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This man has been fighting to save Malaysia's environment for half a century

By TERENCE TOH

Sunday, 30 Apr 2017
6:40 AM MYT



Gurmit Singh was campaigning for the environment even before it was popular to do so. Photo: The Star/Art Chen

For most of his adult life, Gurmit Singh K.S. has campaigned tirelessly for the nation's green soul.

He's written books and papers about pressing issues. He's formed two prominent local environmental organisations – the Environmental Protection Society, Malaysia (EPSM) and the Centre for Environment, Technology and Development, Malaysia – and been involved in many of the country's major environmental initiatives. He's spoken up fearlessly about important issues, never backing down even when his outspokenness got him in trouble with the authorities.

And then there was the time in 1979 when he put on a gas mask, leapt on a bicycle, and raced a car from Petaling Jaya, Selangor, to Taman Titiwangsa, Kuala Lumpur, all to raise awareness for the environment.

"It was World Environment Day, June 6. We wanted to highlight that the air pollution problems in Kuala Lumpur were bad, and that it was very slow to move in traffic. So we decided to have a race, between me on the bicycle, wearing a mask I borrowed (from a public health institute), against an EPSM exco member who drove a car," Gurmit, 74, smiles as he recalls the experience during a recent interview at his house in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

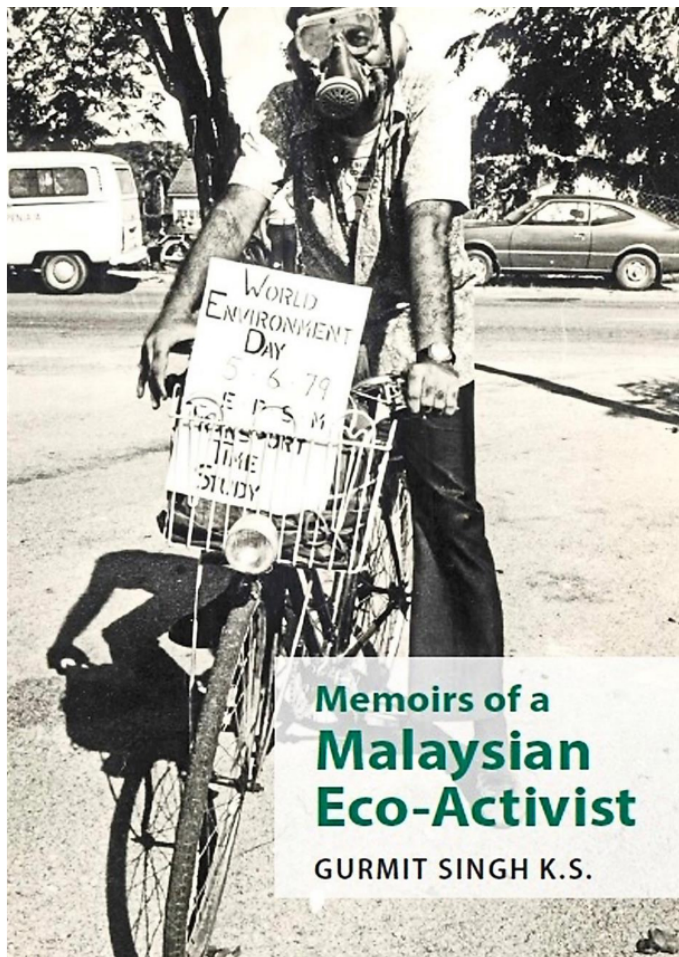
"I won! I beat the car by about five or 10 minutes! But, of course, I had an advantage, he (the other driver) was an old man, so maybe he drove slowly. But the traffic was bad!"

A photograph was taken of Gurmit on his bicycle, which became one of the most well-known images of him. No surprise there: what other picture could properly capture the man's lively spirit or his will to go the distance to pursue what he is most passionate about?



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Memoirs of a Malaysian Eco-Activist

GURMIT SINGH K.S.

Now, almost four decades later, that photo has found new life as the cover of Gurmit's autobiography, *Memoirs Of A Malaysian Eco-Activist*, which was published by Areca Books in early April. The book details the story of Gurmit, told in his own words, starting from his humble beginnings as a child of Punjabi parents in Japanese-occupied Malaya, all the way up to his rise as one of the country's most prominent human rights and environmental advocates.

"I started four or five years ago. It was a long process, I started thinking about it when I became 70. I thought it would be good to record what I have been doing. At first I was in two minds whether anyone would be interested in reading it or not!" Gurmit says.

"I wrote bits and pieces, then forgot about it, then reactivated it later. By the time I finished the manuscript it was about 2015.

Don't think the length of time it took to write the book matches its length: "As an engineer, I'm not really long-winded, so it turned out quite short and concise!"

A rich and colourful life

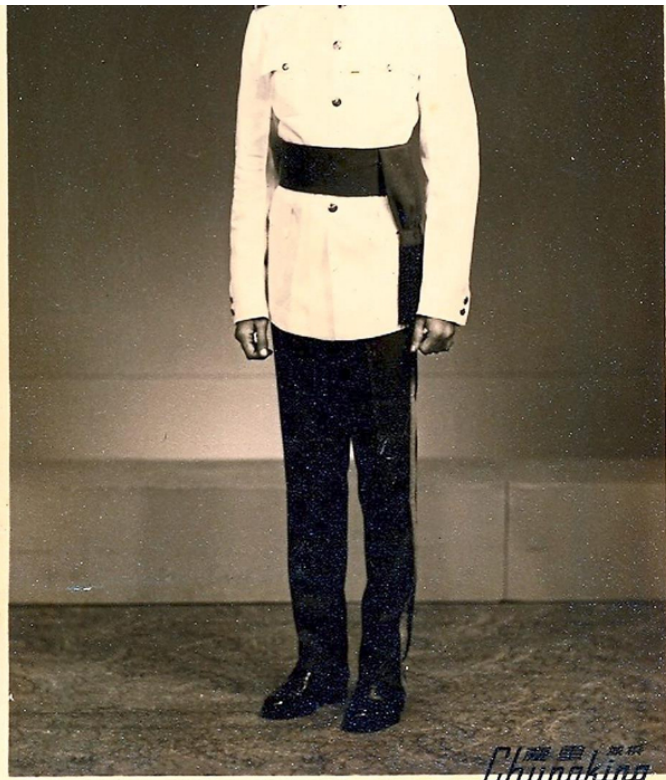
In person, the white-bearded, steely-eyed Gurmit cuts quite an imposing figure – from certain angles, he bears a passing resemblance to the English actor Bernard Hill (King Theoden in *The Lord Of The Rings*). Despite looking rather strict, the man turns out to be rather welcoming, speaking candidly and openly about his life, his voice rising animatedly every time his passions are discussed.

"The environment is no longer seen as dirty a word as it used to be. In the past, people used to run away from it, saying it was too 'technical' to understand. Laypeople especially liked to use the excuse, saying to me, "Oh you are an engineer, that's why you can understand it. I'd always say, 'Excuse me?' You must make an effort to understand it!" Gurmit says.



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Gurmit in his Royal Malaysian Air Force uniform – he was grounded for a lack of coordination

Growing up in George Town, Gurmit was an active scout as well as head prefect at the Methodist Boys School, where he studied. He would later take up teaching for about a year and a half before becoming a trainee pilot in the air force for six months. The British instructor found fault with Gurmit's coordination, however, and he was grounded.

This sent Gurmit to Universiti Malaya, where he picked up an engineering degree, and he later found a job with the Rubber Research Institute (RRI) for about five years. There, he joined the Selangor Graduate's Society, which also led to him becoming actively involved in environmental matters.

This came about when the society heard that the government of the day was planning to introduce a new law, the Environmental Quality Act, in Malaysia. This prompted the members of the society to form an organisation focusing on local environment issues, thus leading to the formation of EPSM.

Gurmit was elected the organising chairman of the society's inaugural meeting in 1974. But fate, it would seem, had bigger plans for him.

"There was a Malay doctor who had agreed to be the president. But he failed to turn up! So by default I was elected! And that's how I got into environmental issues. It's actually quite mundane, it's not like I saw the light or was inspired by somebody," he says with a laugh.

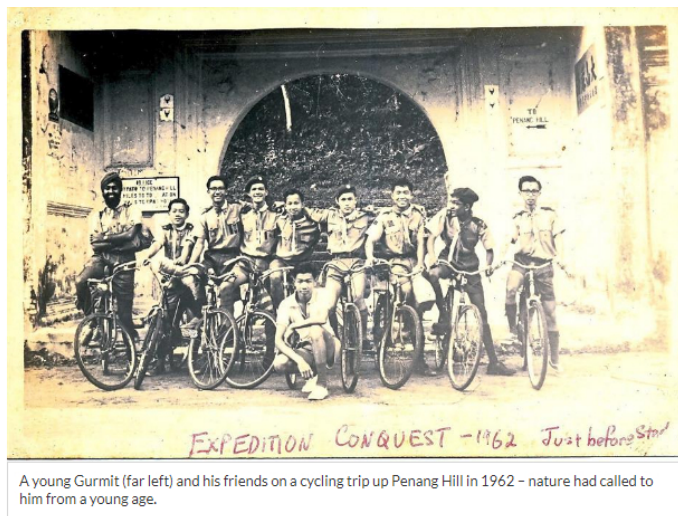
Gurmit left the RRI in 1975 and decided to go into freelance consultancy. The lure of a career in engineering offered less and less appeal to him, in contrast to a simple life devoted to what he cared deeply about.

[pull_quote_right author=""]Too many people are selfish. But we must look beyond ourselves. We must all take action to solve environmental problems.[/pull_quote_right]

"I saw the issues that were becoming more and more relevant, and very few people were talking about them. And in EPSM, I was the only one willing to stick my neck out and be spokesperson. The other members said, 'We will support you, but we have careers', and I was on my own, so I was willing to take the risk," Gurmit explains.

"My outspokenness, of course, cost me in finding freelance jobs. But at that point in life, I was not too concerned about money, just as long as I had enough to survive. I felt the cause was more important than a career in engineering."

Gurmit crusaded fearlessly, speaking out about environmental issues in many national news-making events such as the construction of the Bakun Dam in Sarawak; the proposed construction of the Tembeling dam in Taman Negara, Pahang; the pollution of the Klang Valley's Sungai Klang and Penang's Sungai Juru; the storage of radioactive waste in Bukit Merah, Perak; and the destruction of Batu Caves, Selangor, through limestone quarrying.



A young Gurmit (far left) and his friends on a cycling trip up Penang Hill in 1962 – nature had called to him from a young age.

Gurmit's advocacy did not make him popular, with many people soon accusing him of being anti-development. The environmentalist even remembers a time when the youth wing of a local political party came to protest against him outside his house – though they had the wrong place!

"They came and demonstrated outside on a Sunday morning, against me and EPSM, for campaigning against the Bakun dam. But I was in a different place. The press called me up and asked, 'Aren't there demonstrations going on?' and I said 'No, I'm here reading my Sunday papers!'" Gurmit recalls with a laugh.

Seeding the future

Gurmit and the EPSM's constant efforts to protect the environment have not been in vain: in 1993, Gurmit received the distinguished Langkawi Award from the Government, and in 2008, received the Anugerah Tokoh Hijau (Green Icon Award) MBPJ from the Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ), and the Sustainable Consumer Award from the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry. He has also received an honorary MSc from Universiti Putra Malaysia, among other accolades.

Today, he lives with his wife, organic farming advocate Tan Siew Luang, in an environmentally sustainable house in Petaling Jaya. Don't think, however, that the green lion has retired into the shadows: Gurmit still keeps busy nowadays, as he is the chairman of Cetdem, and still serves as an advisor to EPSM, among other positions.



Gurmit with his partner-in-green Tan Siew Luang at their wedding party in 1987.

Asked if things have changed in the area of environmental protection since the days he first started, Gurmit replies that some things have, while others are still the same.

"Logging is still an issue. The root causes of these problems are still unchanged," Gurmit says. "It's the same story. Some things have not changed because political structures have not changed. That is one of my frustrations."

His hope for the future, he says, is for Malaysians to constantly maintain the environment and to ensure that the people put in charge of such issues are held accountable.

"I think politics is the right of the individual – as long as I don't get involved in party politics. Publicly, I've never condemned a party, although I've condemned actions taken by decision makers. While I was president of EPSM, every general election, I would ask,

where is the environmental plight in your political manifesto?" Gurmit says.



He's still walking the talk: Gurmit with his homemade compost bin outside Cetdem. Photo: Filepic

"Now that people are more educated, they should be aware, and should demand things from their political representative on environmental action. They should hold them accountable and evaluate them during their terms.

"I strongly believe that Malaysians should be more assertive about their rights, which they should exercise in a positive way. You must keep people on their toes, and make sure they take environmental issues seriously."

How did the veteran environmentalist stay so passionate about his cause, even after decades of criticism and campaigning against what seems to be the same issues?

"Some say I'm crazy. But I think these issues are still worth fighting for. Despite the fact that on some things, no action at all has been taken, I believe these issues are too important to give up on. Someone has to do these things, and I hope I can inspire young people to continue, because it's their future that's at stake," Gurmit says.

"Too many people are selfish. But we must look beyond ourselves. And we must all take action to solve environmental problems, because governments alone cannot do it. The power is with the people."

Memoirs Of A Malaysian Eco-Activist is now available at Areca Books, The Star Pitt Street, No.15 Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, George Town (04-251 9001), or online at arecabooks.com. The book will be available in major bookstores nationwide in early May.

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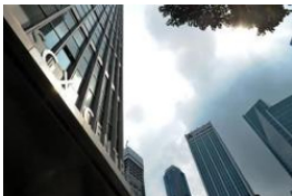
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