

Keeping the PM

trim

and proper

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BY SA'ODAH ELIAS

"YOU don't have to ask other people, I can tell you with certainty that Dr Mahathir writes his own speeches," said M. Mohan.

Can't place the name? That is because Mohan was not a secretary or personal assistant to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he was Prime Minister.

This unassuming man has been Dr Mahathir's personal barber for the past six years.

His monthly trips to Seri Perdana, first in Kuala Lumpur and the last two years in Putrajaya to cut Dr Mahathir's hair gave him the luxury of seeing Dr Mahathir in a relaxed mood at home, tinkering in his woodwork workshop which also doubles as "hair salon," complete with a barber chair.

Mohan had personally seen several of Dr Mahathir's handiwork, mostly tables, chairs and other decorative stuff made of wood.

Dr Mahathir seldom sat idle when his hair was being cut, revealed Mohan.

He always brought along a book to read, or most of the time, would rewrite his speech, jotting additional words and quotes on the margin of the text.

The 46-year-old father of two also cuts Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's hair but unlike Dr Mahathir, Abdullah would

personally come to Lake Club - where Mohan is attached to - about once a month.

"For a Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir is very friendly and polite but he tends to be more quiet compared to Abdullah who always has time to share some laughs and jokes with my other clients at the Lake Club.

"Dr Mahathir is very simple, not demanding at all. His favourite cologne is Bayrum but everything else he just leaves it to me to decide," he said, adding that he washed Dr Mahathir's hair using the generic shampoo that his shop buys by the gallon.

According to Mohan, Dr Mahathir also likes a head massage and he always brought along a special massage oil, the main ingredient being clove, whenever he went to Seri Perdana.

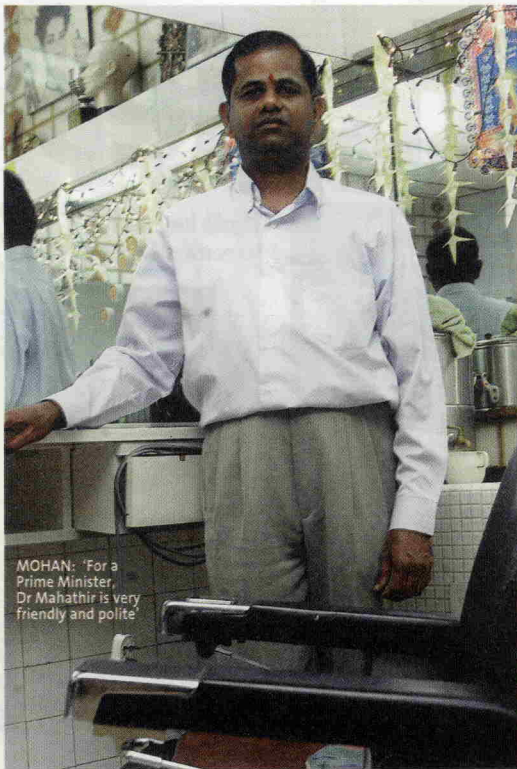
However, he said, he had never given the Prime Minister a shave.

"I think he shaves himself because he is always clean-shaven. He is also always well dressed even to have a hair cut," he noted.

"He is a very disciplined man and has done wonders for the country.

"Although I am just his barber, he never missed asking me about my family, especially the health of my children," said Mohan who got his first break in the trade at the age of 13 in Rasah, Negri Sembilan.

When he was approached by a fel-



MOHAN: "For a Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir is very friendly and polite"

low barber, Sithambaran, to become Dr Mahathir's personal barber in 1997, Mohan thought his friend was joking.

Sithambaran, who was then Dr Mahathir's personal barber, had approached Mohan as he was retiring. A few days later, he said, a serious-looking Malay man came over to Lake Club to observe him at work.

"The man didn't say anything, just sat there and see how I work. He came again the next day and introduced

himself as the Prime Minister's bodyguard and asked me if I wanted to become Dr Mahathir's personal barber," he added.

Mohan had certainly come a long way from "cutting and shaving coconuts" more than 30 years ago when he first became an apprentice at his one-man barber shop that belonged to his uncle's friend to help supplement his rubber-tapper mother's meagre income after his father became

paralysed.

But for the first two weeks of his apprenticeship, Mohan was barred from touching a human head.

Instead, he was given coconuts and under the supervision of the barber, was instructed to practise his hands at cutting the coconut husk to as close to the core as he could without "wounding" it.

He mastered that within a week and was then directed to shave the coconut with the same instruction not to "wound" it. Another week went by before the barber proclaimed that Mohan was ready to try his hands on a human head.

Still, the barber did not trust him enough to work on a paying customer, so his nine-year-old son became Mohan's first customer.

A firm believer in fate, Mohan believed that it had been pre-ordained by God that he should become a barber, although he wanted better things for his two children, Nandhavelan, 16, and Yamunah, 13.

How does he feel now that he is the personal barber to the Prime Minister and his deputy?

Very proud, said Mohan who never told his friends about his "exclusive" job.

It was his choice not to tell people about it because he feared that he would be asked to become an intermediary by someone who wanted something from the two leaders.

In his years of cutting Dr Mahathir's and Abdullah's hair, he had never asked for any favours "as that would be undignified."

His proudest moment, he said, was when Dr Mahathir introduced him as his personal barber when he attended a Hari Raya open house at Seri Perdana.

"I came with my children and when one of his aides saw us, he ushered us to where the Prime Minister was standing. Then Dr Mahathir told his guests, "This is my barber."

"I was never more proud than that day. My children couldn't stop talking about it for days. I always told my children that if they want to succeed, they must emulate Dr Mahathir's discipline