

Biographical Notes

Kernal Singh Sandhu (1929 – 2 December 1992) – Academic/ ISEAS Director

K. S. Sandhu was born to a Sikh family in Segamat, Johor in 1929. A keen sportsman, Sandhu played hockey for the Johor state in his younger days. In 1954, Sandhu began his tertiary education at the University of Malaya where he eventually received a first class honours degree. There, he studied under Paul Wheatley who would later become a close friend and collaborator.¹

Sandhu pursued his Masters at the University of British Columbia under a Canadian Council Scholarship.² Subsequently, he studied under Professor Sir Clifford Darby for his PhD at the University of London. His doctoral thesis was published as *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of their immigration and settlement* by Cambridge University Press in 1969.³ After graduation, Sandhu did teaching stints at the universities of Malaya, Singapore and British Columbia.⁴

On 1 July 1972, Sandhu was appointed the fourth director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). He was the first Asian director of the Institute as well as the longest-serving director, leading the Institute from 1972 to 1992.⁵ From the start, Sandhu's aim was to develop the Institute into "the foremost centre of its kind in Southeast Asia and one of the world's leading institute devoted to advanced quality research on the region".⁶

During his tenure, Sandhu made great strides in enhancing the reputation of the Institute and promoting the cause of Southeast Asian studies in general.⁷ He actively sought funding from governments and organisations for research fellowships and programmes.⁸ In 1987, he wrote an important letter to Dr Tony Tan, then Minister for Education, and eventually won critical funds and support for the Institute.⁹ Among his staff, Sandhu was known for being a humble, selfless and a caring boss.¹⁰

Sandhu built up the collection of the ISEAS library and pushed public education through publications, seminars, discussions and conferences.¹¹ Significant publications included *Southeast Asian Affairs*, an annual review of significant events and trends by Southeast Asian scholars (initiated 1974) and *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (initiated 1977), a journal first started to disseminate ISEAS research findings.¹² By the time of his death in 1992, Sandhu had nurtured ISEAS into one of the most successful research institutions in the region.¹³

¹ Derek da Cunha, "In memoriam: Professor Kernal S. Sandhu", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1993); Wheatley, Paul, "Kernal Singh Sandhu", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 1993).

² "A Canadian award for Malayan", *The Straits Times*, 25 September 1958; Derek da Cunha, "In memoriam: Professor Kernal S. Sandhu", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1993); Lim Pui Huen, P., *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: a commemorative history, 1968-1998*, Singapore: ISEAS (1998), p. 86.

³ Wheatley, Paul, "Kernal Singh Sandhu", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 1993);

⁴ da Cunha, "In memoriam: Professor Kernal S. Sandhu".

⁵ Chew, Cassandra, *Light on a hill: The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute story, 1968-2018*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2018), p. 43.

⁶ 4-point plan to build study institute, *New Nation*, 4 October 1972; Chew, *Light on a hill*, p. 43.

⁷ Lim, *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, p. 17.

⁸ Lee Kim Chew, *ISEAS: studying Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2015), pp. 28-29.

⁹ Lee, *ISEAS: studying Southeast Asia*, p. 64; Chew, *Light on a hill*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Chew, *Light on a hill*, p. 48.

¹¹ Lee, *ISEAS: studying Southeast Asia*, p. 61-62.

¹² Lee, *ISEAS: studying Southeast Asia*, pp. 29, 33; Derek da Cunha, "In memoriam: Professor Kernal S. Sandhu", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1993).

¹³ Lee, *ISEAS: studying Southeast Asia*, p. 64.

Even with a heavy schedule as director of the Institute, Sandhu continued to be active in research, editing and writing. His major publications include *Melaka: the transformation of a Malaya capital c. 1400-1980* (1993, with Paul Wheatley), *Management of success: the moulding of modern Singapore* (1980, with Paul Wheatley) and *Indian communities in Southeast Asia* (1993, with A. Mani).¹⁴

In 1985, Sandhu received the Public Administration Medal (Gold) from the Singapore government.¹⁵ On 2 December 1992, Sandhu died after suffering a sudden heart attack.¹⁶ He left behind his wife, Swinder Kaur.¹⁷

¹⁴ "From colony to NIC: New book will tell how Singapore did it", *The Straits Times*, 12 January 1989; "ISEAS now ready for role in public education", *The Straits Times*, 14 November 1989; Lim, *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, p. 86.

¹⁵ "Goh Keng Swee heads National Day honours list", *Business Times*, 9 August 1985.

¹⁶ Derek da Cunha, "In memoriam: Professor Kernial S. Sandhu", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1993); Chew, Ernest C.T., "Obituary: Professor Kernial Singh Sandhu", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1993).

¹⁷ Chan Heng Chee, "In memoriam: Professor Kernial S. Sandhu, 1929-92", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1993).