

FORGOTTEN COMMUNITY

Many of Malaysia's poor are Indians

Panjalai Venkatraman, a 60-year-old ethnic Indian widow, lives with her son's family in a wooden house on a former rubber plantation in Selangor state. She lost her job as a rubber-tapper in 1993 after her employer sold the estate to a property developer. Although plantation companies in Selangor must provide alternative housing for workers when they stop production, Panjalai has not been given a new home — and she refuses to move out until she gets one. "Although I am old, I will light until I get the house that I was promised," she says defiantly.

Panjalai's story represents the un-

stitute 41% of beggars and 20% of child abusers. Indians rank lowest in national elementary-school examinations; about one in every 12 Indian children does not even attend primary school. Indians, says political scientist P. Ramasamy, have become "the new underclass."

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was a national affirmative-action program designed to give an economic head start to Malays and other indigenous *bumiputras*. "With the strong push for bumiputra economic development, the minorities were neglected," says Ramasamy. Indians used to be well represented in the civil service, but their

numbers dropped in the wake of NEP quotas for bumiputras. Unlike the Chinese, the Indians did not have the economic clout to counteract the NEP's effects; they were also too few in numbers to wield much political influence. The result today is a nation divided as much along race lines as along class lines.

Opinions differ on how to solve the Indian problem. Ramasamy says that the traditionally neglected Tamil-language primary schools should be upgraded with better facilities. Others think Indian children should be taught in Malay from the

beginning to avoid adjustment problems later on. Social action group Suqiu has been calling for an affirmative-action program based on need.

The government says it is helping the Indians. Contributions by the Malaysian Indian Congress, a member of the ruling coalition, include small-business loans and financial aid for students. But that doesn't impress Panjalai, who claims the MIC never helped her. Her family and 13 others in the plantation have formed a committee to campaign for new homes. But as social activist Marimulhu Nadason says, Indians are the "forgotten community in Malaysia." It's going to require more than an action committee to change that. •

—By Santha Oorjitham/Kuala Lumpur



Bob Seng Chong for AsiaWeek

UNDERCLASS Panjalai (far left) and her family pose in front of their wooden house on the rubber plantation

derside of Malaysia's economic success. Despite the country's veneer of racial harmony and opportunity for all, many in the Indian community have limited access to housing, education and jobs. About 54% of Malaysian Indians work on plantations or as urban laborers, and their wages have not kept up with the times. When Panjalai and her husband started tapping rubber in 1960, they were paid 250 ringgit a month (\$82 then). Thirty years later, they were earning just 50 ringgit more.

Indians lag behind other ethnic groups by almost all measures. Though they form just 7% of the total population, they account for 63% of those arrested under the Emergency Ordinance for violent crimes. They also con-