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VR NATHAN

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VR NATHAN

COMMUNITY SERVANT EXTRAORDINARY

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Foreword

The late VR Nathan was an ordinary Hindu Singaporean, who was initially inducted into the Hindu Temple scene only to undertake the specific task of sorting out the financial state of affairs of the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB) that had remained unaudited for five consecutive years. With that task accomplished, he began looking into the operations of HEB and discovered the attendant problems of the HEB; poor management of its four temples and their finances; lack of supervision of the services they provided and the absence of proper controls of expenditures, among others. He came to grips with these weaknesses and discovered the range of problems that needed to be addressed. He began to set them right with hands-on engagement. With the help of HEB's then Secretary – the late P Adistham – VR Nathan overcame the more serious problems needing urgent attention. These and his many other contributions towards the transformations of our temples, his attempts to profile the HEB as more than a temple management organization are well covered in this book by my dear

friend Arun Senkuttuvan, such that it requires no further elaboration from me.

He made HEB a more important social organisation reflecting the aspirations of the community to be an important element of our multi-racial and religious society.

When VR Nathan came into our temple scene, he was a bank executive, quietly devoted to the practices of his faith. The temple scene was not what it is like today, where our temples are well furnished, operated with decorum and very much on their own, reflecting the respect and appreciation Hindus in our society enjoy in the eyes of those practicing other faiths.

In the past, our temples were dominated by community leaders, whose only claim to leadership had been inherited from their ancestors or by right of their dominance in the South Indian caste practices of the Tamil Nadu. Perhaps the only exception was the Chettiar Temple at Tank Road where traditional practices of management were followed, originating as they were from a temple management culture going back to old times.

VR Nathan worked hard to transform the HEB and the management of its four temples. Through his dedication and management practices, he demonstrated to our Hindu community how our temples could be transformed through proper hands-on management and leadership by example. His success helped to profile the Hindu temples and Hindus favourably in the eyes of

other faiths and became icons worthy of adulation by our own Hindu community, and by extension getting HEB accepted as an equal if not important and an integral part of Singapore's multi-religious society and our range of traditions.

With the success he achieved in transforming HEB, his reputation for effective management and experiences soon imparted on other Hindu temples in Singapore, who recognized and sought his advice and services to revamp their own practices of management. As he became a symbol of good practice within the Indian community, other religious and social bodies began to draw him into their orbit and within range of community and social endeavours. That is how Mr Lee Bock Guan of the Buddhist Lodge, Haji Abu Bakar Maidin of Jamiyah and leaders of other community and social organizations drew him to work in partnership with them for various broad-based community causes and activities. Together with them he took an active part in the restoration of Inter-Religious Organisation's (IRO) reputation as a national organization, and ably represented Singapore at various overseas and local conferences discussing inter-faiths co-operation and the promotion of our practices of inter-religious harmony.

It was at the height of his successes, that voices began surfacing about the undesirability of him continuing as Chairman of HEB and how a change had to be forced on HEB. With such views expressed by selective officials in Ministry of Community Development, Youth and

Sports (MCYS), who administer the HEB and within HEB itself, it soon became evident that a call for him to step down would grow and demands be made for him to step down. He soon realized this and offered to step down.

The sad part of VR Nathan's story is that the very people who enjoyed his close friendship, patronage and fruits of his labour chose to distance themselves from him once such views were expressed by prominent people. They began ingratiating with the emerging new forces seeking to dominate the temple scene, with obvious interest of their own. Even the HEB headquarters building, on which he devoted so much time and effort to develop, made him feel he was unwelcome even to occupy a room designated to serve him on retirement. He died a disappointed man, except for knowing that his close friends like Lee Bock Guan and Haji Abu Bakar Maidin of Jamiyah and others were the only ones to stand by him to the end and cherish his memory.

My only regret is that I was not able to intervene, having been advised to lay off the internal matters of HEB. As President of the Republic of Singapore at the time, it constrained me from countering their caveats, much as I wanted to.

SR Nathan
Sixth President of the Republic of Singapore
3 January 2012

Message

VR Nathan and I knew each other since the early 1990s. We had many ideas in common and got along like old friends right from the beginning. Together with then president of Jamiyah Singapore, Abu Bakar Maidin, we were as close as brothers since the days when VR Nathan was still the Chairman of the Hindu Endowments Board. The three of us often had meals and tea together, and we chatted about everything under the sun, whether it was about how to promote inter-racial and inter-religious harmony, what kind of activities we should organize or simply sharing our worries with each other. We also spoke our minds with each other. This sense of trust and camaraderie enabled us to work well together and achieve many successes in our collaborations.

As the leaders of three different religious groups, we led our organizations to cooperate. Through friendly discussions and close coordination, we accomplished a great deal in terms of promoting inter-racial and inter-religious harmony and working for the interests of the common folk. When the Singapore Buddhist Lodge distributed annual bursaries and red packets for the

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less privileged, VR Nathan and Abu Bakar would be invited to take up joint chairmanship and give them out together.

Our friendship was a deep one. We never forgot to invite each other over for festive celebrations. During Hari Raya, we would all go celebrate at Jamiyah. Every Deepavali, VR Nathan invited us to his house without fail.

VR Nathan was a forthright and approachable man. He was sensible in his dealings and a devout Hindu. I know everyone in his family. He valued traditions greatly and once took his daughter to his hometown in India to seek a suitable spouse. He even sought my opinion when he was thinking about buying a piece of land in Newton to build a house for himself and his three daughters. In 1999, when members of the Inter-Religious Organization went on a fourteen-day trip to China, VR Nathan brought his family along. I remember us cruising along the river in a boat, having heart-to-heart talks and sharing many happy moments together.

Now he has left us. I feel a deep sorrow in my heart at the loss of a true friend. Brother Nathan, you are sorely missed and you will always be in my memory.

*Lee Bock Guan
Chairman
Singapore Buddhist Lodge
19 December 2011*

Message

I feel honoured to pen a few lines to this commemorative volume on my close friend, the late Mr VR Nathan fondly known as VR. I came into contact with VR when I was working at Young Advertising in the Accounts Department. He was working with Standard Chartered Bank in the same building, Shaw House, Orchard Road where my office was and hence we met frequently. However, we became much closer many years later when both of us moved into community service, I at Jamiyah Singapore and VR at the helm of the Hindu Endowments Board and both of us also at the Inter-Religious Organization, Singapore.

Mr Lee Bock Guan, Chairman of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge, VR and I had several things in common. We had almost identical views and objectives in doing our part for promoting inter-faith and inter-racial harmony. The strength of VR was that he was a meticulous person and objective in his views and dealings. It is during his tenure as Chairman of the Hindu Endowments Board that the Hindu Indian

community of Singapore came much closer to the mainstream communities of other races and faiths such as the Chinese and the Malay/Muslim communities. VR played a monumental role in fostering this spirit of harmony and goodwill among different communities.

This commemorative volume brings back to me nostalgic memories of the very genial and amiable VR who was from the first instance of my knowing him a truly Singaporean Indian leader who upheld the cosmopolitan spirit of our nation.

His legacy will live on and guide future leaders in community service and multi-cultural harmony work.

Haji Abu Bakar Maidin
Executive Consultant
Jamiyah Singapore
28 December 2011

Preface

When Ambassador K Kesavapany, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, invited me to write a book on VR Nathan, who served the longest as Chairman of Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), my immediate response was: “Shouldn’t the book be on President Nathan rather than on VR Nathan? What did VR do that the President didn’t want him to do?” My reaction was instant, as Ambassador Kesavapany’s invitation was an unexpected one, and uninformed, as I have now learnt. Sure, VR was SR Nathan’s man when he was appointed to HEB. That was how everyone who dealt with him since then saw him. That impression was confirmed by the research that Bala Baskaran and Said Abdullah undertook for this book and in all the interviews I participated in. But we also learnt that VR was more than a President’s man.

VR well understood what was expected of him but on many occasions, within the parameters set earlier by President Nathan, responded spontaneously and earnestly to initiatives taken by others and thereby

won their eternal friendship and support. Perhaps all President Nathan's men are like that. Perhaps that's how the President chooses and mentors his men. For us, it was a pleasant discovery and made us understand the basis of the strong bondage that VR had also built with most leaders of other religions in Singapore.

This was an aspect of VR's later life that was not meaningfully publicized in the media and not appreciated by any of us when we started on this project. The function of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) itself, we suspect, is not as widely understood by Singaporeans as it should be. Be that as it may, what struck me and Said Abdullah, each with a couple of decades of reporting experience, was the emotional state in which we found Lee Bock Guan, Rustom M Ghadiali and Haji Abu Bakar Maidin when we interviewed them. All three were very mature leaders steeped in their religious learning and traditions and not easily given to emotionally breaking down when discussing the loss of a fellow pilgrim. Their words, and what they said they could never adequately describe in words, were the ultimate testimony to VR's valuable contribution to their collective efforts to maintain religious harmony in Singapore.

Peace seldom makes news unless, of course, it follows a disturbance, and efforts to promote peace are even less reported, especially if there had been no incidents to remind people how terrible things would be if such

efforts had not been made or had failed. In Singapore, these men in their own way made sure that there was no such news. They all testified that though everyone took to VR in the first instance as SR's man, fairly quickly found his warm friendship and dedication to their common cause endearing and worthy of trust and support. More than any Hindu representative before him on IRO, VR became the prime mover of several joint efforts involving different religious groups and, even more importantly, the man who secured financial support from the affluent Buddhist Lodge to projects promoted by and benefitting cash-strapped Muslim and Hindu organizations.

The comradeship that VR enjoyed with leaders of most religions in Singapore, to us, was his crowning accomplishment. Even with the evangelist Christian missionaries, with whom he had a bone to pick, he maintained a cordial relationship if he happened to meet them (as they did not participate in IRO). Such a cosmopolitan outlook was not surprising in his backer. But VR was born and brought up in a stable inland temple town in India where no soul belonged to any religion other than Hinduism. He worked all his life for a colonial bank where everyone knew his place in the hierarchy. He married a girl chosen by his parents. His spontaneous advice to me when my father introduced me to him and said that I was going for an interview to be a journalist was: "Why you want to become a

journalist? Newspapers don't pay. Chartered Bank will be recruiting soon. We can try other banks too." He meant well. His advice was practical. He knew from his landlord, who was my father's schoolmate in Cambey (near Yangon), that my family had lost all its wealth in Myanmar. My father was working as a department secretary at the University of Singapore. Job security and financial stability were the key to everything else in life, VR said. His entire career was with the same bank, especially at a time when, because of its conservatism, it lost its supremacy in Singapore. He looked for cultural stability, too. He sent his daughters to study in India and wanted to get them married there. He bought a house in Bangalore for his retirement but then changed his mind and built a four-storey house in Singapore where all his daughters' families could live under the same roof. His was the life of an immigrant who made good.

Yet, when he was called to play a role at the Ruthra Kaliyamman Temple, where worshippers until then had been only Tamils and Tamil-speaking Telugus, he brought in a Malayalee, a North Indian and a Muslim to serve on its committees. This was before he met SR Nathan. After their meeting, everybody assumed that whatever VR did was on SR's instruction. That was my impression too, based on secondhand information, as I had lost touch with VR in 1977. Hence my response as mentioned at the outset when Kesavapany proposed a book on VR. But the persuasive diplomat that he is,

Kesavapany suggested: “Shall we find out if VR was more than a President’s man?” When I pleaded lack of time because of my work commitments, he agreed to my enlisting the support of Bala Baskaran, a veteran broadcast journalist who had by then started researching the history of Indians, particularly Tamils, in Malaysia and Singapore, and Said Abdullah, a former colleague who had served as secretary of IRO for many years.

The book in your hands now is the result of largely their research. Since our access to the records of Hindu Endowments Board with which VR was identified for more than two decades was rather limited we are not able to provide precise details or analysis of as many issues as VR is supposed to have tackled during his membership and later chairmanship of the board. We have tried to compensate for that with as many interviews as we could secure with people who worked with him during those years. We have also provided some background for some of the problems related to Hindu temples that SR and VR inherited. If such historic information appears rather long for a book on one man, it is deliberate. We have only included narratives that we believe have not been published or not known widely before. We believe such information will illuminate the personalities that VR and his associates were and their performance. It seems to us that the nature of Hinduism and Hindus is such that most of the problems are recurring and their management must have required the same tact

and tolerance, perseverance and patience as in earlier decades, even though we are not able to account for all that VR tackled at HEB.

VR basically looked at the four HEB temples as a service industry. He set about providing what came to be known as world-class service. In that he served as a catalyst for other Hindu temples in Singapore to engage in rebuilding and refurbishing, and celebrating hundreds of new special Hindu prayers and festivals which had never reached these shores till then.

What VR achieved in the management and development of HEB's temples and at IRO, with SR's support, and what he accomplished at the Parliamentary Select Committee on the creation of Group Representation Constituencies, on his own, were exceptional. We believe that his contribution to IRO and the relationships that he built up in the course of his involvement in IRO-related projects are exemplary and worthy of emulation by young Singaporeans.

Arun Senkuttuvan

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Baskaran did most of the research for the chapters related to Hindu temples and HEB, and Abdullah for the one on IRO – based largely on public and partially-public sources like HEB, the National Archives, the

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Arun Senkuttuvan