

## Book Review

# Book Review: Decades of Occupational Safety and Health in Malaysia by Harminder Singh

### Article history

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Decades of Occupational Safety and Health in Malaysia delivers a historical perspective on the development of the Factories and Machinery Department (FMD) in precise and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in general. This book is an excellent resource for students, researchers, OSH practitioners, and others to improve OSH in Malaysia. The principal criteria as part of the review includes the content, organization, and reference sources.

## 2.0 THE AUTHOR

The author of this book is Harminder Singh. He has had a successful career in the Factories and Machinery Department of Malaysia which is now known as the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH). He worked his way from a fresh engineering graduate all the way up to the position of Director-General of the Department. In addition to that, he was also instrumental in establishing the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Malaysia, which was launched by the then Minister of Human Resources on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1992. His educational accomplishments include a Professional Mechanical Engineering degree and he is also a Fellow of the Institute of Engineers, Malaysia. He also holds an Honours Degree in Law from the University of London.

## 3.0 CONTENT

The book has been divided into five chapters. The last three chapters are based on the author's account as a staff of the FMD, Malaysia. It allows readers to easily follow the evolution of OSH from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the early 1990s. It presents a comprehensive analysis on the history of OSH in Malaysia focusing on the development of the DOSH. It offers an objective view of the DOSH's developments and illustrates the interaction between the need of the country and the initiatives taken by the department.

The first chapter of the book opens with an early history of machineries introduced in Malaysia and the law governing them during the pre-independence era of the late 19th century. The earliest discovery of tin mining was in Larut and Kinta in the state of Perak in 1848 and 1880, respectively. The chain pump was the machinery used for mining until the introduction of steam engine and centrifugal pump in 1877 by the Europeans. Dredge was introduced in 1912 to enlarge the scale of mining operations. Legislation pertaining to machineries first appeared in 1892 in Selangor and later the Boiler Enactment was passed in 1898 and this was followed by the Machinery Enactment in 1913 to cover all types of machineries. The Machinery Ordinance was subsequently passed in 1953 to cover the entire Federation of Malaya. The Ordinance was an instrument in establishing the Machinery Department.

The book progresses through the post-independence period of 1957 to 1965. It is during this period, that the first batch of six local machinery inspectors join the Machinery Department, which was earlier dominated by expatriates. The author also shares his personal experiences of working with expatriate inspectors. He was under the impression that the expatriate bosses were not very happy with qualified Malaysians filling the vacancies in the department. The expatriates would treat them like children although they were given the responsibility to be in-charge of regional offices.

During the period from 1966 until 1978, the first Malaysian Chief Inspector and Deputy Chief Inspector were appointed in 1966 to replace the expatriate officers. The first task of the Chief Inspector was to uplift the morale of the officers and staff of the department. Secondly, they were tasked to improve the image of the Machinery Department which was run by a drunkard expatriate and dishonest chief clerk. During this period the Factories and Machinery Act 1967 was drafted and enforced in February 1970 in West Malaysia. The Act repealed the Machinery Ordinance 1953. With the gazettelement of the new Act, the Machinery Department changed its name to the Factories and Machinery Department. The new addition in the scope of the Act was the compulsory reporting of industrial diseases. Eventually, industrial health activities and the Industrial Health Unit was established within the FMD. Senior medical officers from the Ministry of Health were seconded to the department. The Pollution Control Unit was also formed in 1969 to monitor the pollution from chimneys and effluent discharge into the drains and rivers. Eventually, the government established the Department of Environment in 1972 and the Environmental Quality Act was enacted in 1974. With the closure of the Industrial Pollution Unit, the FMD switched its focus to industrial hygiene activities beyond the initial focus on machinery hazards.

Several significant achievements were further explored during the 1978-1989 period. The FMD realized the need for more regular dialogue between employers, employees and professionals on issues of safety and health at workplaces. Based on suggestions by the FMD, the Ministry of Labour agreed to establish the National Advisory Council on Occupational Safety and Health in 1984. A draft of the proposed Act based on Lord Roben's philosophy was developed and discussed by the Council in 1984. However, due to some initial objections from several government departments, the lack of support from officials of the Ministry of Human Resources and constant pressure from some organizations, the implementation of the Act was delayed. In 1985, the FMD also tabled a paper on the need to establish an Institute of Occupational Safety and Health similar to what Germany, United States and Finland had. Extensive discussions were held by the Council. The International Labor Organization also agreed to send an expert to conduct a feasibility study. Finally, the government approved the establishment of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in the early 1990s based on the proposal by the FMD.

The final chapter of the book focuses on the 1990-1992 period. It was a short period in which the author was appointed as the Director General of the FMD. The Department was responsible in the establishment of NIOSH, which focuses on training, research, consultation, and dissemination of information. During this period, the FMD continued to work on establishing the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA). In 1993, the new Occupational Safety and Health Act was tabled in Parliament. With the enactment of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), the FMD once again changed its name to the Department of Occupational Safety and Health. In this chapter, the author also provides a glimpse of OSH in the 21st century and beyond.

#### 4.0 STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

The book provides a clear progression of machineries, technologies, and activities that created different hazards and risks in various industries in Malaysia. Thus, readers are taken on a journey through the eyes of an Occupational Safety and Health enforcement officer and will receive first-hand accounts of the activities involved in trying to make the workplace safe and healthy. The bibliography provides some sources for obtaining more historical information on industrial developments in Malaysia. The appendices conclude with photos and newspaper cuttings of the activities involving the author. The tone of the book reflects the author's passion and love for his job.

Unfortunately, the contents of the book only covers the period of up to 1992 due to the author's retirement from the department in that year. It is impossible to explore all topics thoroughly.

#### 5.0 CONCLUSION

Decades of Occupational Safety and Health is a collection of significant events in OSH, emphasized by the people who made it happened and it correlates with the needs of the industries. The book's use of chronological time frames helps to make the advancements of OSH come to life. The author's enthusiasm on the topic is evident throughout the book. Overall, the book covered the historical developments of OSH in Malaysia in a readable and entertaining style. Therefore, it is suitable for those wanting to know about how OSH developed in Malaysia from the perspective of an enforcement department.

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