

Nilanjana Sengupta, *Singapore, My Country: Biography of M. Bala Subramanion*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2016. 239 pp. ISBN 978-981-3141-29-2.

Over the last two decades, biographies and autobiographies have carved a significant niche in Singapore's literary scene. The most popular accounts tend to focus on notables, specifically the life stories of individuals who have held high political office. General interest in these narratives is, to some extent, informed by the widespread recognition that leadership has been crucial in explaining Singapore's rise from the Third World to the First World. The genre adopted, albeit constrained by perspective, is nonetheless valuable in providing readers with an inside-ring view of the circumstances shaping the lives of these notables, as well as how their choices affected both their personal trajectories and bore an imprint on the wider political and social context.

Nilanjana Sengupta's biography of M. Bala Subramanion, is an important addition to this list. It is, however, a narrative that is marked by difference: Bala did not hold political office. Rather, the biography gives us an insight into the life of intermediary level leaders, who left a significant mark on the civil service and community organisations, and through that, an imprint on wider Singapore society. Bala's own life, replete with strive and success in varied arenas, presents ample scope with which to explore a multitude of these developments. Much to Sengupta's credit, she masterfully situates the telling of Bala's life story in the spaces, ideological and political developments, and global moments that early Singapore grew out of.

The six chapters are divided based on key transitions in Bala's life-history. Through these, Sengupta offers accessibly written segues into the larger context of Bala's moves and contributions. Echoing life where Bala grew up, Sengupta's recreation of the multilingual sounds of an early twentieth century childhood in colonial Singapore and Malaya is particularly pleasing in this first chapter. Bala himself was educated in English medium schools, and while he carries a fondness for the words of Shakespeare, this love for language would shape his later career and leadership. Sengupta foreshadows this with her introduction to the Tamil Reform Movement that had begun to take root in Singapore during Bala's teenage years.

The second chapter marks the beginnings of the man who would be Controller of Post. In 1936, Bala begins work with the Posts and Telegraphs Department in the General Post Office at Fullerton. As he moves through different postings in the service, Sengupta takes the reader through the history and layout of the Fullerton Building, its workings with the Singapore River and mail ships, the different branches and functions of the GPO, and the rapidly

changing communications technologies that Bala masters. The chapter ends with the onset of the Japanese Occupation.

The Occupation, and this third chapter, sees Bala continuing work with the postal services under the Japanese. With this, the reader is also brought through the transitions government departments make in such times; stamps are hastily over-printed, postal rules frequently amended and the language of administration replaced with Japanese. This was also a transformative period for the Indian community in Singapore with the formation of the Indian National Army. Bala was not allowed by his father, Murugasu, to join, although his sisters were, but hearing Bose's speech at the Padang stirred him. He would, however, be forced to step up as head of the household with the passing of his father at the Thai-Burma railway.

The post-war decade saw Bala's career grow in quick succession as the fourth chapter draws out. Bala's postings take him to Kuala Lumpur and back, where he establishes and takes leadership in the Postal and Telecommunications Workers Union. Sengupta weaves the complex and rapidly changing post war position and struggles of low and mid rung civil servants, as well as that of labour unions and party politics across Malaya and Singapore. Bala's selection for a two-year advanced postal training course (1949-51) takes him to the United Kingdom and back to Kuala Lumpur. The reader here learns of, as Bala lives through, the Malayan Communist insurgency and the "Malayanisation" of the civil service.

The next decade and a half covered in chapter five is one of even greater responsibilities for both Bala and Singapore. Bala is promoted to Controller of Posts in 1957 and, up till his retirement in 1970, oversees the postal service's many operations through the post-Independence transfer of operations. Bala increasingly takes up community leadership in the 1960s, with the Singapore Indian Association and the Hindu Endowment Board. With this Sengupta also explores the re-emerging role of Indian community associations, particularly on the question of education.

The final chapter explores the development of Tamil education and Indian political representation even further as Bala devotes his time raising funds for students, serving on numerous boards and committees, including two Parliamentary Elections Committees, and even volunteer tutoring with SINDA.

Sengupta's greatest contribution in this presentation of Bala's life lies in her steady weaving of the contemporaneous contexts at all levels, revealing her deep appreciation of Singapore's historical development. Beginning with childhood neighbourhoods, to the bustle and intensity of the Fullerton, from negotiations at Army volunteer camps and workers unions to the global exchange of ideas at postal conferences, from the fight of Indian nationalist movements to Singapore's education boards and parliamentary committees, Sengupta

effectively helps the reader understand the changing world around Bala and just how his contributions fit.

Singapore, My Country also offers refreshing alternative readings on Singapore's history. Bala's experience of the Japanese Occupation, for instance, was not entirely without pleasure. His love for the *kanji* characters and admiration for the Japanese love for their culture would inspire lifelong friendships and indeed influenced his future work with Tamil education. Throughout, Sengupta is an even-handed biographer who both celebrates and questions the moves of her subject. When Bala works closely with the Japanese government in Singapore, she questions if this was just a "compulsion of survival." When in his post-retirement he joins the Singapore Pools, she wonders if he was ever worried about encouraging gambling, or if he thinks about the cost of promoting Tamil language and culture incurred by non-Tamil Indian groups. These are keen observations of a biographer who cares enough to remain critical of her subject. One, however, wonders if she ever sought to ask Bala about these seemingly glaring ironies.

This biography would certainly be of value to a wide range of readers. Its value to historical scholarship, however, would have been enhanced if sources were marked out more systematically and consistently than is currently done. At points, the writing could also do more in distinguishing the voice of the biographer and that of the subject. This nominal critique should not however detract from a stellar effort, nor take away from the fluency of her writing, which makes it so accessible for the public audience it targets.

Rajesh Rai
National University of Singapore
Email: sasrr@nus.edu.sg