

From Indian Immigrants to Singaporeans

By Vasanthi Ravi

A well-known leader and reformist, 'Thamizhavel' Govindasamy Sarangapany, aka Kosa (19 April 1903–16 March 1974) was a pioneer of the Indian community, one who strove to knit its then fragmented groups into a single social fabric. Hailing from Thiruvarur in South India, he was an educated young man who set foot in Singapore in 1924 and began his career as a book-keeper. Within just a few years, he went on to become a manager.

In 1929, Kosa became the Associate Editor of a weekly magazine called *Munnetram* (meaning Progress) and soon became its editor as well. He was also the editor of *Seerthirtham* (meaning Reform) a monthly magazine, before setting up *Tamil Murasu* in 1935. *Tamil Murasu* was originally a weekly magazine and today is the only Tamil newspaper in circulation.

Deeply drawn by the 'Self Respect' movement (founded in India by EV Ramasamy Naicker also known as *Periyar*), he facilitated the visits of *Periyar* to Singapore to spread reformist ideas among the Indian immigrants of British Malaya. He also spearheaded the founding of the Tamils Reform Association in 1932 and campaigned against social evils such as addiction to toddy and the caste system, while also supporting inter-religious marriages and emphasising the importance of literacy.

Kosa not only personally conducted some inter-caste and inter-religious marriage ceremonies, but also ensured that these marriages were registered. Living by what he preached, he married a 19-year-old Chinese Peranakan, Lim Boon Neo. They had six children and although there was an age gap of 15 years between them, their love withstood the test of time.

To unify all the Indian immigrants, he started a yearly gathering called *Thamizhar Thirunal* to showcase his love of the Tamil language, its arts and its rich culture. The event saw some renowned poets from Tamil Nadu, India, being brought in for discourses and seminars while also recognising upcoming local talents in literature.

Kosa also founded *Manavar Mani Mandram*, a youth organisation that encouraged students to write poems, essays and short stories. Membership cards and badges were issued



A billet issued by the Tamils Representative Council for their yearly event, Thamizhar Thirunaal

to its members, who were also trained in literary critiquing and the writing of literary reviews. Their contributions were published in a weekly column in *Tamil Murasu*.

Other key contributions Kosa made included efforts that resulted in Tamil being named one of Singapore's four official languages. An umbrella body, the Tamil Education Society, was formed. It unified poorly run Tamil schools and provided funding for the teaching of Tamil at primary and secondary levels. He also made sure that adequate government grants were given to cover the operational costs of these Tamil-language schools.

In 1957, he became a Singapore citizen and then encouraged other Indian immigrants to apply for citizenship. He personally filled up the necessary application forms and saw to it that Indian immigrants had a stake in nation-building.

It was in 1955 that he was awarded the title 'Thamizhavel' for his enormous contributions to Tamil literature, followed by other awards such as the *Thamizh Kavalal* in 1963 and *Muthamizh Kavalal* in 1966. These titles were conferred on him for his persistent efforts to keep the Tamil language thriving in spite of barriers that remained from the era of colonial rule.

The collection of G Sarangapany's photographs, personal effects and documents on display at the Indian Heritage Centre, were donated by his daughter, Mrs Rajam Sarangapany.



Govindasamy Sarangapany with his wife and children

Vasanthi Ravi is a social entrepreneur supporting migrant worker projects locally and girls' education in India. As a strong believer in lifelong learning, she joined FOM and Toastmasters International.

Images courtesy of the Resource Library, Indian Heritage Centre