

Reports by SUPRIYA SINGH

The man behind the politician

NST 14 APR 1982

AFTER following Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for a day, the first question that comes to mind is: How does he manage such a hectic schedule?

"I get sufficient sleep," he says as he sits in the executive jet on his way home. "Six and a half hours. Then I sleep in the plane or the helicopter whenever I can."

"If you're doing something you're interested in, you don't feel tired."

It must be working for

● I don't like adoration, adulation. That is why when people try to kiss my hand, I pull away. You might remember the incident with Tunku. When I tried to kiss his hand, he pulled it back. That is our custom. So when people want to kiss my hand, I draw it back. I don't deserve that much respect. I'm a nobody. I'm just one of them.

many things in the pipeline that even at home, I devote most of my time to work."

Despite the heavy schedule, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir still finds time for reading. "Just last night, I finished a book by Sanders, *The Third Deadly Sin*. He is one of my favourite authors. I recently discovered him, though he has been writing for a long time. This book is the case of a woman who was a mass murderer. I've read the whole series."

"Then there is Jack Higgins' *The Eagle has Landed*." And Wilbur Smith. He is also one of my favourites. And there is the man who wrote *Overload*. I have forgotten his name, but I've read all his books."

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir also watches TV. "*Eight is Enough* is my favourite. I don't like to miss it. I make sure that if I'm away, my children tape it for me."

"My children like it too." I ask him: Do you like Nicholas?

"Yes, I like him. The programme is so very human. It shows the kind of problems people have at home."

The PM likes reading comic strips too. His favourites are *Blondie*, *Alley Oop* and *The Gambols*.

The thing I have always wanted to ask the PM is whether he gets enough time with his family. "Time for the family? There is never enough of it. But now I go home for lunch, it's just a five minute drive."

What kind of food does he like?

"Salt fish," he says with not the slightest

"The way Conan Doyle solves his problems is the way a doctor solves his cases. There is challenge. There is a lot of job satisfaction."

"A man has appendicitis. After an operation, he walks out after a week. To be able to make a sick man well is very satisfying."

Is it satisfying for him when people speak so positively of the image of the 2Ms?

"I am wary of what people say about me," Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir

says. "To me, it is more satisfying to see the result of what you set out to do." As an example, he says: "In 1973, there was this pineapple cannery in Johore. I had no business experience. But in two years, the cannery became profitable."

"Then there was this problem of pensions. Some people were not being paid even two years after they had retired. Now, with the new system introduced, people receive their pension the month after they retire."

"It was not something very difficult. But I had the authority to put it into effect, to make the suggestions. This is a positive result."

"That's how I get my satisfaction."

him. After four speeches and eleven hours on the move, he looks fresh, while the rest of us are fazed by the heat and the pace.

"I feel good about making contact," he says. "My training as a doctor helps me to communicate. The touch of the hand, that is important. It is like the healing concept of 'the laying of hands'. That is why I try and shake the hands of as many people as I can. It is not possible to shake everybody's hand in a large crowd, but as many as possible.

"When people wave to me, shout greetings, I feel good."

Leaning back as if to savour the experience, he says: "Everything seems worthwhile. It's the way people greet you, the way they seem to accept you. You feel you are not a stranger. Your service is appreciated.

"I used to be very shy. I did not like crowds. I

would not go to the stadium to watch a game. I would not go to an exhibition. In the old days, I would not go.

"But this is different. This is a crowd I can be with. When they wave, shout a greeting, it is very touching. And coming from total strangers — that is what is so heart-warming about the experience.

"I don't like adoration, adulation. That is why when people try to kiss my hand, I pull away.

"You might remember," he says, "the incident with Tunku. When I tried to kiss his hand, he pulled it back. That is our custom. So when people want to kiss my hand, I draw it back.

"I don't deserve that much respect. I'm nobody. I'm just one of them."

By this time, the air hostess in the jet, a Fokker 28 furnished in the Mas style, has served us a chicken snack and a hot

drink. "Help yourself," urges Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir. "Have some chicken." But it is not every day one has the chance to talk to the Prime Minister. The food can wait.

"Initially, when I used to go with Tun Razak, I would not walk on the red carpet," he reminisces. "I would walk off it. He would tell me, 'This is laid for you'. I learnt then to gingerly walk on it."

Now, he says, he can handle it better. "People expect it of you. They've gone to a lot of trouble."

Favourites

When I tell him how some of the people waiting for him at Penang were disappointed seeing him coming out of an F-28 instead of a gleaming, silver jet, he says: "It is sufficient. It is useful for going to Sabah." But even this is more than we can afford.

Now that he is Prime Minister, he says there is no time for gardening and carpentry, the two things he enjoys.

"I used to do it even when I was DPM (Deputy Prime Minister). Now there is no time. Since taking over, there are so

hesitation. "I can't take fresh fish. When I go to Alor Star, I get loads of salt fish. There is one kind I like very much — ikan talang. It has a different flavour about it."

He is careful about his diet. Even when he was having coffee at the Penang Bridge site, he used a sugar substitute instead of sugar. And, of all the goodies on the table, all he took was one popiah.

Satisfaction

For the last 20 years, he says, he has been the same weight. (I forgot to ask how many pounds.) Every day, for fifteen minutes in the morning, he does a set of exercises he designed for himself.

That probably explains his very trim figure.

Does he also make Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah do it? Is that how she keeps her enviable figure? No, he says, smilingly.

Does he miss being a doctor?

"Yes," he says "I miss that. Medicine is something like detective work. You know that Conan Doyle who wrote *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* was a doctor. I read Conan Doyle first, then read medicine.

Then there was this problem of pensions. Some people were not being paid even two years after they had retired. Now, with the new system introduced, people receive their pension the month after they retire