

## ***Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong – a poor state of affairs!***

*By Neena Pushkarna, Committee Member of DAB Ethnic Minorities Committee, 10<sup>th</sup> July, 2017*

A recent article in the SCMP delivered a scathing blow to the Hong Kong government by calling them intellectually indolent and thoroughly compromised as it demonstrated to the world how enfeebled its bureaucrats have become in the face of overpowering entrenched cartels.

The above article was related to a key global trend on ‘Innovation’, but also holds good for the government’s action, of lack thereof with respect to another global trend.... ‘Diversity and Inclusion’.

As of 2015, the poverty line of single household in Hong Kong stands at HK\$3,800! Which means a person who earns HK\$4,000 would not be considered poor, not in Hong Kong, one of the most expensive cities in the world! The 2011 census gave a grave state of affairs of poverty in Hong Kong, which indicated that almost 20% of the population lived below the poverty line. The situation for ethnic minorities\* (‘EM’) is worse, specifically for the Pakistani group with >50% of Pakistanis households living under the poverty line. Indians and Nepalis fare slightly better but there is still a big gap between the sub-groups.

While there are differences among the sub-groups, the South Asian group in HK appears particularly vulnerable. The group, relatively, has a larger household size and their population in HK is increasing vis a vis other EM groups.

The low income of these EM groups has its roots at the start of their life in Hong Kong. One NGO's study Kindergarten Support Report 2015 showed that 62% of kindergartens used Cantonese exclusively as the interview language. Many young children of EM would fail to gain entry at this stage. This poor start continues in life with poor results in school (due to lack of Chinese proficiency) and then continues with discrimination in the job market. Even all the jobs or vacancies are advertised in Chinese, therefore, EM candidates can't look for jobs. Most companies in Hong Kong require Chinese proficiency. This despite the fact that many Westerners work here without knowing the Chinese language, and the Chinese without knowing English. Inability to get into a wide spectrum of jobs in HK could be due to the poorer education levels of the EM group, inherent bias or just plain old discrimination. It is ironic that recent job opportunities posted by the Equal Opportunities Commission in this past year, hired

Chinese candidates exclusively, though the postings did not overtly state that Chinese language was a requirement and in fact they have to deal with many of the EM's cases and need some EM officers in the office. Job posters in Hong Kong need to take a harder look at language requirements and should consider loosening them if it makes sense. More needs to be done. At all levels. By both the government and the private sector who need to start embracing and including ALL communities in Hong Kong.

To the EM community Hong Kong is "home". Yet this marginalisation manifests itself in financial, familial and social exclusion. EMs tend to work multiple jobs to try to keep their families afloat, working night shifts which further takes away from family time. Furthermore, due to language constraints they are unaware (at times unwilling to access) of the available benefits or facilities they can access.

The character of a city is known by its treatment of its most vulnerable group. To be truly called a 'World city', Hong Kong needs to do more to stem the marginalisation of its ethnic minority community. There is still no concerted action/legislation by the government to make a meaningful impact on improving the lives of EM in Hong Kong. This despite the many studies and reports by concern groups that a lot still needs to be done. It's right time that government should take some steps to make improvements.

Access and opportunity is key! There is no reason for EM to perform any less than the general population provided they have access to opportunity. Case in point is Policeman Ifzal Zaffar, known recently as a hero in Hong Kong, whose father hailed from a poor family in Pakistan. His father came to Hong Kong as a child and worked hard to provide for his family. Ifzal Zaffar credits his father and Project Gemstone (run by the police to recruit more ethnic minorities into the force) to his success in integrating within the Police department and making a meaningful contribution to his home city of Hong Kong. His actions in stopping a potential suicide created a real feel good buzz of acceptance of Policeman Zaffar within not only the EM community but the general population. There was a 50% surge in enrolment to Project Gemstone following the media attention Policeman Zaffar received. There is a need for more such inspirational and aspirational stories within the EM community, as EMs have capability and ability to show. Project Gemstone has shown that there is a way to increase productive participation of EM in civil society. But there needs to be a will to do so. More government departments need to step up. As do legislators. Let not Policeman Zaffar be the exception to the rule!

I strongly recommend that now the government should seriously do something to improve the lives of the EMs in Hong Kong to set an example for the world that Hong Kong cares for the EMs.

*Note: Ethnic minorities are noted as South Asians for the purposes of this article as they comprise the largest sub-group and are the group that is growing in Hong Kong (vs. the other South East Asian sub-groups – which excludes FDWs)*

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