

NOTA PENYELIDIKAN/RESEARCH NOTES

PROFILE OF INDIAN STUDENTS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF USM 1992 ENTREES

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INTRODUCTION

The education system of Malaysia is characterised by a multilingual framework at the primary level and a single language medium at the lower secondary, upper secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels. Generally, the school system has a 6-3-2-2 pattern. This represents six years of primary; three years of lower secondary and two years of upper secondary and two years of post-secondary levels respectively.

The six years of primary education is provided in one of the three language media : Malay, Chinese and Tamil. The National medium primary school which uses Malay (the National Language) is open to pupils of all races. The Chinese and Tamil media primary schools operate to fulfil a parental choice option for parents of Chinese and Indian extraction if they so wish to send their children to these vernacular medium schools. It has to be pointed out that while the medium of instruction may be different the content of the curricula is common to all the language media schools. Malay is taught as a compulsory subject in the vernacular schools. English Language is taught as an additional compulsory language in the National primary schools and vernacular primary schools. The Indians have a choice of going to either the National primary or the vernacular primary schools.

The Tamil medium primary school serves the rural as well as the urban Indians. In fact, the rural Indians make up about 65% of the total number of Indians in the country. About 80% of the Indian youth having rural residence attend this type of vernacular school. In terms of numbers, about 96,120 out of a total of 2,447,206 pupils attend the Tamil primary schools (Malaysia : 1992). This makes up about 3.92% of the total primary school population. Even though the ethnic breakdown of pupils in the National medium schools is not readily available we can surmise that since the 1990 population figures show that Indians make up about 8.04% of the total population of Malaysia (Malaysia : 1992), the Indian share of primary school going children could also be roughly 8% reflecting the ethnic distribution. Based on this figure,

slightly more than 50% of Indians send their children to the National Primary Schools where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Melayu. The other slightly below 50% of the Indian children go to the Tamil medium primary schools.

Objective of Study

The unique nature of the choice of primary education for the non-indigeneous sections of the Malaysian population which allows for mother tongue media in the primary level dovetailing into the National Medium at the secondary and tertiary levels has often raised questions as to the efficacy of the different media primary education. This study intends to examine in general, the demographic profile of Indian students who were admitted to the Universiti Sains Malaysia for the academic year 1992/1993 and makes some comparison between the two groups of students from the National medium and the Tamil medium primary schools.

Methodology

Sample

The sample of the study was the total Indian student intake for the year 1992/93. From the data obtained from the university register 206 students were admitted to the various degree and diploma programmes and 5 students to the Bachelor of Education inservice programme. Only the 178 students admitted to follow the first degree programme were the subjects of this investigation. This number comprises about roughly above 7% of the total intake of the students for that year. About 2500 students were admitted into the first degree programmes in 1992.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was designed to collect information related to the academic and socio-economic background of the students. The first part of the questionnaire requested for the personal particulars of the students. The second part of the questionnaire requested for information concerning the academic background of the students. The third part of the questionnaire obtained information about the socio-economic background of the students. The final part of the questionnaire obtained information about the choice of university and the degree programme.

Copies of the questionnaire were sent to all the 178 first year degree students in the three campuses i.e, the main campus in Penang, the Perak campus and the Kubang Kerian campus in Kelantan. Students were given a month to fill and return the questionnaire. Those who did not return the questionnaire were reminded to do so at the end of the one month.

Out of the 178 questionnaires sent out, 168 students returned the completed questionnaire. Attempts to get the feedback from the other students failed. The completed questionnaires account for 94.4% of the study sample. However, a number of students have not filled some parts of the questionnaire. In the analysis of the responses some information do not add up to 100% as a result of this gap in the data.

Findings

Gender

In terms of gender more females have gained admission to the university compared to the males. 58.3% of the Indian students' intake for the academic year 1992/1993 are female students and 41.7% male students. But in the local universities, the trend is towards a higher percentage of male to female students. In 1988 the overall percentage of male to female students was 58% to 42% (Malaysia: 1990). For 1990 the overall percentage was 55% male to 45% female students (Malaysia: 1992).

Age

The average age of the students is 20 years and 8 months. The youngest is aged 19 years and 2 months whilst the oldest student is aged 36 years and 4 months.

Residence

The students were asked to state their permanent family address. Based on this information the residence of the students was classified as urban, semi-urban and rural. For the purpose of this study, addresses bearing the names of big cities and towns such as Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Johor Baru and Seremban etc. were classified as urban. Small towns like Kulim, Sitiawan, Muar etc. were classified as semi-urban and estates and villages were classified as rural. Analysis of this information revealed that 82.1% (N=138) of the students lived in urban areas. 10.1% (N=17) are from semi-urban areas and only 6.0% (N=10) are from the rural area.

Parents' occupation

Information obtained about the occupation of parents of the first year Indian undergraduates at the Universiti Sains Malaysia were classified into seven categories as shown in Table 1 below. The labourer group consisted of occupations such as tapper, mandore, gardener, farmer, Felda worker, etc. Fitters, barbers, tradesmen, drivers etc comprised the Artisan category. The clerical/service group consisted of clerks, supervisors, overseers, information officers, enforcement officers, etc. The semi-professional group consisted of labour officers, Health Inspectors, non-graduate teachers, interpreters, etc. The professional group comprised Doctors, Engineers, Lecturers, Surgeons, Graduate teachers etc. The retired/housewife/deceased categories are self explanatory.

Table 1: Parents' occupation

Category of Job	Father		Mother	
	No.	%	No.	%
Labourer (unskilled)	22	13.1	10	6.0
Artisans (semi-skilled)	12	7.1	2	1.2
Clerical/Services	29	17.3	8	4.8
Semi-Professional	36	21.4	21	12.5
Professional	5	3.0	0	0.0
Retired/Housewife	48	28.6	119	70.8
Deceased	14	8.3	6	3.6

missing data = 2

It can be seen from the table that most mothers are homemakers (70.8%) and a few are semi professionals like teachers and nurses, while the rest are labourers, semi-skilled workers or working in the clerical/service sector.

Most of the fathers are working in clerical/service sector or as semi professionals. A good number have also retired from work. A point of interest is, very few students come from families whose parents are professionals.

Education Level of Parents

The information concerning the education level of parents of Indian students who gained admission to USM for the academic year 1992/93 is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Education Level of Parents

Education Level	Father		Mother	
	No.	%	No.	%
No schooling	8	4.8	20	11.9
Primary (Tamil)	38	22.6	55	32.7
Primary (National)	14	8.3	18	10.7
Form 3	18	10.7	21	12.5
Form 5	65	38.7	41	24.4
Form 6	5	3.0	1	0.6
College	9	5.4	11	6.5
University	11	6.5	1	0.6

It can be seen from the table that about 35.0% fathers and 55.0% mothers have no formal education or only primary education. About 10.0% of fathers and 12.0% of mothers have Form 3 education. A good number of parents have education up to Form 5 level, 38.7% of the fathers and 24.4% of the mothers. Only 14.9% of the fathers and 7.7% of the mothers have education at the post secondary level.

Family Socio-economic Status

The socio-economic status of the family was computed using the data related to parents' occupation and level of education (refer to Table 1 and Table 2 above). Parents with SRP qualification or lower and working in the unskilled or semi-skilled sector were classified as low income group. Parents with SPM or HSC qualification and working in the clerical service and semi-professional sector were classified as middle income group while parents with college or university education and working in the semi-professional or professional sector were classified as high income group. Using this classification the general picture of the socio-economic status of the students is as follows. Of the 168 students 63% (N=106) come from the low income group; 22.6% (N=38) come from middle income group and 4.4% (N=24) come from the high income group. It is clear from the analysis of the

information obtained that vast majority of the students come from low income families.

Family Size

A good number of students not only come from low income families but they are also members of large families. The average number of siblings of students who have gained admission to USM is six. Family size varies from four to thirteen siblings.

Language Spoken at Home

About 60.1% of the students spoke to their parents in Tamil, 15.5% in English and 19.6% used Tamil and English. Only one student spoke in Malay to his parents.

When speaking to other siblings, 35.7% of them used Tamil mainly; 20.8% used English mainly; 24.4% used Tamil and English and 15.5% used Tamil, English and Malay. It is clear from this data that the use of the Malay language in daily interaction is quite low among the younger generation Indians even though they have been exposed to the language for at least 13 years in the National School System.

Siblings in Tertiary Education

27.0% (N=46) of the students have one or two siblings with university level education. The other 73.0% (122) are the first members of their families to gain admission to the university. This indicates that more and more Indian parents and youngsters are giving importance to education.

School and Academic Background

National statistics indicate that roughly 50% of Indian children go to National primary schools and the other 50% attend National type primary schools (the vernacular medium). So in this section some comparisons are made between students from the National primary schools and the National-type (Tamil) primary schools.

Of the 168 students who responded to the questionnaire, 83.9% (N=141) attended the National primary schools and only 15.5% (N=26) attended the National type (Tamil) primary schools. From this it is very clear that very few pupils from Tamil medium primary schools advance towards tertiary

education.

The above data together with the information about the permanent residence of the students reveal that most of the students who gained admission come from urban National primary schools and the National type (Tamil) primary school (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Students' school background and location

School Type	Urban	Semi-Urban	Rural
National Primary School students (N=141)	119 (84.2%)	15 (10.8%)	7 (5.0%)
National-type Primary School students (N=26)	21 (80.8%)	2 (7.7%)	3 (11.5%)
Total	140 (83.6%)	17 (10.3%)	10 (6.1%)

missing data = 1

In terms of academic achievement of the students, at the SPM examination 83.9% (N=141) obtained Grade 1; 15.5% (N=26) obtained Grade 2 and one student obtained Grade 3.

The data analysed in terms of National Primary school students and National-type (Tamil) school students is shown below in Table 4.

Table 4: Students' Primary school background and SPM results.

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
National Primary School students (N=141)	115 (81.6%)	25 (17.7%)	1 (0.7%)
National-type Primary School students (N=26)	25 (96.2%)	1 (3.8%)	0

missing data = 1

At the STPM level 76.8% (N=129) obtained the required number of units to enter the University in the first attempt; 19.6% (N=33) at the second attempt; 1.8% (N=3) at the third attempt and one student at the fourth attempt. The data analysed in terms of the students' primary school background is shown below in Table 5.

Table 5: Students' Primary School background and the number of attempts at STPM before gaining admission to the University

National Primary School students (N=140)	First 111(78.7%)	Second 26(18.4%)	Third 2(1.4%)	Fourth 1(0.7%)
National-type Primary School students (N=25)	17 (65.4%)	7 (26.9%)	1 (3.8%)	-

missing data=3

From the above analysis of the academic performances at the SPM and STPM levels, it can be said that those who have come through the National type (Tamil) primary school are on par with the students from the National Primary school. This is expected as they are selected based on the same criteria of performance. However one has to bear in mind that the number of students who have gained admission to the University with Tamil primary school background is rather small (N=26 or 15.5%). Another observation that can be made here is that those Tamil primary school pupils who obtain Grade Two in the SPM examination do not seem to continue their studies at the STPM level (see Table 4).

Choice of University and Course

The subjects of this study were asked to declare whether they were admitted to the university and the course they applied for. 69.0% (N=116) of the students got admission to their first choice university, that is University Sains Malaysia while for the remaining 31.0% (N=52) USM is not their first choice university.

With respect to the choice of courses 51.2% (N=86) got admission into the academic programme they wanted whereas 47.6% (N=80) did not get their preferred academic programme. However, of these 80 students, 60 of them are satisfied with the academic programme offered to them while the remaining 20 students are not happy with the academic programme offered to them. They form 12.5% of the cohort.

The breakdown of the academic programme into which the Indian students were admitted is as follows: (Data obtained from the University Admissions Office)

Table 6: Indian Students according to Programme breakdown.

Ilmu Kemanusiaan	12
Sastera dengan Pendidikan (Prog. A)	29
Sastera dengan Pendidikan (Prog. B)	10
Sastera (Terjemahan & Interp.)	3
Sastera (Bah. Inggeris & Kesusasteraan)	2
Sains Kemasyarakatan	13
Pengajian Sains	13
Sains Farmasi	6
Perumahan Bangunan Perancangan	7
Sains Perubatan	2
Sains Gunaan	21
Sains Komputer	12
Pengurusan	15
Komunikasi	6
Teknologi Industri	3
Kejuruteraan Bahan dan Sumber Mineral	8
Kejuruteraan Elektrik dan Elektronik	9
Kejuruteraan Awam	4
Kejuruteraan Mekanik	5
TOTAL	178

About 55% of the students have gained admission to science/mathematics based programmes while the remaining 45% (N=78) have gained admission to humanities based programme. This indicates that there is equal representation of Indians in the Sciences and Humanities.

Finance for University Education

About 74% ((N=124) are presently being financed by their parents and they are hoping to get some financial assistance from the different agencies they have applied for assistance. Four students have reported that they have been granted scholarships and two others have secured study loans to finance their education. Ten of them are self financing their education with their savings. Five of them are on half pay leave from their place of employment. Five others are financing their education through part scholarship and parents' help and six others through parents' help and personal savings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the intake of Indian students in one university in Malaysia. It is in effect "a one-dip study" that tries to extrapolate on the state of affairs among Indians in general in their quest for higher education. Given the centralised nature of selection with common criteria for admission in the universities, this result could be representative of the situation in the other universities in Malaysia.

The findings show that although at the point of entry into primary schools nearly equal number of parents send their children to either the National Primary School or Tamil Primary School, this ratio is not reflected when we consider entry into the university. The children from the National Medium Primary Schools far outnumber those from the Tamil Primary Schools by 5.6 times. This finding is alarming and reflects poorly on the Tamil medium primary school. The often-cited advantage that mother tongue medium at the primary level is a boon (Tansley: 1986) to these pupils in terms of their preparedness for secondary and tertiary education does not seem to be operating in this instance. The causes of this phenomena may be manifold.

The rural/urban disparity in terms of participation in university education among the Indians is still largely in favour of the urban Indians. In this study 83.6% of the entrees come from an urban background whereas only 6.1% are from the rural background. This confirms the clear urban bias that was reported in a study done by Ozay Mehmet and Yip Yat Hoong (1986).

The composite index that classifies the Indians into the various levels of socio-economic status shows that about 63% of these students come from the low income group. Thus, very few professional parents seem to send their children to local universities. One reason could be that they aspire to send their children to professional courses elsewhere, knowing fully well that it is difficult to get places into professional courses in the local universities, given the stringent entry requirements. They may also have opted for other opportunities in the form of twinning programmes between local private institutions and overseas universities. This is supported by the fact that 47.6% of students in the sample also stated that they did not get the course of their choice. The avenues stated above are far too expensive for the ordinary average Indian parents to provide for their children, let alone those from the poor sector. So the local universities are the only hope for the poor sector children to get a tertiary education.

Another trend that has emerged in the findings needs to be looked into. The financial condition of the students who come mainly from the poor sector of the Indian community is very bleak. Most of them still depend on their parents to finance their education while at the same time are applying desperately to get financial help from any available source. In this respect the funding agencies or Indian charitable organisations should pool their resources together and manage the issuance of loans etc. in a more systematic manner. It appears at present that some students get help from more than one source while others are unable to secure any help. There should be a more equitable distribution of aid to students.

The findings also show that nearly 23.2% of the entrees gained admission into the university after their second attempt at the STPM examinations. Parents should give their children a second opportunity at attempting the STPM to get the required entry qualification. Tertiary colleges/institutions sponsored by the Indian community should also emphasise the STPM programme as an avenue for students to repeat their STPM. They can also cater for those students who are unable to gain admission in regular Sixth Form classes.

It is interesting to note that there are more Indian girls pursuing higher education at USM than boys. This is an unusual phenomena considering the gender distribution in local universities (Malaysia: 1990; 1992) where male students outnumber female students in institutions of higher learning. But this fact has to be highlighted to parents so that Indian parents are not prejudiced towards the education of their daughters but instead encourage and let them pursue their ambition through tertiary education.

Generally, the Tamil schools are characterised by many identifying features which place them in the disadvantaged category among Malaysian primary schools. They serve a largely poor rural clientele. The facilities in these schools leave much to be desired. The number of pupils in most Tamil primary schools is small and this results in many of these schools having multiple classes i.e. pupils of at least two Standards are grouped into one class. Teachers have to cope with teaching two different Standards simultaneously. According to the figures available, the number of untrained teachers serving in the Tamil schools stand at 30.7% (Malaysia: 1992). This compares very poorly with the overall national percentage of 11.95% of temporary teachers. The analysis of the 1992 Standard Six examinations (UPSR) conducted by the Ministry of Education also portrays a dismal picture. At least 82.9% of Tamil school pupils at Standard Six had not reached mastery levels in writing skills in Bahasa Melayu and 66.0% were

below mastery level expected for Bahasa Melayu comprehension skills. For Mathematics at least 43.9% of these pupils had not reached mastery levels. Even in the learning of the mother tongue at least 25.1% (comprehension skills) and 47.3% (writing skills) of these pupils had not reached mastery levels. The overall analysis of these results shows that the Tamil primary school pupils have the lowest level of achievement in Mathematics, Bahasa Melayu and English compared to the National and Chinese medium primary schools. (A minimum of Grade C signifies an acceptable level of mastery in all subjects at the UPSR examination) (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia: 1992).

Other factors that push out the poor Indian pupils from competing in the school system may be the lack of proper support facilities in the home, the lack of motivation and the overall poor performance in the lower secondary and upper secondary levels with the change in language medium, in no small measure, contributing to aggravate the situation.

Superficially, these facts point to the inefficient Tamil primary school system as the culprit in the poor performance of the pupils who come through it. But it has to be pointed out that the medium of instruction per se is not responsible for this state of affairs. It has to be pointed out that the Tamil primary schools are among the smallest in the country and by that very nature, the funds allotted to them for the running of these schools as well as providing the educational environment is relatively small. Most of these schools are also on private land. This also means that they receive very low priority when it comes to granting of infrastructural development funds by the Ministry of Education for these schools. So they are the poorest in terms of facilities and infrastructure (Marimuthu: 1993). They also possess the highest dropout rates when compared with other medium schools (Murad: 1973). Marimuthu also draws on the concept of the "total institution" when discussing the plantation environment and its disadvantaged position. The socio-economically poor Indians in an isolated, segregated environment find it difficult to break out of the closed world of the estate. Indian children, coming from such a socio-economically disadvantaged environment, are unable to perform well in education.

Colletta (1975) too, in an ethnographic study of the plantation Tamil school observes that these schools have become a major mechanism for socialising the pupils into an estate class structure encompassing a cycle of poverty. He maintains that the relationship between socio-economic status and vernacular schooling reinforce one another in a vicious cycle with little hope of escape.

In conclusion, the Indians, especially those from the rural areas who make up about 65% of the Indian population, do not seem to have benefitted from the education system when it comes to their emplacement in institutions of higher learning. The small percentage of Indians from the Tamil Primary School background in local institutions of higher learning is a very clear warning that these pupils will be unable to participate meaningfully and equip themselves with the necessary skills to play their role in the industrial development of Malaysia in the professional and higher technical levels. The government's policies to diversify the industrial base, enhance human resource development, promote technological upgrading and other efforts to increase the pool of higher level manpower personnel does not seem to have drawn in Indians from the rural sector into the mainstream of economic activities.

A concerted, systematic, long term programme of rehabilitating the Tamil Primary Schools has to be undertaken if they are to play a meaningful role in assisting Indians in the rural areas to move into the 21st century with confidence.

If this is to be done, a task force of concerned Indians, from the professional, social and political sectors has to be set up to harness the expertise to look into the woes of the Indians in general and the Tamil School in particular.

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