

# MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: THE WAY FORWARD

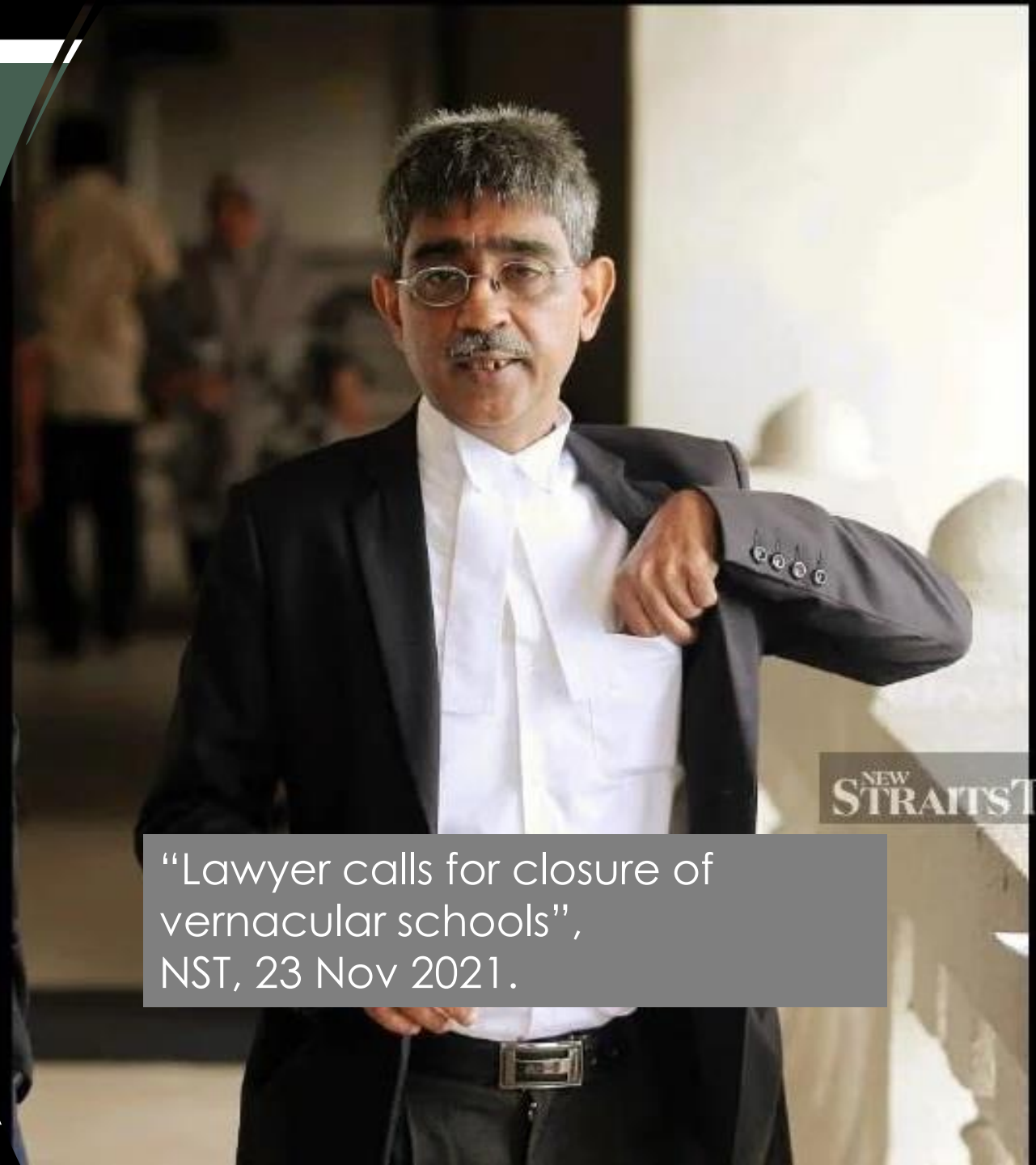
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## Mother Tongue Education in Malaysia has regressed since independence in 1957

- Instead of pointing out the root cause of polarisation on racism and racial discrimination in official policies, the official narrative tries to pin the blame on “vernacular schools”. The most recent example can be seen in yesterday’s headline:



NEW STRAITS TIMES

“Lawyer calls for closure of vernacular schools”, NST, 23 Nov 2021.



## 132 living languages in Malaysia, some listed as endangered

- The tragic case of the seven Orang Asli pupils at SK Tohoi in Gua Musang, Kelantan who fled into the jungle rather than face “national” school in 2015 – four died.
- The Ukit who were displaced by the Bakun dam in 1998





# Number of Chinese schools at Independence and today

• Year	Chinese Pop	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
• 1957	2,300,000	1,342	86	1
• 2021	6,720,000	1,301	63	-

- \* The government even ran a school-leaving exam for the Chinese secondary schools from 1957 to 1961
- \*Enrolment of non-Chinese pupils in Chinese primary schools has grown to 100,000, or one-sixth the total number of pupils in these schools.

## 200 YEARS OF CHINESE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

A PROTEAN SAGA



KUA KIA SOONG



# Number of Tamil schools at Independence and today

Year	Indian pop	Primary
1957	700,000	888
2021	2,244,000	527



## DEVELOPMENT OF TAMIL SCHOOL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

An Analysis of Achievements & Challenges

Manikam Krishnan



# Lack of funding for MLE is a poor excuse

- 1957 - GDP per capita of Malaya US\$800
- 2021 - our GDP per capita is over US\$10,000
- From 1957 to 1965, we had elected local governments throughout the country, now we don't have any to decide what schools to build.
- Consequently, vernacular schools are politicised



# Indigenous languages saw better days

- Iban was the medium of instruction in the Sarawak curriculum during the 19th century, offered as a subject in the public examinations and taught in the teachers' training college. It was the language used in the courts and organs of mass media.
- During the Emergency in the 1950s, the *Siaran Orang Asli* broadcasts in the Temiar and Semai languages to win over the Orang Asli from the influence of the communist insurgents shows that keeping indigenous languages alive is always possible if there is political will.
- During colonial days, missionaries translated the bible into indigenous languages.



# Shortage of teachers and funds

- A perennial problem that has never been systematically addressed.
- Chinese primary schools have received declining development funds since 1970s which are not in proportion to the scale of their student numbers.
- Similarly, Tamil schools lack development funds to improve facilities.
- Rural schools face under-enrolment rates whereas urban schools are grossly overcrowded.
- RM120 million allocated to the 1,800 Chinese and Tamil schools out of a total allocation of RM67 billion to the education sector in Budget 2022.
- Pupil's Own Language (POL) classes have not been encouraged nor seriously implemented for all ethnic minorities' languages.





## Indigenous peoples have made progress in developing their mother tongue

- In recent years, the Kadazandusun, Bidayuh and Semai have developed their respective languages, implemented early childhood education programmes

## MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

of Malaysian Ethnic Minorities

*Edited by Kua Kia Soong*



The Way  
Forward



# 1. Commitment to multi-culturalism: Mother tongue education as a right

- Ever since the 1961 Education Act, the ruling party for more than 60 years, UMNO has doggedly maintained that,
- “The educational policy of the Federation is to establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country...”
- This wilfully omitted some crucial guarantees for the preservation and sustenance of non-Malay languages and cultures in the country specified in the 1957 Education Ordinance and Article 152 of the Federal Constitution:
- “... whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of peoples other than Malays living in the country.”

# Constitutionality of vernacular schools



- For years, UMNO leaders as well as some constitutional lawyers have insisted that there is no constitutional protection for non-Malay vernacular schools especially after the Merdeka University judgement in 1982.
- However, in his foreword to my 2019 title, '200 years of Chinese education in Malaysia', the Honourable Michael J Beloff QC has affirmed the constitutionality of vernacular schools in Malaysia:
- “(1) The Federal Court nowhere said that its judgement cast any doubt on the constitutionality of vernacular schools.
- (2) The only judicial dictum that I have found on this issue said unequivocally, “there is nothing unlawful in allowing Chinese or Tamil schools to continue” (Public Prosecutor v Mark Koding, Mohammed Azmi J).
- (3) Whether viewed through the lens of “authority” or “power”, there are obvious differences between the functions of a university on the one hand and a school on the other, which suggest that a read across from one entity to another would be inappropriate.
- (4) On the international plane there is a growing sensitivity to the preservation and protection of the linguistic rights of minority groups, notably the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Policies 1996. “



# The cost of championing multi-culturalism in Malaysia

- The citizenship of Lim Lian Geok, the 'Soul of the Malaysian Chinese' was revoked in 1961.
- Four Chinese educationists including the author were detained without trial from 1987 to 1989.
- The Chinese Secondary schools' Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) is still not recognised by the government since 1975 even though it is recognised by the rest of the world.

## LIM LIAN GEOK SOUL OF THE MALAYSIAN CHINESE



Edited by  
Kua Kia Soong



## 2. Establish mother tongue schools according to need

- Ever since Independence, vernacular schools have been politicised and racialized by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, the ruling coalition has allowed only a handful of new schools as grand gestures at every general election.
- First, we must bring back elected local government and the decision on building new schools must be decentralised to these elected local councils. Schools would then be established according to a survey of what the community needs.
- Likewise, multi-lingual education for all our indigenous peoples must be placed on the national education agenda and the training of teachers for all mother tongue systems must be standard practice based on need and not on the whim of the ministry of education.



### 3. Fair financial allocation for all mother tongue education systems

- A government agency in charge of ensuring POL classes are embedded in the normal school timetable and not scheduled after school hours.
- Teacher training colleges must train teachers to teach in the mother tongue of all ethnic minorities especially those of the indigenous communities.
- The government must recognise the indigenous peoples' native customary land and stop all so-called development projects that destroy their ancestral lands. For example, the Bakun dam displaced the Penans and the Ukit, the only surviving ethnic community in the world. The cultural environment of the indigenous peoples is crucial to the survival and development of their languages and education systems. Their ancestral land and their political autonomy are critical to the preservation of their cultures and identity.

# Honour the rights of all communities to their mother tongue education

- Thus, we call upon the government to step up and aid the development of mother tongue education of our diverse ethnic minorities and to realise that real unity of “Keluarga Malaysia” can only be forged based on honouring the rights of all ethnic communities to their mother tongue education.
- The Malay/Chinese/Tamil schools’ bodies must set up a ‘Multilingual Education Coalition’ to support mother tongue education of our indigenous communities







“Let our  
multilingual  
schools  
blossom...”

THANK YOU