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Don't forget estate workers in march towards 2020

Dr B.C. Sekhar

A CONTROVERSY has erupted over the economic status of Malaysian Indians. Statistics have been provided to indicate the progress in average household income.

The question really is who represents the majority of Malaysian Indians. It is certainly not the professionals and the "urban dwellers".

The basic Malaysian Indian is really the progeny of indentured labour brought in from India - the plantation worker. His present state represents a marker of the community's economic progress since independence in 1957.

The Malaysian Indian plantation worker has made an inestimable contribution to this country's success. But what has he got in return?

The colonial power brought Indian labour into the country.

The British plantations, to ensure stability of labour, implemented schemes such as toddy shops and Tamil schools.

They wanted tappers and weeders to produce and nurture their children to continue their parents' vocation. There are three or four generations of such workers.

What the colonials did was continued after Independence.

Tamil school teachers in the plantations became a political force in the Malaysian Indian Congress. All that the Tamil schools achieved was to ensure the majority of children either ended up as dropouts or on the payroll of the plantations.

Some tried to join the urban rat race, but were at a considerable disadvantage compared with students educated at National schools.

During my time with the Malaysian Rubber Research and Development Board (MRRDB), monthly wages were approved for the plantation labour. But this was on the basis that plantation workers under Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia were really employees of a statutory authority and therefore covered by the Harun Commission Award.

However, an analysis of RRIM plantations and their Panti Scheme (the concept of a socio-economic plantation) will indicate clearly that monthly wages need not be detrimental to the viability of estates - in fact it would improve discipline and productivity.

A second Indian element in the estates were the Indian conductors, dressers, clerks and chief clerks. They did prosper and some of them became estate assistants and finally managers after Independence.

Their children were given university education and many of the professionals today among them lawyers, doctors and civil servants come from this stock. I, too, belong to this pool, as my father was in the estates until he found the colonial attitude unacceptable and joined the insurance business and prospered.

But such avenues were unavailable to the plantation labour. Tamil schools and toddy shops ensured a perpetual supply of workers.

The question really is what did the plantation labourer get from the "Malaysian Sun". They contributed to the success of the rubber plantations and then the oil palm plantations. With the "fruits" of the plantation operations, Malaysia had been able to diversify and prosper.

With the visionary approach of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia has developed to a stage where we can talk convincingly about Vision 2020.

But what is Vision 2020 for the Indian plantation labourers? Their

children are going to be representative of the future Malaysian Indians and a significant voting population. Their plight cannot be ignored without consequence.

I believe that statistics can lull everyone into complacency. Some basic remedial measures are called for.

Monthly wages can be considered, but will only be a short-term palliative.

Proper education is certainly the most important long-term solution. Surely, the present Tamil schoolteachers - a political factor in the MIC, can be dealt with if they are employed in National-type schools, to teach Indian culture and Tamil.

The racial structure in plantations is undergoing a major change. There are no Chinese or Malay schools in estates. The legal and illegal plantation workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia and other countries have joined the numbers in the plantations.

The time has come for estates to have only National-type schools fully integrated with the national education system. This will ensure children of plantation labourers are able to compete on equal terms and take advantage of all the options available to young Malaysians. Cosmetic changes will not meet the need.

I would even go further and ask the authorities to recognise the contribution of the plantation labourer by declaring those who are second, third and fourth generation progeny be accorded special status and be given privileges, such as land, scholarship and business opportunities.

Whatever the powers-that-be can give to the descendants of the indentured Indian plantation worker to advance himself is a necessary imperative in our march towards Vision 2020.