

## **Indrani Kopal: A Case Study of Video Journalism as Gendered Leadership**

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### **ABSTRACT**

To a certain degree, narratives of gendered leadership in a post-colonial nation like Malaysia have not always been accessible to the members of this multiethnic society. Gendered leadership discourses have been disseminated seemingly, through concerted efforts between gender-sensitive organisations such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, resulting in the identification, promotion and recognition of new talent in different capacities across all creed, colour and communities. As such, research and publications on new gendered leadership talent have become necessary as case studies which simultaneously aim to showcase the agency of women leaders in varying context of female subjectivities. In fact, the collective success stories of gendered leadership do not generally alienate other women leaders whose existentialism are outside the realm of 'Politics'. This paper explores the works of Indrani Kopal, a young documentary filmmaker@video journalist, as she zooms in on the nation's disenfranchised peoples including members of the Indian and Penan communities. If a leadership quality may be signified by the break of one's silence in the face of injustice, we contend that Indrani's unorthodox leadership lies in her praxis of agency. Indrani's optimistic sense of agency has increased her opportunity as a video journalist-with-mission to engage the establishment in the disenfranchised affairs of the disenfranchised.

**Keywords: Documentary, gendered leadership, joint authorship, praxis of agency, the disenfranchised**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Any civilised society should study womenfolk in order to understand and acknowledge the significant contribution of its women. One may consider this as a pertinent issue especially of womenfolk in a multiethnic and multicultural society because apart from contributing progressively to their own community, we believe that they should also be making their acquaintance across social, cultural, religious even political divisions, which define the larger society. Malaysia makes an interesting case study in such regard especially since its historicism is based on socio-political and economic matrices which are prominently played

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out through the majority-minority binary. Women's contribution in Malaysia inevitably has been framed likewise, whereby the dominant social actors in the discourse of gendered leadership who have monopolised the official records, have somewhat gained the exclusive access to the governmental organisational hierarchy. This apparently implicates the phenomenon of gendered leadership in this country with officialdom, where generations of female leaders have been honoured for the high offices they have held.

As for the public sphere, such authority-defined gendered leadership is visible through official recognition and mass-mediated channels of communication. We mostly see (or read about) them in the dailies and coffee-table sized books. But what about those who do not have the clout yet assumed to be the 'lesser' cogs in the wheel? These lesser known 'minority' talents are no less important than those picked by the establishment. In fact, the former is always considered part of the gendered and amalgamated movement of 'universal sisterhood' (Lyshaug, 2006) which arguably, regardless of the diverse ontological nature of its supporters, seems to be putting on the same expression and tone in pursuit of their globalising mission. That universal language arguably carries sufficient logic and appeal to today's 'minority' women of substance; yields enough courage for and confidence in its cause culminating in a compelling sense of agency, awareness and motivation to bring about justice and opportunity for those who have been alienated against.

What has been said above certainly brings two things together: leadership and agency; and both are the thrust of our inquiry into the relationship between a positive sense of agency and an emergent style of 'minority' leadership by a Malaysian woman. This paper aims to showcase a gendered leadership case study for one Indrani Kopal, a female video journalist who works for *Malaysiakini*, an independent online news portal. Through selected videography, this paper also seeks to understand why and how an ordinary woman's sense of leadership becomes rather developed and other factors which sustain her sense of agency to continue to tell the stories of 'Other' lives belonging to this nation. Arguably, Indrani not only demonstrates her concern to the specific problems faced by the disenfranchised Indian-Hindu community but also that of social and cultural challenges of a pluralistic, post-colonial society in general. In short, our study attempts to portray the interplay between Indrani's opinionated leadership through broadcast journalism and a woman's instinct to seek social justice for culturally alienated and exploited minorities. Ultimately, this case study presents an intellectual discourse on the impact of Indrani's works on the development of gendered leadership in Malaysia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Western Discourses on Gender and Leadership*

In this section, we shall attempt to situate and inform rather selectively, the evolving discourses of the loosely termed 'gendered leadership' within the overlapping writings of women's and gender studies. The scholarly review by Moran's (1992) on the topic of gender and leadership provides the most comprehensive view of the landscape since the meta-analysis studies by Eagly and Johnson (1990) and Rosener (1990). Moran's findings, predominantly informed by human behaviourism approach of the western academia, appear to corroborate those of Eagly and Johnson (1990) and Rosener (1990), in that principally,

“women tended to adopt a more democratic or participative style, and men tended to adopt a more autocratic or directive style”. Her critical review also exposes how far “[t]he assumption that leadership equates with maleness *is* [emphasis original] [already] deeply embedded in both our thinking and language”. Interestingly, many researchers in the 1990s have the tendency to interpret the differences in leadership behaviourism between men and women through binomial constructs such as hierarchies of exclusion and inclusion (Helgeson 1990); command and control (Rossener 1990), and the dominator and partnership models (Eisler 1991) to name but a few. In our view, these are rather intensely contested semantics and perhaps paradigmatically, appear rather undesirably different from the much envisioned ‘gendered leadership’ style. Significantly, Moran’s final analysis highlights cultural factors as the future challenge for male and female leaders to develop the type of leadership styles and skills they will need the most.

In their review of leadership theories, Appelbaum *et al.* (2003) cited the works of Kolb (1997) who, interestingly and rather curiously, has proposed a return to the 1980s concept of androgynous behaviour – a hybrid of male and female styles – in order to balance out either masculine or feminine characteristics in male or female leaders. An “androgynous leader blends the characteristics typically associated with males – such as dominance, assertiveness, and competitiveness – with those typically associated with females – such as cooperativeness and a concern for people.” (Moran, 1992:487). As noted in Appelbaum *et al.* (2003), Kolb (1999) maintains that androgynous classifications are clearly preferred to those with “undifferentiated or feminine characteristics” since this style of leadership is seemingly more appropriate and promising for women leaders. However, other scholars, most notably Schein (1989) in particular, “condemns the entire idea of an androgynous leadership style as a ‘foolhardy and dangerous one’” (in Moran 1992:488). In fact, the issue with Kolb’s androgynous dimension had already been anticipated a few years earlier by Moran herself when she made the assertion in concluding her review that “leadership skills need to be varied to meet various tasks and environments. There is no one right style and no one right set of ‘traits’ even if they are androgynous. Although androgyny is appealing because it incorporates what is viewed as the strengths of both males and females, it also perpetuates some of the same stereotypes that have hindered the development of leaders of both genders.” (1992: 488)

The paradigm shift in the scholarship on gender and leadership from behavioural to cultural (post)modernity becomes inevitable. In her important critique of the phallogocentric ‘heroic leadership’ paradigm, where the idealised hero is a white, masculine man ‘at/doing work’, critical feminist scholar, Fletcher (2002:1) forcefully argues that leadership behavioural values have shifted from ‘heroic individualism’ towards “egalitarian relationships and the collaborative nature of achievement”. Both values encode and signify the importance of femininity and relational actions associated with the domestic sphere that somehow “makes it difficult to acknowledge them as leadership competence [or requiring skill of any sort]” (2002: 2). These leadership ethos require relational skills such as “mutuality, an openness to influence, and a willingness to acknowledge the collaborative nature of achievement.” However, Fletcher has admittedly remained skeptical if such stance of “needing others” is genuine, for two reasons: first, because organisational inequities based on race, class, sex

or rank is rather systemic; second, because a relational leadership style that is critical for business success may “require displaying characteristics that subtly mark us as ‘feminine’ and ‘powerless.’” Although relational models of leadership are expected to benefit women in general as social identity of the actor is irrelevant, such demonstrations of relationality can be described as “antithetical to how we have been taught to express ourselves at work” (2002: 3). The ‘newness’ of the relational leadership practice is arguably lesser to women than men because the “femininity associated with the domestic sphere of family and community is that of *mothering* [emphasis original], a labour of love that entails selfless giving.” This confusion or misunderstanding of new leadership style with selfless giving and mothering has resulted in Fletcher’s re-reading of Helgeson’s (1990) notion of the ‘female advantage’ – the idea that gendered norms would translate into an advantage – “as a form of exploitation, where their behaviour benefits the bottom line but does not mark them as leadership potential.”

Reynolds’ (2011) recent theory building effort to approach servant-leadership style from both gender and feminist perspectives is not only ambitious but quite significant in sustaining the critical cultural-intellectual momentum central to gendered leadership discourses on aspects of power. Reynolds’ initially faced a tricky conceptual conundrum – one, that traditional acts of serving and leading are attitudinally paradoxical; the other, following Eicher-Catt’s (2005) feminist reading, servant-leadership is coded as a form of subjugation and typically gendered as feminine. Reynolds attempts to re-model servant-leadership through a gendered-integration of servant-leader characteristics described by Spears (2002) as being “needs-focused and other-oriented: listening, empathising, healing, practising stewardship (serving the needs of others), exercising commitment to the growth of people, and building community”. Since servant-leadership “arises through the conscious decision to serve” (Greenleaf, 1970; 2003), the *distinguishing* [emphasis original] elements of servant-leadership model can serve as a driving force for generating discourse on gender integration in organisational leadership. Reynolds subsequently annexes her servant-leadership model with Eisler’s (1994) partnership model, which looks at leadership as partnership and partnership as gender equality, in constructing a gender-integrative model of leadership. Reynolds extends Eisler’s discourse analysis on the “socialisation of feminine values such as relatedness, non-violent conflict resolution, and empathy” to consolidate her servant-leadership theoretical modelling that is grounded in the “traditional masculine qualities of leadership such as decisiveness, assertiveness and risk-taking”. In actual fact, Reynolds is well-informed of the constructive arguments from Coleman (2003) and Eisler (1994) who both asserted that “typically masculine gendered activities remain essential elements of the leadership equation and are fundamental in striving for a gendered leadership and partnership-oriented approach to leadership discourses and organisations within a gender-holistic framework”. It is also worth noting here that Reynolds’ gender-integrative servant-leadership is also adequately theorised to deal with pro-gender-egalitarianism social movements and the pursuit of social justice.

## ***2.2 Malaysian Discourses on Gender and Leadership***

Research and scholarship on ‘gender and leadership’ in Malaysia is still very premature and arguably warped within the developmental discourses of social transformation. That means

most studies have either hardly focused on the male gender or imposed self-censorship on the minority and politically-incorrect transgenders; instead, the works within this sub-discipline is almost exclusively conceived as and related to the study of Malaysian women's affairs, their subjugation and empowerment and (if only they are successful) on their styles of leadership. The gap in gender and leadership research in Malaysia is obviously informed predominantly by institutionalised if systemically patriarchal political and sociocultural settings, rather than religious or ethnic factors. It is a legacy of the dominant paradigm of women's studies when it was institutionalised, beginning in the 1970s with Universiti Sains Malaysia's Women's Development Research Centre (KANITA) in the 1970s. KANITA's main research focus then had been on national development policy-based studies on women's socio-economic and political contributions. It then took an 'intellectual' turn, when western discourses on women's rights proposed to problematise 'women' through the concept of 'gender'. As informed by local academics Ng and Tan (2011:29), this approach defines gender as a social product as well as a relational concept because "women do not form homogenous groups and do not necessarily share similar social or political aims." It regards the socially constituted relations between women and men as shaped and sanctioned by the ideology and material practices in society.

Following Khan (2002: 39-40) as quoted in Ng and Tan (2011:30), patriarchal structures of power have alienated women's oppression through notion of 'gender' since it has the tendency to "depoliticise women's subservience" since Khan's analysis claimed that "without challenging the material basis of patriarchal relations, gender sensitisation and awareness will not change power relations in society." It stands to reason why it is seemingly important for women in a multiethnic, post-colonial society like Malaysia to have access to democratic ideas and progressive strategies to sustain their cause for empowerment and equality of opportunity. Thus, the institutionalisation of women's (as opposed to gender) studies becomes ever so important for Asian women in order "to challenge and transform gender-blind social theory and conventional male-generated constructions of knowledge" (Resurreccion, 2011:11). In her recent pertinent observation, Resurreccion (2011:12) has suggested that scholarships on gender issues throughout Asia have departed from "political restiveness, nascent democracy movements and growing modernisation in many Asian societies in the face of a number of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes that marked the post-colonial period." Equally, findings by a team of social scientist led by Cecilia Ng, perhaps the foremost authority on Malaysia's women and gender policies, has revealed a 'double-edged' causal relationship between the authoritarian nation-state and women's movement in contemporary Malaysia. Not only has the elected government provided women opportunities for gainful employment and subsequent social mobility; it has also brought about a purposeful, ideological surplus for the cause of women's movement. As revealed in a devastating critique of Ng and Tan (2011), the struggles for equality of opportunity by women's movements have exposed hidden agendas by "the state and other institutional forces to further objectives that were even inimical to women's interests" ((2011:16). In a rather dated electoral study by Rashila Ramli (1998:70) which nonetheless, was cited by Tan Pek Leng (2011:94) for its key findings, the former has suggested that one of the five great obstacles standing in the way of women who wish to participate in politics as "the social

perception of women's leadership ability" that they are deemed "unsuitable/ineffective leaders [besides] religious constraints" which may affect the stability of the political party concerned. Because such a perception seemed rather prevalent in 'non-western' societies, Rashila's argument was later critiqued by Maznah Mohamad (2002) who was adamant that women's meaningful representations would continue to be denied by unequal gender relations within political parties.

Apart from the above, it is perhaps worth noting that the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development has barely managed to produce three publications in almost a decade. Its 'coffee-table' scholarships<sup>1</sup> have somewhat been confined to the legacies of 'successful' civil servants and political leaders across a spectrum of governmental organisations. This is probably how one might understand the Malaysian context of gender and leadership (not gendered leadership): that it is socio-culturally and politically sanctioned. In the final analysis, it just seems that the notion of a 'gendered leadership' is yet to attain the level of leadership and organisational discourses among strategists and social scientists in this country.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 *The Interview*

In-depth interviews are one of the main methods of data collection used in qualitative research. It is also often described as a form of conversation but in reality, although a good in-depth interview will appear natural, it will bear little resemblance to an everyday conversation. Classic ethnographers such as Malinowski stressed the importance of talking to people to grasp their point of view (Burgess, 1982a in Creswell, 2009) and personal accounts are seen as having central importance in social research because of the power of language to illuminate meaning (Creswell, 2009). We decided to use the semi-structured in-depth interview method with our subject, Indrani, as we wanted to engage her in conversations about her own life - worldviews, beliefs, philosophy and meaningful experiences which she might have reflected through her works as a video journalist, blogger and documentary filmmaker, in a relaxed and unassuming manner. We successfully interviewed her on two occasions, the first on 18th January 2012 and the final on 1st March 2012 just before she departed to further her studies at Hofstra University, New York in the United States.

#### 3.2 *The Talent*

Excerpted below from her own blog, *Indra'z*, Indrani describes both her inspiration and aspiration in her existential life with maturity and humility, where both are very significant traits in 'the great leader' style of leadership:

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<sup>1</sup> To date, publications by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development include titles such as *SHE. Penghormatan kepada Wanita-wanita Malaysia* (2013), *Wanita dan Politik. Malaysia* (2010) and *Women in Politics. Malaysia* (2007). The Ministry was established in 2003 during the then premiership of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

\* The initial working paper was presented at I-come, University Utara Malaysia in December 2012.

*I love meeting people and documenting their stories; it is such an honour to be let in like that. I actually like the idea behind the fundamentals and techniques of short documentaries or even compelling photographs that are capable of persuading and convincing the viewer to act upon the message in the films that I make.*

(Source: [www.indranikopal.blogspot.com](http://www.indranikopal.blogspot.com))

Indrani's documentary subjects or themes reflect the strength of her philosophy of enlightened journalism and her keen interests in the socio-cultural and political discourses of human rights in the era of globalisation. The integrity of her professional ethics is apparently shaped and reinforced by her mentor-employer, *Malaysiakini*, which has showed its reciprocity and respect by granting Indrani both the freedom as a video journalist and a broadcast blogger. It appears that *Indra 'z* seems to have been deployed to extend her social critique on the niggling issues enveloping certain unfortunate quarters of the nation's Indian-Hindu community. As a blog that has an 'open' agenda, *Indra 'z* serves as an archive of the struggle of the Indian-Hindu community in various states as framed by her digital camera. She captured various periods of transition which were further fracturing the already desperate lives of the ethnic Indian-Hindu community for the last two decade on a sensitive issue such as the land rights.

Certain contemporary social issues have also attracted her attention including psychologically and sexually deviant manifestations by certain members of the society such as committing suicide, performing trans-sexuality or even a rare case of 'mistaken identity'. Also, through her blog, *Indra 'z*, one may see that Indrani is also sensitive to the media subjectivity of the Penan indigenous community in Sarawak, which is no longer a local issue but is already well-exposed and discussed nationally and internationally. Perhaps one may argue that Indrani's informal lesson in Malaysian politics occurred during the Hindraf demonstration in November 2007 when she was assigned by *Malaysiakini* to document the largest gathering of Malaysian Indians in Kuala Lumpur to ask the government to redress the inequality of opportunity for their community.

### **3.3 The Medium**

Indrani's leadership has been informed largely by the short documentaries which she began filming since 2006. Documentary is *the* vehicle of storytelling for Indrani as she engages with the diverse lifeworlds of selected Malaysian subjectivity. As Nichols (2001) argues, there are three possible ways in which the reality and truth of such lifeworlds may be represented in a documentary film and which are not wholly instructive of the range of works discussed in this paper.

First, documentaries offer us a likeness or depiction of the world that bears recognition of familiarity. Through the capacity of film and audio to record situations and events with considerable fidelity, we see in documentaries people, places and things that we might also see for ourselves, outside the cinema. This quality alone often provides a basis for belief; we see what was there before the camera, so it must be true. In Nichol's opinion, the remarkable power of the photographic image cannot be underestimated - even though it is subject to qualification - because (1) an image cannot tell everything we want of what had

happened and (2) images can be altered both during and after the fact by both conventional and digital means. In documentaries, we find stories or arguments, evocations or descriptions that let us see the world anew. The ability of the photographic image to produce the likeness of what is set before it compels us to believe that it is reality itself re-presented before us, while the story or argument presents a distinct way of regarding this reality.

Second, documentaries also stand for or represent the interests of others. Representative democracy, in contrast to participatory democracy, relies on elected individuals representing the interest of their constituency. In a participatory democracy, each individual participates actively in political decision-making rather than relying on a representative. They speak for the interest of others, both for the individuals whom they represent in the film and for the institution or agency that supports their filmmaking activity.

Third, documentaries may represent the world in the same way a lawyer may represent a client's interest; they put the case for a particular view or interpretation of evidence before us. In this sense, documentaries do not simply stand for *the Others* [our emphasis], representing them in ways they could not do themselves but rather they more actively make a case or argument; they assert what the nature of a matter is to win consent or influence opinion.

#### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

##### 4.1 *The Praxis of Agency*

Agency is *praxis*, to use one of the Frankfurt School's most critical term to denote the act of engaging the subject of interest in order to shape and change the subject's social and political condition. According to Pennell and Burford (2002:111) *praxis* serves as the "epistemology of the modern emancipatory movement" which resonates with the influential Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed. It often begins with an act of thinking or questioning a situation in the light of one's notion of what is right and good (or evil); or what moral disposition will be required to further human well-being and the good life. Inevitably, *praxis* requires a great understanding of *Other* peoples and this may be potentially achieved by way of a synergy between "thought and action [and the] reshaping [of] each other through [our] engagement in social change" (Lather, 1991 in Pennell and Burford, 2002:111).

The concept of agency may be referred to as the ability of the post-colonial subject to initiate either physical or intellectual resistance against a domineering yet hegemonic power. As pointed out by Ashcroft *et al.* (1998), agency means "the ability to act or perform an action [and] it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely or autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed." The *praxis* of agency is an important political action or informed resistance by the subject in order to subvert the forces that construct and define their subjectivity in the first place. Seeing it this way, it should not be a coincidence that Indrani has decided to cast her net rather wide. During one interview, she makes the important assertion of connecting people with politics, arguing that "politics shouldn't belong to a certain group of people and activists shouldn't own politics." Being a video journalist for *Malaysiakini*, Indrani is indeed aware of her capacity to exercise or stretch her agency to maximise the discursive impact of her coverage on communal and

national issues. However, she has insisted that she is more comfortable as a *storyteller* [our emphasis] which does require her to make the adjustment on how she should be approaching the subjects of her stories without losing any impact factor. As shall be shown later, storytelling is indeed a critical *praxis* of articulation through strategic narrative acts into which Indrani deftly embeds her sense of agency, with full self-realisation of her position and what she can do.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of a critical discourse analysis and discussion of Indrani's leadership style and *praxis* as a video journalist, we sampled from her blog, *Indra'z*, a range of her most significant works over a span of three years from 2007 to 2009.

### 5.1 *She's My Son* (2007)

Indrani's foray into the *praxis* of agency through video journalism began in 2007 when she was assigned by her employer to cover a story on transvestites in Lorong Haji Taib, the infamous 'red light' district in the capital city. She was drawn to understand the life and world of the occupants of Lorong Haji Taib better for she believed they had stories which could change public perception on the 'oldest profession'. This was rather interesting as it indicated that while she was emotionally connected to her subject matter, she was also mentally prepared to give prostitution and its actors the benefit of hindsight. She did not place any value to sex workers as a moralist because she was not interested in passing judgement; she merely wanted to tell their stories. Indrani's information gathering led her to a transsexual named Sarika/Saravanan who survived after her sex change purely on her mother's acceptance of her identity. Indrani wanted to tell this incredible story but because Sarika's family members did not want the public to know about it, her documentary project was shelved until Sarika introduced her to Suganya, a transsexual who had a similar story as the former but who was also willing to be filmed. The completed documentary, *She's My Son* (2007), features a resilient mother-daughter blood tie between Suganya and her mother. Perhaps the most significant consequence of the documentary is the closure on the pivotal role of a mother to accept her transsexual child again in full embrace of its new identity, and effectively, silences their critics. When the documentary won an award in the 2007 KOMAS Film Fest that made her become known, Indrani's own profile started to change dramatically.

*I won the award in 2008 and my pictures were in the papers. People started calling me, sms-ing me, adding me on Facebook. ... I sit at the mamak stall and people come up to me. I'm nobody but they come to me and tell me their problems. You have people coming up to you and saying 'I don't know what to do with my life. I want to be like you'. ... Why do they do that? They are looking up to you and I know that.*

*(The interview: 18th January 2012)*

Such was the impact of her victorious documentary on the lives of those who did not have any connection with her before. It reveals that the essential flaw in human society is due to human misunderstanding. Indrani was not overtly 'moralistic' for such discourse is potentially treacherous across the Malaysian identity spectrum but there is no doubting

that her encrypted message had reached some of her audiences. She quickly became aware of the critical reception for her story, and perhaps too, the power of her tool to generate the all-important process of reflexivity among willing members of the society. The documentary was both a much needed intervention in the discursive practice concerning social outcast and a baptism in identity politics for the video journalist. The positive responses would have given her the confidence to continue her increasingly defined activism, which was to tell the stories of disenfranchised persons.

### **5.2 *They Stole 11 Months of My Life* (2008)**

Indian female subjectivity continues to be a highly interesting pursuit for Indrani as much as it is a personal challenge. Indrani relates the story of M. Rajeshvari, a young 22-year-old pregnant woman who was detained for 11 agonising months at the Lenggeng Immigration Depot for illegal immigrants after the police found that she had lost her Malaysian identity card, could not remember its number and spoke only a smattering of Bahasa Malaysia. This is a classic case of mistaken identity for Rajeshvari appeared to have failed to convince the authorities of her national identity. Whilst awaiting her deportation to Sri Lanka, Rajeshvari gave birth to a pre-mature baby who is alive today but with health complications. It seems apparent that through this documentary, Indrani has taken the authorities involved to task by 'questioning' their conduct and the blatant disregard for human rights because she believed they could have done more to help this young pregnant Indian woman reclaim her identity. Indrani's video was determined to expose one of the most fundamental and agonising flaws in the Civil Service. When interviewed on the attitude of the immigration officials involved in the Rajeshvari's case, Indrani was disgusted:

*That guy was very defensive; he said why you keep blaming the immigration office. He refused to see me after that. It's not that I didn't go back. I'll be waiting in the lobby and when they heard the word, Malaysiakini, they would ask me to go. He would tell his people to tell me that he had a meeting though he could see me on the opposite side and waved me off. I saw with my own eyes. I felt so...*

*(The interview: 1<sup>st</sup> March 2012)*

Indrani's pursuit of the truth after Rajeshvari's release from detention marks her as the journalist *sans frontier*. Her persistency in reclaiming universal principles such as truth and justice for those who become victims of discrimination by the authority, is simply one of the great attributes typically found in inspirational individuals. Perhaps a special strength that a gendered leadership talent engenders is a superior sense of empathy. Despite the hardline stand of the official, Indrani knew only too well that one of humanity's greatest challenges is the human conscience and its perpetuation of denial, as evident here:

*I want to hear him say I can't do anything; the system is such that they cannot blame the government. They cannot; they will be sacked and they will be under suspension. I understand. I wish he was daring enough to just say that he cannot comment on this.*

*(The interview: 1<sup>st</sup> March 2012)*

As is it apparent that Indrani's mission was to "expose the system", this documentary becomes a critique of not just the idiosyncrasies of Malaysian bureaucrats but also of local (well-connected) non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists too. It is quite amazing that Rajeshvari's release was realised through the intervention of Andrew Raju from the Malaysian Indian Youth Congress (MIYC), whose singular telephone call to the authority concerned underlines the "traditional way of handling issues like this." In her *praxis* to expose Rajeshvari's 11-month ordeal as an 'alien' in her own land, Indrani asked the government a simple but tough question: 'How did the system fail to protect one very pregnant Indian lady of her rights as a citizen of Malaysia?' Indeed, Rajeshwari's story undoubtedly embeds Indrani's call to the Malaysian lawmakers to review certain standard procedures used in making arrests as well as to make changes in attitude and policy towards minority groups and other disadvantaged peoples.

### **5.3 Nov. 25. *Behind the Revolt* (2008)**

The street demonstration by hundreds of Indians on 25 November 2007 was an eye opener for the ruling government to review their promises to the Malaysian Indian community. Indrani's video is a testament to the deprivation and frustration which had to be outrageously suppressed by a minority ethnic community after five decades of independence. It is surely an important opportunity for any concerned citizen-cum-activist like Indrani to take stock of the causes of the Indian-Hindu revolt. The Hindraf (an acronym for 'Hindu Rights Action Front) protest offered Indrani an insight into her own community's psyche and how it relates itself to other stakeholders in the country, especially the powerful elites. Indian-Hindu 'voices' have made themselves clearly 'visible' in a changing Malaysian political landscape of the post-12<sup>th</sup> General Election 'tsunami' which witnessed the ruling coalition losing two-thirds of its parliamentary majority to the opposition parties for the first time.

Indrani's documentary, called *Nov. 25. Behind the Revolt. Chronology of the Rage*, frames the Indian community as victims of national development, where in particular, the majority of Indian plantation labourers whose forefathers were brought in by the British colonials for a Malayan agrarian economy, have been denied any real social and economic mobility by the Malay-controlled government. This courageous video by Indrani's research team, one year after the demonstration, suggests the serious lack of tolerance and angst against Hindus on the part of Muslim-Malays who called for demolition of Hindu temples; who racialised the proselytisation of Hindus into Islam, and a host of issues including deaths of Indian youths in police custody. Indrani used her video to remind her audience that 'the Indian question' in Malaysia - which is very close to her heart - is not about political power structures, rather, it is about the struggle for survival of those in the lowest rung of their community. This video illustrates Indrani's measured, academic critique of 'the Indian question' as she very wisely avoided a gung-ho approach of government bashing.

### **5.4 *It's Not Easy Being a Penan* (2009)**

Indrani continues to make a critical excursion into national politics; or rather an on-going public debate concerning the plight of the most marginalised of the indigenes of Sarawak, the Penan people. She produced four video films on this subject by December 2009 which

can still be accessed from her blog. In Malaysia, public participation in the political spheres seems to be configured by factors like locality, ethnicity, and religious identity as much as political ideology. Hence, it was possible for a female Indian media operative from Kuala Lumpur to ‘infiltrate’ into Penan affairs because their issues and style of politics was different from those in the Peninsular. Indrani probably knew the sentiments too well but there was nothing more compelling at the time than perhaps to investigate the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development reports from Baram, Sarawak on rampant sexual violence among Penan women by timber loggers. Indrani’s sympathy and solidarity with the victims were too visible as her short video questioned the “slow reaction by the authorities, especially the police, in taking action against the sexual abuse”. The crimes on the shy, peace loving but disenfranchised Penans which were unknown to most Malaysians until the sudden disappearance of the ‘white’ Penan, Bruno Manser, who had been the ‘embedded’ emissary for western human rights groups. Indrani’s presence in the Penan hinterland reinforced the serious international concern that commercial deforestation is killing the Penan community by systematically constricting the liveable area of their forest. This work on the Penan demonstrates Indrani’s hold on the principles of truthful and independent journalism without any fear of being labelled an anti-establishment. ‘Opinionatedness’ is sometimes a useful leadership trait to have; however, it is an Achilles point for which Indrani’s work can sometimes be criticised when it loses its objectivity.

*When I point the camera and I make a statement and objectivity goes out the window, I’ll be very honest about it. I’m moved. I’m not going to cover a story and not feel anything. I feel everything. My idea when I tell a story is to share that with other people so they feel the same.*

*(The interview: 1st March 2012)*

Indrani’s tour of duty in the Penan jungles may have given her an enormous wealth of experience and wisdom. A fine leader should be seasoned with the ways of the world, as it were. Her conclusion on the fate of the Penan minority was promisingly mature but their future, however, was not promising at all and this is because they “are waging a battle on two fronts simultaneously. On one hand, they are trying to protect their jungle from being destroyed by loggers while on the other they are trying their best to get the authorities to provide them with the most basic necessities in life”. The stories from Baram, Sarawak are still unfolding at the moment of writing albeit in the news perhaps for most of us, but not for Indrani. These stories are valuable litmus tests of respect, tolerance, justice and good governance of elected office bearers, who ironically, would also be her potential adversaries, whom she would have to stand up to.

### **5.5 Love ... and Despair (2009)**

One of Indrani’s more compelling stories is interestingly the photo essay *Love ... and Despair* (2009) which tells the story of a woman who contemplated suicide because of poverty and disability. Twenty-nine years old ‘nightingale’ N. Parameswari raised 13 children aged between 6 and 15 years without support from anyone after being abandoned by her husband. Of these thirteen children, six were her own, four were her sisters’ who had left them with her and three were her brother-in-law’s whose wife was deceased. As Indrani had discovered,

Parameswari then was already contemplating seriously whether or not she should commit a ‘mass’ suicide of herself and the children. The abject poverty and starvation could have been taken up easily by the patrons of the Indian community seeking political mileage but it was not forthcoming. Worst still, the enormity of the impact had Parameswari gone over the threshold of rationality would simply catapult their death into a national mourning. Indrani again was critical here of the bureaucracy by the Welfare Department of Negeri Sembilan in delaying (denying?) financial support which they urgently needed.

She teamed up with MIYC’s Andrew Raju once again in order to step in and put up a plan of action for Parameswari and her deplorable dozen that could help provide for a better future since no one else did. Their donation drive helped to secure life’s bare essentials for the children, perhaps most important of all, three meals a day for everyone. This photoessay is a sample of Indrani’s community leadership work at its best. It also frames the failure of the government to look after the welfare of its citizens. The coverage of Parameswari’s story reveals Indrani’s preference for working with charitable NGOs rather than governmental agencies for she knows from her own experience in the Rajeshwari’s story that the latter may become defensive when confronted with ‘hot’ questions on social welfare issues. Indrani’s interview requests are often turned down by the authorities. She has stopped approaching them.

#### **5.6 High Chaparral: The Tale of the Villagers (2009)**

Indrani’s exposure to issues of land rights in Malaysia continued as the focus swayed from the Penans back to Peninsular Indian-Hindu community, in particular the residents of an estate called Kg. Buah Pala, in Georgetown, Penang, who had been served with a notice of eviction by the authority. Understandably, the people were reluctant to evacuate from the land already gazetted as a heritage site which they were supposed to inherit as agreed to by the previous government only to betray its pledge later. As the rest of the area was already developed, there was no other choice for the villagers but to hold on to a stretch of the land and wait for the decision of the new government on their future. The story of Kg. Buah Pala offers an interesting insight into Indrani’s communicative strategy in such a situation where her informants had preferred to keep their silence. When asked how she managed to sway her audiences to confide in her, Indrani recalled a particularly poignant moment below:

*So when I wanted to speak to that lady in green, she didn’t want to talk to me because she spoke to so many of them [reporters]... When I touched her shoulder and I told her to sit down, she looked at me for the very first time; she looked up and she saw my eyes. It was so important for them just to have someone to tell their story to... Everybody was speaking for them but none of them spoke to them.  
(The interview: 1st March 2012)*

Indeed, a valuable lesson here is that even though one may be trained as a journalist, it is simply wrong to assume one always has the professional right to speak for the *Other* party in order to get one’s story. So Indrani, for instance, rather perceptively broke the silent protest by an angry resident by speaking to them and not by questioning them, as many members of the media had been doing in their search for ‘estate stories’.

### 5.7 Bukit Jalil Estate: Meeting Comes to Naught (2010)

Indrani apparently deployed the same communication strategy that had been so critical to making her informants want to share their 'estate stories'. The 'estate stories', for examples, *Batu Arang Special, A Step Back in Time* (2010), *Forty One* (2010), *Tumbuk Estate: How Long More to Wait?* (2010), *Coalfield Estate: Once Tenants now Squatters* (2010), *Bonded Labour – Modern Day Slavery* (2009), *High Chaparral: The Tale of the Villagers* (2009), and *Displacement: The Woes Never End* (2009) apparently have what it takes to be a trope in that collectively, they contextualise the struggle of the agrarian community against the potential stakeholders of the technocratic and bureaucratic kinds. It is in essence a class struggle and Indrani has been able to access such contestations and listening to the disenfranchised folks as attentively and patiently as possible. Indrani took the same strategic stand in the *Bukit Jalil Estate: Meeting Comes to Naught* (2010) short documentary – a *verite* style film for the public but also, as she explained, because it gives her a purposeful sense of 'personal ownership' whenever she takes up a fight for a cause.

The Bukit Jalil estate is adjacent to the Kinrara estate. Typically, each settlement has a strong Tamil-Hindu identity with a temple and a vernacular school regulated by their core business of rubber tapping. The only difference that matters most for the settlers of the Bukit Jalil estate is that when the Kinrara estate was taken over by a government-linked company (GLC), the private land developer gave each settler a double-storey house, built a temple and a school in a win-win relocation and compensation exercise. However, the Bukit Jalil rubber tappers' future was in the hands of the government. As Indrani discovered, the government practically had offered no win-win solution but instead, it continued to make use of them for another 40 years only for them to be told that they would be moved into flats. Indrani's role was to try to elicit logical responses from the government's perspective because the large Indian-Hindu community was prepared to stand their ground to keep their rights and human dignity.

*There's always a story, it's just about getting the story out. You just need to be patient and for them to tell you the truth, you have to go back again and again to get the story. There's only one version of the story but if you go to the government or DBKL, you get different versions of the same story.*

*(The interview: 1st March 2012)*

It may seem clear between the lines above that Indrani's persistency would only come to naught particularly if one's activism is against the grain, so to speak. Yet, no matter how insignificant her role might have been, Indrani herself probably would not have believed another version of explanation had the present government has not shown its reconciliatory 'nambikei' or 'faith' in Tamil, in the people that elected them to power. At the moment of writing, it was reported in *The Star*<sup>2</sup> that the discrimination suffered by the Bukit Jalil Estate community has come to the prime minister's attention and he has promised to resolve their compensation issues despite the existence of a court decision to allow the City Hall authority (DBKL) to carry out demolition works on all 41 households. Whatever may be the final outcome

<sup>2</sup> M. Bavani. Former estate workers are hopeful of getting new homes. *The Star*. 23 July 2012.

be, Indrani's video journalism certainly has its fair share in this chanced but promising gesture from the government.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to introduce Indrani as a video journalist who speaks about and for her community and more importantly, who lets her subjects speak to the world. Indrani's *praxis* of agency is visible throughout her works and 'political' activism over the years at the individual, community and national level. The stories excerpted in the discussion above are largely specific to the diverse junctions of the Indian-Hindu lifeworlds. She arguably has built her leadership talent by immersing herself in these spaces of conflicts, armed with strong professional principles, techniques and an insight into what do her subjects really want say to the authorities. Indeed, Indrani's central and ethical practice as a video journalist is always to "let people tell their own story. Speak to them and let them tell their own story, in their own voice". This is something that she has learnt as a very practical and persuasive strategy over the years.

A natural leader is someone who listens to and makes the effort to pay every possible attention to the stories of the disenfranchised, as Indrani and the prime minister have so wisely demonstrated in regard to highly-sensitive issues. Having the power of empathy is surely advantageous to any leadership talent at any level. Indrani studies her subjects and she knows what they really want and how she can help them achieve some results. She knows that her subjects do not like to be questioned, or be forced to answer in a certain way or she risks getting only the false answers from them. This is perhaps what is meant by Chung (2010) when he talks about the reclamation of the voice of the disenfranchised through 'joint authorship' of the stories. Indrani's agency has enabled more Malaysians to be engaged with the testimonial witnesses of a highly geographic 'situated knowledge' and effectively, to allow for the critical shift from the politics of victims and victimhood to one of survivors and agency (Baskar and Walker 2010), hence the relevance of Chung's liberating thesis of 'joint authorship'. Indrani, as this paper has argued, leads the disenfranchised to some kind of salvation and enlightenment through her awareness raising short documentary works.

In the final analysis, we believe that Indrani's leadership has evolved into a certain form of maturity and there is an unmistakable sense of optimism in her own works and the fruits of her 'joint authorship'. She expresses confidence in her future role with admirable clarity and passion worthy of her salt as the recipient of the Most Outstanding Asian Youth Ambassador (AYA) Award 2008: Indrani intends to open her own documentary centre to train and produce young documentary filmmakers to carry on the fight for justice and equality of opportunity for the disenfranchised.

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