

**Book Review/*Ulasan Buku***

*Langkawi From Mahsuri To Mahathir: Tourism for whom?* by Bella (D.M.) Bird. Kuala Lumpur: INSAN. 1989. 69 pp. Tables, map, photographs, references. M\$5.00

Judged by its cover, this slim volume has an instant appeal to those who have a critical interest in the development of tourism in Malaysia. While the title promises coverage of the entire two-century history of Langkawi, the caption on the back cover offers to draw from Langkawi's experience with tourism development, "... lessons for the rest of Malaysia and the Third World". This makes it the most ambitious of the three slim volumes published on Malaysian tourism to date (cf. Hofmann 1979; Hong 1985). But unlike the earlier authors who rely heavily on published material Bird appears to have gained a more penetrating insight into the issues surrounding tourism development partly from her own experience as a budget tourist-cum-researcher. She also happens to be the youngest and perhaps the most empathetic among the five women who have written personal accounts of their travel in Peninsular Malaysia.

Besides the value of its contribution to the scanty critical literature on Malaysian tourism, the book is important for two other reasons. First, it is arguably the first attempt which treats the subject from the ethnic perspective, i.e., from the viewpoints of the affected parties. Bird tries to grasp the feelings of both the local population and the female tourists in their situational contexts. She portrays the Langkawi Malay villagers as passive onlookers whose destiny is being determined by politicians and outsiders who view the preferences of the locals as irrelevant for purposes of planning and decision-making. Although the author is in full sympathy with the resident community, being the group which is forced to face the onslaughts of modern tourism, she is at the same time strongly critical of a small but growing number of local beachboys and touts whose presence has been a source of nuisance among the young female tourists. The detailed account on the conduct of the beachboys, ogling at sunbathers or making bold sexual propositions, can only come from someone with first-hand knowledge of the problem, either through personal encounters or through conversation with co-travellers. On this score the Malay adage, "one can only clap with two hands" applies; it would have been more balanced and illuminating if the author had also indicated whether there have been cases of female tourists making advances to locals or whether giggoloism, which is known to be a common phenomenon in Gambia, West Indies and the Caribbean, also exists in resorts such as Langkawi.

The other reason concerns the nature and the timing of its appearance. The book was launched at the Faculty of Arts, University of Malaya about

a week prior to the commencement of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Langkawi during October 1989. The meeting can be regarded as a climax to a year of accelerated development on the island; the airport, road, jetty, and the townships of Kuah and Padang Mat Sirat, were spruced up for the occasion as though Langkawi is finally salvaged from the legendary curse of Mahsuri. The atmosphere exudes a certain optimism that Langkawi, under the stewardship of Mahathir, has at last regained its ancient glory; Langkawi has finally been reinstated to its ancient grandeur when it was known worldwide as a rich granary for high quality pepper. Only this time after a gap of some two centuries, tourism takes over from pepper as the island's mainstay.

By injecting an anti-climactic message at the eleventh hour before CHOGM, the publisher (INSAN) had presumably hoped to draw media attention to the less palatable aspects of the "new kind of pepper". The book is organized into eight chapters with the first three devoted to a cursory description of the national and local contexts of the tourist industry. Discussions on three general categories of impacts (economic, environmental, sociocultural) are presented in the remaining five chapters. Except for the first three-sentence paragraph on page 44, where the positive contribution of tourism to the environment is recognized, the bulk of the book delivers a negative judgement. A blinkered viewpoint is not necessarily unfounded, so long as the arguments presented are properly substantiated. Indeed, given the state of euphoria prevalent among industry insiders who dominate the media, an extended discussion on the negative aspects alone would be refreshing and would make a useful addition to the literature on the subject.

Without an explicit statement of the problem, or a clear pronouncement on the objective of writing the book, it is difficult for the reader to examine its strengths and weaknesses. It is nevertheless possible to form an opinion, based on the accuracy of documentation and the coherence of the argument presented. I shall first highlight some of the strong points and then look at the parts which may need to be addressed further.

Unlike the standard approach to tourism reporting in Malaysia, Bird raises questions beyond the familiar concern with the numerics (the volume of tourist arrivals, lengths of stay, room occupancy, the aggregate amount of money spent etc.), and tries to take stock of the overall impact of tourism on the host community. Thus, instead of stopping at the question 'how much is earned', she goes a step further to focus on 'who gets the earnings?', and 'how are the costs distributed?'. These questions are clearly pertinent if the concept 'tourism development' is to be properly understood. According to Bird the present approach to development does not confer any significant benefits to the host community (p. 2, 57).

The group who stand to benefit most from the expansion in Langkawi tourism are mainly outsiders, including individuals who not only have the necessary capital, but also have direct access to business intelligence either by virtue of their business connections (especially the Chinese entrepreneurs), or through political and administrative connections (p. 20, 37, 38). The ordinary Langkawi residents were not consulted, and even if there were token briefings (p. 28) it would not have made much difference since the islanders as a rule have very little insight into the opportunities open to them. Yet it is the host community who have to bear the burden of costs which include intangibles such as moral decadence, environmental deterioration, inflation and the erosion of community cohesion.

Bird is correct on the lack of continual assessment of whether tourism can really benefit the society (p. 2). As far as the public is concerned, accelerated tourism development in Langkawi has not been subjected to the rigorous requirements of the EIA regulations. Nor is there any mechanism which would allow for a fuller appreciation of the multifarious social and cultural consequences brought about by the encounter between an essentially conservative rural community, and the outsiders who as a group are differentiated but are largely more cosmopolitan and liberal in outlook. In this regard the conservative Malay-Muslim rejection of tourism (p. 52) is to be expected.

While the loose "political-economic" framework used in the book is useful in looking at the question of who-gets-what, Bird's application of an evolutionary concept reminds the reader that the hospitality industry is not without its limits (p. 64). Tourism in Langkawi is said to be still at the first stage or the level of euphoria (p. 55), but there are already signs of tourism activities overshooting the limits. One of this is environmental deterioration arising from the lack of proper rubbish and sewage disposal (p. 22). This is a problem faced by most coastal and island destinations in Malaysia. The situation in Langkawi brings into question the desirability of the small-scale chalet operations as an alternative to the large hotels. Here small is not always beautiful, none of the chalets have proper waste disposal facilities.

Another limiting factor is the attitude of the host community to outsiders. Bird's description is not coherent on this; although she considers the Langkawi community still at the level of euphoria (stage of enthusiasm), her accounts of creeping racial polarization (p. 46) and local resentment (p. 37, 46-53) suggest otherwise. One of the sources of resentment is the demonstration effects brought about by tourism. The duty-free status of Langkawi encourages high expectations, and even alcoholism, since consumer items and liquor are now cheaper and readily available. Contrary to official viewpoint however, foreign tourists are not attracted to Langkawi for shopping, the beneficiaries of duty-free shopping

are the locals and the domestic visitors who constitute 90 percent of the tourist traffic.

The issues raised in the book are familiar and the style of presentation, delivered in the genre of protest literature, is unfortunately flawed and hasty in places. Although Bird would have liked to see a continual assessment of the impacts of tourism, which means drawing attention to both the positive and the negative consequences, very little is said on the positive aspects. Looking at the resource capability of the Langkawi District, being poor in natural resources except tourist resources, one wonders whether tourism is not *the only* available option. As to be expected, there are also very little pointers on what might be the viable alternative mode of development, granted the criticisms against current approach.

There is a tendency towards hurried deductions, for example in the observation that plastics, bottles and tin discards can increase the level of phytoplankton (p. 41): Even if this claim is true would not the proliferation of phytoplankton be good for the "ikan bilis" industry which is an important source of income and employment in the island? The author appears to have used a blinkered set of standards when commenting government priorities. Hence she is worried that only 68 percent of homes in Malaysia had piped water in 1980 while only 10 percent of Malaysians have private telephones in 1988 (p. 3), while realizing that by Langkawi standard these are items luxurious even with rapid infrastructural development brought in by tourism (p. 29).

The author cannot be faulted for the use of the 1985 figure for tourism arrival, which is a little out dated, considering the rapid growth in Langkawi tourism. The lack of more current information reflects a major weakness on the part of the government agencies in charge of tourism and this raises the question of whether in the absence of even the most basic requirement in planning – baseline information – our planning authorities can be competent enough to make decisions which can affect the entire future of Langkawians. In the same vein the TDC estimate of 44 percent of tourist expenditure spent on accommodation quoted by Bird (p. 3) must be treated with extra caution, in view of the claim that this represents a large leakage from the economy, a claim that is again left unsubstantiated (p. 3). There are few minor factual errors but Bird can be taken to task for her failure, as in most feature writings on Langkawi, to distinguish myth from history. Her narrative on the curse of Langkawi and on Tunku Abdul Rahman's accounts on the lack of development in Langkawi does not appeal to common sense but serves to reify a myth that has far too often been taken to rationalize the official neglect of the island.

Similarly, the book contains a number of serious but undocumented allegations on the political and administrative abuses of tourism (p. 17, 38),

especially on certain self-serving decisions taken by a state executive councillor which makes it provocative and eye-opening. This small book is thus a useful reading for those interested in the polemics surrounding tourism in Malaysia. It should also serve as a good starting point for any researcher who is interested in studying tourism development in Langkawi.

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