

K. Kesavapany with Anitha Devi Pillai. *From Estate to Embassy: Memories of an Ambassador*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2019. 186 pp. ISBN: 978-981-48-4150-4.

Reviewed by Asad Latif

Singapore

The Malayan oil palm estate is an emblematic marker on the diasporic map of Indians in Southeast Asia. It provided an escape from poverty at home but incarcerated Indian immigrant labour in the global political economy of colonial Britain. The embassy is a gilded manifestation of a country's external presence and influence. Any journey from estate to embassy is not only a personal one but encapsulates the larger possibilities of economic mobility created at the intersection of personal talent and social opportunity.

This book describes the travels, both literal and intellectual, of a man whose Vellore-born father had arrived to work as a *kerani* (clerk) in an estate lying close to Kuala Lumpur in British-administered Malaya in the early 1900s. Krishnasamy Kesavapany, born in Malaya in 1936, inherited a keen, everyday sense of Indian-ness at home, but that legacy was complemented by his nurture in tropical Malaya, whose Malay, Chinese, Indian and other inhabitants drew as close as they could in a plural society where economic function corresponded essentially with ethnicity.

Yet, a third destiny – after being Indian and Malayan – awaited Kesavapany. This was to become Singaporean.

Singapore (along with Sabah and Sarawak) had merged with Malaya to create Malaysia in 1963. In 1965, however, Singapore separated from Malaysia because of differences over the agency and remit of multi-racialism in economic and political life.

Kesavapany – who had been educated at the elite Anderson School in Ipoh, followed by a teachers' training course in Kirkby in Liverpool that led to undergraduate studies at the prestigious University of Malaya – was attracted to the way in which a nascent Singapore under the authoritarian but progressive leadership of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was trying to move beyond being a plural society.

In 1967, Kesavapany embraced his final destiny. He joined the Singapore Administrative Service and worked for five years in the Ministry of Labour before being transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Singapore's Foreign Minister was Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, but the person who would have the greatest influence on Kesavapany was Sellapan Ramanathan, a veteran diplomat who rose to be Singapore's President before he passed away in 2016.

There was no Indian inner circle, no minority cabal, at work in these ethnic connections. Rather, Kesavapany's rapid rise through the diplomatic ranks attested to the emphasis placed on meritocracy. He had

to prove his mettle at every point as his diplomatic journey took him to the United Nations in Geneva as Singapore's Permanent Representative; to the first chairmanship of the General Council of the World Trade Organization; and, supremely, to Malaysia as Singapore's High Commissioner, perhaps the most sensitive post for a Singapore diplomat. He had been posted also to Jakarta and Cold War-Moscow for what would constitute elements of a continuing diplomatic education culminating in the posting to Kuala Lumpur at a difficult time in bilateral relations.

His wife Padmini, a trained special needs teacher, managed a career and a family, which included two sons and Benji, a border collie.

This book provides an anecdotal account of his dealings with countries and institutions more powerful than Singapore, engagements in which Kesavapany was tasked with upholding the interests of a small, island city-state in a predatory world of contending nations and the diplomatic mechanisms through which they seek to exercise their will. He emerged unscathed.

Following his departure from the diplomatic service, Kesavapany became Director of Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), now called the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, for almost a decade. He re-energised it as a credible research institution and think-tank. If Southeast Asia is to be defined by its geographical position, as that of lying south of China and east of India, an early indication of Kesavapany's interests lay in the publication, in 2005, of *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia*, edited by the inimitable Indonesianist Leo Suryadinata. The volume commemorated the 600th anniversary of imperial China's engagement with the Nanyang, the territories lying to its maritime south. The book raised important questions of whether Zheng He's expedition had been imperial or peaceful. The Indian imprint on Southeast Asia, too, played a prominent role in the research projects that the institute undertook under Kesavapany. One landmark effort was its publication in 2009 of *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*. The volume, which Kesavapany edited with Hermann Kulke and Vijay Sakhuja, recalled to popular memory the attack by the Chola, an expansionist power based in India's Kaveri Delta, on Srivijaya in Sumatra in 1025 CE. The implications of the attack for Southeast Asia's relations with Song China, with which Srivijaya enjoyed maritime links to the north, as it did with Chola India to the west, are being recreated in the contemporary Sino-Indian contest for the loyalty of Southeast Asia. History changes: Geography does not. Kesavapany brought an instinctive understanding of the geography of international politics, derived from his years as a diplomat, to his directorship of ISEAS. This book could have delved deeper into those enduring historical themes.

After Kesavapany's ISEAS years, he turned his attention inwards, towards Singapore, in his roles as president of the Singapore Indian Association, as a member of the advisory board of the Hindu Endowments Board, and as president of the Inter-Religious Organisation.

This book is co-written by Singapore academic Anitha Devi Pillai, whose literary instincts have transformed the multi-faceted work of an extraordinary Singaporean into seamless prose that is simple on the surface but which reaches into the depths of shared being that flow through the lives of individuals, nations and world systems. What might have been just another diplomatic memoir reads like a picaresque novel, except that it is true.

Many Indians have succeeded in the world, some by abjuring their legacy. This is the story of an Indian-Malayan-Singaporean who never let go of his ancestry but made it a part of a cosmopolitan universe which, for him, revolves around Singapore. In a gesture of appreciation for the Indian part of that role, the President of India conferred on the Singapore Indian Association the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award in 2017 “in recognition of your valuable contribution in promoting the honour and prestige of India and in fostering the interests of Overseas Indians”. That was not a small way to have travelled from estate to embassy.