

Imagining a Malaysian Malaysia
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When Raymond Sinnathamboo talks about Malaysia and how it feels to be part of this grand, national project of 50 years, he "boasts".

Some will tell you they experienced Malaysia through changes in their neighbourhoods, how they personally met a former prime minister or compare how it was back then and how "us kids" have it so lucky today.

But for Sinnathamboo, or Raymond as he prefers to be called, the story of Malaysia through the eyes of this 67-year-old teacher and military man is seen in his "boasting".

This is not boasting in the way a 30-something yuppie stock-trader would boast about "the thousands he made on the market". Or a Datuk boasting about "this VVIP" or "that VVIP" whose ear he has.

When Raymond "boasts", he puts up the fingers on both hands to make air quotation marks, winks and smiles widely to the listener. The "boast" then loses its hue of conceit and pride and becomes intimate, like a shared secret between him and his listener.

It's less of a story of "What I did". But "look what I managed to get, and if you work hard and play your cards right, you can get it too".

For instance, there is the "boast" of how he managed to buy three houses, two for his daughters and one for him and his wife, a 20-year-old Mercedes Benz and a swimming pool, from the money made by selling his first house of 30 years in Taman Tunku Abdul Rahman, Ampang.

The money, the sale and purchases are all legit and this all happened on a headmaster's pension. But the bigger lesson is that it can be done.

"My life could only have happened in Malaysia, or a country like it."

The context in which Raymond's life unfurled is that of a Malaysian society that was beginning to be organised around the concept of bumiputera and non-bumiputera.

Being of mixed Chinese-Ceylonese parentage, the language and politics of race was as much a factor in Raymond's life as it still is for a child of mixed parentage born today.

As we sat in his sunny single storey home by the sea in Port Dickson, laughingly going over the details of his life, the bumiputra hierarchy became the invisible ruler by which we measure how far he has come.

Another 'boast':

"When I left military service to enter education in 1987, I straight away became a senior assistant. Have you seen teachers getting promoted that fast?

"And after three years they even gave me a school."

After leaving the Armed Forces Tri-services as a major in late 1987, where he had spent 14 years as an educator and librarian, Raymond became senior assistant in Methodist Boy's School Sentul, Kuala Lumpur.

After more than three years, he was promoted again and put in charge of La Salle School Jalan Peel, Kuala Lumpur, which was later rebuilt and renamed as SMK Yaakob Latif, after a former mayor of KL.

"I was promoted over other bumis to become a principal in Sekolah Menengah Jalan Peel. This is what I want to tell the people about. That the government is fair."

Taken together, what Raymond has earned and built, what his wife and two daughters have achieved - another 'boast' - and his more than 40 enriching years in public service are testaments to how good the country has been to him.

"I am proud to be a Malaysian Malaysian. Not an Indian, Chinese Malaysian, but a Malaysian Malaysian."

Of course he still grumbles about the state of the country. Especially how not enough people he feels, want to be Malaysian Malaysians.

"There's too much focus on our racial and religious differences. The country has progressed better physically. But the attitude of the people must change."

Another attitude he hates is how Malaysians take everything on the internet as 'the gospel' and the culture of rumour-mongering that the technology has spawned.

"What is the percentage of the internet being rubbish? 99 per cent?"

And it chafes him when people make claims that his minister's son or that minister's wife got half a million from the government or spent millions on a clothes or jewellery.

"You ask them for reference they say the internet said it."

Unsurprisingly, they are the two primary things that he would like to see change in the next five years.

Raymond himself is a great fan of the James Henry Leigh Hunt poem "Abou Ben Adhem", whose protagonist reaches the Divine through a love of humanity, and John Lennon's "Imagine", that immortal call for an end to bigotry and conflict.

But for someone who seems like an optimist, he claims not to have much faith that Malaysia will close its communal rifts.

"See I wrote here on a piece of paper," Raymond says showing me an A4 sheet where he has written "things I want to see changed". Under that heading, he has written 'racial problems'. Next to it is written 'mustahil' (impossible).

We both laugh heartily at this.

Then again, impossible is also at the heart of his favourite song "Imagine". But it is not a absolutely-never-will-happen imagine, but an impossibility that can be surmounted by faith.

And all it takes is more and more Malaysians who will believe like Raymond does, in a Malaysian Malaysia. - September 12, 2013

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