



## **My Wakil Rakyat and I: Bright and ugly sides of Lembah Pantai**

**By Zakiah Koya**

With no waterside for miles around, one wonders how Lembah Pantai - which translates literally into "beach valley" - got its name. It is a large constituency in the Federal Territory and probably takes in enough of the Klang Valley and the hills of Pantai and Damansara to lend some credence to the description.

Roughly, Lembah Pantai starts from Kampung Kerinchi - on the right of Jalan Pantai Baru coming up the Federal Highway from Petaling Jaya - and encompasses both sides of the busy stretch of Jalan Bangsar until Brickfields and the National Museum.

Its demography is diverse - from Beverly Hills-like mansions to low-cost flats to the zinc-roofed squatter houses of some of the city's poorest.

More than half of the campus of the country's oldest university, Universiti Malaya, is also in this constituency.

Perhaps, the most famous precinct in Lembah Pantai is "yuppie" Bangsar, which is divided into Bangsar Park, Lucky Gardens, Bangsar Baru, Bangsar Utama and Bukit Bandaraya. Bangsar's newly-built look belies its history, which goes back quite a long way. The opulent hilltop mansions (one of the most prominent looks like a spaceship) actually came much later.

It might come as quite a surprise to many that Bangsar actually started as a rubber estate called Bungsar Estate.

This estate is said to be originally located at the crossroads between Jalan Damansara and Jalan Maarof, where the condominiums of the Condo Hills loom overhead. At that time, Jalan Damansara was only a winding service road.

The estate was reputedly founded by a Belgian called Bunge and a Frenchman called Grisar. It was called Bunge-Grisar, which was gradually localised and inflected into Bungsar, and thereafter into the present Bangsar.

In the early days, it was a "model estate" owned by the plantation firm Socfin and the one nearest to Kuala Lumpur. Curious expatriates and colonials used to visit it to get a taste of estate life.

Of course, the rubber trees are all gone now and greenery in Bangsar is scarce. Land in the Bangsar area is also very expensive.

Bangsar has the most active residents' associations in the Federal Territory. Many of their members are wealthy and influential and capable of pulling quite a few strings. They manage to get many of the problems sorted out with the authorities.

The first area in Bangsar to be developed was Bangsar Park. That was said to be one of the first planned housing estates in the capital. Dennis Appadurai of the Bangsar Park Residents' Association says the first houses came up in 1969.

"The development started soon after Socfin estates sold the land to private developers," he says.

The place has grown to such an extent that there are now more than 700 households in Bangsar Park.

Mumtaz Ali, who has been a Bangsar resident since the early 1970s, says he has watched Bangsar grow so rapidly that it can be said to have converted from a green jungle into a concrete one.

"There was no road leading from Jalan Maarof to Damansara and much of the area was undeveloped. The only shopping stretch for Bangsar residents in those days was where the present TMC and Jolly Green Giant are," Mumtaz says, reminiscing the days when Bangsar was much more peaceful.

Mumtaz stays in Bukit Bandaraya, which is the most populated of the Bangsar areas.

"People went to work and returned to their homes in the evening," he says, adding that at that time, there was no such thing as a Bangsar nightlife.

Mumtaz, who is also the secretary of the Bukit Bandaraya Residents' Association, also voices Bangsar parents' concern over this much-publicised nightlife.

"In recent years, entertainment spots such as nightclubs and pubs have mushroomed in Bangsar and it is now hailed as one of the places for nightlife in the city," he says.

This has given Bangsar a "kind of shady" image which does not go well with the area's parents.

"My teenage daughter tells me that her friends hang out in the Bangsar fast-food outlets during lunch and she has asked whether she could go too," Mumtaz says.

It is common to see schoolchildren loitering around the shopping areas, he says.

Residents from all areas in Bangsar also complain of the lack of proper recreational facilities for the young.

"Children tend to play in the backlanes and near the roads," Mumtaz says. He suggests that school fields be made available to the children.

Despite the fact that the Tenaga Nasional Berhad has its headquarters in Jalan Bangsar, the area has had power fluctuations for the past two years. Caused by high consumption, Bukit Bandaraya residents have highlighted the problem and Tenaga is said to be looking into it.

Bangsar Baru was once very much in the news for its population of rats. Although the pest problem is under control, there is still a lot of cleaning up to do and piles of rotting garbage can be seen in many places.

It is quite ironic when these dirty scenes are just outside the luxury mansions mentioned earlier.

The other areas of Lembah Pantai constituency along the railway tracks are mainly occupied by squatters and relocated squatters. Serviced by Intrakota buses and the KTM Komuter, Pantai Dalam is a blend of city and kampung.

The best views of the squatter settlements in Pantai Dalam are from the railway tracks.

The majority of residents here are Malays except for a few Indian families. Many come from other States. According to some of the long-time residents, the place is a big contrast from what it was about 20 years ago.

Kuih seller Zaiton Adam says that in those days, houses were very few and people hailed from the areas around there.

"It was quiet. No traffic jams. People knew each other and were friendly ... a very small community. Macam kampunglah (Like a village)," says Zaiton of the days before "outsiders" decided that it was a good spot for them too.

In the midst of frying her kuih, Zaiton says it was in the 1980s when place started to get "crowded".

"Then we started hearing all kinds of happenings ... house-breakings and robberies became common around here," she says.

Today, Pantai Dalam is a crowded area with squatters of all kinds - the poor and the fairly rich - and commercial stretches which face the railway tracks.

Many of those relocated stay in longhouses and low-cost, cubby-hole flats.

Just hanging around the Pantai Dalam Komuter station, one can observe a world of people busy trying to make ends meet from day to day. Many are factory and office workers and entrepreneurs. The place comes alive after five in the evening when the adults return home from work and children finish school.

Parents complain that despite the big population in Pantai Dalam, there is no school nearby and they have to escort their children all the way to the main road, Jalan Bangsar. Many also attend schools in Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur.

Cleanliness is also an issue here. According to the shopowners, the garbage is only collected once every three or four days. One resident says that as the area does not have residents' associations to take up the issue, the authorities do not bother.

Indah Water Konsortium has a treatment centre here, which adds to the stench that comes from the area's bad drainage. It is somewhat ironic to see many IWK lorries going to and fro when the area's sewage system leaves so much to be desired.

Floods are a common problem and the residents brace themselves for a quick increase in the water level whenever it pours.

The many small kampungs - Kampung Kerinchi, Kampung Abdullah Haji Hukum and those in the Pantai Baru area - suffer much the same ailments as Pantai Dalam.



***A squatter settlement in Lembah Pantai***