

YOUTH AND INDUSTRIALISATION IN SINGAPORE

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Somewhat typical of the developing countries, Singapore has more than half of its 2 million population under 21 years of age and about 70% are under 30. In other words, the proportion of the dependent population is higher than that of the providing population. Singapore, moreover, is a small island state of about 225 square miles, with no natural resources worth speaking of at its disposal. Under such unfavourable circumstances, to support the livelihood of two million people and to create adequate job opportunities for the thousands of school leavers every year is an extremely difficult, if not totally impossible, task.

For the past 150 years, Singapore has been playing the role of the entrepot trade centre in this part of the world, mainly because of its strategic position. However, entrepot trade, while still important to Singapore's economy, can no longer cope with the growth of population and the increasing number of job-seekers every year. Moreover, it is likely that Singapore will gradually lose its importance as the entrepot trade and process centre.

In order to survive and prosper, Singapore has to diversify its economy so that it is not dependent completely upon its traditional role and function as the middle-man of the region. In the early 1960's, an ambitious, massive and imaginative industrialisation scheme was launched despite the realisation that Singapore has no natural resources and has very limited capital, both of which are essential for any industrialisation programme to succeed. As there is no alternative available, the Government has to solve the problem one way or another and, so far, it has been quite successful in doing so. I do not want to discuss how Singapore solved the problem of capital, industrial raw material and a market big enough to support the industrialisation programme. I merely want to address myself to the problem of manpower in the process of industrialisation and to demonstrate how Singapore involves its youth in this key process of national development.

Manpower is the only native asset of Singapore and it must be fully and properly utilised if the industrialisation programme is to succeed at all, considering the lack of other favourable

conditions conducive to the success of such a programme. Industrialisation requires labour, especially skilled labour. As was to be expected, Singapore faced and is still facing the problem of a shortage of skilled labour, which is a problem confronting all developing nations in their attempts to industrialise. The traditional education system, passed down from colonial days, does not adequately prepare young people for careers in industries. General academic studies have been the rule rather than exception. Besides this problem of lack of technical or vocational training in the traditional education system, there is also the problem of a lack of proper psychological orientation towards industrial life. Youth, in diminishing degree, still prefers "white-collar" jobs to "blue-collar" jobs, which is a prejudice handed down from colonial days.

The task of the Government to involve youth in the industrialisation process, not only in the interests of the nation but also in those of the youth themselves, has therefore two dimensions. One dimension is to make school leavers employable skill-wise. The other is to orientate them psychologically to industrial life.

While for the time being skilled and semi-skilled labour has to be imported from the neighbouring countries to meet immediate needs, long-term policy has been drawn up by the Government to solve the shortage of industrial labour on a more permanent basis. The role of education, especially at secondary level, has been re-examined and re-structured. In 1969, a common curriculum was adopted for secondary education in which obligatory workshop subjects were introduced in the first two years of secondary education. After the completion of the second year, students can proceed to complete their secondary course either in academic or commercial or technical streams. The target is to ensure that one out of every three secondary school leavers receives technical training by 1975. At present, there are three vocational institutes and four industrial training centres to prepare young men and women for semi-skilled and skilled work in industry. This apart, the Government also encourages and helps industries to provide on-the-job training for young workers, with a tax exemption incentive. In addition, the Singapore Polytechnic and the Ngee Ann Technical College provide training in the fields of technology, supplying the much needed engineers and technicians for the industrialisation programme, and also technical teachers. The Polytechnic, in particular, offers part-time studies on most of its courses, thus enabling a great number of working youth to further their technical training in their

spare time. In a few years' time, the problem of the shortage of semi-skilled and skilled labour is expected to be solved to a large extent.

While a shortage of skilled labour is understandable, currently there is also, surprisingly, a shortage of unskilled workers, which has made it necessary for the Government to liberalise its work permit policy and to import a large number of unskilled workers, especially from West Malaysia. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon is the fact that Singaporeans have become rather choosy about employment. Although there are about 4,000 registered unemployed, the figure is undoubtedly misleading. Those who allege to be unemployed are actually either under-employed or are looking for better jobs. Many of them do not want to work in factories, largely as a matter of attitude. It is therefore also on this aspect that the Government has increasingly focused its attention. The aim of the task is to prepare youth psychologically for industrial life and whatever it implies. To this end, social education, besides formal education, can contribute in a certain way. Trade unions, community centres and other social education agencies are playing a positive role.

In this connection, I would like to inform the gathering briefly of what the National Youth Leadership Training Institute has done in the area of social education for young people in Singapore. Social education is one of the many aspects of training for young people provided by the Institute. Our aim in the social education of youth is to keep them informed of the problems and socio-political realities of the nation, and to instil in them a sense of social responsibility and national consciousness. We want youth not to think of employment simply in terms of their own personal needs, namely, of getting a job by which to earn a living. We want our youth to think beyond these personal terms and to see their working in industries as participation in national development, participation of which they should be proud. This awareness of their role in national development will not be possible if they do not see national development in its right perspective.

These, then, are some of the many problems facing Singapore in its attempt to industrialise and to involve the young people in a conscious way in the process of industrialisation.