

# Singapore's first Asian postmaster-general M. Bala Subramanion dies, aged 103

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SINGAPORE - Mr M. Bala Subramanion, Singapore's first Asian postmaster-general and a veteran community leader, died peacefully at his residence on Wednesday (Feb 3) evening. He would have been 104 years old on March 5.

He and his wife, Mrs Sumitra Bala Subramanion, 87, had celebrated 55 years of marriage the day before his death. They have a daughter Anidha Thomas, who is married with two daughters.

"More than his age, his wisdom and commitment to the community are extraordinary. Till his last day, he was very much interested in what the Indian community can do better. He never lost his enthusiasm for new ideas," said Mr Arun Mahizhnan, 75, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies.

"He was always youthful and humble. He was an exemplary lifelong learner and an ardent reader."

The two men sat on the Singapore Indian Education Trust (Siet) and Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (Sifas) management committees, and have been friends for about 35 years, he said.

A group of friends who called themselves "Bala Wallas", or disciples of Bala, met him regularly "because of our deep affection for him", said Mr Mahizhnan. "When the pandemic hit, we started to have weekly zoom sessions on Saturday afternoons. He made it a point to put aside other things and get ready for the chat," he said, adding that Mr Bala adopted technology very well, when many past their 70s or 80s could not.

Mr V. P. Jothi, 70, Siet vice-president, said: "His mind was very sharp till his last days and he was well informed about world affairs."

Mrs Bala said her husband was learning Japanese up to his final days, mastering his pronunciation of the language. "He was a voracious reader and loved poetry very much. He was an ardent fan of Omar Khayyam's poems," she said.

Mr Bala joined the public service in 1936 as a probationary clerk in the colonial Postal Services Department. After World War II, he studied the postal system in Britain on a two-year scholarship. After working there for a few years, he returned in 1955 to be assistant comptroller in the Postal Services Department.

Mr Bala's biography *Singapore, My Country* by Nilanjana Sengupta, was launched in July 2016 by then Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the Fullerton Hotel - the former General Post Office where he had an illustrious 35-year career.

Mr Bala became Singapore's first local comptroller of post in 1957, exactly 100 years since the British set up the postal service in Singapore.

He became the first Asian postmaster-general - the equivalent of chief executive - in 1967, a post he held till he retired in 1971.

In an interview with Tamil Murasu in 2018, Mr Bala shared that he faced the greatest challenge in 1965 when Singapore separated with Malaysia, and he had to relocate all Singapore-related work, including finance, savings bank and postage stamps from the postal headquarters in Kuala Lumpur to Singapore.

He received the Public Service Gold Medal from Singapore's first president Yusof Ishak in 1965.

Active in the Indian community, he served as president and trustee of the Singapore Indian Association, and helped found Siet in 1967.

He played a significant role in assisting unionist and community leader G. Kandasamy when the Tamils Representative Council, established in 1951 by G. Sarangapany, was reorganised in the 1980s.

He also contributed actively to the Hindu community in Singapore, going door-to-door to raise funds for the refurbishment of the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road and the Sri Sivan Temple, when it was located at Orchard Road.

He was among those honoured for their contributions to the community at the Hindu Endowments Board's 50th anniversary dinner in 2019.

Mr Bala also served as a member of the Hindu Advisory Board which was set up in 1985 to advise the Government and the endowments board on matters of the Hindu religion and customs.

Siet's Mr Jothi said of his friend of 20 years: "He was a gentle soul and an inspirational person. His wisdom was immense and he was very supportive of all the community efforts.

"He had always volunteered to bring in members for the various organisations and his bag will be full of membership forms. He will persuade whoever he goes for lunch or dinner with to become members."

Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda) chief executive Anbarasu Rajendran said: "Mr Bala was always our cheerleader, encouraging everyone at Sinda to look out for the underprivileged and ensure that their needs are taken care of and their voices are heard.

"Every year, he makes a point to attend Sinda's Annual General Meeting (AGM) and share his thoughts. In 2020, we had our AGM virtually and Mr Bala was there in front of the computer!"

Mr Bala's body is resting at his residence at 46 La Salle Street and the cremation will be on Friday.