

Villagers reflect on early days of 54th estate

FOCUS
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By EDWARD RAJENDRA



Workers at the Ampar Tenang Tea Estate in a photo dated 1960.

INDIANS in Dengkil, Sepang call the Ampar Tenang Indian settlement, *ambaartenaa* estate, which means 54th estate in Tamil.

Ampar Tenang derives its name from a combination of an English planter's name A. Lampard and the Malay word *tenang*, which means calm or peaceful.

Over time, Lampard's name was pronounced as "ampar" among the local Indians who worked at the neighbouring Ampar Tenang tea plantation.

Balasubramaniam (left) with his relative Muthusamy Kauder at the Ampar Tenang Tea Estate in 1962.

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Former tea plantation worker Balasubramaniam Muthu Kauder, who plucked tea leaves as a teenager, said before the 1960s, letters posted from India via Port Swettenham only had "54 EST" as the address on the envelope and the person's name.

Operated by a firm called Guthrie-Ropal, the former tea estate was supervised by an English planter known as Parker.

"Ampar Tenang has always been a peaceful settlement with about 100 families. Each family knows the other. As a result of the huge oil palm and rainforest trees, the air in the settlement is fresh and a sense of calmness prevails," he said.

Children from the Indian settlement attend the SJK(T) Ladang Ampar Tenang.

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Balasubramaniam added that the Ampar Tenang Indian Settlement was established in 1959 after British planters allocated 89ha to workers to rear cows and goats, as the animals that were kept on the rubber estate had damaged the latex cups.

"Even the hooves of the animals damaged the rubber tree roots at the 404ha rubber plantation," he said.

Another worker, M. Kandasamy, 76, a former tea plucker, said in 1959, the then Menteri Besar of Selangor Datuk Abu Bakar Baginda Bendang had given the Indians the land to be used for agriculture.

Kandasamy added that in 1973, the people, with the help of MIC chairman SM Velu, had called on those using the land to register their names and the list of names was submitted to the Hulu Langat District for ownership.

"On April 12, 1984, the Selangor government, with the help of former state executive councillor Datuk VL Kandan, secured temporary occupancy licences (TOL) for 117 lots where 119 Indian families lived on, with six lots for Malay families and four lots for Chinese families, thus recognising it as an Indian settlement," he said.

Kandasamy showing the plaque at the Hindu temple wall in the Indian settlement of Kg. Ampar Tenang in Dengkil that states Dr Khir had given the grants for the land.

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Besides the individual lots for the people, the settlement has the Sri Mayura Nathar Aalayam temple on Lot 31, with its presiding deity Lord Murugan.

A beautiful place of worship, the temple attracts Hindus from all over Selangor during special prayers.

Seventy-year-old P. Theivanai, who also used to pluck tea, said on April 26, 2002, former Menteri Besar Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo, on the recommendation of the late state executive councillor Datuk K Sivalingam, had converted the individual TOL licences into land grants.

"All who lived in the settlement were overjoyed. Acreage varied from 0.45ha to 0.68ha," she added.

Selangor MIC division chief V Gunalan, who grew up on Lot 6 of the Indian settlement, said Ampar Tenang had seen changes with a new Tamil school being built, the SJK(T) Ladang Ampar Tenang, a community hall, a Sri Maha Marriaman temple and better roads.

Kandasamy (left) and friend V. Munusamy at the Sri Mayura Nathar Aalayam Hindu temple. — Photos: S.S.KANESAN/ The Star

Kandasamy (left) and friend V. Munusamy at the Sri Mayura Nathar Aalayam Hindu temple. — Photos: S.S.KANESAN/ The Star

Gunalan was instrumental in discussions with Sime Darby Plantations where initial discussions secured 1.01ha on Main Street. The old partial brick school there was moved to the border of the settlement.

"But, former Plantations, Industries and Commodities deputy minister Datuk A Kohilan Pillay was instrumental in further talks with Sime Darby Plantations that resulted in another 0.2ha, thus 1.2ha," added Gunalan.

Balasubramaniam recalled how he and his mother Muthayee Rasa Kauder used to pluck tea leaves on the sprawling 404.6ha Ampar Tenang Estate in the late 1950s. Muthayee is a migrant from the Sallapallayam village in Salem, India.

A provision shop at the Indian settlement of Kg. Ampar Tenang in Dengkil.

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"Vividly, I remember workers were given rattan baskets and divided into groups of 30 to 45 to pluck tea leaves.

"We were required to pluck only two leaves and the bud from the bushes. With me were 15 other teenagers," he said.

"For one pound of tea, the planter paid us five cents in British currency. I earned \$33 (Malayan dollars) a month.

"Most of the tea harvested was exported to London from Port Swettenham (now Port Klang).

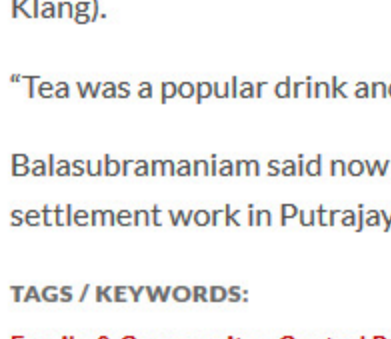
"Tea was a popular drink and also used as dye for textiles in England," he said.

Balasubramaniam said now life is different as most of the youngsters from the settlement work in Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

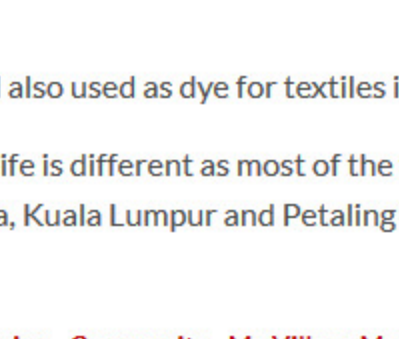
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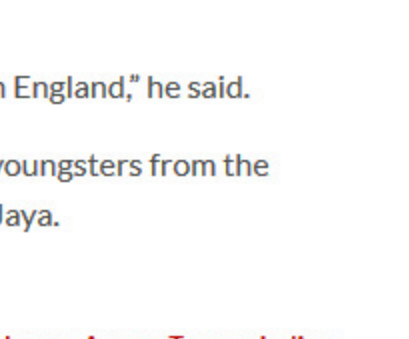
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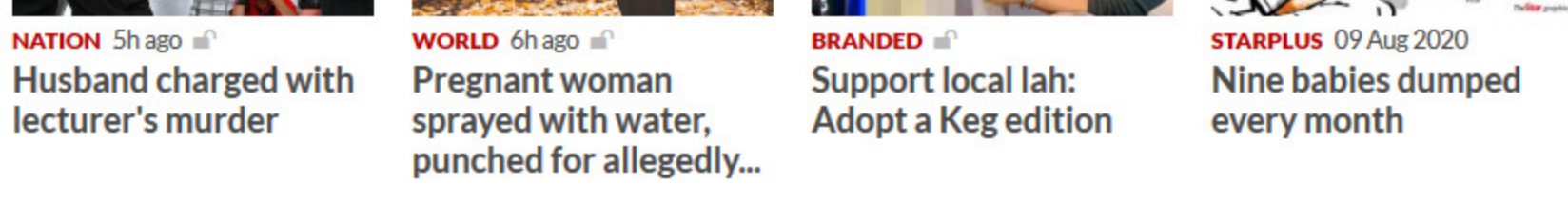
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