

30/05/2004

A track unpaved

"THE roosters didn't wake us up. Hawa Ismail did. She beckons us to go get breakfast, quick! Kelik gi doh... nanti habis (Go now or else it will be finished)."

The bilal at the nearby masjid had just called for the morning prayers.

"Bangun doh, Dani (Get up, Dani)," she nudges her 21-year-old granddaughter Nurdania Jamri, one of her 13 grandchildren.

It is not often that Dani is back in Kg Kemubu, Dabong - "somewhere between Gua Musang and Kuala Krai".

True to Hawa's words, breakfast is all sold out by the time - 8am - we arrive at the market. "Hok stesen ado lagi (there's some left at the station)" a lady tending a stall says.

Breakfast is either nasi kerabu, the blue rice with condiments, or nasi berlauk, rice with a choice of a piece of beef or chicken.

There is roti canai, of course, "but who comes all the way to Kelantan for something he can get in Kuala Lumpur, yes?" Dani says.

At the railway station, seemingly the kampung's social centre, she buys four packets of nasi kerabu priced at two riyal (two ringgit) each.

It would be one riyal elsewhere in town. She picks up a loaf of bread and a can of sardines too. Some of us are not used to having rice so early in the morning.

Hawa - known as Mak Nik among the elders and Mak Tengah among the young ones - has lived in the kampung for 50 years.

At 77 ("I am as old as Mahathir [former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad]"), Mak Tengah no longer moves around as freely as before. "Lutut ni hok jem (The knee is jammed)." She uses a wheelchair.

When her eldest daughter Halimah Awang Seman and son-in-law Mustafa Husain go out to work on the family's orchard, Mak Tengah is left alone in the sprawling four-room house (which is currently undergoing extensive renovation).

She commonly stations herself at the front door, and jokes with Dani that she should be called chairman of the jawatankuasa pintu (door committee).

Projects so far stop 10km short

"She's lonely. She sits there and calls out to people who pass by. Everyone knows everyone else here.

"The womenfolk, the ahli jawatankuasa pintu (door committee members), will drop by and keep her company from time to time," says Dani.

Within hours of our arrival, almost everyone in the kampung is aware that Dani had brought friends from Kuala Lumpur for a visit. Stepping out of a Volvo XC90 didn't quite help us blend in either.

The drive into the village was kind of an adventure. The 10km stretch to Kg Kemubu is still a dirt road. It had seemed endless.

"I am 35 years old. I remember the road being like that since I was 10," school clerk Farid Mustafa says. Farid is Halimah's son and the only grandchild of Hawa still staying in the kampung. Halimah and Mustafa have seven children.

"We've heard countless promises and pledges but we've yet to see it done (having the road paved). And it's just a short stretch," says Halimah, who was only five years old when the family moved here.

It's hard to tell the colour of Farid's Wira (it is blue) under all the red earth.

"My father told mom that we can come here every month if the road is paved," Dani laughs, recalling the tiff her parents had over balik kampung.

Her father has just bought a Naza Ria.

Hawa and her late husband, Awang Seman Yaakob, moved to the village half a century ago. They were among the first to be relocated there.

"Lari dari komunis, kerajae suruh mari sini (Fled from the communists, the Government asked us to come here)," she says.

The village now has basic amenities. When electricity first came in 1974, supply was only from 7pm to 7am. It was 20 years later, the same year Awang Seman died, that the kampung had 24-hour supply.

There's only one Telekom Malaysia's public telephone. "Rosak doh," calls out a passing motorist who saw us fiddling with the telephone. "Panggilan kecemasan sahaja (Emergency calls only)."

And forget your cellphone, there's no signal - except maybe on Gunung Stong, where the kampung's water supply comes from. By the way, the water is refreshingly cool.

Mustafa says he requested for a line a very long time ago but has yet to get any response from Telekom.

"Development projects stop at Dabong. For reasons known only to the authorities, we are forgotten," laments Mustafa.

Dabong is a slightly bigger village. It is about a kilometre from where the highway takes a turn into the 10km dirt road that leads to Kg Kemubu.

Some of the houses in Dabong, including Mustafa's, have satellite TV connection. Those without Astro have TV antennas as tall as coconut trees.

The nearest town is Gua Musang or Kuala Krai, about 98km away. Both are accessible by train too. In fact, most of the villagers use the mail train to get to the towns to do marketing and banking.

If the cost of petrol is any indication, things are a little bit more expensive in Gua Musang than in Kuala Krai and other towns in Kelantan.

It costs a sen higher than elsewhere in the state, which in turn is 3 sen more expensive than in KL.

Dani says her mother and the other daughter of Hawa, Siti Khadijah Awang Seman, used to take the train to school, "but only for a while, before she moved to a school in Pasir Mas".

These days, schoolchildren mostly take the bus. The day's first mail train, No. 84, arrives at 7am, if it is not delayed, says Fauzi, a KTMB staff on duty.

There are six mail train services a day to Kg Kemubu. The last arrives at 5.35pm.

The express train does not stop here but at Dabong, which is about half an hour away.

"Kalau miss trip pagi, kami pergi sekolah naik keretapi. Tapi lambat lah (If we miss the bus, we go to school by train. But we will be late)," a Form Three student tells us.

Kg Kemubu has only a primary school. The nearest secondary school is in Dabong. By bus, students would have to catch the 6.30am service, failing which the next bus comes at 7.30am, and they would be late for school. The ride takes half an hour.

The majority of the villagers are self-employed. "Buat dusun, kerja kampung (estate and village work)," says Mustafa, who tends to his own and his family's durian orchards. He estimates the 400-house village's population at about 1,500 people.

They leave the house for their orchards after the children go to school. "We'll buy breakfast. It's cheaper to buy than make our own," Halimah explains as to why breakfast is sold out so quickly on most mornings. Those who remain at home are the housewives, young children and the

elderly.

Hawa doesn't have any problems if she needs assistance. She has only to holler at whoever passes by, and for a few sen in tips, kampung boys will run the errands.

In the early afternoons when it gets hot, the village children head for the river. They all seem to be very good swimmers, getting to and back from the opposite bank with ease despite the fairly strong current. It is not a short swim.

The people are warm and highly hospitable. Mustafa and Halimah apologise for not being able to provide us with better food. She offers to cook us lunch of ayam kampung before we set off for Kota Baru but we declined, having had a hearty breakfast.

We have an open invitation to visit again, especially during the durian season, which is sometime in August. Will the road be paved by then? For our newfound friends, we do hope so.

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