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Malaysia has seen many changes, achieved a lot since independence

Shukor Rahman

THE country has seen dynamic development and progress in the last 43 years. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, the hard work put in by the multiracial society in the last four decades had put Malaysia on the world map.

Malaysians, he said, should take credit for the nation's achievements since independence because they contributed to its successes.

"We should be proud because people of various races and religions, the Government, private sector, police, military and others all contributed and played a role (in the nation's success)," he said when launching the Merdeka Month recently.

Malaysians, he said, were willing to sacrifice for the nation to ensure that it remained peaceful and prosperous.

He said the people should be thankful that the country had achieved so much within a short period, whereas other countries with multiracial societies faced racial problems.

A human resources manager V.S. Narayanan, 51, of Petaling Jaya, said the country had come a long way since the 1950s and described its achievements as "mind boggling" and "fantastic".

"I can still remember my childhood days in Penang when bullock carts were still around and street lamps were lit manually. We listened to valve radios then, but today the country has superhighways and we are putting satellites in space," he said.

He said in the 1950s, we had to import a lot of things - from automobiles and machinery to cigarettes and underwear.

"Today, we can be proud of the country's achievements in health services, communications, education and other fields."

Datuk Khoo Keat Siew, president of Penang Chinese Association, said there was not much progress before independence compared to today.

"The many facilities we are enjoying are a result of the progress made, so much so that we are today on par with western countries as far as technology is concerned," he said.

Khoo regretted that the the younger generation often did not realise the significance of the period when the country's leaders struggled to obtain independence.

"Our leaders, including community leaders, should document their experience to enlighten the younger generation of their struggle," he said.

Kedah historian Ismail Salleh said the younger generation might take things for granted as they did not feel or experience how difficult it was to achieve independence.

"Young people today cannot make comparisons as they have always enjoyed a good life. They never experience the hardship under the Japanese Occupation or violence at the hands of the Bintang Tiga."

He added that there was no freedom of speech during the colonial period and very little basic infrastructure.

"Those days, most people in Kedah either walked or took the boat to get from one place to another. Today, there are buses which come right up to the house," he said.

Ismail said the hardship faced by the people during the colonial era should be stressed in the school curriculum to enable the younger generation to understand the significance of independence.

Retired teacher Yap Cheng Hock, 58, of Batu Gantong, Penang, suggested that National Day be celebrated on a bigger scale to ensure that younger Malaysians understand the significance of independence.

"During the colonial era, schoolchildren were brainwashed into accepting the superiority of the colonial masters. We were taught to regard the British as protectors and that we would not be able to manage the country without them," he said.

He added that before independence, several places were "off limits" to Asians and were exclusively for Whites only. Among such places were The Crag Hotel on Penang Hill and Penang Swimming Club.

Datuk Abdul Rahim Khan, who was Penang Umno Youth secretary from 1955 to 1959, said that before independence it was very difficult to find jobs. "Those with Malay School education could only work as drivers, police constables or soldiers."

He added that some Malays who were doing well under the British were not so interested in the struggle for independence and always questioned whether we could fight the British.

"It was the ordinary Malays who displayed grit and spirit in the struggle for independence. For instance, fishermen from Teluk Bahang, Batu Ferringhi and Tanjung Bungah donated cash and jewellery to help finance Umno's struggle although they were poor," he said.

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