

## ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

*E.E.C. Thuraisingham: A Malaysian Patriot* by Joseph M. Fernando, Zulkanain Abdul Rahman and Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2013, 90 pp.

Dato' Sir Ernest Emmanuel Clough Thuraisingham (1898–1979), in spite of coming from a minority Jaffna Tamil Ceylonese community of obscure origins, rose from nobody to somebody in the colonial and post-colonial Malaya/Malaysia milieu. He is reputed to have been a multi facet individual: a successful legal practitioner, rubber estate owner, devoted family man, social activist, community leader, able public speaker and debater, the founder President of the Ceylonese Federation of Malaya, race-horse enthusiast, philanthropist, a prominent political figure by virtue of his nominations to several key positions in the post-Second World War colonial administration of Malaya. His initial nomination was as member of the short-lived Malayan Union's Selangor State Council, then to the Federal Legislative Council and later as Member for Education in the Executive Council of the Federal Legislative Council, a key ministerial position in the colonial administration. He was a Senator in Independent Malaya/Malaysia. He was also appointed to serve as Chairman of the critically important Communities Liaison Committee (CLC), initially formed to alleviate the immediate causes of inter-communal friction (Means, 1970: 123). As a leading and influential national and community leader it is generally perceived that his "ideas, thoughts and actions" have had "influenced many facets" of the political and socio-economic landscape of post-second World War colonial and early years of Independent Malaya/Malaysia (p. 73). In recognition of his services and contributions to the country during British rule he was notably rewarded with a Datukship by Sultan Ibrahim of Johore in 1950 and a Knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain in 1955.

Expect for several disparate references in academic and other studies to Thuraisingham, neither a single published record of his life nor a comprehensive and analytical study of his contributions exist. Neither did Thuraisingham did write his memoirs. In the absence of such documented publications, the University of Malaya's Sri Lankan Endowment Fund, a fund that was established at the resourcefulness and behest of Thuraisingham in the 1950s, felt that the story of the life and legacy of this little-discussed figure in Malayan history deserved to be evaluated and recorded through a comprehensive, coherent and critical study for both as a historical record and for a broader audience. The committee therefore initiated, commissioned and funded a biographical study to the Department of History, University of Malaya. As a result three senior historians with the assistance of two of their research assistants undertook the task and have authored the now published biography.

The authors state that Thuraisingham had played a "prominent role in shaping the political and socio-economic landscape of the Federation of Malaya, and, later the Federation of Malaysia" (p. vii). The authors also say that in spite of this, he is one of the lesser known unsung heroes and "has not received adequate attention in the writings on Malaysian history" and "this has invariably left a vacuum" in the country's historiography (p. vii). They stress that "Thuraisingham's life story provides a valuable window into an earlier era of the country's political history and the challenges faced by the Malayan elites to unite a multiracial and multicultural entity, to raise a sense of national awareness and outlook and to forge a new nation-state during the process of decolonization" (p. 3). The authors acknowledge that through their "modest attempt...to record the contribution of this important figure to nation-building" would "provide us a deeper insight into the nation's history and enable us to understand better an important period of this country's past from a different vantage point" and thus "add to the historiography on Malayan history in general and political history in particular" (p. viii).

Thuraisingham's life story and contributions are recounted in seven brief chapters by the authors through a descriptive narration. The biography chronicles the origins of English education among the Jaffna Tamils in colonial Ceylon, thereafter features the Thuraisingham family background both in Jaffna and Malaya and his birth in Taiping, Perak. The biography then tells of his father's professional and monetary success that enabled him to own rubber estates. Family wealth further assisted Thuraisingham and his brother to pursue their high-quality English education in Ceylon, followed by an excellent tertiary education in Britain's prestigious Cambridge University and the Inns of Court's Middle Temple. The study highlights his political education through his courtship and allegiance to the then fashionable Fabian political ideology of social justice and social democracy, his active participation in a broad range of student and sport activities including involvement in semi-league club football during his sojourn in Britain. On his return in 1924, for a brief period he worked as an Assistant Registrar in the Singapore High Court and then built his prominent legal partnership practice in Singapore. The Japanese invasion and occupation in 1942 made him to return to Malaya to be closer to his family, where he established a very successful legal practice, managed the family rubber estates and embarked on community and welfare activities.

A combination of highly visible attributes of ability, wealth, status through a prestigious English and elitist professional education, a successful legal practice and the leadership of the minority but influential Jaffna community enabled Thuraisingham to have the society's legitimate backing to be launched into political prominence and status. The authors point out that his association with local political elites like Dato' Onn Jaafar and David Marshall, the first Chief Minister of Singapore drew him into politics. The fact is, his entry into active politics was catapulted by the British colonial administration to represent

the Ceylonese community. The colonial state nominated and co-opted him initially in 1946 into the Malayan Union Selangor State Council, then in 1948 to the Federal Legislative Council, and in 1949 to be Chairman of the important Communities Liaison Committee. This was to "address outstanding inter-communal issues and problems" (Means, 1970: 122) and promote an inclusive Malayan nationalism as opposed to the United Malay National Organization's (UMNO) Malay nationalism. In 1951, Thuraisingham was appointed as Member for Education in the Member System which was akin to the Ministerial System in the Federal Executive Council, a position he held till 1955. The colonial administration described him as "a modest and affable man, wholly impartial and sagacious presider over heated debates who eased tensions with a spark of humour" (quoted in The Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association, 2010: 159).

As a "London trained lawyer" he was reputed to have developed a "finesse for debate and discussion and took an active part in the debates in the legislative council and impressed his colleagues and the British administrators" (p. 23). In the legislature, the study suggests that he championed the plight of the working class living standards and fought for a rise in their wages with the support of the trade union representatives. What does not emerge from the biographical study is the outcome of his concerns and if he succeeded in achieving for the working class the level and regularity of wages to sustain their living standards?

Thuraisingham as Member for Education, from April 1951 to October 1955, underpinned the importance of education to the development of the country's economy and multiracial society regardless of language and religion. For him "Education and education alone, will bring a decent standard of life and thought that would cure the social, political and physical maladies of the land" (p. 28). Therefore, his ideal was to nurture the foundation for the holistic and broad-based universal and national system of school education strengthened by high-quality teaching. To Thuraisingham it was crucial that to achieve a quality holistic and broad-based education, high-quality teacher education and training was central. Three high-quality teacher training colleges, two in the United Kingdom and one in the country, were established during his tenure as Member for Education. The teachers who were trained in these three colleges were to form the backbone of the country's teaching profession from the 50s to the 70s.

The provision of education in the multiracial colonial society has always been a perennial and contentious issue and a challenge. The colonial government in order to introduce reforms as well as to expand educational provision and foster a sense of common national outlook, appointed two independent and complementary committees, the Barnes and Fenn-Wu, to study the prevailing divisive Malay, Chinese and Tamil vernacular education systems. The Barnes report was in favour of the Malay primary schools to be reorganised into a common type of "National School", while the Fenn-Wu report called for the retention of the vernacular schools but they be incorporated into the proposed

integrated Malay and English "National School" system. Thuraisingham's vision "an education system should be modelled to create a singleness in our plural society and build on it a powerful Malayan nation" (p. 31). In line with the two recommendations, Thuraisingham visualised that "the ideal school would be a school in which children of all races would be educated under the same roof and educated in all those subjects which a child needs for a full and complex education. This is my conception of a national school: a school in which the official languages, Malay and English are taught effectively from the earliest stages and where the cultural languages of the non-Malays, namely Kuo Yu and Tamil are also taught, and above all, a school in which the religion of the parents is taught to every child without exception" (p. 31). Thuraisingham's long-range vision was incorporated into the Education Ordinance of 1952 with the proviso for free primary education in National Schools for children between the ages of 6 to 12. Though he emphasised that the tenets of the Ordinance that underpinned a national outlook in education as essential for nation building, there was stormy opposition from the Chinese and Indian organisations, against their schools being integrated into the national school system. Apart from the stormy opposition from the Chinese and Indian organisations the colonial state's heavy financial commitment to fight the war against communist insurgency led to the denial of the resources needed to implement in full the provisions of the Education Ordinance.

The biography has overlooked an important policy shift in educational development that was implemented through a White Paper during Thuraisingham's tenure as Member for Education. The Government of the Federation of Malaya in conjunction with the Crown Colony of Singapore and the United Kingdom requested the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) in 1953 to send a mission to assess the resources available and how best to utilise them through practical measures for the future economic and social development which included the country's education. The missions' comprehensive draft Technical Report 9 on Education of 1954, was a crystallisation from Thuraisingham's vision which had broad consequences for the country's future education roadmap. The report articulated a 10 point coordinated program to meet the country's "current needs and public demand." The government subsequently incorporated the majority of the IBRD's recommendations which were tabled and adopted in the Legislative Council as a White Paper on Education Policy (No.67 of 1954) in October 1954. Among the key features of the White Paper was to increase funding, improve quality, reduce educational inequalities, expand and strengthen language teaching, enhance the opportunity for primary vernacular school pupils to migrate to English medium secondary schools, reduce drop-out rates, accelerate the expansion of vocational education, emphasis on teacher quality through vigorous development of teacher training colleges and part-time training and maximum practical expansion of part-time adult education (IBRD, 1955: 140–48; 439–501).

With regard to higher education Thuraisingham emphasised the importance of the nation's first university, established in 1949 – that it should be an institution of international repute and eminence. University education for him was more than producing professionals. He was of the view that students should pursue studies on Asian societies and the cultures and customs of the various ethnic groups in the country as well as Malay, Chinese and Tamil languages. Thuraisingham was jointly appointed by both the Malayan and Singapore governments as Chairman of the joint committee to study the Report of Commission of Enquiry on the University of Malaya 1957. The significant outcome of his committee's report was threefold: first, to form a central governing body to oversee, university policy, monitor academic standards and to plan the university's future development programs; second, it prepared a draft constitution for the university and its autonomous divisions of equal status in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore; and third, the establishment of a University of Malaya branch campus at the Pantai Valley in Kuala Lumpur in 1959 which eventually became the country's only elitist, stand-out flagship and fully-fledged independent university until 1969.

More importantly, the authors claim without substantive evidence that Thuraisingham because of his exposure to the exploitative nature of colonialism while in Britain had developed a strong anti-colonial attitude and this became "more visible when he joined Onn's IMP in 1951" (p. 25). Contrary to this claim, earlier studies go to show that Dato' Onn and this in all probability will include Thuraisingham were Britain's men from 1951 to 1954 in Malaya to protect the high stakes of Britain in Malaya (Cheah, 2002: 26). Between 1951 and 1954 both Thuraisingham and Dato' Onn, a close political and social compatriot of Thuraisingham and the acknowledged champion of Malay nationalism and founder of UMNO, changed course to fall prey to the ingenuity of the British persuasive strategy. Thuraisingham was content to be nominated to various positions in the colonial administrations (Cribb, 1956: 98). When John Thivy, the President of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) courted the Ceylonese to join the MIC, Thuraisingham told him, "leave us alone to enjoy the rights we have obtained through our own efforts" (p. 64). In short, he did not endeavour to stand for elections as a candidate of either the Independent Party of Malaya (IMP) or Party Negara (PN), instead he essentially depended on his long-term presidency of the Ceylonese Federation of Malaya and the virtue of the support from a small and narrow constituency among the Jaffna Tamils and the behest of the colonial administration to secure his nomination into the Federal Legislative Council. The study falls short of telling the reader whether Thuraisingham, like his compatriots Dato' Onn, Tan Cheng Lock, Sambanthan and the Tunku were able to enter the social world of the people and galvanise the same broad-based national grass-root community support. On the other hand, though Tunku Abdul Rahman's original political base was communal, he was, from 1952 through the initial UMNO-MCA Alliance and later in 1954 with the entry of MIC into the Alliance fold,

able to articulate and galvanise the support of the larger Malayan multiracial society.

The study has not dug deep to say that both Thuraisingham and Dato' Onn were essentially communal leaders who rode on the sheltered back of their respective community constituencies and were incorporated into key insider positions in the colonial administration. At the bidding of the colonial state that "races in Malaya would have to achieve some sort of unity before independence could be granted" (Cloake, 1985: 301) both these leaders as well as other Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders at the behest of the colonial administrators made several concerted attempts to sow the seeds of Malayan nationalism, a non-communal political culture, initially through their new IMP and subsequently PN. Of course, the forerunner to these two failed political attempts to anchor and lay roots to Malayan nationalism versus the fast evolving and potent Malay nationalism under UMNO was the CLC under the chairmanship of Thuraisingham. The CLC apart from initially preventing the country to be "torn asunder by communal warfare" (Means, 1970: 122) turned its objectives through dialogue, discussions and negotiations to a non-communal approach to politics (p. 41). The main aim was to evolve Malaya into a non-communist, united, multiracial, parliamentary democratic, future self-governing Malayan nation. Therefore, Thuraisingham and Dato' Onn were committed to a more gradual and much longer transitional period for the country to be ready for the full working of democratic politics (p. 44). Their failed efforts to create a Malayan nationalism the biography says saw "the emergence of a new kind of politics in Malaya" the "inter-communal accommodation or consociationalism" (p. 74). The authors without any supporting evidence nor persuasive evaluative arguments seem to give credit to Thuraisingham and Dato' Onn for steering the country's present pattern of new politics of inter-communal accommodation or "consociationalism" and not to the British. In actual fact it was the British who were pragmatic enough to realise that they had to come to terms with a deep rooted and potent Malay nationalism, a nationalism that was coterminous with UMNO and UMNO's growingly visible and viable asymmetrical working relationship with her Alliance partners the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and MIC.

Thuraisingham's prominent roles and contributions did not operate in isolation from the "new kind of nationalism and nationalistic fervor" (p. 2) that gripped Malaya in the immediate post-war years. The country from 1945 to 1955 was in political and economic disarray and was disrupted by major political, economic and political fissures and movements (Khong, 2003). Fervent political and communal tensions erupted and intensified over many issues. There was a threat of communism that was identified by the Governor-General of Malaya and Singapore, Malcolm McDonald, in 1947 as the "Enemy No.1" in Malaya (Shennan, 2000: 318), the formation of a multiracial and united Malayan Union and the rise of a resurgent elite dominated UMNO to oppose the Malayan Union. The colonial response was the granting of the Malay-centric Anglo-Malay

Federation of Malaya Agreement, and the founding of the Federation of Malaya that firmly laid the political foundation for the Malay elite dominated and controlled independent Malay nation-state with Islam as the official religion. The Communist Party of Malaya (MCP), a coalition of left-wing Malay, Chinese and Indian nationalist groups called Pusat Tenaga Rakyat or Central Force of People (PUTERA) and the All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) opposed the Federation of Malaya Agreement. PUTERA-AMCJA the first inter-racial alliance opposed the stringent citizenship laws for non-Malays and urged that "All persons born in Malaya should automatically be given 'Melayu' citizenship and were to renounce their citizenship rights in any other country" and "All citizens should possess equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic, educational and cultural spheres regardless of race, creed, colour or sex" (Khong, 2003: 165). The MCP waged an armed struggle to dislodge British rule. The response was the proclamation of a State of Emergency in 1948 to militarily crush the MCP and to curtail radical political parties and militant trade unions through draconian anti-democratic laws, and to build a non-Communist, non-communal Westminster modelled alternative that was supportive of British economic interest as well as to the Western and American rabid anti-Cold-War political ideology of freedom from communism.

These events gave rise to a complexity of fiercely contested radical political activism underpinned by nationalism, communalism, communism, colonialism and egalitarianism which continues to prevail to this day. The country's overwhelming dependence on the price vulnerability of her primary commodity exports, coupled with the cost of fighting the MCP placed Malaya precariously on the financial balance. Among sections of the population, there were "deep fears and widespread skepticism in the 1950s that independent Malaya would be a fiasco if not a tragedy" (Wang, 2002: xvi). For Britain, the political turmoil was a huge risk to the Malayan economy that was literally bailing out its war ravaged domestic economy. Britain's overwhelming ownership and control of the Malayan economy had to be secured through a twin-pronged strategy of "war and politics."

During this tumultuous and formative period, Thuraisingham, a product of a colonial environment who could be categorised as the epitome of a good variant of Anglophile Fabian ideology of democracy and freedom and a conformist was thrust into the country's political landscape. He was with Dato' Onn and other like-minded Malay, Chinese and Indian communal leaders, endorsed and co-opted by the colonial state and assimilated into the colonial administration to be groomed for eventual leadership in the self-governing democratic nation-state. As a member of the Federal Legislative Council, Chairman of the elite dominated Communities Liaison Committee and Member of Education in the colonial state's Cabinet System he was not isolated from the unpredictable events and the power of the movements. Student activism in the University of Malaya then in Singapore where the majority of Malayan students

were pursuing their tertiary education was on the ascendancy from 1950 (Weiss, 2011). During the same period, in the Federation of Malaya there was a deep-rooted and pervasive network of left-wing ideology and ant-British sentiment brewing in the Chinese schools that was troubling the colonial authorities including the Americans, the major protagonist of the anti-infiltration of Communist ideology in schools (Eells, 1954: 1–20; 37–61). As Member for Education he could not have been surgically separated from these events. How did the colonial dominated historical specificity, particularly during the 1952–1954 years when Gerald Templar, the High Commissioner and Director of Operations was in a position of absolute authority and pursued a ruthless policy of exacting loyalty and subservience (Cloak, 1985: 226; Shennan, 2000: 320) affect or curtail Thuraisingham's commitment as a visible communal representative in the administration or was he a careful conformist to the political and economic norms established by the colonial and later the post-colonial state and rewarded for his subservience? The biography fails to consider their impact on Thuraisingham or Thuraisingham's reaction and role in these intermingling and interdependent historical challenging circumstances.

Can a biography through a "modest attempt" analyse the role and contributions as well as assess and evaluate the significant impact of a nation-builder's inter-communal cooperation and label him as "A Malaysian Patriot" and "provide us a deeper insight into the nation's history" as well as "a valuable window into an earlier era of the country's political history" (p. 3) and "add to the historiography on Malaysian history in general and political history in particular?" (p. viii). "A National Patriot's" scholarly biography has to analytically portray several factors in the individual's life and his legacy during his time and coherently trace the role, individually and collectively, intertwined to shape the larger historical process of the nation in a sequence of events and movements. In other words, in order to bring a new dimension and debate to Malaysian historiography through Thuraisingham's roles and contributions, a full-length biographical study has to be undertaken. It has to coherently and analytically interpret Thuraisingham's roles and contributions, under the structure of power and influence of a colonial state, to nation-building both individually and collectively, in the main events and movements that gripped and divided the Malayan/Malaysian political and social landscape during his active political, community and social life.

A substantive study demands the extensive use of a whole range of materials (including wide-ranging interviews of relatives, friends, legal fraternity, community members and his political compatriots and foes) that are linked with him. The colonial and post-colonial state and the intermingling and interdependent historical events and movements that fermented during the period have also to be measured against Thuraisingham's activities. The storyline has to unravel, the multiple networks of human intercourse he pursued within a multiracial colonial and post-colonial society to be able to justify the label of



Thuraisingham being called "A National Patriot." To scholarly articulate and interpret these events and movements the authors have to undertake a detailed empirical work and writing. Only then can the authors unravel the intertwined historical process during the period and authenticate the various unsupported assertions and generalisations the authors have made in the biography. Hayek (1963: 4) in his essay on History and Politics points out that "...we can hardly hope to profit from past experiences unless the facts from which we draw our conclusions are correct."

Instead, the biography has circumvented its narration away from the tightly interrelated events and movements that have intertwined to shape the interconnected historical processes during the time Thuraisingham was in active politics and community leadership.

The biography falls far short of the authors objective to "provide a valuable window into an earlier era of the country's political history" (p. 3). The biography by the academic historians is neither a sequential biography nor a thematic expose and interpretations of Thuraisingham's influence on the many facets of the events and movements in which he as an insider was directly involved in. It is an under-researched and fragmented biography, padded with a number of repetitive facts and sentences. The authors have obtained many of the factual data for the biography from interviews with one of Thuraisingham's many sons. Many of the study's references are from published secondary sources. Further, a number of the facts and statements are not substantiated with credible references. Like published books and articles on the Sri Lankan community in Malaysia which have direct references to Thuraisingham that are in the public domain have not been referenced. The biography has a number of factual and editorial errors. For example, the authors on page 8 say "He took an active interest in extracurricular activities and was attracted to the various societies in Cambridge" and again in page 9 "He began to take an active interest in the student's societies activities in Cambridge." The original committee report that Thuraisingham chaired to study the University of Malaya Commission of Inquiry Report 1957 is available, the authors instead have drawn their facts from a published secondary source. Rajakrishnan's 1988 published study *Sojourners to Citizenship: Sri Lankan Tamils in Malaysia, 1885–1965* which was incidentally initiated, commissioned and funded by the University of Malaya Sri Lankan Endowment Fund, Durai Rajah Singam's 1968 *A hundred Years of Ceylonese in Malaya and Singapore (1867–1967)*, Selvaratnam and Apputhurais' *Legacy of the Pioneers: 125 Years of Jaffna Tamils in Malaya* and The Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association of 2010, *Celebrating 100 Years* has a write-up on Thuraisingham. All these publications have relevant information on Thuraisingham and they have not been referred to. Some factual errors noticed are that Bandaranaike was the fourth Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and not the second (p. 7); the Indian National Army (INA) was formed in April 1942 in Singapore and not in Malaya (p. 16); was the declaration of the country's Emergency in June

1949? (p. 41); workers were of Jaffna and Tamil origin? (p. 13); and Thuraisingham...was "elected" as a member committee or was he "nominated?" (p. 43), and one can go on.

More importantly the biography fails to critically evaluate the efforts Thuraisingham undertook with Dato' Onn and with the colonial officials' backing to mould public opinion as well as steer UMNO's all powerful central elites towards a multiracial independent state. Instead, UMNO's elites far from accepting an equitable balance of power between the Malays and non-Malays resolutely championed for the resurgence of Malay sovereignty, rights and privileges, surely causing the underlying cleavage and it to be the point of departure to determine the country's future larger historical process. Tunku Abdul Rahman's statement that: "This country was received from the Malays and to the Malays it ought to be returned." The eventual alternative solution, a compromised "social contract" of an asymmetrical multi-communal nation-state in which each of the minority community represents its interest in subservience to UMNO elite's power-base and the combined Malay dominated political-administrative power has come to forever haunt Malaysia's political landscape. The consequences of this alternative compromise have to be explored and detailed, largely because the authors claim that Thuraisingham's ideals and ideas for an integrated and equitable Malaysia went unheeded as they were considered to be controversial and certainly not in UMNO elite's political interest.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I wish to acknowledge the critical and useful comments of J. C. Rajarao, Veloo Saminathan, Lakshmi Selvaratnam, John Doraisamy and Charles Hershman.

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