

IF THERE is someone in Singapore who can claim to be “Mr International”, it is Mr Kishore Mahbubani.

The dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy is Indian by race. He was born here but his parents migrated to Singapore from Sindh, which is now part of Pakistan, during the Partition. He grew up to become a diplomat and married an American of Irish origin. As years rolled by, he became Singapore’s representative at the United Nations and even presided over the Security Council, dealing with nations having diverse interests.

After 33 years in the foreign service, this 60-year-old is now helping to train students from Singapore and abroad in public policy.

However, when this man whose articles appear in journals the world over sits down to put pen to paper, he switches on the music of the legendary Mohammed Rafi. “My mother used to put on the radio to listen to Rafi. I grew up listening to it and became hooked,” says Mr Mahbubani.

It could be one of the reasons why he finds writing very relaxing. He tells me that, on the weekend before I met him, he worked on six or seven articles.

In addition to Rafi, water also gives him inspiration. “I have a room in my house which overlooks a swimming pool and once I put on the music of Mohammed Rafi, I can spend a whole day writing in that room,” he says.

This ability to focus is great because Mr Mahbubani is passing through one of the busiest phases in his life. “I have never worked as hard as I have now. I am being invited to speak around the world. I am working for the World Economic Forum at Davos in their project on global governance,” he says.

Then, of course, there is his role at the LKY School which will celebrate its fifth anniversary soon.



In for the long run... Mr Mahbubani jogs regularly at the East Coast Park. PHOTOS: ARUN RAMU, THE STRAITS TIMES

Mr International

KISHORE MAHBUBANI
Dean, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

As dean, he feels a tremendous sense of satisfaction. In addition, he has also authored two books and written several articles. He has already decided on a third book, on global governance, which will be out next year.

Talking of global governance, he says he is all admiration for India’s prime minister Manmohan Singh: “He is an amazing guy. India is very lucky to have a man who is such a brilliant economist plus incredibly honest; one of the cleanest politicians in the world. And at the same time, he is a man of such determination.”

Despite his extensive travels as a diplomat, one journey Mr Mahbubani remembers well is his visit to Hyderabad in Pakistan two years ago. With the help of Pakistan’s high commissioner here, he was able to locate the Hyderabad apartment his mother used to live in.

“I took photos of the apartment and sent it to my mother’s brother, who now lives in Suriname. He looked at the pictures and said ‘yes, this is the apartment I grew up in.’”

Mr Mahbubani’s mother died in 1998 and all his relatives are now spread across the world. He says he has first cousins living in Suriname, Guyana, Texas, Nigeria, Ghana, Mumbai, Kolkata, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan.

He met Anne, his wife, when he was deputy chief of the Singapore mission in Washington and she was working with the US Commodities Futures Trading Commission. They have three children – son Kishore Richard, 22, who is studying civil engineering at Carnegie Mellon; daughter Shelagh, 20, who has finished her second year of history in Yale; and Jhamat, 18, who is doing his national service.

Along with writing, jogging is another form of relaxation for Mr Mahbubani. He jogs thrice a week at East Coast Park, which is not far from his home in Dunbar Walk. But home, when he was growing up, was a far cry from the luxuries he enjoys today. His parents, three sisters and he used to live in a one-bedroom house till he was about 26, when the family moved to a four-room HDB flat in Marine Terrace.

His schooling was uneventful. He went to Tanjong Katong technical school and wanted to become a technician but was moved to the arts class when he failed his metal work exam. “What saved my life was Joo Chiat public library,” he says. While his friends played after school, he read. After his pre-university studies at St Andrew’s, he took up a salesman’s job at High Street, earning \$150 a month. That was when he got the President’s scholarship. “It gave me \$250 and because of that I went to university. Or else I would have remained a salesman,” he says, looking back at his past while sitting in his spacious office.

And then glancing at his tie, he apologises for wearing one with Chinese inscriptions for a photograph that will appear in a publication for Indians. He says he is yet to find one with Hindi words. But that’s exactly what makes him Mr International.

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What saved my life was Joo Chiat public library.

– Mr Mahbubani, on how he used to read while his schoolmates played. He says his reading habit helped him build his career



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