

Indian winter of discontent
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'Air tenang jangan disangka tiada buaya

'(Don't think there are no crocodiles in the water just because it is still.) The unhappiness has always been there even before Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force) emerged in public.

It began well before Malaysia announced the New Economic Policy in 1970, several months after the May 13, 1969 race riots. There were deviations in the policy from the very outset, it is alleged, and this apparently further exacerbated the 150 years of exploitation during the British colonial era.

indian crowd malaysia 291107When you virtually kidnap, which is what the British colonials allegedly did, perfectly-contented people from the freedom of the vast Tamil Nadu countryside and subject them to virtual enslavement in the pressure-cooker of a regimented estate environment, the pressures build up over the century and decades and must eventually find an outlet.

Historically, the vast majority of even voluntary migrants everywhere, since time immemorial, have generally exchanged grinding poverty in the old country for genteel poverty in their new land. That's the perennial lot of the wage-earner. The "smart" Indians in Malaysia, mostly in the towns and some among the planting class in the estates, are the ones that didn't stay when independence came. They came during the days of the British Empire, saved almost every sen they could lay their hands on and went back cash rich to invest in India, taking advantage of the exchange rate.

In the end, no matter where you go in the world, what matters is the exchange rate and how much you can save every month and whether you can eventually return and neutralise your "karma". Others, especially those shanghaied and kept in the estates against their will on a pittance, were trapped when the Empire fell apart.

Then, came the big Hindraf-led demonstration in front of the British High Commission. There are reports which suggest that many of the Hindraf demonstrators were MIC members. Obviously, there are attempts to distance people from Hindraf. The official line proceeds along an all too familiar pathway: criminalisation, demonisation, dehumanisation, neutralisation, isolation, marginalisation and finally elimination. Will that be the end of the government's troubles?

Hindraf claims to represent the voice of the unseen, the unheard, the forgotten, the ones outside the tight-knit MIC ambit which not so long ago expelled the poorest of the poor led by M G Pandithan. Having just one party in the BN to represent the Indians, it seems, no longer works.

Initial eye-opener

The initial eye-opener came, observations show, with an influx of Indian tourists and when Indian IT expatriates started working in Malaysia. These were the new role models. The government's idea, from press reports, is to get at least one million Indians from India's

middle class, as large as and richer than the combined populations of France and Germany, to visit Malaysia every year and a further one million from China. Sounds good on paper. Now that India is an emerging economic and military power as well, besides being second only to the US in medicine and IT, the Indian community has been further emboldened to make demands especially since Malaysia is increasingly eyeing India (and China too) economically in the wake of globalisation.

hindraf london demo 060208 templesIndia aside, the issue is simple. Hindraf wants the British government to right the historical wrongs to the Indians in Malaysia, the Tamils in particular, and compensate them as well as issue an official apology from the Queen and the prime minister. The memo was meant to internationalise the issue of religious freedom in Malaysia which, allegedly, is less than satisfactory at the state and local government levels.

Aside from freedom of worship, Hindraf also wants equal rights as guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. They are not touching on the special privileges of the Malays because there's no need. Affirmation programmes to correct historical injustices can be within the ambit of the law and the Constitution as long as they do not deviate from an accepted framework and timeframe and do not violate the Constitutional provisions on equality, the fundamental bedrock of colour-blindness.

According to Hindraf, the random demolishing of Hindu temples, allegedly built illegally, has been a growing problem in Malaysia. Hindraf has reportedly threatened a Sri Lanka style situation in Malaysia if the Tamils are further pushed into a corner.

rimba jaya temple 021107 back portionAgain, the core fact is that all this would probably not have risen if not for the temple incident in Kampung Rimba Jaya, Selangor, where not only was the temple demolished around Deepavali day, but the idols too were reportedly smashed. Why did they have to smash the idols? That was the last straw, the proverbial one that broke the camel's back.

In the wake of the current flare-up, the former Selangor MB visited Kampung Rimba Jaya and advised the residents to let bygones be bygones and move on. He mentioned compensation of RM40,000 from a developer for the destroyed temple and a new site. It was in the papers (Move forward, Dr Khir tells Kampung Rimba folk . . . New Sunday Times Dec 9, 2007, Page 5) with a picture etc.

There must be no violence on either side no matter what the provocation. The future of the country is at stake. Besides, Government officials must tone down their rhetoric which only further inflames the situation. Don't they realise that when politics comes in through the door, economics flies out through the window? The rational approach is to talk and keep talking. It's not wise to close doors. There is nothing to fear but fear itself. As long as the talking continues, there would be no violence.

Allegations of police brutality

The police are another issue. There are allegations of police brutality against those in custody resulting in unexplained deaths. Apparently, the "smarter" ones among the newly arrived Tamils from the estates have embarked on a life of crime in collusion with the triads to accumulate capital, as much as possible, in the shortest, easiest, quickest time frame. This is a well-trodden path taken by many peoples all over the world, since time immemorial, to accumulate capital and eventually get into politics.

At this stage, we are not sure whether the urban middle class Indians are riding on their underclass brethren. Historically, movements for change have always been led by the middle class, not the down-trodden, when something bugs them in their comfort zone.

If there are two things that the Tamils are fanatical about, it is language and religion. The Tamils are even more fanatical than the French over language. That's why the Malaysian government doesn't want to dwell too much on the issue of Tamil schools.

For another, it doesn't mean that just because there are quotas for the Malays everywhere, there should be quotas for the Tamils too. I doubt that the Tamils, apart from the MIC, are really interested in this approach. Does the fate of the Tamils in Malaysia hinge solely on the government? The Tamils are the last people on Earth to protest over jobs, business opportunities and university intake etc. That doesn't mean that these are no serious economic issues.

hindraf british petition rally 251107 banner hindraf Somehow, they find their own way in these matters. These matters are just add-ons in the current flare-up, not the real issue. Unless, of course, I am out of touch with the younger generation of Tamils in Malaysia. In that case, there's little difference between Tamil and Malay youth. In fact, no one in the Indian diaspora anywhere in the world has protested over economic issues. Malaysian Tamils are the first to do so and that's what surprises everybody. The temple issue was the catalyst. The "well-off" Indians in Malaysia are of course "ashamed" by the demos etc.

Malaysia has an economy in transition, in the wake of globalisation, and will surely pay a huge economic cost in terms of lost investments, diminished values and higher insurance and business costs, if a picture emerges in the international arena that the country is in the same league as Sri Lanka and Muslim countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Sudan and Somalia. Closer home there are trouble spots like Aceh, the Thai south and the Southern Philippines.

Fifty years after independence, we wonder what the next half century will bring. More of the same?

Pre-occupation with economics

Much of the last 50 years has seen a pre-occupation with economics. This is not surprising considering that Malaysia is a microcosm of the British Empire which was essentially a commercial empire. Globalisation is now seen as the better way forward. The emphasis is on market efficiency, smart partnerships, giving consumers choices rather than allowing governments to protect inefficient industries run by fat cats and cronies, a policy of prosperity neighbour and the common good that comes from companies, wherever they are, doing good, countries doing good and being a blessing to all. Malaysia surely sees a prosperous Indian community as good for the country.

Malaysia will be pre-occupied with race relations and national unity for the next 50 years. We have a Department of National Unity in the PM's Department run by Dr Maximus Ongkili, the former minister in the PM's Department.

malaysians 050905 They tend to focus on a lot of cosmetic programmes. What they need to work on is substance. My recent SMS to Dr Max reads: "At present, there is too much lip service when it comes to national unity. As one who has dear relatives and friends among all races and religions, I venture that national unity is of paramount importance and will

hinge on two major factors viz. tak kenal, maka tak cinta; and parents and teachers must not transfer their prejudices to their children. Perhaps this is something that your department can take up urgently, starting with our police, the press, politicians and PTAs."

I would add that a third factor would be instituting a culture of sharing and caring. Now, greed and materialism gets in the way. I am happy to see the Malays, or others for that matter, doing well. I think it will be good for the country. The same sentiments cannot be detected in the Indian community. When they see others forging ahead while they lag behind, their anger and frustration knows no bounds and borders on the explosive.

Former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad did say before he retired that he has put everything in place for the next century or so. "Only a congenital idiot would ruin everything," he said. A house divided against itself cannot stand and must surely fall!"

Man proposes, God disposes

On a personal level, the Indians can take a leaf from the Chinese in their winter of discontent and not give in to negativity. Man proposes, God disposes. This is not a case of talk being cheap or easier said than done. There are deep spiritual truths here. Always be thankful and grateful and there will be more opportunities to be thankful and grateful for. Look for the silver lining in the clouds, consider everything that happens as a blessing in disguise and always count your blessings. Opportunities often come disguised as problems. You cannot keep a good man down.

For starters, one cannot insist on having the cake and eating it too. Tamil education, up to Year 6, was started by the British colonialists not only to keep the community in the estates in perpetuity but to turn out better tappers.

Obviously, the lack of language skills create a communication gap with other Malaysians and even the syndrome best expressed by the Malay saying: "Seperti katak di bawah tempurung" (The frog under the coconut shell thinks that is the world.). There needs to be greater interaction between Indians and non-Indians in all spheres of national life. It's a great loss to the nation if the Indians keep away from others, either deliberately, or because they have no choice in the matter. Already, there is polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims thanks to the 911 tragedy in New York.

The unrest in Malaysia sounds all too suspiciously like similar eruptions elsewhere in the world in the wake of globalisation. The influx of foreign workers, both legal and illegal, from neighbouring countries has had a negative effect on Indian jobs and depressed wages. Indian unrest should not be allowed to spill over into the other communities. The stresses and strains are evident in Malaysia after 50 years of "nation building". It's a brave new world out there.