

Best birthday gift for H.M. Shah

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MEANINGFUL: One of nation's pioneer businessmen gets 'Tan Sri' award

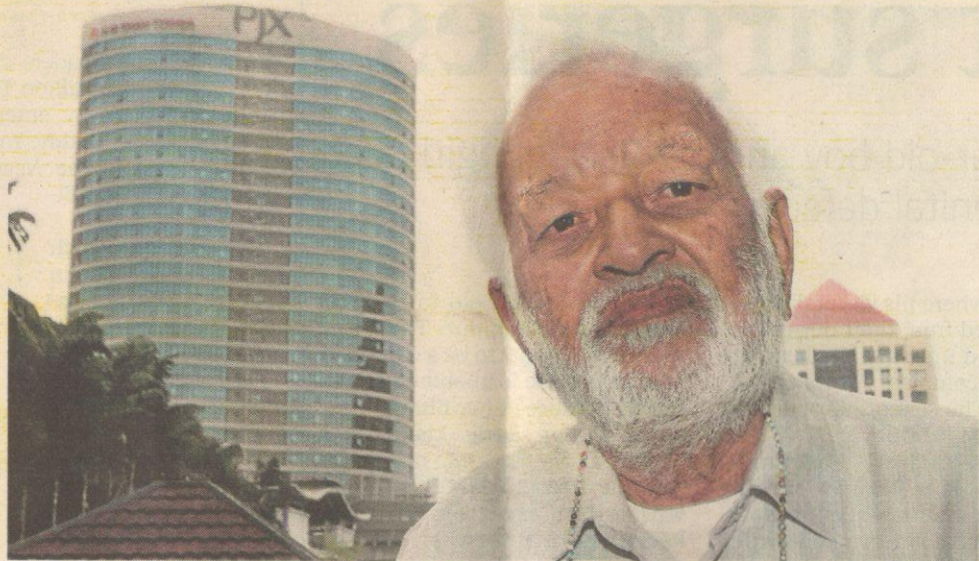
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TO receive a birthday present is meaningful for some, but how do you react when that gift is one of the nation's highest honours.

As one of Malaysia's pioneer businessmen, Tan Sri Habib Mohammed Shah, better known as H.M. Shah, was more than honoured when he was bestowed the Panglima Setia Mahkota award, which carries the title "Tan Sri", in conjunction with the birthday of Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah on June 2.

A timely birthday present for the nonagenarian, whose 91st birthday was just a week before on May 24.

"I'm touched that the country remembers



Tan Sri Habib Mohammed Shah, who owns the H.M. Shah Village Hotel, has long been associated and credited with the development of Petaling Jaya. Pic by SugumaranSuppiah

peaked as it gave me more knowledge on how to be better and to do more."

Shah's winning attitude made him popular with many prestigious clubs and organisations in Singapore at that time.

Shah also scored a number of firsts in the

said, the United States government sent him on a three-month trip to various parts of North America to gain experience and exposure for a possible future in politics.

But he realised that politics was not his cup

of tea and it was back to business.

He set up Shah's Bowling, Shah's Village Motel (now hotel) and Shah's Beach Motel in Malacca. He introduced the first bowling alley in Malaysia and the first hotel in Petaling Jaya in 1966.

"I liked it. If I like it, other people would like it, so I started off with that idea.

Shah was also the first Bumiputera to open a petrol kiosk in Malaysia — the Shell station in Jalan Gasing.

"It was in the middle of nowhere. To get people to go there, I hired local girls as petrol pump attendants.

His wife, Puan Sri Viera Serina Shah, 64 added: "The men would drive all the way to pump petrol there. It was a hit. That was very innovative of him."

Shah shared a close friendship with legendary actor and musician the late Tan Sri P. Ramlee, and stood by him through thick and thin.

Today, despite his age, Shah is still as active as ever.

He wakes up at 5am to check on the hotel's guest list before his exercise session with a physiotherapist. Then it's lunch with the wife and a cosy dinner before he retires for the day.

and appreciates me through such a recognition at this age," Shah told the *New Straits Times* at the H.M. Shah Village Hotel that is owned by him — a prominent landmark in Petaling Jaya, near here.

Long associated and credited with the development of Petaling Jaya, Shah smiled as he reminisced about the bygone days.

"Petaling Jaya was once just a village surrounded by jungle. When people got to know that I was buying a land there, they laughed and called it a bad idea, saying it was not a good location and far from other important places.

"The land was just 35 sen per square feet then. I went ahead and bought land in a few locations there.

"Look at PJ now," laughed the hotelier cum film producer.

His first venture into the world of business was right after the British occupation of Malaya. He found that the British had left behind most of their cars and decided to do something about it.

"I looked at the cars and thought I could sell them second-hand. So I opened a shop in Singapore," he said, recalling how his pioneer business moulded him into a good car salesman.

"I was instantly recognised as the Malay man who ventured into business, which was something very new to our people.

"The Malays were only known to work for others. I had made a difference."

Word got around on Shah's business acumen, prompting then managing director of *Utusan Melayu* Singapore, Yusof Ishak, to approach him to help its fledgling Malay newspaper increase its advertisement revenue.

"I took up the offer to be in *Utusan's* advertising department. I did what I did best, to sell.

"While in *Utusan*, my interest in business

early years.

He was the first Malay to be a member of the Singapore Rotary Club, the American Club and other elite clubs in Singapore.

"I was soon promoted to the post of distribution director and editor for the northern edition of *Utusan Melayu*. I worked hard for more than six years to improve the sales of the paper in Malaya.

The Korean War in the 1950s saw the businessman taking a new direction when he and a friend, Hashim Awang, established a company called Federal Travel Service.

The company's workers were allowed to buy 1,000 of its shares.

"This was to improve their lifestyle and to avoid monopolisation by the management or any individual wanting to control the company. It was also to avoid in-fighting over the ownership of shares."

Shah said the company used its returns on investment to buy *Utusan Melayu* shares to raise the standard of the daily while increasing sales.

"To make sure *Utusan* remained a quality local daily, we suggested a shift to Kuala Lumpur.

"The idea was mooted one year before our Independence but was not well received by the shareholders of *Utusan Melayu* in Singapore."

So Federal Travel Service bought all the shares from the Singapore shareholders and set up *Utusan's* office in Kuala Lumpur, in Jalan Chan Sow Lin where it stands to this day.

By this time, Shah had established close ties with politicians and royalty, including the nation's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj.

"Many of them even advised me to join politics."

After the country's Independence, Shah

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Tan Sri Habib Mohammed Shah