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*The*  
*Dancing*  
GIRL  
A HISTORY OF EARLY INDIA

“ Many knew Dr Balaji Sadasivan either as a doctor or as a politician, but few would have known that he had a keen sense of history. He was drawn to the study of history as a way of knowing the past that moulds people’s present and charts their sense of the future. Politics and history are intertwined. In this book, we have evidence of an historical mind that surveyed India’s place in time both broadly and deeply. Dr Sadasivan’s historical insights were not restricted to India but he was particularly keen in that area. This book makes good reading.”

***S Jayakumar***

*Former Deputy Prime Minister, Republic of Singapore*

“ It gives me great pleasure to write a few words for Balaji’s book dedicated to narrating some aspects of the history of India to appeal to the new generation.

Balaji has been a close friend and I cherish the days we were together as medical students in the University of Singapore.

I remember vividly his interest and inclination towards the arts. He and Swan Hoo both had the same appeal and it was also the chemistry which drew them together and strengthened their relationship as husband and wife later. As a student he researched and was passionately writing about the Malacca Sultanate apart from being involved in the drama productions of King Edward VII Hall.

It is very sad that Balaji was not able to complete this remarkable work on the history of India, but I am sure those portions that have been completed stand testimony to the passion he had for this subject. His aim was to reach out to the younger facebook and twitter generation who have somewhat relegated history to a distant position in their list of priorities.

I hope the book will kindle sparks of interest among the younger generation and stimulate them to relook history as they chart the course for the future.

I would like to thank Swan Hoo for remembering me and allowing me to share my thoughts in this book. Although Balaji has left us, his mission will continue and his spirit prevail through this book.”

***S Subramaniam***

*Minister, Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia*

“ History is inevitably written from the perspective of the writer. By viewing the same history from different perspectives, one achieves greater depth of understanding and derives new insights. Balaji set out to write the history of India from the perspective of ‘a child of the diaspora, setting foot on Indian soil for the first time at the age of 35’. It was to be from the viewpoint of ‘a detached outsider’. Perhaps that was too modest a claim. True to Balaji’s character, *The Dancing Girl* an account of India’s early history, was written with affection, honesty and optimism.”

**George Yeo**

*Former Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore*

“ Even by the exacting standards of Singapore, Dr Balaji was an extraordinary Minister. If he sometimes embarrassed me by knowing more about the country I represented, I forgave him for the insights that he had just provided. His ability to integrate diverse strands of information was a great quality. Conversations with him on modern Indian history, particularly on choices not made, remain a vivid memory. His political background enhanced an ability to communicate easily across cultures. A regular presence at India’s diaspora gatherings, one sorely missed, his book should be as great a read as talking to him was a pleasure.”

**S Jaishankar**

*Ambassador of India to China*

*Former High Commissioner of India to Singapore*

“ I had the privilege of knowing Dr Balaji Sadasivan when I was Pakistan’s High Commissioner to Singapore during my term from 2004 to 2008.

Dr Balaji was a man of tremendous humility, decency and honesty. He demonstrated exceptional commitment and candour.

This book shows his deep interest and knowledge of one of the greatest civilizations that developed around the mighty Indus and Ganges rivers and their tributaries. The ruins of cities like Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Taxila are testimony to the thriving centres of learning in ancient times. Dr Balaji has looked into hitherto unexplored areas of history and culture that continue to enrich the lives of billions of people.

I am honoured to be associated with this book that will forever remain part of the legacy left behind by Dr Balaji Sadasivan.

ISEAS, true to its character, is doing a great service in publishing the works of a distinguished Singaporean.”

**Sajjad Ashraf**

*Former High Commissioner of Pakistan to Singapore*

*Visiting Senior Research Fellow, ISEAS*

*Adjunct Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS*

“ Dr Balaji Sadasivan was a dear friend, colleague and teacher. He was not only a world-class neurosurgeon, but also a polymath. His knowledge of history, in general, and the history of India, was astonishing. This valuable book brings back many happy memories of the ‘tutorials’ he gave me on the history of India.”

**Tommy Koh**

*Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore*

“ I came to know Dr Balaji Sadasivan in 2007, when he was appointed Chairman of the World Health Organization’s Executive Board. He presided over an especially challenging agenda with some potentially explosive items at the political as well as the technical level, including a strategy for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases that crossed paths with some powerful corporate interests. The notorious H5N1 avian influenza virus was likewise on the agenda, fuelling fears of an imminent influenza pandemic and much debate about fairness in the sharing of vaccines and medicines with the developing world should a severe event occur.

The Executive Board chaired by Dr Balaji occurred on my 19th day in office as the newly elected Director-General of WHO. I could not have been blessed with a better Chair for my own personal inauguration into the fast-paced debates that typify these meetings. I was deeply impressed by the way Dr Balaji skillfully and diplomatically steered the deliberations and negotiations. In the end, the Executive Board adopted 21 resolutions, all by consensus.

Apart from his vast knowledge of public health, its political dimensions, and its significance for foreign affairs, he displayed what I can describe, most simply and directly, as the spirit of a great and compassionate man. As a distinguished neurosurgeon, he was equally at home speaking about the power of medical technologies and the unmet needs of poor, often homeless people suffering from tuberculosis, items that were also on the agenda.

I knew him as a courageous leader in public health, and like many others, deeply regret his untimely passing. I am certain that the traits that so impressed me live on in *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*.”

**Margaret Chan**

*Director-General, World Health Organization*

“ Whatever Balaji Sadasivan did, he did with excellence and enthusiasm. He was a first class neurosurgeon who helped to create the National Neuroscience Institute in Singapore, then turned to political life and was in turn Minister of State for Health, the Environment and Transport, and later Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, Health, and Foreign Affairs.

For many years he worked on this book, *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*. Like Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples* it is a work of love carried out over a protracted time but in the end an immensely readable and scholarly volume.

I had the honour of being part of Balaji's training during his time overseas in 1989 and followed his career of service with immense respect. He was thoughtful, affable, and very bright. His interests even then went far beyond the bounds of neurosurgery.

Balaji died too young, of an aggressive cancer. He lives on in several ways, however-through his wonderful wife Swan Hoo Ma, who saw this work to completion as a way of honouring her husband and their mutual love of history; through his children Anita and Dharma; through his contributions to Singapore life including the art gallery in the Supreme Court and City Hall; and now through this book. This volume reflects his humour, his breadth of intelligence, and his commitment to history and our understanding of the modern world. Like Balaji, it is energetic, funny, and thoughtful. It is a wonderful contribution to our understanding of the great Indian subcontinent.”

**Peter Black**

*Franc D. Ingraham Professor of Neurosurgery, Harvard Medical School  
President of the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies*

“ Rarely does one come across a man with so much talent, so much enthusiasm and still with so much humility. He was clearly talented in every field that he touched; as a student before he studied medicine; as a medical student, as a specialist in neurosurgery in many prestigious medical institutions in the UK and US; as a neurosurgeon in the Government in Singapore and later as a leading neurosurgeon in private practice; and always as a friend to so many. Few however knew that he was a voracious reader and a passionate historian! It is such a great loss that he was taken away long before he finished some of his pet projects like the five-volume history of India which he had started in earnest whilst a Minister! His memory will serve as a beacon and an inspiration to everyone he touched. Most of us can only aspire to do in one lifetime a fraction of what Dr Balaji achieved in so short a time. His book aptly titled by him as *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India* will always remind us of Dr Balaji's contribution to history and more importantly his stupendous character.”

**Sat Pal Khattar**

*Life Trustee, SINDA  
Vice-President, Singapore Indian Education Trust (SIET)  
Member, Indian Heritage Centre Steering Committee*

“ To write a book on India’s long and complex history is no mean task, and only the most committed and competent historian will dare undertake such a formidable challenge. Dr Balaji has bravely gone where few historians have dared to venture. Driven by his profound fascination with and deep passion for the history of India, Dr Balaji has succeeded in producing an engaging and insightful story that will appeal to a broad range of readers. This is truly a labour of love, a fitting contribution by an outstanding individual who wanted the children of the Indian Diaspora, of which he was one, to appreciate the civilizational richness of India.”

***Tan Tai Yong***

*Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS)*

“ This is an excellent introduction to Indian history. It is well illustrated and clearly written. There are very few general surveys on pre-modern Indian history, this book fills that lacuna. It will surely draw a wide readership.”

***Tansen Sen***

*Associate Professor, Asian History, City University of New York  
Head, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, ISEAS*

“ Dr Balaji was a remarkable person. His wit and humour put all at ease. I remember fondly the many great moments when he spoke to children as young as Primary 3 to students from tertiary institutions offering advice and directions about their future. His knowledge of matters pertaining to the Indian community was incredible. He was able to offer examples from varied sources to support his points. As President of SINDA, during meetings, he listened to the points made by all and gave his well-thought out solution that was well received. This is a unique ability and made Dr Balaji well-loved by all at SINDA. I am happy that his transcript on the history of India is being published as a book by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). I am very sure that this book will be of immense interest to all those interested in what is a unique interpretation of Indian history.”

***Raja Segar***

*Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA)*

“ I encountered Dr Balaji’s passion for Indian history when he articulated the vision for the Indian Heritage Centre project. In this book, his breadth of knowledge, attention to historic details and concern for rootedness will serve as a beacon to the young Indian Diaspora anywhere in the world. Here is a book on Indian history, for the children of the Diaspora written by a product of the Indian Diaspora.”

**Gauri Krishnan**

*Deputy Director (Research Unit) & Senior Curator (South Asia), Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore*

“ Dr Balaji wanted to tell the history of India in a simple yet interesting style that would appeal to non-academics, non-Indians and especially the children of the vast Indian Diaspora who may have never set foot in India. My sense is that the multi-talented doctor has succeeded in his endeavour.”

**P Thirunal Karasu**

*Chairman, PA Narpani Pearavai*

“ In the short span of time I worked with the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan, I have found him to be an admirable and wonderful person.

Despite his illness, he never failed to discharge his duties as Senior Minister of State in the Foreign Affairs Ministry and as MP to his constituents. He also worked tirelessly to fulfill his dream of writing this book.

It is most gratifying to know that his book has been completed and that many readers will benefit from his vast knowledge of Indian history.”

**Lilian Low**

*PA to 2nd Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
(former PA to the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan)*





The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued almost 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

The  
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A HISTORY OF EARLY INDIA

Balaji Sadasivan

**ISEAS**

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# Foreword

India is a diverse country with a long history of cross-cultural interactions, complex philosophical ideas, and multifaceted literary traditions. To capture the intricacies of Indian history is no easy feat. For people of Indian origin who visit the country sporadically, their ancestral homeland can be mysterious, exotic, and incomprehensible. In his lifetime, despite ailing health, the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan spent long hours digging into India's ancient history to present his findings to the Diaspora Indians. Admirably, with great insights into important events, he has expressed his findings in a way that is exciting to read and easy to follow. His achievement is even more commendable considering that Dr Balaji Sadasivan was not a historian but a neurosurgeon and a full-time politician.

Divided into several chapters, *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*, covers over four thousand years of Indian history. From the Indus Valley Civilization, which produced the beautiful figurine of the dancing girl on the cover of this book, to the splendours of Islamic traditions under the Mughal empire, Dr Balaji has outlined the evolution of Indian religions and philosophical traditions, analysed the Buddhist interactions between India and China and the trading relations between South Asia and Southeast Asia, and given a fascinating account of the spread of Islamic ideas into India.

Every chapter of this book is carefully researched and organized. In the chapter titled "The Reformation", for example, Dr Balaji points out the complexities of Hinduism, its Vedic origins and its "reformation" during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. At the same time, however, he is meticulous about the developments taking place within Buddhism and the support it receives from the Pala rulers of Bengal. He is also thorough in his discussions about the increasing importance of Buddhist monastic institutions and Hindu temples in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Although Dr Balaji notes that the book is intended for the Diaspora Indians, I am hopeful it will attract a much wider audience. Students of non-Indian heritage will find the discussion of India's contact with the wider world particularly useful. Dr Balaji's discussion of this topic comes from his personal involvement in the Nalanda initiative that sought to revive the Nalanda University in India. One of the world's earliest institutions of higher learning, as outlined in the chapter "The Giver of Knowledge", Nalanda attracted scholars and Buddhist monks from different parts of Asia. It imparted knowledge not only about Buddhism, but also about non-Buddhist philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and other subjects. Dr Balaji was intimately involved in this project and was often praised for his contributions by Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen, Head of the Nalanda Mentor Group.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Mrs Balaji Sadasivan for bringing to fruition Dr Balaji's aspiration to complete this manuscript. I must also thank the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for publishing Dr Balaji's book. Works such as these are keys to comprehending the history of Asia and the connectivities among Asian societies and cultures. The publication of this book is recognition of Dr Balaji's intellect and his dedication to understanding Indian and Asian history.

**S R NATHAN**

President

Republic of Singapore

# Message

I met Dr Balaji Sadasivan in connection with our collective effort to reestablish an Asian international university at Nalanda, the site of perhaps the oldest university in the world. I could see that the erudite, soft-spoken doctor and foreign affairs expert harboured a fascination for history, especially the elements of South Asian culture that flowed to Southeast Asia to be creatively adapted in new ways. I did not know then that he was writing his own account of that history for the children of the vast Indian Diaspora. When Ambassador Kesavapany, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), brought to my attention the existence of his manuscript, we could only be grateful that he had more or less completed it before his sad, untimely death. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, must be congratulated for providing the finishing touches and further embellishing the work with pictures and maps.

Dr Balaji Sadasivan's book displays his eye for vivid detail and his ability to choose the most compelling anecdotes to illuminate larger historical themes. His skills as a story-teller will enable him to reach the younger generation of readers. This book is not boring! The stunning urban culture of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha, the dharma of Asoka, the light of knowledge dispersed from Nalanda, the naval expeditions of the Cholas, are all depicted with great insight in the form of a stylish and eloquent narrative.

Had he been with us for a bit longer, I would have tried to persuade Dr Balaji Sadasivan of the grandeur of the Indo-Islamic cultural ecumene that was forged in the subcontinent during the last millennium under the patronage of regional Muslim Sultans and the great Mughal emperors who invited non-Muslims to be partners in building that magnificent edifice.

Nineteenth-century colonial accounts of the role of Islam in India had often privileged myth over history and emphasized the destructive rather than constructive dimensions of the rule by Muslim sovereigns.

One example will suffice to illustrate this point. Dr Balaji Sadasivan tells us that Lord Ellenborough, the Governor-General of India, at the time of the First Anglo-Afghan War “accepted the legend” that the gates of Mahmud of Ghazni’s tomb had been looted from the temple in Somnath. Needing something to claim victory in the aftermath of a catastrophic military debacle in the early 1840s, Ellenborough issued a proclamation on the gates and ordered his soldiers to bring them to India. But did the legend have any historical basis? It was clear from the type of timber and the style of the inscriptions that the doors were the work of north African craftsmen travelling east rather than the gates of Somnath being taken north by an invader. The doors were brought to India with great fanfare, but languished in a corner of the Agra Fort as an example of “Ellenborough’s folly”.

Dr Balaji Sadasivan’s book will entertain and instruct, while engendering, I hope, a healthy and civil debate. It will serve as a useful introduction for the new generation in Southeast Asia interested in tracing the history of what Rabindranath Tagore described as “India’s entry into the universal”.

**SUGATA BOSE**

Gardiner Professor of History

Harvard University

# Message

Balaji was my best teacher. He taught me how to ride a bike, play bridge and how to write sonnets. He taught me many aspects of science, mathematics, economics, politics, law, and history. He taught me compassion, kindness and generosity through his fine example. He had told me that had he not been a neurosurgeon, he would have liked to be a history professor.

Before Wikipedia, he was my Balaji-pedia – my instant source of reference and information on anything and everything. Our courtship days were full of delightful engaging discourses on diverse subjects late into the nights. Our 34 years together were filled with never-ending absorbing discussions and dinner conversations during which he happily shared and imparted his wealth of knowledge. He was a great source of enlightenment.

When the National Museum of Singapore was reopening in 2006 with a gallery on the History of Singapore, we spent many nights discussing Singapore's history. I had endless questions for him as I was a volunteer guide with the museums and was preparing to guide at this new gallery. He had, as was often, such an extensive knowledge on the subject that I suggested he write a book on the history of Singapore.

Some months later, he informed me that he was thinking of writing on the history of India. What a gargantuan task this would be, I thought out loud. But he had it all figured out. There would be five volumes, each with fifteen chapters. The first volume would start with ancient India till 1200 CE; Volume Two would cover the period when India was under the Muslim rulers; Volume Three when India was under the British; Volume Four on India's road to independence and Volume Five on post-independence India. When he retired, he would take a couple of years off to visit and take photographs of all the sites that he would describe in his book. He also dreamed of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) making it into a documentary and showing it as a daily or weekly series on the HISTORY channel, one of his favourite television programmes.



Balaji loved to read. He read children's books, comics, poetry, plays, scientific periodicals, economic and financial magazines, newspapers, fiction and non-fiction. He had his reading material within easy reach throughout the house: on the floor and table by the bed, on the dining table, coffee table, his study, family room, our bathroom, in his car, in his suitcase. He had a remarkable memory and could provide great details, even years later, of all that he had read. Amongst his favourite bedtime books was Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which he had read several times.

His reading style was rather unique. He "slept" as he read. During our days as medical students studying together in the medical library, as I underlined or highlighted the important points in my texts, he would read and nod off to sleep. When he awoke, he would read the next chapter and doze off again. After doing this for several chapters, he would get me to test him. I was always amazed at how he could remember every minute detail in our thick medical texts, down to the exact page and paragraph even though he appeared to have been sleeping during much of the entire period. His brain was processing all the information during his "sleep".

Balaji would scribble some brief notes in his characteristic physician's illegible handwriting before he started to write a chapter. Each chapter would focus on what he considered as an important item, person or event that shaped the course of India's history. Each chapter could be read independently and not necessarily sequentially. Each chapter should be no more than five or six pages long.

He wanted to tell the history of India in a simple, clear and uncomplicated manner so that it would also appeal to non-academics and to non-Indians. More importantly, he wanted to write it for the children of the vast Indian diaspora, scattered in many parts of the world, many of whom may be unfamiliar with India's history and many of whom may have never set foot in India.

He tried not to have too many characters in each chapter so as not to confuse the reader. He chose to be concise. He wanted his book to have many images and maps to accompany the text, to make it interesting and easy for the reader. He personally selected the images for the chapters. He also wanted maps for every chapter.

He bought a stack of tracing paper, a set of coloured pens, some pencils and an eraser. He managed to do maps for several chapters before he felt the ill effects of his treatment for colon cancer. Thereafter, despite his talent for being able to read and write fast, he had only time and energy for his projects and duties at his ministry, his constituency and the community.

It is therefore with great appreciation and gratitude that this book has materialized, much to the efforts of Ambassador Kesavapany, Director of Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, who offered to have ISEAS publish the book, Mrs Triena Ong and Mark Tallara of ISEAS Publishing, who have painstakingly gone through every word in every chapter, sourced for the references for the images, prepared the maps, and collaborated with the designer on the layout and design of the book.

We are greatly indebted, too, to President S R Nathan for writing the Foreword as well as to Professor Sugata Bose for his message. We would also like to thank all of Balaji's friends and colleagues who have contributed their endorsements for the book.

Finally I would like to thank our children, Dharma and Anita, who are now old enough to provide me with guidance and advice, for their love and support, as well as all family members, friends, colleagues, grassroots and community leaders and well-wishers who have helped and supported us in one way or another.

**MA SWAN HOO**  
(Mrs Balaji Sadasivan)



# Preface

I am a child of the diaspora, stepping foot on Indian soil for the first time at the age of 35. In some ways I see India like a detached outsider. I had intended to write a history of India for Diaspora Indians so that we could understand the origins of our Indian Heritage even if we did not live in India. This was meant to be a retirement project for which I collected notes.

I divided the history of India into five periods:

One : The ancient period up to 1200;

Two : 1200-1660, when foreign Muslims ruled much of India;

Three : 1660-1860, when Muslim power declined and the British gained power. This period ends with the first signs of Indian Nationalism emerging during the Indian Mutiny;

Four : 1860-1947, when India took the road to independence;

Five : 1947- present, which covers the post independence period.

Unexpected circumstances led me to publish the first two volumes based on my notes much earlier than I had intended to.

