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The curse of the cyber age

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OPEN houses, whether during Hari Raya, Chinese New Year or Deepavali, have become a truly Malaysian practice. Even in remote villages, people hold open houses or have attended these events.

The three Chinese New Year open houses that I have not missed over the years are hosted by the MCA and the Gerakan at their respective national headquarters and that of the Yeoh Tiong Lay family at the residence of the senior Yeoh.

I also make it a point to attend Deepavali open houses. One that I have been attending regularly for years is that of Tan Sri Kishu Tirathrai of Globe Silk Store fame.

Of course, the Hari Raya open houses are events that you will naturally attend if you have been invited and have the time to spare.

But what strikes me is the Malaysianness of these open houses. By that, I mean the friendly carefree spirit, the mix of people, the variety of food and the riot of colours.

It fascinates me to see ordinary Malays, who I am afraid may know nothing or very little about the likes of the Yeohs, the Kishus and other important businessmen, seem to feel pretty much at home at their open houses. Malaysians from all walks of life, be they Malays, Chinese or Indians, turn up in droves to attend the open houses of the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister, not so much for the food but for the opportunity to greet their leaders and wish them a happy Hari Raya. The same is true at the MCA, Gerakan and MIC open houses. It has become so cosmopolitan that even foreign tourists in their backpacker attire make the trek to sample the festive fare.

It is gratifying to see that in a world full of troubles and sadness - a world torn apart by the clash of cultures and faiths - we Malaysians have turned what are essentially religious and communal celebrations into Malaysian celebrations.

While the religious and communal aspects of these celebrations remain largely intact, it is the social and cultural dimensions that lend them the added significance.

It's all about communicating

They are the best occasions to meet and renew friendships. As a journalist, I find the open houses indispensable.

People are more forgiving and thus are less likely to chastise you for any unpleasant Press or unfavourable comments you've penned.

Thus, I must say that I am grateful to those politicians, senior civil servants and businessmen whom I have met at these open houses for their forbearance despite what I have said about them - people like Robert Kuok and Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong, at Seri Perdana in Putrajaya, and Tan Sri Halim Saad and Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Hussain at other gatherings. Kuok had the time to respond to my query, saying that his group was not giving any less importance to Malaysia, adding that to prove the point, it had recently appointed a nephew, Chye Kuok, as its new Malaysian chairman.

The Lims, on the other hand, said they are open-minded and do not mind some of the things said about their businesses, including by this scribe. Halim is yet to read what I wrote about him and Rashid said he was not upset with what I had said about RHB Bank and the now defunct Sime Bank Bhd although he felt that I had not been fair.

To a humble scribe, there is nothing more satisfying than receiving

comments from readers, whether in person or via letters and e-mails. This is the best way to know whether what he writes about is worth reading. The feedback enriches his mind and draws him closer to his audience.

Thus, on that note, I thank dr_baha@pkriscc.ukm.my (these days many people go by their e-mail identities) for taking the trouble to share his views with me.

I am even more grateful because his e-mail was not actually meant for me. It was sent to the group editor-in-chief of a major national newspaper. He copied the e-mail to me.

While I am grateful to him, I don't think it is nice (or ethical) for me to reveal or discuss the contents of the e-mail.

It is up to the group editor-in-chief-cum-columnist concerned to respond, although it is a known fact that some writers, despite publishing their e-mail addresses in newspapers and magazines, are not in the habit of responding to e-mails from their readers.

One such writer once told me that it was not a good idea to respond to readers' letters and e-mails in my columns. More so to publish these letters and e-mails.

Actually, it is not very gallant of writers to have their e-mail addresses published in their columns and subsequently not respond to messages sent to them. It is even more irresponsible of them not to read the letters and e-mails, either because they are too busy or because they are computer-illiterate.

When I was writing regular newspaper columns in the New Sunday Times and Berita Minggu, I made it a point to reflect as much as possible the views and thoughts of my readers. Some had their letters and e-mails reproduced in full and very often unedited; mistakes, bad writing and all!

In the beginning, I was reluctant to have my e-mail address published because I was afraid I might not be able to read all my mail. But I was strongly advised by my younger and computer-savvy editors that being in the cyber age, an e-mail address is a must.

Sadly, it would seem that a lot of individuals and corporations have created impressive-sounding e-mail addresses merely to be fashionable. They hardly use the e-mails either to send or receive messages.

I once wrote about the builder of the New Pantai Expressway posting signboards announcing the construction of the project and apologising to the public for the inconvenience caused. It posted its e-mail address. But when I e-mailed to suggest they give greater attention to public safety and worksite cleanliness, the only response I received was the notification that `your message has been sent'.

Once, at the meeting of the National Information Technology Council (NITC), chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, I spoke about the lack of IT culture, ethics and responsibility among Malaysians. They created e-mail addresses that they did not use and websites that they did not update.

As for journalists and writers, it can be to their great detriment to publish e-mail addresses without actually servicing them. In cyberspace, the e-mails addressed to them can be easily copied to others at the touch of a button.

Of Public Schools and Life

WHILE I am not at liberty to discuss the points raised by dr_bahar@pkriscc.ukm.my - more so the highly-contentious views regarding the sons of two important Malaysian political figures - I must say that I find them very interesting.

I cannot directly respond because firstly, the e-mail was not intended for me. It was sent to another person. And secondly, I do not know enough about the two VIP children mentioned in the newspaper column upon which

the comment by dr_bahar@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my was based.

All that I dare say is that life as the offspring of important people is not a bed of roses. Even if it is, roses have thorns - one wrong move and you get thorns in your tender flesh.

But I know very well what it is like to be a padi farmer's son. To begin with, you cannot expect to be sent to one of those exclusive educational institutions like the Malay College Kuala Kangsar or Cambridge University in the United Kingdom as alluded to by dr_bahar@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my, more so if you were born 50 or 60 years ago.

Things have changed considerably in recent decades. These institutions are less exclusive and less clubby now, and if you have a better-than-average brain, you may get there.

Of course, being a brainy son or daughter of a VIP has added advantage. Still, I consider myself extremely lucky for having gone to very average schools with above-average teachers. You learn more about life and survival in these schools.

I will always be indebted to great teachers like Datuk Shaari Abu Bakar (Sekolah Melayu Pendang), Datuk Wan Shamsuddin, the late Master Charles Alexander Westwood, Cikgu Zainol Abidin Ismail and the recently departed Miss Mau (St Michael's School, Alor Setar).

Miss Mau was an absolute terror. For those who are familiar with the popular cartoon strip Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Waterson, she was the embodiment of Calvin's hated teacher, Miss Wormwood.

But she weaved miracles. She made us kampung boys confident speakers of English through her learning-by-punishment methods, especially during her Geography lessons. We could all memorise the description of a fjord or other unfathomable geographical features by heart.

The first time we failed to recite the description of a fjord or plateau, we would be administered a painful pinch to the tummy after which one was made to stand. A subsequent failure and you had to stand on the chair before graduating to the table and finally out of the classroom. All of this would be preceded by the famous Miss Mau pinch.

In the end, though, we learnt our Geography well. If today I know the world better than President George W Bush, then credit must go to Miss Mau.

The Knee-jerk Reaction Phenomenon

FINALLY, let us talk about another Malaysian malady - the knee-jerk reaction. We are fast becoming - if not already - a nation of 'knee-jerkers'. So it was when a whole family was driven to suicide when they had had enough harassment from loan sharks.

Since then, politicians, social scientists and media commentators of all shades have jumped to their feet with their already-weakening knees wobbling to demand action.

It would seem that in our country, you need somebody to die a sensational or bizarre death before somebody takes notice. A 'conventional' death or mere run-of-the-mill sickness is not good enough anymore.

You have to be buried alive or suffer an attention-grabbing illness before the YB Menteri will take notice. Of course, this will have to be preceded by front-page newspaper and prime-time TV coverage.

The question is, what is so new or evil about loan sharks? Whether they are called loan sharks, money-lenders, chettiars or Alongs, these people are as much a part of Malaysian life as the Jalur Gemilang, nasi lemak, roti canai and teh tarik.

Before we go around demanding the death penalty or something terminal for loan sharks, we should understand why these people survive and even flourish. Whether we have loan sharks or not, some people will continue to

opt for weed killer or jump off buildings to escape life's miseries.

If they manage their life and their finances well - like working harder, living within their means, paying their water and electricity bills regularly, not changing their car exhaust pipes too often and paying off their debts - they don't have to turn to paraquat or leap to their premature deaths.

We have also to look at the banks and other legal financial institutions. It is not all that easy for small businessmen, hawkers and pasar malam traders to borrow from banks. It is time-consuming and the conditions are way beyond the ability of an average borrower to fulfill.

For years, newspapers have been highlighting the activities of loan sharks or Alongs, whether it's at the Chow Kit, Pudu or Selayang markets. Nothing much has been done because apart from a few broken bones, nobody had chosen to take their life consuming weed killer or jumping off tall buildings, conveniently leaving behind word that the loan sharks were to be blamed.

Maybe banks, MARA and the Public Services Department would have less bad debts if they had employed the Along tactics. We need the Along to teach those borrow-and-disappear debtors that loans have to be repaid.

I hope nobody is going to call for the banning of weed killer just because the concoction can be consumed by desperate people running away from the attention of loan sharks. If we do that, then we will be doing great damage to agriculture and we may have to tear down the Petronas Twin Towers.

And please, please, stop burdening employers. It's utterly senseless to ask them to help their employees who have become embroiled in the clutches of loan sharks. Even without a senseless call like this, employers are already burdened with all kinds of obligations, having to match the Government bonus to falling productivity and job-hopping and all.

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Besides 'Malaysian Business', Kadir also contributes to local Bahasa Malaysia and English newspapers. These articles can be accessed at www.beritapublishing.com.my under the heading 'In My Own Write'.