

A non-Malay Felda settler's success story

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Standing in front of his plush "holiday home" in Bandar Sri Sendayan, Negeri Sembilan, cuff-linked R Thangam, 50, is a Felda success story.

The son of an estate worker from Rembau, Thangam's father was among the small number of non-Malays who joined Felda's 'land for the poor' scheme, moving his family to Felda Sendayan in 1962.

"I was born into Felda. It was tough. There was no electricity, no water. We had to grow our own rice to eat, and there were so many locusts. They only went away after an imam conducted some prayers," he said in an interview with Malaysiakini.

Unlike many other Felda settlements dotting Malaysia, Felda Sendayan is largely multiracial. Chinese, Malay and Indian houses are interspersed with one another, and the neighbours can be seen chatting at sundry shops.

Once a rubber tapper, the now retired settler estimates that Malays make up at least 75 percent of the Federal Land Development Authority scheme settlers in Malaysia, Indians 10 percent and the rest being Chinese and from the other races.

"But there were no more non-Malay settlers entering the Felda scheme, starting the late 1980s," he said.

For Thangam, his father's decision to join the scheme completely changed the course of the family's future.

From humble beginnings, he is now the proud father of a doctor and an airline pilot, while his school-going youngest daughter has a life remarkably different to his, just a generation ago.

The fire that changed everything

Having left the settlement at 18 to join the army, Thangam returned at the age of 29 to tap rubber on his father's land. But a fire next door altered his fate.

"The house of our neighbour, a Malay family, caught fire. The baby was left in the fire. My wife begged me not to go in, but I ... went in and grabbed the baby out. My back was completely burnt," Thangam said.

In return, the then Negri Sembilan menteri besar, Isa Samad (right), offered him a low-cost house but the 'hero' rejected it as he did not want to be seen as seeking a reward for the help he had rendered.

But the good relations with Isa came in handy. Soon after, another neighbour offered to sell his land to Thangam and he cashed his chips with the MB to get approval for the purchase.

It was with this land on which he built his savings, putting his money mostly into Koperasi Permodalan Felda (KPF) and Koperasi Angkatan Tentera.

Today, between Thangam, his settler wife, brothers and inheritance from his parents, his family collectively holds about a million shares in KPF shares - possibly the largest amount held by an extended family in the cooperative.

A deja vu moment

The relationship with Isa soured down the road, when in 1996, several Sendayan settlers, including Thangam, entered a deal to sell their land to the state government.

"We chopped down our rubber trees and gave the government our (land) grants, but we only received 10 percent of the promised sale price," he said.

After about a decade of tussling, most of the settlers reluctantly accepted the new "package" offered by their new menteri besar, Mohamad Hasan - at a loss.

Under this package, the government paid a sales price of RM3 per square feet (psf), set in 1996 for the 10 acres of land, but the settlers need to "buy back" two acres of the land at RM4psf and a RM240,000 link house at Bandar Seri Sendayan.

"We had to pay for the house. It was not given to us," he said.

Last week, at a KPF briefing on the proposed listing of Felda Global Ventures Holdings (FGVH), Thangam experienced a deja vu moment.

"Before, in the Felda Sendayan hall, Isa told us 'the state government guarantees the sale' of our land. At the Felda hall in Kuala Lumpur last week, Isa said 'the PM will guarantee our dividends'. It was just like before," he said.

Racial slurs at meeting

But unlike before, Thangam now has a label across his forehead, which he believes led to his ouster from the briefing last week.

In 1998, he was at a friend's house in Kuala Lumpur when he was told that Anwar Ibrahim was sacked as deputy prime minister.

"My friend said, let's go to his house so we did and we heard him speak. And something changed in me... I would never have dared to fight hard, like I do now on things I believe are right," he said.

Since then, Thangam has been a staunch supporter of Anwar and a loyal PKR member. He now holds the post of deputy division chief of Rasah.

"But when I spoke during the briefing on the FGVH, I spoke as a settler. I left my PKR hat outside.

"It was my birthday that day, marking 50 years as a settler. What right did Isa Samad have to boot me out when he has only been in Felda for two years?" he asked.

Most hurtful, he said, was the racial slurs made by some of those in the room, whom he believes were not KPF members as he has never seen them at the many KPF annual general meetings he has attended.

"They used words like keling pariah. But there I was, speaking mostly for the Malay Felda settlers. So much for 1Malaysia," sighed Thangam.

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