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'Keling' and proud of it

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NEVER has a year gone by without the 'K' word riling up Indians in the country.

Remember the story last year of an Indian doctor who went to the aid of an accident victim, only to be told off that the injured man did not want a "keling" touching him?

In spite of being shocked by the man's racist abuse, the doctor called an ambulance and when paramedics arrived, she briefed them on what to do.

It was only during the conversation that the elderly man, who fell off his motorcycle and broke his right leg (so badly that there was exposed bone), realised that she was a doctor.

"I didn't know you are a doctor. Doctor can touch," he was reported as saying.

In a Facebook posting, she wrote: "Before knowing I'm a doctor, I was a disgusting 'keling', cannot touch. After knowing, all the smiles and sorry."

'Keling', a word deemed to be derogatory and offensive to the Indians since the 1960s, seems to have become a perennial issue in Malaysia.

Before the case of the racially abused doctor, we have heard politicians - ministers, state exco members and MPs - using it blatantly.

The latest rage over the 'K' word was triggered by a two-month-old video featuring Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In the clip, believed to be part of a 'Save Malaysia' campaign speech, Dr Mahathir poked fun at Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's handling of the Islamic State terror group.

He said, "On Najib fighting IS, we can see him holding a rifle. What do the 'keling' say? *Podah!* (Get lost). All lies!"

MIC Youth chief C. Sivarraajh promptly demanded a public apology from the former prime minister.

The party's Wanita chief M. Mohana asked for two apologies, one for the "keling" remark and another for depriving the community of economic development while Dr Mahathir was in power for 22 years.

Hindraf chairman P. Waythamoorthy claimed the video was a reflection of Dr Mahathir's disdain for Indians.

Not to be outdone, PKR's former Puchong division head S. Murali lodged a police report, urging action to be taken against Dr Mahathir under the Sedition Act.

The term "keling" is utterly abhorred by the community today although its original meaning was not pejorative in any way.

It referred to the most glorious days of India and its links to South-East Asia through the power and influence of the Kalinga empire.

The ancient kingdom in east-central India corresponds to present-day northern Telangana, northeastern Andhra Pradesh,

most of Odisha and parts of Madhya Pradesh.

It controlled a vast maritime domain with trading routes connecting it to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, the Malay peninsula, Sumatra, Java and Borneo.

Traders from Kalinga settled in these regions and quite naturally, Indians ended up being referred to as people from "Benua Keling" even after the influence of Kalinga waned and new South Indian dynasties, such as the Chola, rose to power and prominence in the region.

The ignorant racial bigots in our midst might not know this but the word "keling" features prominently in *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), originally titled "Sulatus Salatin" or Genealogy of Kings, composed between the 15th and 16th centuries.

The *Sejarah Melayu*, regarded as one of the finest Malay literary works, provides a romanticised history of the origin, evolution and demise of the Malacca Sultanate and the Malay maritime empire.

The word "keling" in *Sejarah Melayu* is used mostly in the positive context, outlining the community's long and strong political, cultural and economic links with the Malay Archipelago.

British colonial administrator and Malay scholar, Sir Richard Olaf Windstedt, who played a role in preserving the *Sejarah Melayu* and

other works on the Malays and their literature, wrote this in his paper titled "Indian Influence in the Malay World", published by the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in October 1944:

"With little exaggeration, it has been said of Europe that it owes its theology, its literature, its science, and its art to Greece. With no greater exaggeration, it may be said of the Malayan races that till the 19th century they owed everything to India: religions, a political system, medieval astrology and medicine, literature, arts and crafts."

I suppose it is still not too late for the racial supremacists and bigots to find out about the colourful characters who played key roles in history, like Mani Purindan, the first influential "keling" in the court of the Malacca Sultanate, or Nina Chatu (Nayinar Setu), the Tamil Bendahara who minted the first coins when Malacca came under Portuguese rule.

It might be more difficult to find out about Nayinar Kuniappan, though, as records about him are mostly in Portuguese and French.

The Tamil shahbandar (harbour master) of Samudera-Pasai played a major role in the business and political life of the sultanates of Aceh, Kedah, Pegu and Malacca at the beginning of the 16th century.

So when did the derogatory connotation over "keling" begin?

A Dec 16, 1927, report in the now defunct colonial newspaper, the

Singapore Free Press and *Mercantile Advertiser*, offers some clues.

It said when coolie prisoners were brought to Malaya from India and were made to work in chain gangs, local Malays picturesquely named them "Kling" from the clanking sound of their fetters.

But most Indians were brought to then Malaya by the British as indentured labourers, not convicts.

Let's not forget that that even as labourers, who helped to develop this country over decades, they share the same roots as those who were once referred to as from "Benua Keling", whether it was Kalinga, or the later South Indian kingdoms of Chera, Chola or Pandiyan.

It's really up to the Indian community in Malaysia to look at the word as a source of pride or shame.

As someone from Malacca, which has places like Tanjung Kling and Pengkalan Rama, and where the father of Malay literature, Munshi Abdullah (who happened to be a "keling") hailed from, I have no issues with being associated with the word.

Yes, I am a "keling" and proud of it.

Media Consultant M. Veera Pandiyan likes this view of Martin Luther King Jr: Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.