

Submission from Minhaj-Ul-Quran

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Honourable members of the Legislative Council

I am a member of the ethnic minority of Hong Kong. I am a Sri-Lankan engaged in business and have been living here for the last 35 years, during which, I have witnessed the growth of this great international city. Let me say that as a foreigner I am grateful to Hong Kong for the opportunities that it has given my family and me. My two children were born and raised here. They had a good education. One returned to Sri-Lanka and the other, my son is engaged in business in the Mainland.

My subject is education for ethnic minorities. Having lived in ^{Yau Sha Tei} ~~Yau Sha~~ district for the last three decades I am well qualified to speak about it. There is a large concentration of minorities in this district. I have associated closely with them. They come from all walks of life. People from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri-Lanka who either have been here for a long time or who have come here in search of freedom and a better way of life

What I have observed is that a very large number of the ethnic minority belongs to the low-income group and suffers from a great disadvantage. They are unable to speak either Cantonese or English and this closes to them avenues of employment. What they should do is to learn both languages. if not, at least one, say Cantonese. Their children cannot enter government schools without knowledge of Cantonese or English.

How could we solve this? The government cannot build separate schools for the children or centres of teaching for the adults. It will be a large investment. Yet this fundamental need for learning has to be addressed if we want to better the lives of the ethnic minority. As the majority of this group belongs to the low-income group they need government assistance to acquire skills and improve their living conditions.

In this context I wish to make two proposals, one for the adults and the other for the children: The proposal is on the basis that the low income group is unable to meet even the cost of learning one of the two languages, unless they are assisted.

The first proposal is to conduct classes in Cantonese and in English at community centers or at schools, after school hours, for adults. This could be done in Yau Shing District first and be taken to other areas depending on the progress made in Yau Shing. A government teacher or a private tutor could conduct classes for adults once or twice a week for about 2 to 3 hours. Currently some voluntary organizations conduct English classes for adults. The government can do it directly through the education department or indirectly through voluntary organizations. I am unable to say which one is better. A nominal fee could be charged from the participants to defray at least part of the expenses and also on the basis of the universal principle that nothing should be given free.

The second is similarly to conduct classes in Cantonese and English for the children, which will enable them to enter government schools after acquiring a basic knowledge of Cantonese and/or English for one or two years.

In this project invariably cost is an important issue. How much does it cost the government to embark on a project of this nature? It certainly is a matter for the officials to assess.

What I wish to emphasize is independently of the cost, the government should look at the long-term benefit of educating an under privileged group in this city. The prosperity of this city cannot continue whilst there is a segment of the society, which is deprived of their basic needs. The need to learn Cantonese, the language spoken by the majority, and English, in which general business is conducted, is a basic necessity, a minimum qualification, to make a living in Hong Kong. Without this knowledge the minorities find themselves unemployed or under employed and which in turn give rise to grievances against the society and the authorities. It is this language skill alone that will make them useful citizens and which will enable them to integrate themselves into the Hong Kong society. They will then cease to be burden to the government and the society. This alone will be a large saving for Hong Kong in the long run.