

Recognition of Ethnic Rights: "Mary was Fond of Dancing, So She Found a Fiddler for Her Husband"

By BIPIN ADHIKARI

During the World War Two, Nepalese crown let British recruit 20 extra battalions – 40 in total – and let them serve everywhere in the world. In addition to keeping peace in India, Gurkhas fought in Syria, North Africa, Italy, Greece and against Japanese in Singapore and in the jungles of Burma. With 1948 four Gurkha regiments which remained with British formed the Gurkha Brigade and were stationed in West Malaysia. During the Malayan Emergency Gurkhas worked as jungle soldiers as they had done in Burma. They also formed three other units – Gurkha Engineers, Signals and Transport. They were also used for convoy escort duties, security of the new villages and ambushing guerrillas. In the year of Malayan independence, Gurkha Signals also monitored communications during the first free elections. A unit of Gurkha Rifles was also deployed in Brunei in the outbreak of Brunei Revolt in early 1960s.

A majority of the Malaysian Nepalese in Malaysia today are the children, grand children or great grand children of those Gurkhas who opted to stay back in Malaysia even after their assignment was over. At present, the population of Malaysian Nepalese numbers only 652. They are perhaps the smallest minority ethnic group of Malaysia. The group has not forgotten its roots in Nepal. The Government of Malaysia, which is not considered by many as a secular government, has allocated 11.2 acres of prime residential land to the Malaysian Gurkha Association, a representative ethnic Nepali organisation, to construct a well planned Gurkha village which will be one of the tourist destinations within the Malaysian Government's Tourism Master Plan. On this 11.2 acres of land will be constructed 82 houses, one temple and a community hall. With the setting up of the Nepalese temple, the Malaysian Nepalese expect to have a Nepalese priest, and a teacher of Nepali culture, tradition and language. Then they will be able to have their birth, death, marriage and other rituals performed according to standard Nepali traditions. About 95 percent of the Malaysian Nepalis, who are unable to read or write Nepali, will then have the opportunity to revive their dying mother tongue. This is considered a mammoth project which will be up and about by the Year 2007. It needs a lot of money to materialise. In fact, the whole project is expected to cost Malaysian Ringgit 6.7 million (that is equivalent to USD 1.76 million), which is not a small amount for a small Nepali community. However, to start the ball rolling, the ex prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohammad, has personally donated Malaysian Ringgit 500,000.00 from the Prime Minister's Fund.

In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed retired after 22 years in office in November. The country witnessed the end of an era as he stepped down from power. Critics point to Mahathir's control of the press, police and judiciary, and to the "crony capitalism" that has been a feature of his rule. The Anwar Ibrahim trial in the late 1990s, in which the former deputy prime minister was persecuted for his political

opposition to Mahathir, left a permanent blemish on Mahathir's record. His somewhat autocratic rule and outbursts against the West often raised eyebrows among the international community. But he must be credited with the country's economic miracle, equitable distribution of wealth and a number of other achievements. He spearheaded a push for growth and development that yielded spectacular results. Based on modernization, science and technology, Mahathir's economic policies transformed Malaysia from a small-time exporter of rubber and tin into one of the world's top twenty trading countries. Within Malaysia, the evidence of this transformation is clear from huge infrastructure developments, like the massive Petronas Towers, to the island of Penang – once a rubber plantation, now the biggest exporter of hard drives and money chips in the world. The country is well on track for Mahathir's

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'2020 Vision' of Malaysia belonging to the developed world. A strong economy is a value addition to the rights of ethnic people. Malaysia has a highly diverse ethnic composition. The majority ethnic community is that of the Malays, but there are significant Chinese and Indian communities, and numerous smaller groupings. Mahathir managed to achieve economic growth without exacerbating ethnic tensions. True, his affirmative action policies favored the relatively backward Malays, but not disproportionately at the expense of the wealthy Chinese. Other ethnic groups shared the dividends of Malaysia's prosperity. Mahathir himself has described inter-racial harmony as his greatest achievement. There have been stirrings of Islamic militancy within Malaysia, but so far the government has crushed them using the rule of law. Whatever one's assessment of Mahathir – and many would say the good far outweighed the bad, no one can dispute the impact of his rule. A legacy like his is not easily forgotten.

We feel happy when we find Nepali ethnicity recognized abroad. This gives us an eminently sensible view of national identity. But we hardly care when a number of our ethnic communities in the country complain of discrimination and insufficient response from those who run the country in political fronts. We are better at living together, but not so when we are to share the state with each other. Our history is replete with leaders who had nice words for deprived communities, but who failed to translate them into action, simply because they did not consider it a priority. Similarly, many people around us say they want multiculturalism, but recoil from it as soon as this means tolerating views with which they disagree. We become better, not worse, richer, not poorer, as individuals, communities and as a nation, by respecting the dignity and rights of those who are outside the political spectrum. Only when we are fond of justice, and committed to it, can we ensure that justice is done. ■

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