

14/01/1997

Let's not condemn the West for its music success

S. Jeevaratnam

REFERRING to the article "The politics of culture" by Farish A. Noor (NST, Dec 30, 1996), one detects a tinge of envy when he says the Western media corporations are scrambling for power and riches.

He makes Michael Jackson sound like an epidemic that would engulf the world, forgetting that music, pop or otherwise has an aesthetic value. One can't dismiss the charitable work of the superstar. He, in his own way, shows us that he is thinking of the suffering people of the world.

In the West, the arts are diligently funded or sponsored by the rich. Students with great promise get scholarships and other aid.

In Malaysia, there are limitations imposed on would-be writers and musicians. Artists' creativity are dampened by moralists who act on restrictive and seemingly random principles and go about sabotaging their works.

There are too many cultural taboos as well with no free and healthy interaction among the various cultures.

The minority cultures are treated like a poor relation and allowed to totter on the edge of oblivion.

The music of Africa and India and the Kabuki theatre art of Japan are avidly received in the Western world today and are growing in popularity.

If, as Farish believes, that powerful forces like the Western media are determined to engulf the world with their kind of music, surely they would by now have blown them off their shores.

To look at music as a medium of Western hegemony is to allow oneself to sink to the depths to find an argument against its popular appeal - a case indeed of sour grapes.

Music should be embraced with a mind uncluttered by fears that its appreciation may undermine our own musical heritage.

If Jackson could become a billionaire by presenting the world with a kind of music that has people overwhelmed, that is his fortune.

The fulfilment it brings to the masses comes at a far inexpensive outlay than that which comes from dadah.

We burn with indignation at the Western peoples for the way in which they have imposed their music and pop culture on the fabric of our minds.

Come on, do consider the organisation and planning that has gone into building up a global appeal to their kind of music.

Wouldn't we globalise our music and invoke the same mass appeal if only we knew how? Let us give credit where it is due. The West has a way of effectively marketing whatever it has that is saleable.

When we get caught up and bought off by such superior marketing techniques, we cry foul and ascribe hidden agendas to this success.

The West has made marketing a science long before we in the East looked at it as such. It is the West that propounded the concept of finishing to commercial products. It is the finishing that makes the difference between two identical products when it comes to marketability.

Organisation and commitment to the purpose is a rare commodity in this part of the world. When it is present, it shines like a beacon. The thing that makes Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed stand out among his fellow men is his commitment and his zeal to see his plans through.

On the other hand, look at some of our sports organisations. They have become ineffective and totally effete. In-fighting and petty jealousies seem to subvert the will to achieve success.

The West excels in everything its peoples set out to do. Let us not damn them for their success in amassing a fortune by selling well-finished and well-packaged products in the form of Jackson and other pop artistes.

We must blame ourselves for not being able to meet international standards and sweep the world off its feet with our music.

S. Jeevaratnam

Kuala Lumpur.

(END)