

# **Raja's vision**

Mr Rajaratnam's vision of a multiracial society remains relevant today, says author of his biography. -tabla!

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**By Sheela Narayan**

HOW do you write about a multifaceted man like Mr S. Rajaratnam?

Member of Parliament for Tampines GRC Irene Ng looked to the little details about the man to craft her 576-page tome *The Singapore Lion, A Biography Of S. Rajaratnam*.

The first of two volumes - the second volume is expected in two years - it is published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas) and written by Ms Ng who is also the institute's writer-in-residence.

The book, launched by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Feb 4, tells the story of Mr Rajaratnam's life from his birth in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, to his childhood in Malaysia to his time as a student in Singapore and London and as a political figure up to 1963, when Singapore and Malaysia merged.

Mr Raja, as he was popularly known, played a key role in forming the People's Action Party with Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 1954 and was first Culture Minister when Singapore became a self-governing state. After independence, he served as Singapore's first Foreign Minister, before becoming Labour Minister, Second Deputy Prime Minister and Senior Minister. He retired in 1988 and died on Feb 20, 2006, three days before he turned 91.

Mr Raja was a journalist who wrote columns, radio plays and was a published short story writer while he was living in London. He drafted Singapore's National Pledge, which is recited at local schools every morning.

Ms Ng, a former senior political correspondent with *The Straits Times* and *The New Paper* who had interviewed Mr Rajaratnam on several occasions, conducted in-depth interviews with his relatives in Singapore, Seremban and Jaffna and also spoke with relatives of his Hungarian wife Piroska Feher, whom he met and married in London. She also trawled through archived material in Singapore and London.



Ms Ng says Mr Rajaratnam was committed to the vision of a multiracial meritocratic society and, although he did not subscribe to any religion, he was a filial son deeply devoted to his family.

She believes that Mr Rajaratnam's vision and message are even more relevant today than when Singapore was a young independent country.

Lion's roar... Ms Ng with her book on Mr Rajaratnam. "In those days people could not even understand each other's language, rituals or way of life. Because of the concerted effort to integrate them and because of the common language of English, we are nearer to achieving the vision of a united people. It's constantly a work in progress," she says.

She feels if Mr Rajaratnam was alive today, he would not have a problem with new migrants: "He himself had so many different identities; born in Sri Lanka, raised in Seremban, schooled in Singapore and spent 12 years in London. He chose Singapore.

For him it was an act of will, to cast himself as Singaporean, to fight for Singapore.

"He wouldn't have lost any sleep that there are more immigrants coming. You decide where your roots are and you sink them."

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*The Singapore Lion is available in bookstores at \$45 (soft-cover edition) and \$55 (hard cover).*