

MR GOPINATH PILLAI'S EULOGY
FOR MR S. R. NATHAN
FRIDAY, 26 AUGUST 2016

While I am honoured to be speaking today about Mr Nathan, I am also somewhat troubled. What can I say that would do justice to a friend and mentor of almost four decades? How can I adequately put into words the loss I feel without my emotions getting the better of me?

I first heard of Mr Nathan in the late 1950s when I was an under-graduate. But I got to know him well only in the 1980s when he was appointed Chairman of the Hindu Endowment Board. The first thing I noticed about him was that like Winston Churchill, he did not think doing your best was good enough; doing what was required was more important.

His priorities for the Endowment Board were clear. He wanted to get the accounts up to date because we were handling money from a large number of devotees. He brought in an excellent finance member who not only cleaned up the accounts, but also instituted strict measures to ensure there were no leakages.

Mr Nathan was also mindful of religious sensitivities. Once every 12 years, large amounts are spent to refresh Hindu temples— the belief is that this is necessary to maintain the temple's divine powers. When I suggested discontinuing this practice, Mr Nathan advised me not to change established traditions. He reminded me that our task was to run an efficient system, not to tinker with people's beliefs.

Once, I asked him why he had agreed to be Chairman of the endowment board. He explained that in the political arena, there were credible Indian ministers who had won the respect of all races. He thought the various Indian institutions should also be credible. It was incumbent on those who have succeeded to be involved in the running of community organisations. He felt very strongly that those who have done well should not cut themselves off from their respective communities.

This sense of giving back to society was always paramount in Mr Nathan's mind. He was one of the founders of SINDA and believed firmly that every child irrespective of race or religion should have the opportunity to develop to his full potential. He spearheaded many initiatives at SINDA which have led to the betterment of many lives.

Mr Nathan looked at everything from a national perspective. When I was appointed Chairman of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at NUS, he spoke to me about ISAS's role. While Singapore and India enjoyed friendly relations, they did not have in his view a deep understanding of each other. His advice to me was: "You should champion Singapore in India and India in Singapore. That way you can help to increase each country's understanding of the other." ISAS has tried to live up to his expectations.

Mr Nathan was a man of foresight. He had long believed that the diaspora from various South Asian countries had much in common and there was much potential and value in bringing them together in a neutral venue. He felt Singapore was one such natural hub for the global South Asian Diaspora. He was the driving force behind the publication of the Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora in 2006, the most comprehensive account of the global Indian Diaspora even today.

To show our deep gratitude for his immense contributions, the South Asia Diaspora Conference last July conferred on him The Outstanding Member of the South Asian Diaspora Award.

Mr Nathan has received many accolades and honours throughout his distinguished career. But for many of us who knew him before he occupied the highest office in the land, what struck us most about him was his common touch. As Kipling says "walk with kings but do not lose the common touch". When he was President, he showed a real interest in the Singaporeans he met and endeared himself to them. He was warm and friendly and would not leave any function he attended without taking photographs with the employees of that establishment. I would venture to say that almost half the households in Singapore would have one photograph of him with a member of their family.

There was also a lighter side to Mr Nathan. He loved to watch Tamil and Malayalam movies. He appreciated both the classical Carnatic music and light film songs. The song that we heard at the beginning of these proceedings, Thanjavooru Manneduthu, was a particular favourite. It speaks volumes of the man that this Tamil song resonated with him precisely because he heard it in a tale of Singapore -- how from many, we became one; how despite our different traditions, cultures religions, we could be “one people”.

When news broke that he was critically ill in hospital and the newspapers published it, a lady who had once worked for us as a domestic helper called my wife from Kumbakonam, a remote town in Tamil Nadu, to enquire about Mr Nathan’s condition, and to say she was praying for him. He had made a deep and lasting impression on her, as he had on all those who came in contact with him.

Another person who contacted me was Mr Tan Guan Heng, a visually-handicapped writer, one whose books Mr Nathan launched in 2001. Mr Nathan had also written a foreword to Guan Heng’s latest book “Pioneering the Disabled and the Able”. Guan Heng accompanied me and my wife to pay our last respects to Mr Nathan at the family residence.

My wife and I travelled several times with Mr Nathan and his family. On those trips, we saw a side of Mr Nathan that few outside would have seen. He was above all a family man. The childhood love between Mr and Mrs Nathan seem to have grown with the passage of time. Their marriage is an extraordinary tale of devotion and love that inspires us all. The family they created -- with their children Juthika and Osith as well as Gay Eng and Hooi, and grandchildren Monisha, Kiron and Kheshin – they are a closely-knit one. Mr Nathan lives on in them as he does in our hearts. At this time of sorrow, we share the loss Mrs Nathan and her family feel, and pray that they will have the strength to withstand it

Today, we bid farewell to a remarkable man whose life was an unusual journey. We were all fortunate to have been in some measure a part of this unexpected odyssey.

Farewell Mr Nathan. May you rest in peace.