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Bring back estate culture of pre-merdeka era

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IT is gratifying to note that the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has directed the MIC leadership to carry out a study on the plight of estate workers (NST, Aug 2).

The study is welcome and long overdue. To get a clearer picture of the problems faced by estate workers, a closer look at the management of the plantation industry is necessary.

The rubber and palm oil plantations have thrived in this country for several decades and the colonial capitalists reaped huge profits.

They provided the workers with sufficient quarters, clean water, electricity, creche, schools, group hospital, provision shops and temples.

For their recreation, there were football fields, badminton courts, community hall, radio and later television sets.

Sports events, dramas and temple festivals were an annual affair. Later, movies were shown regularly.

The workers, though not a contented lot, were an entity of their own, contributing substantially to the economic prosperity of the country.

The scenario, however, changed somewhat dramatically when the ownership of the plantations passed on to local tycoons and corporations.

The new owners were profit driven.

In most estates, the permanent living-in workforce was disbanded in favour of contract workers, as a cost-cutting measure.

The employers were also less inclined to maintain and improve the basic facilities provided by their predecessors.

The built-in amenities of yesteryears disappeared over the years.

This has resulted in general decline of the working environment and the drifting of the existing workers to other areas in pursuit of greener pastures.

The employers have a social responsibility to the workers and the country.

To boost the one time life-line of the nation and to attract local workers, employers, in addition to considering payment of equitable monthly salary, must also bring back the old 'estate culture' of the pre-Merdeka era.

Money spent on reviving the facilities is a sound investment as it will be more profitable in the long run.

Employers will be spared the hassle of recruiting unskilled foreign workers and payment of levy.

Foreign workers can be phased out gradually, thus eliminating the social ills to some extent and saving foreign exchange.