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Vibrant 'Little India' has it all

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THE mere mention of Jalan Masjid India conjures up images of bustling streets and busy sidewalks in the minds of those familiar with the predominantly Indian area of central Kuala Lumpur.

The "Little India" of the capital is famed for its market-like ambience with a cacophony of sounds encompassing tooting horns and pulsating Indian music.

Also characteristic of the area are the heady aromas of incense and fried vadai which intermingle with the usual smog and exhaust fumes - courtesy of the choking traffic.

Ever present, too, are "medicine men" who hold roadside performances extolling the healing powers of their "miracle" drugs and other cure-alls to the thousands of people passing their way.

Pirated goods and trinkets are also hawked off five-foot-ways and cul-de-sacs. No small wonder as designer eyewear suspiciously bearing Ray-Ban and Calvin Klein insignia can be found on straw mats, along with the local versions of Rado and Rolex.

However, there are also genuine wares being traded along the busy streets and back alleys in and around Jalan Masjid India. Adding colour to this culture-rich area for the past 30 years are the 20-odd families in the floral business.

These people have been plying their trade all over the area for three decades - from Jalan Melayu to Jalan Melaka to Medan Bunus. Relocated by City Hall to Jalan Masjid India on March 29, they now occupy the motorcycle parking bay behind Mydin Wholesale Emporium.

The 14 stalls selling flowers, betel leaves, lime and garlands for temple prayers, weddings and other Indian functions operate seven days a week from morning till night.

Jasmine, orchids and chrysanthemums of various hues are acquired from farms in Rawang, Batu Arang and Sungai Choh. Carnations and roses are obtained from Cameron Highlands. It is estimated that jasmine sales in the capital alone amount to an astounding RM50,000 daily.

The art of stringing garlands requires deft fingers as each flower is knotted individually with yarn spun from the stem of banana plants. Completion of each garland depends on its size and intricacy, the easiest taking about half an hour to make.

Sri Marathandavar Flower Stall owner Kurunadan Ayasamy, 47, said he has been in this business for over 30 years, having been an apprentice to his parents after he finished his Form Three.

"My mother learnt to make maalai (garlands) from her father who was a temple priest. This is the only business I know.

"Times have changed a lot. Now, my children do not want to learn how to make the maalai as they are interested in studying computers and mechanics," said Kurunadan, adding that he makes between RM100 and RM200 a day from his labour.

Kurunadan claimed that his garlands have graced the necks of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad back when he was Deputy Prime Minister and Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu.

"When (Indian film star) Sivaji Ganesan came to Malaysia some 20 years ago, he was welcomed with one of my maalai.

"A customer even took my maalai to India for a function around the time that Rajiv Gandhi was murdered. The police had to check it for bombs," he

said.

Another stallholder, Kalaimuhan Kanan of P. Amarawathi Flower Stall, said that the 20 families in the business were as close-knit as kinsfolk.

"We also make grass garlands for the Vinayagar festival where people offer prayers and fruits to (elephant God) Ganapathy," said Kalaimuhan, 42, who took over the business from his parents 15 years ago.

He said that he was relieved that the flower stalls have been shifted just further down the road as his regular customers would not have problems finding his stall.

Although the place at Medan Bonus they were previously stationed at has been gazetted for licensed hawker stalls, their current location has made them all the more visible to the throngs of locals and tourists milling about.

City Hall, in realising that these people contribute to the vibrancy of the area, has been sympathetic to their needs. The flower traders would be provided with a covered roof, electricity and water supply.

Dr M. Thambirajah, the MIC representative in the City Advisory Board, said that the stallholders were quite content with their new location as, aside from their usual clients, tourists and passersby were also flocking to their stalls.

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