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The way forward for Indians

DATUK Seri S. Samy Vellu must surely be one gratified political party leader. The 54th MIC general assembly ended on Sunday with the party manifestly united. The president and his deputy were returned unopposed. The three president's men were elected as vice-presidents. And all but one on his "preferred list" gained seats on the 23-member central working committee. The icing on the cake of his satisfaction would be the announcement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his opening address to the assembly that the Cabinet has agreed in principle to accord monthly wages to estate workers.

The monthly wage had long been a chimera for daily rated estate workers. Their daily toil and rewards were dictated by the fickle but cruel vagaries of the weather. As leader of the ethnic group that for decades had been the main workforce in estates, Samy Vellu had hitched his wagon to the task of obtaining an assured monthly income. Indeed, he had even put on record, repeatedly over the past several weeks, that he would quit his Cabinet post and his political career if his cause turned out to be an exercise in futility. That long-pursued object is now an imminent reality.

By year-end hopefully, the numbers would be crunched and a monthly wage, agreed to mutually by estate workers' representatives and employers, should be in force. It would also be a laudable feather in Samy Vellu's cap. That achievement transcends racial barriers as Indians comprise only 38 per cent of the 300,000 labour working in estates. Reports say 37 per cent are Bumiputeras and the rest, migrant workers.

A monthly wage, however, would transpire into nothing more than a pyrrhic victory if the other attendant problems that ail the estate worker community are not resolved. Equally pressing is the issue of housing. Large plantations provide labour lines. These are only temporary quarters, not homes. Few owners, of large or small estates, would wilfully apportion land to build houses for workers. Only the willing allocation of land by State Governments would result in houses for estate workers. So far such gracious interventions have been few. Thus the old and dislocated estate workers are forced to be squatters in adjacent urban areas.

Samy Vellu knows the solution to this protracted and intractable problem of estate workers. He has, time and again, reminded Indians to rid themselves of the mind-set of being born in estates, fated to work in estates and destined to die in estates. Many in the past have broken out of this vicious cycle to gain an education and join the ranks of lawyers, doctors, professors, and successful entrepreneurs. Proportionally, the Indians, as Dr Mahathir noted in his speech, have a better representation among the professionals in the country than the other ethnic groups. More Indians should emerge, through education, from the estates.

Political leaders have visions to shepherd their people forward. Dr Mahathir has long expressed his vision to take the country to the ranks of developed nation. Samy Vellu has his for the Indian community which he made clear in his address to the MIC assembly. The way forward for them is to accept the opportunities available in Information Technology. Many of their forefathers came as indentured estate labour. That should not remain their destiny. They should pass on the legacy of a monthly wage for estate workers to others.

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