

# HE SAVED THOUSANDS

THE STORY OF DR JMJ SUPRAMANIAM

NALEEZA EBRAHIM  
with Dato Paul Supramaniam



ARMOUR



*The Jaffna soil is limestone, which needs  
to absorb so much and gives so little in return,  
and so we find that the Jaffna man, or the  
Ceylon Tamil as he is better known,  
has a hard life. Money is not plentiful and the  
average man is no lavish entertainer or a 'splasher'  
though he is a kind and sound fellow.*

*'Oh, they are the Scotsmen of Ceylon,' the rest of Ceylon  
with bantering envy say of the Jaffna people  
who live in the Peninsula which is in the north of Ceylon.  
Like the Scot, he has plenty of intelligence and integrity  
and may be found in the key positions  
of the government of his country.*

*Adapted from "How Big Is Your Dowry" by Ranji M Handy.  
The Straits Times, 9 January 1945, p.4*

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**Bicentennial**  
From Singapore to Singaporean

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*"A doctor's doctor—cerebral, kind, compassionate and humble..."  
Professor John Wong, CEO of National Healthcare Singapore,  
speaking of Dr JMJ Supramaniam (2018).*

# FOREWORD

Dr JMJ Supramaniam was a mentor and a friend.

He played a critical role in the development of our healthcare services. He dedicated his life to serving those around him and saving thousands.

Dr Supramaniam's life story is a valuable addition to Singaporeans' collective memories as we mark the Singapore Bicentennial. He lived through the early years of Singapore healthcare; he helped to shape it to what it is today. His story is one of our Pioneer Generation that came of age during the war, who fought for independence, and who—through sheer grit—determined their fate and that of Singapore.

Against the scourge of tuberculosis (TB), Dr Supramaniam devoted himself to finding a treatment option that developing countries could afford. His work changed the way we treated and cared for TB patients. As chairman of the Singapore Tuberculosis Research Committee, he represented Singapore at the World Health Assembly and countless international medical conferences to spread the message and best practices. He saved thousands not just in Singapore, but many more in the Third World.

Beyond saving lives, he left an indelible mark on those he mentored. You can read the many comments of former colleagues and then doctors-in-training in this book. They are words of gratitude. I, myself, had benefitted from his coaching and hand-holding when I was a young civil servant in the Ministry of Health (MOH).

He never told me about his personal war experience until years later after he had retired. I had tea with him during his last visit to his former office at MOH. Only then did I learn of his time during World War II as a volunteer with the British Medical Auxiliary Services. On several occasions, he strapped to his body the medical supplies that were critically needed at the POW camp in Changi while riding the military truck. He was a war hero!

It was an honour to have known Dr Supramaniam. He lived a full life and inspired many.

**Khaw Boon Wan**

Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure  
and Minister for Transport, Singapore

*“The practice of medicine  
is an art, not a trade;  
a calling, not a business;  
a calling in which your heart  
will be exercised equally with your head.  
To prevent disease,  
to relieve suffering  
and to heal the sick  
this is our work.”*

*Dr JMJ Supramaniam quoting Sir William Osler,  
a founding father of Johns Hopkins Hospital*



*Dr George Supramaniam (1914–44), JMJ’s older brother  
and forerunner in medical studies.*



*Dr JMJ Supramaniam (1921–2008).*



# PREFACE

*“One person can make a difference and everyone should try.” — John F. Kennedy*

In early 2016, former President S R Nathan sent word that he wanted to see me. He asked that my younger son, Matthew, who had previously sung for him, should join me. And so, on 30 March 2016, we met at his office in Singapore Management University.

Mr Nathan, an alumnus of Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), was in excellent form. He narrated stories from the 1930s, saying he knew about my paternal Grandpa (b. 1880), Reverend Arumugam Supramaniam, a pioneer in Singapore whose name is etched in the ACS as well as in education, community and history books. He also knew my maternal grandfather, Dr Samuel Aiyathurai (b. 1891), a doctor in Malaya who treated many poor Indians free of charge. And he knew my father, Dr James Mark Jeyasebingam (JMJ) Supramaniam. Mr Nathan and my father had, in fact, received their respective public service medals from President Benjamin Sheares at the same investiture ceremony in 1974.

He then shared his concerns about a generational Indian underclass in Singapore. He felt that the new economy had not embraced them sufficiently and wanted the ‘established’ Indian families here to do more. Lauding the good work of the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), he felt that those from the older families should also play a part to help and support SINDA. He urged me to galvanise such an initiative, saying the Indian ministers would appreciate better support and wider feedback from us Indians in the private sector.

He expounded the benefits of encouraging the community by examples of the travails of earlier settlers here and how they had progressed by persevering against the odds. He then suggested that I write the family story, saying it was a useful narrative that would be good for both the Indian community and Singapore. He said that he would write the book’s Preface but told me to get a move on as he was already unwell and, as he noted, “on borrowed time”.

I promised him I would do so. Mr Nathan’s sad passing in August 2016 reminded me of my solemn promise to him. So, I asked Naleeza Ebrahim to do the honours. She conducted research and interviews and gleaned information through photographs, press reports, history books, family archives and considerable source material my father had started collecting painstakingly after the early death of his father, my Grandpa.

Naleeza was also able to use the material I had started penning and chapters about the family written for the Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association's (SCTA's) 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication, as well as an account of my paternal grandmother, Harriet Supramaniam, my wife, Margy had prepared some years ago at the behest of the Indian Heritage Centre.

This book focuses on the life of my father and the impact of his role model, my Grandpa, who arrived here in 1892. Through limiting the scope to two family members, I hope, someday, to write a fuller story of the Jaffna Tamil migration to Singapore in its wider context. For that is also a story worth telling.

Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had written on 18 December 1967, referring to the Ceylonese Community:

“... in terms of achievement and contributions to the growth and development of modern Singapore and Malaysia, have done more than warranted by their numbers... In the Judiciary, in the civil service, in the University, in the Medical Services, and in the professions, they continue to make substantial contributions out of all proportion to their numbers. They are there not because they are members of a minority community, but on the basis of merit...”

My Grandpa, Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam (James Sr), who co-founded the SCTA in 1909, died in 1937, 20 years before I was born. However, as I grew older, delved into family history and began to know and better understand my father (whom I dearly looked up to), I began to realise that living with Father was, in many ways, akin to living with Grandpa. Father and Grandpa were remarkably alike. Grandpa's steadfast and unimpeachable character, exacting standards, diligence and sense of service before self were etched in Father. Duty, honour, loyalty and dependability were drummed into Father by Grandpa. Both were cerebral with a love of learning. Grandpa's eloquence and flair with English and Tamil as writer of prose and poetry were manifested in equal measure in Father.

That had much to do with history and timing.

Father was the fourth son of five, but he was the closest companion during Grandpa's years as the Methodist district superintendent of Pahang, Negri Sembilan and Selangor (1934–37). Grandpa's elder sons being away (Samuel in Ceylon, Robert at Raffles College and George at King Edward VII College of Medicine) and the youngest, John, being too young, Father became Grandpa's travel partner. This meant accompanying him on his civic engagements and weekly drives to the parishes and villages through those three states, observing at close quarters Grandpa exercising

his responsibilities, and witnessing Grandpa's missionary endeavours with church plants and bringing families into the Christian fold.

The New Testament that Grandpa gave Father in 1932, with an inscribed message from father to son, was with Father till his death in 2008. It was with Father when he entered medical school in 1940 and when he joined the British Medical Auxiliary Services just after Pearl Harbour was bombed. He was carrying it when he was wounded in the leg by Japanese shelling, narrowly escaping death, on 14 February 1942—the eve of the surrender of the British to the Japanese in World War II—and it bolstered him throughout the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. He cherished it during the post-war years back at medical school, his years in the United Kingdom during the 1950s and through service as a doctor under the colonial administrators and later, self-government and independence. It travelled with him in 1964 to Geneva when he was Singapore's representative at the World Health Organization (WHO) and to Kenya, Taiwan, Hong Kong and India in the 1960s when he was a WHO fellow helping to set up medical services in various countries. It augmented him through his roles in national office as he helped build medical services in Singapore.

That New Testament is now with me, much treasured as one of many tangible links with the past and also a beacon for the future—the wings to my feet and a light to my path. I am blessed also to have Father's autograph book, with profound reflections during the years of the Japanese Occupation, as well as Grandpa's English and Tamil Bibles, dictionary, the hymn book he sang from and many other family artifacts.

Back to 1933 and Grandpa's journeys through the aforementioned states of Malaya: to Father had fallen the responsibility of making sure Grandpa's car was in good running order, the tyres pumped up and the spare ready at all times, extra jerry cans of petrol in place and water loaded, the horns working and handheld lights and sticks available to scare off wild animals. Father learnt much from being in Grandpa's presence for four years; watching him interact with village heads, school headmasters, pastors, community leaders, village doctors; hearing Grandpa speak, preach, counsel and guide. The influence on Father was indeed profound. I recall him telling me so on a number of occasions.

I can well understand the powerful impact of spending time with one's father.

In the 1960s, our driver would often drop me off at Father's medical superintendent office in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, where I would patiently wait for him to finish his work before he took me for night time tennis lessons. I was able to observe him in deep concentration reviewing memos. He always cleared his desk before leaving for the evening. The *jaga* (watchman) would then carry Father's old brown briefcase to the car

in the porch downstairs. His secretary and stenographer also worked late, waiting for him to finish. Often, on Sunday evenings, I would accompany Father to visit elderly friends of Grandpa, such as Reverend CB Paul, and I would hear them speak about my Grandpa.

In 1975, I had the pleasure of travelling with Father in Europe, visiting museums in Florence, Paris and London, listening to history come alive as narrated by him, hearing about the World War II years and lessons learnt from relying on a foreign power for our protection (“Never again!” he would say). As we also walked around Edinburgh together, he would recall his time in the United Kingdom as a post-graduate medical student and his stint as a young specialist chest physician on attachments. The influence on me was great.

I remember, as if it was yesterday, a quick stroll with Father from Hyde Park Corner to Paddington, struggling to keep up with his brisk pace—he had long legs and was considerably taller than me. When I asked why he walked so fast, he replied, “Son, time is not to be wasted, the bracing English air lends itself to brisk walking, and this is good to get our brains working faster.”

Reflecting on the lives of both Father and Grandpa, and in due course becoming family archivist and custodian of family papers, I have also been struck by the love of history they both had for Ceylon, and especially, our ancestral homeland, Jaffna. One of the values of the Ceylon Tamils that motivated them was the belief that with privilege comes responsibility. A great Ceylonese king in the 1100s had said:

“Remember that it is not meet that men like us should live and enjoy what has come into our hands and care not for our people. Let there not be left anywhere in my kingdom any land, though it be of the smallest dimensions, that does not yield some benefit for man.”

As I delved further, it became clear that their enduring attachment to the ancient family home in Ceylon, Tamil culture and history in no way diminished their deep love, strong pride and fierce affection for fledgeling Singapore. Indeed, the cultural ballast and confident assurance of the centuries-old hereditary connection with Jaffna only served to ground them all the more to our much-cherished and consciously chosen home, Singapore.

The parallels between Grandpa and Father extended to each returning to Jaffna for his bride: Grandpa in 1908 and Father in 1955. Remarkably, Father, who had never lived in Jaffna, unlike Grandpa—who had spent his first 11 years there from 1880, found it natural to go back to Jaffna to marry even though many eligible girls

in Singapore were keen on the athletic, handsome and intelligent young doctor with bright prospects.

Both Grandpa and Father married English-educated brides from good Jaffna families. Each would-be bridegroom sought beauty and refinement; Grandpa found it in Harriet Navamany Joseph (whose portrait hangs alongside Grandpa's in Singapore's Indian Heritage Centre), and Father in Eunice Princess Jebaranee Aiyathurai. In that regard, they emulated my great grandfather, Mudaliyar Sinnathamby Arumugam (a devout Hindu), whose wife, Sellam, was a lady of elegance.

Another notable, but sad, parallel is that both Grandfather and Father were orphaned young, Grandpa at eight and Father at 15, and consequently, both made their own way in life. But this impacted them differently. Grandpa knew his mother and a mother's love till age seven, but never really knew his father, who died in Malaya when Grandpa was only eight. Thus, Grandpa's teachers and mentors at ACS, such as Bishop Oldham, became father figures to Grandpa; their huge impact leading him to follow them into the Methodist mission as minister and educator.

Father, on the other hand, was blessed to enjoy paternal love but lost his mother at age two. He once told me that he had no recollection whatsoever of his mother. In effect, his eldest sister was his mother. Rose, 11 years his senior, was serious and by all accounts very much like their mother. Margy's article about Rose for the SCTA centennial celebration publication is included in Appendix I as it gives good insight into part of Father's upbringing. Aunt Rose, a renowned opera singer, had later come from Kuala Lumpur to live with us at Berrima Road in the early 1960s when Father arranged for her cancer treatment in Singapore. During those years, I came to know her well and through this, acquired a sense of what my paternal grandmother could have been like. I am forever grateful for that. Through her influence—and that of Father—my siblings and I, and our children, have developed an abiding love for Western classical music.

With the digitisation of *The Straits Times*, I have been able to read some of Grandpa's speeches and those of Father. There is a similarity in their writing style, their sentiments on matters such as the importance of education for societal upliftment, duty and honour, the correct way to do things, loyalty, perseverance and forbearance. Photographs of both men show a similar dignity of bearing and presence, and of dress.

In Grandpa's article, "The Contribution Our Schools Have Made", written in 1935 for the golden jubilee of the Methodist Church in Malaya, he noted, "The educational programmes of our schools have included not only the prescribed or customary course of study as outlined by the Education Department, but have also planned and provided

for the training up of a generation of high-minded, pure-hearted, generous youth, who have been made to acquire the principles of right-thinking and living, who are intensely interested in the moral integrity and well-being of the home, school, community and country. It has been the concern of all mission schools to produce an 'all-round' boy or girl. Hence, we have always had as our objective the development of the mental, physical, moral and spiritual well-being of the student."

Forty-five years later, as the guest of honour at Anglo-Chinese Junior College's Founder's Day celebrations, Father referred to the erosion of some of those noble values and asked for a return to such principles. He ended his speech with an exhortation to the students:

"Let me commend you to a passage which I find profitable and edifying in developing the kind of intrinsic values that all of us need to have to enrich our lives and enable us to help the lives of others, 'Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praises, think of these things.'"

I am grateful that the National Heritage Board (NHB) has seen it fit to support this book covering both their lives (though ostensibly told around Father and what shaped him to become the man he was); that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has supported the launch of the book as part of the Singapore Bicentennial and that the publisher, Armour Publishing, have embraced this book.

On behalf of the Supramaniam family, I wish to express our profound thanks to Armour Publishing, NHB and the many other agencies that have supported this book, including Anglo-Chinese School, Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship of Singapore, the Indian Heritage Centre, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), the three medical schools in Singapore, the Malaysia High Commission in Singapore, the Methodist Churches of Singapore and Malaya, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, National Library Board, National University of Singapore, Prime Minister's Office, the Oxford and Cambridge Society of Singapore, SINDA, Singapore Indian Association, the British and Sri Lanka High Commissions in Singapore and many more agencies.

We are honoured and privileged that so many from all walks of life in Singapore and abroad, who were impacted by Father, agreed to be interviewed and provided deep insights. There are too many to name, but each of you know who you are. Our thanks are heartfelt and profound.

As a family, we are deeply indebted to Coordinating Minister Khaw Boon Wan for writing the Foreword and launching this book. Minister Khaw worked with Father and I know the high regard they had for each other was mutual.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to our sixth president of Singapore, the late Mr S R Nathan, for planting the seeds for this endeavour. His purpose was singular—to edify future generations. He had kindly penned a short tribute to Father noting his contributions to Singapore, which appears in this book.

I wish also specially to thank our seventh president of Singapore, Dr Tony Tan, who knew Father from the early 1960s when Father was president of the National Students Christian Movement. Dr Tan has kindly agreed to grace the book launch. He, with his lovely wife, Aunty Mary, has contributed immeasurably to Singapore. The mark of good friends is being there for one another in difficult times. They sent their car and driver to be of service to my mother when Father died and Aunty Mary spent much of 15 December 2008, the day of Father’s funeral, sitting alongside my mother and then accompanying my mother to Father’s burial.

NHB and the other supporting agencies have indicated that they believe the book will prove to be an inspiration for future generations as it narrates the story of two patriots of our nation who, through their lives, exemplified grit, determination, selflessness and the art of the possible. Their core DNA defines the Singapore spirit.

In the case of James Sr and James Jr, there was also the added moral and spiritual ballast built around Faith, Hope and Love—characteristics I commend to my sons, James Timothy and Matthew Edward to whom this book is dedicated. May they be worthy of their grandfather and great grandfather whose family name they bear.

I wish to include in the family embrace the other Supramaniam grandchildren and great grandchildren of Dr James and Reverend James, respectively: Jonathan, James, Evangeline and also Johanan, Julianne, Joy, Grace, Chryshantini, Shalini, Shiranee and Joanna.

Again quoting from Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1967, may I remind them that:

“Their forefathers emigrated and succeeded and toiled to build a new world out of virgin jungle and swamp so that their descendants could live in dignity and equality; not on sufferance but as of right, because they sweated and toiled to build their new homeland.”

Spes Mea Christus.

**Dato Paul Supramaniam**





*Paul in the arms of Dr JM, on the grounds of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, doctor's quarters (1958).*



# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

## **Dr James Mark Jeyasebasingam Supramaniam — “JMJ” (1921–2008) Generation 4**

Son of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam and Harriet Navamany Joseph. The Reverend, who is featured prominently alongside Dr JMJ in this book, played a significant role, as a role model and mentor, in shaping Dr JMJ’s life and character. Dr JMJ was husband to Eunice Princess Jeabarane Aiyathurai Supramaniam and father of Paul, Angeline and Michael.

## **Dr George J Supramaniam — “George” (1914–44) Generation 4**

Elder and favourite brother of JMJ. Third son of Reverend James Supramaniam. President of the Medical College Union (1938/39). Died in Kuching Sarawak whilst serving as a doctor during the Japanese Occupation. His early death (aged 29) galvanised JMJ to commit his life to serving his fellow men.

## **Emma Amirtham Kandiah nee Supramaniam — “Emma” (1886–1958) Generation 3**

Paternal aunt of JMJ, the Reverend’s youngest sister, who came to Singapore aged six with Arumugam, later converted to Methodism and was baptised “Emma”. Youngest of three children of Mudaliyar Sinnathambu Arumugam of Jaffna. She married her cousin D V Kandiah. Her eldest child, Dr Alfred Kandiah later married his first cousin and Reverend Supramaniam’s eldest daughter, Rose Supramaniam.

## **Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam — “Reverend” or “Subramaniam” or “James” or “James Sr” (1880–1937) Generation 3**

Father of JMJ. Born Arumugam Subramaniam in Vaddukodai, Jaffna, the eldest child and only son of Mudaliyar Sinnathambu Arumugam. Nephew of both Annamalai and Mudaliyar Sambanthar. Orphaned at the age of eight, came to Singapore in 1892 with his youngest sister Emma Amirtham. Became a Methodist at ACS Singapore in 1894, aged 14, and was baptized “James”, becoming “James Arumugam Supramaniam” and after ordination as a Methodist minister, “Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam”. Married Harriet Navamany Joseph and father of seven surviving children. Two more died as infants.

## **Meenachi Appakutty nee Supramaniam — “Mambu” (1884–1966) Generation 3**

Younger sister of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam, also called Mambu. Stayed behind in Jaffna following the death of her parents in 1888. Married Kathiravellu Appakutty in Malaya (1900) but moved back to the ancestral home in Vaddakodai Jaffna following the death of her husband (1902) and her stillborn son in 1901. Came to Malaya periodically to care for her brother’s children after the death of his wife,

Harriet, in 1924. She was also the mainstay for the enlarged family over many generations when they visited Vaddukodai, Jaffna.

**Eunice Princess Jeabarane Aiyathurai Supramaniam — “Ranee” or “Mother” (1931–2015) Generation 4**

Wife of Dr James Supramaniam (JMJ). Third daughter and fourth child of Dr Samuel Aiyathurai. Born in Segamat Johor, educated at a French convent in Malacca and then at boarding school and college in Ceylon. Graduated with a degree in Botany from the University of Ceylon. Mother of Paul, Angeline and Michael.

**Mudaliyar Sinnathambu Arumugam Pillai — Generation 2**

Paternal Grandfather of JMJ and father of the three siblings: Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam, Mrs Meenachi Appakutty (Mambu) and Mrs Emma Amirtham Kandiah nee Supramaniam. Came to Malaya from Vaddukodai, Jaffna, in the 1880s to work. Died during the Rawang typhoid epidemic circa 1888.

**Sellam Sabapathy — “Sellam” (died 1887) Generation 2**

Paternal grandmother of JMJ. Wife of Mudaliyar Sinnathambu Arumugam Pillai and eldest child of Mudaliyar Sabapathy. She died in Vaddukodai in 1887, leaving three young children, Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam, Mrs Meenachi Supramaniam Appakutty and Mrs Emma Amirtham Supramaniam Kandiah.

**Rose Jeyamani Kandiah nee Supramaniam — “Rose” (1910–63) Generation 4**

Eldest surviving child of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam. Leading concert pianist, opera singer and for some years a teacher at ACS. Married her first cousin, Dr Alfred Kandiah, son of Emma Supramaniam Kandiah. Took on role of “mother” to JMJ and John after the death of their mother, Harriet, in 1924. Also acted as “hostess” for Reverend Supramaniam after his wife’s death accompanying her father for civic engagements.

**Mudaliyar Sambanthar Sabapathy — “Mudaliyar Sambanthar” or “Sambanthar” Generation 2**

Granduncle of JMJ, maternal uncle of the Reverend and younger brother of Sellam. He was Inspector of Roads in Singapore. Subramaniam and Amirtham lived with him in Singapore from 1892 to 1894, until he chased them out of the house when Subramaniam converted to Christianity.

**Mrs Sinnathamby — Generation 2**

Aunt of the three siblings and younger sister of Sellam and Sambanthar. Lived entire life in Vaddukodai, Jaffna. Youngest daughter of Mudaliyar Sabapathy (great-grandfather of JMJ). Mambu grew up with her after Subramaniam and Amirtham came to Singapore in 1892.

**Mudaliyar Sabapathy — Generation 1**

Great-grandfather of JMJ. Maternal grandfather of the three siblings: Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam, Mrs Meenachi Appakutty and Mrs Emma Amirtham Kandiah nee Supramaniam. Father of Mudaliyar Sambanthar, who became guardian of Subramaniam and Emma Amirtham in Singapore in 1892.

**Annamalai Arumugam Pillai — “Annamalai” (1839–1920) Generation 2**

Granduncle of JMJ and uncle of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam. First member of the Supramaniam family to migrate to Singapore from Jaffna, Ceylon, in the 1870s. One of the largest private landowners in Singapore, owning large estates in Tanglin, Bukit Timah, Katong and Siglap. Surveyor General of the Straits Settlements in the 1870s.

**Mudaliyar Nagalingam — (1884–1963) Generation 3**

Nephew of Annamalai Arumugam Pillai. Younger cousin of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam. He named his daughter, Anamah, after his mother. Became heir to Annamalai Arumugam Pillai and sole inheritor to the Annamalai Estate after James Arumugam Supramaniam was disinherited.

**Reverend (later Bishop) William Fitzjames Oldham — “Oldham” (1854–1937)**

Founder of Anglo-Chinese School in 1886, mentor and later friend of Reverend James Supramaniam.

**Dr Samuel Thamotherampillai Palani Aiyathurai — (1891–1967) Generation 3**

Father-in-law of Dr JMJ Supramaniam and father of Eunice Princess Jebaranee. Born in Jaffna, a student of the Reverend and attended King Edward College of Medicine from 1911 to 1917. Became a prominent doctor in Malaya and Singapore, personal physician to Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, and the first non-white principal medical officer of Johor State. His daughter, Eunice Princess Jebaranee, married the Reverend’s son, Dr JMJ Supramaniam.

**Richard Aiyathurai — “Richard” (1889–1917) Generation 3**

Eldest brother of Dr Samuel Aiyathurai. Ceylonese Test Cricketer, joined the Ceylon Light Infantry and fought in Europe during World War I. Joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Sportsman’s Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers after surviving a German U-Boat attack. Fought through and survived the Battle of the Somme. Killed whilst leading a charge against a German gun post at the Battle of Cambrai in France on 3 December 1917.

**David Vyranathan Kandiah — “D V Kandiah” or “David” Generation 3**

Uncle of JMJ, nephew of Annamalai and cousin of the Reverend. Married his cousin, Emma, in 1904, and their son, Dr Alfred Rasasingam Kandiah, married the Reverend’s daughter, Rose.

**Dr Alfred R Kandiah — “Alfred” (1906–95) Generation 4**

Nephew as well as son-in-law of the Reverend. At King Edward College of Medicine 1925–31, a captain in the Singapore Volunteer Corps, interned in Sime Road Camp during the Japanese Occupation. Married Rose in 1933 and was Medical Superintendent of various Malayan hospitals and a leading authority on Malayan stamps. JMJ spent some of his teenage years living with Rose and Alfred.

**Harriet Navamany Joseph — “Harriet” (1885–1924) Generation 3**

Mother of JMJ and wife of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam (married 1908). Daughter of Mudaliyar Daniel Vinnasitamby Sinnasamy Joseph. Before her early death, had seven children who survived infancy: Rose, Samuel, Robert, George, Grace, JMJ and John.

**Samuel J Supramaniam — “Samuel” (1912–2005) Generation 4**

Eldest son of the Reverend. Became “head” of the family after the Reverend’s early death in 1937.

**Grace J Supramaniam — “Grace” (1919–77) Generation 4**

Second daughter of Reverend Supramaniam and Harriet. A top student, she gave up her Federated Malay States (FMS) medical school scholarship for younger brother JMJ and became a mathematics teacher. Married Theodore Niles and they had one son, Reverend Dr James Niles.

**John B J Supramaniam — “John” (1923–2014) Generation 4**

Younger brother of JMJ. Fifth son and youngest child of Reverend Supramaniam and Harriet. President of Raffles College Students’ Union and later Headmaster in Singapore Education Service.

**Dato Paul Supramaniam — “Paul” (b. 1957) Generation 5**

Eldest son of JMJ and Eunice Princess Jebaranee Supramaniam. Married Margaret Rachel Vazeille Seale in Cambridge (1991), and they had two sons: James Timothy (b. 1993) and Matthew Edward (b. 1998).

# PROLOGUE

*“Leave thy Home, O Youth and seek out alien shores. A wider range of life is ordained for thee.” — Petronius*

The two children were by themselves on the ship. The little girl, Amirtham, was only six years old and 12-year-old Arumugam Subramaniam was just a boy. Yet, he cared meticulously for his sister throughout their voyage as they sailed on the daunting journey from Jaffna to Singapore.

Subramaniam had become accustomed to his mantle of responsibility after they were orphaned four years earlier. It was his duty as the eldest child and only son; duty was instilled in their staunch Hindu family where discipline and tradition held sway.

Their father, Mudaliyar<sup>1</sup> Sinnathamby Arumugam Pillai, had been working and living in Malaya as the Public Works Department’s overseer<sup>2</sup>, while his family remained in Jaffna, Ceylon. They lived in the Hindu part of Vaddukodai—a town that had become the centre of Jaffna’s intelligentsia after New England missionaries established the region’s first university, the Batticottu Seminary, there in 1823. The family was grief-stricken when the Mudaliyar’s wife, 27-year-old Sellam Sabapathy Sambanthar (Sellam), died in 1887, barely a year after delivering her youngest child, Amirtham. Tragically, the Mudaliyar followed her to the grave in 1888; he died in Selangor during what the family believed was the Rawang epidemic.

Thus, at eight years old, Subramaniam had suddenly found himself in 1888 responsible for his younger siblings—four-year-old Meenachi and two-year-old Amirtham.

Bereft of their parents, the three siblings had to depend on the care and kindness of relatives. In a family of their long lineage, there was no dearth of those. Subramaniam’s mother was the daughter of Mudaliyar Sabapathy, a descendant of the Aryachakravarthy Dynasty that had ruled the kingdom of Jaffna from 1215 until 1624.

Their royal ancestors had, in the 1200s and 1300s, hosted legendary travellers. During his sojourn in Ceylon in 1292, the famed Italian voyager, Marco Polo, had described it as “undoubtedly the finest island of its size in all the world.” The

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1 *Mudaliyar* is the honorific conferred by the Portuguese invaders of Ceylon upon members of the country’s original ruling aristocratic family, the Aryachakravarthy Dynasty. *Mudaliyar* translates to mean ‘first people’ or ‘first among equals’.

2 In the 1890s, the railways, postal services, roads and survey departments in Singapore and the Federated Malay States were primarily run by Jaffna Tamils.

Moroccan explorer, Ibn Battuta, during his first visit in September 1344, described Subramaniam's nineteenth great-grandfather, King Marthadan Perumal Singam Aryan Pararajsekaran Aryachakravarthy, as "The greatest king of all Ceylon," and highlighted the opulence of his jewels. In 1348, Giovanni de' Marignolli, the Italian papal legate returning from China, noted that the Jaffna king had attained such eminence as to become overlord of the whole island of Ceylon. De' Marignolli, thus, called the kingdom of Jaffna the "Second Kingdom in India".

Then, in the 1620s, the royal families of Jaffna were ousted by Portuguese colonisers who, within a space of three years, destroyed 500 Hindu temples. Following that, most of the clan was forcibly converted to Christianity (see Appendix III).

Mudaliyar Sabapathy's lineage, however, had remained staunchly Hindu and managed to prosper through the years. The wealthy Mudaliyar had dowried Sellam and her younger sister, Mrs Sinnathamby, with land and houses in the same vicinity.

Thus, Sellam's orphaned children had moved across the road to live with Mrs Sinnathamby. But it was not for long, as strict Jaffna Tamil tradition did not allow a married woman's relatives to live with her in her matrimonial home. The children should stay with their mother's male siblings or relatives. Accordingly, their maternal uncle, Mudaliyar Sabapathy Sambanthar, an inspector of roads in Singapore, had sent for the orphans to live with his family there.

But the children were not to all travel together for in the event of any mishap, their entire line would be wiped out. Thus, eight-year-old Meenachi had remained in Jaffna with Mrs Sinnathamby while the other two sailed to Singapore<sup>3</sup>.

Their uncle, Mudaliyar Sambanthar had arranged to meet Subramaniam and Amirtham when they docked in Singapore. But for the time being, it was just the two children, literally and figuratively, at sea.

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3 Unbeknownst to them, it would be eight years before Meenachi joined her siblings in Malaya. She travelled there to marry Kathiravellu Appakutty, Chief Clerk of the Malayan Railway, in 1900. Her stay in Malaya was, however, brief and filled with grief; she had a stillborn child in 1901 and her husband died in 1902, leaving the 18-year-old childless widow with no recourse but to retire to her ancestral home in Vaddukodai. She returned to Malaya temporarily to help Subramaniam (who by that time had converted to Christianity and taken the name "James Arumugam Supramaniam") and his seven young children after the untimely death of his wife in 1924. In accordance with strict Hindu tradition of those times, Meenachi never remarried and dressed in widow's whites for the rest of her life. She became the mainstay of the family in Jaffna, hosting her siblings' children and grandchildren during their holidays there until her death in 1966. Dato Paul Supramaniam, her brother's grandson, vividly remembers her loving hospitality during his childhood visits to Vaddukodai with his parents and siblings.



*Meenachi (left) with Ranee Supramaniam (Subramaniam's daughter-in-law and JM's wife) at the ancestral home in Vaddukodai, Jaffna (circa 1950s).*







# PART I ANTECEDENTS

*“The Jaffnese work hard and faithfully wherever they go and have won not only general respect but also affection so great that they have earned many nicknames such as ‘The Aberdonians of Asia’ and ‘God’s gift to government officials’.”*

From *A Hundred Years of Ceylonese  
in Malaysia and Singapore (1867–1967)*  
by S. Durai Raja Singam (1967)

## CHAPTER 1

# *Subramaniam Arumugam – Orphan Immigrant*

*It has happened again.*

*Subramaniam could not believe that his world is collapsing one more time. He is only 14 and life has dealt him yet another blow. But this time, he has brought it upon himself.*

Just two years earlier, in 1892, Subramaniam and his younger sister, Amirtham, had arrived in Singapore to live with their maternal uncle, Mudaliyar Sabapathy Sambanthar.

They had travelled on the Peninsular and Oriental (P & O) Steam Navigation Company's steamer, taking almost a week to arrive at Singapore's New Harbour, recently completed in 1886. The deep water anchorage had been discovered by Captain Henry Keppel in 1848 when he was tasked to clear the Straits Settlements of pirates. Based on his plans, a new harbour had been created with the surveying done by him. Eventually, in 1900, it would be named Keppel Harbour in his honour.

As they prepared to dock, 12-year-old Subramaniam had stood on deck, holding Amirtham's hand. Though filled with trepidation for the future, he could not let his six-year-old sister sense or suspect his feelings. He summoned his courage and took comfort in the familiar, gripping his leather case and holding it close; nestled in it was the family tree, written on palmyra leaves, to remind him of his roots, as well as a few silver items and old coins from the ancestral family home in Jaffna.

Compared to Ceylon, with its long and legendary history, Singapore had been somewhat lost in the mists of time until 1818, when Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles prised its existence out of old archives. He had first sighted it in 1811 when travelling to invade Java with Lord Minto. The young officer of the British East India Company (EIC) was keen on establishing a strategic trading post to rival the Dutch interests in the region. As Lieutenant-Governor of British Bencoolen in Sumatra, he was anxious for alternative locations to Java. He knew that the days of the British in Indonesia were numbered, due to growing Dutch hegemony in the area. Although the British held Penang and Malacca in Malaya, neither was as lucrative as the Dutch holdings in Indonesia. If he did not act, the Dutch would one day reign supreme. In his keen search for a new commercially viable base, Raffles unearthed records of a significant port and trading settlement on an island called Temasek and later, Singapura, at the tip of the Malayan Peninsula.

Major William Farquhar, the British resident of Malacca from 1803 until 1818 when the Dutch had returned to Malacca, also gave him favourable accounts of the location. Raffles was able to gain permission from Governor-General Lord Hastings, based in Calcutta, to establish a new British base at the southern end of the Straits of Malacca. However the then Governor of Penang, John Bannerman, had taken an early dislike to Raffles and resented Raffles' mission to establish a new settlement in the Straits which might undermine the role and status of Penang, and so he forbade Raffles from setting out for Singapore. Farquhar had also received intelligence that the Dutch intended to invade Singapore to thwart British interests, and sought Bannerman's assistance. Hugh Egerton, Raffles' biographer stated that Bannerman's "untiring efforts to thwart British interests were worthy of a better cause".<sup>1</sup> Defying Bannerman, Raffles secretly left Penang at dawn on 19 January 1819 onboard the *Indiana*, commanded by Captain James Pearl. Raffles was a man on a mission to Singapore.

Raffles was nothing if not artful and a skilled negotiator; these were the very traits that had catapulted him to the post of Lieutenant-Governor of the Dutch East Indies by age 30, in 1811. He brought his skills into play after landing on Singapura on 28 January 1819.

At the time, the region in which Singapura lay was in a tricky political situation. Singapura was occupied by the Temenggong of Johor—who had moved there from Johor in 1811—and over 100 Malays and about 30 Chinese. The Temenggong was governing Singapura for the Sultan of Johor, Tengku Abdul Rahman. However, Abdul Rahman's position as Sultan was questionable. His older brother, Tengku Hussein, had been heir apparent by right of primogeniture during the reign of their father, the former Sultan, and was poised to become the next Sultan. When Hussein was in Pahang for his wedding, the old Sultan passed away with Abdul Rahman at his side. Local tradition required the Sultan's successor to be at his deathbed in order to be pronounced as the new Sultan. In Hussein's absence, the Bugis courtiers who favoured Abdul Rahman declared him the new Sultan at his father's deathbed. However, tradition also stipulated for the declaration to be ratified by a formal coronation with the official royal regalia. The regalia were in the safekeeping of Engku Putri Hamidah, the late Sultan's primary consort. She refused to furnish it to Abdul Rahman. In her eyes, he was usurping Hussein's rightful royal title. It was effectively an impasse, but nevertheless, Abdul Rahman assumed the title of Sultan of Johor and Singapura with the support of the Dutch. Hussein, despite having the support of the Temenggong and Malay nobles, could do nothing and retired to live in exile in the Riau Islands. Raffles was apprised of the political poser and seized it to his advantage. He directed the Temenggong to smuggle Hussein into Singapura. Hussein arrived under the

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1 *Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles: Book of Days* by Antiques of the Orient. Singapore: Antiques of the Orient, 1993, p.44.

cover of night and in the ensuing negotiations, Raffles made both Malay men an offer neither could refuse. He promised to crown Hussein as the rightful Sultan of Johor and Singapura with an annual payment of 5,000 Spanish dollars. In return, Sultan Hussein was to grant the EIC the right to set up a trading post in Singapura. For his part in facilitating the arrangement, the Temenggong would receive 3,000 Spanish dollars annually. The men signed a treaty to that effect on 6 February 1819. Major Farquhar was appointed the first Resident and Commandant of Singapore and Raffles departed for Penang on the same *Indiana* on 13 February 1819.

Singapore's meteoric rise began from there. Farquhar operated it as a free port, a master stroke by the British to counter the excessive taxes imposed by the Dutch at their ports. Singapore's port became extremely popular and saw 400,000 Spanish dollars' worth of trade in its first year alone. By 1821, the trade volume was worth 8 million Spanish dollars and the island had attracted 5,000 residents who came from far and wide.

Raffles returned to Singapore on 10 October 1822 and by 1823, he had signed another treaty with Sultan Hussein and the Temenggong wherein they gave up their judicial and land rights, except for the plots already reserved and occupied by them, in return for lifelong monthly payments of 1,500 and 800 Spanish dollars, respectively.

Due to differences between Raffles and Farquhar regarding the administration of Singapore, Raffles had Farquhar unjustly removed as Resident and replaced him with Dr John Crawfurd as the second Resident of Singapore. Thereafter, on 2 August 1824, Sultan Hussein and the Temenggong signed the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance with John Crawfurd, fully ceding Singapore and its islands to the EIC. This treaty was necessitated by the excessive debts chalked up by the Sultan and Temenggong, which Crawfurd offered to cancel in exchange for the treaty. The men would continue to receive lifetime allowances from the British and a one-off payment of 20,000 Spanish dollars each.

The Temenggong eventually moved back to Johor and his descendants are the present-day rulers of Johor. With this final treaty, the British acquired control of the entire island and brought Singapore under British sovereignty. The Crawfurd Treaty was a triumph for British colonial designs to exploit Singapore's bright prospects and strategic location for the Crown. By then, in accordance with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 23 March 1824, the Dutch had also given up any interests north of the Straits of Malacca. The British could rule Singapore unchallenged.

From that point, Singapore's growth was unbridled. In 1825, there were over 10,000 residents and trade volume exceeded 22 million Spanish dollars. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, seaborne trade between the West and China increased, to Singapore's considerable benefit.

Thus, when Subramaniam and Amirtham stepped ashore in 1892, Singapore had already become a multinational, multiracial and multilingual cultural mosaic, and a place of opportunity for the immigrants incessantly streaming in. The children were thrown into a new and growing city that was finding its feet; Singapore was forgiving of failures and celebratory of success and heaved with the nouveau riche jostling among the desperate poor. It was starkly different from the ancient and established Jaffna with its rigid caste system, ruling classes and old money.

Children are resilient and the pair adapted quickly to their new life. For the first time, both of them had to speak more English than Tamil, learn Malay and interact with non-Tamil staff in the household of their maternal uncle and guardian, Mudaliyar Sambanthar.

Education was the traditional mainstay of Ceylonese Tamils and it was no different in their family. According to the family's records, Subramaniam first spent two years at the old government school on Bencoolen Street, close to Sambanthar's home.

“Of the forty-two years I have been in this country of Malaya, except two, which were spent in the old government school on Bencoolen Street, Singapore, where the present government clinic is situated, all my life-career has been connected with Methodist mission schools and Christian work...”

— *Rev James Supramaniam, in an article entitled “The Contributions Our Schools Have Made”, Methodist Mission Jubilee Edition, 1935*

By 1894, young Subramaniam had transferred to Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), probably with the influence of his paternal uncle, Arumugam Annamalai Pillai, who had connections with the school. Although ACS records indicate that Subramaniam was already a student there in 1892, Subramaniam's own written account, quoted above, shows that this may not have been correct.

ACS was a new institution at the time, established by Reverend William Fitzjames Oldham and his wife, Marie, in 1886, and was gaining a good reputation. It came to be called “Anglo-Chinese” school because lessons were conducted in both English and Chinese, at different times of the day. The impetus for the school had come from Chinese businessmen who had asked Oldham to provide a Western education for their sons. They were desirous of learning English and Western ways as a means of keeping up with the colonials.

Reverend Oldham was born in Bangalore, India. His father had been a British military officer commanding Sepoy troops in the country. Oldham had qualified as a surveyor in the United States and after his return to India, was influenced by American Methodist missionaries. He returned to the United States to train for ordination and arrived in

Singapore under the auspices of the American Methodist Mission as a missionary in 1885. He was just 31 and new to missionary work. Yet, several prominent Chinese businessmen, impressed by the charismatic man and gifted orator, immediately supported his cause. By 1886, he had set up the first local Methodist church, which later came to be known as Wesley Methodist Church.

When the Chinese businessmen asked him to start a school, Oldham began conducting lessons at 70 Amoy Street on 1 March 1886. There were 13 boys at first and the school grew at a rapid pace as more than 100 boys enrolled within the year. Reverend Oldham quickly put up a school building at Coleman Street adjoining the Methodist church that he had constructed.

Merely a few years later, when Subramaniam joined as a student, ACS was already being recognised as an institution of some distinction. In that milieu, Subramaniam quickly distinguished himself as an outstanding student.

“This young man has been one of our favourite students, clever, faithful and good.”

— *J E Banks, ACS Head in 1900 (and engineering graduate from Cornell University), writing about James Supramaniam.*<sup>2</sup>

Beyond imbibing his lessons, Subramaniam was also well-immersed in Christian teachings and values as espoused by the Reverend and Mrs Oldham.

“There ought not to be any discrimination between evangelistic and educational work; each can be as educational or as evangelistic as the one in charge chooses to make it...”

— *Mrs Marie Oldham, as quoted in a magazine article in 1907*<sup>3</sup>

Young Subramaniam was naturally influenced by the ways and values of his teachers and mentors in that highly regarded institution. Their impact on the orphan boy was immediate and within the year he joined ACS, 14-year-old Subramaniam decided to convert from Hinduism and become a Methodist. Many years later in 1928, the *Malaya Tribune* related that the conversion had taken place “in the little attap shed known as Anglo-Tamil school”. It was a decisive and dramatic step for one so young to take. The idealistic youth might not, however, have anticipated the extreme reaction his decision would arouse in his staunch Hindu family.

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2 Aptly, these very qualities are embodied in the James Supramaniam Gold and Silver awards, inaugurated in 2007, by Anglo-Chinese Junior College for top students who best exemplified the award’s motto, “Academically Excellent, Clever, Faithful and Noble of Character”.

3 *ACS Website, Our History 1880s–1900s*, sourced on 30 March 2017.

Subramaniam was then living with his maternal uncle and legal guardian, Mudaliyar Sabapathy Sambanthar, and was also set, in due course, to marry Sambanthar's daughter<sup>4</sup> in accordance with Jaffna traditions of kinship and marriage. Mudaliyar Sambanthar was Inspector for Roads of the Singapore municipality and a well regarded member of the Ceylonese Tamil community. Tracing his lineage to the Aryachakravarthy Dynasty who had ruled Jaffna for 400 years before being ousted by the Portuguese colonials, he descended from the branch of the family that had resisted conversion to Christianity despite pressure from the Portuguese. He was, thus, viewed as a pillar of the Hindu society in Singapore. Naturally, he was enraged by Subramaniam's conversion to Christianity.

He was not the only one.

Arumugam Annamalai Pillai was Subramaniam's uncle on the paternal side. Born in 1839 in Vaddukoddai, he was elder to Subramaniam's father. He had been educated in Jaffna at St John's College (founded in 1823) and was one of the first three matriculants from there to Madras University in 1865. Upon graduating as a surveyor circa 1868 in India, he returned to Ceylon and became a government surveyor at Galle where he was talent-spotted by James Wheeler Woodford Birch. Birch was a British colonial officer who had served as Commissioner for Roads in Ceylon in 1846 and as a police magistrate in Jaffna from 1853 to 1856. He was later a government agent in the eastern province of Ceylon from 1867. Birch, therefore, had extensive work experience with the Ceylon Tamils and knew them well. In 1870, he was appointed Colonial Secretary of Singapore and requested for Annamalai's transfer to Singapore as a government surveyor. En route to Singapore, Annamalai did stints as a surveyor in Penang and Malacca. He is recorded as the third prominent Ceylon Tamil to arrive in Singapore. Thus, the Supramaniam family connection with Singapore began in the 1870s when Queen Victoria was the empress and "the sun never sets on the British Empire".

Annamalai proved himself in Singapore and was quickly promoted to be Surveyor General of the colony. A far-sighted and astute man who grasped Singapore's bright prospects as a major global trading centre, Annamalai foresaw the potential rising value of the island's real estate. Accordingly, as Surveyor General, he instituted valuing land in Singapore by the square foot.

Annamalai chose to resign from colonial service circa 1883 and set up a lucrative surveying partnership with Englishman Alfred William Lermitt, a fellow of the Royal Society of Chartered Surveyors. It became a leading surveying practice in Singapore and Malaya. Annamalai was believed to have been responsible for three quarters of

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4 She married magistrate and lawyer, Allasundram, and went to live in Ceylon with him. Subramaniam's eldest son, Samuel, visited them in Ceylon in the 1930s and enjoyed their kind and generous hospitality.

the land surveyed in Singapore. He had also surveyed the boundary between Selangor and Perak as well as that between Selangor and Sungei Ujong.

According to title deeds held by the family and historical records, Annamalai owned estates in Katong and Siglap by 1885. He then started purchasing large tracts of land in Tanglin and then in the Bukit Timah area when he acquired a beautiful Malay mistress in that neighbourhood. Those environs came to be named after him, albeit in the shortened version, "Namly", because the British struggled with the full "Annamalai". His Bukit Timah real estate extended from Sixth Avenue to Farrer Road, through the present day Namly Ave, Namly Close, Namly Crescent, Namly Drive, Namly Garden, Namly Grove, Namly Hill, Namly Place, Namly Rise and Namly View, which continue to retain his name. He also opened up many roads in the area for his horse carriage to traverse. Loyal to the British Crown, he named them King's Road, Queen's Road, Duchess Road, Coronation Road (for the coronation of Edward VII), Prince of Wales Road and Victoria Park (after Queen Victoria). Leedon Park and Bin Tong Park were also part of his real estate portfolio; he owned one of the largest private land estates in Singapore.

Annamalai was well-acknowledged as one of the richest men in Singapore, often seen in his grand Victorian carriage pulled by four Australian horses. He also frequently used his wealth for the good of the community.

One such occasion was reported in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 August 1902.

"In order to commemorate the Coronation and as a thanksgiving for the recovery of His Majesty the King, Mr A Annamalai gave a treat to the Asiatic poor of Singapore on Coronation Day at his plantation in Bukit Timah Rd, opposite the Wayang Satu Railway Station.

"A social gathering of the Jaffnese residents in Singapore was held on the plantation for the purpose of carrying out the feast. Large attap sheds without closed sides were put up in different parts of the plantation for the accommodation of the indigent Tamils, Malays and Chinese. These sheds were made as far apart from each other as possible, so that there might not be any friction between the different nationalities. Orientals are very particular to their habits of eating and drinking and nothing was left undone to make the arrangements satisfactory in this respect.

"As the guests arrived, each one was conducted to the respective shed erected for his nationality, and the cooking was adapted to the taste and prejudices of



the different people for whom the treat was intended. Chinese were told to do the Chinese cooking, whilst Malays did that for the people of their class, and Tamils attended to Tamil wants.

“Food was provided for 5,000 people. The feast commencing at 12.30, and lasting till 5 o’clock. 600 Chinese, 700 Malays and 1,200 Tamils partook of the repast. The feast was resumed on Sunday when a large number of people were again treated.

“Several friends of Mr Annamalai, including Mr and Mrs Tomlinson, were present during the function and they were entertained at the large house on the plantation, which was tastefully decorated for the occasion.

“The day was further marked by the opening of two roads in the locality which have been named after Their Majesties the King and Queen.”

— “*Mr Annamalai’s Treat to the Poor*”, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 August 1902, p. 3

Another report in *The Straits Times* demonstrated Annamalai’s leading role in the Ceylonese Tamil circles.

“Tomorrow is the grand Pongal feast of the Tamils. A large number of the local Tamils will assemble at Mr Annamalay Pillai’s garden, Tanjong Katong, and have a sea bath and dinner. According to the Tamils’ idea, the sea is the king of waters and a bath will wipe out all sins.”

— *The Straits Times*, 12 January 1906, p. 5

In the fashion of many wealthy and powerful men, Annamalai had a string of mistresses. Yet, he remained unmarried and childless until his middle age and was grooming Subramaniam as his protégé and heir. But it was not to be.

Subramaniam’s decision to convert to Christianity shook both his uncles to the core. Mudaliyar Sambanthar’s ultimatum was, “Forget Christianity, or leave the home.” Annamalai disinherited him and in due course instated another nephew, Mudaliyar Nagalingam, as his heir instead. Nagalingam, was sent for some years later and is believed to have been admitted briefly into Anglo-Chinese School.

These were cataclysmic events for 14-year-old Subramaniam; forsaking his family was akin to setting himself adrift without a lifeline. It was a daunting prospect for someone so young and in a foreign land. But Subramaniam had a core of steel, tempered by

his aristocratic upbringing, life's hard lessons and his new Christian faith. He was unwavering and stood by his decision.

So, in 1894, 14-year-old Subramaniam Arumugam left his home and family's fold, stepping out to forge his own destiny as the Methodist "James Arumugan Supramaniam"<sup>5</sup>.

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5 "James" was Subramaniam's baptism name upon conversion. In a speech at the opening of the 1921 Annual Methodist Conference in Singapore, reported in *The Straits Times* on 14 February 1921, James recalled his conversion and explained that he had modified his given Hindu name, "Subramaniam" (a term of reference for the Hindu God, Murugan), to "Supramaniam" in acknowledgement of his roots and family heritage which he was deeply connected to and keen to retain.



*P & O Wharf where Subramaniam and Amirtham would have landed in Singapore in 1892.*



*Mudaliyar Sabapathy Sambanthar and his family, whom Subramaniam lived with after arriving in Singapore. (Supramaniam Collection)*

2<sup>nd</sup> March 1857.  
Thomas Owen Clare.  
Joaquim D. Almeida  
and Jose d. Almeida  
to  
Joaquim d. Almeida  
and Jose d. Almeida  
Conveyance of land  
Rev N<sup>o</sup>. 1677/57.

2<sup>nd</sup> March 1857 —  
Original conveyance of land by  
Thomas Owen Clare Joaquim de Almeida  
and Jose de Almeida to Joaquim de Almeida.  
It later became part of the Annamalai estate.

Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1886.  
7/8  
a. Annamalai —  
— to —  
William G. Greig —  
Mortgage of the  
Confederate Coconut  
Plantation in the Island  
of Singapore to secure  
\$60,000 and interest.  
Rodyk + Davidson  
Singapore.

3<sup>rd</sup> August 1886 —  
Arumugam Annamalai to William G  
Greig—Mortgage of Confederate Coconut  
Plantation comprising 344 acres to secure a  
loan of \$60,000 plus 15% interest per annum.  
(Annamalai was forced to borrow at these  
exorbitant interest rates to fund the  
acquisition of his property portfolio.)

Dated 4 August 1887.

10

Arumugam Annamalai  
to  
Wee Kim Yam

Conveyance of freehold  
land known as Lots Nos 6, 7,  
8 and 9 of the Confederate  
Coconut Plantation

Rodyk & Davidson  
Singapore.

4<sup>th</sup> August 1887 —  
Sale by Arumugam Annamalai to Wee Kim Yam for \$54,975. Conveyance of freehold land encompassing 274 acres comprising lots 6, 7, 8, 9 of the Confederate Estate. (The original grant of the land was on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1848 between the East India Company on behalf of Queen Victoria to Jose de Almeida and Joaquim de Almeida.)

Dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1903.

Arumugam Annamalai  
to  
Arthur Knight and Sam Tomlinson.

Mortgage of 947 lots of  
land being part of the Confederate  
Estate, situate in the District of  
Siglap in the Settlement of  
Singapore.

Rodyk & Davidson  
Singapore.

11<sup>th</sup> May 1903 —  
Arumugam Annamalai of 103 Tank Road to Arthur Knight and Sam Tomlinson. Mortgage of 947 lots of land being part of the Confederate Estate situated in the district of Siglap in the Settlement of Singapore, for \$25,000 and interest at 12%.



Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1904

Sam Tomlinson Esq.

to

Arumugam Annamalai

Statutory Reconveyance

X

Drew Napier  
Singapore

3<sup>rd</sup> October 1904 —  
Sam Tomlinson Esquire to  
Arumugam Annamalai.  
Statutory reconveyance of the 947 lots of  
Confederate Plantation from Sam Tomlinson of  
No. 1 Raffles Place to Arumugam Annamalai  
of 307 Bukit Timah Road.  
(By 1904 Annamalai had repaid  
all the loans secured on the mortgages.)

Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1904

Sam Tomlinson Esq. and another

to

Arumugam Annamalai

Reconveyance supplemental  
to three Indentures dated  
respectively the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1903  
the 20<sup>th</sup> February 1904 and the  
22<sup>nd</sup> August 1904.

X

Drew Napier  
Singapore

3<sup>rd</sup> October 1904 —  
Reconveyance of land from Sam Tomlinson  
Esquire and Walter John Napier.  
(Previously charged to them by Annamalai  
on repayment of the loans.)

Dated 9<sup>th</sup> May 1902.

✓

Tan Swee Kee and  
another.

to

Arumugum Annamalai

**Conveyance** of freehold  
land situate in the District of  
Siglap in Singapore being Lots  
Nos 6 and 7 of Government  
Grant No 2.

Rodyk + Davidson  
Singapore.

9<sup>th</sup> May 1902 —  
Sale by Tan Swee Kee and Navena  
Chellappa Pillay (moneylender) of 86 acres  
of land in Siglap to Arumugum Annamalai  
at a price of \$19,500. (Annamalai  
purchasing 86 acres of Siglap.)

Dated 10 March 1905

A. Annamalai  
to  
N. C. Narainan Chitty

Conveyance of portions  
of Grants Nos 16 and 17  
and portions of Lease Nos  
367, 439 and 453 situate  
at Bukit Timah Road

①

Van Langenberg & Parsons  
Singapore

10<sup>th</sup> March 1905 —  
Sale by Annamalai to Narainan Chitty for  
the price of \$20,000 comprising 111 acres  
of Queen Astrid Park with a 999-year lease.  
(Annamalai sells Queen Astrid Park.)

Dated 13<sup>th</sup> January 1921.

Saravana Muthu Tamby  
To  
Mantala Singha Sakuna  
the Mudaliar Nagalingam

Assignment  
of  
leasehold hereditaments  
situate in the District of  
Tanjur in Singapore to sub-  
lease.

⑤

Ronaldson & Burkinshaw  
Singapore.

13<sup>th</sup> January 1921 —  
Saravana Muthu Tamby to Mudaliar Nagalingam.  
Purchase by Mudaliyar Nagalingam (heir and  
nephew of Annamalai) of the ground rents for the  
same 111 acres in Queen Astrid Park previously sold  
by Annamalai in 1905. Dr Anamah Tan, daughter  
of Mudaliyar Nagalingam remembers, as a child,  
going to collect the ground rents.





*Oldham Hall, where James Arumugam Supramaniam lived after leaving Mudaliyar Sabapathy Sambanthar's home in 1894.*



*James Arumugam Supramaniam graduated as a teacher at ACS in 1904.  
(Supramaniam Collection)*