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Allow ourselves to go separate ways

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ASK Pak Samad* about his days in Singapore at your own risk. Even if you've spent some years there yourself, he could take you places you knew nothing of.

I spent my first 17 years in the republic and I find his Singapore more fascinating and far more sinister than mine. St John Island to him was the garrison and barbed wire where they kept him as a political detainee for three years back in the 1950s. Me, I was frolicking on the island's sandy beaches in the mid-1970s on school excursions.

I grew up in the Beatles era in a wooden "longhouse" in West Coast Road which is today a concrete jungle of affluent apartments. About a mile away was the Clementi barracks where many Malaysians serving in the British army lived with their families (until the early 1970s).

A little farther up is NUS, where a young sideburned Mahathir Mohamad received his degree at the then King Edward VII College of Medicine. Yusof Ishak was President of the republic and Jalan Ahmad Ibrahim was the longest stretch of road in the republic.

One clear memory I had as a teenage Malaysian growing up in Singapore was how close other Singaporeans and Malaysians were.

The republic was many Malaysians' second home (as London was and is to the wealthier Malaysians). Sungei Road was kept alive everyday by Malaysian tourists who would come by the bus loads to shop for bargains, counterfeits and canned longans. From there they would proceed to Orchard Road or Queensway or Geylang to do their bit for the small economy of Singapore or to visit relatives.

RM1 was equal to a Singapore dollar (Singaporeans were still calling their currency "ringgit" in the 1970s), so everything was very cheap and very familiar for Malaysians.

Along the way, things turned sour a little. Today, Malaysians and Singaporeans are not that close anymore.

Political differences aside, I believe things started to change between the people on the opposite sides of the Tebrau when Harry Lee Kuan Yew's government decided to do away with all kampong houses and build flats to house a growing population.

There were not enough Singaporeans to work on the construction sites so the developers (the Housing Development Board of Singapore and the Jurong Town Corp were two big developers) brought in thousands of Malaysians. Years later other Malaysians started working as waiters and bell-boys in hotels and manual workers in the factories.

I say things were never the same again after Singapore started constructing the flats because from then on Malaysians became a means - a cheap means - to achieve Singapore's economic goal. Malaysians became servants of Singaporean employers, some of whom think the foreigners owed the republic a living.

The Malaysian construction workers lived in shacks we called "kotai" and they were referred to as "Mat Kotai". They were frowned upon, not unlike the way some Malaysians regard the Indons and Bangladeshis who work on our construction sites today. Other Malaysians were called "Mat Benut" in reference to a supposedly forsaken town in Johor.

The Singapore economy grew by leaps and bounds and the republic joined the ranks of the newly industrialised economies. Singaporeans became relatively richer than Malaysians, enjoyed a higher standard of living,

and for a while behaved like a superior race.

If busloads of Malaysians from Johor Baru used to enter Singapore daily, Singapore cars (with tanks filled with petrol) started to jam up the Causeway, especially on weekends. They splashed their dollars in Johor Baru, bought club memberships and properties in Malaysia, occupied our hotels and resorts, and burned their tyres on our roads.

Then the Malaysian economy started to grow meteorically, a result of the Government's policy to emphasise more on the manufacturing and industrial sectors. Now we have everything Singapore has, and more. We have the LRT (against Singapore's MRT), we have KLIA (Changi), we have PTP (Port of Singapore), we have Dr Mahathir (Lee Kuan Yew), and we have the world's the tallest buildings. We even emerged better from the 1997 financial crisis and do not feel that we are inferior to anyone in this region in whatever terms.

Today Singaporeans work in Malaysian companies but their numbers are small. Singapore investors have journeyed deep into Malaysia's business world and we don't mind that they are making money off us, although some would tear down our historical sites and values if we allowed them.

Despite the frequent skirmishes between the two governments over thorny bilateral issues, many of us think nothing of crossing the Causeway or the Second Link for business or pleasure. We can afford it and, after all, Singapore is quite a safe place to be.

All the time, we drift further apart and some of us say we should not.

Me, I say we should allow ourselves to go our own ways, mind our own business and chart our own destinies. Singapore and Malaysia will never become enemies but we won't be as close as we once were. In most things we do, we have become the keenest of rivals. Our shared history should just be a collective memory and not a baggage.

Like Pak Samad's St John Island, there is no need to revisit it too often.

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