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Child Welfare Services in Malaya (1946-1957): Evidence from Archival Sources

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Abstract

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This paper discusses the essential welfare services provided by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) during the period of 1946-1957 under the British Colonial Government. As the major agency authorised to provide child care and protection in Malaya, the DSW had to deal with, among others, post-war social issues that needed immediate attention. It focused on issues during the post-war period that triggered the government's desire to provide services to ensure the well-being of children. The paper also explains the DSW programmes designed to meet the children's needs. It highlights the involvement of voluntary associations and other governmental departments towards the well-being of children. Also, this paper highlights other services, namely, blind welfare, delinquent children, repatriation of detainees, vagrancy, and children of prisoners.

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Keywords: Child welfare services; Colonial government; Post-war social issues; Archival sources.

1. Introduction

The study seeks to analyse the development of the British colonial response to social consequences of the aftermath of the Second World War. During the early establishment of the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), efforts were made to deal with the most serious social issues. Welfare arrangements were largely confined to groups generally categorised as the “needy” and ‘those in need of special help if they were to lead normal happy lives’ (Jones, 1958). It is important to note that children's welfare was affected both directly and indirectly by the availability of the services also provided to other groups of people. Jones (1958), who studied services offered by government agencies, including the DSW, gave some idea about the people who were cared for in Malaya. According to her, they were:

- i. Children who lacked a normal home background, neglected, abandoned, or cruelly treated.
- ii. The physically and mentally challenged.
- iii. The chronically sick or chronically unemployed, including beggars.
- iv. Senior citizens, if homeless, in financial need, or incapacitated for reasons of age.
- v. Persons on probation, juvenile offenders, and discharged prisoners.
- vi. Small communities with special need, such as those in under-developed areas, aborigine communities, and those who had suffered sudden disaster, such as flood or fire (Jones, 1958).

Some of the major services reflected the social welfare policy in Malaya in terms of the activities and duties that were introduced by the British Colonial Government through the DSW between the years 1946 and 1960. The progression of the welfare provision, however, did not cover the larger population in Malaya. The services were provided only on ad hoc basis or when they were very much needed, especially immediately after the war (1946-1950) when the focus was more on introducing emergency programmes, such as to help war victims. More serious efforts were undertaken to establish a section solely for children in the DSW only when the circumstances as a result of war began to ease. As a result, a section for Children's Services was introduced. However, currently, not all children-related services exist in Malaysia because those that were provided as direct consequences of the war are no longer relevant and, therefore, have been terminated.

2. Methodology

In order to consult the original sources, we did most of the fieldwork in various libraries and archives in Britain and Malaysia. Historical records pertaining to Malaysia are found in abundance overseas, but they are scattered in several countries. The biggest collections are kept in Britain, Holland, and Portugal. They are also found in India, Japan, France, Thailand, and Australia (Hassan, 1981).

Research work in the UK was essential for the review of historical materials since major documents on the government policies during the colonial period are mainly available in the National Archives in London. Besides the National Archives and the Rhodes House Library in London, other institutions that have Malaysian records in their holdings in the UK are the India Office Records and the British Library.

Content analysis was the approach used to analyse the documents (Padget, 1998) in this study. The analysis was carried out through the data, working file by file, and separating them according to specific themes. In order to complete the research analysis, we needed some knowledge of the government administration and related events during the period of study. Thus, we searched for and used all relevant materials to answer the research questions under study (Leashore and Cates, 1985).

Generally, we organised our findings by using thematic and chronological presentation (Stuart, 1988). The strategy of 'illustrative style' suggested by (May, 1997) had helped us to select data in

relation to its ability to illustrate general themes, which emerged and were supported by the use of concrete examples.

3. Child Welfare Services

3.1 Blind Welfare

Blind welfare by private voluntary efforts was perhaps more successful than the efforts of the government, probably because different governmental departments were interested in various aspects of welfare for the blind. The government needed the support of voluntary organisations in handling blind welfare and pointed out that, through its and the combined support from voluntary organisations, the best results could be achieved (RC 228/46).

The care of the blind attracted the sympathetic attention of the Central Welfare Council (CWC) of Malaya. As a result, a survey of blind persons in every state and settlement was initiated by the CWC in October 1946. Sir Clutha Mackenzie, the Chairman of the St. Dunstan's Home for Indian War Blinded at Dehra Dun, wrote to the government to suggest the employment of a Welfare Officer for the blind. At a subsequent meeting, the CWC undertook the financial responsibility for appointing Major Bridges (Penang Secretariat, 77/49), who was himself blind, as the first Welfare Officer for the blind (P/SUMU2, 1946).

The first task undertaken by Major Bridges was to gather information to produce a report and make recommendations on blindness in Malaya. The CWC provided information on the number of blind people in various states from the lists made in conjunction with the DSW when paying relief to the blind. These figures, together with the figures of the blind in different homes and institutions run by the DSW, enabled the Welfare Officer for the blind to make a reasonable estimate of the number of the blind and partially blind in Malaya. In 1947, the Welfare Officer for the blind investigated, planned, and prepared for the organised development of blind welfare services (P/KEB1, 1948) and toured most of Malaya to obtain first-hand impressions of the country, and of the standards of living in towns and rural districts (P/SUMU2, 1947).

Major Bridges intended to form a committee to design a Braille code in three main languages - Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil - based on International Braille to facilitate the learning of English Braille for advanced education and training for employment (P/SUMU2, 1946). Accordingly, the Council on Blindness was set up to initiate schemes for the welfare of the blind in 1948. The immediate task of the council was to formulate future policy on blind welfare and to appoint a Braille committee to design a Braille code in each language spoken by the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. This designing of the Braille code for three different languages indicated that the council made an attempt to take into consideration the complexity of multi-ethnic satisfaction and requirements.

The report by this council showed that the proportion of blind children in Malaya was more than five times greater than in Britain. Approximately 12,000 blind or partially blind people were accounted for, and 200 children requiring schooling and 400 persons requiring employment needed specialised help from the Blind Welfare Organization (The Malay Mail, 1948).

Through the assistance of the state authorities of Johore, the Princess Elizabeth School for Blind Children was established, which was a residential school with provision for day pupils, at the State

Welfare Home, Johore Bahru (P/PM3, 1952). Its curriculum was similar to that used in government primary schools. Parents needed to pay fees (Selangor Secretariat 1294/47). Forty-two children of school age were accommodated in 1952 and the number increased to 75 children a few years later (P/PM3, 1952). Later, in 1955, the Gurney Centre was opened to provide training in semi-skilled trades (Jones, 1958) and took in about fifty students. Four full-time and two part-time teachers were employed, and the school was maintained by the government (P/PM3, 1952).

The only document on blind welfare published by the government was White Paper No.9 of 1948, which was tabled at the meeting of the Legislative Council on 27 April 1948. It was the report on and recommendations for blindness in Malaya by Dr Bridges, the Welfare Officer of the blind. It contained a statement of the position of the blind in Malaya, but the conclusions reached, together with certain recommendations, did not include a detailed scheme (Selangor Secretariat 1294). No financial responsibility for the welfare of the blind was allocated. However, it suggested (Selangor Secretariat 1294) that philanthropic funds should shoulder the capital cost of building Blind Welfare Units after-care, placement in employment, "home visiting" and the like. On the other hand, it noted that the government should provide for annually recurrent expenditure for the maintenance of the Blind Units, such as school and trade training centres, as well as cares for the aged, destitute, and physically and mentally challenged blind persons (Selangor Secretariat 1294).

The Blind Section of the State Welfare Home, in Johore Bahru created considerable local interest, resulting in the state authorities' willingness to allocate a site in Johore for a school. This school was built on a cottage plan. The living quarters for the blind children were cottages, housing about eight children each. The small units had many advantages over large institutions which usually consisted of barrack-like buildings with big dormitories and a central dining hall. The cottages made it possible to obtain harmony within a simulated family group that resembled normal living conditions. Thus, the child could express his or her individuality. The design was flexible and lent itself to coordinated expansion. The large dormitories, in contrast, bore no resemblance to normal living conditions and could neither be easily expanded or broken down. Moreover, the child became regimented and rigid. The cost of the building was out of all proportion to its value to the blind, and little or no repair work could be done by the children (Selangor Secretariat 1294).

3.2 Delinquent Children

The Child Child and Youth Welfare Sub-Committee (CYWSC) understood that the issue of delinquency, while evident in most colonies was not as acute as it was in England. All the South-east Asian colonies were aware of the problem and took active steps to deal with it. The CYWSC noted this fact and recommended steps for the treatment of delinquency and for the establishment of an efficient probation service. They also pointed out that the implementation of their previous recommendations on the care of children and young people would considerably lessen the incidence of delinquency (Colonial Office 859/225/3).

In the Far Eastern colonial territories, the law made special provision for delinquents or neglected children. In Hong Kong, for example, the police normally referred any delinquents to the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs, which attempted to prevent delinquency and care for the potential delinquent. A

Chinese Committee of well-known citizens advised on individual cases. In Malaya, the Children's Ordinances protected children against ill-treatment. Ordinances empowered magistrates to send delinquents to appropriate schools. No probation system was in operation in Malaya then, but, in 1941, legislation was passed in the Federated Malay States (FMS) providing for the institution of a probation service. Additionally, similar legislation was under consideration in the Strait Settlements. A feature that was noticeable in the records of court awards in Malaya was the ingenuity exercised in passing an appropriate sentence on young offenders.

Dr. Rawson, who was proud of the work and experience in the Homes such as Serendah Boys' Homes, stressed that the DSW was 'in a position to complete a system for the care of adolescents in Malaya second to none in the Far East' (Selangor Secretariat 510/47). Three types of Approved School were set up, namely, the Junior Approved School, the Senior Approved School, and the Camp School. The Junior Approved School took boys from seven years of age up to 12 years; the Senior Approved School took boys from 12 to 14 years old, and the Camp School received juniors below 11 years old.

The Junior Approved School at Taiping, opened on 1 February 1947, was the first Approved School in Malaya. When opened, only three boys were admitted, but, within three months, there were over 30 boys. At the end of the year, 134 boys received education and training and were being helped towards a better way of life (P/SUMU2, 1947). During the year, the school improved the building of the classrooms and workshops, renovated staff quarters and improved the playing field (P/PM3, 1950).

A Senior Approved School was set up at Sungei Buloh (P/PM3, 1950). The first camp school, Telok Ayer Tawar Camp School, was opened on January 1950 in Province Wellesley, Penang. This Camp School, again of the cottage type, was for both boy and girl juniors under 11 years of age who had appeared before the Juvenile Courts (P/PM3, 1950).

Dr. Rawson questioned the suitability of mixing boys in need of care and protection with delinquents. He also claimed that the Approved Schools in Malaya was another name for Borstal in Britain because the government put young prisoners who were not suitable for the Approved School System there into the Borstal Institution. These Borstal institutions were built to train and develop boys and young criminals into reliable individuals later in life.

3.3 Vagrancy

There were few beggars in Malaya before 1942, but their numbers dramatically increased during the post-war period (RC 228/46). From November 1954 to March 1955, the DSW carried out a pilot survey of beggars in the Federation of Malaya and cross-checks showed that there was virtually no intentional lying among these beggars. The report estimated that the number of beggars was between 734 and 832 in 1954 and 1955, respectively. Of 59 beggars who were widows, 27 had dependents, usually small children (Department of Social Welfare, 1955). It was estimated that the survey covered over 90 percent of the 'professional' and 'amateur' beggars, and at least 50 percent, of the 'casuals'. There were 734 beggars in rural as well as urban areas interviewed all over the country. The survey was under the charge of an experienced officer who could speak Malay, Mandarin, and English with the help of social workers from major ethnic groups. The reports also stated the reasons for their existence and offered easy solutions to this social problem. This detailed and factual report provided

the Federal and State Settlement Government with reliable information necessary for framing realistic and constructive policies (P/PM3, 1955).

Although it was a common complaint amongst the public that there were many child beggars, according to the survey, not many were traced. Altogether, five boys were found begging on the streets and it was 'most unlikely that these boys were homeless because they looked quite well fed'. The report also stated that 'there [were] beggars who sometimes [took] their children with them on begging expeditions' (Department of Social Welfare, 1955).

Despite the fact that there was no serious beggar problem, as far as children were concerned, children of vagrants brought by the police to the Social Welfare Office were sent to children's homes. Parents of these children were asked to produce guarantors that the children would not be involved in begging again. When guarantors were produced, the children were released from the homes (Selangor Secretariat 499/49).

D. Rawson reported that until 1950, there were no vagrant homes for boys in Malaya because of the absence of regularised legislation for vagrants. Dr. Rawson also stated that it was impossible to admit any boy to Sungei Buloh or Taiping Home without the order of the Juvenile Court or that of a magistrate's recommendation for Approved School treatment for a period of not less than two years (Selangor Secretariat 912/50).

3.4 Children of Prisoners

An increase in the number of female prisoners in the Federation was partly because of the Emergency. The DSW was able to help the Commissioner of Prisons in this matter by arranging for the children of female prisoners to be placed with relatives or in suitable homes for the duration of the mothers' sentence (P/PM3, 1952).

One case involved a Chinese woman who was sent to prison for six months. She wanted to bring along her two children aged four years and three years to the prison since her husband had gone to Taiping, Perak to look for employment. However, the Prison Authorities did not allow the children to go with her but instead placed them in the care of the DSW of Penang. Nevertheless, these children were handed over to the father when he turned up about a week later (Penang Secretariat 292/50).

However, currently, not all children-related services exist in Malaysia because those that were provided as direct consequences of the war are no longer relevant and, therefore, have been terminated.

4. Conclusion

The paper discussed the primary services provided by the DSW for children, who were the war victims. The DSW took steps to settle the issue of repatriation of detainees, children of prisoners, leper settlement, resettlement, and immigration that existed in the three ethnic groups in Malaya. The paper also revealed that the government had provided assistance to the vulnerable group and through the DSW the government had relied on the help of its other agencies and voluntary bodies in their provision of services to the needy people in Malaya during the period of 1946-1957.

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