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NOV 26 — There is a corner in KL, just across the street from my school I remember too well. It is where I wait for father after school on Fridays. He never comes on time, no matter how much I hope he does. He can't. Government drivers don't plan their time, they live someone else's schedule. And so must their children.

And this son wants to talk a bit more about poverty.

My family was never in the poorest category, we got by far better than a lot of people. I know, I am related to many of them. But my parents did make a choice which complicated things a bit, we moved to a life beyond our means — settling down in lower middle-class housing while being a working-class family.

You are always poorer than everyone else around you. Imagine that, eh. They are children of senior clerks and you find yourself out of your depth. You get numb when the power is disconnected — sitting with candles when the street is all lit up and the TV is playing from next door. Actually, water cuts are far worse but you can hide your shame on that one.

My parents wanted to get us out of the spiral of destruction inside the old squatter colony we were from. My grandma's home, where a single kerosene lamp keeps some parts of the house lit and the single car battery for the odd TV session. My old rented house was quite close to grandma's, but the second half of the walk was a dirt road with no street lights. They have no piped water, the 40-odd homes share two taps.

But at least no one is having one-ups on the others. So you deal with your poverty far better. The trade-off was to live in a community riddled with drugs, gangs, crime and low literacy.

Which leads me to the present debate about poverty in Malaysia, or rather the playing down of it. Since the inarguable portion of the New Economic Policy was the eradication of poverty irrespective of all other considerations, the government has always had to be hugely defensive about poverty alleviation levels.

It is always dropping, no matter what happens in the country or the world. Which makes Malaysia an anomaly among nations.

But the facts on the ground don't necessarily support the supposition. There are those in this city, this Kuala Lumpur, who do not flinch when it shows "Sunday brunch, RM120 per person" and a large number of us who would sit long and reconsider our buying decisions when the neighbourhood mamak lifts 50 sen to the fried noodles prices.

There is a widening gap between income groups in the country, and in the last 20 years a discernible drop in the quality of life for the working class.

But it takes being part of the class or careful observation of society to understand the increasing plight of this class of people. Of the taxi driver who has to pay RM1,200 a month to the taxi company with no medical, no personal insurance and savings plan to protect him in case he hits dire straits. He is only guaranteed of the monthly liability to the company.

The stress of this poverty requires you to acquire the vantage point of the working class.

It is far easier to show empathy for those in abject poverty — elsewhere in the world — refugee camps and kids chasing relief trucks.

However, the neglect of the working class bears a brunt on our system. The rise of unskilled workers ill-equipped for globalised employ, the compendium of crime-drugs-violence-single mothers and the creation of ghettos.

It is in the interest of a nation aspiring to developed status to confront its contemporary poverty rather than drown it in a clever breakdown of stats and trumpet-blowing of cosmetic initiatives.

The poor need a leg up, not your leg to chew on. And certainly not a series of PR exercises driven by the ideas of management consultants built around clever slogans.

They would appreciate the following:

Housing for all, without emphasising which government-friendly construction company gets first dibs where.

Public schools which deliver standard education meeting minimum international standards not bogged down by the politicisation of education and an obsession with construction rather than white-boards (please look at above for type of companies involved).

Healthcare which is not held hostage by the continued unregulated privatisation of all the profitable aspects of the industry to friendlies and delaying/denying for more demanding afflictions.

Public transportation which does not punish people for not being able to afford private vehicles.

I'm not poor today. Choices and effort have taken my boat to better harbours. I had a lot of help, which makes me lucky. But that luck is not universal or a given.

Our society has to decide on how much help we can afford the weakest among us.

They are the easiest to ignore. They don't dictate legislation, nor demand for funding or influence the civil service — to better their lives enough.

I guess I am asking our large middle class to act. You'll be surprised at the power you possess, and you will be even more surprised on how much the ruling class fears a conscientious middle class.