

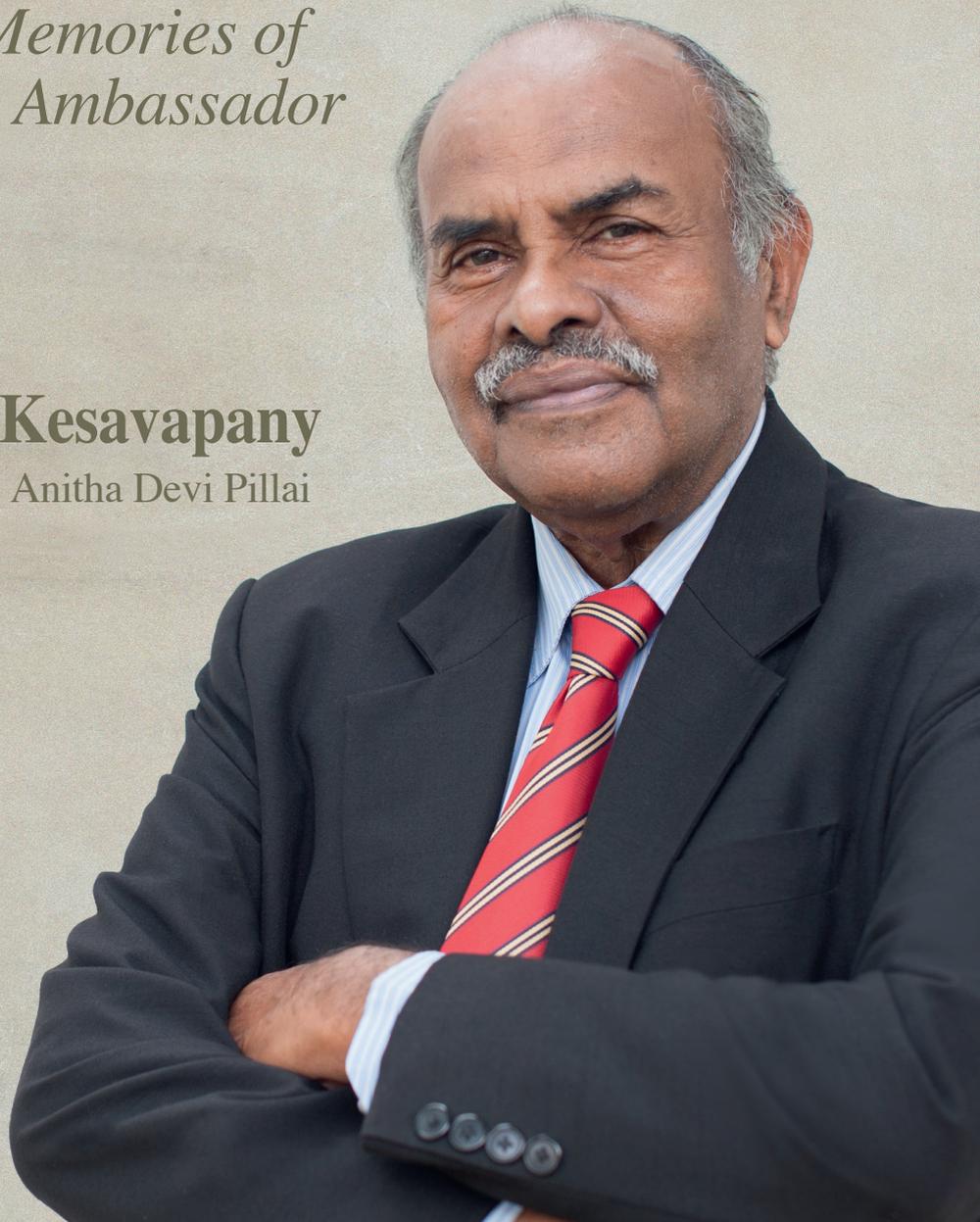
For Review only

K. Kesavapany  
with Anitha Devi Pillai

# From ESTATE To EMBASSY

*Memories of an Ambassador*

**K. Kesavapany**  
with Anitha Devi Pillai



From ESTATE To EMBASSY

Marshall Cavendish  
Editions

This biography documents K. Kesavapany's journey from the Malayan estates in the late 1930s to his move to Singapore when he was headhunted to join the Singapore Civil Service in the 1970s, and from his entry into Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to his subsequent sojourns abroad, such as in Australia, Turkey, Geneva, Jordan, Indonesia, Russia, United Kingdom and Malaysia. After retiring from his last post with the MFA, he took on the position of Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

This book also elaborates on the next phase of his journey where he holds several prominent portfolios in Singapore's social and academic scene, such as at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Dyslexia Association of Singapore, Singapore Indian Association, Inter-Religious Organization, as well as the Singapore International Foundation.



"Kesavapany reminds us how Malaya and Singapore after the Second World War provided many with the opportunity to develop their talents to the full. How he took every opportunity to make use of what he learnt to serve his country is an inspiring story for future generations of Singaporeans."

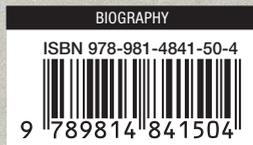
Professor Wang Gungwu  
University Professor  
National University of Singapore

"Kesavapany, or just Pany to his friends and colleagues, has written an eminently interesting and readable story of his remarkably diverse life. From rural, or at least plantation, Malaysia he made it to the upper reaches of the diplomatic world in Singapore's Foreign Service. In the process, he has been a teacher, a civil servant in several ministries of the government, the leader of one of Asia's renowned 'think-tanks', namely the Yusof Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and an active member of his community."

JYM Pillay  
Rector, College of Alice and Peter Tan,  
National University of Singapore

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“A fascinating account of Ambassador Kesavapany’s remarkable journey from modest origins to a distinguished career in public service and diplomacy – and now, with boundless energy, in community service. Written with his characteristic brevity, wit, charm and candour, it also offers the author’s personal glimpse into Singapore’s evolution since independence and of his peers and friends who helped shape it.”

**HE Jawed Ashraf**

High Commissioner of India to the Republic of Singapore

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“Ambassador Kesavapany has done Singapore a great service by recounting these illuminating and inspiring stories; stories which also provide valuable insights into the history of Singapore (and Malaysia) and into the nature of diplomacy. Personal relationships matter: imagine a Brazilian Ambassador tearing up an EU paper at a WTO meeting just out of solidarity with his friend, Pany. This book will surprise, amuse and entertain you.”

**Kishore Mahubani**

former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

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“*From Estate to Embassy: Memories of an Ambassador* is a book full of history and knowledge. It is an invaluable source of guidance and advice for many generations to come.

The author, Mr Kesavapany, is a diplomat, a scholar and an interfaith leader. As Singapore’s High Commissioner to many countries as well as Singapore’s Permanent Representative to the UN, he represented Singapore to the best of his abilities. His experiences became an asset when he was made the Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. It was not surprising that our former President SR Nathan was the one who recommended that Kesavapany take up the role of President of the IRO from 2017–2018. It was during Mr Kesavapany’s tenure as president that the IRO received its biggest donation (over a quarter million dollars) since its founding in 1949.

I first heard of Kesavapany through Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, the former Head of the Department of Malay Studies (NUS) and Vice-Chancellor (UM), who had very high regard for him and used to say that Kesavapany was highly intelligent and a man of vision. It is no doubt that Mr Kesavapany is an icon that Singapore should be proud of for his tremendous contributions that spanned decades.”

**Syed Hassan Al-Attas**

Imam & Head, Ba’alwie Mosque, Singapore



“I had the good fortune to join, and spend my maiden year at, the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), Singapore, during Ambassador Kesavapany’s presidency in 2017. Ironically, I had the good fortune to spend my first cycle of reservist duty in the Singapore Armed Forces with the Ambassador’s son, Murali, 15 years prior.

Usually armed with a kindness of some sort, a word of encouragement, or a knowing smile, it was immediately clear that Ambassador Kesavapany’s many years of leadership in public service and his easy-going personality were twin assets for the IRO.

Ambassador Kesavapany infused in the IRO a renewed energy to drive forward and to urgently reconsider its current standing in a changed world. He introduced and initiated various new programmes during his presidency and supported key modernising initiatives that may very well prove to be fundamental to the future of the IRO’s inter-faith work.

True to Ambassador Kesavapany’s nature, *From Estate to Embassy* is a modest, elegant and hopeful read about life. I hope others enjoy it as much as I have.”

**Ben J Benjamin**

President, Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore

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“A distinguished diplomat’s understated record of a long and dedicated service to his nation.”

**Ravi Velloor**

Associate Editor, *The Straits Times*

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“I am delighted that that this long-awaited book, *From Estate to Embassy*, has finally come to surface. But it was worth the wait as it takes time to chronicle in detail the life of an amazing individual. Indeed, Ambassador Kesavapany has led a truly remarkable life in service to nation and community. His contributions are immeasurable and extend beyond his diplomatic service to his indefatigable leadership in the upliftment of the Singapore Indian community and his contributions particularly in the social, inter-faith and charity sectors, all earning him much deserved high admiration and recognition. I can think of no greater honour than to call him my friend.”

**Ameerali Abdeali, JP, PPA (G), PBM**

President, Muslim Kidney Action Association



For Review only



“Like thirty percent of the graduates of the Malayan Teachers’ Training College, Kirkby, Liverpool, (MTTC Kirkby), K Kesavapany (Pany) and I opted out of the teaching profession after serving the government of newly independent Malaya for the contractual period of five years. Pany and I had the same ambition: to become lawyers. However, our financial situation was such that we accepted, gratefully, the offer to be trained as teachers in England.

Pany and I were in the same batch, the fifth, 1955–1957, and in the same English tutorial class under Cambridge graduate, Mr Geoffrey Broughton. Pany was his favourite student, topping in the term tests.

There was a spiritual, religious trait in Pany. At Hindu festival times like Deepavali, Kesavapany became the College’s Hindu priest. Donned in his Veshti and bare chested, he conducted poojas and recited the mantras with all solemnity and divinity in a shivering cold climate!

At ambassadorial level, Pany was an accomplished diplomat who was known to have worked closely with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew himself. As High Commissioner of Singapore to his native Malaysia, he helped to resolve many a knotty issue between the two countries. It was during that time that Pany organised one of the best attended and most enjoyable Kirkby Reunions in the Concorde Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, patronised by HRH Tuanku Bainun, herself a Kirkbyite of the 1952–1954 batch. Pany was also involved as a principal organiser of the 2018 reunion in Johor Bahru and continues to keep close touch with the Kirkby alumni.

Thank you, Pany, for contributing substantially to the success of the Alumni.”

**Dato VL Kandan**

President, Persatuan Alumni Malayan Teachers’ Training College  
Kirkby, Liverpool, England

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“Kesavapany’s skill as a people person able to connect across cultures, sparring with elites and interacting with the man in the street comes through clearly. This book is more than the memoirs of a diplomat. Pany gives us a feel of the societies that he lived in, an insight into the rapid changes in Malaysia and Singapore during his lifetime, as well the challenges facing Singapore as we become a middle aged society.”

**Ambassador Barry Desker**

Distinguished Fellow  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University



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**EMBASSY**

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an Ambassador*

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*I would like to dedicate this book*

*to my wife Padmini,*

*my sons Murali and Sashi,*

*my daughters-in-law Jyoti and Geetha,*

*and my grandchildren Kishan and Jaynna*

*for their love and affection.*



# For Review only

## Contents



Acknowledgements 10

Foreword 12

A Message 15

CHAPTER 1 Before the Journey Begins 17

CHAPTER 2 The Kirkby Experience 26

CHAPTER 3 Once I was a Teacher 35

CHAPTER 4 Varsity Life 40

CHAPTER 5 The Letter from Singapore 45

CHAPTER 6 Working in the Ministry of Labour 48

CHAPTER 7 The Diplomatic Journey Begins 55

CHAPTER 8 My Southern Odyssey 58

CHAPTER 9 To the Land of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky 64

CHAPTER 10 To be in England 71

CHAPTER 11 Tending to the Region 92

CHAPTER 12 Diplomacy in Geneva 97

CHAPTER 13 Returning to my Roots 109

CHAPTER 14 Entering the World of Academia 121

CHAPTER 15 The Change that I Wish to See 143

CHAPTER 16 The Rotary Movement: Service above Self 156

CHAPTER 17 My Inter-Faith Journey 163

CHAPTER 18 My Encounter with APJ Abdul Kalam 168

CHAPTER 19 Lessons I Learnt from Five Decades of  
Interaction with the Late Mr SR Nathan 171

CHAPTER 20 My Journey Continues 178

A Letter from President SR Nathan 180

Author's Note: The Scribe's Journey 182

About the Authors 187

## Acknowledgements



As can be seen from the story to be unfolded in this book, the late Mr SR Nathan loomed large in my life, starting from the time my wife and I arrived in Singapore to the last days of his life when he performed an act of unforgettable kindness to my family. He was a life-long mentor to me.

The book would not have seen the light of day if not for Dr Anitha Devi Pillai, a lecturer at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University. She cajoled and bullied me into completing work on the book. Anitha, I thank you for your selfless labour of love.

I wish to acknowledge Ms Melanie Phua, my teaching assistant at the Singapore Management University, who was with me at the start of the journey. Lawson Law and Sumi Baby Thomas had helped in various stages of the writing of the book.

Mrs Triena Ong, my friend and former colleague at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) had also helped with editing the

draft. I would like to thank my former ISEAS colleague, Asad Latif, for helping to put the finishing touches to the book. Mr Glenn Wray and Ms Anita Teo, from Marshall Cavendish International (Asia), completed the journey with tender loving care.

On the occasion of my 82nd birthday, I am happy that I am able to celebrate the completion of work on the book and have it launched in 2019.

My heartfelt respects to my in-laws, the Kultars and the Naidus. To my relatives and friends in the globalised village of today, my thanks and gratitude for enriching my journey.

K. Kesavapany

1 March 2019

## Foreword



I thank my good friend and old comrade, Ambassador K. Kesavapany (Pany), for giving me the pleasure of contributing the foreword to his memoirs.

Life is a mysterious journey. We cannot choose our parents or the circumstances of our birth. Although we have free will, we often have little or no control over our career or professional life. We definitely have no control over when and how our life is ended.

Pany was born and grew up in a rubber estate in Malaysia. His father was a conductor of the estate. Because of his ability and hard work, he was given the opportunity to study at one of Malaysia's top secondary schools. He applied to be a school teacher and was sent by the Malaysian government to study at Kirkby College, in Liverpool, for two years.

Although Pany was happy teaching, he decided to study for a degree in history at the University of Malaya. His loyal wife, Padmini, worked as a teacher to support him. He graduated with a good degree and applied to join the Malaysian Civil Service. Because of the Bumiputra Policy, he was rejected. Malaysia's loss would be Singapore's gain.

Fate intervened and changed the course of his life and career. He joined the Singapore Civil Service. After spending five years in the Ministry of Labour, he managed to transfer to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He found his calling. He became a Singapore Citizen and loved his new career as a Singapore diplomat.

We have worked together twice. The first time was in June 1992. I was appointed to chair the Main Committee at the so-called Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro. I had a very good team, consisting of Pany, Chew Tai Soo, Viji Menon, Burhan Gafoor and Richard Grosse from MFA and Khoo Seow Poh and Fong Chee Leong from the Ministry of the Environment. I was successful in my work and will always be grateful to the members of the team.

The second time was in 1996. Pany was our Ambassador to the WTO, in Geneva. He had been elected as the first Chairman of the Council of WTO. Singapore had offered to host the first Ministerial Council. Singapore's offer was accepted by everyone except the United States. The Clinton Administration was angry with Singapore because we had caned an American boy called Michael Fay for vandalism. The then US Trade Representative, Mickey Kantor, was determined to block the offer. Pany decided to put the matter to a vote. Because of Pany's friendship with the US Ambassador, he chose not to follow Kantor's instruction and did that vote. The ministerial meeting was chaired by our then Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr Yeo Cheow Tong. Pany and I worked closely with Mr Yeo and the WTO Secretariat to ensure the success of the meeting.

What makes Pany a successful diplomat?

He is a successful diplomat because he is well read and knowledgeable. He has high EQ and is able to connect with people. He is able to win the friendship and trust of his colleagues. He has the ability to build bridges and to create consensus.

In addition to MFA, Pany has served, with distinction, as the Director of the Yusof Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He has reformed and modernised the Singapore Indian Association. He was President of the much-admired Inter-Religious Organisation. He was also a very effective Non-Resident Ambassador to Jordan.

In recent years, Pany and his admirable wife, Padmini, have been helping the poor, the disabled, the marginalized and the needy. In his memoirs, Pany has pleaded for a more systemic and generous approach to helping our poor and our elderly.

On a final note, I would also like to compliment Dr Anitha Devi Pillai for collaborating with Pany on the writing of this book.

Tommy Koh  
Professor of Law, NUS  
Ambassador-At-Large,  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore  
26 December 2018

## A Message



I am most delighted to write this message, not only because Pany is a close friend of many years but also because I see the deeply educative value of this autobiography, which I believe will remind the youth of today that the key to achieving your goals in life are hard work and humility.

Pany's story is a fascinating and easy reading account of how a kampong boy from a rural town in Pahang, Malaya, endeavoured, achieved academic success and made his way up as a teacher, civil servant and then served as one of the most self-effacing diplomats to walk the corridors of power, displaying quiet skills that served Singapore best, at the most critical times in its history. And when all is done, he takes satisfaction in once again being a teacher, imparting his vast experience to those keen on diplomacy and international relations. Yet, despite his elevated roles as mentor and guide, you will read that he always remained a student, and has never stopped learning, including lessons that he has learned from the late President SR Nathan.

The reader will also get to know of Pany's deep interest in the welfare of the man in the street. He makes no bones about his strong views on the rising income inequality and the need for a helping hand to prevent people from falling through the cracks.

This is indeed a book that will inspire the younger generation.

M Bala Subramanion  
Centenarian  
First Asian Postmaster-General  
Singapore

CHAPTER 1

**Before the Journey Begins**



Of the many memories that will be unfolded in this book is a meeting with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew at the Istana in 2005. After a crucial decision to a matter relating to Malaysia, MM Lee asked me, "Pany, don't you think that the Malaysians now know that the second-generation ministers are calling the shots?"

Looking at him straight in the eye, I replied, "No! The Malaysians still think that you are calling the shots."

Not too pleased with my response, MM Lee hitched up his trousers and paced up and down in the room. However, I felt that he was secretly pleased about still having a role to play in the management of Singapore-Malaysia relations.

How did I come to be where I am today?

Destiny is not created by the shoes we wear but by the steps we take. The journey of my life began in the General Hospital in Kuala Lumpur where I was born on 4 November 1936. My father, Muthial Krishnasamy, was a conductor in an oil palm estate in Glenmarie,

about 30 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur. Migrating from Vellore in South India, he arrived in British-administered Malaya in the early 1900s.

As he was English educated, he was able to get an administrative job in the estate. Memories of the first five years of my life in that estate are somewhat hazy. It was only in 1940 when we moved to Kuala Lipis, Pahang, that I began to have a firmer recollection of my life. My father was transferred from Glenmarie Estate to Benta Estate, which was about 60 kilometres from Kuala Lipis, the then capital of the state of Pahang. My family lived amongst a cluster of houses surrounded by coconut trees, which came to be called Toddy Kampong. This was on account of the coconut trees that were tapped for their sap, which was then made into toddy. My siblings and I grew up among Indians, Malays and Chinese, and this was my early introduction to an integrated community. We played cricket and did all the things that the youth of those days used to do, like catching spiders and all other kinds of invented games.

In 1941, the Second World War broke out, and Japanese troops moved into Kuala Lipis. By and large, our family did not have any negative experiences of the Occupation. In fact, as my father and elder brother quickly learned Japanese, they were employed as staff in the Food Control department. This gave them access to staples such as rice, cooking oil and salted fish. My father and brother shared some of these foodstuffs with other people in the kampong, in the spirit of give and take. However, while we had a well-stocked larder, we had no one to cook for us. My mother, Andalammah, who also hailed

from India, had a heart attack one morning at the age of 40, and passed away. My father, brothers and I had to fend for ourselves. My family now consisted of my father, my sister, Jayaletchumy, and five boys: Chakrapany, Kothandapany, Thasarathapany, myself and Navaneethapany. My sister had married and moved on to start her own family. So, we had to look after ourselves, with my elder brothers taking on the task of cleaning the house and cooking. A cousin, Jeya, would occasionally drop by to help us with the cooking. My task was to look after the six goats, which provided milk for the family. Any extra milk was bartered with neighbours who grew vegetables. By and large, it was a carefree existence surrounded by family and friends.

This tranquility was disturbed when Chakrapany, in an altercation, slapped a Japanese officer. His only recourse to safety was to run to Singapore, where he joined the Indian National Army (INA). For some time, the Japanese Administration kept our house under surveillance. It was at this time that I first came to hear about the INA and its leader, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Little did I know that years later I would commission a book on Bose at the suggestion of the late Mr SR Nathan. It was written by Nilanjana Sengupta and entitled *A Gentleman's Word*.<sup>1</sup> It is a comprehensive account of Netaji's legacy and his contribution to India's struggle for freedom. The book was well-received and profiled Nilanjana as a scholar and an informed intellectual.

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<sup>1</sup> Nilanjana Sengupta, *A Gentleman's Word: The legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

One fine day when I was six years old, my father brought home a lady and told us that she would be our stepmother. Her name was Subbamah. Twenty years younger than my father, she added four more to the family brood: Govarathnapany, Audilethchumy, Santaletchumy and Lalilalethchumy. Typically, stepmothers are known to breathe fire on their stepchildren, but Subbamah was kind and loving to us. My father was taciturn by nature and we did not, therefore, get to learn much about our Indian roots. This is something I regret until today, as I have not been able to discover my ancestral origins in India.

By the end of the war in 1945, British troops returned to Kuala Lipis. My strongest recollection of this period was the tins of condensed milk and Kraft cheese that the British troops shared with the local children. To this day, these two food items are my favourites, especially the round tins of Kraft cheese, which I could eat a whole tin by myself!

In early 1946, the British Administration restarted the only English school in the town. It was called Clifford School, after Sir Hugh Clifford, who was the Governor of the Straits Settlements and British High Commissioner in Malaya from 1927 to 1930. We were all told to line up according to our ages, and I found myself in the line for Standard One, the equivalent of Primary Three in today's terms. School was largely a pleasant experience, in a multiracial and multicultural setting. The Headmasters were British, while the teachers were Asians, including Indians, Sri Lankans and Burmese. The most notable of the headmasters was Dr GED Lewis, who wrote an excellent book on the geography of Malaysia. It became a textbook in schools, for the study of the subject. The others were Mr Mac Cockendale and Mr GF

Jackson. They were all sports-inclined, and therefore Clifford School acquired a reputation for excellence in sports. I played cricket and rugby, and did long distance running. Among the teachers, the one who made the strongest impression on me was my history teacher, Inche Halimi. His passion for history rubbed off on me and was to stay throughout my life.

Mr Somasundram, Mr Selvanayagam and Mr Sinnappo, all Sri Lankan Tamils, taught English language and English Literature. The grounding in literature that I received from them remains with me. At one time, I could recite lines from the "The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám", such as:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
A Jug of Wine, A Loaf of Bread – and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –  
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

This early introduction to Sufi literature – a mystical brand of Islam – was again a formative influence in my life. It was to lead me to embrace inter-faith dialogue in later life. Mr Somasundram introduced us to the beauty of English poetry, by poets such as Wordsworth, PB Shelley and Tennyson. The poem "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray was one of the most haunting poems that left a deep impression on me.

Our home in Toddy Kampong was at the back of the Ganesha temple. As such, temple-going was part and parcel of my life. A particular

reason for going to the temple was the *prasadam*, the offering made to God and later distributed among the devotees. In 1954, I finished Form Five, and was planning to go to Anderson School in Ipoh for Form Six. The major schools in Malaya then, like Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur, Free School in Penang, King George V School in Seremban and King Edward VII in Taiping, accepted students from schools such as mine. While waiting for the term to begin, I took up temporary teaching in Abdullah School, Kuantan, Pahang. I was there for only four months before starting class at Anderson School. When I was moving to Kuantan, my father made a prescient remark. Out of the blue, he said, “It is destined that you will not stay put in one place but move to distant horizons.” He added that this had to do with a “chakra wheel” on the sole of my right foot. Alas, he did not live long enough to know how accurate his prediction would be!

When the Cambridge results were released, I found my grades good enough to enter Anderson School as a Form Six Lower student as I had hoped for. Among my classmates was Tunku Razeleigh Hamzah, a prince from the Royal House of Kelantan. He went on to study law, and later became the Finance Minister of Malaysia from 1976 to 1984. History was to show that he would have been “the best Prime Minister that Malaysia never had”.<sup>2</sup> Ku Li, as he was popularly called, was the victim of vicissitudes in Malaysian politics of that time. He is still active in the political scene and defended his seat in the 2018 General Elections. We remain friends. Another friend of mine was

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<sup>2</sup> <http://tommythomas.net/publication-article/the-best-prime-minister-malaysia-never-had-the-edge/>

Dr S Selvaratnam, who after studying in the University of Malaya in Singapore, went on to become a World Bank official. We remain in close contact.

The most notable and unforgettable of the teachers at Anderson School was Mr NS Selvamany, who taught me Economics. He was a legend in his time, he was more than a teacher. He was a friend, guide and a source of inspiration. With his prodigious memory, he knew the name of every student who had passed through his hands and kept track of his/her progress in life. Asked why he did this, he would quote the following words of wisdom:

The water that irrigates the padi field  
also benefits the grass on the bunds.  
I am the grass.

Former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong and I were privileged to have been “irrigated” by the friendship of this sagacious teacher. CJ Chan was to become one of the best Chief Justices in Singapore’s legal history. Describing him as a “first rate world class judicial mind”, his successor, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, has said, “Chief Justice Chan was almost always the perfect judge to hear a case, any case.”

For his lifelong commitment to the teaching profession, Mr Selvamany was bestowed many state awards, but the ones he cherishes most are the ones he received in 1996, Tokoh Guru Perak and in 1997, Tokoh Guru Kebangsaan.

Along with his wife Poovayee, Mr Selvamany continues with his good work of remaining in contact with his students who, on the occasion of his 80th birthday in 2012, published a book called *Selvamany: More Than a Teacher*. The concluding paragraph in the book by the author, Rokiah Talib, sums it all up:<sup>3</sup>

Cikgu, your contributions and deeds are so enormous as a teacher that if I were an artist I would draw the best portrait of your kindly demeanor; if I were a poet I would pen a beautiful poem to capture and reflect your life's wonderful journey; if I were a composer I would write the best song to sing praises of your good nature; if I were a sculptor I would carve the most handsome statue of your persona. I am but a mere mortal with a limited ability to write, so, it is this book that must represent my utmost gratitude and that of others, as our tribute to you!

As my ambition was to read for law, my subjects were English, History and Economics. However, this was not to be. The result of an application I had made while in Kuantan for a teaching scholarship was announced, and I found myself among one of the 150 who were selected for a two-year course in Kirkby, Liverpool. This was a unique experiment by the Malayan Government to fast-track the training of teachers. It was a prestigious scholarship, and much sought after. So, I set aside my plans to study law and opted for the journey to Britain. Besides, my father had told my siblings and I that he could only afford

to educate us until Form Five. After that, we had to fend for ourselves if we wanted to further our studies.

This training of teachers in the Kirkby programme started in 1951, and 150 trainee teachers were sent to England yearly. It was truly a multiracial, multicultural experience, and we interacted without any inhibitions. As soon as one batch returned, another batch left. Hence, at any one time, there were 300 Malayans in a social setting far away from their homeland. All in all, 1900 teachers graduated from the Kirkby Teachers' Training College.

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<sup>3</sup> Rokiah Talib, *Selvamany: More Than a Teacher* (Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2012) p 273.

## CHAPTER 6

### Working in the Ministry of Labour



On the first day, I reported to the Public Service Commission (PSC), which was then at the Fullerton Building, fully expecting to be posted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To my utter disappointment, the officer who dealt with my posting told me that I was assigned to the Ministry of Labour.

Taken aback, I asked for the reason for the change in my posting. I was told that Mr Pang Tee Pow, who was then the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, had demanded that the next Administrative Service Officer who was recruited by PSC be sent to his Ministry. Mr Pang was a powerful figure in the Administrative Service and no one dared trifle with his demand.

So off I went to the Ministry of Labour on 3 November 1967 and reported for duty at the Labour Court. This was a special court within the Ministry of Labour to address minor labour disputes, mainly through counselling and mediation.

It was a rather unique experience to sit as a “judge” and have lawyers appear before me to plead their clients’ cases. Very soon, I was joined by Lee Shuang Hui and Wong Kan Seng, and we became fast friends.

Kan Seng was to rise rapidly up the ladder and ended his political career as Deputy Prime Minister. I was a witness at his wedding to Hong Geok. However high he rose in rank, Kan Seng never forgot the start of our relationship and he would always introduce me to his friends as the person who had been the witness to his marriage.

In 1968, Wong Hung Khim joined us as the Principal Assistant Secretary in the Ministry. He, too, went on to have an illustrious career in the Civil Service. Highly accomplished and with good PR skills, he became the Permanent Secretary in several ministries and headed several statutory boards.

Mr S Rajaratnam, one of the core first generation leaders, handled both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Labour portfolios. It was during his term that the Labour, Industrial Relations, and Arbitration Court Acts were passed by Parliament.

These laws, described as “draconian” by some quarters, ushered in a period of industrial peace and stability, which in turn set the stage for Singapore’s rapid economic progress.

In retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise to have spent five years from 1967 to 1972 in the Ministry of Labour because I came to experience, firsthand, some of the most pressing labour and industrial relations problems that Singapore was facing. Strikes were an everyday occurrence and the trade unions were split into pro-government and anti-government camps. Unemployment was at an unprecedented rate of 14%.

Situated in the heart of Chinatown, the Ministry of Labour was faced with frequent demonstrations by left-wing unions. At times, it was not even safe to venture out for lunch.

If not for the harsh laws, Singapore would not have enjoyed industrial peace and attracted the attention of foreign investors, particularly multi-national corporations (MNCs). The prevailing developmental theology among Third World countries was to shun MNCs as they were viewed as “agents of exploitation”. Singapore took a contrary view and welcomed the MNCs. This was because they had technical knowledge, capital and markets, all three factors of production which Singapore did not have. The first MNC to come to Singapore was Texas Instruments. Within sixty days of starting operations, the company was able to send Singapore-produced microchips back to the US. This was the start of the Information Technology (IT) industry in Singapore.

It was at this time, 1968 to be precise, that the British dropped their bombshell of evacuation from their military bases in Singapore, under the “East of Suez” policy. With the loss of empire and a worsening domestic economic situation, the Harold Wilson government downscaled the British presence in Southeast Asia. For the second time, Singapore was left in the lurch, the first being the hasty retreat from the onslaught of the Japanese invading forces in 1941. These two events brought home to the leaders and people of Singapore that they had to take responsibility for their own survival and well-being. These searing experiences served as the genesis for several policies, including the decision to set up a citizen army, with National Service

at its core. In the area of foreign affairs, Singapore decided to adopt a multi-directional approach. Singapore’s first foreign minister, Mr S Rajaratnam, spelled out the policy of cultivating as many permanent friends as possible, given that it is not wise to formulate foreign policy on the basis of permanent enemies, in his first speech in Parliament as Foreign Minister.<sup>11</sup>

Already reeling from the effects of Separation, the Singapore government had to deal with the loss of the sizable financial contribution made by the British to the local economy. Thousands of workers and their families were dependent on employment in the bases.

Pleas by Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues to the British government to delay the withdrawal by a couple of years fell on deaf ears.

As part of the terms negotiated for the withdrawal from the bases, the British government gave Singapore a sum of £50 million, half of it as a grant, the other half as a soft loan. Taking it as a solace of some sort, the Singapore government used the money to address the socio-economic problems confronting the nation. The chief of these problems was unemployment. There was also the question of what to do with the bases. Information about the bases was lacking locally as the records were held in London. I recollect Permanent Secretary, Mr Pang Twee

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<sup>11</sup> From email communication of 9 December 2018 with Irene Ng, author of *The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S Rajaratnam* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010).

Pow, telling us that the information was wanted urgently. I was among a task force, headed by Deputy Secretary Wong Hung Khim, which worked overnight and produced the required information in a report, within a record time of 48 hours. Among other things, this information was to be the basis for the conversion of the British bases to civilian use. A Bases Economic Conversion Department (BECD) was headed by Mr Hon Sui Sen, with the title of Commissioner. Mr KR Chandra, P.S. Law, headed the Land and Facilities Department, while Mr JY Pillay was in charge of the economic side where he was tasked with, commercialising some of the facilities and workshops the British forces left behind. Among the accomplishments of BECD was the incorporation of Sembawang Shipyard to take over the dry-dock workshops and employees of the British Naval Base.

Like me, Mr JY Pillay had also moved from Kuala Lumpur in the early 1960s. The comparison ends there as Mr JY Pillay went on to scale the heights of the public and private sectors. His greatest achievement was the success story of Singapore Airlines. If ever a demonstration of the validity of Singapore's policy of "meritocracy" is needed, the life and achievements of Mr JY Pillay would serve that purpose admirably. Mr JY Pillay served as Chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisors for 18 years. He also stood in for the President when the President was away from the country. Simple in his tastes, his favourite restaurant is Madras New Woodlands at Upper Dickson Road, where he meets his friends regularly. He refers to the restaurant as "Woodies". Another one of his favourite meeting places is Annalakshmi, a vegetarian restaurant at Central Square. Occasionally, I am a beneficiary of his generosity. Mr JY Pillay recalls, "Actually, Woodies started as an apres-

tennis outing on weekend mornings. As age and infirmity caught up with us, the tennis was gradually dropped." (From his personal email communication with me dated 16 January 2019).

Another area that the Singapore government looked into, to address the fall-out from the consequences of the British withdrawal, was the promotion of tourism. Among other things, this required an urgent increase in trained manpower for the industry. Using a portion of the grant from the British government, a Hotel and Catering Training School was set up in Nassim Hill around 1968. As the project was also targeted at reducing unemployment, the Ministry of Labour was a key player and I was assigned to cover its interests in the project.

I am happy to see that the Hotel and Catering Training School has evolved into the prestigious SHATEC Institute of today. It was established in 1983. A recent publication, *Developing Hospitality Talent*, tells the story of how the Training School, initiated and developed by the late Mr Pakir Singh, is now compared to the Lausanne Hotel School (EHL) in Switzerland. As Madam Kay Kuok, president of the Singapore Hotel Association has put it,<sup>12</sup>

... in the last thirty years, SHATEC has forged ahead and carved for itself a brand name in hospitality, training and education, not only in Singapore but in the region as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Raini Hamdi, *Developing Hospitality Talent* (Shatec, 2013) p 5 <<https://epublishbyus.com/ebook/ebook?id=10033114#/6>>

This is truly an illustration of how the mighty oak comes from the humble acorn.

On top of this, I was also tasked by the successive Permanent Secretaries to handle the Labour Ministry's external relations. This enabled me to travel to Geneva to participate in the annual International Labour Conference. However, my heart continued to yearn for the diplomatic career that my Permanent Secretaries, Mr Kwa Soon Chuan and Mr Lim Joo Hock, were reluctant to release me to. I suppose they found me handy in dealing with the foreign dignitaries coming to Singapore and dealing with matters relating to international relations.

However, when I heard that Mr Kwa himself was going to be transferred to the Ministry of Health, I went up to him and said, "You want me to stay but you are moving on!" Realising that I had set my mind on a diplomatic career, he allowed me to be transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Diplomatic Journey Begins



I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 1 August 1972 as a Grade VIII Officer. It was a very small outfit then, with Mr Rajaratnam as Minister, Mr GV Boggaars as the Permanent Secretary and Mr SR Nathan as the Deputy Secretary. Tan Boon Seng, Peter Chan, Barry Desker, Kemal Siddique and See Chak Mun were among the other officers in the Ministry. Mushahid Ali, Tan Seng Chye and Raymond Wong, Jayaletchimi, Mary Seet and Mark Hong were among the others who joined us later.

I was posted to the Southeast Asia Section, which dealt with regional countries. Seven months after joining the Ministry, I was sent on a diplomatic training course to Canberra, Australia. This was a specially designed course for Australian diplomats with provision for some foreign diplomats to be included in it. It was a great learning experience and also an introduction to the lively Australian way of life. Some of the course participants like John Buckley and Alexander Brooking became lifelong friends.

Besides the formal training, participants were also taken on tours within the country. In my case, I travelled with a group by air from

Canberra to Alice Springs. We then travelled by car to Ayers Rock, a 500-kilometre drive through the desert. Ayers Rock is regarded by native Australians as a sacred place.

The participants also went to Papua New Guinea and visited the highland area of Goroka, where the inhabitants lived in a primitive manner. Some of them went around naked, with only ash smeared on their bodies. We were invited to a meal in a village, where we witnessed the method of preparing the meal. A hole was dug in the ground, and subsequently, meat and vegetables were put in. The hole was then covered up and a fire was lit on top! Imagine that! After a few hours, the food was dug up and served. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Perhaps the most memorable tour, for a wine lover like me, was a drive from Canberra to Adelaide, where we stopped at every winery along the way and tasted the best of Australian wine. We made sure that we had a teetotaler in the group, who did the driving. At one particular winery, we were offered drops of a 100-year-old wine, which had become treacle by then. It was like drinking toffee, very mushy but nice!

At the end of the formal part of the course, the participants were sent to various Australian postings for on-the-job experience. I was initially posted to the Australian embassy in Ireland. However, as I had already been to Ireland on holiday, during the time I was in Kirkby, I asked for another posting. My request was granted, and I landed up in Ankara, Turkey. Little did I know then that I would be visiting Turkey two decades later, in an ambassadorial capacity.

My arrival in Ankara coincided with the Embassy's search to rent a holiday bungalow by the seaside. So, the First Secretary, one member of the local staff and I went to various parts of the Turkish coast to scout for a suitable location. The Turkish are very hospitable, always warm and welcoming to people from foreign lands. We stopped for the night in a small fishing village and had some light snacks to sustain ourselves in the afternoon. We told the restaurant owner that we would be back for dinner. Upon our return, we were pleasantly surprised to find that he had gone out to sea and caught some fish for our dinner! These are the small things that stick in one's mind.

All in all, the diplomatic training experience provided by the Australian government was a very pleasant one, with points learned and friendships forged.

Upon my return to the Ministry, I was told that I would be posted to Kuala Lumpur as the Deputy High Commissioner. I felt rather uneasy about this, as it was less than five years since I had come from Malaysia. I was not sure how the Malaysians would react to my return, and I was concerned that this would have an adverse effect on my performance. I expressed my concerns to Mr Bogaars. Understanding my concerns, he agreed that it was not a wise move to post me to Kuala Lumpur at that point in time.

Fate, however, ensured that I would return to Malaysia three decades later as the High Commissioner!

## About the Authors



**K Kesavapany** was Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia from 1997 to 2002. He served as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and was concurrently accredited as Ambassador to Italy and Turkey (1991–1997). He was elected as the first Chairman of the General Council of the WTO when it was established in January 1995. He was also Singapore's Non-Resident Ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. From 2002 to 2012, he was the Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Over the years, he held several prominent portfolios in the social scene of Singapore, including serving as the President of the Singapore Indian Association, President of the Inter-Religious Organization Council, President of Rotary Club of Raffles City, Term Trustee of SINDA, Board Member of the Hindu Endowment Board, as well as a Governor on the Board of the Singapore International Foundation.

Mr Kesavapany is currently an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (National University of Singapore), an executive committee member of the Dyslexia Association of Singapore



and the Indian Community Oral History Committee (ICOHC), as well as the President of the Abdul Kalam Vision Society.

**Anitha Devi Pillai** (Ph.D.) is an applied linguist and a teacher educator. She lectures pre-service and in-service English Language teachers at the National Institute of Education (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore). Her teaching modules focus on writing skills and writing pedagogy.

She was the recipient of the Singapore University of Social Sciences Teaching Merit Award in 2013 and 2014, as well as the Research Excellence Award from *Pravasi Express* in 2017 for her research on the Singapore Malayalee community. In 2019, she was awarded the *Excellence in Teaching Commendation Award 2018* from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

Anitha is the first author of *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee Community* (Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2017) and *Project Work: Exploring Processes, Practices and Strategies* (Pearson Education, 2008). She has also published in academic journals and books based on empirical research on writing pedagogy and writing processes as well as poetry and short stories in local and international journals.

“It was such a treat for me to read *From Estate to Embassy: Memories of an Ambassador* by K Kesavapany with Anitha Devi Pillai.

It flowed so seamlessly that I read it in one sitting without any break.

Ambassador Pany is such a lovable people person that it is no surprise at all to read about how he has networked so smoothly through all aspects of his life from career to charity and from politics to poetry.

I propose an addition to the title *From Estate to Embassy: From Excellence to Ecstasy*. I mean ecstasy to include Pany’s spiritual side as well with his interfaith journey.

My second proposal is that Pany may wish to say more or highlight chapter 13, “Returning to my Roots”. I recall that when Mr Lee Kuan Yew spoke to us in Kuala Lumpur on his last sentimental journey to Malaysia, his speech was peppered with one recurring phrase, “as Pany told me”. It is an awesome feat for any mortal to make such an impact on a leader as formidable as Mr Lee.

My second proposal is therefore both for idealistic and practical reasons.”

**Dato’ Dr M Shanmughalingam**

author of *Marriage and Mutton Curry* (best seller)

“Reading about Kesavapany’s personal recollections, one can better understand Singapore’s historical journey and the role he and his peers have played leading up to what we know today.

True to form, his detailed descriptions of his friends reflect his character of being ever grateful for even the smallest deed extended to him. To his friends and his adopted country, he is extremely loyal to a fault!

This book serves to remind the younger generations of the existential fact of Singapore life and its inherited vulnerabilities and the ever relevant human values required to deal with these issues.”

**Ambassador Zulkifli Baharudin**



# For Review only



"Publishing is an art my good friend Pany excels in. During his days with ISEAS, he would have released a book every couple of weeks – a feat not many can achieve. No wonder his biography *Estate to Embassy* adopts a simple, elegant and easy to read (journalistic) style, encouraging even a non-serious, casual reader like me to read the manuscript from end to end!

Pany, the quiet but successful 'diplomat' with an illustrious career full of measurable outcomes (his stint with WTO, for example) also had the time and mindset to focus on other interests as well, outside of official work (to balance work with life). Recognition and awards granted to him by many governments and multilateral institutions are not really a surprise to those who know him well.

But what strikes me the most about Pany is his unassuming nature and friendly demeanour. Always caring for the challenged, his concern and readiness to do more than 'something' by way of tangible, timely help for those in need, are qualities not seen in many. His involvements with IA (particularly the "Falling through the crack" initiative), HEB/HAB, IHC, SINDA, IRO and a few others amply validate his genuine interest in the service of community far beyond the call of duty."

**Ambassador R Jayachandran**  
Chairman, Hindu Endowment Board

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"From *Estate to Embassy* is not just a biography. It's our history presented through his story. It's a story about finding joy in circumstance, about self-belief and passion, and the need for compassion. The emotions are real. Pany, with your famous smile coming through the words, you have reminded me of the importance of making time for people, and being grateful. Thank you, my friend!"

**Viswa Sadasivan**  
former Nominated Member of Parliament, Singapore



"It is said that a journey is best measured in friends not in miles', as is my journey of friendship of near 60 years with the Pany family. It is one of my cherished treasures that I often recall, relive and bask in. Memories of the times that our families had spent together in Haig Road and the East Coast as Pany moved from 'estate to diplomat' brought a smile to my face.

The foundation of our friendship was a love for the performing arts, the community and the family. We shared laughter, joyful moments, troubled times, long chats. Your family was there for me and my children when I lost Rajan in 1977 and then my father in 1982, and gave us unwavering affection, care and concern.

As you moved from 'estate to diplomat', we were separated physically but had no problem picking up the threads of our friendship when you returned even for a short period. The bond that I share with your family is extremely special, strong and unusual. We have no expectations from each other and we have never hesitated to ask each other for any help. Friends like you are hard to find, difficult to let go, and difficult to forget.

Thank you for being there, Pany and Pappi!"

**Dr Uma Rajan BBM, PBM, PBS**  
Consultant (Student & Elder Care) & Indian Arts, Culture & Heritage

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"Ambassador Kesavapany's autobiography is not an ego-trip for the author. It is a revelation of a man who is humble, kind and truly grateful for the many blessings he has received. It is also a heterobiography about many who touched his life and he is quick to credit them for many of his achievements in one lifetime. Recollected with historical accuracy, recounted with diplomacy and related with authenticity, his life and work continue to inspire me."

**Dr William Wan (JP)**  
General Secretary, Singapore Kindness Movement



*"From Estate to Embassy* is not the story of a man with vaulting ambitions who is self-absorbed in wanting to reach the pinnacle. It is the story of a gentle, humane person who recounts his experiences handling a variety of tasks which he had not sought but had landed on his plate, which nevertheless he executes with great skill. The concern he shows for his pet dog Benji as well as any human being who needs help reveals the character of the man. The book is an easy read, giving interesting insights from 1967 when Pany gets that letter from Singapore."

**Ambassador Gopinath Pillai**

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"K Kesavapany is a man of many talents who had a distinguished career in the Singapore civil service, especially in the field of diplomacy and foreign relations.

He has won many distinguished awards from so many countries for his contributions.

I came to know him when he was Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia. He used to engage me on some matters and it was he who introduced me to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew during one of his visits to Malaysia in the late 1990s.

Following retirement from UKM, I joined ISEAS as a Senior Research Fellow at the time Kesavapany was the director.

During my brief stay in ISEAS, I had the opportunity to work closely with him on projects related to early Indian influence and on the Chola voyages.

Kesavapany might have been a civil servant but he was one of the best directors ISEAS had. His broad knowledge of history enabled him to commission outstanding works at ISEAS. I am proud to have been involved in some of the projects at ISEAS.

Kesavapany might have sought a formal retirement from the civil service, but his role in society seems unceasing. He has taken a lead in rendering social service to the needy and occasionally speaking on matters of spiritualism."

**Professor Ramasamy Palanisamy**

Deputy Chief Minister of the State of Penang, Malaysia

