

My country, Malaysia
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By Sarala Poobalan

I was born a couple of years after the Independence in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. The population of this place can be a miniature Malaysia with 80% of them being Malays and the rest are Chinese and Indians. I grew up not knowing what is “pendatang” or “bangsa asing” until recently.

The best part is, we did not even know or identify ourselves as the “other” race. I had no qualms asking the pak cik to send me to the temple or play in the mosque grounds with my friends. When we hear the evening azan, or the prayer call, we know it is time to go home. Life was so simple. We were free to walk around the town because everyone was taking care of us not because of our race, but because we were children.

Later, I moved to a bigger town, Seremban. The composition changed, from 80% Malays to 80% Chinese. There was no change in the scenario. We grew up together, ate the same food, played and fought together. School was fun. I looked forward going to school every day because I liked being with my friends. I did not care if my friends were Malays, Chinese or Indians.

We were just friends and did what friends usually do. Again, on the way to school and back, we were taken care of by the people around us. We were treated as people not by race. I still did not know what pendatang or bangsa asing was.

Why is this word used so rampantly now? Today, the news is filled with that word pendatang or bangsa asing. I am not one. The citizenship was given to honour the contribution and loyalty that the other 2 major races gave this country particularly in the peninsula. There were lots of hardship and pain. It is never easy to leave your family especially when times were hard, and moving to another land was a necessity not an option.

They worked hard to make this country wealthy with her god-sent gift of natural resources. I will not question or answer whether it was wrong or right when citizenship was given because I did not witness or ask for it. For heaven sake, I was not even born. My birth certificate was issued by the Malaysian government and I am recognised by Malaysian government as a citizen of this country.

Why am I called a pendatang or even bangsa asing? I am the third generation in Malaysia. Do we call the third generation of Indonesians pendatang? If they are not, then why am I called one? I am not even asking for a Bumiputera status or want that status. All I want is to be left alone and to do what I am allowed to do as stipulated by the constitution. Some of the basic needs that are stipulated in the constitution that I know as a layman are:

1) I am allowed to practice my religion the way I want to without any restriction on what I can do or say. I know that the constitution forbids me to preach to my Muslim friends. I respect and will follow it. I wish those who are doing otherwise to be prosecuted in the court of law with evidence. Let us respect each other’s boundaries. Anybody on either side of the fence who crosses the boundary should be prosecuted.

2) I am allowed to choose vernacular schools in this country but like my parents, I chose to send my children to a national school. Unfortunately, national schools are not what they used to be. It

has become so religious. It is not wrong to be religious or learn about religion, but let that job be done by the religious schools not national schools. That is why vernacular schools are the schools of choice, instead of national schools. Who do we point the finger when the racial polarisation is coming to its peak? Vernacular schools? It is said that if you point a finger at someone, you have four others pointing back at you.

When we are asked to be respected, what are we expecting? I respect you only? Respect works both ways. I will take pains to prepare food the way your religion requires. I expect the same when you prepare food which I have to consume especially when I am invited to your function or homes.

I am proud to be a Malaysian. The majority race in this country especially the politicians keep questioning my loyalty. I don't like people questioning my loyalty and patriotism to my country. I don't question yours. So why should you question mine? My question is what is loyalty to you? For me it is the concept of Rukun Negara. My loyalty is to my country not to a singular race or party. When people ask me, I always say "Kesetian kepada Raja dan Negara". It never said loyalty to a race or a party. It never said that I should "kowtow" to someone else's idea of loyalty and patriotism.

For once, walk around as a non-Bumiputera, and see what and how we feel when someone uses words like pendatang or bangsa asing. For me, these words are provocative and unnecessary. It is easy to say either Bumiputera or non-bumiputera. I am not a pendatang or bangsa asing. I am simply an Indian born in Malaysia, a land where the peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak come together as one.

Tanah Melayu is a term used before the formation of Malaysia. Just like Malaya, Tanah Melayu is remembered as history, something that we need to know as our nation's roots. In simple terms, I am a Malaysian.

Maybe this is just a wild and unimaginable suggestion, but if you want to correct this giving of citizenship that we non-Malays have to be grateful for, which is often harped upon, then what about paying each and every single Chinese and Indian born after the Independence the wealth this country generated from the hard work provided in the tin mines, estates, the civil service and of courses the businesses?

The income should be paid to us because of the so-called error made by Tunku Abdul Rahman (May god continue to bless his soul). Of course it has to come with interest. Hindraf suggested this and most Malaysians including the Chinese and the Indians laughed at this suggestion. Why? It is because we looked at ourselves as Malaysians. We the non-Bumiputera are not asking this. In fact all we want is to be left alone and be treated as a Malaysian.

Let us move on as a nation. Stop calling the non-Bumiputera as pendatang, bangsa asing or worst still – ungrateful. Like it or not, we are Bangsa Malaysia. Unless the fanatic Malays groups look at us as Malaysians or are at least nipped in the bud by the authorities, there is no way we can improve as a nation.

Lastly, if what I write has an offending tone, I apologise. It is not my intention. I just wanted people to see the other side of the coin too. I also want my children to see Malaysia the way I see her and not the way the politicians portray her to be. – March 6, 2014.

**Sarala Poobalan reads The Malaysian Insider.*

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