



By Monica

I've seen 10-year-old Raj for months. He's neat, clean, courteous, helpful and obedient. I must confess I favour him in my heart, though I know I shouldn't practise favouritism.

He's ten and attends a Tamil-medium school. Understands almost no English and very little Bahasa. Communicating with him comes with exaggerated hand gestures and facial expressions, as well as interpretations by his English-speaking friend.

Given that I only get to spend a couple of hours a week with them, getting to know each one better is challenging, to say the least. One thing which I can definitely say, though, is that I receive much affection from them. And in this way, they actually give to me way more than I give to them.

Today, I had a little more time with Raj and to my utter amazement, I found out he has ten other siblings! His eldest sister, 17, is already married to a 20-year-old. They are both quite illiterate! In this day and age!

No.2 is 13 years old and the range goes all the way down to an 8-month-old baby. Satu tahun, satu. The eldest, the 17-year-old, looks so worn out, and if you ask me, she looks more haggard than her smiling-from ear-to-ear 33-year-old mother. A quick calculation will tell you that her mom had her when she herself was only 16. A mere child herself then. And now, the cycle repeats itself.

Raj's parents, 33 and 38 years of age, are both "tukang sapu di highway" and "potong pokok" respectively, living in Lembah Subang. Their family is just one of the many there who survive miraculously.

How do they feed a family of 13 on their meagre income? And yet, none of them is skinny or looks undernourished to me. Thank God. Their eyes are bright, eager, expectant, joyful and full of life and hope. Except for the eldest, the 17-year-old. I see the light has all but dimmed.

Will it be the same for Raj when I look into his eyes a few years from now? I don't want to.

Talking to him, his siblings and his parents today, it has so clutched at my heart to do a little more. I asked Raj's mom if she's taken steps to stop further pregnancies. She says: "Mahal lah".

I say: "Pergi HUKL lah. Murah mah."

She says: "Tak ada duit. Satu ratus lebih....tapi ada ubat boleh makan....", and gives me a wide grin. I want to cry. I cry.

Later, the Indonesian worker and I talk. And she says, "Mengapa dia orang tak fikir.... ada anak banyak-banyak, anak yang susah....."

I say: "Kita yang lebih mengetahui bisa berpikir begitu, tapi dia orang kurang mengetahui....."

And therein lies the problem. They know not. They have not had their learning. They have not been taught. They have been deprived of that basic right to education - education which is so important to the pursuit of knowledge that can break the shackles of ignorance, fear, dependency, helplessness.

And not knowing better, they live according to their basal instincts. And who are we, how can we point a finger and fault them?

I notice the children from the families with fewer children - two or three - speak English and Bahasa as well as their mother tongue. Their parents had received at least lower secondary education. Their lives are better off. They have higher ambitions for their children. And very likely, these children will do better than their parents before them. So, education is still the key.

But what of the many who are deprived - where the ugly cycle repeats? And daily, this number is growing. Biologically as well as because of the legacy of the race regime in this country. Meanwhile, the haves continue with their 1.5 children plan.

I shudder when I imagine the overflowing poor, hungry, angry, disenfranchised striking back if things in the country continue on their present course.

DSAI et al talks about not having the space to address the rural marginalised. Label me naive or shallow, I don't care. But it sounds to me to be such a very vacuous, stalling excuse. Is it such a monumental obstacle? Is it? I am nonplussed. Absolutely.

Cell. Do it at cell level.