

23/02/2004

Awakening the countryside

FEW developing nations have so wilfully and successfully addressed the problems of rural poverty as Malaysia. For two generations now, this country's national development policy has revolved around the green rut of the hinterland, recognising that the source of Malaysia's heart and soul was also the seedbed of its economy and national well-being - or otherwise.

The success of eight five-year plans is readily quantified. The number of poor households declined from more than 600,000 in 1990 to fewer than 250,000 by 2000. The incidence of poverty was 30 per cent in 1970, 15 per cent in 1990, and under 7.5 per cent today. The success is also visible. Dilapidated fishing villages have grown into bustling towns; decrepit rural communities without any real social structure are now development hubs for the hinterland.

Therefore, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi speaks now of raising people out of poverty, he speaks more of a mindset than infrastructure, amenities or economic opportunities, all of which now exist. For there was a dark side to the Government's decades of assistance to the rural poor. It was known as the "subsidy mentality". Give a fisherman an outboard engine or a net, or a farmer land, seed, tools and machinery, and they still might not think of these things as their responsibility but the Government's.

Working against the Government's best efforts, then, is a certain sense of helplessness; of jodoh or "karma" or fate, ascribing to each his immutable station in life, such that attempting to change one's lot is almost to be disrespectful of divine decree. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his 22 years as Prime Minister, railed against this stifling of the mind as the single greatest impediment to upward economic mobility, especially for the Malays.

Now, Abdullah has picked up the baton. His administration is obviously continuing efforts to modernise agriculture and catalyse development in the hinterland, doing all it can to enable the upliftment of the poor. But it can only hope that the intended beneficiaries of these efforts will cooperate, by abandoning the impoverishment of thought that stubbornly persists in regarding poverty somehow as a birthright.