

IN MEMORIAM



Emeritus Prof. Dr. Singaravelu Sachithanatham (22 December 1936 – 13 January 2020)

Emeritus Prof. Dr. Singaravelu Sachithanatham is a personality I got to know when I did my undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 1985. During the first year, students were given the option to choose 3 departments and I chose Indian Studies as my third option besides History and Malay Studies. I took his course entitled “The Ramayana Tradition in Southeast Asia” which besides dealing with history also focused on values that one could impart from the characters in the Ramayana epic. I enjoyed his lectures and tutorials because it was well structured and he was well versed in the subject matter. There was no room for jokes and this created a tensed atmosphere in the lecture hall. He would ask students to leave his class if they were found chatting or not paying attention to his lecture.

There were certain values I admired in him. He was always on time for his lectures and tutorials. All the assignments were thoroughly read and returned to the students well before the exams. One could see how meticulous he was based on corrections made by pencil on every page of the essay along with his comments. I still cherish the undergraduate essay for which I got a “B” grade.

I got to know him better when he became Emeritus Professor in 2004. We used to meet up quite often to discuss academic matters and listen to his views on the standard of academia in the faculty compared to the 60s and 70s. I guess he reflected the common grouse of the more senior and retired academics on the condition of the present. He decided not to come to the Faculty when he found it difficult to ascend the stairs to his room at the Indian Studies Department. It was sad to note he passed away on 13 January 2020. If one were to look back at his role in the university, one could recognize he left a mark in many fields and it would be a difficult task for the others to walk in his footsteps.

Tertiary Education

Prof. Singaravelu received his tertiary education in a number of institutions of higher learning. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree (Economics, History and Tamil) from the University of Madras (Chennai) in 1957; Bachelor of Arts degree (Economics, History and Indian Studies) from University of Malaya in Singapore in 1959; Bachelor of Arts with (First Class) Honors degree (Indian Studies) from the University of Malaya in 1960; Master of Arts from University of Malaya in 1965 and Ph.D. from the same university in 1981. His Master thesis was entitled “Social Life of the Tamils in the Classical Period” and his Ph.D. was on “The Ramayana Tradition in India and Southeast Asia”. Once retired, he pursued his law degree

and was awarded Bachelor of Laws (LLB) Honors degree from the University of London in 1989 and Certificate of Legal Practice (CLP) of the Malaysian Legal Profession Qualifying Board in 1991.

Academic Career

Prof. Singaravelu served the University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur as Graduate Assistant in the Department of Indian Studies (1960-1961); Assistant Lecturer (1963-1966); Lecturer (1966-1975); Associate Professor (1975-1980); Professor (1980 -1994) and Professor Emeritus from 2004. During the thirty-one years (1963-1994) of service as a full-time academic staff of the university Prof. Singaravelu served as the member of the Senate (for 25 years from 1969 to 1994). He also carried out administrative duties as the Head of Department of Indian Studies for fifteen years from 1969 to 1984.

He also served as the representative of the Department of Indian Studies on the various Sub-committees of the Faculty, such as the Undergraduate Studies Committee and Graduate Studies Committee. He was also a member of the Board of Studies established by the Senate for the purpose of restructuring the Faculty.

Membership of Learned Societies

Prof. Singaravelu was an active member of the Association for Asian Studies, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA; Ikatan Arkiologi Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor; The International Association of Tamil Research; The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Kuala Lumpur; The Malayan Historical Society, The Malaysian Society for Asian Studies and the Siam Society, Bangkok, Thailand.

Advisory Services

Prof. Singaravelu served as a member of the Advisory Council on Culture, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Government of Malaysia (1979-1992); member of the Panel for Hadiah Cerpen, sponsored by the Malayan Banking Berhad and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (1987 to 1992) and also as member of the Panel Hakim for Hadiah Sastera Malaysia (1984).

Teaching

Prof. Singaravelu had the requisite proficiency that enabled him to use Tamil, English and Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction for the courses he taught for the undergraduate students in the first, second and third years. As for the use of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, he was one of the pioneering lecturers who undertook to teach Indian Studies courses such as that on Tamil Culture and Civilization in Bahasa Malaysia in 1969 especially to meet the needs of students from the national stream entering the university in that year. Since then, he taught several more courses in Bahasa Malaysia for the second and third year students. This initiative on the part of Singaravelu and his colleagues enabled the Department to enroll more students and to offer Indian Studies courses to any student willing to pursue them.

Another important innovation introduced by him with the cooperation of his colleagues in the department and the Faculty was to open the Indian Studies courses to students majoring in other disciplines or departments so as to enable them to pursue the courses as electives and also enable students in the Faculty to major in two disciplines or subjects (e.g. History and Indian Studies) which proved to be useful for various career-prospects including teaching in the secondary schools of Malaysia.

In addition to offering course on various aspects of Indian Culture and Civilization, Prof. Singaravelu also offered courses on special disciplines such as “Temple Architecture and Sculpture in India and Southeast

Asia”. The courses, although relating to Indian culture and traditions-were generally oriented towards the Malaysian and Southeast Asian context.

Research

Prof. Singaravelu’s research is focused not only on Indian Culture and Civilization but also on their adoption, adaptation and acculturation in the societies of Southeast Asia during the centuries-old cultural relations between India and Southeast Asia. He carried out research on Tamil Culture and Civilization under the supervision of his mentor Professor Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, the first Professor of Indian Studies in the University of Malaya. He researched the earliest known Tamil literary sources of the classical period for knowledge about the social life of the Tamils which he analysed with the help of modern anthropological theories applied to the Classical Tamil Literary period for the first time.

Prof. Singaravelu went on to research cultural relations between India and Southeast Asia. His one-year-long sabbatical programme in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, 1967-1968 enabled him to carry out additional research in the field of cultural contacts between India and Southeast Asia in the pre-modern era. His second sabbatical programme of nine months (March – November 1974) in the Department of Asian Studies, University of Winsor, Ontario, Canada enabled him to establish contacts with several indologists as well as scholars carrying out research on the history and cultures of Southeast Asian countries and to make use of extensive library facilities in Canada and USA.

International Conferences

Prof. Singaravelu actively participated in international conferences where he presented learned papers on various aspects of cultural relations between India and Southeast Asia. The subsequent publication of the papers in the conference proceedings and learned journals helped to disseminate the vast knowledge obtained through his researches to interested scholars in the world.

From 1966 to 1992, Prof. Singaravelu presented learned papers in no less than 25 international conferences held in countries such as Australia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and USA.

Most of his papers are published in learned journals such as *Asian Folklore Studies*; *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, *Journal of the Siam Society*, *Journal of Tamil Studies (Madurai, India)* and *Tamil Civilization*.

Publications

Prof. Singaravelu’s prolific writings which have also included a number of books continue to be of relevance to present day Malaysian society. A number of them is a must read for us to understand how the country has dealt with the outside world and how the past and the present have interacted without any conflict. His notable publications are, “The Rama Story in the Malay Tradition”, *JMBRAS*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 1981; “The Ambassadorial Mission of Laksamana Hang Tuah from the Kingdom of Malacca to the Kingdom of Vijayanagaram in South India”, *Tamil Studies*, 1982; “The Malay-Tamil Cultural Contacts with special reference to the festival of Mandi Safar”, *Tamil Civilization*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1985; “The Malay-Tamil Cultural Contacts”, *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 1986 and “Some Aspects of Syncretism between Hindu Religious Belief and Indigenous Malay Folk-belief in Peninsula Malaysia”, *Brahmaviya Golden Jubilee Volume*, Chennai India, 1986.

In all this publication, Prof. Singaravelu has demonstrated convincingly that the Southeast Asian countries and its people did not lose their own identity by adopting some of the Indian cultural traditions

on a selective basis and adapting them to their own cultural and environmental needs. This is indeed a significant departure from the earlier traditional view among some of the orientalist and Indian historians who had freely and often mistakenly used such terms as “colonization” and “indianization” (of Southeast Asian countries) when they referred to the -subject of India’s cultural relations with Southeast Asia in pre-modern times.

From the immense contributions made by Prof. Singaravelu, it can’t be denied he has helped to place University of Malaya and the Department of Indian Studies on the scholarly map of the world. It will be a tall order for the Department to retain the high academic standards achieved by him. May his soul rest in peace.

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