

# Estate Chronicles: On the way to school

By [Ravindran Raman Kutty](#) - March 19, 2023 @ 6:01pm

THE Rangkaian Merah (today it's Minnal FM) radio station came on at 5am, alongside the *azan* call to prayer and the estate wake-up bell. My father was the earliest to rise to his ritual of brushing his teeth and cleaning his lungs.

Being a cigar smoker, his loud cough not only brought out chest phlegm, but also acted as the morning alarm for us, as well as all the neighbouring households.

My mother and older sister would be awake by 5.30am, and the morning routine of preparing breakfast and getting us ready for school would start.

The chilly mornings were never comforting to those of us who dreaded getting ready for school. Our house would be dimly lit with two kerosene lamps – one in the kitchen and another in the dining area.

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My older sister would dress me up, combing my straight straw-like hair with a drop or two of coconut oil. With navy blue shorts and a starched white shirt tucked in haphazardly, Cuticura lavender-scented powder on my body and face, I was ready for a hearty breakfast and to begin the long walk to school.

## HEADING TO SCHOOL

The walk from home to school covered 5km. The estate's laterite road had only two conditions: dusty on a sunny day or wet and muddy red on a rainy day.

On wet mornings, our shoes would leave muddy prints on the school floor, but no one would mind as they would be the same as those in nearby estates and kampung, too. The walk in the pitch-dark dawn was made joyful with the moonlight artistically illuminating our path to school.

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My siblings and I would walk in batches with our neighbours, playing with our shadows and wondering if the moon was following us or the other way around. By shifting our focus to the shining moon, we would reach our school with less pain.

If time permitted, we would stop at a newly opened sundry shop in Kampung Muhibbah – a new residential area located at the entrance of our estate.

When the tin mine company abandoned the land, almost every estate worker began to fence off a portion of the barren land and build their houses on it. Of course, these illegal homes were scrutinised by the local authority, but it was a daunting task to curb the mushrooming of the structures as they could be built over the weekend at top speed.



The walk to school was full of adventures for the then young writer. -- FILE PIC

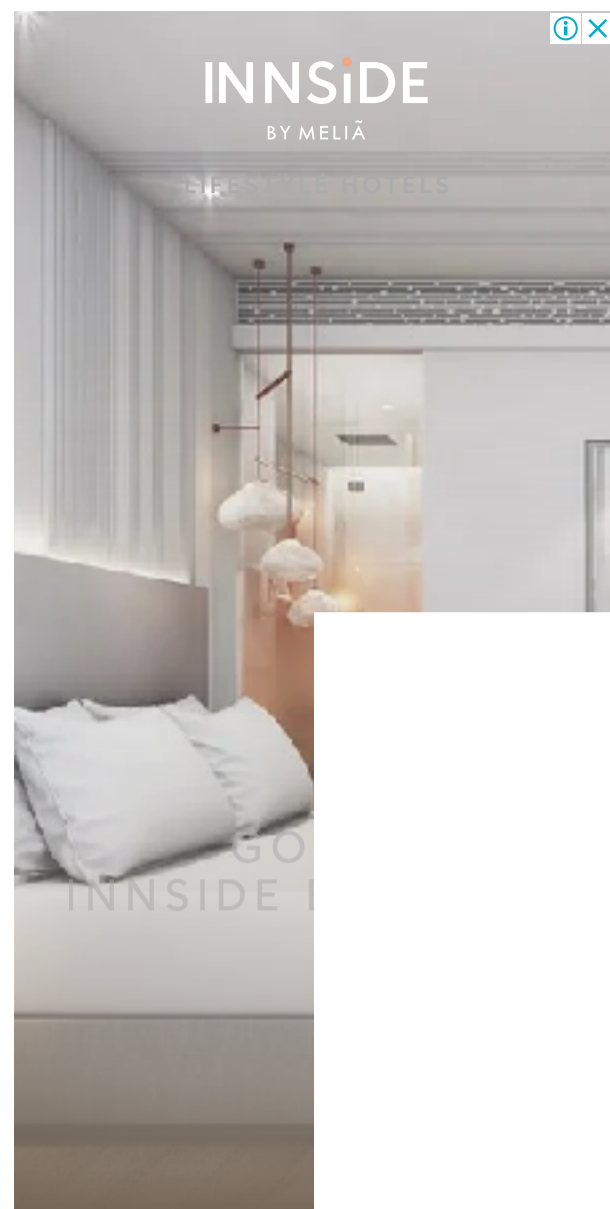
At the shop, the boys would play "tikam". They could invest or bet five cents, and try to win double or more. There would be a thunderous roar when a winner was among us. I was just a silent observer with my five cents safely in my pocket.

That money allowed me to buy one piece of kuih. That was it. Water to quench our thirst came straight from the school tap.

Sometimes, our morning journey would have an added stop at the rubber firehouse, where the rubberwood logs continuously fired the urn that dried the freshly baled rubber sheets. This firehouse was simply the best place to stop by and warm yourself before the long walk, especially in the wee hours.

Upon resuming our walk, we would reach school by 6.50am or 7am. On a lucky day, we would arrive by 6.45am.

Afternoon school sessions provided few or almost no opportunities for such "adventures". Each day would be a quick dash to the rubber plantation in the morning, where I would help my parents clean the rubber



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cups, then a rush home by 10am for a quick shower and then off to school.

The lingering smell of dried rubber on my body must have been unbearable, yet none of my classmates or friends complained or showed any repulsiveness. What sports they were!

## GOING HOME

The walk home from school brought us another set of memories. On sunny days, it was blisteringly hot at 1pm. With no umbrellas or caps, we would brave the scorching sun and find our way back to my sister's kitchen to fill our hungry tummies.

However, on rainy days, the laterite estate road would literally turn into a river. My cousin Rajan and I would wade through this "river" in the pouring rain. We would sometimes spot fish too. Our schoolbags and books would be drenched, not to mention us!

The walk home was more challenging than the walk to school. I always hoped for any passing motorcyclist or bicyclist to give us a ride. Many people who were heading to the estate would oblige.

My walks between home and school ended after my Sijil Rendah Pelajaran exams. My parents bought me a bicycle, and this gave me a licence to cycle to my school, SM Sri Sentosa, alongside Rajan, Guna and Batu.

Although having a bicycle saved me a great deal of time and a pair of aching legs, those walks will never be forgotten. They were a form of early morning exercise, a form of camaraderie, and another stitch to further strengthen our estate family.

Such beautiful schooling days would be etched in my mind and heart forever. What beautiful days they were. A moon that follows you, amidst the dark, laterite road. The scorching heat never shook us. The rain never stopped me from going to school.

This is an electrifying experience to cherish and for the current generations to know; how we grew up then, completing Primary One to Form Six.

**The next installment of the Estate Chronicles will be published in a fortnight**

Keywords: [School](#), [Estate Chronicles](#)

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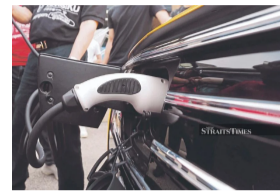
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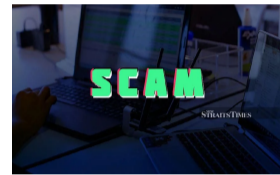
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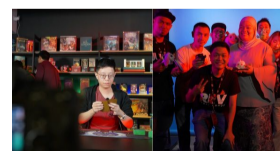
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