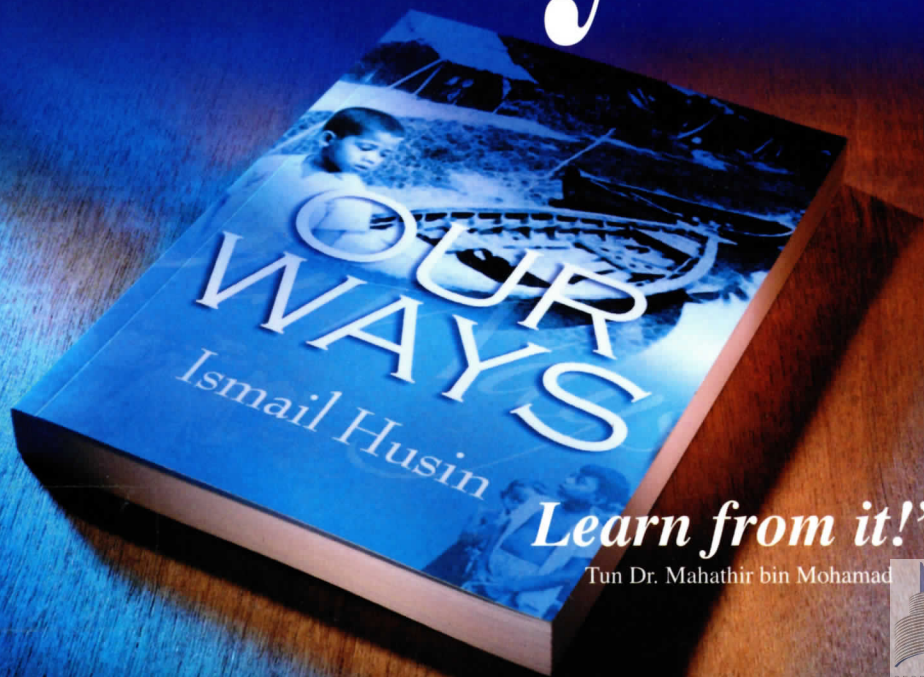


*"This is who we are..."*

# Our Ways

*Ismail Husin*



*Learn from it!"*

Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad



*With Compliments  
From*

**DEWAN PERHIMPUNAN  
MELAYU KEDAH**

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# Our ways

*Ismail Husin*

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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DEWAN PERHIMPUNAN MELAYU KEDAH



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# CONTENTS

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Foreword	vi
Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Chapter 1 The Day Before	1
Chapter 2 Merdeka	10
Chapter 3 The Rainy Season	17
Chapter 4 Harvesting Season	23
Chapter 5 The Changes Begin	30
Chapter 6 Secondary School-days	39
Chapter 7 More Changes	46

Chapter 8 <b>STAR</b>	50
Chapter 9 <b>At the University of Malaya</b>	59
Chapter 10 <b>Double Cropping</b>	73
Chapter 11 <b>In Government Service</b>	83
Chapter 12 <b>Matana Sdn Bhd</b>	102
Chapter 13 <b>The Recession</b>	113
Chapter 14 <b>The Great Shock</b>	121
Chapter 15 <b>Searching for the Right Way</b>	137
Chapter 16 <b>The Right Way</b>	147
Chapter 17 <b>More Business Opportunities</b>	158

<b>Chapter 18</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>The Hajj of 1990</b>	
<b>Chapter 19</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>Market Fever</b>	
<b>Chapter 20</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Sourcing for Hardware</b>	
<b>Chapter 21</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Illness And Recovery</b>	
<b>Chapter 22</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>The Bad Times Return</b>	
<b>Chapter 23</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>The Road to Recovery</b>	
<b>Chapter 24</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>The Ana-Mat Foundation</b>	
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>238</b>



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# FOREWORD

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We seldom come across story books about poverty and poor living conditions in remote villages and the changes there after our country achieved independence. We now have better infrastructure and more commerce, industry, etc. throughout Malaysia. OUR WAYS is dedicated to this development.

The narration is in simple language; the story is interesting and able to keep readers wanting to read till the end.

The story is relevant especially to young Malaysians who wish to get a correct and better understanding of our past and the present, and so be more prepared for the challenges ahead. The need to work hard, strive for excellence and to be resilient will enable our youths to lead a better life and drive Malaysia to greater heights.

I recommend this book to our young generation.



Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad

# PREFACE

---

This is a story about life before and after Malaya gained its independence in 1957 and the changes after that (with the formation of Malaysia in 1963) until the year 2003. Beginning a day before independence, the story revolves around Ahmad, then an eight-year-old son of a poor paddy farmer in a remote village in Kedah. Independence enabled him to attend an English-medium secondary school, graduate from the University of Malaya and become a government officer. Seeing business opportunities, he went into the construction business and became very successful. Later he teamed up with Ng, his former hostel room-mate while studying in the university, in brick manufacturing and had it listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.

As the country developed, ways of living and the value system of the people changed. The changes in the ways of living from the days of poverty with slippery roads and plenty of leeches to double cropping of paddy cultivation with tarred paths right to farmers' houses, are vividly described. Also narrated are the ways of life and aspirations of some of the very rich and successful Malaysians, resulting from Malaysia's spectacular economic growth.

The story goes on through the difficult times as well: the recession of 1985, currency speculation crisis of 1997 and 1998 and the negative responses to Malaysia's prescriptions said doomed to fail but proved otherwise, and how Ahmad and Ng coped up with those drastic changes.

Positive values like the need to be hardworking, to strive for excellence and the ability to cope with changes during good and bad times, paving the way to success and happiness, are revealed in the story.

I hope readers especially those in secondary schools and studying in institutions of higher learning will find the story informative and interesting as well as be able to correctly understand our past and our present better and be more prepared for the future.

Also by adopting those positive values they will find life more pleasant. Striving for the better is an inherent and important part of it. With such qualities among our youths, Malaysia will continue to be a very peaceful place, continue to prosper and become a developed nation in 2020 or even sooner, benefiting all, Insyah-Allah.

Ismail Husin

August, 2004

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Many thanks are due to the Kedah Public Library Corporation, Kedah Museum and the Muda Agricultural Development Authority for giving their permission to use their photographs in OUR WAYS.

Sincere appreciation goes to my wife, Che Som bt Zabidi, who is very supportive and has yet to complain for waking up in the wee hours to prepare my hot drinks, and my children for helping me with the computer which I am yet to be proficient.



## Chapter 1

# THE DAY BEFORE

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It was the day before Independence. Our class teacher announced that the next day would be a holiday. My class of eight-to ten-year olds exploded in joy. We did not realise the significance of the event. To us all holidays were wonderful and causes for celebration in themselves.

The bell rang. Actually, the ‘bell’ was a long iron bar hit several times with an iron rod by Imran, a Standard Five pupil, who happened to be the headmaster’s son. Besides being entrusted with the august task of signalling the start and end of school, he was also the only pupil to wear a wristwatch.

The pupils filed out of the classrooms to make their way home. Most of them walked the mile or two to their homes while a few rode bicycles. There were about twenty bicycles belonging to both teachers and pupils’ parents parked under a large *angsana* tree behind the school.

I was one of the lucky ones. As I made my way to the tree, I saw that my sister Fatimah, was already there waiting for me. I would ride with her on our father’s old but famous Raleigh. My father was one of the few in Sanglang, our village, to own a bicycle. Ah Seng, one of the three shopkeepers in the village, had told him that Raleigh was the best make in the world. It was an English make, therefore it was superior. I observed that every part - the tyres, pedals, dynamo,

light bulbs - was manufactured in the nation our teacher described as the richest, the most powerful on earth and having widespread colonies including our country, Malaya.

As she pedalled, Fatimah chattered on, telling me about her day and checking if I had done the necessary for the celebrations the following day. Being older, perhaps she understood the significance of this holiday better than I did.

“Mat, have you collected your new shorts for tomorrow’s parade?”

“I will, after Qur’an lessons.”

“You had better get it before that.”

My name is Ahmad bin Ali. Everyone calls me Mat and my sister Timah. We Malays like to shorten names for convenience. Similarly my friend Mansor is called Chot while Hasyim is known as Chin.

Fatimah was not a girl guide but “be prepared” seemed to have been her motto in life, even from a young age. She could not abide by what she considered to be my sluggish ways, and often scolded me. Sometimes, when she found scolding less than effective, she would resort to more physical punishment, pinching me, with her hand over my mouth to prevent my parents from hearing my screams of pain. She did not have much opportunity though as I am fleet of foot and would take to my heels whenever I saw a certain look in her eyes and realised what was coming. Despite our differences, we had a deep and abiding love for each other that nothing could shake.

When we arrived home, we had lunch in the kitchen as was customary. We sat with our parents in a circle on the mat, with our food laid out in the centre. As usual, before every meal, our father recited a short prayer, thanking Allah for His blessings. Then we dug

## THE DAY BEFORE

in. It was our standard fare - white rice with freshwater fish caught in the paddy fields. My mother alternated between frying the fish, steaming it or making curries.

Freshwater fish were plentiful. All farmers had at least one net to catch them. Their sizes were very much dependent on the season. At the beginning of the planting season, most of the fish were small, having just been hatched. By the time the paddy was ready to be harvested, most were quite large. Fatimah was already able to help mother in the kitchen, having mastered the basics of cooking while I, being a boy, was not expected to learn this skill.

Once or twice a week, we would vary our menu with fish caught from the sea. Saltwater crabs and prawns were considered delicacies, to be had only once a month or so. Mother would purchase them by bartering our chicken or duck eggs, ripe coconut or rice. Like the other village women, she got her supply of sea fish, prawns and crabs from a fishmonger who peddled barefoot through the village every morning. The fishmonger, who balanced two baskets on a pole across his thin shoulders, got his supply from the small coastal fishermen in Kuala Sanglang, two miles away from my village.

Beef, chicken and even milk were considered luxuries in paddy farming communities, only to be had during festive occasions such as *Hari Raya Puasa*, which marks the end of the fasting month and *Hari Raya Haji* which falls on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the Muslim month of Hajj. Of course, these luxuries were available to all during wedding feasts, to which the entire village would be invited. In addition, some farmers who reared buffaloes would have fresh milk for months when their animals calved.

We finished our meal. After lunch it was my duty to collect the firewood my father had chopped a few days earlier and left to dry in the sun. I would carry the wood to the kitchen, where it would be

used for cooking purposes.

Fatimah would use the wood to boil water to make hot black coffee for father and sweet tea for the rest of us, before she cleaned our lunch mat and washed the pots and pans.

After my afternoon bath, I put on a sarong with a *teluk belanga* shirt and proceeded to collect my new shorts for the celebrations as my sister had told me to. Then I went to Haji Ariffin's house for my Qur'an lesson.

As usual, my ever-punctual sister was there before me, seated in the girls' corner. She displayed considerable talent and was able to recite the Qur'an superbly. Haji Ariffin and his wife were constantly reminding us of the importance of reciting the Qur'an correctly, with the correct grammar, pronunciation, intonation and pauses between words. He told us that there were 6236 sentences in the Qur'an, the final revelation by Allah to mankind and djinns through the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him (PBUH).

Of course, none of the attempts from our little circle could compare to the recitals we heard over the radio. There was only one radio in the village and it belonged to Penghulu Mahmud, the administrative head of the *mukim* of Sanglang, which consisted of some ten villages. He always kept his radio on loud, so that it could be heard even half a mile away. It was a very good radio. People said it was made in England, like my father's Raleigh, and was powered by wet rechargeable batteries. As I had yet to step into his house at that point, I could not say for sure.

Our class with Haji Ariffin was quite large. There were some 30 students, with boys seated in one corner and girls in the opposite corner. Before the classes commenced, the bigger boys would help chop firewood while the smaller ones would collect water from the ponds to fill the big clay water container in the kitchen to be used for

drinking and washing purposes. Every day we had also to fill to the brim another clay water container next to the staircase. We all had to wash our feet before ascending the front steps of a Malay house. We seldom put on shoes, sandals or slippers. We would only put these on during festivals, but this too, only when the weather permitted. It was not possible to put anything on your feet during the rainy season as you would be forced to trudge for miles in the soft muddy ground which would submerge shoes and even bicycle tyres.

Haji Ariffin and his wife taught on a voluntary basis every afternoon. After every harvest most of their students' parents would give a portion of the compulsory tithe known as *zakat* from their annual harvest to the couple. Students took turns to read a few sentences from the Qur'an in front of them every day. The more capable ones like my sister could manage a whole page. When we had mastered our given allotment, we were taught the next few sentences or the next page. We were expected to practise these sentences over and over again so that we would be fluent when asked to repeat them in front of our Qur'an teachers the following day. Some of the slower students would have to repeat their sentences for days or even weeks before moving on. We always read in stentorian tones, which could be heard from a long way off. Haji Ariffin told us this would scare off the evil spirits who could not bear to hear the words of the Qur'an.

For the most part, we learned how to recite without understanding what we were reciting as neither Haji Ariffin nor his wife was fluent in Arabic. They had memorised the meanings of a few key chapters, particularly the *Al-Fatihah*, which must be read in every *solat*, and they encouraged us to do the same. The only one in our village who was fluent in Arabic was Haji Shafie, who had been sent to Mecca to study when he was just a child, and returned to Sanglang some twenty years later to take over as the village *imam* when his father, the old *imam*, passed away.

Our Qur'an class ended when all students had had their turn. The boys would race off to their various games. During the windy harvesting season, we brought out our kites and when the windy season was over we played tops, marbles and *sole*.

When it didn't rain, we could usually be found splashing about in the river in front of Haji Ariffin's house. This was always the best part of the day for me. Smaller boys like me would leave our clothes on the river bank and dive into the cold, clear water. We all knew how to swim. During our initial forays in the river, there would always be some older boys there to teach us the basics of swimming. Before we were adept, we would be required to hold on to ripe coconuts or the trunk of a banana tree which acted as floats. We played games and had all manner of contests with each other, trying to see who could swim the fastest, last the longest underwater and make the most beautiful dive from a tree branch.

The girls were accorded less freedom. They had to make their way home straight after the Qur'an class; some tending to the few flowering plants in front of their houses before helping their mothers prepare the evening meal. In most cases this involved heating up the leftovers from lunch. Only the white rice was freshly cooked for dinner.

The boys would obediently cease their games when they heard the big drum at the mosque signal the evening *maghrib* prayers. Rushing home that day, as always, I refilled our two kerosene lamps and lit them, one for the kitchen and the other for the rest of the house. At 8 pm, we had our dinner followed, as with lunch, by hot sweet tea while Father enjoyed his black coffee.

"Tomorrow, we will be independent. No more being ruled by the British. Our own people will manage our country. We will be better off" father said, rolling tobacco inside a dried young *nipah*

shoot for his nightly cigarette.

“Are you sure we will be better off?” countered mother, shaking her head doubtfully.

“You were there last week. You heard what our UMNO leaders said” father replied.

My parents had to sell two chickens and three ducks to Ah Seng to cover the boat trip to Kodiang to listen to speeches by some UMNO leaders.

“Yes,” said mother, “I remember. But can they really do what they have promised ... to improve the lives of our people? What if they fail and with all the English people gone back to their country, the Japanese army will come again. Oh no, please no!”

“No, mother, the Japanese army will not come back,” Fatimah said, reassuringly. “My teacher told us that they are now weak and poor. They have promised the Americans not to make war or conquer any other country after being defeated in the Second World War.”

Father finished his cigarette in silence. He extinguished it and turned to mother telling her that as simple people, we had to trust our leaders and support them wholeheartedly, even if it meant supporting them with our lives.

“I am not against independence. I don’t have anything against our leaders. I was impressed with what they said they would do for us and *Insyah-Allah*, they will succeed. But I do not want to go through what we went through during the Japanese Occupation period again – no food, no clothing, no kerosene, no flour, no peace,” mother replied.

# OUR WAYS

*“ It was the day before Independence. Our class teacher announced that the next day would be a holiday. My class of eight-to ten-years olds exploded in joy. We did not realise the significance of the event. To us all holidays were wonderful and causes for celebration in themselves.”*

It was in fact a celebration of sort for Ahmad bin Ali, an eight-year old son of a poor paddy farmer in a remote village in Kedah. His journey through life runs in tandem with the developments of a post independent Malaya. His bare-footed frolics in the muddy sludge of the paddy fields ends when Malaya’s leaders, buoyed by self-rule, initiate policies that lead to opportunities for a bumiputra like him to attend an English-medium school, graduate from the University of Malaya and become a government officer. As Malaysia progresses and industrialisation beckons, Ahmad becomes an entrepreneur with help from his Chinese ex room-mate in University of Malaya. It is this last journey that is most challenging for Ahmad as he grasps between wealth and the morals of a simpler life of yesterday.

It was the authors’s yearning for the young to understand the nation’s post independence triumphs and failures that prompted the writing of the book. His desire is to inspire youths to have positive values as this will lead to greater achievements.

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