

Six decades as top nurse and leader

V.K. SANTOSH KUMAR

Mr Harbhajan Singh (right) is humbled to be featured in the exhibition Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold, which is on at the Indian Heritage Centre till Sept 30.

“I am most delighted to be featured as a healthcare worker who embodied resilience, responsibility and lifelong dedication in nursing and rising to the occasion when duty called to battle the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) pandemic (in 2003) despite the risks,” the 80-year-old told tabla! “This is in line with nursing ethics as well as my Sikh culture, teachings and religion.”

Mr Singh, the longest-serving nurse in the National Healthcare Group (he still works part-time at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) where he began his career as an 18-year-old), features in a section of the exhibition titled Contemporary Perspectives, which chronicles stories of Sikhs from diverse walks of life. It shows him as a “Sars Warrior” and traces his nursing journey from 1959 and his commendable work with TTSH since his posting to the hospital in 1965.

“I joined the nursing profession in 1959 through a Public Service Commission interview, although teaching was my first choice,” he said. “I have been in the nursing service for 62 years. I spent three years as a student nurse, three years at Singapore General Hospital and 56 years at TTSH.”



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– TTSH senior nurse manager Anni Dionne Liew

PHOTO: TTSH

Mr Singh witnessed the transformation of TTSH from a tuberculosis hospital to a full-fledged tertiary hospital, as well as the construction of the main building which became fully operational in 1999.

He was also a member of the TTSH staff who were at the forefront of the fight against Sars and several other epidemics, including the Nipah virus, Ebola, H1N1 and now Covid-19.

“My happy memories of a long career are tinged with sadness when I recall the outbreak of Sars in 2003,” he said. “We lost members of the health team and 33 people died.”

“As a unit nursing manager at the Communicable Disease Centre, I sud-

denly found the close to 100-year-old building put into action to contain the deadly virus.

“We quickly refurbished disused wards, converted facility rooms into wards and brought in shipping containers to set up makeshift isolation wards.”

“I took charge of some 100 nurses and played a key role in containing this contagious virus on top of managing distressed family members and keeping the morale of staff high.”

Another challenge was caring for HIV-positive patients in the 1990s when immense stigma was attached to them and the hospital staff were reluctant to treat or care for them.

“I worked to get a special allowance

for nurses, created opportunities for them to train and build a HIV clinic for the hospital,” he said. “I also organised a charity event and raised \$200,000 for HIV patients.”

Six decades of dedicated nursing service has taught Mr Singh that in an ever-challenging healthcare environment, lifelong learning, actively seeking social-oriented activities, sharing knowledge with co-workers and improving technology skills are vital.

“Perseverance, dedication, determination and hard work are key to success,” he said. “I also learnt a crisis cannot be handled singularly. It requires collaboration with all agencies and strong teamwork.”

For his exemplary work, Mr Singh was conferred Emeritus Fellow, TTSH’s highest honour to outstanding staff, in 2015. Last year, he also received the Public Sector Transformation Award in the Exemplary SkillsFuture category for picking up IT skills in his 70s and being unafraid to seek help from younger, tech-savvy nurses.

“Mr Singh is open to challenges and always willing to pick up new knowledge,” said TTSH senior nurse manager Anni Dionne Liew.

“He has shown us, the younger generation of nurses, the meaning of resilience.”

Mr Singh still works 30 hours a week at TTSH – supporting the nursing service administration and the corporate communications team.

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E-book featuring Indian personalities launched

Singaporean freelance journalist Soundara Nayaki Vairavan’s interviews with prominent Indian politicians, leaders, ministers and diplomats were released in an e-book format virtually last Saturday.

“It is a compilation of interviews that I did for my e-magazines Online Voice and Sing-Ind over the past 20 years,” said the 48-year-old (right). “Events attended by celebrities are also part of the e-book.”

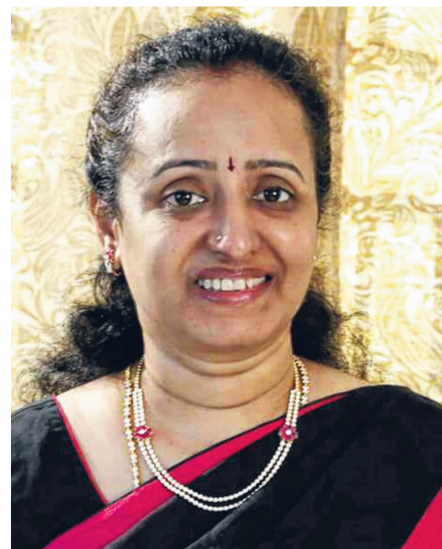
Among the distinguished people featured in the e-book are former Singapore President S R Nathan, Minister for Communications and Information S. Iswaran and former diplomat K. Kesavapany.

India’s former finance minister P. Chidambaram, former chief ministers M. Karunanidhi and Chandrababu Naidu and the current High Commissioner to Singapore Periasamy Kumar also figure in it.

“I have always been lucky to get appointments with them,” said Mrs Soundara Nayaki, who has worked as a part-time tutor at the National University of Singapore (NUS). “I either met them in Singapore or India.”

She started Online Voice in 2001 and Sing-Ind in 2019 as platforms to express her views.

“As the interviews were well received, there were suggestions to make it into a book,” said Mrs Soundara Nayaki, who is also the



founder of Kalamanjari, an organisation that aims to promote Tamil classical music. “So I launched it as an e-book now.”

Her 182-page book, A Harvest Of Inspiring Tales, was launched virtually by Mr Benji Dorji, a former Bhutanese diplomat who served as Bhutan’s ambassador to the United Nations and European countries from 1991 to 1994.

It was followed by a panel discussion that included Ms Chitra Sankaran, associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at NUS, and Rajaram Ramasubban, registrar at NUS.

V.K. Santosh Kumar



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