

# Successful Sri Lankans of Singapore

The story of diligent Sri Lankans who have migrated to Singapore and etched out successful careers

By Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar

**Sri Lankans** migrating to Singapore on work is quite rare. Those who did venture to Singapore for work would gather experience and, sometimes, move to other countries. Living in Singapore is expensive, space is limited and housing is pricey. Yet, there are plenty of jobs in knowledge and technology-intensive occupations like cyber security, pharmaceuticals, research & development, logistics, and financial services; and Sri Lankan diaspora in Singapore help immigrants from their motherland find a foothold. Sri Lankans are not at ease outside their comfort zones. As a result, migrants sometimes accept jobs at lower levels in the hierarchy than previously employed, leading to financial challenges. Students find it easier to assimilate by embracing local and expat friends, food, and culture. Often, it's their diligence and resilience that make them successful in Singapore that is a hotbed for global talent. These are stories of gritty Sri Lankan achievers who have become successful in system-driven and pragmatic Singapore. Yet, none have abandoned their banyan tree-like roots of Sri Lanka, and plan to retire in their beloved island.





# A Second-Generation Sri Lankan- Singaporean

## S Somanesan

### *Radiation Physicist*

Operations & Senior Quality Assurance  
Manager, Singapore General Hospital

#### SECOND-GENERATION SINGAPOREAN

Somanesan's grandfather sailed from Jaffna to Penang in 1923 and worked as a male nurse in British Malaya. His father migrated to Singapore in 1955 and worked in Singapore's government service. Some Sri Lankans of that generation became the founding fathers of Singapore. Born in Singapore, Somanesan has been their successful flag-bearer. His father's migration set Somanesan's life on path. Associated with Singapore General Hospital, he feels proud to have visited Kandy to help the Nuclear Medicine Department of the Peradeniya University and guide them in line with international best practices. He defines himself as a 'Singaporean of Ceylon Tamil descent', and his identity card carries his nationality as 'Ceylonese'.

Tamil language and rituals are integral to Somanesan's family. His children are also fluent in Chinese and Malay. He works from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m., and travels an hour to work. Maintaining a work-life balance is tough here. However, weekends are for family and friends.

Somanesan remembers that he had problems adjusting to basic toilets on his holiday to Jaffna as a 7-year-old, but enjoyed the freedom of rural life where he could climb trees, cycle, ride bullock carts, and run with chickens and goats. In comparison, his children had to be content with the sterile Singapore zoo to feed domestic animals. Being a citizen, Somanesan understands the struggles of relocating from vibrant Sri Lanka to concrete Singapore. On weekends, he sometimes meets newer Sri Lankans at temples or the Ceylon Sports Club. Somanesan follows Sri Lankan cricket and feels it is what binds all Sri Lankans. Integrating is not difficult as there are enough Sri Lankan people and eateries to help relieve nostalgia. Somanesan mixes freely with expats, many of whom he meets at the hospital, enjoying the cultural exchange, and assists them to acclimatize as well.

#### ↓ Favourite restaurant?

Staits Kitchen  
for local and  
regional fare

#### ↓ How do you spend your free time?

Go for walks  
around the  
various gardens,  
parks and  
walkways

Soft-spoken **Somanesan** is proud to be a Singaporean of Ceylon Tamil descent. As a Radiation Physicist, he is an able flag-bearer of Singapore's industrious first generation Sri Lankans





# Sharing The Lankan Teaching Culture

**Marissa Jansz**

*Drama Teacher*

Overseas Family School

YEARS IN SINGAPORE: 12

Marissa Jansz's dream of pursuing her Master's degree in English Literature in the prestigious National University of Singapore came true in 2006. However, assimilating to a new culture during her student days proved to be more challenging than getting employed. Initially, as a student, Marissa faced difficulty in adapting. She kept to herself, trying to cope with homesickness. With the help of some Sri Lankan friends, Marissa brushed aside her nostalgic stupor. She started using the university library more, actively participating in class and socializing. She believes that many international students suffered from similar predicaments. Initially, she availed the university's basic accommodation facilities, but thereafter, shared spacious and cleaner apartments.

Thereafter, Marissa adjusted well. She appreciates Singapore's liberalism, safety and cleanliness; she can roam around without getting harassed or robbed. She does not need a car, but happily uses public

buses, the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) and taxis. Marissa finds the 24/7 maintenance facilities provided by most apartments comforting. Her work in international schools exposes her to diverse cultures, and she loves her colleagues' open-mindedness. Now, she enjoys exploring the churches of Singapore on Sundays with her former Filipino flat-mate.

Having lived on a student visa and after completing her Master's, Marissa immediately found a job in Singapore as a high school English and Drama teacher. Her career progressed steadily. The respect and money that Marissa has earned in Singapore and Hong Kong are unimaginable in Sri Lanka. She appreciates that students and ex-students greet her outside school. Even taxi drivers acknowledge the contributions of a teacher respectfully. Education is taken seriously and teachers are well-compensated to live a secure life. She is now in a position to explore other career possibilities.



## Go-to spot in Singapore?

Holland Village or the restaurants at the Esplanade. There's something about the vibe there that makes for a pleasant evening, and the view is gorgeous



## A must-visit site?

The museums here are fantastic. Also, Gardens by the Bay and the Singapore Zoo



Marissa's hearty laughter and mobile face reflects her interest in life and drama. Singapore opened the world to her during her studentship and teaching career





# A Lankan Pioneer In Singapore

Kavitha de Silva Wijeyaratne

Entrepreneur  
Director, Peddling Pictures

YEARS IN SINGAPORE: 7

Having headed management for leading producers in the region, Infocus Asia Singapore and Endemol Shine SEA, Kavitha de Silva Wijeyaratne recently set up his own business venture, Peddling Pictures. Producing original content for broadcasters like Nat Geo, CNA, Discovery, HBO, History, etc, Kavitha manages the business aspects, while his business partner provides the creative juice. Their creativity and stability, combined with the Singapore government’s support through funding, have enabled substantial business growth and entrenched them on the path to success. However, putting down roots wasn’t easy!

A late-night call from Singapore offering his wife a job opportunity and a 15-minute decision spurred the family’s relocation to Singapore. A resilient Kavitha tried to get a foot in the door of Singapore’s methodical and merit-based employment system. When he applied for work at Infocus Asia – one of Singapore’s best production houses – despite having been a senior manager in Colombo and a freelancer for contracts sourced from Singapore, his lack of a Singapore-recognised qualification was an obstacle, even in the creative industry. His application was refused, and the position remained vacant.

Subsequently, he took a calculated risk to take a pay cut and started work at a very junior position. Kavitha had not anticipated the obstacle. He was confident of landing a job. On the contrary, he floundered. He has since succeeded professionally. After reaching a ceiling within the company, Kavitha pondered on changing jobs and venturing into carpentry.

His wife, meanwhile, carried on working until she had their second child. Kavitha tries hard to give more time to his family despite the pressures of consolidating a new business. He misses the time when he had taken a 6-month sabbatical in Colombo to enjoy fatherhood. Kavitha is a self-taught man with hands-on experience, selecting management essentials from life. His measured boldness has helped him overcome personal and professional hurdles.

Kavitha’s youthful confidence and cheerfulness belie the struggles he has experienced to become a successful entrepreneur in Singapore

↓  
**Favourite restaurant?**  
Din Tai Fung... for dumplings!

↓  
**A must-visit site?**  
Palau Ubin, a little nostalgic island a 15min boat ride away



# East Meets West In Singapore

**Chandi Jayawickrama**

*Communications*

Executive Producer Brand, Shell

YEARS IN SINGAPORE: 20

Raised in England and having worked in Colombo, Chandi Jayawickrama needed the right address to quench her thirst for adventure, yet lead a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Singapore, an Asian country with a western lifestyle, is best suited to balance her British mind and Sri Lankan soul. It has given Chandi many professional opportunities and friends from various countries. She feels alive with the city's restaurants and bars, theatre, film festivals and art galleries. Easy-to-settle Singapore suits diverse lifestyles where one can live as cheaply or as expensively as one wants. Housing is her biggest expenditure; easy internet connections, her delight. Chandi misses adventure and rusticity in Singapore, but likes to return to its sedate pace. Her work provides the adventure she craves for. The most exciting experience in Chandi's adventurous life has been a basic offshore safety training programme where a helicopter was submerged and capsized in water multiple times, simulating a crash.

Chandi, with her brown face and white accent, stole the show for MTV in Colombo in the mid-1990s. She left Colombo for lack of ongoing professional opportunities. There was a significant gap between Sri Lankan and international standards of operation. Singapore bridged the gap. While staying on a tourist visa during the first Asian financial crisis, her perseverance was tested. Chandi's own production company collaborated with Nat Geo, Discovery and BBC for documentaries, some of which are still aired globally. Her reputation grew as she learned how to run a company successfully in a competitive market. Chandi's experience and aptitude help her in producing documentaries for Shell, like on malaria, relief work after Typhoon Haiyan and reef conservation in the Philippines. She covers the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and North African regions for Shell, which has exposed her to a Fortune 500 brand's method of operating. Chandi hopes to retire in Sri Lanka for the lifestyle, landscape, and primarily because her heart firmly resides there.

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**Go-to spot in  
Singapore?**

I live across the road from Holland Village, so loads of bars and restaurants are a stone's throw away

↓  
**What do you  
do in your free  
time?**

I love the theatre and dance performances of all kinds. I probably go out for dinner with friends about twice a week

Chandi's animated eyes and hands express her thirst for adventure and Sri Lankan vibrancy. She appreciates cosmopolitan Singapore's proximity to Sri Lanka



The dynamic duo are grateful to Singapore for helping them strike a balance where they can give equal attention to work and family

#### What do you do in your free time?

Nitya loves a cup of chai latte, playing board games with the family and heading to the library. Angelo loves watching and playing sports

#### Best Singaporean cuisine?

Hawker centre food is a must. Even the local bakeries have the most scrumptious Gula Melaka cakes and curry buns

# Striking The Perfect Lankan-Indian Balance

## Angelo Perera

### Logistics

Global Client Director, DHL Express & President, Singapore-Sri Lanka Business Association

YEARS IN SINGAPORE: 8

## Nitya Rao-Perera

### Entrepreneur

Managing Director, Lumen HR

YEARS IN SINGAPORE: 8

Angelo Perera has been around the world on work since he was 19 years old. So, when he was transferred to Singapore from Vietnam by DHL, he seized the chance to explore another country. His Employment Pass ensured an open door. His wife, Nitya Rao-Perera, also found employment due to her qualification and proficiency. They needed to integrate seamlessly and etch out a work-life balance. Sri Lankan Angelo and Indian Nitya have struck a harmonious chord of a 'perfect imbalance'. Angelo has been out of Sri Lanka for 17 years. Nitya's childhood saw her in diverse lands, having lived in seven countries. Both naturally accept new cultures and people with open minds. They are grateful to Singapore for providing safety, education,

technology and a sense of community. The couple inculcates positive thinking in their children, designing their lifestyle around each other's dreams. They gym together; socialize, generally with other expats; take part in sports; and at least one of them sees the children off to bed every night. When they miss earthiness, they travel abroad. Angelo keeps returning to Colombo on holidays, and sometimes, for Royal-Thomian cricket matches. As a corporate head with DHL and President of the Singapore-Sri Lanka Business Association (SLBA), Angelo has to juggle time between work, travel and family. The SLBA committee recently successfully coordinated the "Invest Sri Lanka" forum where the chief guest was Sri Lanka's Prime Minister. The Association's mandate is to promote bilateral trade between Sri Lanka and Singapore, and to expose Singapore's Sri Lankan Diaspora to investment opportunities in their homeland. Singapore is ranked No. 2 globally on the World Bank's "Ease of Doing Business Index" where PRs and citizens can register a business easily, while foreign ownership is unrestricted. The setting was right for Nitya to successfully launch Lumen HR specializing in executive coaching.

Angelo and Nitya have combined their strengths and self-knowledge to achieve a lasting balance in their personal and professional spaces.

They both feel that Sri Lankans who aspire to succeed in Singapore should embrace the opportunity to work in a truly international marketplace. Newcomers can use the Sri Lankan community and expat connections as a stepping stone, while making an effort to get to know the locals. Singapore is a great place to accumulate knowledge, build experience and consolidate wealth. The work culture is definitely faster-paced and results-oriented. Angelo feels that Sri Lankans are technically very competent in specialised industries, but need to improve on critical thinking and marketing themselves better. Sri Lankans need to leave their cushy lives, continuously develop themselves to compete and articulate a stronger point to succeed internationally. Simultaneously, they need to retain their cultural uniqueness.●