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APRIL 29 — My father would be 67 if he were alive today. He'd probably still vote Barisan Nasional (BN).

My mom's much younger but she tells me that we have to speak carefully about the government — you might get into trouble if you are not careful.

So, let's take on this often said thing. That the ethnic Indian vote is a BN vote bank because no matter what you do to the Indian, he will somehow limp to PWTC and give his undying, or in this case his dying support.

Is that true?

Them people first. Starting with myself, I suppose.

My family on both sides are urban from the word go — “go” as in when they arrived in Malaysia from their respective villages in South India . They come from a line of general workers — for city councils.

My dad went one step higher by being a Public Works Department driver and even served in the Armed Forces. There is the odd number of Telekom workers in my mom's extended family, you better believe it when they give you the snub once in a while.

We were all part of the urban poor. Some got their acts together and their children live better lives, but most still remain in that poverty cycle. And we all meet at weddings, and the wedding cost will let us know how that relative got on with life.

Council workers are just part of a large family of workers in the general services, like the railways, electricity board, water board, etc. But mind you general workers nevertheless, by and large.

And our cousins, the more mentioned estate workers live in the rural points of the peninsula's west coast. Their numbers are large and since they were in a large rubber industry, their homogeneity tended to make most Malaysians think Indians were synonymous with estate workers only.

Together they made up the bulk of the Indian population here — poor, lowly educated and looked down. It has been a long journey for many of us.

The urban dudes by virtue of living in the towns had access to better schools and a fluid job market, if they competed for them. In the estates mobility is limited and the future all about staying in that economy.

The economic accidents have resulted in us broadly categorising the estate Indians as firmly blue-collar and the urban Indians as having a range of professions and fortunes.

I somehow got into a “good” school for my secondary education. One of its founders was kinda Indian, Thamboosamy Pillai. He was Sri Lankan Tamil.

There are and were the same number of oligarchs, feudal lords, capitalists and peasants in India and Sri Lanka. However, the migration pattern turned out that the latter with their English education were posited as support staff to the British rather than doing the grunt work.

Even today Ceylonese Tamil families are averse to letting other Tamils marry into their families.

But they are not the “vote bank” the not-so-upwardly-mobile children of the service workers and estate are. They keep their allegiances to the concept of MIC, even if not to the party. The concept? Indian representation under native leadership in a nation unwelcoming to a group not big enough to matter on their own.

This leads to the question of political consciousness within this people.

Have they ever been able to afford it?

They've spent lives — most times inherited and passed on — of economic turbulence. Every day is filled with anxiety, let alone months and years. The rain in a rubber estate means the loss of income, and now the systematic withdrawal of plantations from the peninsula mean half week jobs.

You've heard it all before, so I'll spare you the repeat.

This people have less expectation. They expect a bit of respect and the right to live with dignity. They really don't expect more, or expect others to care more than that.

In the 80s one of the main concerns was when the Tamil film will be screened. Radio Television Malaysia had the only two channels in the country and kept moving the screen time.

And then there was this plan to get makkal (people) to invest in a small project by MIC...

You build a political consciousness if you have developed the economic security or are pressed so mercilessly until being active is no more a choice.

I'll argue that the "living just enough" model kept them away from forced activism.

They don't set the agenda, they survive it.

There is the obvious that most people don't notice. That these guys, these peeps who end up crossing the BN box are mostly poor.

They are more likely to vote BN not because they are Indians, but because they are poor. And poverty is colour blind.

People point out to the loss of Chinese votes in Hulu Selangor, but really it is about percentage, right? A substantial number of Chinese voted for BN, too, just that a lot more did not.

And if you were to cut through the numbers in terms of percentage, the BN would have had their biggest share from the poor and the wealthiest.

Those who are inclined to show immediate gratitude to the largesse presented to them even if it feels awkward. And then those who benefit from the inequalities of our society.

So actually the question is wrong. It is not why the Indians in the more depressed economic zones of the country support BN, but it is to ask, does BN command most of the poor's vote when the political climate is too convoluted?

Poor meaning poor, not any variation of it. All colours and shades of them.

If the numbers are gathered properly then you will notice that the BN got most of the poor vote. A combination of putting cash in your hand and confusing the political spectrum.

What do you do, if you are trying to break in?

You can wait for the next Hindraf, or Baling or any other peasant uprising. Or you can move the other part.



You can inspire them.

The ceramah where you point out the various corruption of this government, that really only goes that far. A shopping list of all that which the BN government has moved erroneously will seem like the same thing to the poor.

In their minds any RM12 billion in some disused free-zone or odd million bits for a mentri besar or minister means that there are bad people out there.

But there have always been different bad people, and they the impoverished never get to see the millions, let alone touch it.

That is why they zone out.

They need inspiration. They need to feel moments of liberation when they attend the ceramah. The language is incidental. People feel inspiration, and the Pakatan Rakyat strategy team might want to invest some time into that.

So back to the question, the real question. When will those out of power inspire those who are powerless?