama seperti kehamilan pada usia muda, penceraian, status sosio-ekonomi yang rendah dan lain-lain agak kompleks dan sukar untuk dibendung sepenuhnya. Walau bagaimana pun, masih terdapat langkah-langkah yang boleh diambil secara bersama untuk mengurangkan kesan risiko tadi.

Program kesihatan yang menyeluruh bagi pasangan muda mestilah dilaksanakan agar kemungkinan terjadinya situasi bayi lemah akibat kurang berat badan dan zat besi dapat dikurangkan. Satu perkara yang harus ditekankan semasa sesi kaunseling bagi pasangan muda dan ibu-ibu tunggal hamil ialah mewajibkan pemeriksaan kesihatan semasa mengandung. Satu lagi golongan yang harus diambil kira ialah mereka yang tergolong di dalam kelompok sosio-ekonomi yang rendah. Program pengagihan makanan yang dapat membantu meningkatkan zat besi mestilah dilakukan. Golongan sasar adalah dari kelompok Melayu/Islam yang berpendapatan rendah yang mempunyai ibu-ibu mengandung dan anak-anak kecil.

Masalah penceraian juga memainkan peranan penting di dalam peningkatan

jumlah bayi lemah di dalam masyarakat ini. Di samping mengurangkan jumlah penceraian, masyarakat juga hendaklah dididik tentang kesan-kesan yang timbul jika perkahwinan itu tidak dapat dipertahankan. Oleh itu usaha-usaha yang dijalankan hendaklah mencakupi bukan sahaja bayi yang telah dilahirkan setelah penceraian berlaku, tetapi juga bayi-bayi yang bakal dilahirkan oleh ibu-ibu tunggal yang mungkin akan menderita kelak. Badan-badan bantu diri juga boleh memainkan peranan dengan meningkatkan kesedaran di kalangan masyarakat, khususnya mereka yang berada di dalam golongan ini. Lebih banyak insentif dan galakan juga harus diberikan kepada kajian yang dijalankan terhadap isu-isu kesihatan dan pendidikan.

### Biologi tidak bermakna takdir

Kita tidak harus bergantung kepada takdir semata-mata. Manusia mempunyai keupayaan untuk mengubah bahagian atau komponen tertentu proses perkembangan kehidupan mereka. Mentelah, hujah-hujah yang dikemukakan di atas adalah berteraskan persekitaran sekeliling yang boleh dikawal dan berupaya memberi kesan langsung terhadap kesihatan masyarakat kita.

Tujuan utama rencana ini adalah untuk meningkatkan kesedaran di kalangan masyarakat tentang peri pentingnya penjagaan sewaktu kehamilan dan kesihatan bayi. Ia mempunyai kesan langsung ke atas perkembangan minda bayi dan kelakonan pelajaran mereka. Tambahan pula, masa hadapan kita bergantung kepada para bayi inilah kerana mereka merupakan bakal pemimpin yang akan menerajui masyarakat kita.

*Farhan Ali ialah pelajar pos-siswazah dalam bidang biologi di Universiti Harvard. Hidayah Amin pula ialah penerima biasiswa Fulbright yang aktif di dalam pelbagai ekspedisi kemanusiaan yang mendekatkan beliau dengan isu-isu kesihatan dan golongan kurang upaya. Kedua-dua mereka adalah ahli Lembaga Pengurusan AMP Muda. Artikel ini diterjemahkan ke dalam Bahasa Kebangsaan oleh Mahdi Mahyudin.*



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# IMPROVING THE EDUCATION OF THE MALAYS:

## *Time for a Change?*

Sharifah Maisharah Mohamed

**SUCCESS** IN school, it seems, does not happen as often for the Malay students as it does for the other races. The statistics speak for themselves. The Malays are seen to be lagging behind in foundational subjects such as Mathematics and Science, in the GCE 'O' Level passes to qualify for junior colleges or polytechnics and the proportionately lower enrolment in university. Year after year, despite steady improvements, the gap with the other races serves as a constant reminder of what could have possibly gone wrong and how differently the community could go about tackling this problem.

### Education in the Community

Talk about education and the Malays and the issue covers a wide spectrum and spans as far back as 1965, if not even further. Academics the likes of Syed Hussein Alatas and Stanley Bedlington address the shortcomings of colonial educational policies and the implications on the Malays' educational and socio-economic status. Lily Zubaidah Rahim in the *Singapore Dilemma* addresses the systemic discrimination of the Malays based on historical, class, ethnic and institutional factors. Jason Tan in his article on *Marketisation of Education* addresses the capital deficit theory where students from households in the lower socio-economic group are under-represented in top and independent schools. Since a higher proportion of the Malays belong to this group, this issue indirectly links to their access to these ladders of success.

There are so many different angles with which to approach this issue. How have the Malay/Muslim community groups gone about tackling it? Amidst these unfavourable conditions, Malay/Muslim community groups have stepped forward with programmes to help the Malay students take the crucial first steps towards academic improvements and hence better career opportunities for them. Some of the notable programmes include the parent-child workshops and development programmes by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and Yayasan Mendaki. Other programmes aim to address the Malay students' self-esteem and approach towards the exams while there are others that provide free tuition services for the low-income.

Indeed, Malay students have shown progress over the last two decades. According to data from the Ministry of Education, an average of 60% of the students pass their Mathematics and 70% pass their Science, up from a percentage average of 50%. These are worthwhile efforts in themselves. Complementing these endeavours, what else or what new can the community do to add value?

### Keeping Education in Perspective

Education now is commonly associated with the need to produce workers who can add value to the economy. Community leaders have acknowledged the need to adapt to the knowledge-based economy (KBE). Even though KBE is not a new term, it is arguably one that many are still grappling with ever since it was introduced to the community 15 years ago. How then does the founder of the concept of “knowledge worker”, Peter Drucker, view education?

Drucker focuses on the process and long-term development of education. He is concerned that today’s educators and students’ parents still look to the past model that have previously served the elitist few in verbal and theoretical knowledge. The outcome, according to Drucker, is a school that “deforms rather than forms”, where the “verbal straitjacket” in academic disciplines does not allow a student to perform but to only follow what someone else has already done or spoken. Given these stifling conditions, Drucker does not find it surprising if the students one day decide to revolt!

Drucker further believes that every child is different in his or her learning development; it is not advisable for a school to cram too many foundational years of generalist education as the child does not get to apply the knowledge learned. Referring to Jean Piaget’s work, Drucker cautions that there are huge differences in attention span and learning pace and that if these are subdued as has happened in “traditional schools”, then “dumb children are created”! This explains why he is for continuous learning even through adulthood, when students are able to synchronise learning with their working experience.

These thoughts may seem unfair to schools in Singapore that are taking the effort to make lessons come alive through lesser curriculum content and more learning-based programmes. However, the community needs to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the school as an institution to offer the Malay students a customised and individualised approach to development, given their socio-economic background. The local schools are largely governed by two main objectives of nation-building and economic development. The focus to date has been on how best to achieve in schools and along with it, the narrow parameters of success. This is where the different community groups can come in to develop the Malay students through education but not necessarily through schools.

### Creating Opportunities

#### *Open Education*

The different self-help groups and community organisations can pool their resources together towards developing a one-stop resource centre on the different means and pathways to success. There can be multiple accesses to this one-stop resource via the online portal and physical set-ups. Working towards the idea of open learning, this resource centre will be a discussion point for students or parents to raise queries on their prospects for further education given their current academic standing. What is more important, it will be an open platform where educationists from all walks of life can contribute different learning methods available and best practices.

More than just receiving drop-in queries and help, this proposed entity will also actively assess, through research studies or funding, the main obstacles for a Malay student to pursue tertiary education and advancement. This is especially so with the new education landscape where even the average performers may be pushed out of their preferred courses in the polytechnic as the high academic achievers begin to crowd out the competition. With only 60% Malay students getting GCE’O’ Level passes, to what extent do academic scores still restrict their options? In the end, how many had to pursue their tertiary education overseas? How many do not have the means to consider the latter

*The different self-help groups and community organisations can pool their resources together towards developing a one-stop resource centre on the different means and pathways to success. There can be multiple accesses to this one-stop resource via the online portal and physical set-ups.*



*“ It is time to diversify the community efforts towards engaging the tertiary institutions who determine the intake and the industry players who shape the employment landscape.”*

option, given financial constraints and the limited bursary options by the community groups? The community groups can come together to deliberate on the relevance of current criteria for financial support towards continuous education.

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#### *Pacing Educational Development*

If there is one thing we can take away from Drucker's idea of education, it would be pacing educational development for the individual. It does not matter if the student fails his critical examinations because his poor economic background means that he is focused more on getting immediate means of income than good grades. What matters is that he is aware that at some point of time, he would need to upgrade his skills to one that is applicable to the industry. It is therefore as important that there are learning support systems for him to rely on when that time comes. At this point, it is apt to mention a private school that is run by the City Harvest Church providing second chances for an individual as old as 25 years old to obtain his 'O' Levels certificate for that next step in his educational progress. This institution helps the individual to overcome his stigma of having to sit for an examination

at an age that is 10 years older than the average candidate. There is something here for the Malay/Muslim community to learn from.

In Singapore where an individual's occupational status is generally determined from two critical junctures at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and 'O' Levels, the system could be less kind to those who are late bloomers. Given these circumstances, there are bound to be students who fail in these window periods. For those who retake the exams, the situation is tougher in a society that is less forgiving of failures.

#### **A More Open Employment Landscape**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech in 2007 has promised multiple pathways to success. Amongst these, he has promised higher local university intake up from the current 22% to 30%. With the addition of the fourth university, how has this been made more accessible for the Malay students? With the focus on engineering and design, the foundational subjects for which are Mathematics and Physics, the statistics does

not seem to favour the cohort of Malay students. One possible route is through the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) which offers a hands-on engineering course. Recently, the ITE has been given the educational standing it deserves for its curriculum and applicability. The next question to ask is whether the percentage of Malay ITE students who are admitted to the polytechnic courses and henceforth the university is substantial.

Generally, community groups have been working on the students and their capability to achieve in the academic subjects. It is time to diversify the community efforts towards engaging the tertiary institutions who determine the intake and the industry players who shape the employment landscape. The education landscape is continuously evolving and with it, the opportunities for development. The important thing is to keep the pace and keep moving.

*The writer is an activist with the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), the research arm of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). This article is written based on inputs and materials provided by AMP's Training & Education Division and RIMA.*





# Ability-Driven Education: *A Community in Review*

Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib

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***“ Educational performance is not driven by aspirations and expectations alone. There is also a need to look at the role of the school, family and the public in making ADE a successful strategy. ”***

**EDUCATION IN** Singapore has always been anchored on the fundamental philosophy of multi-racialism.

In his Ministry of Education report in 1978, the then education minister Dr Goh Keng Swee added on an efficiency-driven slant, with an emphasis on language competency and on streaming in schools to improve the performance of students. The efficiency-driven education paradigm then was to support Singapore's economic restructuring strategies which focused on building a capital-intensive economy emphasising science, technology, research and development.

When the Singapore economy became more knowledge-based, the ability-driven education (ADE) paradigm was initiated in 1997 to tackle the challenges of this new economy. ADE emphasised the maximal development of talents, abilities and lifelong learning. Under this initiative, public tertiary institutions began offering more

degree and diploma programmes that were multi-disciplinary and broad-based in nature. This was done with the hope that the all-rounded and multi-disciplinary education would stimulate innovation and encourage a proactive attitude amongst students.

This emphasis was underscored by Senior Parliamentary Secretary of Education, Mr Masagos Zulkifli in his opening speech at the recent Community in Review seminar jointly organised by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). The seminar engaged more than 100 academics, educators, community leaders and members of the public to discuss the progress of Malay students in education and the alternative strategies available in the current education landscape. The discussion was led by a panel of speakers who included: Associate Professor Jason Tan of the National Institute of Education (NIE), Assistant Professor Trivina Kang of NIE and Ms Fuziah Taha, principal of Fuhua Primary School.

The Community in Review (CIR) is an annual seminar jointly organised by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). The seminar series provides a regular platform for the community to review developments and issues.

Mr Masagos highlighted three ways through which ADE hopes to develop the abilities and strengths of students to prepare them for the workforce. It aims to 1) ensure that all Singaporeans receive the basic level of education to equip them with skills needed in the workforce; 2) identify and develop varying strengths of each student to enable them to take advantage of the future economy; and 3) create a flexible education system which allows every student to achieve success through multiple pathways.

*While there are undoubtedly many successful students in the community who have been celebrated and highlighted by the media and the community of late, we have to keep in mind the others who did not make it in the race for excellence. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Malay students are still over-represented in underachievement in Mathematics and Science subjects.*

### **Aspirations and Expectations of Students**

The main objective of ADE is to provide more pathways and opportunities for Singaporeans to leverage on and to encourage students to stay in school for as long as possible in preparation for the workforce. But how can the ADE be implemented effectively on the ground? In addressing this, the aspirations and expectations of the students as well as the roles played by the school, family and community, must be considered.

Dr Trivina Kang carried out a study on the aspirations and expectations of a group of students. She found that students of all streams generally had high levels of aspirations. However, students from the Normal stream tend to have lower educational expectations than their counterparts in the Express stream. For instance, a student from a Normal stream may aspire to get a degree but his expectations might be lowered by the possibility of him having to go to an Institute of Technical Education first. He would then have to excel there before moving on to a polytechnic. Only with good results at the polytechnic would he then have the opportunity to pursue a degree. Often times, when faced with such a situation, it is understandable if the student expects to obtain something less than a degree.

This is where community and social organisations are critically needed to work with these students and set educational targets with them in the hope of elevating their expectations. It is not meant to dictate what their choices in education should be but to provide a clearer view of the pathways available to them which they can leverage on to achieve educational excellence. This might also guide them in their decision to shape their own future.

### Key Players in a Student's Education

Educational performance is not driven by aspirations and expectations alone. There is also a need to look at the role of the school, family and the public in making ADE a successful strategy. These are the three key players in a student's decision-making process and knowledge absorption.

#### *Schools*

Through the "Thinking Schools Learning Nation" initiative launched by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1997, schools are given the autonomy in running the institution headed by the principal, thereby facilitating ADE in the schools. This meant that the development of a child's non-academic activities is heavily dependent on the direction of the particular school's work plan. For example, some schools aim to be the centre of excellence for music while others focus on being centres of excellence for sports or other areas. There could be a conflict when a particular student's ability or expectations is not in line with the school's aspirations. This might lead to some students leaving the school with zero talent or ability in the area that they were strong in at the beginning.

#### *Family*

The needs of the family should not be dismissed when discussing a child's decision making process. These include parents' aspirations, family's limited resources and the pertinent needs of the family. The aspirations of the individual child may at times differ from the aspirations and expectation of the parents. In such a case, the child might compromise his or her own aspirations and expectations to fulfil the parent's expectations.

This will not be an issue if the parents are well informed and understand the educational landscape in Singapore. Their relatively high expectations and aspirations might eventually benefit the child. However, when the family is limited by its resources, financial or otherwise, and is ill-informed about Singapore's educational development, the family's expectations and aspirations may well be detrimental to the educational success of the child.

Many social organisations in Singapore offer financial assistance programmes to ensure that every child is not left behind in his or her pursuit of educational excellence despite their families' financial background. However, not much has been done to effectively communicate the educational policies and systems to the families. Based on feedback from educators and parents, it seems that there are many families out there who are relatively unaware of the current developments in the educational scene in Singapore. When not fully informed of the development, how can parents then

craft their expectations and aspirations according to the available opportunities for the child to leverage on?

#### *Public*

We also cannot afford to underestimate the influence of the mass media and popular culture which greatly influences a child's aspiration in life. They can easily affect the child's perception of aspirations which is very much associated to the child's peer influence. According to Neil Postman, in his book entitled *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1994), there is a widespread influence of popular culture in the changing nature of education. The influence of popular culture in a child's aspiration misleads as it is often detached from reality. It has been seen by educators as potentially disruptive and distracts the child from their pursuit of educational excellence.

### Multi-Faceted Effort for Educational Excellence

While there are undoubtedly many successful students in the community who have been celebrated and highlighted by the media and the community of late, we have to keep in mind the others who did not make it in the race for excellence. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Malay students are still over-represented in underachievement in Mathematics and Science subjects. At the foundational level, there is still an urgent need to improve the child's competency academically. Despite the various avenues created to harness a student's ability and aspiration, it is still very much an exam-based system.

With the introduction of the Direct School Admission (DSA) programme, students are encouraged to establish their non-academic abilities in music or sports for entry into their choice of secondary schools. DSA is one of the many pathways that the community can leverage on in achieving educational expectations. The new educational landscape also provides many opportunities for students to ride on via various avenues and diverse pathways.

However, there is also a need to firstly understand the "invisible bag" – a term used by academic Dr Mukhlis Abu Bakar in a discussion on ADE. This refers to a student's socio-economic background that shapes his/her mind before the intervention of the school. These children might carry to school his background that limits his/her performance and aspiration in education, even before particular targets or expectations are set for them.

Already grappling with meeting the expectations of the family amidst the competitive educational landscape, a further pressure to dictate their choices in education may be detrimental to them psychologically. As a community, we must take on the responsibility to provide quality education to our children and make sure that every individual gains access to education equally regardless of socio-economic status and family background.

*The writer is a Senior Research Assistant with the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), the research arm of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).*



# MALAY STUDENTS : BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

## *An Interview with Dr Trivina Kang*

*Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib*

Dr Trivina Kang, an assistant professor with the National Institute of Education (NIE), was one of the three presenters at the recent Community in Review seminar organised jointly by AMP and the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) in January this year. Karyawan caught up with Dr Kang recently for a chat on the paper she presented at the seminar on managing the aspirations and expectations of Malay students.

### **What are your comments on the educational aspirations of our Malay students in public schools?**

What is striking is that Singapore students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or family background or schools, generally have high educational aspirations. When asked about what kind of educational levels they hope to achieve, it is clear that most of them aspire to obtain university degrees or at least a polytechnic diploma.

### **Are there any significant differences in the aspirations of the Malay students in different streams compare to the other ethnic groups?**

Although students in all streams generally have high aspirations, when asked about their educational expectations – i.e. what educational levels they expect to achieve (as compared to hope to achieve), there are differences across streams. Students, whether they are Malay, Chinese or Indian, in the Normal Academic and Technical streams do generally report lower expectations than their Express counterparts.



**What are the factors that may influence their aspirations and expectations and could there be a pragmatic reason behind these influences?**

The gaps between students' educational aspirations and expectations suggest that although Singapore students value education highly and hope for the highest possible credential, they are also realistic about what they might achieve when they leave school. For example, although a Normal Technical student may aspire to get a degree, his expectations may be more modest because he knows that although the system provides opportunities, he will need to do very well in the ITE in order to enter the polytechnic, then come out among the top in his cohort to be admitted to a local university or, if finances allow, proceed to a foreign university.

Along the way, if the student is male, he would have to factor in time in National Service. Or if help is needed to support the family, there is also the opportunity cost of staying in school instead of getting a job to consider. Coupled with the rising starting salaries of ITE and polytechnic graduates, it is very understandable why despite hoping to obtain a degree; this student realistically expects to obtain something less than that.

**Do you think the educational performance of the Malay students can be improved if there is a shift in their aspirations and expectations?**

I think it is too simplistic to attribute educational performance (achievement) to aspirations or expectations alone. The link between educational attainment (years of education attained) and aspirations is probably much tighter. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, Malay students do not espouse significantly lower aspirations than Chinese or Indian students in their streams. I do not think it is the expressed education aspirations and expectations themselves that are all important. Rather, we need to understand what these educational aspirations mean to them in the context of other life choices and things they value in life.

**Studies in the United States have shown that strong inter-racial ties in schools vis-à-vis national integration have shaped a significant improvement in their educational performance. What are your comments on this and how would you contextualise it in the Singapore landscape?**

The situation in the United States is hardly comparable to that in Singapore. Much more has been done at a national systemic level in Singapore to integrate the different ethnic groups within schools and more importantly, the system here provides equal resourcing to schools regardless of their student profile. It was especially the absence of the latter in many US school districts that was a key barrier to ethnic minorities' educational opportunities to learn.

However, what has been interesting is how some schools in the US have worked with less educated parents from ethnic minorities to help them get more involved in their children's education. Given the rapid changes in the Singapore education system, it is becoming increasingly challenging for parents (regardless of their educational level) who grew up in very different types of schools to keep up and be involved in their children's education even if they wanted to. I know some schools in Singapore are providing workshops for parents as well and this is something that I really think will ultimately influence student performance.

**In your opinion, what is needed from the social organisations to elevate the aspirations and expectations of the Malay students?**

I am not sure if the most crucial task for social organisations should be to raise aspirations and/or expectations of Malay students. I personally feel that what would be most helpful is for organisations and mentors to come alongside students to help them plan in concrete terms how to reach the goals they set for themselves, and maybe to guide them in figuring out what it is they would really want out of life.

Many students already have rather high bars they have set for themselves but they often do not know how to reach them. They often try it their own way, fail and then give up. Other times, students blindly commit to aspirations because this is what their friends or the society want and never ask how appropriate or realistic they are for themselves. What many students really need is informed counsel from people who have the skill sets to help them think through and guide them through these issues. More experienced family members can provide such assistance but this could also be an area social organisations can help out in, especially for students without such familial support.



# ABILITY-DRIVEN EDUCATION: *Maximising Potential for Learning*

*Jumaat Masdawood*



*The ability-driven paradigm has been the topic du jour in the academic circles. Jumaat Masdawood looks at what this new paradigm is and how the community can contribute to ensure students benefit from it.*

**PRIOR TO** independence, in 1959, not all children in Singapore had the opportunity to get an education. As a result, many joined the workforce with little education, or worse, without any schooling at all.

Since they were able to eke out a living despite the lack of education, this created a free-caring attitude towards education among parents and students. This could be one reason why parents placed little importance on getting children to benefit from the educational opportunities available then.

With independence, however, it became imperative to provide education for all children to ensure sufficient numbers of educated citizens to guarantee the survival of the nation. A survival-based education policy evolved. This would ensure that most students completed their education at an appropriate pace that matched their capacity to learn. What it meant was that students had to follow a more or less common structure of education tailored to groups of children with common learning patterns and behaviours. The focus was for the system to ensure that education was provided for the population with as little student attrition as possible: an efficiency-based education policy.

More recently, we often hear ministers and educationists refer to Ability-Driven Education (ADE). How different is it compared to what we had in the system before – the opportunities for students, and the impact on the roles of parents and the community.

## **Ability Driven Education (ADE) – How Different Is It?**

In ADE, the objective is to enable every student to develop his strengths or talents to excellence and realise his potential. To do this, we need to create student-focused learning environments in schools. In response to this challenge, schools provided enhanced curriculum offerings and introduced more creative and innovative teaching to cater to the varied needs of their students. The speed with which schools have managed to offer more electives at secondary school levels -- and the varied means of enabling



learning at primary school-- speak well for the school system and personnel.

With more subject electives, varied subject combinations, streams and courses offered, students at all levels would have many more opportunities to develop their inherent strengths in areas other than the traditionally-tailored curriculum, inflexible subject combinations and fixed expectations.

In ADE, the innovative and creative approaches are employed by schools and teachers. This would enable every student to learn at his own pace so that real learning takes place, ensuring that every student maximises learning in the ten years spent in school. Of more significance in ADE is this: schools and teachers would attempt, to their best ability, to identify the learning needs of their students so that every student would, in their own special way, be assisted to succeed. If they fail to achieve via a certain stream or course of study, there will be other ways to get there. ADE is really about ensuring that every student gets as much assistance as possible to help him find his way through the school system, achieve his own level of success and realise his potential.

#### How Students Benefit from ADE

ADE requires schools to focus on the learning needs of the students. Each school would exercise flexibility in varying the mode and delivery of lessons so that every student gets the opportunity to learn at a pace that enables and facilitates effective learning. Not all students learn at the same pace and schools take this into consideration to ensure that students understand lessons as planned.

There is an adequate range of subject electives offered by different schools to cater to the needs of the varied student learning affinities, capabilities and strengths. This would ensure that their strengths in areas other than the traditional curriculum would be surfaced and developed. For example, students who are good at hands-on work but do not have an affinity for book learning may be offered additional subject electives that would expose them to practice-oriented learning experiences. This is



Photo: AMP

to get them more interested in what they are learning, be satisfied with themselves and succeed in areas where their strengths lie.

Similarly, varied teaching and learning experiences enable every student to learn meaningfully and thus facilitate his or her learning process. This would build confidence in the students' capabilities and hence enable them to achieve success. However, this does not mean that the needs of every student will be matched by the school. Some schools may offer electives and programmes that others do not. This does not mean that they are not doing enough for their students.

Schools have limited resources and these would decide what they can realistically offer their students. This is where students can look towards the Cluster and Zonal Centres of Excellence when sourcing for appropriate electives and programmes that they can benefit from. Whilst the schools can provide varied and interesting initiatives to facilitate learning, students themselves need to be guided and driven to want to succeed and, to seize the opportunities available. This is where the role of parents and the community would be most crucial.

#### Role of Parents and the Community

It is acknowledged that parents and the community play important roles in enabling learning that influence the ability of students to cope with and succeed in school. One of the more common issues is that of portraying a negative stereotype of what a particular stream, course or subject combination would lead to. Such perceptions influence the outcomes that the student finally delivers. For example, if we propagate the belief that a technical stream student would end up with an ITE certificate that limits his range of job opportunities, then the student and others would realise this belief and deliver exactly what is perceived.

Parents and the community should send out more positive signals to encourage the student to excel in whatever course he undertakes and get him to believe that there are various means for him to climb to higher achievement levels. Positive parental and community support and encouragement can drive the student to view continuous learning as the key to better qualifications and eventually employment opportunities in a highly competitive world.



***“It is not realistic to expect every student to end up as a doctor, engineer or lawyer, but it is important to communicate the belief that students should seize the opportunities available, maximise their learning and excel in their chosen fields.”***

At home, developing a trusting and loving relationship with the children enhances family bonds and mutual respect. This enables the student to bear the interests of his family in whatever he does. It is a well-known fact that students who do well usually do so to live up to the trust and love they enjoy at home. Parents can further support the student by involving him in making decisions, especially those that affect him, e.g. in choosing course subjects. When he is more involved in deciding on things that affect him, the student becomes more responsible for what he is doing. This makes him want to do well.

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These are just some of the things parents can do to support the student. There are skills needed and this is where community support groups like AMP, Mendaki and others can lead in helping parents acquire such skills and information. Providing courses and programmes for parents is one way. An alternative would be to form learning groups of like-minded parents who can learn from each other, with resource persons from self-help groups and the education community leading these groups.



It is not realistic to expect every student to end up as a doctor, engineer or lawyer, but it is important to communicate the belief that students should seize the opportunities available, maximise their learning and excel in their chosen fields. Every parent must believe that all students can excel, albeit each one achieving his own degree of success via a variety of means. Put more simply, everyone can achieve, but the route taken by each one differs as no two students are alike in their approach to learning.

#### **Simple List of what ADE is all about**

In conclusion, let us try to create a simple list of what ADE is meant to portray and what it does not. Hopefully, this listing can help us to benefit most from what is available in our schools. ADE can provide opportunities for our students to excel and achieve, and in so doing, reach out for the opportunities available for the taking in a rapidly changing and demanding world.

#### **ADE**

##### ***What it is***

- Caters to the needs of most students
- Assists in identifying inherent strengths and talents
- Provides adequate opportunities for effective student learning
- Provides a varied and flexible school programme
- Provides a variety of electives to cater to most students
- Enables students to work for success

##### ***What it is NOT***

- Caters to the needs of every student
- Identifies strengths and talents of students
- Ensures all students learn effectively
- Provides programmes to suit the needs of every student
- Provides electives to meet the needs of every student
- Ensures all students achieve equal success

*The writer is an External Consultant to the National Institute of Education (NIE) and a Project Manager with the NIE Planning Office in Bahrain. He was formerly a School Superintendent with the Ministry of Education until he retired in March 2007. Views expressed are his personal opinion based on his experiences as an educator.*

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# WHITHER OUR MADRASAHS?

*Mahdi Mahyudin, Azeemah Mustafa and Yang Razali Kassim*

*When Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim announced the Joint Madrasah System model in October 2007, many applauded the initiative while others were apprehensive.*

**THE INTRODUCTION** of Compulsory Education (CE) by the government in 2003 was a milestone for Singaporeans. All children would have to be schooled, at least up to Primary 6. For the Muslim community, the significant impact was on the local madrasah system. Until now, our madrasah students did not have to sit for the mainstream Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). As this is something totally new to them, the big question is: Can our madrasah students make it under CE? What does the future hold for the madrasah system as a whole?

## **The Challenge**

The challenge for the madrasahs now is how to ensure their survival – without compromising the quality of the system and the graduates that it produces. Ever since the CE, our madrasahs have been trying hard to adapt. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), as the authority on Islamic affairs, has been playing its part to help the madrasahs face the changed landscape. A key development has been the introduction of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS) to help the madrasahs adjust. But the adaptation process post-CE has not been easy. While many in the community welcome the JMS, some harbour apprehensions, if not suspicion, towards the JMS. Given the importance of madrasahs to the community, the madrasah issue was the subject of a closed-door roundtable discussion recently organised jointly by AMP and its research arm, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). Taking part were community leaders, academics and senior representatives and officials from Malay/Muslim organisations and mosques.

When Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, announced the JMS model in October 2007, many applauded the initiative while others were apprehensive. The online debate and coffeeshop talk on the JMS were passionate, fuelled by MUIS' revelation of how this system would work.

Over the years, support for madrasah education has been divided. Many within the Muslim community wish to see our madrasahs flourish and progress further; an increasing number of parents are opting to send their children to madrasahs instead of mainstream schools. At the same time, just as many wonder whether our madrasahs should continue, given the state they are in. One of the problems lies in the inability of the madrasahs to live up to

expectations. The challenges they face range from the quality of their schooling and lack of funding to inefficiency – despite reforms in the past. This predicament is reflected in the employability of madrasah graduates, the management of the system, teachers' remuneration and availability of resources.

Apprehensions have arisen whether the madrasahs can cope with the demands of CE. As a project funded by the public wholly or partly, the madrasahs are expected to be run efficiently and produce students that are assets to the community.

Madrasahs in Singapore have a long tradition. They pride themselves in churning out Islamic scholars who contribute immensely to the development of religious knowledge in the community and also in the region during the earlier years. There is no doubt that in the end, the community will want to see the madrasahs continue so that there is an uninterrupted supply of respected religious figures who can ensure the growth of

Islamic religious knowledge in Singapore. But a restructuring of the madrasahs is inevitable if their future is to be assured.

### Joint Madrasah System (JMS)

The move to implement JMS in 2009 is a reform measure to close the gap between the madrasahs and national schools. Administered by MUIS, JMS is an integrated system involving Madrasah Al-Irsyad, AlJunied and Al-Arabiah. Al-Irsyad will offer primary education while AlJunied and Al-Arabiah provide secondary education. Students who are less inclined toward Islamic studies can chose Al-Arabiah for secular education in a madrasah setting, while those who are interested to pursue Islamic education at higher levels can go to AlJunied. The specialisation is meant to accommodate the growing number of parents who expect the standards of the mainstream schools in the madrasahs but without disappointing those who are comfortable with the existing madrasah system. Thus the JMS provides options or alternative routes to madrasah education for students upon entering the secondary level.

Reactions to the reform in the madrasah system have been varied. Those who are concerned about the current load on the madrasahs expect some easing on this front, including the number of mandatory madrasah subjects. Some parents applaud the alternative routes open under the JMS while some are critical. Community leaders have welcomed MUIS' commitment to ensure an adequate supply of

administrative and teaching resources. Madrasah teachers welcomed the move to uplift their economic status and hope the changes could one day lead to a first class full-time Islamic education.

It is too early to forecast the effect of JMS on madrasahs and Islamic education in general. Nevertheless, there are at least three major aspects that affect the madrasah landscape and the future of Islamic education in Singapore. They are the role of MUIS; the direction of Al-Arabiah; and the welfare of the non-JMS madrasahs.

### Role of MUIS

The future of the JMS very much lies in the hands of the madrasahs, but the role of MUIS is just as critical. Apart from providing overall supervision of the system, MUIS plays an important supporting role to the madrasahs, especially in introducing a new management system and overcoming resource deficiency. As a result, the role played by MUIS may

inevitably lead to a more centralised management, which MUIS may however want to handle sensitively.

On the one hand, centralising the management system will mean a more transparent madrasah and a free flow of communication between the madrasahs and the authority. In addition, MUIS' involvement will ensure the madrasahs' development is on track and progress monitored through a standard system. Moving forward, limited resources, training and development programmes of these madrasahs could be synergised and better handled.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, centralising the management could risk eroding the independence of the madrasahs, unless autonomy is given to them, which is a trend that mainstream schools are driving towards. Understandably, some of the madrasahs fear greater bureaucracy and a slower decision-making process. If, as some believe, educational leadership means giving authority to the principals to decide the direction of madrasahs, then any excessive intervention by MUIS may cloud and complicate the decision-making process of individual madrasahs.

The bigger question for MUIS is whether it should act as the MOE – the "Ministry of Education" – of the madrasahs. Even if MUIS has all the resources to do so, it is something to be cautious about given the strong spirit of independence that the madrasahs have always



Photo: AMP

displayed. But the madrasahs themselves have to decide whether they can improve the madrasah system on their own under the post-CE scenario, or require the support of MUIS.

### Direction of Al-Arabiah

The Al-Arabiah approach is a unique example. It is the first school to experiment secular education in an Islamic environment. This will mainly attract students who wish to study academic subjects within a madrasah setting. While the notion of “Islamic environment” itself has not been thoroughly discussed, for most it is the attire, the segregation of the sexes and the hope of raising morally upright children are the main considerations.

The Al-Arabiah model has some similarities with the proposal mooted by the incipient Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) in the 1990 National Convention of Malay/Muslim Professionals which led to AMP’s formation. In its recommendation to shape a model minority community, the professionals suggested that madrasahs should generate more professional Muslims who would breathe the spirit of the Quran and Sunnah (See accompanying articles). Furthermore, adopting MUIS’ guidelines while retaining the madrasahs’ history and identity are consistent with the trend that other religious schools have subscribed to to survive. A case in point is the Canossa Convent Primary School that still retains its identity as a missionary school. Al-Arabiah is hence expected to produce well-rounded students who excel in their secular education while being sufficiently equipped in their Islamic grounding.

One major fear with regard to Al-Arabiah’s future is that it might turn out to be ‘secularised’ by offering secular subjects, in line with MOE’s guidelines, with a very minimal religious load. The value in Al-Arabiah’s approach is an education that combines secular and religious instructions under one roof. To what extent can Al-Arabiah’s students achieve better results than their Muslim peers attending national schools remains to be seen. If Al-Arabiah succeeds, it can attract more students. If it produces inferior results, it will die a slow death, as experienced by our Malay schools in the 1960s and 1970s. Any closure of a full-time madrasah, given the already limited numbers of such madrasahs, will be a great loss to the community. A small enrolment into all the madrasahs each year will result in a decreased number in the community who are Islamically-educated.

There are, however, some in the community who wonder whether there is a need for an Al Arabiah model since the national schools are already providing first world education and the part-time madrasahs at many mosques can provide the religious content. Moreover, even if parents would like the “Islamic environment” for their children, the question is why this should be funded by the community. Nonetheless, Al Arabiah or any similar model should eventually evolve into a privately-funded school that charges a premium similar to existing private non-madrasah schools.

### Welfare of Non-JMS Madrasahs

A critical factor in the future of local madrasahs is funding. The aid package of \$700,000 for local madrasahs shows MUIS’ support for the success of the madrasahs under the JMS. It is laudable that non-participating madrasahs are allowed to join JMS later when they are ready to, while those on-board can opt out when they choose to move on their own. However, the community is eager to know MUIS’ timeframe as to when the JMS could be declared a success, or otherwise. Also, will the same financial assistance be extended to the madrasahs beyond the JMS ambit? However, if the same assistance is rendered to those outside, where then lies the incentive to join JMS?

MUIS’ announcement to exercise fair treatment to all madrasahs, regardless of their affiliation with JMS, is certainly welcomed by the community. Being an authority that has a direct interest in the formation of JMS and its success, MUIS will certainly spare no effort in ensuring the JMS meets its targets and not fail. But this has raised a subsequent fear that MUIS may overstretch its resources for JMS.

Another concern is the extent of MUIS’ involvement in the internal matters of madrasahs within JMS. With the appointment of MUIS’ senior officials as directors at these madrasahs, what would be the new perimeters for their respective principals? It is hoped this matter is clearly spelt out so that duplication of job or disagreements could be minimised, if not eliminated. Could the fear of excessive intervention by MUIS, and therefore the erosion of independence, be a reason for the other madrasahs staying out of the JMS for now?

### Managing Expectations

Less than a year from now our madrasahs will face the new challenge. The first cohort of their Primary 6 students will sit for the compulsory PSLE. Their performance from now on will mean a lot to the future of the entire madrasah education system. Hopefully, the madrasahs can continue to operate within their existing system vis-à-vis the overall national education landscape. Nevertheless, not much is made public on their preparation to face the PSLE. Although several madrasahs are known to have taken the initiative by taking part in the PSLE syndicate for several years now, the result is not readily available to gauge their readiness to face this new challenge.

Armed with the intention to bring madrasah education to new heights, the JMS ought to be given the opportunity to prove itself. Similarly, assurance should be given that Arabic and other core requirements of a madrasah educational system will not be abandoned. While it is imperative for one to acquire a rounded religious knowledge, one’s competitiveness in other areas should also not be neglected.

The quest for a Singapore Muslim identity – a community that is an asset in a multi-religious society – is an important goal. A reformed madrasah system must be a crucial part of it.

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# REMODELLING THE MADRASAH IN SINGAPORE:

## *Past, Present And Future*

*Yang Razali Kassim*

*Not many people realise that the first madrasah in Singapore was set up as early as 1907 with an indirect link to the Muslim world's early reformers... Our madrasahs today can and should live up to the spirit of their predecessors.*

**WHEN I** was an undergraduate at the then University of Singapore, there were two fellow female students who made quite an impression despite coming from the all-female Madrasah Al-Maarif. They spoke fluent English and were bright. One of them was so good in Economics that she became a reference point for those amongst us who took the subject. It was my first time coming into contact with the products of our madrasah system. Their impression on me was such that, many years later, I could not really understand the fuss when madrasahs in Singapore became the subject of some debate.

### **The initial controversies**

In the 1990s, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had wondered whether the six madrasahs in Singapore were producing

graduates who could survive in the economy. That created some controversy. The Malay/Muslim community immediately felt threatened. Some even wondered whether the government was "softening" the ground for a possible closure of the madrasahs in Singapore. But it became clear to some in the community that the madrasahs in Singapore could voluntarily close down eventually – if nothing was done about their viability.

As the government saw it, our madrasahs were overproducing. The community was churning out more madrasah graduates than it needed. The problem was many of these graduates could not find jobs other than being *asatizahs*. Being trained mainly in religious knowledge, many of our madrasah students ended up not doing what they were trained for. In other words,

the government was raising the yellow flag for the community to sit up and take note of an emerging problem.

While there were rational reasons behind the government's concern, some within the Malay/Muslim community were restive. They were reminded of the 1960s when the government faced a similar problem with Chinese education. Graduates of Chinese-stream schools were not getting jobs because they were not trained for the growing market for English-speaking workers. Chinese parents were increasingly favouring English-stream schools. The declining popularity of Chinese schools, amidst widespread student radicalism, was one of the key reasons that led eventually to the closure of, first, Nanyang University, and later Chinese-stream schools.



The Malay/Muslim community had seen a similar fate befalling Malay stream schools in the 1970s. The tide of the market had led to the closure of Malay stream schools. An important symbol or icon of Malay language and culture had gone. The community would not accept the closure of another of its identity marker which the madrasahs have become. A closure of the madrasahs would be disastrous for their sense of identity as Muslims in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. More importantly, as a community, they needed a steady stream of trained and qualified people who could provide them with moral and spiritual compass as they moved forward into the 21st century. The madrasah system is best placed to produce such people – the ustaz and ustazah, or asatizahs, and the ulamas.

So the challenge before the community was how to preserve the madrasah system, while making sure its survival is in tune with the forces of demand – the demand of the community, and the demand of the market. The demand of the community is what is expected by Islam of the asatizah and ulama class – their leadership in religious matters. The demand of the market is the acceptability of our madrasah graduates in the economy. Are the two forces compatible? Certainly.

This was clear from the 1990s, if not earlier. That was why at the First National Convention of Malay/Muslim

Professionals in Singapore in 1990, which led to the formation of AMP, there was a proposal for a restructuring of the madrasah system to meet these two demands (see accompanying article on pages 28 to 30 on the 1990 resolution on the madrasah system). Significantly, 17 years later, the essence of the proposal is finally becoming a reality with the introduction of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS) by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS).

### Key elements of the 1990 proposal by Muslim professionals

The 1990 convention proposed the development of the local madrasah system into “an excellent centre of learning for both religious and secular knowledge”. Within 15 years, the convention proposed, the community should aspire to see the madrasahs emerge into well-established institutions similar to the mission schools.

The convention also envisioned the local madrasah system becoming a training ground for scholars of Islam. At the highest level, the madrasah system should become like Indonesia’s IAIN (now known as Universitas Islam Negeri or UIN) “where potential top brains in Islamic studies are produced and later sent for higher studies overseas”.

The vision of transforming our madrasah system – from a cluster of struggling religious schools into an Islamic educational system

of excellence – must necessarily entail a major restructuring. As the professionals envisaged in 1990: “Eventually, there should only be one madrasah specializing in post-secondary education (eg either Aljunied or Al-Maarif), one in secondary education (again either Aljunied or Al-Maarif) and one for primary education (eg Al Irshad).”

A restructuring of the madrasah system in this direction was actually already being contemplated by MUIS at the time. What the 1990 convention did was to give it the necessary push to realise what the professionals thought was a vision worthy of support by the community. Among the other changes proposed by the convention included: a) reducing the heavy curriculum of the madrasah schools; b) reducing intake so that the madrasahs could focus on quality rather than quantity, including engaging qualified teachers; and streaming as well as vocational training.

The principal objective of the restructuring, the 1990 convention said, should be to “provide the best Islamic education to the majority of students while at the same time equip them with sufficient skills and knowledge for employment”.

### Key elements of the JMS

Although MUIS took about 17 years to finally restructure the local madrasah system under



what is known as the Joint Madrasah System, it is better late than never. But the JMS did not come out of the blue. It should be seen as an evolution of the thought process within the community that stretched over nearly two decades. In that sense it is a change that is generated from within the community, albeit jolted by the government. This continuity in idea should be seen as reflecting the long-standing concerns of the community for the wellbeing of our madrasahs.

The JMS will be implemented in 2009 and will involve 3 of the 6 full-time madrasahs. The 3 madrasahs pioneering the JMS are Al-Irsyad, Aljunied and Al-Arabiah. Some \$2 million has been set aside to start up the JMS, mainly for the recruitment of new teachers and staff. The Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, told Parliament in March 2008 that the long-term goal was for the 3 madrasahs to be managed independently, albeit with the assistance of MUIS. The 3 other madrasahs – Al-Maarif, Alsagoff and Wak Tanjong – are staying out for now. They may have their own reasons for wanting to remain on their own, whatever these may be. How well Al-Irsyad, Aljunied and Al-Arabiah do under the JMS will eventually be the pull – or push – factor that will determine the future of JMS.

A key feature of JMS is role specialisation – something which the Muslim professionals called for in 1990. Each of the 3 madrasahs will specialise in their areas of strength while preserving their respective identities. Hence Al-Irsyad will specialise in primary education while Aljunied and Al-Arabiah in secondary. Aljunied and Al-Arabiah will therefore stop taking in primary school students and focus on moulding secondary students. Al-Irsyad will stop taking in secondary school students and act as a feeder for Aljunied and Al-Arabiah for secondary education. In this way, the 3 madrasahs will mutually reinforce each other.

Aljunied will focus on producing the religious elite for the community. It will have a hybrid curriculum giving equal emphasis on religious knowledge and academic subjects. Al-Arabiah will focus on producing graduates who want to be academically trained but with a religious grounding.

The immediate challenge for the JMS is to ensure that students who enter the madrasah system can pass the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) – something which they did not have to go through before. This is a change brought about by the policy of Compulsory Education in 2003, meaning all children in Singapore must go through the PSLE. In other words, students who go through our madrasah education must also have some basic ability to pass the PSLE.

This will give them the option to join the conventional mainstream schools if they

so wish later. In this way, the madrasah students will open up their options in life, though the choice is up to them.

### Inspiration from the Past for the Future

Not many people realise that the first madrasah in Singapore was set up as early as 1907 with an indirect link to the 19th and early 20th century reformers of the Muslim world. Al-Iqbal, as it was called, was founded by Syed Sheikh Al Hadi, who was influenced by such Islamic reformists in the Middle East as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. Al Hadi's madrasah was revolutionary as it integrated religious instructions with "modern" subjects like mathematics, science and even town planning. Unfortunately, Hadi's madrasah closed down a year later because of the lack of community support, forcing him to move to Malaya. But Al-Iqbal was a trendsetter for reform-oriented madrasah education in the region. It embodied the spirit of reformist Islam and popularised the idea of a modernising Malay/ Muslim – something we are still grappling with today.

Our madrasahs today can and should live up to the spirit of their predecessors. The reformist zeal has been there even before the community got caught up with its own challenges of identity – and when public focus was on such issues as the tudung, and then the fear of radicalism, which our madrasahs have fortunately been spared from. Singapore's madrasah system is clearly facing a crossroads; the path forward is for the madrasahs themselves to decide. Our madrasahs today may not be in their best conditions, while the JMS itself may still be evolving. But the future can certainly be better. Like the first madrasah in Singapore set up in 1907, our current madrasah system can be just as reform-minded.

“ *The reformist zeal has been there even before the community got caught up with its own challenges of identity – and when public focus was on such issues as the tudung, and then the fear of radicalism, which our madrasahs have fortunately been spared from.* ”

*Yang Razali Kassim is Supervising Editor of Karyawan and former Chairman of AMP. He was part of the Convention group in 1990 that debated the future of the madrasahs in Singapore.*



# FLASHBACK - THE MADRASAH ISSUE IN 1990: RESTRUCTURING THE MADRASAH SYSTEM

*From The First National Convention of  
Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals in 1990*

*Yang Razali Kassim and Winda Guntor*

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**THE FIRST** National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals on October 6 & 7, 1990 raised and discussed many issues facing the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore, one of which was madrasah education. There was a call then by Malay/Muslim professionals in Singapore to restructure the madrasah system to achieve the following objectives:

- To develop the madrasah system as an excellent centre of learning for both religious and secular knowledge;
- To ensure that the madrasah system becomes a conducive training ground for potential scholars.

Seventeen years on, and with the implementation of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS) next year, this issue has resurfaced and has prompted numerous discussions within the community.

Below is an excerpt of what was recommended for madrasah education in Singapore in the journal published and presented at the convention entitled *Forging A Vision – Malays/Muslims in 21st Century Singapore: Prospects, Challenges & Directions* (from para 56 page 147 to para 68 page 149).

***“Conceptually, within 10 to 15 years, the Malay/Muslim community should aspire to see the madrasahs in Singapore develop into well-established institutions similar to various mission schools. ”***

## RESTRUCTURING THE MADRASAH SYSTEM

### 56. Long-term objectives

a. To develop the madrasah system as an excellent centre of learning for both religious and secular knowledge. Conceptually, within 10 to 15 years, the Malay/Muslim community should aspire to see the madrasahs in Singapore develop into well-established institutions similar to various mission schools.

b. To ensure that the madrasah system become(s) a conducive training ground for most of our potential scholars of the above Scholars Programme. At the highest level, the madrasah system should be like Institut Agama Islam Nasional (IAIN) in Indonesia where potential top brains in Islamic studies are produced and later sent for higher studies overseas.

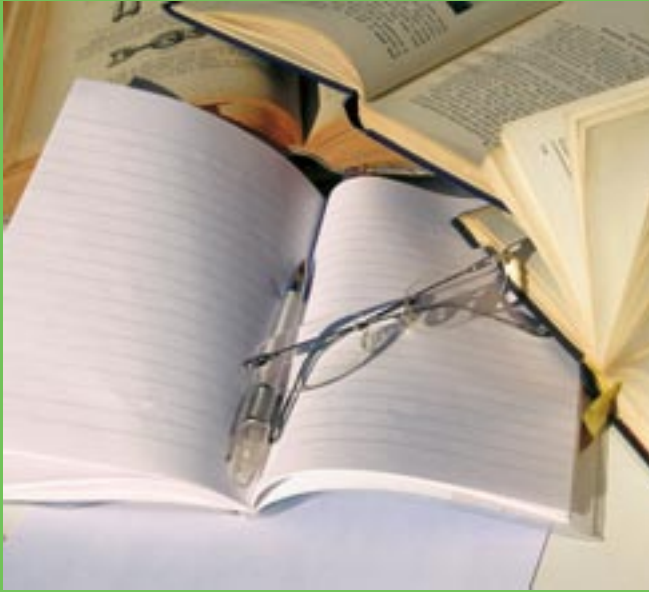
57. To fulfill the above objectives, efforts must be made in the next few years to reorganise and restructure the present madrasah system.

58. Eventually, there should only be one madrasah specialising in post-secondary education (e.g. either AlJunied or Al-Maarif), one in secondary education (again either AlJunied or Al-Maarif) and one for primary education (e.g. Al-Irsyad).

59. In terms of curriculum the madrasah system should move towards a more balanced curriculum with 50% of it covering academic or secular subjects, while the other half, Islamic/Arabic subjects. At the highest level, the curriculum should be such that for those who have the potential to become Islamic scholars they should be given a more rigorous training in Islamic subjects than the secular ones.



60. At the lower level, the madrasah system must eventually move towards a curriculum with a higher content of secular syllabus (e.g. 60% secular subjects and 40% religious/Arabic subjects). This is because the bulk of the madrasah students both presently and in the future are unlikely to pursue a career as Islamic scholars or even religious teachers. Since most of them will end up looking for



employment like the products of the secular system, it is prudent to ensure that they will leave the system with proper skills and knowledge needed for general employment.

### **Short-term objectives**

61. The restructuring process which is being undertaken by MUIS now should be continued and should be completed within the next five years.

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### **The principal short-term objectives of the restructuring should be:**

62. a. To provide the best of Islamic education to the majority of students while at the same time equip them with sufficient skills and knowledge for employment.
  - b. To identify the best among the students who have the potential and keenness to pursue a career as religious scholars. These students should be channelled to an intensive programme where training in Islamic studies should be more rigorous than for the others.
63. Since the attrition rate of madrasah students is high, the following steps are proposed:

### **Reduce the curriculum**

64. At the primary and secondary levels, more emphasis should be given to secular subjects to enable majority of the students to prepare for national examinations such as the PSLE and GCE 'O' Levels. The objective is to make it easier for those who want to be transferred to secular school at the next stage of education and also easier to find employment if they decide to leave the system.

### **Reduce intake**

65. Given its present shortcomings it was unlikely for the madrasahs to be able to provide the best necessary educational opportunities as the Government schools. Hence, the possibility of a higher attrition rate.

66. To reduce this problem, student enrolments should be reduced to a manageable proportion particularly at primary and secondary levels. With fewer students the system should be able to operate more effectively because:

- a. It will require only a small number of talented and dedicated teachers
- b. More attention can be given to the need of the students
- c. Less expenses will be required to finance the salary of the teaching staff

### **Streaming**

67. At secondary and post-secondary levels, streaming should be conducted for the purpose of giving the correct type of education for students of different aptitudes. For those who have the aptitude for Islamic studies at a higher level, a heavier curriculum on Islamic/ Arabic subjects should be given to them. Similarly for those who are keener towards secular subjects, they should be given a lighter curriculum on religious/Arabic subjects.

### **Vocational training**

68. For students who do not have the aptitude for any academic subjects, secular or otherwise, they should be given some form of vocational training. Certainly this requires assistance from the Ministry of Education to enable madrasah students undergo vocational training at some centres.







# NIKAH GANTUNG:

## A 'Halal' Alternative to 'Unlawful' Dating?

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Hasanul Arifin

**NIKAH GANTUNG** has been a known practice by members of the Malay/Muslim community for quite some time. In fact, it was one of the topics raised during a discussion session on gender interactions organised by Young AMP under its Muslim Youth Intelligentsia Series for Malay/Muslim undergraduates in February this year. In my personal experience, many of my friends have commented that they feel *nikah gantung* may be a solution to romance and relationship woes among youths. Despite this, there has been very few academic studies or publications that have been conducted or written on the particular subject matter, although it has been briefly mentioned in the book "Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore" by Judith Djamour.

### What is Nikah Gantung?

According to the anthropological study by Djamour, *nikah gantung* is a suspended marriage contract that is practised by the Javanese and Boyanese communities. This practice, although not widespread or prevalent enough to be considered a social phenomenon, cannot be considered to be uncommon either, especially within these two communities. The suspension or *gantung* mentioned here is the suspension of the rights to consummate the marriage. In other words, the couple that is going through such a marriage contract is still registered and legally bounded to one another by a state-appointed *kadi* in a solemnisation or *akad nikah* ceremony. The only difference is that the right

to consummate the marriage is temporarily suspended for a stipulated amount of time. This altered clause is based on the reason that it is a marriage with a girl who has yet to attain puberty, hence is deemed unfit for consummation, until she has attained puberty. As such, the girl continues to live in her parents' household, separate from her husband, until she has attained puberty. This is based on the account of Aisyah's marriage to the Prophet. According to Djamour, when this is achieved, the suspension or *gantung* is then lifted, and the girl is then handed over to her husband for consummation and starts the life of a wife in her husband's household from that point onwards.

*“ This point of view can be seen as the ‘Islamic solution’ for students in love who are concerned with the halal and haram aspects of gender interactions and are already set in committing their lives to one another. Increasingly, we notice this growing practice amongst students who are in love and want to preserve the “islamicity” of their relationships with the opposite sex. ”*

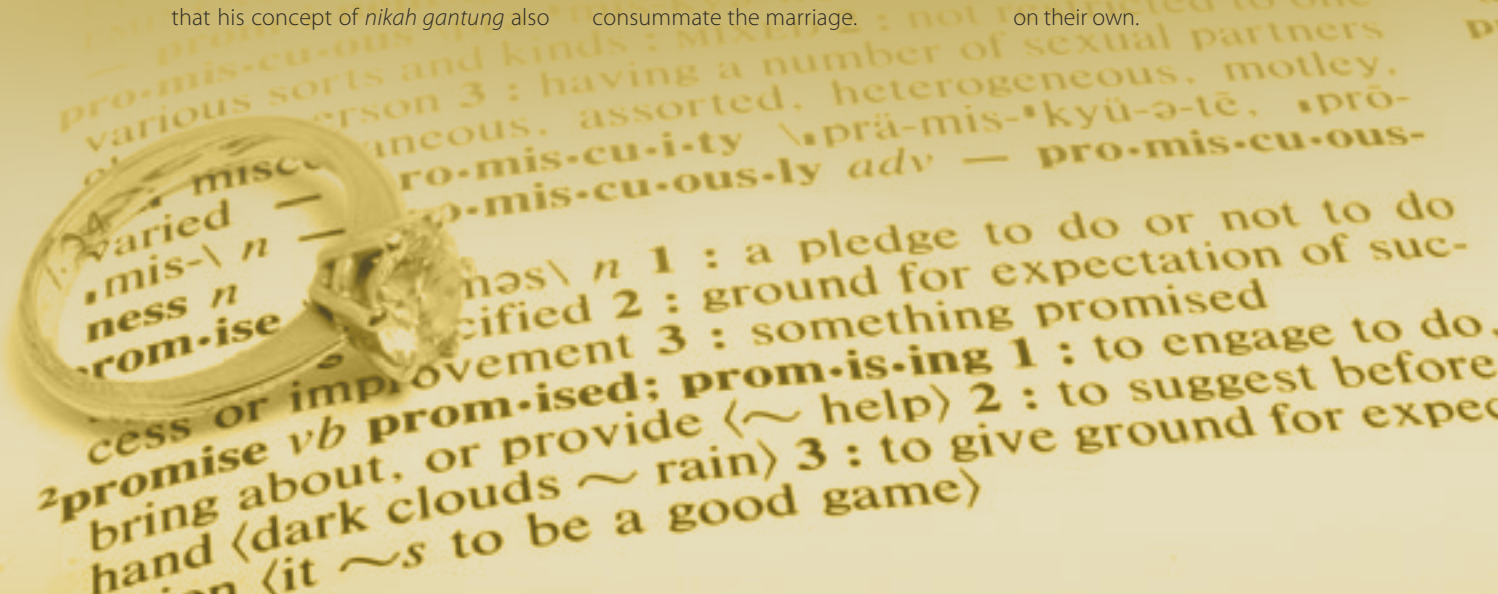
This definition of *nikah gantung*, however, differs from the personal studies conducted for the purpose of this article. *Nikah gantung* still remains, although it is practised in a different way, possibly because it has evolved over time to adapt and suit the changing needs of the community as well as to suit the changes in marital laws in Singapore where child marriages are no longer legal.

**The Differing Concepts of Nikah Gantung**

Mr Zawawi Buang, a 47-year-old Javanese Workshop Instructor who went through *nikah gantung* at the age of 21 is still happily married with 4 children. He shares that the temporary suspension does not only involve the temporary suspension of the rights to consummation but also the temporary suspension of a proper marriage ceremony for a stipulated period of time. This means that his concept of *nikah gantung* also

involves postponing of the wedding or *bersanding* ceremony to a later date, usually for up to 2 years from the *akad nikah* ceremony. The reason for doing so is mainly to save up enough money to pay for the marriage ceremony as well as the financial liabilities that would be incurred in living together, which may include the purchase of a HDB apartment. As such, after the *akad nikah* ceremony, the married couple will live in separate households, restricting their engagements with one another to that of a social, non-sexual relationship. The husband is still required to contribute part of his income to support the livelihood of the wife in accordance with the Syariah, although they may be living separately from one another. This act of living separately comes to an end once the *bersanding* ceremony is conducted. As such, the relationship after that evolves to that of a typical husband and wife's, where the husband is then allowed to consummate the marriage.

This concept of *nikah gantung* differs from the one held by Madam Mariam Alias, a 46-year-old private tutor of mixed Indian-Malay descent who went through *nikah gantung* at the age of 19 and remains happily married with 7 children. Madam Mariam's concept of *nikah gantung* extends beyond working adults saving up for the *bersanding* ceremony and the financial liabilities that would be incurred for a married couple living together. In fact, Madam Mariam views *nikah gantung* as the ideal alternative to the dating culture prevalent among youths today which may be a slippery path towards premarital sex, modelling her ideas based on the marriage trends of youths in Saudi Arabia. As such, her concept of *nikah gantung* revolves around the idea of parents taking up the responsibility to support the married couple financially temporarily until the husband is financially ready and the couple is independent enough to live on their own.





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*Nikah gantung is a tricky subject that has not been studied in great detail and its definitions vary from one individual to another.*

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This point of view can be seen as the ‘Islamic solution’ for students in love who are concerned with the *halal* and *haram* aspects of gender interactions and are already set in committing their lives to one another. Increasingly, we notice this growing practice amongst students who are in love and want to preserve the “Islamicity” of their relationships with the opposite sex.

#### **The Potential Problems of *Nikah Gantung***

On the other hand, it may be argued that this proposed solution may open doors to even more problems, which may include the loss in the sacredness of the marriage contract, as immature youths may abuse the circumstances they are offered and treat the marriage


contract lightly, resulting in the possible increase in divorce rates.

According to Ustaz Abdul Rahman Shariff, a deputy *kadi* who has handled several cases of *nikah gantung*, it is often performed among youths whom he feels have not yet achieved the maturity required to carry out the roles of husbands and wives. It is also sometimes practised among youths to cover up unwanted pregnancies.

Besides the potential problems of immaturity and divorce, there are moral and ethical considerations in the practice of *nikah gantung*. Ustaz Abdul Rahman says such a concept is foreign to the spirit of Muslim marriages, whereupon the signing of the marriage

contract, the husband is obliged to fulfil his obligations towards his wife, especially financially. He disagrees with the notion that parents should bear the financial burden of their children’s marriage as this is contrary to the fundamental clauses of a marriage contract, forcing the parents to perform roles that are not supposed to be theirs. This view is shared by Mr Zawawi, who argues that the suspension of the financial responsibilities of a husband would reduce the marriage institution to that of a ‘legalised’ boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. This shaky affair would be made more complicated should the couple disrespect the mutual agreement of restricting their relationship to that which is non-sexual in nature. This circumstance may lead to





unwanted pregnancies, which would further add to the financial burden that is borne by the parents. In addition, the young husband may not be matured or responsible enough to anticipate his new role as a father to his children.

Madam Mariam defends her idea of *nikah gantung*, asserting that the prevention of sin is greater in value than that of divorce. In fact, divorce is never considered a sin, whereas unlawful gender interaction is. She further adds that the usage of contraceptives, common in today's world, would help to prevent unwanted pregnancies as discussed previously.

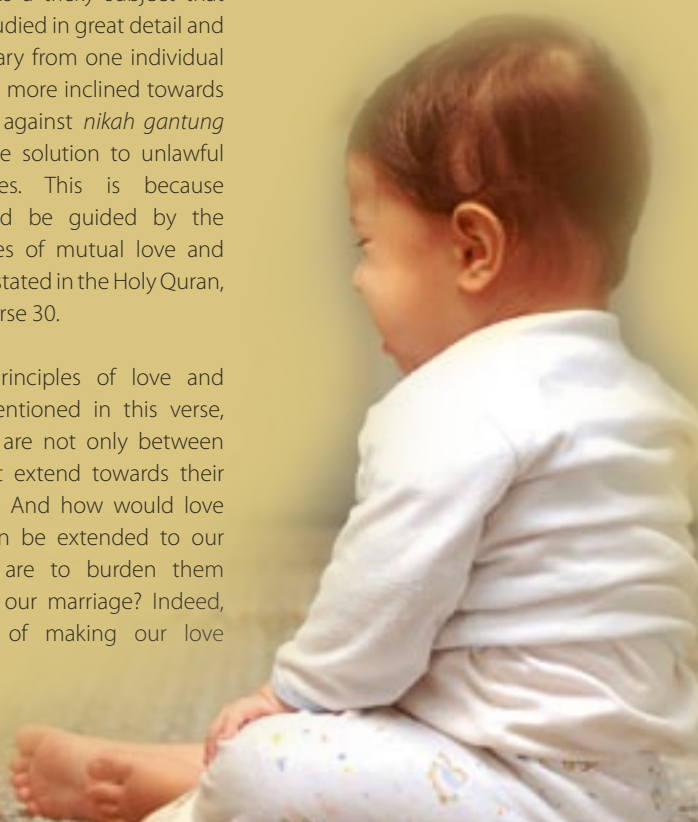
#### A 'Halal' Alternative?

*Nikah gantung* is a tricky subject that has not been studied in great detail and its definitions vary from one individual to another. I am more inclined towards the arguments against *nikah gantung* as an alternative solution to unlawful dating practices. This is because marriage should be guided by the ethical principles of mutual love and compassion, as stated in the Holy Quran, Surah A-Rum verse 30.

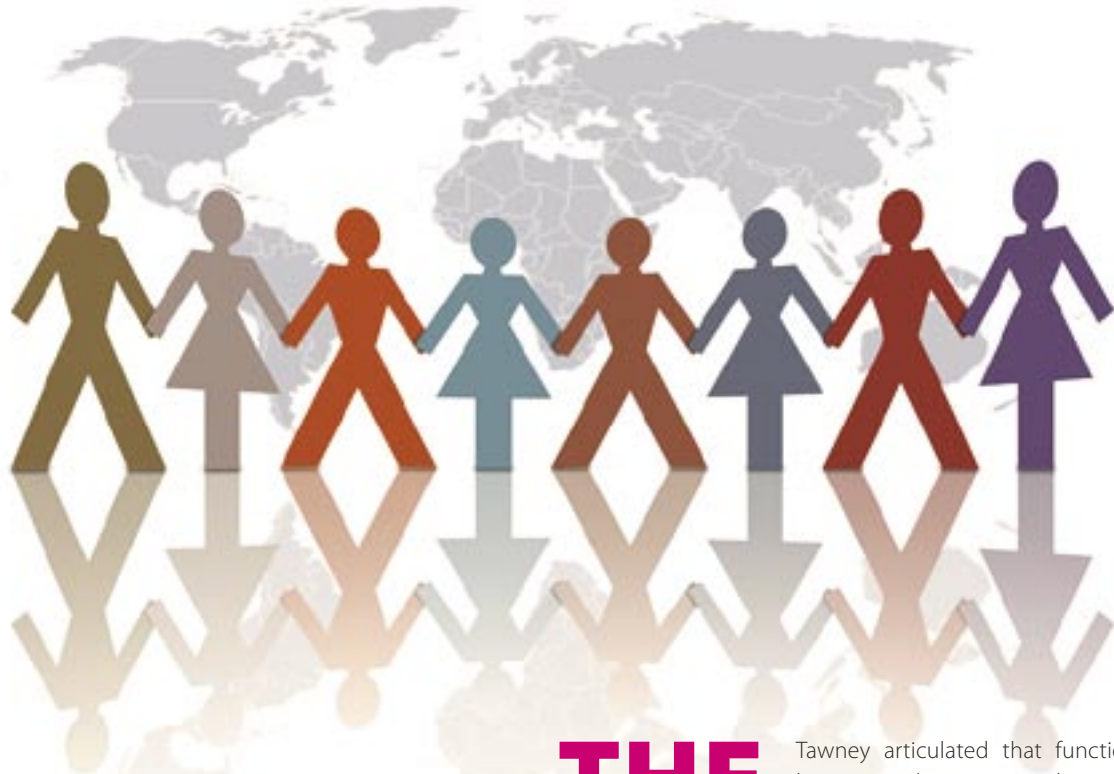
The guiding principles of love and compassion mentioned in this verse, in my opinion, are not only between the couple, but extend towards their parents as well. And how would love and compassion be extended to our parents if we are to burden them financially with our marriage? Indeed, the intentions of making our love

relationships lawful via *nikah gantung* may be to prevent the occurrences of sin and premarital sex. However, to carry out this approach without considering the guiding principles of love and compassion towards our parents would not make our good intentions fully aligned with the spirit of Islam. I am not saying this is wrong. But the idea of formulating a practical way out seems in contrast to the spirit of *jihadun-nafs* (the struggle against one's desires) and the Prophet S.A.W's advice to perform the fast to quell the sexual urges if one cannot afford to marry.

Nonetheless, *nikah gantung* remains a debatable subject that is open to further scrutiny and analysis.



The writer is a first year bioengineering undergraduate in the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is also a member of the NUS Muslim Society.

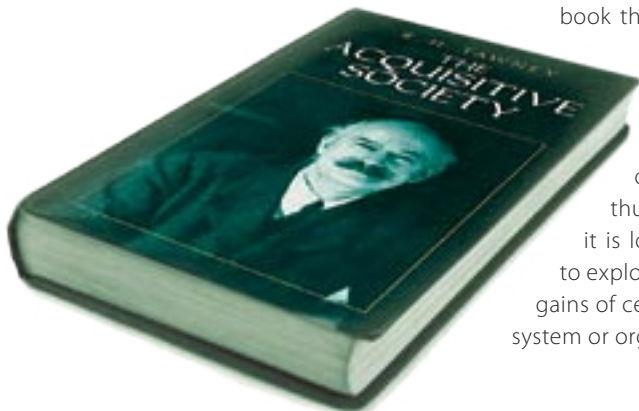


# THE ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

by R.H Tawney

Review by Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib

**THIS IS** probably Tawney's most provocative and influential book. Published in 1920, *The Acquisitive Society* held that the acquisitiveness of a capitalist society was a morally wrong motivating principle. He mentioned in his book that acquisitiveness had and will always corrupt both the rich and the poor. He argued that in capitalist societies work is deprived of its inherent value and thus becomes drudgery, for it is looked at solely as a means to exploit the workers for monetary gains of certain individuals within the system or organisation.



Tawney articulated that function should be a principle governing the way societies work. He also argued that the right to property should be conditional on the obligation to public service. "All rights", as he wrote, "are conditional and derivative, because all power should be conditional and derivative". In his view, this was because they were derived from the end or purpose of a society. If a society is to be healthy, the people must regard themselves not as the owners of the rights, but as trustees for the discharge of functions and the instruments for social purposes.

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A society in which industry and institutions are organised around the concept of human happiness and social good is described by Tawney as functional. According to him, this is in contrast to the 'acquisitive societies' where production and accumulation of wealth have become ends in themselves.

Let us observe in the context of Singapore, especially where community or social organisations are concerned.

Do these institutions play their part in providing human happiness and social good whilst providing community service and playing the advocacy role for the

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***Let us observe in the context of Singapore, especially where community or social organisations are concerned. Do these institutions play their part in providing human happiness and social good whilst providing community service and playing the advocacy role for the particular community they are serving?***”

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particular community they are serving? These institutions are entrusted to “function” and provide not only financial resources to the needy but also provide answers and solutions to the community issues at hand. Such institutions cannot be functional when they focus their efforts solely on raising funds that goes beyond the productive output for the benefit of the community. Are our community organisations producing programmes based on “function” or “acquisitiveness” as tabled by Tawney?

In a capitalist society, acquisitiveness, which is the pursuit of personal gain rather than good, manifests itself in the religion it embraces. Within the functional societies, Tawney advocates that the institutions and organisations function as educational agencies supporting the production of debates on what the social good might be. This is in line with what Delbert R. Terrill mentioned on the ‘concentration of purpose’ among citizens - and how ‘from those purposes spring rights’.

Function is very much closely related to providing service in this understanding of social purpose. Service, in this sense, is participation in furthering purpose. In this arises a great deal of Tawney’s originality. He ingeniously married service and purpose to the concept of position of property. According to him, by organising around function, the industry and commerce could be governed by the activities of trade boards (participants within the industry who were responsible to the community for the conduct of their industry). An additional feature of his vision was that every trade would be treated as a profession. These traits came together as follows:

The organisation of society using Tawney’s basis of functions instead of rights, implies three things:

- that proprietary rights shall be maintained when they are accompanied by the performance of service and abolished when they are not;
- that the producers shall stand in direct relation to the community for whom production is carried out, so that their responsibility to it may be obvious, not lost, as at present, through their immediate subordination to shareholders whose interest is not service but gain; and
- that the obligation for the maintenance of the service shall rest upon the professional organisations that perform it, and that, subject to the supervision and criticism of the consumer, those organisations shall exercise as much voice in the government of industry as may be needed to ensure that the obligation is discharged.

Function is wrapped up in notions of the common good. A community’s appreciation of what this might entail changes with time. Purpose provides the rationale for industry including other social and economic activity.

*The writer is a Senior Research Assistant with the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), the research arm of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).*





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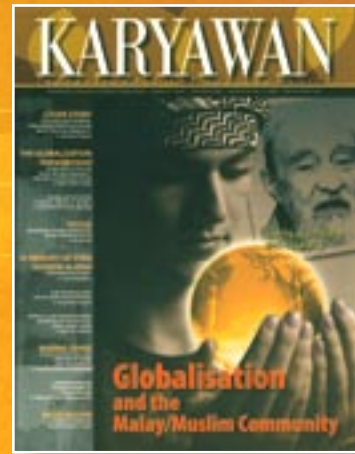
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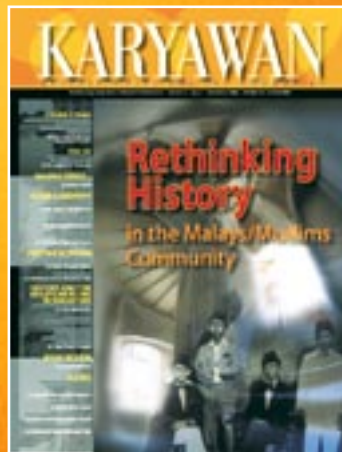
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