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THE announcement by the government to make history a must-pass subject in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) from 2013 seems to have received indifferent responses from many quarters. Although the majority agreed history is important for nation building some have warned that one has to be cautious before implementing the policy.

As a historian I would like to state my view on the matter. It is a known fact that the subject of history in school doesn't attract the interest of students and this view would be shared by teachers too.

The common grouses are that the subject is boring, syllabus is too wide, politically aligned, favours a particular race, the focus is on one main religious civilisation, memorising of dates and personalities, hero worshipping certain events in history and moral lessons for every historical event. History then is memorised for the sake of passing exams.

The emphasis of Form Five syllabus which draw moral lessons from historical events is indeed true in the exam questions. The exam papers are filled with questions relating to the morals of a particular historical occurrence.

History lessons in Malaysian schools seem to be meant for nation-building and fail to appreciate the subject as it is.

History is not everything about the greatness of the past but also the dark side of a nation. History can no longer be limited to the story of great wars or narrative of political events. It must give due attention not only to few outstanding men whose names are known in Malaysian history but also to the anonymous masses.

All the different kinds of history contribute to our knowledge of how a civilisation is formed and how it develops from age to age.

Students must be taught that the history of a nation has its glorious and dark days. They must be taught that from the pages of history one can see that not all decisions in it are correct and they change according to times.

The economic policy of Europe in the 17th century which was known as mercantilism was right at the time but not so in the 18th century. Adam Smith debunked mercantilism and promoted a laissez-faire policy and it explains why Britain and other European nations spearheaded industrialism.

History is a process and one should not take an event and worship it without seeing its shortcomings.

Another example is Malacca which was a great trading empire in the 15th century but it had its shortcomings which led to the fall of the Portuguese in 1511. In short, history is not all about the glory of the past depicted in our school textbooks.

The government must make sure that the views of all stakeholders are sought before a decision is taken to make the subject compulsory.

As suggested by MCA, it would be good if the government could set up a multiracial panel representing the curriculum review committee to oversee the writing of the history syllabus from Year One to Upper Six. The panel must make sure that history in the school syllabus is objective and covers the total history of Malaysia – not only about government and politics, but also about the minorities, the leftists and the oppressed.

Only then will we be doing justice to history.

Efforts should also be made to change the method in which history is taught in school. Students should be tested on their historical skills rather than ability to memorise facts.

It will be good for us to ponder on what Professor Arasaratnam Sinnapah said in his lecture entitled "Problems in the Writing of Malaysian History," which he presented at the Malaysian History Seminar in 1972. His views are relevant to the current polemic. To quote Arasaratnam: "Each age writes about what it wants to know from the past, looks at it through its own eyes, interprets in its own way." There is thus a continuing process of interpretation and reinterpretation going on. Therefore it is a right and a necessary thing that we are doing in this stage of our development to seek to reinterpret our history.

But a word of caution – it is all right for an age to write its own history, but in doing this it must see to it that the past is not subject to the present; that the past does not become the slave of the present. History has no lessons to teach. A historian writes history and then allows the statesmen, the politician and propagandist to draw their own lessons from it. But history itself does not teach any lessons. History as past happenings is independent of the present – it is done, it is gone, it is finished. Its independence and its autonomy must be respected. You just cannot use it for your own end at this stage. An interpretation of today may and perhaps be rejected tomorrow.

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