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What the Indians want



Getting to the heart of the matter: (From left) DAP central executive committee member Dr P. Ramasamy, Devakunjari Tun Sambanthan, lawyer and daughter of the late MIC president and Labour Minister Tun Sambanthan, *The Star* group chief editor Datuk Wong Chun Wai, businessman cum philanthropist Datuk Dr V. Shanmuganathan and Yayasan Strategik Sosial executive director Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria in discussion during the recent Cafe Latte Chat.



THE Malaysian Indian community is at a defining moment. Comprising just 1.8 million or roughly 8% of the country's 26 million population, it has never been so politically divided. Although the MIC – the third largest component party of the Barisan Nasional – represents the community in the Government, the political allegiance of

Indians is split.

The Gerakan, PPP, Indian Progressive Front, DAP, Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Democratic Indian United Party have their share of Indian members and supporters.

The recent street protest led by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), sparked by perceptions that Indians have been marginalised, has led to the community becoming a focus of the national political debate, with the MIC and its leadership coming under intense scrutiny.

The debate revolves around the community's lack of a meaningful stake in the economy, opportunities to progress in education, employment and business and its disproportionate representation in crime statistics.

Are the grievances affecting the Indians real? What are the solutions? What needs to be done to move the community forward? Have the more successful members of the community played their part? Cafe Latte discusses the topics.

The Indian community and politics

Wong: In the coming general election, various political parties will represent the Indian community. The community is small yet it is fragmented into so many different groups. What is your take on this, Dr Denison?

Dr Denison: If you take the political parties – MIC, PPP, IPF, Gerakan – it might seem fragmented, but they are all invariably pro-Barisan Nasional and cohesively part of its framework. But if you look at opposition parties such as DAP, Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Parti Sosialis Malaysia, there is also quite a number of them there. But the central issue is the composition of the constituencies. No Indian can win just on the Indian ticket. The community needs the support of other communities. An example is the case of the Sreenivasagam brothers who won in the 1959 elections for the Socialist Front. Back then, we had more Indians in the Opposition than in the MIC. Having said that, the fragmented parties that we see (now) will have a major impact on the general election. For example, the Merdeka Poll survey conducted recently found that since September, there has been a 44% drop in positive views towards the government. There were also other indicators showing the people's unhappiness towards the gov-

ernment and its policies. The question here, however, is whether such findings will impact the outcome of MIC candidates who hold nine parliamentary seats and 19 state seats. The MIC is sure that it will retain the nine parliamentary seats.

Dr Ramasamy: Going back to the 1990 elections, I think that a slight majority of the Indian community voted for the Opposition. But in the subsequent election, it was back to status quo. I think the difference this time around is the mobilisation created by Hindraf. Based on the turnout of the event that day, it would be safe to say the Indians know they can be king-makers in particular constituencies. There are also indications that the popularity of the ruling government has gone down. But then again we must ask whether the Indians will remain faithful to Barisan Nasional.

Wong: There's talk that because of the Hindraf issue, many controversies have arisen. As a result, is there a fear in the community that its representation in Government may decline because of the anti-establishment sentiments?

Devakunjari: We have to go back into history where the initial premise of Malaya was power-sharing among the races. This was needed back then to show the British that we could, and deserved, our independence. But here we find a situation where the government relies on MIC to produce feedback and solutions to the community. And there are perceptions that MIC is not being given enough airplay within the government, and that it has not really done its job. Neither perception assists BN in securing the Indian votes. The reason why Hindraf received such popular response was because the Indians, at least at the grass-roots level, believed that no one else speaks for them and highlights their grievances.

Dr Denison: Indian votes make a difference in 62 constituencies, and we will be king-makers if there is a split in the Chinese and Malay community. You might be the most hardened Indian candidate but you cannot win the seat because you do not have 100% Indian voters in the constituency. But the shift, I would say, based on the sur-

vey is that the people are unhappy. But whether this will translate into votes is a different matter altogether. This is because Hindraf is not aligning itself to any political party.

Wong: What about the perception that MIC has not done enough for the community, as stated by Devakunjari?

Devakunjari: Only now are there so many groups talking about the Indian problem. Suddenly, there is interest in the community. I've sat in various forums and the pertinent question that always arises is 'What is the available aid being given by the government now?' In one particular forum the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry informed us that there is a 3% allocation on every initial public offering for the Indian community. Sadly, it didn't filter down because there is no methodology. So the question that some people are asking is why certain things such as this, which is available within the system, are not given a delivery route to the poor Indians.

Dr Denison: I think, in terms of perception, the documentation of Indian problems, even from the start, focused on plantation

difficulties and related issues. Things like salary, housing and working conditions centred on this premise. The more recent ones have been analysis on the urban trends and shifts. If one were to look at documents presented by Mapen 1 (the first National Economic Consultative Council), the analysis of problems and issues are there. If you take OPP 3 (Third Outline Perspective Plan) for example, it begins to recognise, for the first time, the Indian issues on public policy agenda.

Wong: But you have said before that the system is such that there's nothing you can change because the community is small.

Dr Ramasamy: You must agree that the Hindraf gathering shook the ground, no? They made a huge impact by coming out together.

Dr Denison: I think we still have to go back to the core of the problem, whereby under the Federal Constitution, it is stated that the special privileges of the Malay community is balanced with the legitimate rights of other communities such as freedom of religion, positions in the civil service, right to education and so forth. Now, if we take it into more recent policy discussions such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), we see more of a re-structuring of society by addressing issues such as poverty. But when

we come down to OPP 3, I think there are enough resources and agencies to cater to Malay needs. This is highlighted by Mapen 2 in documents on crime, housing, urban poverty and education issues.

Wong: These documents are all fine, but the bottom line is the perception that not enough is being done by the MIC. They are being compared to Umno and MCA where they can see proper structures for development and education, such as universities and skills development institutions.

Dr Denison: MIC has done its best within the power-sharing basis and it has extensively contributed in terms of education and skills development. We have sent many students abroad on scholarships and even prepared the necessary avenues for those interested in skills training. Micro-credit financing for small businesses have also been made available. However, the problem is that the outreach is inadequate. We have not had the necessary interventions from the states, which is pivotal to addressing these problems. There needs to be an increased participation through the relevant agencies too.

A national problem

Wong: Plantations used to be the forte of the Indians, but foreigners have replaced them. Due to this, they have migrated to the towns and because of the lack of skills they have resorted to small businesses such as car washing and scrap metal.

Dr Ramasamy: The problems faced by the community are not an Indian problem but a national one. We are all Malaysians. This is why when there is the mindset that it is an Indian problem, it will be germinated into the political pillars that MIC can and is responsible to handle the problem.

Dr Denison: But this is where the OPP 3, 8th Malaysia Plan (RMK8) and RMK9 development plans recognised the low-participation of the Indians in the economy and looked at skills training for the youth. I would say that such policies have been properly outlined and written.

Devakunjari: I agree that the Indian problem is a Malaysian problem. The source of many of the problems we see now arose from the fact that when the estates were developed in the late 70s there were no proper programmes to resettle, rehabilitate or assist this community. So they lost this

> TURN TO PAGE 22

Desire for equal rights

> FROM PAGE 21

'community' when they relocated them and there were no opportunities in terms of education or profession. Even today, 75% of Tamil schools are not affiliated with the government. However, we must agree that when problems arise out of government policies, should not the government take ownership of the solutions and not just delegate the whole exercise to MIC?

Dr Denison: When we look at the national economic council and the development plans, it needs aggressive state intervention because no one individual or political party can do it. We are doing the best we can.

Dr Ramasamy: If we go back to Hindraf and take a survey of the people who came, we will find that it was not just the poor plantation people but rather professionals such as lawyers and businessmen who felt they were short-changed. The question here is, can we brush away all these things?

Self-help

Wong: There's this perception that there is no self-help in the community despite the emergence of many successful Indians and many in the upper-middle class. There is no reaching out to the grassroots.

Dr Shanmuganathan: We must realise that there is no solid middle-class for the Indians. It is hollow. For example, if one were to go to Masjid India and check their financial statements, it is very weak. But people perceive that just because it is a big shop they must be making a lot of money. They are hollow businessmen because they are not fundamentally strong financially. In addition, as of 2004, Indians were said to have 1.5% equity in the economy. I would not be surprised that as of this moment, the figure stands at just 0.9%. And from this, if you take away the slice belonging to the top five Indian tycoons like Ananda Krishnan and Air Asia's Tony Fernandez and others, there is just 0.2% for the rest.

Education

Wong: We've mentioned the state of Tamil schools. Is it true that they are losing their appeal?

Dr Ramasamy: I disagree with you. Tamil schools have actually out-performed national schools in the last five years. The problem with Tamil schools, however, is that they need more facilities and infrastructure. This is caused by the current system of education because there is less focus on them. Despite this, we find that in the last 10 years more and more parents from the middle-class are sending their children to Tamil schools.

Dr Shanmuganathan: That's true. This year the intake for Tamil schools increased by 30%.

Dr Denison: Although the number of

Tamil schools has dropped, the number of students has gone up. The discrepancy is where the schools are located and where the people are living. Almost 70% of the schools are in estates, but the majority of students are in urban areas. There is a major difference between the Indian and the Chinese community. The Chinese buy the land, build the school and then get the licence transferred whereas the Indians ask the Government to provide the land in the urban areas. Therefore, schools in the rural areas have less density.

Devakunjari: In the last five years, Indian parents have found that their children were not being given enough attention at the national schools. The balance has tipped and Tamil schools have become more alert to the needs of the children. This is why more people from the middle-class prefer to send their children to Tamil schools. They want them to have this attention and a sense of cultural identity.

Dr Denison: The government has also said it would allow Tamil to be taught in SJK schools. I think these policies would take quite a while to sink in. But while there is a major increase of students in Tamil schools, the resources required by the schools are

definitely more. There are about 7,000 teachers employed now. So, if infrastructure is improved, I'm sure that the disgruntled feeling among Indians would be alleviated.

Wong: I can't help but notice that we have kept on referring to asking the Government for help. I know this is a Malaysian problem but surely there must be some kind of self-help.

Dr Shanmuganathan: There are. Several of my close friends and I, for example, have adopted many schools. We are paying tuition fees for the students. After school, we conduct training for them to get better results. We are also paying the teachers and even giving them two months' bonus but we cannot afford to do the same for all Tamil schools.

Dr Denison: When we talk about rebuilding Tamil schools — the *bantuan modal* schools — they are largely being rebuilt through community funds because the state does not provide that. Even in the RMK8 allocation of RM86mil, it was for the *bantuan penuh* schools. So, currently, they have allocated about RM60mil for *bantuan modal* schools, and the requirement is quite huge. MIC for example has allocated student loans for up to 7,000 students at RM85mil.

MIC and its leadership

Wong: I think it is on the minds of many Malaysians that the MIC has a leadership problem.

Dr Denison: In terms of determining the MIC president, the decision is in the hands of the MIC delegates. Regarding the candidates for the general election, we have been informed that a sizeable change would be made. This is a step forward to newer faces.

Devakunjari: Regardless of the MIC and its leadership, as mentioned earlier, the problems faced by the community is still a Malaysian problem. Let us look at the example of single Indian mothers and the problems they face. The poverty line index sets at least RM661 per month as the minimum to sustain one's self. Most of the single mothers earn RM550 or less. They have two to three children and have no housing programmes. How are they going to live? We are not even talking about food. And as far as self-help goes, it would not make much of a difference if the government does not step in.

Solutions

Wong: We know the cause and the grievances but what can be done?

Dr Shanmuganathan: Requests and proposals have been made to the Prime Minister seeking his approval to set up a special team under the Prime Minister's Department or the Economic Planning unit to come up with a guideline to develop Indian businesses. The Malays, for example,

have the Perbadanan Nasional Berhad to assist them. All we are asking for is 10% allocation of the same aid. From that allocation, the community can automatically develop for the next 10 years.

Wong: I've heard talk about affirmative action for the Indians. Do you think this is practical?

Devakunjari: It depends on what you mean by affirmative action. My concern is that the existing policies are not being filtered into something tangible that can be delivered. There is a Minimum Standards Act, for example, to regulate the welfare of the plantation workers and yet it is not being enforced.

Dr Ramasamy: It is very simple. Indians want the opportunities and equal rights.

Wong: But isn't there an Indian quota prepared for university entries?

Devakunjari: It does not seem that way.

Dr Denison: University admission issues aside, we have to look at the fundamentals of education first. We have to look at the grassroots – the pre-school and primary school. And as we move along, we have to consider business windows and other opportunities for the community. What I'm saying is that what has been promised by the government in OPP 3, RMK8 and RMK9

must be delivered. And one of the suggestions that Mapen 2 requested was for an independent monitoring mechanism.

Wong: Who would run this mechanism?

Dr Denison: Representatives from civil societies. We need such mechanisms to make sure the process is one of transparency.

Wong: What type of programmes would you all like to see to address all these grievances?

Devakunjari: We would like to see excellent education opportunities from pre-school right up to higher education and more skills training.

Dr Shanmuganathan: Going back to single mothers, in my office I have set up a training centre for them. We teach them marketing, business, hands-on work and so forth. After training, we find jobs for them and then we monitor them for at least a year. At the time they come to us, they earn on average about RM550 but we have assured them that if they follow our advice, they can make up to RM5,000 per month. So far we've helped about 225 single mothers.

Dr Ramasamy: Fundamentally, if the Government is serious about it and makes it a national commitment to resolve the issue, Indians will feel that they have a place in society.

THE PANELLISTS



Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria is executive director of the Yayasan Strategik Sosial, an MIC body set up for the social development of the community. He holds a PhD in Sociology from Oxford Brookes University. He also participated in a leadership development course at the JFK School of Government at Harvard University. A member of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) for two years, he plays key roles in a variety of policy forums and community organisations related to poverty and education.



Dr P. Ramasamy is a visiting Senior Fellow at the Institute of South-East Asian Studies in Singapore. He was also a visiting professor at the University of Kassel in Germany after retiring as a political science professor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He has written extensively on Malaysian Indian issues. He is a member of DAP central executive committee and its international secretary.



Datuk Dr V. Shanmuganathan, head of the accountancy firm Shan & Co, is also a businessman and a philanthropist. His wide community service interests include the development of entrepreneurs, including single mothers and young entrepreneurs. Raised in a poor family, he obtained his accountancy degree from Universiti Utara Malaysia, a Masters from Universiti Putra Malaysia and a PhD from Bircham International University. This chartered accountant is now pursuing a degree in Jurisprudence in Universiti Malaysia.



Devakunjari Tun Sambanthan, daughter of the late Tun Sambanthan who was MIC president, signatory to the Declaration of Independence of Malaya and the first Labour Minister, has a law degree from the University of Buckingham in England. She was called to the English and Malaysian Bars. A partner in a law firm, she has long been active in social work focussing mainly on destitute single mothers and the education of their children.



Datuk Wong Chun Wai is *The Star* group chief editor. He graduated from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in political science and has worked in the newspaper for 23 years. He attended leadership and management courses at American business schools including the Peter Drucker Business School in Claremont University and the University of Southern California under Bank Negara's International Centre for Leadership in Finances.