

SPEAK NOT OF THE 'INDIAN VOICE' BUT OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

It is unfortunate that we still hold on to old paradigms to resolve current issues. While reflecting on historical injustice is vital to bring remedy to matters such as poverty, the question that should be asked is whether past approaches, terms and slogans are useful to the people we are trying to help.

Lately, an expert in poverty issues pointed out that Indian voices have been excluded in the development of the 12th Malaysia Plan.

“It is sad to note that there has been no major effort by Indian-based political parties and major Indian-based civil society organisations to host public discussions on the 12th Malaysia Plan,” Denison Jayasooria, a sociologist and research fellow at University Kebangsaan Malaysia, said in a statement.

The 12th Malaysia Plan will be released in Parliament on September 27.

The term “Indian voices” connotes an ethnic perspective that has not produced significant results over the years. The very reason for the existence of race-based parties like Umno, MCA and the MIC, and the ethnically inspired individuals in the opposition party, is because they want their racial voices to be heard and derive some sort of political expediency and legitimacy among their communities.

It is sad an organisation such as Mitra, set up for the empowerment of the Indian community, had to be reminded to engage with the community in the state and district level, which indicates a structural failure of past policies in regards to the Indian community.

In the opposition, there are some who criticise institutionalised racism in the government sector, while choosing to be silent on ethnic discrimination in the private sector. The reason is obvious; the bulk of their supporters are from the private sector.

The ethno-political manoeuvring over the decades has resulted in a conservative social economic order and system, where the gap between the rich and the poor among all communities has widened. We have rich Malay and non-Malay elites who have increased their wealth through connections and the game of ethnic politics, while ordinary Malays, Chinese, Indians, Iban and Kadazans have to endure high expenses from the monopoly over public goods and communication devices, the patronage system and ethnic discrimination at work places, a lack of public consultation on socio-economic issues in local areas, and a polluted environment due to unbridled capitalism.

When we speak of the Indian voice, which category of people are we addressing? Is it the B40, M40 or T20? The term Indian is simplistic in the complex dynamism of the social economic system.

The Statistics Department’s 2016 Household Income and Expenditure survey report mentioned that the majority of Malaysian Chinese were wage earners, accounting for 70% of the Chinese population, while

72% of the Malays were wage earners, with Indians at 83% – which showed that the relative percentages of all ethnic groups were comparable.

In its The State of Households 2018 report, the research outfit of sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional Bhd noted that the gap in the real average income between the top 20% of households (T20), the middle 40% (M40) and the bottom 40% (B40) households in Malaysia had almost doubled compared to two decades ago

“Therefore, the gap between the rich and the poor is common among all ethnic groups, including between urban and rural areas. While there is no denying there are legitimate ethnic grievances due to discrimination, it is vital to address these issues in the broader dimension of the current political and economic system that is in place in the country.

What the nation really needs is solidarity among all ethnic groups to challenge a system that privileges the elites in the name of communal rights.

For example, we should push for an equal opportunity commission to address ethnic discrimination at workplaces and institutionalised racism.

We need an equitable social system that addresses the political, economic and social gaps between elite politicians and the people, the rich and the poor, and build an egalitarian society where power is diffused to reflect an equal society.

The Indian community will surely benefit more from a just, decentralised social-economic system.

“The Indian voice” is an old paradigm that serves only conservative political purposes. It is neither evolutionary nor revolutionary.

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