09/01/2003

We've come a long way

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EACH afternoon Cikgu Mardiah would get on her bicycle and head for a kampung in the district of Kota Setar. Today, this kampung, tomorrow another kampung, the next day a third and so on. The year was 1957. I was then a young schoolboy. I didn't know what Cikgu Mardiah was up to. Only much later did I realise that what she was doing was to go from village to village to teach men, women and children of all ages in what was then known as kelas buta huruf (classes for the illiterate).

What Cikgu Mardiah was doing was truly a jihad. Her work was purely voluntary - after school hours. Nobody told her to do it. It was purely on her own initiative that in each kampung she organised the folks into a class. She worked with a sense of mission and for a noble cause. No rewards were expected other than the satisfaction of seeing poor illiterate kampung people learning to read and write.

Today, Cikgu Mardiah is no longer alive. But her example inspired awe and wonder in my schoolfriends and I then and even now. There must have been scores of men and women like Cigku Mardiah in Kedah in the 1950s and 1960s.

Eradication of illiteracy and providing free primary education formed two important pillars in Malaysia's post-Merdeka development plan. In Kedah and the whole of Malaya then, illiteracy was very high. No amount of effort and money expended on physically developing the country means much if the population remains illiterate and uneducated.

The situation today is a far cry from what was in Kedah and Malaya then. Indeed, we can say that the very fact we can conceive the idea of Kedah Maju and Wawasan 2020 today presupposes that the population has reached a high level of education and that illiteracy has almost been wiped out.

Pre-colonial Kedah society had a high level of consciousness of the need for ilmu (knowledge). This was evident in the number of pondok and madrasah in existence throughout the State.

But education then was limited to Islamic ilmu. The worldly ilmu was neglected. And colonial laissez-faire education policy benefited only the people in the towns. To correct the imbalance and bridge the gap had been a major thrust in our education policy since Merdeka.

To be truly maju (developed), a society must develop both physically as well as in mind and spirit. It means a balanced economic, social, educational and spiritual development. Physical development alone is non-sustainable if the population lags behind in education and knowledge and in terms of consciousness of social and political duties. All have to advance together in tandem.

This is what our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad meant when he presented Wawasan 2020. Likewise, in opening the Kedah Maju Convention in Alor Star on Dec 12, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stressed the importance of education as the "foundation for development".

In Kedah today, efforts in education are already in place to complement the physical aspects in the drive towards Kedah Maju 2010.

In Kedah today, there are 516 primary and 149 secondary schools with a total of 390,740 pupils. This is not counting the independent religious schools.

Besides, there are also technical schools, polytechnics and community colleges. Mara has its junior colleges and under the Human Resources

Ministry there are several training centres or institutes licensed by Majlis Latihan Vokasional Kebangsaan.

Obviously, we have come a long way since Merdeka in meeting educational needs in Kedah. As elsewhere in the country today, every child in Kedah has a right to education till Form Five. The latest change in government policy makes it mandatory for parents to enrol their children in a primary school.

The Government will spare no effort to expand and improve the education infrastructure and facilities in Kedah to meet the needs of the time.

As we move further into the 21st century, adjustments and changes may have to be made to meet the challenges ahead. Thus, the recently instituted programme to bring computer literacy to schools. In time every school in Malaysia will have a computer laboratory to familiarise our children with this important tool of learning and communication. Thus also the recent introduction of the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English.

All these are not done for the present generation but for our children and future generations. Education is always an investment in the future; and the future is a borderless, globalised world which places a premium on mastery of international communication technology, innovation, competitive ability, foresight and enterprise.

We would not have arrived where we are today in Kedah and in Malaysia if not for the foresight and wisdom of our past and present leaders and the good policies in education and development they had implemented.

An excellent system of federal and State roads connects each school to the kampungs and towns, even in the once ulu (interior) places. In the kampungs, dirt paths, which became muddy patches during rain, have now been tarred.

Since Merdeka, the number of schools has increased many-fold. Each school is staffed by qualified teachers. Every year new schools are built and old ones upgraded.

Educational opportunities are there for everyone without exception.

If Cikgu Mardiah were to come back to life today, she would survey around and smile with quiet satisfaction. Her jihad has been a success. The kampung illiterates she taught how to read and write 40 years ago have borne children and grandchildren who are doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, surveyors and other professionals.

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