

Being masters over

NST 19 SEP 1981

their destiny

ANYBODY with any interest in Malaysian political life has heard of *The Malay Dilemma*. Not everybody, though, has read it. Or read it with an open mind.

The notoriety of being a banned book and snippets of information from not always disinterested foreigners have given rise to many preconceptions. Now the ban has been lifted, perhaps more Malaysians would read it for themselves.

Indeed the book by the country's present Prime Minister has already become Malaysia's latest bestseller. Following last month's new English edition, Malay and Chinese translations are planned.

The book is an eloquent effort to arrest and turn back a historic trend which, at the end of the sixties, not only found the Malays out of the mainstream of the country's economic life, but also left their political power dangerously exposed.

It examines why and how the Malays found themselves in that position. And what must be done to get them out of the rut.

Certain blemishes should not be allowed to subtract from the overriding, cogent exposition. Thus, while one may argue with some of the rather sweeping statements on the hereditary causes of Malay backwardness (as was done by a New York Times correspondent following a recent whistle-stop tour of the region), the fact of Malay

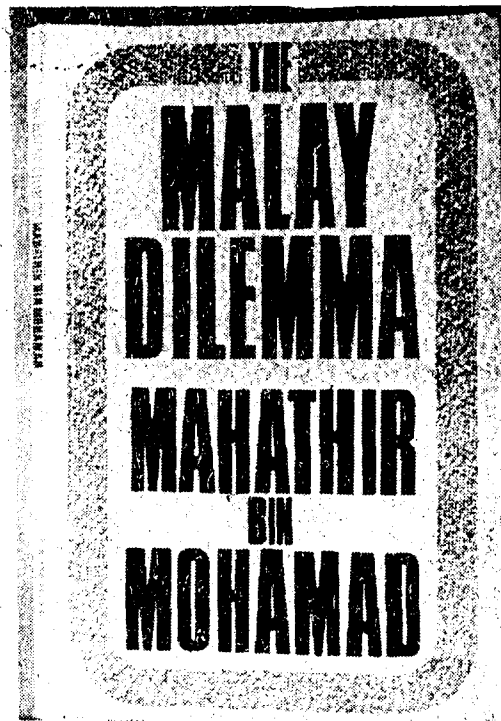
backwardness in the period prior to the introduction of the NEP cannot be denied.

There is no question of the book resolving the great heredity versus environment debate in the development of a race. Neither does it pretend to have discovered the relative importance of one as against the other. That question remains unresolved.

But what appears to have gone some considerable way towards resolution is the dilemma of the Malays as Dr Mahathir posed it in 1970: "...a conviction that no matter what they decide or do, things will continue to slip from their control; that slowly but surely they are becoming the dispossessed in their own land."

Now the Malays are being given the opportunities, have gained confidence and no longer consider themselves captive to fate and historical conspiracy.

Now the Malays have begun to feel they can be



MAHATHIR bin MOHAMAD: The Malay Dilemma
Federal Pub. \$9.50

masters of their own destiny.

The dilemma which they now face — as Dr Mahathir himself said last year — is whether or not to take the opportunities offered them. But they will not be able to say they were never given a chance.

And that this chance be given — through a properly charted plan of positive discrimination, not in a haphazard fashion — is the main thrust of Dr Mahathir's book.

He offers his analysis of the problems facing the Malays and outlines what has to be done to

assure them a better deal in their homeland.

In the course of it, he has many harsh things to say. About the British colonialist, about the Chinese, about the Government prior to May 1969, about the Malays themselves.

The charge often made of Malay extremism does not hold because it is based on selective quotations which leave out some extremely stinging comments Mahathir makes on the very people whose cause he espouses. Yet nobody can say he is anti-Malay.

Mahathir was not out

And in this search, Dr Mahathir does not avoid difficult counter-arguments: Why should the Malays be the definitive race in the country? Is Malaya the land of the Malays? What is a Malay? Why should Malay be the national language? Why should there be a truly Malaysian absorption?

His arguments are compelling, persuasive. It would be instructive for all Malaysians to read them, without the intervention of foreign abstractions. Dr Mahathir writes of the Malaysian reality.

to please anyone. Indeed the book is also a disavowal of qualities which shackle the Malays — like courtesy to a fault, a desire to avoid unpleasantness.

He was looking for solutions; he was out to get them. But, whilst presenting the Malay position, he did not seek to do the non-Malays in.

In his own words: "The cup of Malay bitterness must be diluted. A solution must be found, an equitable solution which denies nothing to anyone and yet gives the Malay his place in the Malayan sun..."