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Private sector's role in combating nation's social ills

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IN the 1950s and 1960s, when he was a government medical officer and later a private practitioner in Alor Star, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's preoccupation was treating the people, mostly Malays, of physical illness - anything from kudis buta (scab) to tuberculosis.

Through these contacts, his commitment to community service was reinforced. He became more convinced that the problems facing the Malays were not confined to physical illness and disease alone. They suffered a worse malady - backwardness.

Serving in places like Langkawi in the 1950s as a young doctor and Kota Star Selatan (now Pendang) in the 1960s as a novice Member of Parliament convinced him of the relationship between the poor standard of health of the Malays and their backwardness.

He and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, had the distinction of being the first medical couple at the time when modern medical practice was still a rarity among the Malays.

Dr Mahathir became even more convinced that the poverty among Malays and the unequal economic opportunity were the root cause of the May 13 1969 communal riots which occurred days after the near defeat of Parti Perikatan (the Alliance Party and predecessor of Barisan Nasional) in the general election.

Dr Mahathir lost his Kota Setar Selatan constituency to Pas' Yusof Rawa when the non-Malay voters, mostly Chinese, turned their backs on the Alliance and supported Pas.

He went on to write "The Malay Dilemma" which many students of politics and history credited with being the basis for his political and economic agenda during the New Economic Policy period (1970-1990).

When Dr Mahathir took over the leadership of the country in 1981, the NEP was half way through its life and significant progress had been made in reducing poverty. Much of the poverty-induced illnesses affecting the Malays had also been eradicated.

But for Dr Mahathir it was not to be smooth sailing. Four years into his stewardship, Malaysia faced yet another type of illness - economic recession. Induced to a large extent by the delayed effects of the second oil crisis, the economy went into a tailspin.

Once again the good doctor had to prescribe a bitter pill to the nation which had by then become accustomed to his penchant for shock treatments. Some aspects of the NEP were held in abeyance, investment rules liberalised and the privatization policy introduced.

The economy not only recovered speedily but took off in a manner that has come to be accepted as extraordinary by world standards. For the past eight years, the economy had grown by more than 8 per cent a year.

Unfortunately, on the back of this rapid growth, another form of ailment has reared its ugly head in our society. Some people say these social diseases - dadah addiction, domestic violence, child abuse, premarital sex, lepak and bohsia - are linked to economic progress.

They argue that rapid economic growth has transformed our society to the extent that it can no longer cope with seemingly common problems, allowing them to become endemic.

Dr Mahathir had taken these problems to the Muslims in a meeting last Wednesday at the Islamic Centre in Kuala Lumpur. He expressed the same concern in his Hari Raya Aidilfitri message.

As much as the business community has benefited from Dr Mahathir's bold policies and his personal guidance, it is only natural that his concern about these problems should be shared by our businessmen.

While it is acknowledged that the Malaysian business community has always been supporting community-based projects within and outside official supervision, the problems Dr Mahathir spoke about require a new kind of understanding and commitment by our businessmen and corporate executives.

These problems, if left unattended and unchecked, will eventually affect the business community adversely as well. It will not only be deprived of the much needed manpower but also the market for their products and services.

Businessmen and their associations do not have to wait for the Government to ask for their assistance and cooperation. They should perhaps suggest to the Government what they can and will do to assist in fighting the malaise.

The Malaysia Incorporated spirit is a two-way traffic. The private sector should be as keen to help the Government as much as the Government is helping the private sector.

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