

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE IN MALAYSIA

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Honourable Chairman, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

Development, as obvious to us all, carries different meanings to different people. It, likewise, means different things in the different disciplines. To an economist, development is, of course, economic. It is viewed in the light of economic input, the outcome of which is measured by some economic indicators. To the psychologist, development is a process of growing up of individual beings. To the sociologist, development is still economic, although his interest will be more in what the development brings, in sociological terms, to the people.

In the government bureaucracy, one of the more familiar terms is the Five-Year Plans. First used in the USSR in 1929, the planning of national development into various plan periods has become an accepted practice among most countries of the world. Malaysia is no exception.

This year, 1985, marks the end of our sixth plan period. Our first five-year plan that began in 1956 was called the First Malaya Plan or A Development Plan for Malaya, 1956-60. The First Malaysia Plan, 1966-70, is the third plan for the country; we are currently in the Fourth Malaysia Plan.

The First Malaya Plan (1956-60) was said to be

dominated by the defence and security sector and the pre-occupation of finding the revenue to finance the Emergency expenditure, a problem that was aggravated by the decline in the prices of rubber and tin in the aftermath of the Korean War boom (1).

The objectives of the Second Malaya Plan (1961-65) were

an improvement in the rural standard of living, the provision of greater employment opportunities and a faster rate of economic growth, the diversification of agricultural and industrial activities, and an expansion of social overhead facilities.

Of the First Malaysia Plan (1966-70),

the fundamental aim was the creation of an environment in which all the three major ethnic groups could live in dignity and harmony. This was to be achieved through a faster rate of economic growth, the creation of greater employment opportunities, and the reduction in the relative economic imbalance in the distribution of income and wealth.

The Second Malaysia Plan (1971-75) embodied the New Economic Policy which aims at the eradication of poverty by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians, irrespective of race. The New Economic Policy also aims at accelerating the process of restructuring the Malaysian society to correct the economic imbalance so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function.

The Third and the Fourth Malaysia Plans are the continuation of the Second Malaysia Plan; the attainment of the objectives of the New Economic Policy is central to each of them.

Thus, we see that development planning in Malaysia is highly dominated by economic considerations. The economists in our midst will naturally find these development plans interesting for economic analyses and post-mortems. The sociologists among ourselves will find the plans wanting in that not much sociological consideration has been given to the formulation of the various development strategies. Those among us that are philosophically inclined may find the plans to be lopsided or skewed very much towards materialistic and worldly affairs.

My own view, however, is that while it is true that the plans are economic and technological in emphases, "national unity" as the ultimate objective of the New Economic Policy is socio-political in concept, and so are its two-pronged strategies, namely, the eradication of poverty and the restructuring of society. But, unfortunately, beyond these socio-political pronouncements, the plans almost entirely consist of economic and technological programmes for attaining the goals.

Lest it be misunderstood, let me clarify that this address does not at all attempt to make an analysis of the Malaysian development plans. The objective of the plans have been mentioned, however, to demonstrate that Malaysia too is no exception to the general trends of development the world over. They are economic and technology based. However, development plans should not be judged only on the basis of their stated objectives; nor should the development of a society be judged by its national development plans alone. There may be other forces at work within as well as outside the development plans. It is for this reason that I have decided to dwell on the impact of development generally and beyond the scope of the country's development plans.

And now let us get back to the issue before us, namely, the impact of technological development on the political, economic and social life in Malaysia. Systematic

and empirical studies on the subject are, at best, scanty. That being the case, we have to be content with mere observations.

The major impacts of technological development on the people in this country may be listed as follows:

1. As a result of the technological input into development, the people have become "modern" and "westernised." This is evident in the kind of, and in the way, technology is adopted in this country. This is also evident in the values prevalent among the youth in this country. However, people do not react to modernization and westernization in the same way. This results in part of the population going back to the basics and fundamentals. One consequence of this is the emergence of social and cultural conflicts within and between groups. Sad to say, this unintended and unpredicted outcome is indeed contrary to the very ultimate objective of the New Economic Policy, i.e., the fostering and attainment of national unity for the country.
2. Technological development has reached the rural areas in impressive ways. Double-cropping of padi is now possible. Water buffaloes that used to wallow or graze the padi fields, ploughing the land diligently and obediently for their masters, are now a rare sight; perhaps they are enjoying an easier life under the shade of the coconut palms since their traditional functions have been taken over by the more sophisticated "iron buffaloes" from Japan.

While some technologies are reaching the rural areas, newer and more powerful technologies are making their impact on the urban population. The result is the maintenance, if not the widening, of the gap between the rural and the urban sectors. This applies to education in a very significant way. I refer here specifically to the library, the media and the computer technologies.

Apart from the urban-rural technology and economic gap, we are now beginning to see a rural-rural economic and technology gap because development does not, nor is it able to, reach all corners of the rural areas at the same pace; neither are the acceptance or receptivity rates for change among the rural populace the same.

3. With improved mass media technology and free mass education, the process of westernization becomes even more rapid. If we are not careful, we will soon have problems similar to those faced in Japan, where their younger generation is fast becoming Americanised. The most current controversy, in the press, over the extent to which English should continue to play a dominant role vis-a-vis Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of the country, is a recurrence of the fear among some of our people that our national identity is facing the danger of being eroded away by the Western cultural forces. This westernization process (if unchecked through

the strengthening of our defensive or oppressive type of nationalism) would pave the way for more forms of neo-colonialism to set foot in this country.

4. With the so-called "progress", brought about by the technology-based developments, come other hitherto unforeseen outcomes. The farmers are getting old. Their offsprings have left to settle down in the urban areas. Villages have been robbed of their youthful citizenry. Cities are faced with problems of rural-urban migration.

School and college enrollments are on the increase. School and college leavers all clamour for white-collar jobs.

Some land schemes under the rural development programmes suffer from lack of response from the local population to participate as pioneers. Some lands are left untilled. The Government is indeed concerned over the emergence of what is labelled as the people's "subsidy mentality."

All these point to the fact that the country's development efforts which are economic and technology based have, on the one hand, failed to reach some quarters in the target population, resulting in their non-participation in the development programmes intended for them. On the other hand, those that have been reached by the development programmes have become exposed to other factors attendant upon the so-called "progress". They have become "misfits" because of that.

The four impacts of technological development can be summed up as follows:

- (1) Some people become modern because of the development. Others become anti-modern despite the development. This gives rise to social and cultural conflicts within and between groups. Politically, some people become liberalised and are tolerant of others, yet others are withdrawn into their own psychologically secure groups.
- (2) Technology and development reach various sectors of the populace at different speeds. People's receptiveness to change brought about by development also varies. This results in gaps being maintained and perhaps widened between the rural and the urban areas, as well as within each sector.

To put it somewhat differently, technology works both ways. It assists the slow, the poor, and the underprivileged, but at the same time enriches the able, the rich, and those with initiative. Keeping other things constant, the gap existing between them will grow bigger.

- (3) Technology brings with it not only the good but also the bad "subcultures". To optimise its usefulness, the recipient culture must have strong resilience. It must have the capacity to absorb the good and resist the negative.

- (4) Technology obliterates the cultural boundaries of a nation. Unanchored culturally and spiritually, the people will gradually lose their national or cultural identity and become blindly receptive to anything Western. Therein lies the danger of the people being less resilient in the face of the less apparent forms of neo-colonialism.

Westernization and modernization that come with technological development bring with them all their characteristic features in totality. They do not come selectively, bringing with them only the good and leaving behind the bad. Unprotected, a part of the populace may become cultural and social misfits in their own society.

All in all, Westernization and modernization that emerged through planned development, dominated by economic and technological considerations, have rendered part of the populace socially and culturally misfit, economically discontented, and physically and culturally uprooted. The laissez-faire approach to social and cultural development planning has further worsened the situation.

I may have seemed anti-development. If so, my words and expressions have betrayed me. Believe me, I do like, and I do want development for my countrymen. I do want modernization if it means enhancing people's competency and efficiency through the adoption of technological advancement for the betterment of their quality of life. However, betterment of the quality of life is not to be measured in terms of economic productivity alone, nor can it be measured merely in terms of economic indicators.

Development is multidimensional. It cannot, and it should not, be pursued merely along a unidimensional line such as economic development or economic and technological development because men are both cultural and spiritual beings.

Coming from the discipline of education, I cannot help but think that the development of a person, from the standpoint of education, is quite similar to that of a people or a nation. As you may well know, the three domains of educational objectives are cognitive, psychomotor and affective. A child that lacks any of the three domains becomes developmentally handicapped and unbalanced. This child may be intellectually superior but emotionally underdeveloped. He is not likely to grow into a happy man. Likewise, a people or a nation that is economically and technologically superior may suffer from identity crises, cultural vacua and spiritual emptiness.

In conclusion, allow me to quote Misra to impress upon you a point that is central to the issue at hand.

MAN IS the measure of all things. It is not the power of a nation — state, economic or military — nor industrialization, urbanization or modernization: it is the happiness of man that ultimately counts. The development of a country must, therefore, be seen as the sum total of the satisfying lives of millions of

men and women who constitute its citizenry. The final goal of development is to obtain a life worth living (2).

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you all.

NOTES

- (1) This and the following three quotations were taken from Lim, David. "Malaysian Development Planning." In Jomo K.S. and R.J.G. Wells (eds.), *The Fourth Malaysia Plan: Economic Perspectives*. Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia, 1983.
- (2) Misra, R.P. "Humanizing Development: Promises, Problems, and Prospects." In R.P. Misra (ed.), *Humanizing Development: Essays on People, Space and Development*. Maruzen Asia, 1981.