

MALABAR TO MALAYA

Ravindran Raghavan

# MALABAR TO MALAYA

*Ravindran Raghavan*

We came from Malabar  
(Kerala, India) to serve the  
British rubber plantations  
in Malaya and never  
saw our homes again!

It was a one-way  
journey 3-generations ago.



# MALABAR TO MALAYA

*This is a story about my ancestors' journey out of India, that caused them to lose their entire family "tree" and "home"*

*The historic journey was the seed that planted me in the progressive country called Malaysia*

Ravindran Raghavan

This is a condensed edition. Full version (336 pages) is available on

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# THANK YOU

## A special thank you

... to those who may have been a positive touch-point in some part of my journey. Your small tweaks helped me achieve a great deal in navigating the troubled waters and reach my goals.

## And I have not forgotten

... those who gave me trouble and caused more mess than necessary. You know I do not appreciate those contributions and I do not say “you taught me valuable lessons in life”. No, I have not forgotten those great deeds!

## To my readers

... this is my story the way I want to remember it. I am narrating this from my own narrow perspective of historical events, the little memory of my world and the few memorable experiences.

This is not a history book, just enjoy my journey as seen through my eyes.

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RAVINDRAN RAGHAVAN

# PART 1 THE STARTER

## CHAPTER 1.1

# LOOKING BACK FROM DUBAI, 2017

This is my journey through life since 1965. My grandfather might say that this is an untold story of a Malayalee immigrant from Malabar who migrated to Malaya in search of a better future and never to return for 3 generations! The lost social network of one generation led to the lost roots of our entire family tree.

I was born in a plantation house (not a hospital) and my birth certificate was "processed" in a police station. That is how I arrived earth in 1965.

Grew up in the rubber plantation, soon to become unpaid underaged labour helping my parents tap rubber trees starting at 04:30 in the morning amongst the mosquitoes and snakes; smacking into spider webs between the trees and getting my socks soaked with water from the wet bushes surrounding the rubber trees.

Our dining table starts with a perfect setting after pay-day and dwindles into a lack of food by end of the month. The vicious cycle seems to never end year after year.

Fortunately, in the years to come, I graduated as a Chemical Engineer and that changed our "fate" by placing food on our table consistently. As I set sail on my career, my life took various positive turns that brought me to be a Company Director, occasionally signing cheques with six digits in them (in Malaysian Ringgit!).

I must thank the Malaysian government that gave affordable education,



health care and a great economy that helped me climb through these steps of life.

As I look out of my office window on the 33<sup>rd</sup> Floor of Latifa Tower, Dubai, I see that it took me 7 hours to travel 5,236 km on Emirates flight EK347 to get here ... but it took me many million hours to crawl out of the poverty that I was born into.

This book shares some of the turbulent and smooth parts of my journey that took me through episodes of pain, gain, glory and gratification.



*The Raghavan family 1972*


*From left ... my sister (Prema) dressed like a boy (!), dad (Raghavan), me (looking harmlessly innocent), mom (Kaliani) and my brother (Jeghathish) with his baby hairstyle.*

## CHAPTER 1.2

## MY WORLD AND THE LARGER WORLD

THE WORLD AROUND ME		MY SMALL WORLD
The British Empire was flourishing and soon the term “the sun never sets on the British Empire” was evident	The 1800s	My ancestors were living happily in India
The large influx of indentured Indian labour and English educated supervisors into Malaya	The early 1900s	My great-grandfather came to Malaya and pioneered the extension of our lineage into Southeast Asia.  This was followed by two grandfathers and one grandmother
World War II. Japan invaded Malaya and the British troops ran home abandoning their “fertile” economic ground	1940	Japanese rule of Malaya continued till 1944.  My “grandpa troops” were running from point to point taking shelter from possible stray bombs and trying to avoid being recruited for the Death Railway project.
The insurgency of communist guerrilla after World War II.	1948	Both grandpas promptly got their NRICs and for the family thus

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Malaya introduced the National Registration Identity Card (NRIC)		maintaining the “legal residents of Malaya” status quo
Federation of Malaya became independent, 31 Aug 1957	1957	
Malaya-Singapore-Sabah-Sarawak merged to form “MALAYSIA”, 16 Sep 1963	1963	Nothing exemplary for us, my ancestors must have continued living their normal lives while listening to the news on the radio.
	March 1965	I was B O R N as the precious eldest child of two rubber plantation workers and joined the population below the national poverty line, March 1965
Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent country	Aug 1965	
	1971	Guthrie Group celebrated its' 150 <sup>th</sup> year anniversary  <b>At work</b> ... mom & dad received an anniversary celebration souvenir from the plantation company  <b>At home</b> ... still unable to fulfil Maslow's first hierarchy of needs i.e. struggling to have daily food on the table consistently
	1972	Enrolled in Malay medium primary school in Kluang, Johore

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	1978	Moved on to secondary school in Kluang, Johore and struggled to cope. School grades fell to the ultimate low levels.
Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister of Malaysia and sprung Malaysia onto the world map with various economic achievements	1981	Re-established my hold on education and became a Top-3 performer in school
	1985	Family income is still below the poverty line at approximately US\$10 per day. Admitted into the undergraduate programme with State scholarship
Malaysia's economy was flourishing, and jobs were plenty	1990	Graduated as Chemical Engineer. First job as Assistant Factory Manager at Guthrie Rubber Processing plant ... the same company where my parents were still rubber plantation workers!
	1991	Project Engineer for a Finnish polymer pipe manufacturing company involved in submarine pipelaying projects.  NOW I was no longer counted as being below the poverty line!
	1995	Promoted as Technical Manager

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	1999	General Manager (ASEAN) for a US-owned fibre conduit manufacturing company
	2000	Started my own business, ROLINE and sold off in the next 6 years
	2005	Director (Malaysia/Singapore) for a multi-national shipping company
	2015	Shifted to Dubai to work as General Manager (at the Group CEO's office) for the same company
Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister for the second time!	2018	I published my book!

**PART 2 FAST  
FORWARD, my journey  
of 245,669 miles**

## CHAPTER 2.1

### BORN ON A WOODEN BED

*I was born in a plantation house (not a hospital) and my birth certificate was "processed" in a police station. That is how I checked in to earth in 1965.*

*Grew up in the rubber plantation, soon to become unpaid underaged labour helping my parents tap rubber trees starting at 04:30 in the morning amongst the mosquitoes and snakes while smacking into spider webs between the trees.*

This is a journey of 53 years that saw me transform from being a rubber plantation worker to a graduate Chemical Engineer, a Manager and now a Company Director.

Thanks to the British Empire and its conquest of Malaya, the chain of actions hit the reset button on my family tree causing my roots to be permanently erased from its original history and re-started in Malaya (now Malaysia with a “reborn” Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamed in 2018).

I am enjoying the fruits of my grandparent's sacrifices. Going back to the core problem, you read it right the first time, we did not have sufficient food on the table frequently. By "frequently" I mean about 5 days each month between February to June when rubber tappers earnings are low. That was a core problem that needed fixing.

My "conscious childhood" started in a rubber plantation, greeted daily by spiders with webs constructed among rubber trees, snakes that pass by in transit, armies of ants around the house and termite moulds around rubber trees.

I had my first encounter with a black cobra at the age of 4 when dad with another three neighbours killed a cobra near our house. We play with small spiders in a variety of manner. We lock them in matchboxes, feed them with chillies and participate in spider fights with the neighbourhood kids.

Starting from scratch, wading through the turbulent waters of poverty and crawling out to the brighter world was a journey filled with hard lessons.

I am sitting at the lobby of Sofitel Hotel, Chicago wording this chapter and looking back on my long journey of life that brought my genetic code from British India to be "germinated" in the Malay peninsula (Malaya) and jobs that took me to the rest of the world.



### Looking back ...

I must be exaggerating my hunger stories. Statistically, I probably had insufficient food for not more than 5 meals in a month during the low period.

But being a kid, one insufficient meal felt like the world is crumbling.

### Looking forward ...

I have gained my rights to boast. Google says I have travelled 245,669 miles covering, 189 cities in the world within 23 countries

& worked (or have done something that pays money) in 11 countries, and

... and I feel good about it!

This is clearly boasting about myself and you can white out this part if you hate it.

## CHAPTER 2.2

# THE NEW SUNSHINE

March 1965 was historic for my parents when I was born at home to Raghavan, my dad (**Konda's 4th son**) and Kaliani, my mom (**Chatu's eldest daughter**).

Mom had her contractions too soon and with the lack of transport facilities within the plantation, she was not able to get to the town hospital fast enough for the new arrival. Their "new sunshine" was born at home aided by my paternal grandma. Daddy decides that his son is named Ravindran meaning the King of the Sun.

Know what? A **police report** had to be lodged to get a birth certificate issued for me. Thus, my birth certificate was handwritten by a policeman and issued by the Kluang District Police Station!

Being the eldest son, I was the most important thing to happen in my parents' life at that point and all attention was given to ensure my superb upbringing.

The house where I was born is a single bedroom plantation house which was a black **wooden house with no toilets**. Painted black to prevent termite attacks and wood borers, I guess! ... or just because that was the cheapest available paint! Common toilets were available - four for every 8 houses. The whole house was probably slightly larger than an average bedroom today.

When I was around 2 years old, we moved to a brick house painted light yellow with a black bottom margin. The black margin painted at the bottom of

the wall prevents moss and dirt (I assume). In today's term - it was a semi-detached corner house!! **How was that??**

*The baby that was "Ravi", 1965*

*That big black dot on the  
forehead is not a birthmark, it's  
a "bad omen deflector" mark  
made of burnt-rice paste.*

*A norm in those days.*



Fortunately, this improved house had built-in bathrooms (with a flimsy door) and a kitchen with no door. The whole house was pretty much a 50 feet x 50 feet maze, which, over the years had memories painted on every brick, tile and pillar.

I must say this was a comfortable house that served our needs. We lived in that same house from 1966 till 1995 when it was finally torn down by the plantation management paving way for new development.

When I was three, my sister was born in Kluang Hospital and this time around we had a private taxi to take mom to the hospital! I can vividly remember mom having pain, then in hospital and arriving back with my baby sister. And there comes **responsibility!**

I was assigned to feed her every evening. The concept of fresh milk was pretty much unknown in our area back then.

Babies were either

- a) breastfed with free milk, like me or

- b) fed with “expensive” milk made from fortified powdered milk (usually imported from Australia) where Dumex was a popular brand or
- c) cheap milk made of sweetened condensed milk in which Dutch Lady was the number one brand.

My sister was not lucky enough to be breastfed full time, so mom assigned me to feed her Dumex “milk in a bottle” during evenings. Dad specifically ensured that we use Dumex powdered milk and nothing less.

And guess what, bottles then were made of cheap plastic which when squeezed, dispenses the milk faster ... I became an expert at this soon. That is how my sister grew to be healthy “force” in the house!!

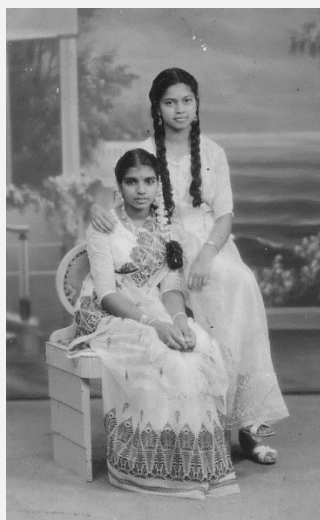
There are very few incidents that I can remember until my brother, Jeghathish, was born. One clear memory is that of Visalatchi, my cousin who is much older to me. She stayed with us for most parts of her secondary education and we called her "**Mani**". She was my dad's favourite "daughter" until my sister was born!

*The two beautiful young women ... my mom  
(seated) and Mani*

After secondary education, Mani got a job as a teacher in the Elaeis Estate Tamil School. Soon she got married to Ramakrishnan (then a plantation Assistant Manager) and left us.

Early childhood was never a bore - with grandma (paternal grandma) taking care of Suresh (my partner-in-crime), his sister, my sister and myself. Dad was closer to his youngest brother and only sister than to anyone else ... **Why so?** Aha! That's where the **juicy gossip** is, and we will explore the details later!

Most of my childhood memories revolved around my house, Suresh's



house and the plantation environment in general.

*Back then I used to think - dad's rubber tapping background coupled with his marriage to mom when she was just 15 did not give the family much of a headstart financially.*

*Why didn't he get an education?*

*Wasn't that one of the few means of upgrading their social status and financial wellbeing? Let's come back to that later.*

## Suresh Kumaran, the king of spider fights

Let me digress here

My cousin brother, Suresh, was well known as the **King of Spider fights** within our circles for a long time. He usually has the best spiders and winners. He had the skills, the will and the persistence to find and keep great spiders; and to feed them with the right amount of chilly!

Suresh, was my permanent companion, my partner in crime as you may call it. Cycling together, playing hide and seek in the plantation, exploring new frontiers when they uproot old rubber trees and checking out unattended rambutan trees for free fruit. He was not only more adventurous than me but also had more guts.

Suresh was great at playing marble games. “Slow pitek” was his favourite word! This is a warning rule set to the opponent that he would lose the next strike if the current strike is too slow. In his own “rule of the international marble confederation” a slow strike means one where the marble that got hit did not move more than six inches. Often, Suresh would con the opponent into believing that six inches are measured using his elbow.

He “kills” most opponents in rubber band games and card games as well. No one in our neighbourhood ever got close to his professionalism in

executing his strategies in those games.

## Selling brinjals

We went to Suresh's house when my parents went to work, and my aged paternal grandma took care of us. Suresh's neighbour was Uncle Narayanan (dad's elder brother) who had a reasonable vegetable garden with lots of brinjal plants. **One fine day Suresh & I decided to 'sell' brinjals!** So, we dragged Uncle Narayanan's unfinished birdcage to Suresh's house and plucked every piece of visible brinjal from his plants! Arranged them on the cage rack and displayed for sale!!

Our business venture lasted only until Suresh's dad came home for lunch and chased us under the bed. He then probably took the brinjal's back to Uncle Narayanan (also his brother).

The mystery remained unsolved on what eventually happened to those brinjals, but Uncle Narayan was too busy with his backlog bicycle repair that we were never reprimanded by him.

## CHAPTER 2.3

### DAYS IN A “CAGE”

This “cage” is called “aaya kottai” in Tamil. Aaya kottai is the Tamil term for a creche, and the creche is a 1950s version of the child-care nursery. Aaya means the nanny and kottai mean cage!

Creches were pretty much like a large cage with a brick or wooden bottom half wall with a fence like material on the top half. Children were “locked” in here while parents were at work - and we had one nanny per about 20 children of 1 year old until 7-year-old.

One fine day our grandma decided to return to her eldest son's place in Pamol Estate and that is our Uncle Velayutham - dad's eldest brother who then worked as an Engine Driver in Pamol Oil Mill. Alas! Reality sets in. My choice of going to Suresh’s house, stealing brinjals or monkeying around is coming to an end. We shall go to the creche??

Dad was aghast and in a hasty decision, he got mom to stop working and stay home taking care of us. He felt that the kids needed better attention than the creche. Meanwhile, Suresh was sent to the creche by his parents. He conquered his worries and soon became the 'ringleader' there. I had a wonderful time with mom at home, not knowing that at backstage mom & dad was playing 'wayang kulit' trying to match income to expense. This was the time when I learnt my alphabets, numbers and some new stories.

By the way, “wayang kulit” means shadow play, where puppet figures are used to show the shadow on the screen while a narrator runs the story to the crowd.

I started going to Primary 1 - happily spending 30 sen a day buying specifically fried noodles (10 sen), 2 curry puffs (10 sen) and one juice (10 sen) which was based on my dad's doctrine called "recommended and approved diet for recess time".

When the family income was RM150 per month, my pocket money was 4%! Our family balance sheet began to turn from bad to worse, coming to a point where we had to eat tapioca for lunch. Soon it became tapioca for lunch and dinner. The choice of tapioca was because it was free. Tapioca grew in my dad's vegetable patch and it was an easy choice.



*This is the "aaya kottai" (creche) where I was placed*

My pocket money? It changed from pocket money to bringing food from home which was rolled pancake every day. And soon I got really tired of it. It was really tiring after 20 days of the same stuff.

Eventually, after about two years of testing the one-man working formula, we gave up and mom resumed work at Lambak Estate Division 3. Mom cycled at 05.00am to the workplace which was 4 miles away.

Now we too went to the creche, joining Suresh and his sister!

My sister became extremely affected by this change causing her to have speech impairment. Mom and dad were worried sick of it but had no real choice. Suresh was our involuntarily appointed lead authority for the initial



days in the creche.

It took quite a while for my sister to regain her footing and adapt to the change. Thankfully her speech problem resolved itself and she is today an English teacher making full use of her talking skills.

### **A little digression ... chicken coup**

Dad self-designed a double storey chicken coup where he would rear chicks at Level 1 and move them to Level 2 when they become larger and heavier.



*Our double storey wooden chicken coup*

Usually, it will be a batch of 10 chicks and they mature by 2 months with the coordinate feeding. Dad was good at his construction skills as well as planning and managing the whole chicken growth cycle.

These are times when we had better management of our food sequence too.

## CHAPTER 2.4

# PRIMARY SCHOOL

January 1972 was my start of primary education. Given that I am from a plantation, there is no kindergarten to initiate our “schooling”. This step into a school is my first ever touch of a school. I was enrolled into Standard One Red at Tunku Mahmood School (1).

*Let me explain this encrypted code.*

*Standard One is the term we use to call Primary Year One. “Red” was the class denominator. During my time classes were referred by colours i.e. Standard One to Standard Six had Red, Blue, Green, Yellow in the order of exam certified intelligence of the kids in it!*

*And, interestingly we had two schools operating in the same premises hence mine was called Tunku Mahmood School (1) where there was another session operated by Tunku Mahmood School (2).*

*We switched the session each year, wherein, one “school” will operate in the morning 07:30 am to 01:00 pm and the other 01:00 pm to 06:30 pm. We had two sets of headmasters and teachers too!*

In the Malaysian education system, we start our primary education at 7

years old in Standard One and go on till Standard Six by 12 years old. That is the end of primary education and we move on the secondary schooling level

Our school, known as TMS in Kluang (popularly nicknamed as Thousand Monkeys' School!!) was then a very popular school. Thus, dad had my name submitted way back when I was 4 years old, just to guarantee a seat in that school.

My first day of school was never in a classroom - because I did not know where to go(!) and spent the entire afternoon just sitting outside the school office ... can't beat that stupidity! On the second day, my only friend, Umar bin Hamsa's elder brother, Ali bin Hamsa came to escort us into the class. He probably monitored us for the next few days we were such utter stupid guys who did not know how to go to class on our own.

*Interestingly ...*

*Ali rose rapidly in his career and became Tan Sri Ali Hamsa, the Chief Secretary of the Malaysian government. That is one unbeatable achievement for a plantation worker's child.*

My first two years were good. Always among the top 10 in class and by the second year, Suresh came into Standard One and we had a team, running together and falling in the mud one after another!! This is when I started speaking “broken” English with Suresh no matter how Malay or Malayalam it sounded. And soon we began speaking the best English in our school bus where 80% of Indian students were Tamil speaking!

By 1977, I have already passed the then Standard Five Assessment with one A and four Bs, ready to go into secondary school. My best friend for all those six years in primary school was Mukilan Murugesan. He was my only friend because no one else endured the boredom of being a friend to me. I don't play games, no extra-curricular activities, no movies, no weekend fishing and no television at home.

Mukilan's dad was a driver with Lembaga Letrik Negara, the National

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Power Board and he stayed at the government quarters near the Kluang Hospital. Probably we had many similarities in terms of shortcomings at home thus we successfully remained friends for a long stretch.



*With Mukilan, at 7-years old, at our primary school, 1972.*



*After crossing 50-years old, 2017.*

Mukilan drifted away by secondary school and we were barely in touch thereafter. Life took various turns for him and for me by the time we met again in 2012 ... thanks to Facebook.

My primary school experience is best described as dull with no real big achievements other than sustaining in the top class all the time. No prizes, awards or positions.

Interestingly ... Mukilan went on to complete his accounting qualification and became an accountant. His track took him through various changes and he is today the Head of a television channel in Malaysia.

He also took on an active role in some community service and socio-political movements

## CHAPTER 2.5

# MOM AND DAD'S EDUCATION

Let me re-examine the earlier question of “**Why didn’t my dad get an education?**” In short, my dad lost his normal education track due to the Second World War that disrupted Malaya’s normal functioning of schools and the country’s economy.

He caught up by attending adult classes and attained the Standard 7 Tamil qualification. Good enough to become a teacher or clerk or small-time government officer. But none of these happened. That failed outcome was probably due to his lack of guts.

*But dad is my hero. You bet I am going to downplay all his shortcomings and perceived failures!*

Dad was born in 1939 saw his short-lived childhood glory filled with memories of the Second World War<sup>1</sup>. Living in Wessington Estate, the family had a paddy field area near Rengam which helped feed them after the first bombs fell near the plantation.

Dad had his early education in a local primary school within Wessington Estate (where he also learned Telegu). The family were then still tending to

---

<sup>1</sup> Malaya was occupied by the Japanese from 1940 to 1944 during WW2. Incidentally the British masters walked steadily across the causeway into Singapore where they surrendered to General Yamashita (nicknamed the Tiger of Malaya).

their paddy fields while his father, Konda, was a toddy harvester while his mother, Parvathy, was a housewife.

*What in the world is toddy? Let's talk about this a little later!*

With his incomplete primary education, the family moved on to Lambak Estate near Kluang where my paternal grandfather, Konda took up a job as a rubber tapper. Konda had by then abandoned his toddy harvesting business and took on this new job.

Dad's education halted for a couple of years. By 1953 he resumed adult classes to sit for the then Standard Seven Tamil Examination. He was then a close friend of Periasamy the son of Solamuthu, who was the shopkeeper of Lambak Estate's local grocery shop. Dad passed the exam in 1956 and decided to pursue SC (Senior Cambridge Certificate) while working.

Dad went on and took up his first job as a teacher at the Ulu Remis Tamil Primary School near Layang-Layang (which was then another sleepy hollow within Johore). As a new teacher, he stayed at the given living quarters, ate at a designated tuck-shop which served fish curry and rice day in day out.

*Dad was not such an extrovert neither a fighter,  
he was a pampered second last child of the family.*

A continuous flow of fish curry and rice cooked up a storm in his stomach pretty soon. Dad began to hate his job, the place and diarrhoea. Within a short time, he left the job and guess what? He came back to Lambak Estate and soon became a rubber tapper! This ended his 'educated gentleman' stint.

How about mom?

She was educated in Paloh Tamil School until Standard Six and the next stage (Secondary One) was available only in Kluang, 25 km away, which was then connected by a one-hour scheduled train or a winding plantation road.

Her dad, Chatu, decided that she stops her education at that point as he was not ready to send his 12-year old girl on a train to such a distance. But then, no

real jobs were available for a Standard 6 Tamil educated 12-year-old kid. She took the natural step towards working in the plantation with her parents.

### As I was thinking ...

Maybe it is due to their own half education that my parents emphasized a lot on having a good education for us. Dad registered me in a town school back when I was only 4 years old just to ensure that I get a seat! He did not believe in Tamil education from the plantation-based school and neither do I.

The plantation school at Lambak Estate had serious shortcomings in proper teaching aids and committed teachers. There are many “loyal Tamil school supporters” who would disagree with me and call me a non-loyalist.

However, dad was an ardent supporter of Tamil learning as a third language. Malay was first and English second languages which are compulsory in national schools. He “forced” all of us to take up Tamil as a subject until our Secondary 5.

*Incidentally, I sat for the Tamil examination for the Malaysian government examination in Secondary Five and passed with a Credit.*

Don’t call me a non-loyalist unless you read, write and speak Tamil as good as me!

### Alas ... What is toddy?

Toddy is a liquor - sap tapped from the un-bloomed flower of coconut. My grandpa (Konda) was a good harvester and chose to do this after failing in his original grocery business.

*Toddy was a “killer” social diversion that probably affected much progress in plantation children's education.*

Back when the British brought Indians to work in the plantations, toddy was supplied through toddy shops in plantations as well as nearby towns.

The objective of making toddy easily available was probably to contain the workers within their “boundaries”. This helped workers spend most of their money locally and be trapped in plantation jobs.

True to the fact, there were many workers who would get drunk frequently and cause an uproar in their homes.

I remember a “drunkard” who used to make his extra earnings from minor carpentry and woodwork, then get himself drunk, and walk past my house loudly talking to himself. His “speeches” would cover various topics from the current issues at the plantation, workers problems to just singing some famous MGR songs!

“MGR” refers to the actor MG Ramachandran who was a big hit in the Tamil movies of those days. He was portrayed as a saviour of the working class; hence the plantation workers just loved his movies. Interestingly, MGR became the Chief Minister of the state of Tamilnadu, India in his later years!



## CHAPTER 2.6

# SECONDARY SCHOOL

The undoubted place we went on from TMS (primary) was into **High School of Kluang** which was originally called General English School (GES) then Secondary English School (SES ... unofficial abbreviation for Silly Elephant's School!) then Sekolah Menengah Inggeris Kluang (SMIK) and finally Sekolah Tinggi Kluang (or the English version - High School of Kluang).

A little explanation about secondary education in Malaysia ...

Secondary school is divided into lower secondary, upper secondary and pre-university.

Our lower secondary education consists of Form 1 (at 13 years old) progressing until Form 3 where there is a government examination to complete the Lower Certificate of Education (Sijil Rendah Pelajaran, SRP) to determine whether we get into the Science or Arts stream thereafter.

Upper secondary consisted of Form 4 and 5 ending with another government examination to complete the Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, SPM).

The last leg is the pre-university consisting of Form 6 with the Higher Schooling Certificate (Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia, STPM) as the completion milestone.

Form 1 and 2 was horrible. I was lousy at studies, the family financial situation was bad, again we had inconsistent food at home and my bad dressing!

*As I got into Form 1 at 13 years old, I had unknowingly positioned myself for a bumpy ride ahead. I gained all the habits, rituals and routines that were determined to make me fail.*

The home front was facing a financial crisis due to increasing costs and stagnant income. So that added to my combination of bad omen to make matters worse. This went on until the end of my Form 2 (i.e. Secondary Year 2).

Form 3 (i.e. Secondary Year 3) was an eye-opener - my eyes opened to reality! That is, being from a rubber tapper's family was I going to study medicine in Los Angeles with my dad's money and mom's political connections?? No man!! That was not going to happen. One inch of an error and I will have a reserved rubber tapping lot beside mom & dad! God! That was scary, and it made my spine chill ... with that terrorizing feeling, I began following some footsteps of my then friend Pang Sen Tong.

*A little diversion here ...*

*Sen Tong went on to study in Singapore and worked for the Public Utilities Board in Singapore. His uncle was my dad's good friend and a watch dealer. We bought my first Orient watch from him who was then living in Middleton Estate. Later the family moved to Rengam, Johore).*

*Sen Tong has since left his job in Singapore and is now running his own business.*

Sen Tong had a good habit of going through each completed page of our textbook prior to each exam.

Guess what? I had two years of unfinished work to go through as a preliminary readiness to embark on the contents of Form 3. And these “preliminaries” are now to run concurrently with my Form 3 work. And that's

exactly what I did - no more extra sleep, no more sleeping over rainy days and no more solo football (this was my favourite past time - playing football alone just thinking that I am the Maradona in the making!)

Since we had no television at home, deciding to study was easy and it was just a decision away. I don't hang out with the neighbourhood kids and by then I was also in bad terms with my cousin Suresh - so all of this was a perfect recipe to bury myself in books. That race never ended until completing school and am damn glad that I woke up that year! From Year 3 onwards I was either top 3 or top 2 in school until the end of secondary school ... the university was entirely a different story!



*Our English debate team after becoming Johore State Champions  
(at Muar, Johore)*

The climax of my glory in school was during my Form Six (pre-university). This is the time I became closer to my friend Anand who had been my classmate since Primary 1. Anand was a very stylish and the most well-dressed guy in our group (standing rightmost in this picture).

It was a good complimentary friendship since I was the worst dressed in a 1960s hairstyle! This picture was taken in High School Muar when we became the champions in the Johore state level English debate. Except for Stanley, the rest of us were also in the Young Scientist Research team and we were selected for the Esso & RTM programme.

## MALABARTO MALAYA

We appeared on national television in 1985 where our *Pandanus odoratus* plant research project was aired nationwide.

In Form 6, I was also selected to represent the Kluang District in a course called "Kursus Tatanegara" which was a good exposure though I was such an introvert with bad social skills (but great in studies). Met many students but one whom I am still in touch is Rajes Patel - now a high-flying lawyer in Kuala Lumpur.

*Rajes Patel (third from left) and me (third from right), Dec 1983*

*Rajes had been a friend and a "go-to" person for my many legal and corporate queries*



The Kursus Tatanegara participation gave me a far better altitude in life as it gave me the properly verified picture of the country and its challenges. My ignorance was high as I do not read newspapers (we could not afford them) and television news was limited.

## CHAPTER 2.7

# UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

The University of Malaya was my dream destination during Form Six. That being the top university in the country and situated in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, was a dream destination for most of us.

Once I got there, I then learnt about life away from home. Although our home was small with incomplete doors and we had inconsistent food, it was heavenly that all problems will be solved by mom and dad. In university, I am left to fend for my own and my university life was extremely stressful financially in the first year.

I first got to Kuala Lumpur<sup>2</sup> in June 1985 with no real idea of how I was going to “survive” except that I am admitted to the University of Malaya. End of day one, I and dad went to my mom's uncle's house in search of a place to stay. That’s Gopalan Aleppa and Alemma as I call them. They were our only known relative in KL but whom we have not met for the last 12 years! They were extremely kind and helpful even in the face of such a completely unplanned demand being placed on them to provide me with a place to stay. It was like a God-sent rescue. I stayed there, absorbed a little of KL lifestyle and started to adapt quite well.

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<sup>2</sup> Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, is referred to as “KL” and a well-known abbreviation all over the country.

## A little regret ...

Aleppa and Alemma ... I stayed at their home for about a month and that was the most educational part of my Kuala Lumpur initiation. I must have seemed quite dumb to them as I speak very little and I do not participate in any real conversations at home. I had a huge inferiority complex that pressed me down.



*Gopalan Aleppa and Kanagamani Alemma in their younger years.  
Photo courtesy of their daughter, Rahma Devi Chandran who now  
lives in Liverpool, UK*

The only thing that lifted my spirits is the fact that I have reached Kuala Lumpur and entered the University of Malaya on my own merits. Probably that was the only element that made Aleppa agree to allow me to stay there and he figured he should help a plantation kid in need.

I made it a point to visit them periodically all through my university days. And I kept this decorum all the way into my working life. I always felt that they were the pillars of support at a time when I was weak and alone i.e., they rendered help without having an expectation from me.

Sadly, I drifted away over time and did not meet them often enough during their older age. By the time both of them passed away, and I felt I could have met them a little more frequently.

## Adapting to Kuala Lumpur

Soon I adapted too well to the city that I failed one subject in Year 1 and was extended. In year 2, I missed most classes and was a full-time Executive Council member of the Tamil Language Society of the university. Was that an extreme stupidity or what?

By the final exam, I got worried pretty much like how it was in Form 3 in secondary school. That's when I remembered Tan Thiam Hock, a well-regarded counsellor, who finally drove some sense into me and also gave me a great tool to evaluate the situation and derive an action plan. his method works for me till today even for work

Step 1 was to disband my unnecessary active participation in socially connected activities like the Tamil Language Society and its antiquated politics.

Step 2 was to have a road map of my non-negotiable academic goals and stick to studying as the first priority because a Degree would make a great deal of a difference to my life. But I won't say Tamil Language Society was bad because it gave me some great insights into life and the parts which I never saw before.

Among other achievements in university, by 1988, I met the dream of my life ... Muthamah (called Thangam at home and Lya in my letters)

The first time I met her, though she captured all my sensible attention, I was consciously aware that I am a deep-rooted Malayalee and she is a Gounder with bonds in India. No way we can even think of going steady or getting married. That is not a possibility in this incarnation! Being an ardent Hindu then, that was the line of thought.

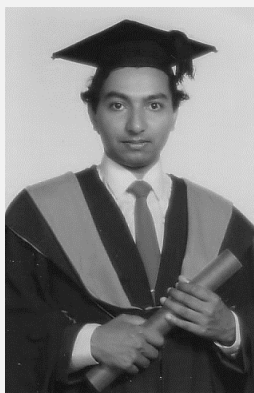
Why so? Because the Malayalees (migrants from Kerala, India) mostly considered themselves superior because many spoke English due to the schooling in missionary schools in Kerala. Meanwhile, the Gounders carry themselves with an extreme high pride among the Tamils (migrants from Tamilnadu, India) because Gounders are usually prudent financially and would generate revenue by various commercial activities besides just working.

Given the North Pole and South Pole synonym of both of us, plus the fact that we grew up traditionally with the belief that our life partners have to be from the same “clan”, it was unthinkable to ever go into a steady relationship.

But then who controls the heart? I used to write to her and must have written an average of about 3 letters per week narrating various happenings of my life. And in 2 years that works to a few hundred letters and several of them were more than 10 pages long. Man, where did I get all those thoughts and energy?

And guess what? The heart wanders into an unknown land, enjoys the adventure and sometimes settles there. And that's exactly what happened. We fell madly in love and by 1990 we were battling the truths & reality

*As I graduated and finally held the scroll  
that says “Bachelor of Engineering,  
Honours”*



By the time I graduated in July 1990, we had decided that we'll have to brave the controversies.

I went on to work in a rubber factory at Tebong Malacca ... a God-forsaken place where there are no phones in my company-provided bungalow. I had convinced my mom & dad by the middle of 1991 when she graduated - and it was at the graduation ceremony that her dad decided that he is going to accept the inevitable truth and finally agreed to our marriage.



## CHAPTER 2.8

### FIRST “REAL” JOB

In 1990 the job market was good with Malaysia's unemployment level standing at about 0.3%. I got a trainee job at Transwater Tenaga Sdn Bhd before getting my final results.

By the time I got my results, Guthrie had offered me the position of Assistant Factory Manager (sounds great right? but believe me, in a place like Tebong when you are a bachelor, it is the worst job I have ever had!)

Times changed since then. Responsibilities increased with my marriage in 1992, by which time I had shifted back to KL working for a Finnish firm, Forenede Plast M Sdn Bhd.

My career grew well with Forenede where I became the Technical Manager in 1997 under the management of Lai Ah Ying, my boss. At this time a new American company, Southwire Integral (M) Sdn Bhd offered me almost double the pay for a similar position based in Kuantan, Pahang. Naturally, I chose to shift to Kuantan and eventually became the General Manager of the merged company, Duraline Malaysia Sdn Bhd.

#### By the millennium ...

By this time, I have 2 kids, Thangam was working full time as a Dentist in Cheras, near Kuala Lumpur. By 2002 we had a third addition to the family.

I left Duraline in 2000 and started my own company **ROLINE SDN BHD**. “ROLINE” here meant **Ravi-on-line** equating to the explosive growth

of online businesses and the dot-com era.

I had expanded my business into several subsidiary companies i.e. Roline Asia Sdn Bhd, Roline Systems Sdn Bhd, Roline Ventures Sdn Bhd, Roline Shipping Sdn Bhd and Roline Ventures (India) Pvt Ltd.

After initiating, inducting shareholders and running some business each was either sold or re-organized. This group of companies took me into many different ventures ranging from import-export, information technology, to aluminium ingots and education.

At present, I am attached to a shipping company, IAL GROUP (Headquartered in Dubai) as the Director for Southeast Asia and General Manager in the Group CEO's office.

*You might still be looking for the 245,669 mile stretch of my journey!*

Well, to put the number in perspective, according to Google, that's the miles I have covered on earth in the last half-century of my life.

PART 3 THE JOURNEY  
THAT STARTED ON THE  
“RAJULA”

## CHAPTER 3.1

# MALABAR COAST, INDIA

*Taking a few steps back into history.*

*You have had a quick view of my journey.*

*Let me take you back a few years and see  
where all this started*

Malabar (Port of Calicut) was the epicentre of the pepper trade in the 1700s. For my ancestors, it turned out to be a one-way journey, from Malabar to Malaya and no turning back!

Four of my known ancestors came from Malabar coast of Kerala, India to work in Malaya<sup>3</sup> and never did go back. All of them essentially took a one-way journey and never saw their homeland ever again until death took them away from earth.

They never knew that they were indeed waving the final goodbye to all their siblings, friends, relatives, the shack they called home, the coconut trees, favourite cow, loyal dog and probably their heartthrob.

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<sup>3</sup> Malaya was the British name of this country. Upon independence and the onward merger of Singapore and East Borneo in 1963, the country was renamed as Malaysia.

Notably, Singapore left Malaysia in 1965 to become an independent nation.

## Ancestor 1: Kunjamboo Nambiar

**Kunjamboo Nambiar** was the first to set foot on Malaya, however, I know very little about his history. He was my great-grandfather (my mom's grandpa) who lived with his son in his older age. He lived long enough for me to know him and I have had several short conversations with him.



*Ancestor 2: Thamotharan (a.k.a Konda), my paternal grandfather*



*Ancestor 3: Chatu, my maternal grandfather*



*Ancestor 4: Parvathy, my paternal grandmother ... with lots of fond memories!*

## Ancestor 2: Thamotharan

**Thamotharan** (known as **Konda** in Malaya) travelled to Malaya with a vision to develop his spice business after serving the British (Indian) Military in the Kabul War. He lost heavily in his grocery business and lost his hope of

returning home. He moved to Wessington Estate<sup>4</sup> and settled down there with grandma.

I have never met him as he passed away well before my dad got married. He is said to be a strict man who speaks very little. But again, most “men” of that era that I knew were either strict and quiet or drunk and dancing. However, this is not a special characterization but just one of the types of personality in existence in that period of time.

### Ancestor 3: Chatu

Meanwhile, **Chatu** came to work with the British Railway in Malaya, the then newly formed Malayan Railway. Left the railway and married my grandma, came to the small town of Paloh and settled down in Sepuloh Estate. My mom was born there.

I knew Chatu as a strict grandpa who stays in command whenever we meet him. Though in front of grandma (his wife) he did not seem as much in control of the fort. I was never close to him as he was always in a grumpy mode with sharp questions. It looked like he would be a consistent state of “anger”. He could have been a soft-hearted soul but “what you see is what you get” and all we saw was his aggressive side.

*If Konda and Chatu were to meet me today, I would sincerely thank them for the invaluable sacrifice they made in 1902 that changed my destiny.*

*They lost their native home, but I found mine.  
Their journey ended here in Malaysia and mine  
has just started.*

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<sup>4</sup> This was originally owned by the Guthrie Ropel Group (UK) which was later acquired by Kumpulan Guthrie Berhad (Malaysia). Now owned by the Sime Darby Plantations Group and called Ladang Simpang Rengam in the southern state of Johore, Malaysia.

As of today, this is the only ancestor whom we have traced back to the past and my uncles went to his village to meet the current generation of people who are connected to us.

## Ancestor 4: Parvathy

Let me introduce Parvathy (my grandma) here.

She can be said to be the only “real” Kerala stock with whom I had any meaningful relationship as she took care of me and my siblings when we were young. We had moments of grandma-grandkid nuances that are worth remembering.

I have loads of fond memories with Parvathy. And that includes fighting with her, punching her and causing her to cry. That was a testing emotion as I had never seen her cry prior to that.

She was soft as ever and hardly ever shouts. But her sarcasm will spill out of her words like a sharp sword. My mom has had sharp moments with her and as a grandkid, I was probably too young to notice.

**Parvathy, Konda and Chatu** are our only possible connection to our roots in Kerala, the land of spices. Kerala saw many incoming foreigners since the dawn of time that includes Portuguese, Dutch, and British who came to tap the richness of the land. But my grand relatives left the Westerner's land of richness to reach Malaya.

## Ancestor 5: Janaki Nambiar (born in Malaya)

To complete the circle, I must mention my grandma (maternal grandmother) **Janaki**. She was born in Malaya. Well known in our family circle for her religious “skills” and knowledge of various rituals.

Going back to the descendants who made the one-way trip to Malaya, all had dreams to be built in the new land of hope and prosperity. However, dreams and visions don't always translate into reality. With strings of events

that took them down, the "castle" was never built, and both passed away in Malaysia without ever seeing India again!

That planted us in Malaysia with no other branches in the family tree. Our only known branch of the family tree starts with Konda and Chatu.

*As of today, my uncles have traced a great part of  
Chatu's network of blood-bond relatives.*

That re-connects some of the lost dotted lines for my mom's side of the family tree. This is amazing given the length of time we were disconnected.

But sad to say, on my father's side, Velappan, the only sibling of Konda who was in India passed away without ever getting married hence there is no "next in line" left at home.

Meanwhile, Parvathy was the last child of her family who escaped out of India (her brother was already in Malaya at that time and we have since lost touch) thus has no further links to be explored.



## CHAPTER 3.2

# THE SHIP CALLED RAJULA

*Let me take you onboard the passenger vessel, S.S. RAJULA ... the ship that ferried thousands of Indians into Malaya on it's crowded "deck class"*

*To re-define the guts of my ancestors, we can call them visionaries or just plain foolish kids who ran away from home.*

My grandparents possibly came onboard the ships S.S. Rajula and State of Madras, or their successor M.V. Chidamparam that were at that time the "luxury" liners plying between India (Madras, Visakhapatnam) and Malaya<sup>5</sup> (Penang, Port Swettenham<sup>6</sup>, Singapore).

I do not have any records of their travel neither their passports to pinpoint the travel dates. All traces were lost during the many shifting and during the World War II period when they must have "ran" from shelter to shelter to avoid

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<sup>5</sup> Malaya is the old name for Malaysia during the pre-independence days, thus Malaya in these paragraphs refers to Malaysia.

<sup>6</sup> Port Swettenham is the old name of today's Port Klang in Malaysia.

## MALABARTO MALAYA

being hit by stray bombs and bullets!

Thus my "dotted lined" genetic links to Kerala (India) is through a few daring Keralites (inhabitants of Kerala, India) who crossed the oceans and landed in Malaya with no clue on what they were going to face.

	Ancestor	Where they came from
1	Kunjamboo Nambiar	First ancestor to land in Malaya, probably from Thrissur (I am unsure)
2	Thamotharan	(who later became known as Konda), from Edapal, Kerala
3	Chatu	from Poyiloor, near Kannur, Kerala
4	Parvathy	from Kozhikode, Kerala

Thamotharan (Konda) (my paternal grandfather) came on his own. Little is known about his issues at the village and the mystery remains as he was not as outspoken about it. It seemed like he was not keen to return. His brother, Vellappan, came to fetch him back and he refused.

Chatu (my maternal grandfather) also came on his own after some dispute with his elder brother. Apparently, the elder brother came to the ship looking for him and he hid behind some sacks of rice!

Parvathy (my paternal grandma) followed her elder brother as she did not have her parents in India at that time. They had died earlier. She came via Penang and pretty soon lost touch with the only brother.

Janaki (my maternal grandma) was born in Malaya while her parents must have been from India. I only know her dad who was alive until 1999 and was a very soft-spoken great grandpa. But I know very little about him.

All four of my grandparents who were originally from India did not ever return to India. Neither have my parents been to India until 2004 (when they were both retired!).

Thus, for a good 2 generations, we had no links or communications with our Indian counterparts.

## PART 4 COORDINATES OF MY INITIAL JOURNEY

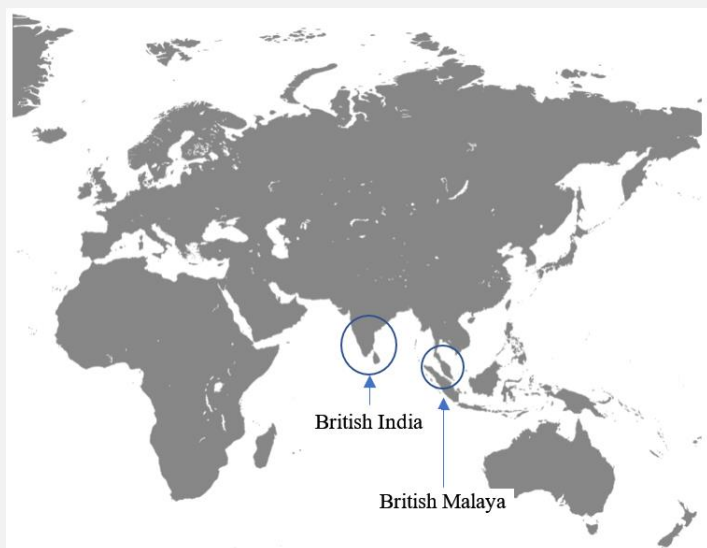
Let's take a pause here.

Let me place the towns, places and locations into perspective so that you see my story more meaningfully.

## CHAPTER 4.1

# THE 2,500 KILOMETRES GAP

British India and British Malaya<sup>7</sup> were approximately 2,500 kilometres apart separated by a vast ocean and a one-month journey by sea.



The northern route by land is a long way via Burma (now Myanmar) then Thailand and into the north border of Malaya.

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<sup>7</sup> Source: World - Single Color by FreeVectorMaps.com

## CHAPTER 4.2

# MALABAR COAST, WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Malabar coast, State of Kerala, India<sup>8</sup>  
where my ancestors came from on their  
one-way tickets

My friend Joseph Thomas says that  
the northern part of the river  
Bharathapuzha is called the Malabar  
region.

Since his description was so  
convincing, I stopped researching  
further into historical records!

India is a vast country of 3,200km x  
2,900km which is more like a continent.

Given that the SS Rajula called on  
Port of Madras at the east coast, it must  
have been an adventurous trip for my  
grandparents to get out of their villages  
and travel 700km to the other side of the  
country.



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<sup>8</sup> Source: India with States - Single Colour by FreeVectorMaps.com

## CHAPTER 4.3

# MALAYA, WHERE WE LANDED

Lambak Estate, Kluang town, State of Johore, Malaysia<sup>9</sup> where I was born and call it home.

This is Peninsula Malaysia (also called West Malaysia). The Southern state of Johore is the neighbour of Singapore.

Frankly, the country is not large enough for me to be intimidated. It's about 840km x 320 km.

However, my move to Kuala Lumpur, 250km up north from my hometown was such an “adventure” that caused a reasonable agitation in me.

Naturally, I must have lost the guts that my grandparents had when they crossed the oceans.



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<sup>9</sup> Source: Malaysia with Regions - Single Colour by FreeVectorMaps.com

## PART 5 RE-WRITING HISTORY



## CHAPTER 5.1

# REACHED THE TOP OF THE LADDER

This is an era where I graduated with Chemical Engineering and was selected to work with Guthrie as an Assistant Factory Manager at their factory in Tebong, Malacca.

*The exponential track that helped my career growth ...*



*Assistant Factory  
Manager*



*Technical Manager*



*General Manager  
(ASEAN)*

Upon completing my final year examinations, I was attached to Transwater Tenaga Sdn Bhd (soon this company was listed on the second Board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange) as an Applications Engineer. This was a trainee job where I learnt more about costing than real engineering.

After some time, when I received my final year examinations results, I was offered the position at Guthrie. Being my first tangible job, it was a new culture for me. But again, being in a "jungle" was no fun other than the so-called healthy lifestyle, which was again severely hindered by the constant ammonia fumes coming from the factory which used to operate 24 hours!

Interestingly though my boss, Mr Beh Chong Guan, the Factory Manager was a graduate from University Malaya with a Degree in Science majoring Chemistry. He was around 50 years old and probably the worst boss I ever had in my working life.

However, the attachment with Guthrie was a very important turning point for me ... and a very significant "event" ... Why? ... You see, my dad was a rubber tapper (the bottom-most rung) in one of Guthrie's plantations and I felt proud that I rose to the top rung within one generation.

### **Moving on to the KWH group**

Subsequent to Guthrie, I joined Forenede Plast Sdn Bhd, a Finnish company owned by Finfund and the KWH Group. I was employed as the Project Engineer to market their range of polyethene pipes and fittings.

*Significant milestone:*

*I took the first flight in my life while working here.  
That was for a meeting in Kota Bahru where I  
travelled with our Sales Manager, JY Tan.*

*It was an exciting experience to be in the flight  
versus seeing aircrafts flying high above our  
house back in the plantation!*

These were new products at that time with only one competitor factory, Polyolefins Pipe Sdn Bhd.

Selling was quite easy as I began to gain better product knowledge. Guidance from the General Manager, Mr Lai Ah Ying, was indeed very encouraging. Mr Lai was probably the best career teacher that I ever had in my working life. I learnt a great deal of corporate matters and selling skills from him. Holding a Masters in Engineering and being an expert in the field, he would address every contentious question from clients very calmly.

As a fresh graduate, this was a great start especially since I was aghast with my time wasted in Guthrie with a not-so-great boss.



*The calm Mr Lai who resolves work problems with a smile. I have hardly seen him “hit the roof” at work. (Picture courtesy of Facebook!)*

I started selling submarine pipeline projects and it started well as the Johore State Government had then launched its Rural Water Supply programme that needed many river crossings.

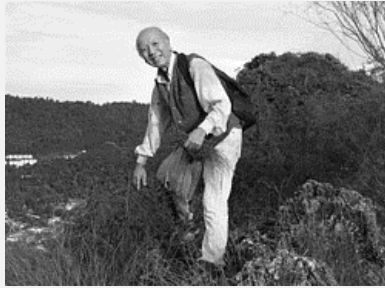
As I successfully sold some three main projects, I was given the opportunity to manage a project the company had won in Malacca, the Pulau Besar Submarine Pipeline project. This was a golden opportunity for me as I learnt to manage a project as the Project Engineer.

The then Technical Manager, Mr Tam, gave lots of help in terms of information and the "better way to do things". Before the end of the project, Tam had resigned, and it became an opportunity for me to climb the ladder to be promoted as Technical Manager. But the catch was that I needed to learn about ISO9000 Quality System. I took the challenge, learnt, coordinated the certification programme with our Consultant and the factory was certified successfully by TUV Cert of Germany.

Some colleagues of this era: **JY Tan**, our Sales Manager, went on to

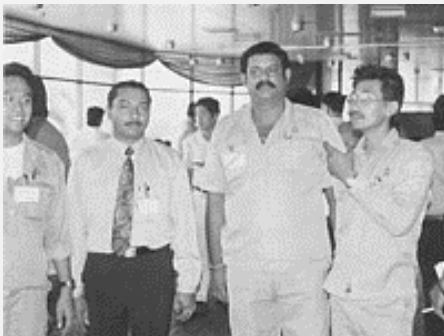
## MALABARTO MALAYA

become a high-end car sales & showroom owner. **HP Tan**, our Senior Sales Executive, later became a herbal medicine producer and then a badminton coach. HP Tan is a high energy man with multiple talents and he dives deep into whatever he does. Dharmananda moved on to set up his own trading company.



*HP Tan on one of his trips up a mountain in search of herbs*

Some people in my team who greatly helped me succeed in my mission as Technical Manager.



*Zoolhilmi on the left ... and Sahadevan on my right.*



*The same Zoolhilmi after many years!*

**Sahadevan** – our Project Supervisor who was a force at the project sites and controlled the site team with his iron fist! I could rely on him to get the job done once we agree on a plan.

**Zoolhilmi** – one of our most efficient polyethylene pipe welders and executes each job with such speed that we were always ahead of time ... and that meant great efficiency in project delivery.

**Ah Heng** – our boatman who must have ferried us many nautical miles in the seas between Southport (Port Klang) and Pulau Ketam. Always on time and manages all hiccups on the way.

Apart from this circle of positive contributors to my career ladder, I had a customer who later became a good friend, **Desmond Tan**. Second generation businessman who made it well and went into semi-retirement to enjoy life.

Many interesting moments and a huge amount of learning continued during the submarine pipelaying projects. This was a period of time when I dealt with various government agencies, large foreign contractors (Japanese, Korean, Indonesian), projects in foreign countries and a variety of problem-solving situations.



*Boatman, Ah Heng, on one of our preventive maintenance visits along the submarine pipe track*



*Desmond Tan, 2018. Always ready for coffee and chat, enjoys travelling and enjoy talking!*

This part of my career laid the foundation on selling, negotiation, customer management, project management and people management. I must say this was my second university education!

The work involved a broad spectrum of people. I could be in a formal meeting with Engineering Consultants, government Department Heads and

## MALABARTO MALAYA

approval authorities on some days while we negotiate a project or conduct the routine progress meetings. Meanwhile, I could be thrust into a rustic village environment with an aboriginal population of workers who speak no English.

In some projects, half of our days will be on speedboats plying between the mainland and an island to get the work done. Or it would be on a tugboat trying to align the pipeline or manoeuvre along the designed elevation.

*A little diversion ... during the project days, I was given a company car (Proton Saga Megavalve 1.5 - WCS5716). The project site gets very muddy and messy during heavy rain making driving so much fun.*

However, Proton was our Malaysian made national car with an extremely good air conditioning and very good durability considering that I was using it in many project sites which did not have properly paved roads.



*The memorable car that took me miles and had excellent air conditioning and great radio*

## Some memorable moments at work



*Factory visit by a Japanese client, 1993. This was the most detailed factory audit ever done by a client. The Japanese Engineer had a comprehensive checklist.*



*Kuala Balingian (Sarawak), bringing water to an aborigine village, 1996. On the sidelines, for our dinner, we had the best ever fresh prawns from the fisherman.*

## MALABAR TO MALAYA



*Pulau Besar (Melaka) submarine pipe sinking process guided by Virum from Finland. This is on our usual tug boat used to launch the pipe into sea.*



*Brunei project using the automatic polyethylene welding machine for the first time, 1996. Michael Jackson had a performance in Brunei at this time ... and admission was free of charge!*





*Laying of sewerage outfall at Hong Kong, while watching the large container vessels pass by the straits, 1996*



*I had the opportunity to navigate speed boats frequently and sometimes, our tug boat too.*

Along the submarine project works, I met **Stanley Yeong**, a highly skilled diver with a long list of records, collector of vintage cars, holder of private

pilot's license and a skilful navigator with his own yacht ... in short, he can drive on the road, navigate on the high seas and fly like an eagle. He is a remarkable man whose perseverance inspires me in many ways.



*With Stanley at one of the project sites in Chennai (India) after  
many years*

## Spreading my wings

As I was getting comfortable with KWH, I was head hunted by Ernst & Young for a company coming up in Kuantan, Southwire Integral Sdn Bhd belonging to the Southwire Group in Carrollton, US.

Initially, the interviews in early 1997 were like "fire" with 3 interviewers i.e. Martin Hanchard, Tony Randolph and another representative from the US. Then there was a big gap when I thought it had fizzled out!

After some time one Mr John Pickrell called me and I met him with Martin at the then Concorde Hotel. This meeting was in the coffee house, very casual and sounded like a friendly chat. More so it gave the impression that there was nothing serious.

Finally, in October 1997 I was told that I am being offered the position of QA Manager and I was to meet the newly elected General Manager, Mr Eric Goh. We met at the Crystal Crown Hotel in Petaling Jaya, had a chat over tea

and got cosy with each other.

But my good relationship with Eric was not meant to last ... somehow, we fell apart on various issues and constantly argued at work after I officially joined the company. There was always an air of suspicion and of course, both of us did not pretend to hide our feeling either! Maybe I was also too upfront about my opinions causing constant friction and arguments with Eric. It was not that Eric was uncooperative but when two guys become frank about comments it affects the protocol!

In the line of the work and the technical training, I had a visit to the Middlesborough plant and also the Dallas facility. The best was the visit to Southwire (the main shareholder of Southwire Integral Malaysia) in Carrollton where we were essentially the VIPs of a company that owned probably two-thirds of the properties in that town!

By the way, the facilities they had at Southwire Carrollton was highly commendable and I was amazed by the depth of research and funds allocated for product development. It was built by one man called Roy Richard, who sadly died young due to cancer and his son, Roy Richard Jr was then in charge.

The commissioning of the Malaysian plant in Kuantan was done by a team of people from USA and UK. These were the engineering crew who were specialised in setting up of polymer extrusion facilities. One such person who became a good friend and still remaining in touch was Wolfgang Gloger.



*A lunch meeting with Wolfgang Gloger in Dallas, Texas. 2017.  
This was after several decades of knowing each other from our  
Kuantan factory commissioning days*



*This is Ricky Koh, a significant friend that I met in Kuantan and has been an important source of help during my days in Southwire Integral.*

Ricky is a single handicap golfer and his daughter Michelle is a national golfer who has played many tournaments in the world.

I had lost touch with some other favourite team members such as Dave Treweek (QA Manager, UK) and Buddy Powers (Southwire).

Sometime in 1998, Eric resigned, and I was given the opportunity to be the Operations Manager. This was a good stepping stone towards greater responsibilities and career advancement.

At one point I also considered a choice to work in the Dallas factory, but dropped the idea after the visit to Dallas as I did not think I will fit in. At that age, I was not willing to lose sight of the Malaysian shores! And in retrospect, was wondering about the guts of my grandparents who lost sight of Malabar shores back in history.

*Significant milestone:*

*I started flying Business Class from around 1998 when I became the Operations Manager. This was a significant jump in status.*

Towards 1999, there were talks about the whole Integral group (the polyethylene duct manufacturing division) was being acquired by the Duraline

Group, USA which was then our only aggressive worldwide competitor.

With Duraline taking over, I met with Robert Heller and started the discussions about the merger and shifting the factory to Beranang, Selangor where Duraline had a two-extrusion line facility. I was then promoted as General Manager.

Duraline's scenario was slightly different, they had a local Malaysian shareholder one Iraqi who had by then gained Malaysian citizenship, KS Khalaf. He was probably not all that happy with the changes and more so since a General Manager was appointed without his "specific consent".

Since I was appointed by a discussion of the US partners, I couldn't care much about Khalaf too! Again, that means friction in our relationship which could not be avoided. By then I was more seasoned in this drama of arguing and messing with silly opinions. I just enjoyed the twists and turns as we went along. Occasional guidance from our Singapore representative, Mr Rajendra went a long way in helping me deal with the political complexities within the company.

My relationship with the key customers kept me afloat and useful for the shareholders.

Later in 2000, I was offered a Consultancy for 2 years when Duraline USA decided to pull out of the partnership. I took up the offer which was a blessing and launched me into a different tangent in my career.

With the spare time in hand, I decided to start my own business although I had no idea about running my own company.

## CHAPTER 5.2

# RUNNING MY OWN COMPANY

The first thought that came to me when I took the Consultancy was to get another job. I was a little tired of the pipe and duct industry so wanted to try something new. But then there was also a choice of trying my own business.

*The final decision was to start ROLINE  
SDN BHD*



*... which became my start-up company that  
was going to be my learning ground and  
brand name from there on.*

This deal of running my own company was very new to me and I had to sweat it out trying to grasp the basic concept of working without a boss! I had my good friend Cheng Wan Ming and RS Baskkaran as shareholders.

Baskkaran helped connect me to various people in India and some in Malaysia. I must say that his honest assistance propelled me into the business world faster than I expected.

Those little dots connecting the right people made the business successful. I certainly have not thanked him for this!

Cheng was already a businessman himself and running a successful automotive air condition workshop with various government tenders. His “Chinese DNA” gave me an alternative view to many things. I saw problems and opportunities as an engineer, while he saw them as possibilities.

RAVINDRAN RAGHAVAN



*Trekking adventure with Baskaran at Endau-Rompin, Malaysia*



*Coffee-with-Cheng. I was heavier and had a moustache in the earlier days!*

Another notable character is Md Din who was my partner in one of the subsidiary companies. He was a very progressive thinker and very skilful in handling people of all levels.

He is also a connoisseur in handling cigar meetings, wine networking and a historian to name a few of his admirable skills. Notably, he is the most informative historian that I have met!

Md Din, being educated in England in the early days of independent Malaysia, had a very global perspective to everything around him.



*A more recent “encounter” with Md Din, the historian, storyteller  
and a sharp telecommunications Engineer*

Significantly, around this time, I met a very special person in India, Cavalier Dr MS Mathivanan. This was a pure accidental meet through a chain of other meetings in Malaysia.

A completely unassuming man with such vast talent and involvement in a broad spectrum of business and activities. I learnt the working of the inner web of Indian business from him.

*Incidentally ...*

*Dr Mathi is the son of Mr SS Marichettiar who was among the notable figures in the circle of advisors working along the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, Dr MG Ramachandran.*



*He has grown up seeing many influential figures gather at their dining table once in a while for crucial discussions and decision making.*



*With Dr Mathi (5<sup>th</sup> from left) at the Open University Malaysia delegation, circa 2013*

- From left, Vikraman (my partner in academic talk programs),
- Prof Dr Selvaraj (a very important component and notable mentor who motivated my success in the academic talk programs),
- me (a few kilograms heavier than now!),
- Tan Sri Anuwar Ali (Vice-Chancellor of Open University Malaysia and still a great friend),
- Dr Rosli, Prof Krishnakumar (Director of School of MBA in Dr Mathi's college) and
- Joseph Thomas (Project Director of Open University Malaysia in their Indian wing, a good friend and the one who gave me many wow experiences of Kerala, India)

## MALABARTO MALAYA

And after some years of growing up, we still meet for tea and catch up on old stories...



*Old friends gathering here for coffee at Kuala Lumpur, 2016*

Second from right is Tan Sri Anuwar (former Vice-Chancellor of Open University Malaysia) who enjoys “masala tea” and on the left is Tuan Haji Repin Ibrahim (retired Vice President of Open University Malaysia) who was an excellent people’s person who can handle people of all walks of life with a great decorum.

Working with Tan Sri Anuwar and Tuan Haji Repin on Indian academic projects was indeed memorable.



*Breakfast with Dr Mathi at Marriott Dubai, 2017*

Dr Mathi is an admirable achiever who indulges in a wide spectrum of activities from academic to spiritual to social service. His list of achievements includes being a signatory on the “Rights of Child” memorandum at the United Nations representing India. This extended to him being conferred the title “Cavaliere” by the Royal establishment of Italy.

He must have created a few thousand successful students all around the globe in his years of academic adventure and running of his college at Komarapalayam, Tamilnadu.



*Coffee with Prof Selva at the World Trade Centre cafe, Dubai,  
2017*

Prof Selvaraj is a man of excellence in creating and executing unique experiences for students. He is a genetic scientist who was part of the Japanese-Malaysian expedition to Antarctica. That’s a wow story! I have always dreamt of touching Antarctica and he has been there.

His adventure started when he was involuntarily sent to India by his parents to complete his secondary education where he turned history in his favour by enrolling himself into Panjab University, soon to become a State hockey player as well as a prominently popular Malaysian student in an Indian university. The climax of the journey was attaining a PhD in genetics.

CHAPTER 5.3

## SUMMARIZING MY CAREER JOURNEY



*Let me introduce this significant person in my friend's circle. Narayan (second from left) during our meet at Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur*

**“You did many things that I know of, what went well and what went wrong?”**

This was a hard-hitting question from my friend, my university friend Narayan, a vegetarian “swami” of many talents who now live in Sydney, Australia. That triggered my thinking and the answer probably gives the best description of what I did on my business ...

Dear Narayan,,

**Part 1 my career:**

*My jobs in Malaysia was going well with reasonable promotions and perks.*

*Last employer (Duraline) was acquired worldwide and the Malaysian outfit was sold to a local partner.*

*Prior to that, I had an option to relocate to Dallas (with Integral). Was not ready for a rough and tough Dallas atmosphere. I went there, tested for a week and decided I stay put in Malaysia.*

*In this range of time, my job involved selling projects to large clients ... Water Authority, Telekom Malaysia, TOT/CAT (Telecom Thailand)*

**Part 2 my business:**

*Started in 2001 with me running after every feasible idea ... I was doing several things:*

***Roline Asia Sdn Bhd*** ... Trading in plastic resins/masterbatch from Thailand/steel tubes from Korea/welding wires/Koshibu textile fabric from China. We did sales of RM2.3m in the second year ... I sold the company to Mohan Kumar when our partnership did not work out.

***Significant achievement:*** These fields were new to me. However, in that year we supplied the entire Koshibu material from China (used for making scarfs for school children) for “Canggih” brand

*scarfs and many tonnes of welding wires for gas cylinders manufactured in the state of Kelantan.*

***Roline Systems Sdn Bhd*** (Bumiputera company) ... selling web design, Jupiter IT Collaboration products (USA), the garden88.com website for gardening products, taipan.com.my website for Arjun, biometrics device from Korea, attendance system. Turnover was not great, maybe RM750k or so ... finally left it to Md Din, my other shareholder.

***Roline Sdn Bhd*** ... education/training ... had a 10-year franchise of eBITS India and 12 other agency agreements. Had a recruitment contract with SSM. Obtained Class A HRDF license too.

*It was not earning much, but the style was good!! Needed a proper push to invest in a training centre and take it through ... I did not have the guts.*

***On hindsight*** ... the businesses had value and it did turn around a decent profit ... I could have done better if I had focussed a little more plus if I had the guts needed to do business.

*I worried too much about every delay in customer payment and that was not good for business.*

### **Part 3 back to a job!**

*In the process of doing business, I had many visits to India for the steel and Koshibu material sourcing. The sourcing never succeeded as I was not good handling the Indian style of negotiation neither the constant unpredictability in quality.*

*However, the positive part of these journeys was that I began to grow a network of friends in India which included Mohandas*

*(who was the South India Regional Director of IAL Group, a shipping company), Hari Govindan (Resident Director of IAL Bangalore) and Suresh Menon (General Manager of Leela Group).*



*Mohandas, after retirement. He is so indulged in IAL that he can talk non-stop about the history and achievements. Good material for my next book?*



*Hari Govindan, as we met in Bangalore after some years. The man who is always calm and highly systematic*



*Suresh Menon, still maintains the “big boss” look*

*The key connector of this network was one Ashoka Kumar who was the General Sales Agent of Uzbekistan Airways in Chennai. Unfortunately, Ashoka was a “take it easy” person who enjoys his days with whatever activities he likes to do while generating million-dollar ideas that will never get off the ground!!*

*All this was pure coincidence that unfolded after some introduction by my university friend, Baskaran.*

*As IAL wanted to expand in Malaysia I was invited to be their Director (2004). Took it easy and slowed down all my business ... and became full time in a year.*

***IAL Group, Director for Southeast Asia:*** *It went really well, with IAL investing in many assets, opening more branches plus keeping a good inventory of containers in Port Klang. I soon became Director for their Singapore operations too.*

*With Mr TVN Kutty, then  
Managing Director of IAL  
Group.*

*His meticulous forward  
planning and strategy  
creation make him live in the  
future most of the time and  
he probably has never  
enjoyed the present!*



*The next recession made a U-turn in IAL’s business in Southeast Asia. Malaysia and Singapore operations were made dormant due to loss-making trade sectors.*



*I remained as Director (did not abandon the ship!) and kept busy by being a trainer for a while ... teaching MBA students about supply chain logistics. We made inroads into approx 23 institutions in India, conducted a convocation for some 65 students in the first year, trained more than 1,000 students in the process.*

### **Extension of Part 3, adventure into Dubai:**

*As the Chairman of IAL, Mr TVN Kutty, was retiring, I was engaged to coordinate the "transfer of power" to his son, Arjun Menon, as Group CEO. Upon completion, I now work as General Manager in the Group CEO's office ... this is a whole different altitude and Arjun's detailing of his mission is out of the world!*



*With the IAL Team in Hyderabad.*

*From right Nandakumar (Chennai), Parag (Mumbai), Vikram (Delhi), Harsh (Dubai), Arjun Menon (our Group CEO), Baskar (CFO) and me.*

*In this job, I touch upon many business units' activities, jointly review their business plans, monitor the cash flow, manage some administrative matters and look at legal compliance across several countries with different tax structures ... and that's a real exciting game. A great tool in the form of a training session by Keith Cunningham has given me a good grasp of the "real feel" of a business.*

*Apart from this, I also get to be part of the "think tank team" in Arjun's efforts to design a future proof system for the business.*

### **Continuing from here**

*I have no idea what life has in store from this point onwards. It's journey that's yet to unfold.*

**That sums up my \$\$-related adventures till 2018!**

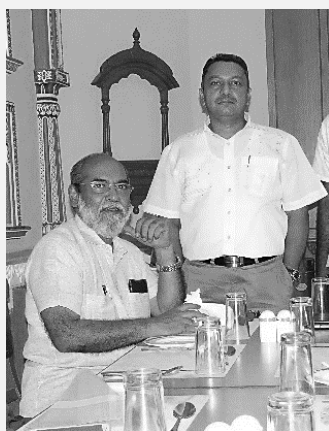
## CHAPTER 5.4

# THE NETWORK THAT DEVELOPED

### The significant network in Kerala

Along the way, while working for IAL, I had significant interactions with some interesting personalities in Kerala.

KB Kannampilly was the Chief General manager of IAL, an ex-banker who has lived in China and speaks a lot about the cultures of Assam (India). He has lots of depth in historical perspectives and his dad served the Nehru administration as a high-level official.



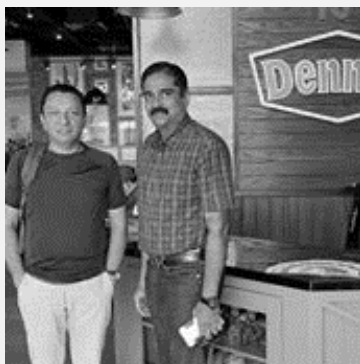
*Lunch with KB Kannampilly in Kochi, 2013*

I have heard amazing stories about tribal village gatherings, a river crossing on a log bridge, an accident with a guard dog on a lonely road, quick fix for milk (his daughter was a baby then) by a village stall owner and receiving a large fish as a gift in a meeting.

He has also shared his experiences in China including dancing on a pile of cabbage during winter. His personal adventures in orchid gardening, planning a fruit plantation in Munnar as well as printing and publishing has many notable lessons that I learned.

He has proven his mettle by grooming his daughters into self-reliant adults who are now in admirable professions. One of them is an astrophysicist and the other is an archaeologist.

We still meet for lunch whenever I am in Kochi. He now runs his own accounting and audit Consultancy while maintaining his cool lifestyle.



*With RG Menon in Dubai, 2016*

RG Menon is my “Calicut connection” whom I met in IAL when he was our National Sales Manager who is now leading a property company that builds and sells shopping malls. A very sharp and no-nonsense person whom I admire for his factual narrations whenever we speak about any commercial subject.

## Friendly connections at work

My early work contact in IAL was Manikandan Kongattil, who was then the General Manager in IAL at the helm of the shipping liner business. He was my reference, advisor and guide on my initial days of visiting Dubai as well during the many meetings with IAL's management.

The other person who became a friend very quick was Sunil C Baby, who was the de-facto Finance Head. Whatever his business card may have said, he was the man in control of finance.

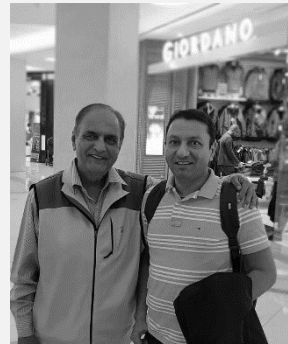
Tapas Dey of Kolkata grew into a friend and his Bengali diplomacy and my Malaysian nuances must have got interwoven into an easy friendship.

Over time, many more touch points evolved into friendships. A distant colleague who became a close friend is Alexander Joseph who has a great deal of contribution in my adapting to Dubai in the current engagement. From a distance, he looked like the “gung-ho” mafia leader but at close range, he is an excellent support for my Dubai initiation.

Towards the current era, the dash-and-flash entry and exit of Rahul Hariyani connected us into our common interest of photography and that network quickly expanded to his dad **Vijay Hariyani**.



*Rahul Hariyani during one of our weekend meet*



*Coffee with Vijay in Dubai, 2017*

Vijay is a highly respected person in Kutch and well known in the salt industry circles. He is also known for his active involvement in the school for children with hearing impairment in Gandhidham.

I also realised that friendships at work are proven only when it remains after the work period!

RAVINDRAN RAGHAVAN

# PART 6 HALF A CENTURY OLD

CHAPTER 6.1

## A GREAT FEELING

The message was from my daughter that came with her birthday wishes to me on my 50th birthday that sums up my achievements in simple childish words.

Every word here is like a musical note that triggers a song in my heart and spring in my walk!

*Dear Acha,*

*Every child experiences childhood differently. My brothers and I had an amazing childhood thanks to this man, my father.*

*In fact, I am the speaker that I am today thanks to him. My love for public speaking started because of his encouragement for me to join a storytelling competition when I was 7. He sat down and helped me make the props, helped me practice, gave me ideas and I emerged Champion. That passion hasn't died till today.*

*From random "hiking" trips to the mini jungle behind our apartment equipped with sardine sandwiches and orange juice, to driving to the petrol station to claim our "pop" carbonated drink reward after a car wash at home, to hunting the supermarket for stuff to make the perfect ice-cream sundae at*



*home, to having "buy all the snacks you want" days, to the amazing kitchen experiment sessions of making delicious food, to the half day long weekend gardening sessions teaching us about plants and fertilizers and insects... to the many more beautiful, little childhood memories, he made it all happen.*

*He is an amazing cook, a comedian at family dinners, a consultant when I and my brothers need help, an artist when I'm with my art projects and a father all the time. He has always been a role model, someone who inspires me and someone whose visions I hope to someday fulfil. His ideas, thoughts, experiences, sense of humour and a unique approach to things is what makes him so lovable.*

*I was not always the perfect child. When I had my tantrums and issues, he did not give up. He would be the one to always patiently talk me out of it with his advises and ideas. When I am stressed with a baking project that seems to be failing, he would sit with me late at night trying to make it work. When I feel confused over decisions to make, he would clear my doubts and help me make the right decisions. It reached a point where I just trust that his decisions will always be right.*

*With love, Ashwinee Rvan, 11 March 2015*

## CHAPTER 6.5

### CLOSING CREDIT, THE INVISIBLE HANDS

*These invisible hands tremendously helped me through the challenging times. This part is like the “closing credit in a movie” where I feel obligated to mention the people who had various positive touch points in my journey.*

Along with my journey out of plantation life, there were small benefits that we enjoyed due to people’s kindness. In some cases, I landed on some unexpected help without being part of my plans. These were the “invisible hands<sup>10</sup>” that delivered magical twists to my path.

Breaking out of the poverty trap and getting out into a more consistent economic situation required a real leap. It was not simple steps but a L E A P. Such a leap required a whole lot of blinded focus and years of little sacrifices.

I would say, the success of my efforts to break out of the poverty trap was not solely due to my single-handed effort or my family’s sacrifice. There were many “invisible hands” that helped my goal and most of those were stumbled

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<sup>10</sup> The term “invisible hands” is borrowed from the words of Mr TVN Kutty, Chairman of IAL Group. He uses this term to describe unexpected goodwill that drops on his business actions.

upon and not by design. You can call these “luck” or “chance”.

The combination of effort, some sacrifice and many such strategic invisible hands helped me leap out.

There are many people who rendered help that was completely unplanned and some of these were the little tweaks that propelled me towards the right mission in life. These “not part of the design” help from the sky were invaluable in sending me in the correct direction.

I am trying not want to miss important personalities in this list. Let me make a conscious effort to remember all those unassuming characters who helped in my journey.

Listed in chronological order of the time when they entered my journey.

### **Uncle Kuppusamy**

Dad’s childhood friend who helps financially whenever we have small hiccups. My dad’s turn to person whenever there is a quick fix needed for money! He gracefully lent us the little amounts needed to bridge our gap in expense versus income. He probably just trusted dad at a time when we did not have enough, and we did not hold a position of influence in society.

### **Varathan, teacher**

A teacher whose mom was living in the same plantation and dad’s important academic advisor. He probably had a great deal of unseen contribution that would have added the twists in charting my academic path and the related decisions.

## **Raman, astrologer**

Dad's high-level guide astrologically and just as a friend. He would have helped dad deal with various real-life crisis and stress from the viewpoint of being a good listener.

## **Ms Quek**

First formal teacher in my life in Standard One. All my formal learning started here.

## **Mr Robert Gan Siew Sin**

He is my Standard four & five class teacher. He was among the best teacher we had and treated us like adults by getting us involved in everything from organising teacher's day party to re-organising the classroom. His teaching was well beyond the textbooks and I learnt a great deal.

## **Mr Lim Ban**

He was my Standard Six class teacher. Apparently, he was a very strict teacher prior to coming to our class. He gave us lots of survival skills that took us through the first days in secondary school.

## **Dr Wong Teik Pooi**

Wong became my new friend in Form 1. He was the son of our estate's Hospital Assistant. He was a wonderful friend who was my first management staff link in the plantation.

Due to my own inferiority complex and also due to the prevailing culture in the plantation (where management staff do not freely mingle with workers);

I have never visited his house neither called him to my house.

## **Pang Sen Tong**

Pang is a saviour! He and I would arrive early to school. And due to that, we would study together, and his meticulous habits rubbed into me causing me to take studies far more seriously than what I used to. The last I know he was with the Public Works Department in Singapore.

## **Lee Hwa**

Lee Hwa's friendship was short ... only in Form 2. But he opened my thoughts as he would always talk about studying in Taiwan, which for me was an outer space destination at that time! He would touch on very deep and high-altitude topics during our school recess break.

## **Azman Taufik**

Azman was a great scientist-in-the-making! He would know stories of each and every subject that thrills the rest of us. He showered me with thoughts about research, creating working papers and opportunities in finding solutions to pollution. He is now with Maybank.

## **Anand Jude Anthony**

Anand must have been frustrated with me ... I was an introvert and he was a stylish up-to-date extrovert. His push got me into the debate team that entirely changed the "Ravi" I was to the Ravi I am!

He dragged me on most of the time when my inertia was creating a delay in change.

## **Mrs Jegha, Ms Ruth Ratnam & Ms Lim Jit Eng**

Our debate teachers who created the sense of timekeeping and proper presentation of our arguments. They guided our team to finally become the Johore State champions.

The path to becoming champions was filled with many exciting days of work and many long hours of getting things done. My ability to my thoughts in words was drastically improved in this.

## **Mr Harrinder Singh**

Our school Senior Assistant and guided me very much on studies and was a very good English teacher. He knocks sense into me whenever I drift off from exams during my debate participation.

## **Mr Tang Tiong Seng & Mr Ng Cher Luang**

Excellent Science teachers and the first to provide proper guidance on science projects. Our Petronas project was selected and aired over RTM television in 1985.

## **Mr Sithambaram**

Education officer in Kluang and father of Tamizarasu (my classmate) took time to “educate” me about taking the right decision on university application rather than fear the financial burden.

## **Ms Vimala Nair**

She was technically my landlady! ... She is the mother-in-law of Bala, my uncle, and I stayed with her during my short stint of working in Johore Bahru.

She was an excellent character builder ... when I was rather insignificant, she made the efforts to guide me through my university decision.

She connected me with Puru (then a final year student in Accounting) who was a good information centre on University Malaya.

### **Purushotaman**

He was the first to give me a "living story" of University Malaya ... practical and true. The few conversations with him gave me the necessary fillers to face university with better confidence.

### **Chinese auntie (sadly I do not know her name)**

She is a clothes vendor who continues to supply clothes even though our credit is stretched most of the time and lent us MYR1,000 without collateral, to help with my entry expenses for university enrolment the moment I received my admission. That was a major help.

### **Pubalan**

A teacher at SRJK (Tamil), Jalan Yahya Awal where I had a short stint as an Attachment Teacher. He made a concerted personal effort in ensuring that my name is listed for the Johore State Scholarship. Without his push, I may have ended up stretching through my university without financial help. He had a very short stint of knowing me (less than 6 months) but the help he rendered was of immense value in helping my journey forward.

### **Gopalan Aleppa and Mani Alemma**

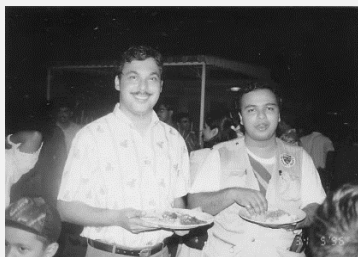
My mom's uncle and auntie, gave me a place to stay, fed me for free and chaperoned me where needed, with no prior discussion and with no

expectations at a time when I was not a valuable contributor to them in any way.

## Dato' Sankaran Nair

He was my dad's close friend who went on to become the National Secretary of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), who helped me in getting a small scholarship and also a place in the PPN Hostel.

## Mohan Kumar



*This is a picture of Mohan with my brother, Jegha*

Mohan was known to me in 1985 when we both did Chemical Engineering in University of Malaya. I owe a lot of my KL exposure to Mohan ... mainly because at that time he was very pious and would go to many temples and I used to go with him on my bike, hence learning the nooks and corners of KL.

He is now married to Renu from Haryana, India and stays in PJ.

Sadly, we drifted apart after a short period of doing business together. Getting into a business partnership is probably the best way to break good friendships.

## Mr Puniamurthy

The Assistant Registrar of Students' Affairs at the University of Malaya,



spend lengthy sessions of guiding me through the fun, fantasy, trial and tribulations of my university life.

I owe a great deal to him for making me see the world with a different binocular. His gentle push made me feel the pulse of university life in a meaningful way.

### **Saat Othman**

The Sr Assistant Manager in the Guthrie rubber factory where I was posted as the Assistant Manager. This man, an ex-military personnel, was a good friend ... gave me the hard facts of working life and the guidance in battling my first job stress.

### **Poo Liong Chai**

He was previously the Asst Manager in Lambak Estate Div 3 where I was merely a rubber tapper's son! When I joined Guthrie in Tebong, he was the Sr Manager of the neighbouring Kemuning Estate. he became a very good friend helping me with the basic survival skills of being a fresh Assistant Manager in the plantation field.

### **Lai Ah Ying**

General Manager of Forenede Plast Sdn Bhd and my boss during my first real job. He was a lighthouse that guided me into becoming a trained engineer. I landed in his office as a novice fresh graduate and he unknowingly lit the spark that sharpened most of the important work skills that launched me into my onward journey.

He had all the patience to teach and prompt the strengths in me ... I was able to tap my strengths and do well in my job to a large extent due to his support and guidance.

He must have been annoyed when I resigned to change jobs. But that change was necessary to spring board me to the next level in career.

## **Robert Heller**

He was the Vice President of Marketing in Duraline ... the company where I was the General Manager for their Malaysian factory. His flamboyant style rubbed into me to an extent and his push gave me much international exposure in my thinking. I may not have ever explored Dubai if not for the “open up” that he created in my thinking.

## **A. Rajendra**

He was the Duraline's Consultant in Singapore, now settled in Australia. Excellent thinker and strategist ... sometimes I talk to him about my plans just to get an insight in a different perspective. He can punch holes in my arguments while seeming to be in agreement with me.

There may be many more “captains” who guided my ship.  
Will re-kindle my memory and expand the next edition of  
my book.

## IN CONCLUSION

I am happy to have reached where I am today. Looking back, I can see a long trail of challenges, obstacles, difficulties and contentions that I faced on my journey.

I also see the invaluable help from “strangers”, unexpected meeting of the right persons, taking the correct turns and making the little tweaks that brought me victory, joy and celebration along the way.

It was not easy until I found my purpose. It is easy now to advise and give recommendations to people in a similar equation as me. But believe me, you need to make your own mistakes and meet your “right persons”. Your journey is not mine and I cannot see what you can.



*Picture courtesy of  
Rahul Hariyani, my  
one-time adventure  
buddy*



*Enjoying the desert  
plains of Dubai in winter*



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*... this is my own journey, narrated in  
my own words ... walk my path and  
feel the sights along the way.*

## Malabar to Malaya

The British rubber plantations in Malaya (now Malaysia) created a huge migration of indentured labour from India. My grandpa joined the wave to start a spice business and lost it all. That plunged my generation below the poverty line!

I was born in a plantation house (not a hospital) and my birth certificate was "processed" in a police station. That is how I arrived earth in 1965. Grew up in the rubber plantation, soon to become unpaid underaged labour helping my parents tap rubber trees starting at 04:30 in the morning amongst the mosquitoes and snakes while smacking into spider webs between the trees.

Our meals starts on a perfect dining table after pay day and dwindles into lack of food by end of the month. The vicious cycle seems to never end year after year.

In the years to come, I became a Chemical Engineer and that changed this "fate" by placing food on our table consistently. As I set sail on my career, my life took various positive turns that brought me to being a Company Director. This book shares a part my journey that took me through pain, gain, glory and gratification.



Non-fiction: Biography

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