

Living the Asian Century

AN
UNDIPLOMATIC
MEMOIR

Kishore

0092
Mahbubani





Praise for
Living the Asian Century

“Living the Asian Century is a well-written and thoroughly engaging book by Kishore Mahbubani which captures the highs and the lows of his amazing and curious life. He describes his personal crises and career with surprising openness and frankness, which will surprise many readers who are exposed only to his political and strategic thinking in his many books and articles. This is a story of fierce survival and grit on borrowed optimism. Mahbubani weaves analyses of realpolitik and geopolitical dynamics in his account of the international power play and negotiations he witnessed and experienced in bilateral diplomacy in national capitals and in multilateralism at the United Nations and the UN Security Council. Public officials and diplomats can draw many sharp insights from this memoir to deepen their understanding of how to navigate when faced with similar challenges in foreign policy.”

—Chan Heng Chee, Singapore’s former
ambassador to the United States (1996–2012) and
ambassador at large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

“To have travelled from ‘poverty to plenty’ and lived in an eventful time in history would endow any life with rich complexity. Mahbubani’s journey through our Asian century, from



childhood deprivation to adult eminence, reflects his brave, intrepid, and fearless spirit. He offers a kaleidoscopic view of the cut-and-thrust of world politics as he experienced it as a diplomat in the US, alongside a local and intimate bird's eye view of Singapore's political struggles, and those of its founding fathers, especially the inimitable Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. Zooming out of global crises and into poignant personal moments and difficulties, this is an absorbing memoir of unflinching honesty. It is a pleasure and an education to read it."

—Meira Chand, recipient of Singapore's Cultural Medallion and author of *A Different Sky*

"Mahbubani's memoir tells the remarkable story of his rise from poverty to a distinguished career in diplomacy and academia. This deeply personal account also captures the incredible transformation of Singapore and Southeast Asia. This is an inspiring story, beautifully written, that I just could not put down. A must-read."

—Indra Nooyi, former chairman and CEO, PepsiCo

"The arc of Mahbubani's remarkable life and career tracks the birth and rise of Singapore as an independent nation. Through insightful and amusing stories, always told with his trademark candor, this distinguished diplomat and public intellectual also provokes us to think hard about 'the Asian century.'"

—Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO, New America

"Having known Mahbubani for fifty-nine years, I never expected to learn new things about him in his memoirs. But

he surprised me by revealing so many details about his life in this no-holds-barred account that I finished within a day. His seductive writing skills and his excellent storytelling ability make this one of the best memoirs I've read of a Singapore public servant."

—Eddie Teo, chairman, Council of
Presidential Advisers, Singapore

"I first met Mahbubani as a fiercely bearded and rather combative, though undeniably brilliant, mid-level official of the Singapore foreign ministry in 1981. Thereafter, I have had the pleasure of watching him rise to an outstanding permanent representative of Singapore at the United Nations, the founding dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and a public intellectual of coruscating intelligence and insight who has carved a niche for himself in the world of geopolitical ideas. His memoirs are a beguiling glimpse into his fascinating journey from very humble beginnings to the highest echelons of international diplomacy. Punctuated with eclectic anecdotes across continents, anchored in the warmth and affability of Mahbubani's personality, this is a must-read for all those enthused by a diplomatic career and those driven to understand the lessons it can teach for life."

—Shashi Tharoor, author, parliamentarian,
former UN Under-Secretary-General, and
former government minister in India

"The rise of Asia is the great economic and political story of our age. Nobody's life story could illuminate better than



Mahbubani's—a man of Indian heritage, a product of multiracial Singapore, and someone with deep knowledge of Western ideas and achievements—how and why this transformation happened. This book, then, is far more than the fascinating autobiography of a man who is arguably Asia's most influential thinker on today's transforming global order. The experiences and achievements of his life as student, diplomat, and commentator also provide important lessons for Westerners. Not least, it will help them understand how an informed and favorably disposed outsider judges both their historic achievements and recent follies."

—Martin Wolf, chief economics commentator,
Financial Times

"When I once mused to a senior European journalist that Mahbubani must be the most well-known Singaporean internationally, she agreed emphatically. Apart from Lee Kuan Yew, no other Singaporean has achieved a wider reach through his writings and speeches. In his short but fascinating memoirs, Mahbubani gives the reader an insight into what drove him. Rooted in different cultures, he rejoices in a new Asia re-emerging on the global stage. His non-Chinese view of China opposes a widespread western perception that China's actions somehow threaten peace and stability in the world. Mahbubani's analysis of the role of raw power in global politics is sobering. He watched and experienced it at close range. Mahbubani freely admits that he had detractors, both in Singapore and outside, and tries to understand their criticisms of him. One can sense the pain he must have felt writing those paragraphs. As the



Founding Dean, Mahbubani was hugely responsible for the exceptional success of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Yet, even here, he faced many criticisms. Happily, he emerged stronger and more energized after each of life's challenges. He had more than his fair share. Mahbubani's memoirs are not only about foreign affairs, but also about an individual life in the Singapore story which would not be put down by misfortune or hardship. His story will inspire a younger generation of Singaporeans."

—George Yeo, former foreign minister, Singapore



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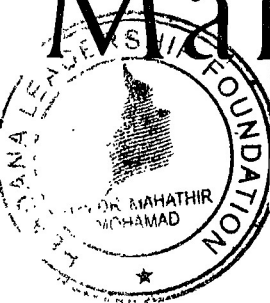
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*With gratitude to
my late mother,
Mrs Janki Mahbubani,
and
my late father,
Mr Mohandas Detaram Mahbubani,
for making Singapore my birthplace*





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CHAPTER 1

Born Poor

BLAME IT ALL ON THE DAMN BRITISH.

After effortlessly colonising the Indian subcontinent for a century or more, they royally screwed up their departure in 1947. The partition of British India into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India triggered a mass migration, with Muslims fleeing India to go to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs fleeing Pakistan to go to India. Riots and terrible communal violence accompanied these flights, resulting in a mass wave of killings. Up to eighteen million people were displaced, and two to three million people died as they tried to flee Pakistan and India.¹ My mother could easily have been among them.

As a young Hindu woman, she grew up in Hyderabad, Sind, where she was born on August 8, 1925. She was twenty-two when partition happened. Like many Hindus, she had to flee Pakistan. She managed to get on a train to India with my elder sister, Duri, who was just one year old. She was in the last car of the train with a few dozen other Hindu women, also with children. They were protected by a single Sikh guard with a single-shot rifle. In the middle of the night, their car was decoupled from the train, stranding all these Hindu women in the middle of the desert. If a Muslim mob had come along, they would have been raped and killed. It was a terrifying night. Fortunately, the next morning, another train came along and literally pushed her stranded car across the border into India. It was a close shave.

After her narrow escape from Pakistan in August 1947, she first ended up in Mumbai (then called Bombay), as she had many relatives there. These relatives helped to arrange a passage by ship to Singapore in January 1948, as my father had already moved back there, which was why I was conceived in Singapore and born there in October 1948. All this happened only because my father had been sent to work as a peon for five cents a day in Singapore in 1933, when he was thirteen years old. Hence, my being born in Singapore was an accident. I could just as easily have been born in any corner of the British empire, where the sun never set in 1948.

As independence approached in the Indian subcontinent in the 1940s, and as troubles between Hindus and Muslims increased (partly stoked by British divide-and-rule policies), my Hindu Sindhi ancestors began to flee from Hyderabad and

Karachi, where they were an imperilled minority. The killings began before partition. My father told me that a Muslim mob had brought the dead body of his brother to his family home in Hyderabad to ask if he was a member of his family. Wisely, the family had denied that the dead body belonged to them. If they had accepted it, they could all have been slaughtered. Given this violence (and it must be emphasised that both Hindus and Muslims carried out these killings), it's not surprising that my relatives fled to all areas of the earth to seek safety and prosperity.

One little-known fact about Sindhis is that they are remarkably entrepreneurial. When the Hindu Sindhis began to flee from what became Pakistan in 1947, they went to all corners of the world (often to cities where Sindhi merchants had already been operating since the late 1800s) and, amazingly, succeeded in many different environments. I can say this with confidence since I have first cousins sprinkled all around the globe: in Guyana and Suriname in South America, in Nigeria and Ghana in Africa, in Hong Kong and Tokyo in East Asia, and of course in Mumbai and Calcutta. I could just as easily have been born in any of these places.

The first stroke of good luck in my life was to be born in Singapore. I am absolutely sure that if I hadn't been born in Singapore, I wouldn't have had the life I have enjoyed. The accident that led to my being born in Singapore was a result of my father, Mohandas Mahbubani, having been orphaned soon after he was born in 1920. He was brought up by his sisters, who couldn't spare time for him as they had their own children to take care of. This was why his sisters sent him from Sind at the age of thirteen to "Wild West" Singapore, where he worked

as a peon in a Sindhi textile shop. One reason Singapore was chosen was that one of his elder sisters had moved there with her husband. In theory, it was her responsibility to take care of him. In practice, she had little time to do so. She was focused on her own children and adjusting to a new country herself. As a result, my father grew up as an unsupervised young teenager in Singapore. Inevitably, he acquired many bad habits. He began to smoke, drink, and gamble. With these rough foundations, he ended up having a rough life. I discovered these facts only after I had become an adult. Hence, even though my sisters and I resented (and sometimes hated) our father when we were young, I came to forgive him when I understood that life had dealt him a very bad hand.

My father's life must also have been affected by the turbulence in Southeast Asia. Fortunately, he left Singapore just before World War II broke out and thus did not live there under the harsh Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. He returned to Sind to live with his relatives. While he was there, his relatives arranged a marriage with my mother, following traditional Hindu Sindhi customs. My mother had no clue that she was being married to a young man who had accumulated many self-destructive habits. Her Kirpalani family, a respectable clan, was happy that she was marrying into the supposedly prestigious Mahbubani clan. Almost all Asian societies are hierarchical. The Sindhis were no exception, and in the hierarchy of surnames, the Mahbubanis ranked high.

Having been brought up in a stable and conservative home, my mother had no idea of the turbulent life that awaited her after her marriage to my father. All her siblings, three brothers

and three sisters, ended up in stable and successful marriages; she was the exception. Since she ended up in Singapore, she was far from sibling support. There were no close relatives she could turn to (except that preoccupied sister-in-law), even though she experienced a great deal of turbulence as we were growing up.

We were poor. I first became aware of this at the age of six when I was put on a special feeding programme when I first enrolled in school.² All the Primary 1 boys were weighed when they joined Seraya School, and about a dozen of us were deemed to be underweight. At recess, we assembled in the principal's office, where a big pail of milk with a single ladle awaited us. Each of us drank from the ladle, happily sharing our germs and inadvertently boosting our immune systems. Being underweight was obviously not a positive state, yet I was lucky to be alive at six. My mom told me that when I was six months old, the doctor told her that I would not survive a bad case of diarrhoea. I could have become an infant mortality statistic in Singapore.

Our poverty was a direct result of my father's inability to hang on to a job for very long. At one point or another, his bad habits, especially drinking and gambling, would get in the way. He would also become violent, getting into fights after heavy drinking. My memory has erased some of my more dramatic encounters with my dad. Yet my oldest childhood friend, Jeffery Sng, whom I have known since the age of six since he lived less than a hundred metres from my home, remembers one of them vividly:

During the hot afternoon, we gathered inside the high-ceilinged living room to enjoy the cool air under the hanging fan. In the

evening, the family would move out to sit on rattan chairs in the veranda of our Peranakan-style³ bungalow to enjoy the natural breeze coming from outside. One day when we were on the veranda, shouts suddenly rang out from the street, accompanied by the sound of footsteps of people running. When I looked down, I saw the neighbours and our kampong⁴ boys running past our big gate towards the Crane Road junction at the head of Onan Road. I could not help being infected by the sudden burst of excitement from the street below and rose from my chair to rush out from my house and follow the neighbourhood boys running ahead towards Crane Road. As I approached the junction, a crowd was building up in front of the corner kopi-tiam.⁵ There was a large crowd, which spilled into the street, blocking off motor traffic. I pushed my way through the crowd, asking the onlookers in Malay and Hokkien dialect, "What's happening?" "It's a fight!" someone replied. As I nudged my way, body against body, to the front row, a police car arrived. A policeman was already walking past the tables on the shop floor towards the large counter where the shirtless Hylam Chinese owner was standing. People's attention was directed to a particular spot next to the large counter. They were looking at an Indian man standing by a table with a broken Tiger Beer bottle and a broken beer mug. His white shirt, wet with beer, was torn and spattered with blood. He had an unshaven square face and neatly pomaded shining black hair parted in the middle. It suddenly struck me that he was Kishore's father. The shirtless coffee-shop owner was standing nearby but hesitated to approach. Kishore's father, the object of attention, looked

drunk and fiercely defiant. Meanwhile, the policeman who came from the patrol car made his presence felt and started asking questions and waving his notebook. I couldn't hear what was said. Then I suddenly noticed that Kishore had shown up next to the policeman and was calling out loudly, "Dad, Dad!" He went up to his father and took his arm lightly, with an anguished expression. "Please come home, Dad," said Kishore. The Indian man with his torn shirt let himself be led by his son out of the kopitiam. The crowd parted to let the father and son pass through. I watched them cross the street together. Kishore's house was almost right across from the kopitiam. Kishore walked his father up the front steps leading to the door of the house. The door opened, and they disappeared inside.

The person most traumatised by this event must have been me, not Jeffery. Logically, I should be the one who remembers it and Jeffery the one who has forgotten it. Instead, the opposite happened. This episode made me aware of how faulty our memories are. We remember some traumatic events. We also forget a lot. Nonetheless, I recall similar events. One night, our neighbours knocked on our door to say that my father had fallen into a nearby drain while walking home drunk. I vividly remember pulling him out to bring him home. I have even more frightening memories of going to the door of our house to tell some Chinese gangsters (and debt collectors) that my father was not home while he quickly rolled under the bed to escape detection. I don't recall how the gangsters looked, but I'll never forget the look of absolute fear in my father's eyes.

He knew that he would be beaten very badly if the Chinese gangsters got hold of him. In some ways, we lived on the edge in many phases of my childhood.

While my father was often involved in violent incidents, he was not violent at home. If he became angry, he would take it out on objects, not people. My three sisters and I remember one incident well. For Hindu families, the main celebratory event of the year (similar to Christmas) is Diwali, the festival of lights. That's when we clean the house, buy new clothes, and indulge in eating a lot of sweets. One year, as Diwali approached, my father was prospering, and so he showered us with new clothes. He even bought a massive TV set that must have been five feet wide. A real luxury.

Unfortunately, he got into one of his usual drunken spats on the eve of Diwali and returned home angry. In his drunken anger, he took away all the new clothes he had bought us. He also carried the TV set out of the house. He piled up all the new luxuries in front of our home and set them alight, creating a huge bonfire that attracted the attention of the whole neighbourhood. Everyone came to witness it. Our then neighbours still speak about this memorable event today: the festival of lights, done rather differently.

Incidents like this were traumatic for us children. They must have been even more traumatic for my mother. Her reaction to these domestic troubles was to pray—a lot. She would wash little silver idols of Hindu gods such as Krishna and Ganesh first in milk, then in water. I would sit by her as she prayed in front of our little family altar. Given the many hours I spent praying with my mother in my childhood, I should have emerged as a

devout Hindu. Instead, the opposite happened. I felt restless and bored as she prayed, yet, as I sensed that the prayers helped her, I suppressed my boredom.

My father got into debt mostly because of his gambling, especially on horse races. Foolishly, he would take money (collected on behalf of his employer) and use it to gamble in the hope of striking it rich. He never did. He would lose the company funds, and as a result, he would lose his job as one Sindhi employer after another dismissed him for losing their money. Nevertheless, those Sindhi employers were kind and generous: they only fired him. The big mistake my father made was to accept a job from a respectable British firm, China Engineers. Initially, things went well. He earned more money from this more prosperous British outfit. Then the inevitable happened. He gambled away some funds he had collected on behalf of the firm.

The British, being British, played by the rules and reported this theft to the police, who arrested my dad. On October 30, 1962—six days after my fourteenth birthday—he was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment for criminal breach of trust. He was jailed in Outram Prison, which had been built by the British in 1847. As the only other male in the family, I was designated to visit him. These were not happy occasions. I had to take several buses to travel to the prison, which was far from our home. We often had to wait outside the prison until the visiting hours arrived. During our visits, I could not touch or hold him. We could speak to each other only through a window. He said little. I said little too. But the ritual of visiting seemed to help him. All I remember is feeling sad whenever I visited him.

While my father was in jail, my mother took the brave step of going to the government's Legal Aid Bureau—which had been set up just a few years earlier, in 1958—to initiate proceedings for a legal separation from my father. It must have taken a great deal of courage, as she had no legal experience or knowledgeable friends to help her out. Fortunately, her brothers in Suriname and Guyana were doing well in business and sent money to keep us going when my father had none. However, my mother had no relatives in Singapore to help her with practical matters or provide psychological support. Hence, at the age of fourteen, I became the second senior adult in the house. I accompanied my mother to the Legal Aid Bureau to obtain the separation papers.

My father was informed of the separation while he was in jail. Legally, he had no place in our home after the end of his prison term. Still, we dreaded the day of his release, fearing that he would forcibly try to enter our house. Our house in Onan Road had once had very attractive colourful glass windows facing the street. However, one year, in one of his usual fits of rage, my father had thrown stones at them and shattered them. We had no choice but to replace them with ugly metal grilles. We felt comforted by those metal grilles on the day of his release from prison.

Sure enough, straight out of jail, my father appeared in front of our Onan Road home. He didn't try to force his way in. He sat in the coffee shop opposite for several hours and then left. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

The legal separation turned out to be a blessing. My father rented a room and earned just about enough to keep himself

going. We survived with the support of welfare payments from the state and the checks we received from my mother's brothers in Guyana and Suriname. It was always a pleasure to accompany my mother to the post office to cash a banker's draft that had come in the post. The money would be sent in British pounds. In those days, we got 8.5 Singapore dollars for each British pound. Today, you can get barely 1.7 Singapore dollars for each British pound.

The poverty that my family, as well as our Malay neighbours, experienced created many challenges and handicapped us in many ways. It prevented the full education of my sisters. My elder sister, Duri, left school at the age of twelve; my younger sister Vimu left school at sixteen; and my youngest sister, Chandra, left at eighteen. All our Malay neighbours also dropped out before they could graduate from secondary school.

I believe Jeffery Sng and I were the only two children from our section of Onan Road who ended up in university. Why were we the exceptions in our poor neighbourhood? At that time, university was not considered a necessary or even useful preparation for many occupations. We both had strong mothers who protected and nurtured us. We both accidentally discovered the Joo Chiat Public Library in our childhood and became voracious readers from a young age. Indeed, many of our childhood peers ridiculed Jeffery and me for the time we spent reading books.

While these personal factors were important, there were also larger national forces at play. If Jeffery and I had grown up in one of the British colonies that became either a failing or failed Third World nation, we wouldn't have completed our

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—GEORGE YEO

Kishore Mahbubani is a veteran diplomat, student of philosophy, and celebrated author; his nine books and numerous articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, and *Foreign Affairs* have earned him global recognition as "the muse of the Asian century."

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