

DATE: 23/08/2007

# Small in size but rich in history

NST - 23/8/2007

IT is arguably the cradle of both ancient and modern Malaysia.

There can be little argument over the fact that much of what defines Malaysia today took place in the second smallest state — Malacca.

Its size has never really mattered in terms of being the location for the events that changed the course of the nation's history.

The only exception, perhaps, would be during its golden age in the 1600s, when Malacca's reach in terms of economics and trade extended far beyond its current borders.

Portuguese writer Tom Pires wrote that "Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice... for in Malacca, they give garlic and onions more than musk, benzoin and other precious things".

And this is why Malacca is special to Malaysians: It has history, character and people who matter.

It all began with Parameswara (later Sultan Iskandar Shah), in the 1400s, who started Malacca on the journey to the most glorious period of its history when it was a respected name in much of the world.

Fast forward to Feb 20,



Tun Tan Cheng Lock

1956, when the nation's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, announced the date of independence.

There are also other events and personalities in Malacca who have contributed to the growth of the nation and its people.

It is the home state of two statesmen — Tun Tan Cheng Lock, an MCA founding father who also led the campaign for independence; and his son, Tun Tan Siew Sin, a distinguished former finance minister.

Malacca is also where the Independence Obelisk (with the alphabet "M" which stands for Merdeka) is located. According to the book *The Cul-*

*tural Melting Pot* by Robert Tan Sin Nyen, the obelisk in Dataran Pahlawan signifies the place where the last British resident commissioner of Malacca, H.G. Hammett, handed the instrument of independence to the first local governor of Malacca, Tun Leong Yew Koh, on Aug 31, 1957.

It was also on this field that more than 50,000 people welcomed Tunku Abdul Rahman and his entourage on Feb 20, 1956, on their return from England after negotiating for the country's independence.

"It was on this field that the locals, right under the noses of the colonial masters, gave the joyous shouts of 'Merdeka'.

"There was one outstanding banner with an eye-catching caption, '*Di bawah runtuhannya Kota Melaka, kita dirikan negara bahru*' which means 'Within the ruins of the Fort of Malacca, we form a new nation'," Robert wrote in his book.

Malacca, for the modern-day local, is a state steeped in history and rich in culture due to the intermingling of races. It has a wealth of architecture from its colonial past and is uniquely Malaysian.

Where else can one find a modern five-star hotel within minutes of a 16th century Por-

tuguese building, a restored 16th century galleon beside a busy thoroughfare and a unique community that speaks 16th century Portuguese?

The Portuguese are by far the best known minority nationwide; a people who have evolved over time to become fully Malaysian and yet managing to retain their 16th century charm.

Malaccans of Dutch and British origin also add to the colourful cultural mosaic that the state represents.

The most imposing relic of the Dutch period is the Stadthuys, a striking pink town hall which is today the oldest Dutch building in the Far East.

Next to it stands the bright red Christ Church, constructed with pink bricks imported from Holland and covered with local red lacerite.

The state is also home to two other unique homegrown communities — the Baba and Nyonya (a mix of Chinese and Malays) and the Chitty (a mix of Tamils, Malays and Chinese).

The Baba and Nyonya have spread their wings far and wide, having moved around the country and abroad with their charming subculture and patois.

As for the Chitty (not to be confused with the money-lending community called the Chettiar), they are still poorly documented despite their contributions to the state.

They are a small group whose uniqueness in terms of culture and language (they speak a mix of Malay and Tamil) is being threatened by the cultural strength of the Tamils.

Most are centred in Kampung Chitty in Gajah Berang, while the Portuguese stay in the Portuguese Settlement in Ujong Pasir.

According to Malacca International Islamic College of Technology president Prof Emeritus Datuk Mohd Yusoff Hashim, most historians presumed that Parameswara was a name.

"He was also one of Temasek's (Singapore) rulers. Temasek had four rulers and they were all descendents of Srivijaya royalty. Parameswara was a title, and not a name."

Most Malaysians also know Malacca as the home of the five "Hang" — Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat, Hang Kasturi, Hang Lekir and Hang Lekiu — who stood with the sultan against all his foes.

Hang Tuah, especially, stands today in Malay folklore as a symbol of loyalty.

How did Malacca get its name?

The jury is out on this with numerous versions of the origins of the name.

Mohd Yusoff said Parameswara was supposed to have been leaning against a tree when his hunting dogs went after a white mousedeer.

Instead of being frightened, the mousedeer kicked Parameswara's dogs.

"Parameswara took this as a good sign and asked his ministers what the name of the tree was. They told him 'Malacca' and he named it such," he said.

There is some debate on whether Parameswara became a Muslim.

Contrary to history reports, said Yusoff, Parameswara never embraced Islam.

"He lived and died a Hindu. It was his son, Megat Iskandar Shah, the second ruler of Malacca, who embraced Islam," he said.

According to Yusoff, the population of Malacca had grown from 1,000 in the early 15th century to 190,000 less than 100 years later.

He said Malacca exerted a tremendous effect on the world in the 15th century and by the 16th century, it had become a port of call for ships bearing most known flags.