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THE STORY OF
**SREE NARAYANA
MISSION
(SINGAPORE)**

BY LOH KAH SENG



The Story of Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore)

Dr Loh Kah Seng

Contents

	Page
Preface	iii
Introduction	vii
Chapter 1 Pioneers of SNM	1
Chapter 2 Chathayam	26
Chapter 3 Statue Debate	36
Chapter 4 Road to Direct Welfare	43
Chapter 5 British Military Withdrawal (A turning point)	54
Chapter 6 Nursing Home and the Advisory Committee	73
Chapter 7 People of the Nursing Home	94
Chapter 8 Move to Yishun	111
Chapter 9 Spirituality, Community and Charity	127
Conclusion	138

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Preface

I first met members of Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore) in October 2019. They said they wanted to document the Mission's history and began telling me about 48 Soon Keat Road, visits by Lee Kuan Yew and David Marshall, former President M.K. Bhasi, and of course Sree Narayana Guru. I left the meeting at Yishun Avenue 5 with a big bag of documents.

The research started in earnest as a National Heritage Board (NHB), Heritage Research Grant in 2022 (the delay was because I was preoccupied with other projects). As a historian, I began to trace old records and interviewed people to find the history behind those memories.

Among my interviewees was Viswa Sadasivan, one of the Mission's Trustees. He told me that the research came about because of a debate about the Mission's founder at the 2019 Annual General Meeting (AGM). This was new to me but was not unlike Singapore's commemoration of the Bicentennial. I began to understand why the past mattered so much to Sree Narayana Mission (SNM) members. Another remarkable interviewee was R Asokan, the Mission's de facto archivist and historian. I met him twice and each time left with large stacks of documents.

This book is the outcome of the research, conducted by a team of historians. It is not only academic history but also a contemplation on the heritage, memory and the vital connections between past, present and future. It is also the eventful story of a voluntary organisation in Singapore, of interest to other voluntary organisations, the government

agencies that worked with them and the ordinary people whose elderly sick are cared for in a nursing home.

I have to first thank members of my research team, fellow historians John Solomon and Darinee Alagirisamy, senior teaching educator S N Chelva Rajah, as well as SNM members Raghavan Mohanadas and Shalini Damodaran. They helped with the research, especially at SNM, and gave me contacts and ideas.

The research which originated with SNM owes much to the many supportive people there, particularly Jayadev Unnithan (the Immediate Past President), Anil Sarasijakshan (President), S Devendran (CEO), and the Heritage Subcommittee chaired by Mohanadas. A special note of thanks must go to A Sarojam, the tireless Project Officer who knew my interviewees well and could get on the phone with them in an instant.

I am grateful to the NHB for awarding the grant and supporting heritage documentation of an ethnic minority organisation. Senior Director Yeo Kirk Siang and his colleagues John Teo, Sabrina Chao, Tan Yong Jun, and Sim Tng Kwang helped immensely with the administration of the grant.

Acknowledgements are also due to the National Archives of Singapore (particularly Director Julia Chee), the Registry of Societies, the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (especially Kitson Leonard Lee), the National Council for Social Service, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, the Ministry of Communications and Information, the Ministry of Education, the Public Works Department, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Professor S Vasoo, Dr Priscilla Ho Lai Peng and Associate Professor Anitha Devi Pillai.

I am further indebted to our excellent team of research assistants, translators and volunteers: Uma Sankar, Ambika Raghavan, Ong Shihui, Sami Sim, Vivien Sim, Irene Wong, Lydia Ng, Mrithini Gritharan and Mok Ly Yng.

I am innately curious, so it was enlightening to speak to people connected with SNM. I thank them all for their memories and stories: B Aravindakshan Pillai, R Asokan, Dileep Nair, Joe Tan, Dr Subhashini, Mdm Sadanandan Suganthy, K S Salina, Syam Lal, S Vasoo, M Velayudhan, Syamala Senan, Sunu Sivadasan, Prasanna Dayanandan, Swapna Dayanandan, Don Mathews, Viswa Sadasivan, V Anilan, M K Bhasi, Radhadevi Vijayan, Sheeba Vijayan, Sunanda Asokan, Anil Asokan, S Premjit, P S Subramaniam, Chandra Bose, Chandra Mohan K Nair, Dilip Kumar, K R Baskaran, V Chandranathan, Thilagavathi Thanapalam, G P Sasidharan, D Sambasivan, Jayadev Unnithan, Anonymous 1, Shalini Damodaran, Indira Damodaran, Snehaletha Kuttan, R Mohanadas, A Sarojam, Divakaran Sabu, S Devendran, Anusha Senan, Laina Raveendran, B Sujatha, Kamala Devi, and N Sarasijakshan.

Earlier versions of three parts of the book have been published elsewhere:

‘The British Military Withdrawal from Singapore – The Story of the Sree Narayana Mission’, *Roots SG*, 2024.

‘Pioneers of Sree Narayana Mission’, in Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore), *Annual Souvenir Publication 2023: Celebrating the 169th Birth Anniversary of Sree Narayana Guru*, pp. 56-60.

‘The People of the Sree Narayana Mission Nursing Home’, in Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore), *Annual Souvenir Publication 2023:*

Celebrating the 169th Birth Anniversary of Sree Narayana Guru,
pp. 61-66.

Kah Seng
March 2024

Introduction

This book is several things. It is, at heart, the history of a group of Malayalees dedicated to the study and practice of the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, a renowned spiritual leader and social reformer. As the Guru lived in the southern Indian state of Kerala, this is also a story of migration – how Malayalee migrants brought their ideas of spirituality to Singapore and put them in practice. On the island, the Guru’s teachings were adapted to the local circumstances and gained a life of their own.

In Singapore, the Sree Narayana Mission (SNM) historically pursued three things – spirituality for the Guru’s disciples, community for the Malayalees and charity for vulnerable Singaporeans in general. The connections among the three, with spirituality at the core, are the theme of the book. From the beginning, SNM provided social services for the less fortunate, as the Guru urged his followers to do.

Over time, the Mission’s welfare programmes evolved and expanded, especially after its Home for the Aged Sick was set up in 1979. Thereafter, SNM began to actively support the government’s welfare policy, becoming a major voluntary welfare organisation in the process. Thus, the book is also a social history of Singapore and becomes a part of the Singapore Story, told from the perspectives of a small but remarkable group of volunteers.

A Book for SNM Members

The book is written for two audiences. First and foremost, it is intended for the members of SNM. In recent years, there has been a desire among

the members to properly document the Mission's long history, which now exceeds 75 years. This was how this research came about and the book tries to address the members' questions about the origins of SNM – who the founder was and how the Mission grew as an organisation.

These questions arose as the membership is ageing and SNM is expanding its repertoire of social services. The wish to know one's roots in a time of rapid change is a familiar one. Singapore itself has been going through this experience of retrospection, introspection and reflection as a nation.

Most recently, during the Singapore Bicentennial, the Republic was confronted with vital questions about its past: Was it a British Colony, a pre-colonial settlement or a society of immigrants? Singapore decided that it was all three. In Chapter 1, using the historian's tools, I similarly suggest that there was not a single founder of SNM, but a group of pioneer members who came together to form the Mission and make it grow in the early years.

As immediate past President Jayadev Unnithan related, SNM wanted to trace its history, not to venerate the founders but to highlight the spirit of helping, giving and sharing. This history, he said, will serve as an anchor for the Mission going forward.¹ The book tries to do that, by highlighting how the Guru's teachings have permeated each of SNM's three aims: spirituality, community and charity.

Some of the chapters in the book, especially the early ones, are concerned with the spiritual and community programmes. Chapter 2 covers such notable events and activities as the Chathayam celebrations of the Guru's birthday, *pooja* (prayer) sessions, Flag Days, cultural programmes and Malayalam classes. An important finding is the less

¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Jayadev Unnithan, 15 July 2022.

visible but crucial role of women in all of them. The women members are among the most important pioneers of the Mission.

The book also has a chapter (Chapter 3) on the intense debate that broke out among the members in the late 1970s: whether to have a statue of the Guru at the Mission Office. It is included because of two reasons: it is richly remembered by both senior and younger members and it highlights a key debate among the members: Should the Mission revere the Guru as a deity? Or observe his teachings and be committed to charitable work? The majority voted to have the statue, but this did not stop the Mission from going ahead with the Nursing Home project two years later.

Part of the Singapore Story

Besides the members, this book will likely interest those looking to find out more about the Singapore Story. In the last two decades, the study and documentation of Singapore's past has grown substantially. The publication of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs in 1998 was a major catalyst. It told the story from the vantage point of the country's long serving Prime Minister and it was the original Singapore Story.² It sparked off a series of biographical and historical writings, both complementary accounts and rejoinders.³ Most of these were political histories.

² Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings: Times Editions, 1998).

³ See Sonny Yap, Richard Lim and Leong Weng Kam, *Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2010), 2nd edition; and Poh Soo Kai, Tan Jing Quee and Koh Kay Yew (eds.), *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the Politics of Postwar Malaya and Singapore* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SIRD, 2010).

In recent years, the government has also encouraged seniors – regular people – to recount their memories and write their biographies, while agencies like the National Heritage Board (NHB) have supported heritage projects. These histories are quite different from the political accounts – they are often personal stories of life and change, or they document some part of Singapore’s cultural heritage. Previous research for this book was supported by an NHB Heritage Research Grant. These socio-economic and cultural narratives are valuable Singapore stories, adding to the rich tapestry of Singapore history.

In recent years, nostalgia for vanished pasts has become a social phenomenon, with many elderly Singaporeans posting old photographs and reliving their memories of old Singapore on social media.⁴ There is growing interest in many aspects of Singapore’s history and heritage. Alongside this is a yearning among many older people to reminisce what has changed and what has been lost. This book is part of this mix of historical documentation, cultural heritage and social memory that make up the Singapore Story.

While researching about SNM, we found new information on its history. Much of this naturally gravitated to the 1960s and after, when Singapore became a self-governing state and then an independent nation. The reason for this is there were more sources in this period. I found useful archival records on SNM in the 1970s to the early 1990s, while most of the people I interviewed remembered this period better than the years before.

This post-1960s history is of interest both to the members and the general readers. Much of it, while more recent, is not well-understood.

⁴ See the Facebook groups, *Nostalgic Singapore*, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/48000673979/>; *On a Little Street in Singapore*, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/183252211695508/>; and 十里之外, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/265763383605892>.

For example, senior members have long known SNM's association with Dr Tony Tan and Dr S Vasoo. Both of them were key figures in the origins and development of the Nursing Home. But what exactly they did and how they helped the Mission has not been documented. Thanks to the NHB grant, I managed to find the records behind this history.

The story that emerges from the research is how a voluntary organisation was persuaded – cajoled initially – to support the government's 'Many Helping Hands' welfare policy, as this was later called. There was an important history behind the Nursing Home, which is recounted in Chapters 6 and 7.

Vital in this history were Lee Kuan Yew's triple visits to the SNM Office at 48 Soon Keat Road in the 1960s, including the crucial second visit just a month after Singapore separated from Malaysia. There was also the impact of the British military pull-out from Singapore on SNM in the late 1960s, as well as the issue of Flag Days that preoccupied the Mission and the Singapore Council of Social Services in the early 1970s.

Then, there was the eventful history of the Nursing Home itself, as told in Chapters 6 to 8. It seems administrative and mundane on the surface. But the story, when put into perspective, is an important one. We learn how the tripartite members of the SNM Advisory Committee – the Mission's officials, representatives from government agencies and outside professionals like medical doctors – worked together to manage the Nursing Home. They dealt with pressing matters such as admitting paying residents, staffing and funding, as related in Chapter 6.

Finding new premises for the Home and the Mission Office, recounted in Chapter 8, proved a long, arduous process for the Advisory Committee. It required SNM to work closely with its partners and enlist

the help of Dr Tony Tan. Chapter 7 peers within the walls of the Home, gaining a close look at the three groups of people involved there: the residents, visitors and staff.

This history of the Home is a major contribution to our understanding of social services in Singapore. Most of what we know has focused on the role of the state. For example, Ho Chi Tim's doctoral study dwells on the work of the Social Welfare Department established by the British colonial government and how it contributed to the development of Singapore.⁵

There are also useful writings by S Vasoo, the former director of the Singapore Council of Social Services (SCSS), who straddled the social service sector as a practitioner and an academic. His voluminous work has recognised the role played by non-governmental actors, such as community development and voluntary welfare organisations.⁶

This book builds on Vasoo's writings by examining the collaboration between SNM and its partners from the government and professional sector. This gives us insights into the development of social services in the Singapore Story. There are some important questions: What was the relationship between the government and the Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs)? Was it mainly persuasion or was pressure also applied at certain points? How did government officials translate policy into practice in running homes for the aged sick?

On their part, how did the volunteers respond? How did they express their views to the government in turn? How did SNM stay true to the spirit of the Guru's teachings while putting them into practice?

⁵ Ho Chi Tim, *The Origins, Building, and Impact of a Social Welfare State in Late Colonial Singapore*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2016.

⁶ S. Vasoo (ed.), *Collected Readings on Community Development in Singapore* (Singapore, World Scientific Publishing, 2019); Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Vasoo, 15 March 2022.

In tackling these questions, the book has referred to the underlying relationship between spirituality, community and charity. SNM sought to strike a balance between the three. The study of history shows that the relationship was not fixed but always changing. In the final chapter (Chapter 9), the book examines the Mission's growing welfare commitments in recent years. Some members have asked, if there is too heavy a focus placed on charity at the expense of spirituality?

The book does not offer any big answer, only some thoughts and suggestions from a historical perspective. The question of balance arose originally when the government asked voluntary organisations to offer what it called 'direct welfare services' in the 1960s and 1970s, such as running homes for the aged-sick. As a result, the organisations had to serve their members as well as the wider interests of Singapore. This is a running issue that the members will have to continue to address.

The history of SNM, in reconciling between spirituality, community and charity, is an important part of the Singapore Story. It is the story of how the Mission adopted the government's welfare policy in the 1970s, expanding its charity works. This was in line with the Guru's call to help the poor and needy in society. The history of the Nursing Home is important to SNM members, who feel proud about what the Mission has achieved as a charity.

Working with the SCSS and government agencies, SNM also evolved and changed as an organisation over the years. The Mission became more oriented towards social issues in Singapore and more modern in its inner workings and processes. The history of this change tells us much about the role of volunteers in the Singapore Story.

Chapter 1

Pioneers of SNM

The history of SNM is made by its people – members who have given their time and energies to promote the Guru’s teachings, bring the Malayalee community together and serve the underprivileged in Singapore. The Mission’s accomplishments would not have been possible without their contributions. In this chapter, we highlight two groups of volunteers who laid the groundwork for SNM’s growth and success. One group, though obvious, has been subject to debate in recent years – the early founders. The other has largely been neglected – the women volunteers. Both groups are rightly pioneers of SNM.

The Singapore Bicentennial

The question of origins is important for any organisation or country. Singapore has witnessed a long-running debate over its origins – whether its history began in 1819 or should it be traced to the 13th century when it was a thriving port settlement called Temasek. This debate is not only academic, but also has a bearing on the colonial legacy and Singapore’s heritage.

A compromise was reached during the nation’s Bicentennial in 2019. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged both the existence of Temasek and the role of the East India Company. But as he emphasised, commemorating 200 years of Singapore history was not only about

‘remembering Stamford Raffles or William Farquhar, though we should’. It was also about ‘acknowledging and appreciating the broader context which shaped and created today’s Singapore,’ namely ‘our journey, from Singapore to Singaporean’. He highlighted the sojourners who came to Colonial Singapore to make a living, who gradually developed a shared sense of community and eventually, nationhood.⁷

Thus, the origins of Singapore were not about a single year or historical personality, but the story of a long, eventful journey involving many groups of people. We can learn a thing or two from the Singapore Bicentennial. In recent years, the origins of SNM have been a matter of debate for some of its members. We know that it was formally registered with the Registry of Societies (ROS) on 18 June 1948, though it had existed for a time before this.

Not surprisingly, it was during the AGM in 2019 – the year of the Bicentennial – that the question of SNM’s origins was raised. Former Secretary R Raveendran proposed that G Bhanu be ‘suitably recognised for founding SNM (Singapore).’ President Shanavas Vijayan replied that the Mission’s 65th anniversary publication had credited ‘Mr G Bhanu and his friends’ for this, as did the exhibition panels at the SNM Office. Generally, many senior members such as B Sujatha have held Bhanu to be the founder of SNM,⁸ as did his niece, Dr Subhashini Anandan.⁹

However, another long-time member, R Asokan, objected to Raveendran’s proposal. He maintained that SNM’s founding and early

⁷ Lee Hsien Loong, speech at the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial, 28 January 2019, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-launch-of-the-Singapore-Bicentennial-Jan-2019>

⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Sujatha, 30 October 2022.

⁹ Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with Subhashini Anandan, 11 March 2022.

development was due to a group of people, not Bhanu alone.¹⁰ Viswa Sadasivan suggested that a ‘task force be set up to research and establish key developments of SNM’s 70-year history’ – this was the genesis of the current book. The proposal was accepted.¹¹ At the next AGM in 2020, Jayadev Unnithan, the new President, noted that Bhanu was acknowledged as the founder of SNM in the *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, published in 1956. He added that research on the Mission’s history, led by the present author and his team, was ongoing.¹²

Thus, when our research into the history of SNM started, one of the first questions we had to tackle was that of origins. This posed a difficulty for historians, who rely on primary sources. There were no authoritative or independently verifiable historical sources on the Mission’s origins. There were only personal accounts, based on memory. Our solution was to take a leaf from the Bicentennial and recognise a group of founders, or ‘pioneers’ who individually and collectively contributed to SNM’s early history.

There are two caveats to this approach. First, while there seems to be two contending views on Bhanu’s role, they are not as contradictory as they may seem. Both agree that a group of people, not just one person, was involved in the founding of SNM. The contention laid rather in their roles. For example, though Sujatha acknowledged that several people were involved, Bhanu was the leader while the others were ‘helpers.’¹³

¹⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with R. Asokan, 16 February 2022; Loh Kah Seng, interview with Viswa Sadasivan, 12 April 2022.

¹¹ SNM, Minutes of the 68th AGM, 18 August 2019; Loh Kah Seng, interview with Viswa Sadasivan, 12 April 2022.

¹² SNM, Minutes of the 69th AGM, 20 September 2020.

¹³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Sujatha, 30 October 2022.

Second, the debate so far has concentrated on key office bearers, who were men. Women did not hold office in the early years. Nevertheless, they played leading roles in the spiritual, social and cultural programmes, while also supporting their spouses in less obvious but important ways. The words of D Sambasivan, when I interviewed him, are fitting - women were the ‘silent partners’ of SNM.¹⁴ Their contributions should be acknowledged. Documentary evidence on the women is sparse and the minutes of meetings do not often record their contributions. But we were able to interview many pioneer women during the research and document their endeavours. The founders of SNM should include women as well as other ordinary members.

A Tale of Two Sources

Let us look at the existing historical sources. On the early years, there are two SNM sources. One is the *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, one of the oldest publications by the Mission. In it is a page with names and photographs of the officials between 1948 and 1952 (see Figure 1).¹⁵ At this point, we should note that a souvenir publication is not a primary source. A primary source should be a document created at the time of the event. No such document existed as far as we know. The *Building Inauguration Souvenir* (1956) was published several years later to commemorate the Mission’s achievements, based on other sources. We do not know the sources of its information.

¹⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with D. Sambasivam, 16 March 2021.

¹⁵ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir* (Singapore: Sree Narayana Mission, 1956).



Figure 1: SNM's Early Office Holders, 1949-1953.

Source: Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir* 1956.

The closest we have to a primary source is SNM's *Returns to the Registry of Societies* (Figure 2) between 1949 and 1953. Kept at the Registry of Societies (ROS), they listed the members of the executive committees of these years.¹⁶ These are useful, as they corroborate the officials in the *Building Inauguration Souvenir* but they do not say who the founders of SNM were.

¹⁶ SNM, *Returns to the Registry of Societies*, 1949-1953.

SHREE NARAYANA MISSION
WORKING COMMITTEE.

The following were elected to the working committee for the year 1949.

1. Mr. M. Prabbakaran.	Hon. President.	177-10, 13½ Mls.	Selektor. Clerk.
2. " P.V.Devan	" Vice President.	Block 42-9,	Naval Base. Clerk.
3. " K. Damodaran	" Secretary.	" 47-19	" " Clerk.
4. V.K. Kunjuraman	" Joint Secretary.	188-9, 13½ Mls.	Selektor. Clerk.
5. K.P. Kunjuraman	" Treasurer	188-D, 13½ Mls.	Selektor. Merchant.
6. L.B. Fernandez	" Auditors	182-4, 13½ Mls.	Selektor. Surveyor.
7. K. Damodaran		Block, 74-18,	Naval Base, Clerk.
8. G. Sanban	Committee Member	Block 42-21,	N-Base, Fitter.
9. P. Madhavan Pillai	" "	" 3-1 R.N.A.D.	N-Base, Clerk.
10. M.A. Karim	" "	Senoko - Naval Base.	M.T. Driver.
11. G. Bhanu.	" "	177-91 - 13½ Mls.	Selektor. Physician.
12. V.K. Sदानandan	" "	Block 29-16,	Naval Base. Fitter.
13. O. Mohamed Kunju	" "	80-10 .	Naval Base, Fitter.
14. K.K. Menon	" "	188-D, 13½ Mls.	Selektor, Teacher.
15. S. Krishnan.	" "	Block 27-10.	N-Base. Fitter.
16. K.G. Veloo	" "	Blk. 44-7 .	Naval Base. Fitter.
17. N. Narayanan.	" "	Block 9-2 R.N.A.D.	N-Base. Clerk.
18. N. Vasam.	" "	Block 42-17.	N-Base. Fitter.
19. M.M. Musthafa.	" "	Block 26-10.	N-Base. Fitter.
20. M. Sivadasan .	" "	177-16, 13½ Mls.	Selektor. Fitter.



CERTIFIED TRUE COPY

Can

for Registrar of Societies
Singapore

Figure 2: SNM's First Returns to the Registrar of Societies (1949).

Source: Registrar of Societies.

These two sources, while imperfect, point to a group of pioneers, rather than a single founder. In the *Building Souvenir*, G Bhanu (2nd row, middle image in Figure 1) was named the founder of SNM in Malayalam. Jayadev Unnithan highlighted this during the 2020 AGM. However, the 1949 ROS return identified him only as an ordinary committee member. He was no longer in the committee in subsequent returns.

The *Building Souvenir* lists other early officials of SNM. M Prabbakaran (1st row, extreme right) was the Mission's first President from 1948 to 1951. He was succeeded by V A Velayudhan (1st row, extreme left), who held the office in 1951-1952. The third President, and editor of the souvenir, was N Balakrishnan (not photographed but listed in the ROS

returns), who helmed the Mission between 1952 and 1956. Velayudhan and Balakrishnan were assisted by Haji E A Habeeb Mohamed (1st row, middle), the Vice President from 1951 to 1953. The souvenir also named G Madhavan and Bhaskaran (2nd row, extreme left and right respectively) as active members, who were likely committee members.¹⁷



Figure 3: SNM members gather at their first building (hut) with a picture of the Guru.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The *Building Souvenir* also contains an interesting article (in Malayalam) by SNM Secretary Leon Fernandez. This is a retrospective account on the origins of SNM, based on his memory and possibly that of other members. He stated that the Mission was established sometime in 1946

(year 1121 of the Malayalam era) in a small, thatched hut with a triangular roof in Sembawang. This was when an “ardent devotee”, Bhanu, “started meditating with a simple picture of Gurudevan in this hut.” Fernandez added, “Some young men who were devotees of Sri Narayana had started helping him out as much as possible”.¹⁸

Soon after, the landowner told SNM to vacate its premises. The Mission then moved to another hut on a hill, also in Sembawang. Fernandez credited Bhanu and his associates for organising this move. In an oral history interview, Dr Anandan also related to us that Bhanu and other Malayalees in the vicinity had built this second hut.¹⁹

¹⁷ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.

¹⁸ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 94.

¹⁹ Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with Subhashini Anandan, 11 March 2022.

On 21 February 1947, this group formed an 18-person working committee to run SNM – its first Executive Committee. A year later on 14 March 1948, a larger committee of 36 members was convened. It was led by President Prabhakaran, Vice-President K P Kunjuraman, R Viswanathan (Secretary), and N Peethambaran (Treasurer). By this time, the Mission had over a hundred members. Its finances were limited, with little funds left after paying for its activities.²⁰

We also have a later source – the *Souvenir Magazine* published in 1966 when M K Bhasi was the President. It held the founding of SNM to be a collective effort but did not mention Bhanu specifically:

*A small group of people in Singapore realising the contemporary significance of the messages of Sree Narayana decided that an organisation inspired by his teachings could play an important role in this part of the world. This was how the Mission came to be registered in 1948.*²¹

We may thus stitch together a rough history of the first five years of SNM. In 1946, Bhanu and his friends formed SNM to promote the Guru's teachings among the Malayalee community. He was more of a spiritual teacher, taking a backseat in the running of the organisation. This was left to other pioneers – the office bearers listed in the 1956 building souvenir and ROS returns. Bhanu served in the Executive Committee (he was not the President) for a year in 1949, though he could also have been involved the previous two years when no returns were submitted to the ROS. He apparently returned to India in 1954, leaving the Mission in the hands of others.²²

²⁰ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.

²¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.

²² Loh Kah Seng, interview with R. Asokan, 16 February 2022.

It is thus probable that the founding and early development of SNM was a collective effort. We should recognise the contributions made by Bhanu, the office bearers and other Malayalee pioneers who were unnamed or did not hold office.

The ROS returns also tell us something else. They documented the addresses and occupations of the early SNM officials. Most of the officials were educated and knew some English – one was a teacher. Many others were white-collar or skilled blue-collar workers, such as clerks and fitters employed in the British military bases in the northern part of Singapore, namely, the Naval Base in Sembawang and the Seletar Airbase. Bhanu was listed as a physician residing at the latter.²³ SNM's office bearers were thus mostly drawn from the more educated and skilled Malayalees employed in these bases. Many ordinary members then were labourers and crane operators at the Naval Base, and most could be bachelors.²⁴

Historically, the Sembawang area around Naval Base gained the nickname, '*Kochu Kerala*' (Little Kerala). This was due to the large number of Malayalees employed in the British bases there – not only the Naval Base but also the army camps and other auxiliary facilities. The Malayalees did not merely work there, but also brought along their culture and social life, from *kathakali* dance groups to religious and spiritual organisations, among them SNM.²⁵ To cultivate a love for Malayalam among the young and old, the Sembawang Malayalees also established the Naval Base Kerala Library, a repository of books in Malayalam.

²³ SNM, *Returns to the Registry of Societies*, 1949-1953.

²⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with R. Asokan, 16 February 2022.

²⁵ Liew, 'Labour Formation, Identity and Resistance in HM Dockyard, Singapore (1921-1971)'. See also Anitha Devi Pillai and Puva Arumugam, *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee Community* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2017), pp. 89-91.

The question of SNM’s founders is crucial for its identity and heritage. It means that the Mission has grown and succeeded as a voluntary organisation. Its members want to know how SNM came about, how it developed and who contributed. The past is key to a related question: Where should the Mission go in the future? The history is also a personal one: members wish to know the good deeds and positive memories of their parents, uncles and aunts, and close friends.

The idea of ‘pioneers’ is also vital for Singapore. It allows us to go beyond what historians call the ‘Great Man’ history for a more complete and inclusive understanding of the past. History is rarely the work of one person alone. Other persons and groups also played their roles. So did historical circumstances and developments – political, economic, social, and cultural. The origins of SNM are not only about its pioneers, but also its broader purpose and how that purpose evolved and changed over the years.

48 Soon Keat Road



Figure 4: 48 Soon Keat Road.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

A big milestone in SNM’s early history was the building of new premises in 1956. This was a two-storey building at 48 Soon Keat Road in the shape of a laterally flipped ‘L’. The building was located within Chong Pang Village, at the intersection between Soon Keat and Kee Ann Roads. The village was located outside the main gates of the Naval Base, serving those who lived and worked inside. The building was the long-time office of SNM till 1994.

Many interviewees would tell me, the Mission's office at 48 Soon Keat Road was a theatre of memory – a place that is no more, except in people's minds where it is still associated with memorable activities and events.²⁶

In 1948, SNM started raising funds for new office premises. It had moved twice already in Sembawang but the plan now was to have a concrete building. Four years later, enough funds had been raised for construction to begin at 48 Soon Keat Road. Many SNM members donated part of their wages to fund the project.²⁷ Besides the office, the building would house a small library, showing that many early members were literate. There was also a big hall inside with a sitting capacity of 500 and a modern stage, illustrating the scale and significance of the Mission's spiritual, social and cultural activities.²⁸

One of the social memories of Soon Keat Road was that Chinese businessman and community leader Lim Chong Pang donated the land for it. He passed away in 1956, shortly before the building's official opening. He was the son of Lim Nee Soon, who not only owned many rubber plantations but also had, like his father, the northern part of Singapore named after him.²⁹ The donation of land showed that by the early 1950s, the Mission had attained credibility among the wider community in the Sembawang area. It was no longer a small, enclosed society of Malayalees who followed the Guru, but one that served the community.

²⁶ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994).

²⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with V. Srinivasan, G.P. Sasidharan and D. Sambasivam, 16 March 2021.

²⁸ NAS, interview with M.K. Krishnan Vasu, 12 June 2010, Reel 2.

²⁹ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.

Sunu Sivadasan, who visited the Soon Keat Road premises as a child, recalled its pastel-coloured walls, surrounded by a sea of green. Among the flora were two gooseberry shrubs which were quite rare in Singapore. Sivadasan would pick berries and flowers among the bushes.³⁰

At the time, Singapore was taking big steps to become a self-governing state. SNM's building project received strong support from British colonial officials and other prominent figures in a show of strong state-society relations. In 1952, Sir Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, laid the foundation stone. Four years later, Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock officially opened the building. He commended the Mission for its brand of mutual help in the educational, religious and cultural fields.³¹



Figure 5: Sir Malcom MacDonal (centre) arriving at Soon Keat Road to lay the foundation.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 6: Foundation stone laid in the presence of M Gopala Menon from the Indian High Commission (left).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

MacDonald had left Singapore by then but wrote warmly in the building souvenir, 'I remember vividly the sunny day when the foundation stone was laid, and the enthusiasm of the large crowd at the prospect of the Mission being established there'.³² Leon Fernandez, also writing in the souvenir, returned the compliment by recounting

³⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Sunu Sivadasan, 28 March 2022.

³¹ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.

³² Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.

MacDonald's presence that day, 'His speech, appraising the messages and teachings of Swami in front of a massive crowd reverberates in our hearts even to this day'.³³ The first Chief Minister, David Marshall, also congratulated the Mission for its 'practical voluntary service to community'.³⁴



Figure 7: Singapore's Chief Minister, Lim Yew Hock officially opened the building in 1956.

Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

In addition to the locals, the Mission had a strong connection with Kerala, the homeland of Singapore's Malayalees, and more generally India. In the *Building Souvenir*, the Governor (Rajpramukh) of the Indian State of Travancore-Cochin (which became Kerala in November 1956) sent his congratulations. The building would not only 'serve as a common meeting place for the large number of our people who have settled down in Singapore so that they can establish and renew friendly contacts with each other,' but also allow them to collectively 'work for their spiritual and moral advancement.'³⁵

R K Tandon, the Commissioner of India in Malaya, hailed SNM's new home as a 'Temple of Peace and Brotherhood.' He noted that the Guru's teachings on the unity and dignity of humankind was crucial for a multiracial country like Malaya.³⁶ John Spiers, Head of the Narayana Gurukula World Centre in Bangalore, observed that the Guru's central tenet, 'Unity of one with all', had brought about a 'silent revolution' in

³³ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 95.

³⁴ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 12.

³⁵ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 14.

³⁶ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 11.

his lifetime.³⁷ SNM also received messages of support from the government of India and the Indian Ministry of Education. The Swami Satyananda, who was President of the Pure Life Society in Malaya, wrote, ‘there is no doubt that the fiery sincerity of its [SNM’s] President Sri N Balakrishnan B.A. is the life-force behind the centre.’³⁸

The support of local and foreign officials showed that SNM was well-recognised for its charitable work in Singapore in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Already, the new premises began to serve as a temporary sanctuary for the homeless, as well as the headquarters of a relief programme for the needy in the neighbourhood.³⁹



Figure 8: An Executive Committee meeting in progress.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

³⁷ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 16.

³⁸ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*, p. 17.

³⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.

Some Past Presidents



Figure 9: N Balakrishnan B.A. (front row in coat and tie).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 10: C P Ramakrishnan (centre with tie) with
Teong Eng Siong MP for Sembawang.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 11: M K Bhasi.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 12: M. Sadanandan.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

‘Women Held the Fort’

Besides the male officials, the early women of SNM played key roles, both formally and informally. The two best-known women Presidents in the Mission’s history are B Sujatha (1995-2000, 2007-2010) and more recently Swapna Dayanandan (2011-2014). G P Sasidharan credited them with bringing organisational change to



Figure 13: Longest serving female past President,
B Sujatha (right).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

SNM, when the ‘Mission felt the power of the women.’ He thought that Sujatha was instrumental in helping SNM’s move to its present premises in Yishun in 1994.⁴⁰ In 1978, as the Secretary, she also convened the Women’s Subcommittee.⁴¹

Dayanandan’s tenure saw SNM emerge a better-run organisation after she introduced reforms to enhance governance and transparency.⁴² Chandra Bose, who worked with her in the Executive Committee, felt that the reforms were ‘sensible’ and ‘essential.’ They succeeded because she implemented change in a ‘peace-loving’ and ‘humanitarian’ way, minimising conflict within the committee.⁴³ R. Mohanadas felt Swapna’s tenure brought about major changes which modernised the Mission, when the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), rather than the Executive Committee, took charge of running of the Nursing Home. Her committee also began to recognise senior members for their long service to SNM.⁴⁴



Figure 14: Dr Letha Karunakaran (2nd from left), the first female President of SNM.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

But Sujatha and Dayanandan were not exceptional in the Mission’s history. Other women leaders had paved the way for them. In 1980, the Executive Committee recorded a vote of thanks to two women who were instrumental in the welfare programme that year. Long-time member Sunanda Asokan had helped organise the Mission’s

⁴⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with G.P. Sasidharan, 16 March 2021.

⁴¹ SNM, Report of the Management Committee, 1978.

⁴² Loh Kah Seng, interview A. Sarojam, 10 August 2022.

⁴³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Chandra Bose, 18 May 2022.

⁴⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Raghavan Mohanadas, 2 August 2022.

flagship symposium on ‘Youth, Moral Responsibility and the Aged.’ Dr Letha Karunakaran held a barbeque gathering at the Nursing Home (then at Canberra Road) to garner the members’ support for the project.⁴⁵ The efforts of Asokan, Karunakaran and Sujatha were important in the 1980s, when the Mission was embarking on new welfare projects.

Another notable woman was Vasanthi Pillai, who straddled management and cultural roles. She was an Executive Committee member who also helped organise the Mission’s cultural activities.⁴⁶ Yet another key woman volunteer was Snehaletha Kuttan, who told me that she was once the highest collector during a SNM Flag Day. She was a masterful and dedicated canvasser, beginning her rounds at six in the morning when workers arrived at Keppel shipyard to work, and doing it again at lunchtime.⁴⁷ Friendly competition during Flag Days helped raise the amount of donations among SNM’s women, children and men, as well as teachers and students from participating schools.



Figure 15: Snehaletha Kuttan, a top collector for the Flag Day. Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Other pioneer women were not office bearers but SNM’s vital cultural workers. This was a role which women, as well as some men, valued and excelled in without having to be involved in the politics of executive office. Sunanda Asokan remembered that it was difficult sitting through long drawn-out arguments in committee meetings, which ended as late as 1 a.m. in the morning. While some members

⁴⁵ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 29 June 1980.

⁴⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Vasanthi Pillai, 24 March 2021.

⁴⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Snehaletha Kuttan, 29 July 2022.

seemingly brought personal matters into the meetings to ‘argue for argument’s sake,’ she simply wanted to ‘do some work that is right and good.’⁴⁸

Likewise, Dr Subhashini Anandan was a volunteer doctor at the Nursing Home in the 1990s, keeping her role to patient care as she also wanted to stay away from committee politics.⁴⁹ She was known among the staff for her human touch to the residents: she spoke kindly to them, held their hands and patiently explained her medical advice.⁵⁰

Not to hold office was a conscious choice for many capable and dedicated women volunteers at SNM. Snehaleta Kuttan thought she was not confident enough to do so, though she was on the Pooja Subcommittee for a year.⁵¹ Many women have also expressed this reservation. This stemmed from the lower educational level of women vis-à-vis men in Singapore in the past.

Others like, Indira Raveendran, the wife of R Raveendran, who was a schoolteacher, stayed away from the executive office as she did not want to canvas for votes. But she was an active member of the Women’s Subcommittee and in many activities involving women, including preparing the Chathayam lunch. To her daughter Laina, Indira Raveendran embodied the spirit of service at SNM.⁵²

Prasanna Dayanandan, too, was on the Pooja Subcommittee and a fellow mainstay in the Chathayam lunch preparations. She also declined to be an official because she felt, like Kuttan, that she was not

⁴⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Sunanda Asokan, 28 April 2022.

⁴⁹ Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with Subhashini Anandan, 11 March 2022.

⁵⁰ Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with Thilagavathi Thanapalam, 27 June 2022.

⁵¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Snehaleta Kuttan, 29 July 2022.

⁵² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Laina Raveendran, 27 October 2022.

fluent in English.⁵³ There were three long-time ‘chief cooks’ for the Chathayam lunch – Dayanandan, Radhadevi Vijayan and Sunanda Senan. The latter was also a member of the Women’s Subcommittee. The subcommittee organised prayers, celebrations of the Guru’s birthday and death, and children’s activities.⁵⁴

As Vijayan’s daughter Sheeba aptly put it, SNM’s women ‘held the fort.’⁵⁵ At the same time, many other women have also expressed their reservations because they lacked the ability or command of English to serve in the executive committee, or that they wished to avoid the politics and squabbles. These obstacles, real and imagined, to women’s participation in office should be addressed.



Figure 16: Mrs Sarada Raghavan, (2nd from left).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

In 1981, when Sarada Raghavan passed away, the Executive Committee recognised her contribution as ‘an ardent supporter of the Mission’. It unanimously decided to donate \$800 towards her funeral expenses.⁵⁶ In the mid-1960s and 1970s, as her sons R.

Asokan and R. Mohanadas proudly remembered, Sarada Raghavan was a talented artiste and musician who performed in *kadhaprasangam*, the lyrical story-telling in Malayalam. She could act, sing and play the harmonium (a reed organ). She was part of a Malayalee drama troupe that performed in Malaysia. She also helped raise funds for the 48 Soon

⁵³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Prasanna Dayanandan, 4 April 2022.

⁵⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Radhadevi Vijayan, 26 April 2022.

⁵⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Sheeba Vijayan, 26 April 2022.

⁵⁶ SNM, Minutes of Extraordinary Committee Meeting, 8 March 1981.

Keat Road premises by performing in *kadhaprasangam* plays, while continuing to act in many dramas in the following decades.⁵⁷

Another talented female volunteer was S Suganthy. Born in Kerala like many of the pioneer women, she arrived in Singapore in 1959 along with her husband S Kanagan, an Executive Committee member. Suganthy and her husband performed in several Malayalam dramas in front of packed audiences at the Victoria Theatre. One play titled '*Vishuma Virutha*' was about an Indian worker returning from Singapore to India, where his family members tried to extort money from him. This was a likely experience for many returning Indian migrants.

It was uncommon for women to act at the time, as men usually took the female roles, but the Mission persuaded Suganthy to do so. She also conducted Malayalam classes at SNM, served on the Pooja and Women's Subcommittees, helped prepare the Chathayam lunch, and collected donations, along with her family, during Flag Days.⁵⁸ She, and other pioneers like her, were remarkable women.

From my interviews, it seemed that many SNM women chose how and in what capacities they wanted to serve. Women leaders such as B Sujatha, Sunanda Asokan and Syamala Senan did not think there was any gender discrimination at play.⁵⁹ Undoubtedly, there is a need to encourage more women to assume executive roles, as for more men to embrace supporting positions or cultural work. This is already a work in progress that needs further encouragement.

⁵⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with R. Asokan, 16 February 2022; Loh Kah Seng, interview with Raghavan Mohanadas, 2 August 2022.

⁵⁸ John Solomon, interview with S. Suganthy, 12 March 2022.

⁵⁹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Sujatha, 30 October 2022; Loh Kah Seng, interview with Sunanda Asokan, 28 April 2022; Loh Kah Seng, interview with Syamala Senan 21 March 2022.

The Culture of Volunteerism

To fully understand the pioneer generation of SNM members, let us take a look at the development of volunteerism in Singapore. Volunteering has a long history that traces to the British colonial period. It was a historical necessity then because the British colonial government did not provide social services for the immigrant population at large. Associations of volunteers, bound by ethnicity, kinship, language, religion, and culture, emerged to care for their less fortunate peers from the time they arrived in Singapore to when they died.

For SNM, volunteerism was shaped by social, economic and political developments in post-war Singapore. The island was not only becoming a self-governing state but also a more settled society and an industrial economy. People were forming nuclear families and working jobs that were often permanent and full-time. The days of the sojourner who eventually returned to India or China after several years of working casual or part-time jobs here were becoming a thing of the past.

In this context, while its volunteers were inspired by spiritual, social and cultural factors unique to SNM, they were also influenced by a larger culture of volunteerism in Singapore – why, how and when Singaporeans volunteered. This culture is historical, changing alongside new circumstances, both in the volunteer's life and the nation's history. Volunteerism was not static or fixed but dynamic and fluid.

Like all volunteers in Singapore, SNM members had to reconcile with a fundamental tension between structure and agency. Volunteering is an act of agency by the individual but it is also affected by structure –

the socio-economic demands of making a living and raising a family in Singapore. Practising the Guru's teachings and celebrating Malayalee culture were acts of agency. Another was the positive action of parents, bringing their young ones to SNM's activities at an early age. This laid the foundation for the children to become volunteers later, beginning in many cases with the Flag Days.

V Chandranathan remembered his early days at SNM as an 'office boy,' running errands for the Mission's adults. The premises was close to his father's restaurant in Chong Pang Village, which catered food for the Chathayam lunch. During Flag Days, Chandranathan distributed collection tins to the collectors; after doing so, he also canvassed for donations.⁶⁰

The migrant experience of Malayalees further contributed to their agency. Between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, many male Malayalee migrants to Singapore worked in the British military bases in Sembawang and Seletar. After work, they quite naturally gravitated to 48 Soon Keat Road to discuss the Guru's teachings, socialise with fellow Malayalees and plan the Mission's activities.

When Singapore became independent, more Malayalees, especially women, arrived, often to marry and settle down, becoming Singapore citizens themselves. This group of Malayalees gathered at 48 Soon Keat Road for social and cultural reasons. Many of them attended the *pooja* (prayers) or helped prepare the Chathayam lunch. This enabled them to maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to life in a new country. They chatted about their families back in Kerala, often in Malayalam.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with V. Chandranathan, 14 June 2022.

⁶¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Radhadevi Vijayan, 26 April 2022.

But volunteerism was also affected by structural forces. Volunteering with SNM was an uneven experience with ebbs and flows, similar to other voluntary organisations in Singapore. The socio-economic pressures of work and raising the family weighed heavy. Most men and economically active women were only able to volunteer at certain points in their lives. They might have started doing so as children and youths, encouraged by their parents. Then, there was a drop-off when they became adults, preoccupied with work and their own families. This was especially so in the 1970s and 1980s when Singapore's manufacturing, hospitality and services sectors took off. Full-time employment was essential to pay for a middle-class lifestyle, including a Housing and Development Board apartment and the tertiary education of children.

Volunteering for most working men and women re-surfaced later in their lives, when they reached middle age or retired from work. This was when their desire to serve the community was rekindled or they had the time and mental space to do so. For example, Dilip Kumar, K R Baskaran and V Chandranathan were close friends. They began their associations with SNM when they were young, as their fathers were also involved with the Mission. This was interrupted when they started to work. Decades later, however, they returned to SNM to jointly organise two charity golf tournaments in 2004-2005 and 2009, raising funds for the Mission.⁶²

Interestingly, for some women volunteers, their experiences were somewhat different. As we have seen, men held most of the offices in the executive committees and subcommittees. Women tended to play secondary or informal roles in spiritual and socio-cultural activities, though these were still an active form of volunteerism. Moreover,

⁶² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Dilip Kumar, K.R. Baskaran and V. Chandranathan, 14 June 2022.

women's marriage and childcare created additional constraints. For example, Sheeba Vijayan was the Treasurer in 1988 and a member of the Executive Committee on and off till 2008. She eventually left the committee because she felt she had neglected her young children due to her heavy commitments with SNM.⁶³

On the other hand, many women volunteers had an advantage because they were not involved in executive office. They did not have to attend regular meetings or attend to the periodic affairs of the Mission. Instead, they attended prayers during the weekly *pooja* as participants or helped out at the annual Chathayam celebrations. In this sense, those SNM women in supporting roles have more sustained contributions throughout their adult lives than men (and working women) beset by work. This is further reason to acknowledge the pioneer women.

Whether men or women, SNM's members were dedicated volunteers. They reconciled with the structural forces to put into practice the Guru's philosophy and celebrate the culture of the Malayalee community. Till the 1970s, the Mission relied chiefly on the time and efforts of its members. In 1966, its only paid staff were two part-time caretakers. The members shouldered the bulk of the work, organising the spiritual, socio-cultural and charitable activities, which were still modest at the time.⁶⁴

It was only in the early 1970s that SNM began to employ full-time staff. Don Mathews, who was one such person hired as the Welfare Officer in 1974. These staff were needed as the Mission scaled up its welfare services, requiring staff with the professional expertise to run the Nursing Home and other programmes.

⁶³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Sheeba Vijayan, 26 April 2022.

⁶⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.

In 1975, the Executive Committee formed five subcommittees to better manage its activities: Membership, Finance, Cultural, Pooja, and Sports & Flag Day. It acknowledged the contributions of the members of these committees:

Majority of the members serving in the sub-committees were from outside the Executive Committee. Some were very active and worked with dedication, sacrificing much of their valuable time in the interest of the Mission.⁶⁵

A final point on SNM's volunteers – they are a resilient and forgiving lot, able to reconcile with structure and conflict. In my interviews, disputes with other members have often not diminished the desire to serve the Mission. According to her daughter Laina, for some years R Raveendran distanced himself from SNM due to disagreements with other members. However, he resumed his interest in recent years before he passed away in 2022. He attended the AGMs and in 2019 had asked the Mission to better recognise Bhanu as its founder.⁶⁶

The willingness to make peace bodes well for SNM's future. Volunteerism should not be taken for granted in response to Singapore's growing welfare needs. It is organic, driven by factors affecting the volunteers at the individual, community and national levels. It may grow or diminish. The history of SNM's volunteers offers lessons on how to better sustain and nurture volunteerism in Singapore in the future.

⁶⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Report from the Management Committee, 1975, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Laina Raveendran, 27 October 2022.

Chapter 2

Chathayam

One of the landmark events of any SNM year is the annual Chathayam celebrations, named after the star of the same name in the Malayalam calendar. As Sree Narayana Guru is believed to have been born under this star, his followers have adopted the day of Chathayam as his birthday. In Singapore, as in Kerala, Chathayam is a keenly anticipated and warmly celebrated festival of the Malayalee community. It is held in the month of *Chingam* (usually August or September). It also falls on the fourth day of Onam, the harvest festival celebrated by Malayalees.

In recent years, Chathayam has been renamed Guru Jayanti. However here, in tracing its social history and cultural heritage, we will use its old name.

Women and the Chathayam Lunch



Figure 17: Chathayam lunch
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Traditionally, the highlight of the Chathayam celebrations was a social lunch at SNM called *Onam Sadya* (a vegetarian feast). This has been a major event with a deep cultural significance for the members. R Asokan believed that the lunch

started in 1972, the year he joined the Mission when he was still doing his National Service.⁶⁷ At the time, SNM was recruiting younger members like him. The Chathayam lunch was a significant event in its own right, an experience for the members. Part of this was due to the serving of a large number of traditional vegetarian dishes from Kerala, possibly 26 items in all. They were served in a certain order. Some of these dishes were *aviyal*, *theeyal*, *thoran*, *pachadi*, *sambar*, *pappadam*, *parippu*, mango pickles, ginger *achar*, lemon *achar*, *rasam*, *moru*, banana chips, *sarakra puratti*, and four types of *payasam*.⁶⁸

Historically, the making of the lunch was an all-women's affair. In the earlier days, families would prepare the different food items in their homes and bring them to the Mission. However, as time went by, they paid money for the dishes to be prepared at the Mission. For many of SNM's women volunteers, their preparations for the lunch were indeed the real festival. As Prasanna Dayanandan related, there was a genuine 'festival mood' as the cooks and helpers went about their work.⁶⁹ The way the women divided the preparation and cooking has become part of the social memory of SNM. It is a women's history reflecting the spirit of volunteerism among the female members.

There were two chief cooks: Dayanandan and Radhadevi Vijayan. Other women like Sunanda Senan were given special roles such as purchasing specific grocery items in large quantities and bringing them to the SNM premises to be cooked. This sounded simple but in practice, the sheer quantity made it a manpower and logistical challenge.

⁶⁷ R. Asokan at the Forum, 'Memories of Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore),' 3 December 2022.

⁶⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview A. Sarojam, 10 August 2022; Pillai and Arumugam, *From Kerala to Singapore*; Anitha Devi Pillai, 'Malayalee Community and Culture in Singapore', in Mathew Mathews (ed.), *The Singapore Ethnic Mosaic: Many Cultures, One People* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2017), pp. 265-302.

⁶⁹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Prasanna Dayanandan, 4 April 2022.

Preparations such as the cutting of vegetables would begin in the morning of the day and the cooking starts at ten the night before and continues into the early morning. By noon, the lunch would be cooked and ready to be served to about a 1000 guests.

Vijayan was in charge of cooking lentil curry (*parippu*), the first dish served with rice, while Dayanandan made the *sambar*.⁷⁰ Indira Damodaran was responsible for a vegetarian dish called *pachadi*, served with bitter gourd, other vegetables and yogurt. She would cook it in a large pot at home and then bring it to the Mission Office.⁷¹ Though the work was demanding, it was ‘a real thrill’ for the women to work together as a team, as remembered by Vasanthi Pillai, who helped cut the vegetables.⁷²



Figure 18: Preparation for the Chathayam Sadya
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Renewing the Mission

The lunch was historically the centrepiece of a series of spiritual and socio-cultural activities during Chathayam. Disciples of the Guru from Kerala sometimes came to speak to the members, while High Commissioners from India were also oft-invited guests.⁷³ The members put up a cultural show which included *kathakali* performance, a form of traditional play from Kerala with song, music and dance, in addition

⁷⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Radhadevi Vijayan, 26 April 2022.

⁷¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Indira Damodaran, 29 July 2022.

⁷² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Vasanthi Pillai, 24 March 2021.

⁷³ John Solomon, interview with S. Suganthy, 12 March 2022.

to participating in the sports and games.⁷⁴ Among the latter, musical chairs and tug of war were crowd favourites. This was naturally so for the children and youth, but adults also took the competition surprisingly seriously.

The presence of the young and old signalled Chathayam's importance as a family and intergenerational event. It was key to the renewal of the Mission's membership in the long run. Syamala Senan regularly brought her young daughter Anusha to the celebrations. Later, Anusha began volunteering with the Mission as a young adult, organising activities for the youth before joining the Executive Committee. She also became a follower of the Guru. Although Anusha's childhood memory of Chathayam was that of 'a huge party,' the event had a deeper significance for her as a volunteer.⁷⁵

SNM's arts section organised cultural shows and entertainment for the members, often during Chathayam. The big hall and stage at 48 Soon Keat Road, with a capacity of 500, had been built for this purpose. The shows were duly documented by the Ministry of Culture, from which the Mission had to obtain entertainment licences. The scripts of the shows were also vetted. According to Krishnan Vasu, the performances were held in the hall, while the sports and games during Chathayam took place in the vast area outside that could accommodate hundreds of people.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Pillai and Arumugam, *From Kerala to Singapore*; Pillai, 'Malayalee Community and Culture in Singapore.'

⁷⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anusha Senan, 17 October 2022.

⁷⁶ NAS, interview with M.K. Krishnan Vasu, 12 June 2010, Reel 2.

Chathayam Activities



Figure 19: Children's Games.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 20: Chathayam Concert.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 21: Beauty Pageant.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 22: Public Forum.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 23: Stage Drama.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 24: An attentive audience.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Inside the hall, Malayalam dramas were popular with audiences, while the use of Malayalam reinforced the cultural identity of SNM members.⁷⁷ During the Chathayam celebrations in 1969, the SNM Library presented a dramatic re-enactment of the traditional Malayalee

⁷⁷ Pillai and Arumugam, *From Kerala to Singapore*; Pillai, 'Malayalee Community and Culture in Singapore'.

boat race, '*Vallam Kali*'.⁷⁸ The 1972 programme included three days of *pooja* followed by dance, music and devotional songs.⁷⁹ The Malayalam play, '*Thulaabharam*', was staged during the celebrations two years later.⁸⁰ In August 1977, SNM presented the Malayalam drama '*Vishamavirtham*', which was hailed as 'a great success'.⁸¹ In 1980, the play, '*Neelakkadambu*', based on a novel, was performed at 48 Soon Keat Road,⁸² while the Malayalam drama, '*Sabdan*', was staged at the Victoria Theatre the following year.⁸³

Wider Engagements

Chathayam was also an official occasion, allowing SNM to showcase its growing social services in the wider community. Government officials graced the event as Guests of Honour (GOH) and invited guests. Their speeches frequently lauded both Malayalee culture as an exemplary form of multiculturalism and the Mission's contributions to Singapore society. In past years, Chinese and Malay drama groups also performed during Chathayam.⁸⁴ These broader engagements made the celebrations doubly meaningful to the members.

School students were a fixture in the festival, sharing the stage with members and government officials. In 1970, students from Parry Secondary School performed a multiracial show at the start of the celebrations. This was followed by the presentation of SNM

⁷⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1969.

⁷⁹ MC 1/72/143, Letter from General Secretary, SNM to the Entertainment Licensing Officer, Entertainment Department, 17 August 1972.

⁸⁰ MC 1/72/143, Letter from the Licensing Officer to Director, I.S.D., 21 June 1974.

⁸¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee's Report – 1977.

⁸² MC 1/72/143, Application for a Licence, 7 August 1980.

⁸³ MC 1/72/143, Application for a Licence, 1 September 1981.

⁸⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with V. Srinivasan, G.P. Sasidharan and D. Sambasivam, 16 March 2021.

scholarships to students of different ethnic backgrounds by Mohd Ghazali Ismail, the Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Education (MOE). The Mission then made its own presentation that was the keys to an ambulance donated by Chor Yeok Eng, Ismail's counterpart at the Ministry of Health (MOH).

The next item that day was what was reported to be a 'very stimulating forum' on 'The Conflict of Generations'. This involved academics and public officials, namely, Dr Gwee Ah Eng, G G Thomson, Gerald D'Cruz and Dr Nalla Tan.⁸⁵ The celebrations of 1970 alone signified the triple ideals of SNM: spirituality, community and charity.

Seven years later, the Chathayam celebrations took place between 29 August and 4 September, after National Day. Another forum with a social theme was held on 'Developing Welfare Programmes for the Youth and the Aged in our Community.' Don Mathews, the Welfare Officer and Chair of the forum's organising committee, explained why it was necessary to understand and tackle Singapore's major youth problems, such as school dropouts and drug abuse. The event reportedly drew an audience of 300.⁸⁶ There was a public meeting after the lunch, with SNM members Joe Chellam and George Netto speaking in English and Malayalam, respectively.⁸⁷

Matters of Religion and Language

Besides Chathayam, the Mission was actively involved in promoting racial and religious harmony in other ways – values that were also promoted by the Singapore government. In 1977, when SNM

⁸⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1970, p. 2.

⁸⁶ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Sree Narayana Mission: Reaching Out, 19 May 1976.

⁸⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee's Report – 1977.

celebrated the International Sree Narayana Guru Year, it organised a discussion on the Guru's teachings. A public forum on the major religions in Singapore was also held that year. Various experts spoke: Venerable Mangala Thera on Buddhism, Abdul Rauf bin Fauzal Hassan on Islam and A Janardhanan on Christianity.⁸⁸

SNM also organised night classes for English, Hindi and Malayalam for the members' children. Various pioneer teachers who volunteered their time and expertise have received recognition for this, such as N Peethambaram, V Vasu Pilla, Perinattu Kunjuraman, and P Sambasivan, whose names were recorded in the 1956 *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.⁸⁹ The Malayalam classes were taught by volunteer teachers five days a week from 6.30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Vasanthi Pillai recalled that when she was in primary school, her brother and she studied Malayalam at 48 Soon Keat Road. This was their mother tongue which their mother felt was important for Malayalees to learn.⁹⁰ The SNM Library had Malayalam textbooks for Standards 1 to 5.⁹¹



Figure 25: Malayalam Class at Mission with Teacher, Sadanandan.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The Malayalam classes were historically interesting because they reflected the initiative and self-help of the Malayalee community. Malayalam was not made an official second language in Singapore, yet it was, according to Anitha Devi Pillai, 'the binding force of

⁸⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee's Report – 1977.

⁸⁹ Singapore Sree Narayana Mission, *Building Inauguration Souvenir*.

⁹⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Vasanthi Pillai, 24 March 2021.

⁹¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee's Report – 1977.

the community’, widely used before Singapore became independent.⁹² As we have seen, Malayalam stage shows were still popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Malayalee organisations such as the Narayana Gurukula (also nearby in Chong Pang Village), the Kerala Association and SNM strove to keep the language alive by offering free classes. However, Malayalee children were growing up learning another second language in school like Tamil or Malay.

In this context, SNM’s Malayalam classes, though well-remembered, were not successful. Attendances were low. Most parents did not see any practical value sending their children there. In 1977, many parents asked the Mission to include the Guru’s teachings in the Malayalam classes to make them more relevant. The outgoing Executive Committee thought that the next committee might propose this to the Narayana Gurukula, whose classes SNM could subsidise.⁹³

Unlike the Mission, the Gurukula was dedicated solely to the study of the Guru’s teachings. It seemed to have been a rival spiritual organisation, though it was not involved in socio-cultural or charitable activities. The following year, SNM decided to include the Guru’s teachings in its own Malayalam classes instead. They were conducted by Vinodini Menon, who was a ‘qualified and experienced teacher.’⁹⁴ In the 1980s, however, the use of Malayalam in Singapore declined.⁹⁵

Historically, the Chathayam celebrations fulfilled the spiritual and socio-cultural functions for SNM. The primary function was that it was

⁹² Interview with Anitha Devi Pillai, ‘The Language that Binds the Malayalee Heritage’, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/KAYA/Heritage/The-language-that-binds-the-Malayalee-Heritage>, date accessed 25 June 2023.

⁹³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.

⁹⁴ SNM, Report of the Management Committee, 1978, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Pillai and Arumugam, *From Kerala to Singapore*; Pillai, ‘Malayalee Community and Culture in Singapore’.

an occasion for the Guru's followers to reaffirm their adherence to his teachings each year. It also enabled them to meet fellow Malayalees, maintaining their ethnic ties and identity. Furthermore, Chathayam affirmed the Mission's commitment to the wider cause of charity in Singapore. It was at once an event for the Guru's followers, the members of the Malayalee community and the government's 'Many Helping Hands' policy. It showcased the balance of spirituality, community and charity at SNM.

Chapter 3

The Statue Debate



*Figure 26: The Bronze Statue of the Guru.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.*

In recent years, SNM has become a leading voluntary welfare organisation, caring for the aged and aged sick in Singapore. Compared to other Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) its distinguishing mark is its adherence to the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru – a marriage of the ideals of spirituality and charity. His philosophy was simple and universal, but SNM members have debated their interpretation and application from time to time.

One such event in the Mission's history stands out, that was whether to install a statue of the Guru at the SNM Office at 48 Soon Keat Road in the second half of the 1970s. The question had a spiritual dimension: would this statue make the Guru a deity in the eyes of his followers? If so, this had a social implication: was it appropriate for a registered society in Singapore to have such a statue? The statue sparked much disagreement and debate, but it also has some positive things to tell us about spirituality and voluntarism in Singapore.

The minutes of SNM meetings, held at the National Archives of Singapore, together with my interviews with Mission members, allowed us to retrace what had happened. The statue of the Guru, a

bronze one, was donated by Meeras Jagadeesan, a medical doctor from K.J. Hospital in Madras.⁹⁶ Many members of SNM wanted the statue at the Mission. During the Annual General Meeting (AGM) in 1976, the general members voted to establish a Statue Fund to raise money for it.⁹⁷ However the Executive Committee was not in total agreement on the issue, they were split equally.

The 1977 AGM

During the AGM in January 1977, SNM President R Sreedharan told the members that a senior member, Dr Letha Karunakaran, had published an article in the *Malaysia Malayalee* newspaper. She questioned if the statue should be placed in the *pooja* (prayer) room. Sreedharan called the article ‘distasteful,’ as members had the freedom to pray as they chose.⁹⁸ Karunakaran, who was present, replied that members also had the freedom to write to the press. In the election later that day, she lost to K M Bhaskar for the post of Vice-President. This showed where the majority of SNM members stood on the statue issue.

Subsequently during the AGM, D Madhavan tabled a resolution to install the statue in the *pooja* room in place of the Guru’s portrait there. He was seconded by N Karunakaran but opposed by Haneefa, who argued that the resolution was unnecessary since the general members had voted to form the Statue Fund. There was a mixed reaction to this from the members, with N Valalan pointing out that there were no instructions on the size or form of the statue, or where to place it. He admitted that he opposed the statue, as the Guru himself was against idol worship. He was supported by two senior members, the immediate

⁹⁶ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee’s Report – 1977.

⁹⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, 25th Annual General Meeting, 25 January 1976.

⁹⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of 26th Annual General Meeting, 23 January 1977, p. 1.

past President Bhasi and M Bhaskaran.⁹⁹ Bhasi had in fact stepped down as President before the AGM, whereupon he was replaced by Sreedharan.¹⁰⁰

Bhaskaran noted that the majority of members wanted the statue, though some wanted it in the *pooja* room while others simply wanted it in a ‘protected and respectable place.’¹⁰¹ Bhasi suggested keeping the portrait in the *pooja* room, but this was rejected by the general members. Bhaskaran proposed an alternative resolution, for the portrait to be removed from the room and replaced by a mirror. This was also soundly defeated, by a vote of 53-13, with two spoilt votes and one abstention.

A second resolution was tabled – for the statue to be placed in the new office block which was to be built, while the portrait would be retained. This was again defeated though the vote was closer, 40-23, with one abstention. Madhavan’s original motion – to have the statue replace the portrait in the *pooja* room – was passed to ‘wide applause’ from the members.¹⁰² Most members wanted the statue to be installed prior to the Chathayam celebrations later in the year.

The Extraordinary General Meeting

However, the matter was not fully resolved; disagreement persisted. An Extraordinary General Meeting (EOGM) had to be called by the Executive Committee half a year later in July to reaffirm the January resolution. About 138 members attended the meeting which was more

⁹⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of 26th Annual General Meeting, 23 January 1977.

¹⁰⁰ NAS, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 14 October 2017, Reel 6.

¹⁰¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of 26th Annual General Meeting, 23 January 1977, p. 2.

¹⁰² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of 26th Annual General Meeting, 23 January 1977, p. 2.

than the AGM. This included ten members whose membership was expiring – perhaps they were unhappy and did not want to renew their membership.

The mood at this meeting was tense as the minutes of the meeting stated, ‘Mixed feelings and differences of opinions prevailed at the outset.’¹⁰³ Even the Standing Orders for the meeting were contested from the beginning. Many of those who came wanted to speak longer than the usual three minutes allowed per person.

Sreedharan started by highlighting the ‘malicious rumours spread by some irresponsible persons regarding the statue issue.’ This, he claimed, had sowed discord among the members.¹⁰⁴ The Committee had also received a separate petition from members to discuss the statue question. He assured that the petitioners would have every chance to speak. He asked for the January resolution to be reaffirmed, that was, the statue of the Guru would be installed in the *pooja* room, replacing the portrait. Numerous members rose to speak for or against the resolution, showing differences in their views of the statue and more broadly the role of SNM in the Singapore context.

Bhasi was again among the opponents, as were notably, two women, Mrs Asokan and Mrs Sarasijakshan (Kamala Devi). Some of the critics (not named in the minutes) feared that the statue would turn SNM into a ‘sectarian institution.’ Others were concerned that as a charitable organisation serving all Singaporeans, the statue went against the Mission’s Constitution.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, Devi was a devout follower of the Guru but her position was that his statue should not be worshipped,

¹⁰³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977, p. 1.

only his words, teachings and materially his portrait. It was his teachings that really mattered.¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, the proponents numbered Madhavan and at least one other woman, Mrs A G Dharan. Another supporter was R Raveendran, who had asked the Madras doctor to donate the statue.¹⁰⁷ They roundly rejected the charges of sectarianism. They argued that the statue ‘was in reverence of the Great Guru, [while] Portraits of Jesus Christ, Lord Buddha and Teachings from the Holy Koran would be displayed above the statue.’ The statue would thus enhance SNM’s standing as a charitable organisation for all Singaporeans.¹⁰⁸

So far, the debate had been rational, if robust. But the tension soon boiled over. An unnamed member made an unspecified personal accusation against Bhasi, who ‘retorted in kind.’¹⁰⁹ The meeting then degenerated into ‘complete disarray with members demanding for apology and blowing their tops.’¹¹⁰ Order was eventually restored, with Sreedharan apologising on behalf of the member who had accused Bhasi. The member himself also apologised for his remarks.

The debate resumed, lasting over three hours. But when it was time to vote, Bhasi tried to add an amendment to the resolution. Another member, D Sambasivan, further proposed a separate amendment for the statue to be placed outside the SNM Office. Both proposals were rejected as the hour was late. SNM’s legal adviser T V Sukumar briefed the members about the secret ballot in English and Malayalam – many

¹⁰⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Kamala Devi, 7 December 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Laina Raveendran, 27 October 2022.

¹⁰⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977, p. 2.

present still used the latter language. He appealed for continued cooperation among the members regardless of the outcome.¹¹¹

The resolution received a strong endorsement again, with 83 members supporting it against 48 objectors. There were three spoilt votes and four members left the meeting before the ballot took place. More members who opposed the statue departed when the resolution was reaffirmed.¹¹²



Figure 27: The Statue installation, 1978.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The SNM Executive Committee hailed the outcome ‘a resounding mandate’ for having the Guru’s statue.¹¹³ This duly took place on 15 March 1978.¹¹⁴ Sambasivan resigned from the committee that year because of the decision.¹¹⁵ Viswa Sadasivan, a youth at the time, was so dismayed by the acrimonious dispute that he vowed never to step into SNM’s premises again (he later did and became one of SNM’s trustees).¹¹⁶

Reflecting on the controversy four decades later, Bhasi saw it as arising from a basic tension between the spiritual and social reform sides of SNM. He had opposed the statue because he thought it would make the Mission into a religious institution. He reasoned, ‘You are making it [the Mission] smaller than what it could be [by having the statue]. It

¹¹¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977.

¹¹² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Extra-ordinary General Meeting, 3 July 1977.

¹¹³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee’s Report – 1977.

¹¹⁴ SNM, Report of the Management Committee, 1978.

¹¹⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with D. Sambasivan, 28 June 2022.

¹¹⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Viswa Sadasivan, 12 April 2022.

has a wider base and it has a wider appeal, if it is not tied down to religion.’¹¹⁷

The Guru’s statue in the later part of the 1970s was a fractious issue. The majority of SNM members had voted in favour of it. In doing so, they underlined their devotion to the Guru and his teachings, although as Kamala Devi pointed out, the statue was not necessary for the devotion. On their part, the opponents had emphasised that the Guru was a social reformer and the Mission was a charitable organisation. Both sides had argued their case robustly before voting on the matter.

The statue controversy was a milestone event. By placing the statue in the *pooja* room, SNM sought to strike a balance between spirituality and charity. The Mission would expand its welfare work in Singapore while staying true to the Guru’s teachings. It did not become a sectarian organisation. Two years later, the SNM Home for the Aged Sick opened – its first major commitment to the Singapore government’s direct welfare policy. In the next chapter, we will trace SNM’s journey to this policy.

¹¹⁷ NAS, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 14 October 2017, Reel 6.

Chapter 4

The Road to Direct Welfare

SNM's flagship welfare project, the Nursing Home established in 1979, did not happen overnight. It was a result of decades of endeavour in the Mission's history and more broadly, the history of Singapore. Since it was founded, SNM had carried out various social services on its own, from Flag Day fundraisers to food rations for the poor and needy. These were small-scale and mostly concentrated in the Sembawang area.

The 1960s and 1970s proved to be a time of reflection and transformation for SNM, as it was for Singapore. In 1967, the organisation became an affiliate of the Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS). This helped the Mission's fundraising but placed it under pressure to provide what the SCSS called 'direct welfare services.' After some hesitation, SNM's leaders eventually embraced this new role. Again, they drew upon the Guru's call for his disciples to help the underprivileged and give back to the community.

'Indirect' Welfare Services

The Guru had been the spiritual influence of SNM's services to the community from the start. One of his early followers in Singapore was Kesavan Narayan Unnithan, who arrived on the island sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s. Like many male Malayalee migrants, he worked at the Naval Base for a time, but eventually left to set up a spice factory at Jalan Kedai in Sembawang. Unnithan was not only a

businessman but a disciple of the Guru and a philanthropist in his own right. He would loan out his factory's vehicles for the Mission's use, while also contributing to the funeral expenses of SNM members who had passed away. His son, Jayadev was the Mission's immediate past President. Inspired by his father's charitable deeds, he advocates expanding SNM's welfare work.¹¹⁸



Figure 28: President R. Sreedharan distributing food to the needy.

Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

From the late 1940s, SNM provided financial assistance and food rations to the poor and needy in the vicinity of Chong Pang Village and Sembawang in the northern part of Singapore.¹¹⁹ These benefitted both members and non-members, cutting across ethnic lines. One of the

beneficiaries was a 68-year-old male retiree, living at Delhi Road inside the former Naval Base in 1979. He was previously employed by the Royal Navy. He had 13 young children, most of whom were in school, doing National Service or unemployed. His wife was a labourer. He wrote to SNM requesting food rations. Subsequently, the Mission passed him an application form to fill in¹²⁰ and rations were provided.

¹¹⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Jayadev Unnithan, 15 July 2022.

¹¹⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.

¹²⁰ SNM, Letter from Adikan Ponnusamy to SNM, 25 November 1979. The Mission's minutes documented that the executive committee sent him the application form, but not what happened afterwards. SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 25 November 1979.

During the 1970s, some of the free rations were donated by factories in Jurong Industrial Estate, such as Mujoo, Beecham and Sugar Industry of Singapore.¹²¹

Another beneficiary was a relative of Joe Tan, who grew up in Chong Pang during this period. As a young boy, he would collect



Figure 29: Donated food items.

Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

food coupons from the SNM Office at 48 Soon Keat Road on behalf of his aunt, a widow. These could be exchanged for household items like rice, Milo, condensed milk, and canned sardines. SNM's kindness made a lasting impression on the boy. Tan's company has made yearly donations to the Mission in return. In his mind, the Mission's charity was cross-cultural. He remembered there were also Chinese volunteers who helped out with the Mission.¹²²

Flag Days

When Singapore became a self-governing state in 1959, it quickly led to a spurt in SNM's charity work. The newly elected People's Action Party (PAP) government supported the Mission's social services, as it did with other voluntary organisations. The government did not wish to create a large and expensive welfare state. Instead, social services would primarily be provided by the family, followed by the voluntary sector and finally the state. This became known as the 'Many Helping Hands' policy in the 1980s.

¹²¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Don Mathews, 7 April 2022.

¹²² Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with Joe Tan, 10 March 2022.

SNM's charity work in the 1960s did not only rise in volume, it also became more 'national,' in line with the country's welfare needs. This can be seen in the numerous political leaders and luminaries who graced its office at 48 Soon Keat Road throughout the decade. They included Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, his deputy Toh Chin Chye and Mrs Rahim Ishak, the sister-in-law of Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak.¹²³

These distinguished visitors handed out scholarships to deserving students, always from different ethnic backgrounds. In 1962, the Sree Narayana Mission scholarships, valued at \$100 each, were given to students of all language streams. The role of the distinguished persons at the award ceremonies was symbolic as it highlighted the importance of multiracialism in Singapore, as well as a close relationship between the state and voluntary organisation.



*Figure 30: Mrs Rahim Ishak giving out Scholarships.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.*

In those days, the Flag Day was SNM's primary means of fundraising. The first Flag Day was held in 1961. This showed that the government recognised the Mission as a reputable charity. Though other organisations in Singapore also had Flag Days, reportedly SNM and the Sree Ramakrishnan Mission were the only two predominantly Indian charitable organisations permitted to hold them in the 1960s.¹²⁴

¹²³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.

¹²⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.



Figure 31: Scholarship Recipients.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission

According to Syamala Senan, the Flag Day was ‘Singapore’s speciality,’ as it was not practised by Sree Narayana Missions in India.¹²⁵ The sale of flags was a community effort, carried out by SNM members and their families. Prizes were given out to the top flag sellers as an incentive. The Raghavan brothers, Asokan and Mohanadas, remembered the early Flag Days vividly. As a primary school pupil, Asokan was a top collector.



Figure 32: Flag Day Volunteers.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The Flag Days evolved and expanded over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Executive Committee member, V Srinivasan became the expert organiser. Originally, collections had been fairly modest, limited to the areas where members lived, such as Sembawang, Tanjong Pagar and Queenstown. Srinivasan, who was a teacher, was able to enlist the support of school principals and scaled up the event to the national level. As a result, the collections grew.

¹²⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Syamala Senan 21 March 2022.

The Flag Days were warmly remembered – the canvassing as well as the counting the money afterwards. The collections often came in the form of coins rather than dollar notes. Malaysian coins were still being used in the 1960s and had to be sorted out from Singaporean ones. Counting took place at a very crowded SNM Office where the members would gather. It went on through the night into the early hours of the morning. Eagerly anticipated was not only how much had been collected but also who had collected the most.¹²⁶



Figure 33: A Top Collector receiving her trophy.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Children and Youth

In the 1960s, SNM was greatly interested in the welfare of children and youth. This differed from its later focus on the aged sick but it was quite natural at the time. Singapore's population in the 1960s was a young one. The baby boomers born after the Second World War were still youths and young adults. In 1963, for example, SNM gave a small grant to a needy family to support the education of the children.¹²⁷

In the early 1960s, the Mission even had plans to build an orphanage. The plan was to build one by extending the office premises. The orphanage would have a dormitory for the children, a library and an office for the staff. In 1964, SNM President C P Ramakrishnan reported that the project had been in the works for three years and was likely to

¹²⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with V. Srinivasan, G.P. Sasidharan and D. Sambasivam, 16 March 2021; Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Aravindakshan Pillai, 12 February 2022.

¹²⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from G. Rajah to President, SNM, 11 January 1971.

be fulfilled soon. The extension plans were approved by the government two years later.¹²⁸

But the major obstacle was finances. In mid-1967, the Mission informed the SCSS that the funds raised fell far short of the cost of the extensions – \$30,000 against \$50,000. It would have to consider alternative projects if it could not raise the remaining budget.¹²⁹ By 1969, the idea of an orphanage had been dropped but education – and thus children and youth – remained the focus.¹³⁰ In 1971, the Executive Committee unanimously agreed to give \$180 per month in assistance to a request from the Singapore Children’s Society.¹³¹

Children’s Day was a lively occasion in the Mission’s calendar in the 1960s. In 1969, the members organised music, dances and a magic show for a thousand children. Among them were those who had participated in the Flag Day that year.¹³² In 1970, SNM also started taekwondo classes thrice a week and the students were affiliated to the Singapore Taekwondo Association. The form of Korean self-defence, which was becoming popular in Singapore, was deemed useful to ‘improve coordination of the mind and body and instils self-discipline.’¹³³

¹²⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1966.

¹²⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, General Secretary, SNM to Administrative Officer, SCSS, 2 June 1967.

¹³⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Meeting between SCSS and Bhasi, 5 March 1969.

¹³¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Joint Committee Meeting, 31 January 1971.

¹³² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1969.

¹³³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1970, p. 4.

Lee Kuan Yew's Triple Visits to SNM

Another sign that SNM was moving into the orbit of the national welfare policy was Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's three visits to 48 Soon Keat Road in the 1960s. Many older members could recall the years he came, which were in 1963, 1965 and 1967. Little is known about the first visit, other than it took place on 24 March 1963. Lee did not make a speech on that occasion.¹³⁴



Figure 34: PM Lee Kuan Yew arriving at the Sree Narayana Mission (1963).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

However, his second visit on 12 September 1965 was a memorable one. This was when as many older members recounted, Lee made his famous 'mudflats to metropolis' speech. It was a poignant time as Singapore had left the Federation of Malaysia just a month earlier after a

tumultuous merger. In July 1964, the island experienced serious riots between Chinese and Malays.

In the aftermath of the violence, SNM President C P Ramakrishnan warned, 'In Malaysia, with a multi-racial population of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Ceylonese etc., racial harmony is the kingpin of our very existence.'¹³⁵ The violence did not prevent the Chathayam celebrations from going ahead that year, with police approval. SNM also organised a symposium at the Victoria Memorial

¹³⁴ SNM, *Souvenir to Commemorate the 109th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru*, 1963.

¹³⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, *Souvenir to Commemorate the 110th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru*, 1964.

Hall in early September on ‘The Universality of Religions in Terms of World Brotherhood’.¹³⁶

During his second visit, Lee had the recent racial conflict in mind, as well as the Mission’s multicultural efforts during the merger. He gave out a dozen SNM scholarships to students from schools all over Singapore.¹³⁷ The students



Figure 35: PM Lee handing out a bursary (1965).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

consisted of six Indians (it is unclear if any were

Malayalees), three Chinese and three Malays. This made an impression on Lee. In his speech, titled, ‘Towards a Model Multiracial Society’, he contrasted the awardees with scholarships in Malaya, which were given out to students from one ethnic group.

The Prime Minister emphasised that there were many races in Singapore but only one nationality. It was not the British who built the Naval Base, but Malayalees, past and present. He assured the audience that ten years after its unexpected departure from Malaysia, Singapore would rise from a clump of mudflats into a metropolis. He assured that the new constitution of Singapore would safeguard minority rights.¹³⁸ The speech lauded both SNM and multiracialism in Singapore.

¹³⁶ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 110th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 1964.

¹³⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966; MOE 2488/67, The Sree Narayana Mission Scholarships – 1968.

¹³⁸ NAS, Transcript of a Speech Made by the Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the Sree Narayana Mission, 12 September 1965; SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Souvenir to Commemorate the 112th Birthday of Sree Narayana Guru, 31 August 1966.



Figure 36: PM Lee with SNM members (1965).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Lee came to the Mission again two years later. This was an informal visit, as he asked not to be given publicity. He praised SNM for its charitable work benefitting the other communities. This was, he said, similar to the Chinese clan associations and the Kwong Wai

Shiu Free Hospital, which also aided non-Chinese. Such cross-ethnic charity was important in fostering a Singaporean identity and a sense of citizenship. It was a sign of ‘the greatest self-reliance’ among the people.

In concluding his speech, Lee suggested that SNM should look to recruit non-Indians to its fundraising efforts – foreshadowing the participation of school students in Flag Days in the 1970s.¹³⁹ He met with the Executive Committee afterwards and was gratified to learn that most of the members were Singapore citizens, not foreigners, as he had thought.¹⁴⁰

Although he came mainly to make speeches, Lee’s visits to the Mission were historically important. His words spoke to a general audience about Singapore’s evolving place in the post-merger world. But they also specifically engaged the Malayalees in attendance. SNM was about to be called upon to make a greater commitment to the nation’s socio-economic development. Lee may not have directly orchestrated subsequent changes in the Mission’s role, but he was prescient in having predicted it.

¹³⁹ NAS, Transcript of Speech by the Prime Minister at the Sree Narayana Mission, 20 August 1967, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 20 April 2022.

The significance of these events in the 1960s and 1970s for the history of SNM has not been fully realised. As we know, this was a key period in Singapore's journey to nationhood. For the Mission, too, they were years of increased activity, pressure and ultimately, change. But there was one more event that led SNM to become a provider of direct welfare services. This was the sudden British military withdrawal in the late 1960s, which we now turn to.

Chapter 5

The British Military Withdrawal: A Turning Point

The British military withdrawal was a watershed moment in Singapore's history, well-known and impactful to those who lived through it. In 1968, the British government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson decided to close down military bases on the island ahead of schedule. This created headaches for Singapore's defence and economy. The city-state had just separated from Malaysia to become a Republic in 1965. It was a tiny nation with no natural resources. Its security still rested largely on the presence of the 50-odd British military facilities all over the island. Chief of these was the massive Naval Base in Sembawang.

The British pull-out also had economic implications. One-fifth of Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) came from the bases. In Chong Pang Village, located just beyond the gates of the Naval Base, numerous shops, restaurants and bars relied on the patronage of British servicemen. The bases also employed over 25,000 Singaporeans, both enlisted and civilian staff. There were a further 8,000 or so *amahs* working in the households of British officers. Mass retrenchment loomed for a country that was already struggling to provide jobs for a growing population.

Singapore capably avoided these repercussions. By the mid-1970s when the British finally left, the island had not only survived the rundown but emerged stronger as a nation. Conscription through

National Service ensured that the nation built up its own defence force. The spectre of mass unemployment never materialised as the government increased public spending, while white-collar workers such as clerks were retrained for technical jobs.

Most crucially, the land occupied by the bases amounted to ten percent of Singapore's total land area. It was an invaluable real estate and all of it was used productively – for defence, industries, schools and other public facilities. The dockyard inside the Naval Base was converted into a successful commercial venture called Sembawang Shipyard. Blocks of flatted factories sprang up in the largest of the British bases forming the Pasir Panjang complex. The British pull-out thus became a catalyst for Singapore's robust economic development in the 1970s.¹⁴¹ It had a similar effect for the Sree Narayana Mission as well.

A Crisis Loomed for SNM

As the drama of the British rundown began to unfold, SNM was still a small organisation at 48 Soon Keat Road. The social link between the historic event and the voluntary organisation was evident. The members of SNM were virtually all Malayalees. Many of them were immigrants from Kerala who had helped build the Naval Base in the 1930s, as Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted in 1965. By that time, many SNM members were employed in the Naval Base and Seletar Airbase as clerical or technical staff, or in the British auxiliary camps and facilities near these major bases. Others resided in settlements such

¹⁴¹ Loh Kah Seng, 'The British Military Withdrawal from Singapore and the Anatomy of a Catalyst', in Derek Heng and Syed Khairudin Aljunied (eds.), *Singapore in Global History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 185-204.

as Chong Pang Village and Jalan Kayu, providing services to the bases.¹⁴²

The British withdrawal struck SNM like a hammer. Prior to the rundown, the Mission had over a hundred members,¹⁴³ 80 percent of whom were Naval Base employees, but they were not citizens of Singapore.¹⁴⁴ Many of those born in India went back to their home villages, never to return. Others who were British subjects took up London's offer to settle in Britain. The British pull-out thus dispersed Malayalee families and friends in three locations around the world, namely Singapore, India and Britain.

The membership of SNM plummeted as a result and a crisis of survival loomed for the organisation, as it did for Singapore. In 1969, SNM President M K Bhasi met with Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS) officials to discuss its welfare programme. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Mission was becoming more aligned to the national welfare policy in the 1960s. The Council was the umbrella body for all organisations in Singapore that provided social services. The Mission had become one of its affiliates in 1967.

Bhasi wanted to ask SCSS for donations to SNM to be made tax-exempt. However, the main topic of discussion turned to the effects of the withdrawal. As he admitted, 'Ordinary membership has dropped sharply for the last two or three years'.¹⁴⁵ We will return to this meeting later in the chapter.

¹⁴² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Sree Narayana Mission, Singapore, Rules and Regulations, 18 October 1966.

¹⁴³ NAS, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 14 October 2017, Reel 5.

¹⁴⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Meeting between SCSS and Bhasi, 5 March 1969, p. 1.

¹⁴⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Meeting between SCSS and Bhasi, 5 March 1969, p. 1.

One of those who left Singapore was K S Kumar, who had been the President of SNM in 1960. He returned to India though his sons remained in Singapore. He eventually returned to Singapore in the 1980s where he passed away.¹⁴⁶ In 1969, N Raveendran Nair, the Assistant Secretary and also an active member, resigned from the Executive Committee and migrated to Britain.¹⁴⁷ Two years later, another committee member P Gangadharan returned to India, as did K Sahadevan, who was missed as ‘a strong supporter and a mainstay of the Mission’.¹⁴⁸ The Chathayam celebrations that year had to be cut back due to reduced support from the remaining members; some of whom could also have been retrenched from the bases.¹⁴⁹

The Recruitment Drive

Faced with the membership crisis, SNM launched a recruitment drive in Sembawang, seeking younger Malayalees and even members from other ethnic groups. By 1969, the membership was down to 200, though the majority by now were Singapore citizens.¹⁵⁰ In 1971, the Mission was still facing an ‘urgent need’ to find new blood. The President V Jayaram (President from 1970 - 1971) formed a recruitment subcommittee, comprising himself and committee members V. Sukumaran and V K Narayanan.¹⁵¹ Only 14 new members joined that year, leading to some pessimism that ‘This figure does not augur well

¹⁴⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Dilip Kumar, 14 June 2022.

¹⁴⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1969; SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1971.

¹⁴⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1971, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1971.

¹⁵⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Meeting between SCSS and Bhasi, 5 March 1969.

¹⁵¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Minutes of the Joint Committee Meeting, 31 January 1971.

for the future of the Mission'. But the committee vowed to renew its efforts.¹⁵²

LIFE Paid #10

WHATEVER BE RELIGION IT IS ENOUGH MAN IMPROVE
மதம் எதுவானாலும் மனிதன் தன் குக இருத்தல் போதும்

ONE CASTE ONE RELIGION ONE GOD FOR MAN
ஒரு தரகி ஒரு மதம் ஒரு தெய்வம் மனிதருக்கு!

SREE NARAYANA MISSION
ஸ்ரீ நாராயண மிஷன்
48, SOON KEAT ROAD, SINGAPORE-27
48, சூன் கியாட் ரோடு, சிங்கப்பூர்-27

DATE தேதி: _____ 19__

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP
அங்கத்தினர் விண்ணப்பப் பத்திரம்

No. _____ IDENTITY CARD No. 0177339(1)
எண் _____ அடையாளக் காட்டு எண் _____

To
The President.
தலைவர் அவர்களுக்கு
I WISH TO APPLY TO BE ADMITTED AS A SUBSCRIBING / LIFE MEMBER OF THE MISSION.
நான் ஸ்ரீ நாராயண மிஷனில் சாதாரண/ஆயுள் உறுப்பினராக விரும்புகிறேன். மிஷன் சட்டதிட்டங்களுக்குக் கட்டுப்பட்டு நடப்பேன் என இதன் மூலம் உறுதியளிக்கிறேன்.

Name பெயர் **Asokan** Age வயது **20** Male/Female ஆண்/பெண்

Profession தொழில் **National Serviceman**

Address முகவரி **93, Nee Soon Rd, S'pore 26** Signature ஒப்பம் **Asokan**

Proposer's Name & Address முன்மொழியல் பெயர் & முகவரி **S. KANNA GAN, Singapore** Signature ஒப்பம் **[Signature]**

Seconder's Name & Address வழிமொழியல் பெயர் & முகவரி Signature ஒப்பம்

Entrance Fee Ordinary \$ 1.00 Sd. ஒப்பம் President தலைவர் **[Signature]**
துறைமுகக் கட்டணம் [சாதாரணம்] \$ 1.00

Monthly Subscription \$ 0.50 S. N. Mission ஸ்ரீ நாராயண மிஷன்
மாதச் சந்தா \$ 0.50

Life Membership ஆயுள் கட்டணம் \$ 50.00

Bharatha Power, 41 Chamber Road, Singapore

Paid \$10: only.

Figure 37: Life Membership Application Form.
Source: R. Asokan.

Indeed, the crisis turned out to be transformative, as many crises do. SNM found new members who were younger, locally born and more oriented towards Singapore affairs. Bhasi, the President during most years of the British withdrawal (1967-1970 & 1972-1976), was a schoolteacher. He brought several English-educated newcomers into the Executive Committee.¹⁵³

¹⁵² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1971, p. 3.

¹⁵³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 20 April 2022.

Among them was V Srinivasan (the Assistant Secretary and also a schoolteacher), whom we saw in the previous chapter became an expert in SNM's Flag Days. Srinivasan in turn roped in his friends and fellow teachers, G P Sasidharan (who became the Honorary Secretary) and D Sambasivan (the Honorary Treasurer).¹⁵⁴ Another new member was R Asokan, who joined SNM in 1972 while he was still doing his National Service. He paid a subscription fee of \$50 to be a Life Member. Six years on, he joined the Executive Committee where he remained till 2002.¹⁵⁵

The accelerated British pull-out had created an emergency, but SNM did not merely trump it, it was transformed as an organisation. It was plausible that with the younger leadership and a generally younger membership, English was used more frequently. The new members were also more likely to have been born in Singapore (or Malaya).

The Mission continued its charitable work as best as it could during these challenging times. Its Flag Day collection of \$15,783.17 in 1970 was hailed as 'an all-time high'. The Executive Committee credited the volunteers with this achievement – the men, women and children of the Mission who had collectively canvassed for donations in neighbourhoods all across Singapore.¹⁵⁶

The 1971 Executive Committee led by President Jayaram continued to award scholarships, study loans and welfare assistance to needy families, students and destitute persons. It also made contributions to the Children's Society, the Spastic Children's Association and other welfare organisations, as the SCSS encouraged (see below).¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with V. Srinivasan, G.P. Sasidharan and D. Sambasivam, 16 March 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with R. Asokan, 16 February 2022.

¹⁵⁶ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Management Committee, 1970.

¹⁵⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Social Welfare Programme for 1971, 31 January 1971.

One of the beneficiaries during this difficult period was Madam Janagy Vadival, an Indian *amah* employed in a hospital. When she fell ill, SNM gave her \$200 for food, textbooks and clothing for her five children. The children also received \$30 for their monthly transport. This allowed them to resume their studies while their mother recovered from her illness.¹⁵⁸

By 1978, the Mission had recovered from the loss of members. It had 153 Life Members and 152 Ordinary Members. This was a smaller number than before the British withdrawal, but the members were more rooted in Singapore. The Executive Committee, now led by President R Sreedharan, noted, ‘The increase in membership is proof of the fact that the Mission is becoming identified by the public as a viable and reputable charitable organisation’. The Mission’s numerous subcommittees had also performed well – proof that the general members were active across its major activities.¹⁵⁹

Flag Day as a Pressure Point

The British rundown brought to the fore a new group of SNM leaders. Largely English-educated professionals and white-collar workers, they generally had a greater interest in local affairs. This helped SNM’s move towards the national welfare programme in the late 1960s and 1970s. When the Mission became an affiliate of the SCSS in 1967, it was able to apply for government funding for its programmes. This would ensure its long-term sustainability.¹⁶⁰ In the context of the British withdrawal and drop in membership, it made sense to do so.

¹⁵⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Y.S. Fung to K. Bhasi, 27 January 1968.

¹⁵⁹ SNM, Report of the Management Committee, 1978, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ John Solomon, interview with M. Velayudhan, 16 March 2022.

The new leadership was also more inclined to support the government's welfare policy. Though it had always been involved in charitable activities since the late 1940s, SNM had done so in its own way and on a limited scale. Now, as an affiliate, the Mission was encouraged to offer the type of welfare services that the SCSS wanted.

In 1967, SNM sought approval from the SCSS to hold its annual Flag Day. It then received an unexpected query. The Mission was asked to submit its annual report and accounts for its welfare activities.¹⁶¹ The following year, when SNM asked for its donations to be exempted from tax, the Council again wanted more information on its welfare and charitable programmes, as well as its future plans.¹⁶² The latter was especially of interest to the SCSS but was something that the Mission was still undecided about at the time. It was clear that the Council wanted SNM to carry out welfare programmes that were in line with its policy.

We now return to Bhasi's meeting with SCSS officials in 1969. He surmised the Mission's existing welfare activities: it gave financial aid to the destitute, many of whom were recommended by the SCSS and almoners, as well as scholarships to needy Singaporean students across four language streams (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil). Bhasi said that SNM was open to the Council's recommendations for financial aid and scholarships. He also reported that the Mission organised cultural and variety shows and inter-religious meetings. However, Bhasi admitted that it had no plans to expand these activities or introduce new ones. The Mission was just trying to recruit new members at the time.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Goh Chor Hiap to General Secretary, SNM, 25 May 1967.

¹⁶² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from S.C. Tang to President, SNM, 22 June 1968.

¹⁶³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Meeting between SCSS and Bhasi, 5 March 1969.

This did not satisfy the officials. Two years later, in 1971, as SNM was striving to recruit new members, the SCSS was unwilling to support its Flag Day. It felt that the Mission ‘has no extensive direct welfare services program’. SNM was asked to explore the possibility of running an ‘old people’s home’, presumably together with the Indian Welfare Association. This came to naught at the time. The Council eventually approved the Flag Day ‘with much reluctance’, though with the proviso that most of the collections had to be distributed to charitable organisations affiliated to it, rather than be used for the Mission’s own activities.

SCSS also reminded SNM that, as an affiliate of the Council, it was governed by government regulations. This was the key point. The SCSS made a firmly worded statement, that Flag Days would no longer be supported ‘unless the Sree Narayana Mission comes out with a direct welfare service program’, for ‘we would not like to be in a position to be questioned by them [the government] on the misuse of Flag Days by our Members’.¹⁶⁴

The matter did not end there. The following year, SNM went ahead with preparations for the Flag Day before seeking approval from the SCSS. The Council initially rejected the request, but was compelled to finally approve it because the Mission had made the preparations, a *fait accompli*.¹⁶⁵ The Council was clearly unhappy and reminded SNM that in future to submit fundraising plans prior to making preparations. The SCSS stated that the official policy was to reduce the number of Flag Days because there had been numerous complaints from the public. It would grant approval for a Flag Day only when the organiser provided direct welfare services or in exceptional cases, when the entire proceeds

¹⁶⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from S.C. Tang to M.K. Bhasi, 6 July 1971, p. 1.

¹⁶⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from M.K. Bhasi to Chairman, SCSS, 20 July 1973.

were given to charitable causes. The Council stressed that SNM was not an exceptional case.¹⁶⁶

Therefore, when SNM requested approval to hold the Flag Day in 1973, this was predictably denied by the SCSS. The Mission was again told that it was not directly involved in welfare work.¹⁶⁷ Bhasi protested in writing to the Council's President, Ee Peng Liang, stating, 'Sree Narayana Mission is an organisation actively involved in welfare work since its registration 25 years ago'.¹⁶⁸ He pointed out that associations which were permitted to hold Flag Days that year, such as student unions of the University of Singapore and Singapore Polytechnic, were not directly involved in welfare work as such they simply donated their collections to other welfare associations.

In contrast, Bhasi said, SNM was helping needy families recommended by the SCSS and almoners. It also supported the children of these families with their education. He thought that the Council's policy on Flag Days should be applied fairly to all affiliates. Bhasi emphasised, 'We are all voluntary workers and we expect encouragement and appreciation from the Council'.¹⁶⁹ In the previous two years, SNM had raised \$70,000 from Flag Days, of which nearly half – \$32,000 – went to welfare organisations, including a sizeable donation made to the Thomson Road General Hospital to purchase an ambulance.¹⁷⁰

Bhasi had a point. As a society of Malayalees, SNM had historically drawn upon the Guru's teachings to help the community. It was more of a welfare organisation than the student unions or other groups that

¹⁶⁶ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from S.C. Tang to M.K. Bhasi, 22 July 1972.

¹⁶⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Extract of Minutes of the First Board of Management Meeting at Council Board Room, 1 June 1973.

¹⁶⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from M.K. Bhasi to Chairman, SCSS, 20 July 1973, p. 1.

¹⁶⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from M.K. Bhasi to Chairman, SCSS, 20 July 1973, p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Extract from Minutes of Fourth Board of Management Meeting, 31 August 1973.

raised funds to support state-sanctioned welfare causes. However, this history did not matter to the SCSS and the Council did not relent.

In reply to Bhasi's letter, the SCSS restated the need to reduce the number of Flag Days held in the streets. It assured SNM that it would be able to hold a Flag Day as long as the proceeds were donated to charitable organisations or used for an approved direct welfare project.¹⁷¹ SNM finally agreed to the latter, after which approval was granted¹⁷² but this was only a stopgap. The solution, as SNM's younger leaders realised, had to come from providing direct welfare services.

New Direct Welfare Projects

Under the leadership of Bhasi and subsequently Sreedharan, SNM's slew of what were deemed to be direct welfare services grew throughout the 1970s. One of these was a counselling and referral service started at the Mission Office in 1974. It was held between 3 and 5 pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. In September 1973, following previous difficulties with Flag Day, Bhasi had informed the SCSS that SNM had 'finalised plans to start counselling service for school dropouts and family problems'. A subcommittee had been formed, comprising female social workers and schoolteachers, who were likely members of the Mission or their relatives. One of them was Sunanda Asokan, a senior teacher at the Naval Base Secondary School who agreed to work on school dropouts.¹⁷³

Bhasi asked the SCSS that part of the proceeds of the year's Flag Day be used to fund the counselling and referral service, with the remainder

¹⁷¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Lim Ewe Huat to M.K. Bhasi, 14 September 1973.

¹⁷² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Extract from Fifth Board of Management Meeting, 28 September 1973.

¹⁷³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from M.K. Bhasi to Executive Director, SCSS, 20 September 1973, p. 1.

donated to the St. John's Home for the Aged Sick. The Council agreed to this in principle. Finally, there was a resolution to the Flag Day matter.¹⁷⁴ How Bhasi went about it this time was significant. He had informed the SCSS of the Mission's plans before making preparations for Flag Day. This paved the way for rapprochement between the two organisations.

An added effect of the counselling and referral programme was the hiring of Don Mathews as the Mission's first Welfare Officer in the same year, in 1974. He had been recommended by S. Vasoo, the SCSS Deputy Director.¹⁷⁵ Mathews had just finished his 'A' Levels and was looking for a job.¹⁷⁶ He was followed by more permanent staff at SNM in subsequent years, carrying out welfare or related administrative work.

The counselling and referral programme was much needed. Distressed residents living in the northern and central parts of Singapore, from Sembawang, Woodlands and Nee Soon to Ang Mo Kio and Thomson, could contact SNM, which would refer them to the appropriate government agency, such as the Labour or Social Welfare Departments.¹⁷⁷ The SCSS recognised SNM's expertise and outreach in these parts of Singapore. In addition to referrals, the Mission also provided relief and assistance in cash or kind to needy residents, drawing upon the funds it raised.¹⁷⁸

The service proved to be invaluable. This was a time of considerable socio-economic distress due to rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in Singapore in the 1970s. The advent of mass public housing was

¹⁷⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Extract from Fifth Board of Management Meeting, 28 September 1973.

¹⁷⁵ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Discussion held at the Council with Members of SNM, 15 December 1973.

¹⁷⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Don Mathews, 7 April 2022.

¹⁷⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Counselling and Referral Service Annual Report, 15 January 1975.

¹⁷⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Counselling and Referral Service.

changing the way of life in areas that previously were rural. Industrialisation had given rise to full-time regular work, especially in factories, but this also created stress for the individual and the family.¹⁷⁹ Locally, the British military pull-out hurt the economy of Chong Pang Village where SNM was located.

More than half of the counselling and referral cases in the mid-1970s required financial assistance or help with finding jobs. Other problems were due to some form of conflict – in families, marriages and other relationships. There were also a small number of cases of depression and anxiety, as well as poor health.¹⁸⁰ In 1979, an Executive Committee member visited a case to find the person who was unwell and without any Central Provident Fund savings. The Committee agreed to give him \$500 in assistance.¹⁸¹



Figure 38: Youth Camp participants (1975).
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Part of the counselling and referral programme in 1975 was a youth training camp on ‘The Community and You’. Held at the Kampong Tengah Holiday Camp, it involved young adults residing in Sembawang. They took part in discussions on current social issues.¹⁸² Teong Eng Siong, the MP for Sembawang, hailed the

camp as a way to cultivate ‘industrious, receptive and constructive’ leaders. The camp was a significant event, as Singapore’s economy had been hit by the global oil crisis and inflation in 1973 to 1974.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, ‘The Community and You’, 1975.

¹⁸⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Counselling and Referral Service.

¹⁸¹ SNM, Minutes of Emergency Committee Meeting, 18 November 1979.

¹⁸² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Counselling and Referral Service Annual Report, 15 January 1975.

¹⁸³ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, ‘The Community and You’, 1975.

The camp was followed by a ‘Youth In Community Service’ forum, held during the Chathayam celebrations in August that year.¹⁸⁴

The forum also tried to get the youths to be more involved in serving the wider community. This and other counselling and referral activities were largely due to the



Figure 319: Participants at the Youth Forum.

Source: Sree Narayana Mission

efforts of Don Mathews. He was constantly on the lookout for ‘adventurous’ projects that would benefit the community, raise SNM’s profile and help raise funds.¹⁸⁵

The Department of Social Welfare assisted SNM by informing its public assistance recipients who were living in Sembawang. It suggested that the Mission should find out from school principals if their students required educational, counselling or nutritional assistance.¹⁸⁶ In January 1975, SNM sent out 50 letters and numerous leaflets publicising the service to schools, community centres, youth groups, clinics, religious organisations and commercial firms.

Chia Soon Hai, the Chinese manager of the Sultan Theatre in Chong Pang Village, also supported the counselling and referral service. The cinema showed daily slides on the service in the four major languages free of charge. Write-ups on the service were also published in the *New Nation*, as well as in the SCSS newsletter, *Rapport*.¹⁸⁷ That year,

¹⁸⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Bhani Karthigusu, 9 July 1975.

¹⁸⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Don Mathews, 7 April 2022.

¹⁸⁶ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Lee Siew Kwong to President, SNM, 29 November 1973.

¹⁸⁷ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Counselling and Referral Service Annual Report, 15 January 1975.

Mathews reported that the service attended to 114 cases from the three major ethnic groups in Singapore.¹⁸⁸



Figure 40: Tuition class in progress.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

SNM continued to focus on education in the 1970s as the Guru had urged. From 1977, the Mission ran tuition classes for English, Mathematics and Science for Primary 5 and 6 students who were slow learners or from underprivileged backgrounds in Sembawang. In contrast to the Malayalam classes,

these classes were decidedly in greater demand. The students were from schools in the northern part of Singapore, such as Sembawang Primary School, West Hill School, Canberra School, and Sembawang School.¹⁸⁹ Though many of them were likely children of Malayalee parents, others could have been from the other ethnic backgrounds. That year, SNM ran two tuition classes with a total of 80 students.¹⁹⁰ They were usually taught by volunteer teachers from the Mission.

While the SNM Library contained Malayalam textbooks, it was also open to the wider public. This was to encourage more children and youths to read, as access to reading material was lacking in the northern part of Singapore.¹⁹¹ The Mission also continued to award scholarships and study loans to deserving and needy students, regardless of ethnicity. In 1977, it gave out two study loans worth \$500 each to needy students from the University of Singapore and the Singapore

¹⁸⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Report from the Management Committee, 1975.

¹⁸⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Management Committee's Report – 1977; SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Tuition Project; SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Don Mathews to Principal, Sembawang Primary School, 26 January 1977.

¹⁹⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Don Mathews to Principal, Canberra School, 22 February 1978.

¹⁹¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Neighbourhood Library Service.

Polytechnic.¹⁹² Two years later, SNM gave a low-income family \$300 for the purchase of textbooks and other school expenses for the children, as well as \$25 monthly in food relief to another family.¹⁹³

In 1977, the Mission proposed additional welfare projects. One was to allow the aged to engage in cottage industry work at its premises – a sign of its growing interest in this demographic. It also wanted to launch a mentorship scheme called the ‘Big Brother and Sister’ Project, a sewing workshop for school leavers seeking employment, and sewing classes for girls of weak intellectual ability. Not all of these proposals materialised due to the lack of funds.¹⁹⁴ But they showed that SNM was becoming a Singaporean voluntary organisation with a growing repertoire of direct welfare services, as the SCSS intended.

As S Vasoo recalled in his oral history interview with me, these welfare efforts were the Council’s way to encourage an initially hesitant group of SNM leaders to make ‘small, incremental changes’ in welfare services, so they could eventually mount a major project.¹⁹⁵ Bhasi admitted in an oral history interview in 2017, when the Mission was asked to run a home for the aged sick, ‘Actually we were a bit scared, because it is a big responsibility to run it. We didn't even have the place to run the home.’¹⁹⁶ SCSS’s soft yet insistent pressure across the 1970s culminated in the Mission adopting the SNM Home for the Aged Sick project, which came to fruition at the end of the decade.

¹⁹² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Study Loans.

¹⁹³ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 15 April 1979.

¹⁹⁴ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Don Mathews to Lee Pong Tee, 4 April 1977.

¹⁹⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Vasoo, 15 March 2022.

¹⁹⁶ NAS, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 14 October 2017, Reel 1.

International All Stars

Another interesting event in the 1970s was the International All Stars '76 Charity Show. It aimed to support the Mission's Building Fund, formed to raise funds for the expansion of the SNM Office.¹⁹⁷ Held at the National Theatre on 27 June 1976, the show was supported by the SCSS.¹⁹⁸ It was organised by a subcommittee chaired by Don Mathews and overseen by President Sreedharan.

In his preface on the show, Mathews highlighted a tripartite guiding influences: the Guru's teachings, Singapore's welfare policy and popular culture in the 1970s. He introduced SNM as a 'charitable and welfare organisation...dedicated to the alleviating of sufferings of the less fortunate ones in our society, regardless of race, colour or creed'.¹⁹⁹



Figure 41: Brian Richmond hosting at the Charity Show, National Theatre (1976). Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The charity show highlighted an interesting blend of the Guru's spiritual philosophy and contemporary popular culture. It was sponsored by Texwood Jeans, a company from Hong Kong that made the popular 'Apple' brand of jeans and had a showroom in

Orchard Road. Texwood was known for promoting fashion and music shows in Singapore and the region.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ MC 1/72/143, Letter from Don Mathews, SNM to the Controller of Immigration, Immigration Department, 28 May 1976.

¹⁹⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from Don Mathews to Lee Pong Tee, 29 March 1977.

¹⁹⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, International All Stars '76 Charity Show.

²⁰⁰ York Lo, Texwood (德士活) and "Apple Jeans" (蘋果牌牛仔褲), *The Industrial History of Hong Kong Group*, 14 June 2021, <https://industrialhistoryhk.org/texwood-%E5%BE%B7%E5%A3%AB%E6%B4%BB-and-apple-jeans%E8%98%8B%E6%9E%9C%E7%89%8C%E7%89%9B%E4%BB%94%E8%A4%B2/>

What President Sreedharan hailed as ‘eight of the most talented musical groups of international repute’ performed at the show, namely local bands such as Family Robinson and Sweet Charity as well as Shiner from New Zealand, Talismen (Karachi), Eddie Katindig & the Sound Movement and the New Minstrels (both from the Philippines), Casino (Indonesia), and Alley Cats (Malaysia).²⁰¹

These performances by Western bands were a departure from the usual traditional Malayalee theatre. It was proposed by Mathews who probably saw it as one of his ‘adventurous’ projects. The organising committee included two Chinese women – the Secretary and Assistant Secretary. But the spiritual inspiration came from the Guru, while the policy influence derived from the SCSS and by extension, the Singapore government.

In the 1960s and 1970s, SNM thus adapted to new circumstances in Singapore, evolving as a voluntary organisation. While continuing to adhere to the Guru’s teachings, the Mission became progressively more involved in officially sanctioned welfare programmes. A combination of factors – the loss of members due to the British pull-out and pressure from the SCSS, contributed to the change.

SNM emerged more ‘national’ and ‘Singaporean’ in its outlook. In 1977, it acknowledged that previously, it had played only an indirect role in welfare work, merely contributing the funds it raised to charitable organisations in Singapore’.²⁰² The new leadership had thus adopted the terminology of the SCSS.

In conclusion, let us turn to the SNM Nursing Home. Originally, it was located at Blocks 87/89 Canberra Road – the former Naval Base

²⁰¹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, International All Stars ’76 Charity Show.

²⁰² SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Welfare Service Report, p. 1.

Hospital Annexe. The conversion of a military facility into a home for the aged sick is a fitting way to show how the British withdrawal acted as a catalyst to renew and transform the Sree Narayana Mission.

Chapter 6

The Nursing Home and the Advisory Committee

The establishment of the Home for the Aged Sick in 1979 was a milestone in SNM's history. It was the Mission's first major direct welfare project. As the Nursing Home grew over the years, it propelled SNM into one of the leading voluntary welfare organisations in Singapore. Much of the credit for this lies with the Advisory Committee that managed the Home in the 1980s and 1990s. The Committee was chaired by Presidents R Sreedharan, K M Basker, M Sadanandan, M K Bhasi, and Dr Letha Karunakaran. They, along with B Sujatha, the long-time Secretary, were instrumental in the early development of the Home.

The Advisory Committee also had important external members. Its history tells us about how voluntary welfare services developed in Singapore. Besides Mission officials, the committee also comprised government representatives and outside professionals such as doctors and medical social workers. Working together, the committee members dealt with numerous practical issues, such as residents' welfare, staffing, admission of paying cases, and premises for the Nursing Home. These issues were often pressing and difficult.

The Advisory Committee was thus a tripartite body, quintessentially Singaporean in its work. On the one hand, SNM officials worked closely with representatives from the Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS) and the Ministries to run the Home, ensuring that it was

aligned to the official policy for the care of the aged sick. On the other hand, the officials listened to professionals with healthcare and welfare expertise, enabling the Home to provide quality care for the residents. It was not a one-way street either. On their part, SNM officials articulated the Mission's values and perspectives, and the importance of the Guru's teachings, to the other members.

The Advisory Committee was dynamic, with a healthy, sometimes robust, exchange of ideas and views. In 1982, for instance, government representative Pavala R Velu urged the committee to complete a survey on the aged sick by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA). This was important as part of the ministry's review of social services for the aged-sick in the 1980s.²⁰³ Conversely, in 1984, when the committee welcomed a new member, Ho Gang Hiang, from the SCSS, Chairman Sadanandan gave a detailed account of the Mission's activities. His main point was that the Guru's teachings are non-religious, based on the equality of people.²⁰⁴ When the committee organised a Lunar New Year celebration for the Home's residents the following year, Ho and H K Teoh (the senior medical social worker) were among the organisers.²⁰⁵ The committee applauded the pair for a successful dinner party.²⁰⁶

The Guru's Teachings in the Nursing Home

The Advisory Committee's work seemed technical on the surface. Philosophically, however, it was guided by the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru. This distinguished the Nursing Home from institutions

²⁰³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 21 August 1982.

²⁰⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 16 June 1984.

²⁰⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 January 1985.

²⁰⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 April 1985.

run by other voluntary organisations with their own concepts of spirituality and social service. On the one hand, the government and professional members in the committee drew the Home towards a set of national guidelines and standards. This made the institutions seem alike, operating within the government's policy for the aged sick. On the other hand, the Guru's teachings permeated the work of the Advisory Committee and the development of SNM's Home. His ideas were adapted to the circumstances and needs of Singapore society in the 1980s and 1990s. Over time, they shaped the Mission's evolution into a modern welfare organisation.

For example, the Advisory Committee decided in 1980 that the official opening of the Nursing Home would take place on 30 August 1980, together with the Guru's 126th birthday celebrations during Chathayam.²⁰⁷ When SNM applied for a Building Fund for new premises of the Home in Yishun in 1987, the aim was to 'provide shelter for the aged sick of Singapore irrespective of their race or religion'.²⁰⁸

As the Guru's disciple Kamala Devi observed, his teachings encompassed different aspects of life: spiritual, social, cultural, and educational.²⁰⁹ His principles, 'One in Kind, One in Faith and One in God is Man' and the 'Oneness of Humanity', offered moral support to the care of the aged sick in Singapore. Among the four core values in

²⁰⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 29 March 1980.

²⁰⁸ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from M.K. Bhasi to Comptroller of Income Tax, 1 June 1987.

²⁰⁹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Kamala Devi, 7 December 2022.



Figure 42: Mirror depicting the Guru's Values.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

his teachings are *sathyam* (truth), *dharmam* (righteousness), *shanthi* (peace), and *dhaya* (compassion) – the last expressly endorsed the care of the aged sick. In recent years, as SNM's welfare services expanded, this growth has not been for growth's sake, but remains anchored around the Guru's teachings.²¹⁰

My interviews with SNM members highlighted this influence. Over a period of 16 years from 1979, B Sujatha was the Secretary of SNM and the Advisory Committee, as well as the Mission's President in three separate stints in 1995, 1999 and 2007. A practising lawyer with her own law firm, she spent up to 30 percent of her time with the Mission. She gained much satisfaction from seeing the Mission grow from a humble organisation based in a small hut in Sembawang to providing major social services for vulnerable Singaporeans.

Sujatha was a disciple of the Guru, as her parents had been. She viewed his teachings in practical terms: running the Nursing Home was a way to put his philosophy into practice. She did not find it difficult to work with the government representatives in the Advisory Committee. On the contrary, she found them helpful and had good working relationships with them.²¹¹

²¹⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Devendran, 13 October 2022.

²¹¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Sujatha, 30 October 2022.

Many members echoed Sujatha's view. Chandra Bose had been involved with SNM since he was 30 years of age. He served on the Executive Committee while working a full-time job. He is proud that a Malayalee organisation is running a Nursing Home for all Singaporeans. This, he said, is rooted in the Guru's teachings. His contributions were practical as well as moral. When he was the Chair of the Building and Maintenance Subcommittee, Bose oversaw the addition of a fourth storey to the Home. His team conducted detailed surveys to ensure that the building was structurally sound and no further foundation work was needed.²¹²

For SNM members born in Kerala, like the Guru, the Nursing Home has a special meaning. According to her daughter Laina, R Raveendran and his wife Indira had seen first-hand how the Guru's social reforms had revolutionised Kerala. Raveendran was a former Secretary of SNM who believed in giving back to the wider community. He had introduced inter-faith conversations at the Mission.²¹³

For those members who arrived in Singapore as migrants, the Guru was both a spiritual and cultural force. For example, A Sarojam came to Singapore from Kerala to marry her husband in 1980. She soon became actively involved in the Mission's cultural programmes, which allowed her to connect with her roots. She met other Malayalees – especially the women – at the Chathayam celebrations. She became a life member in 1993. Before that, on 6 July 1990, she joined the Nursing Home staff as a clerical officer in order to support her family.

In 2022 and 2023, Sarojam was still active, being the project officer who helped immensely with this research into SNM's history. She was the point of contact for my interviews. When I asked her about her time

²¹² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Chandra Bose, 18 May 2022.

²¹³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Laina Raveendran, 27 October 2022.

at the Mission, she simply said that she is grateful to be able to work at the Nursing Home, putting into practice the Guru's call to serve the community.²¹⁴

Like Sarojam, Divakaran Sabu came to Singapore from Kerala around the same time – in 1978. He was also well-versed in the Guru's teachings in his hometown, but also understood what they entailed in the Singapore context. As he explained, unlike in India where the Guru was often worshipped as a deity, the main focus in Singapore was treating people equally regardless of race and religion.

As soon as he arrived, Sabu began volunteering in the Mission's cultural programmes. He sang and acted in numerous dramatic performances, as well as helping out during the Chathayam celebrations. For Sabu, the Guru's teachings brought a unity to the Mission's spiritual and cultural programmes for the members, while driving the efforts to help needy Singaporeans. He was actively involved in both ways: as Chair of the Cultural Subcommittee, and as a member of the SNM Executive Committee and the Subcommittee for Meranti Home, Members' Welfare and Facilities.²¹⁵

SNM's souvenir magazines have constantly highlighted the Guru's influence on its welfare projects, particularly the Nursing Home. President Sadanandan, writing in the 1984 issue, described the aged sick project 'as the type of Home that the Guru has visualised in his days: This is the model home where all men live in brotherhood, without any race distinction or religious differences'.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with A. Sarojam, 10 August 2022.

²¹⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Divakaran Sabu, 17 August 2022.

²¹⁶ SNM, *130th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1984), p. 13.



Figure 43: Dr Tony Tan was a regular visitor
Source: Sree Narayana Mission

Political leaders, government and SCSS officials made similar speeches during the Chathayam celebrations or their visits to the Home. In 1980, Dr Tony Tan praised SNM for its welfare work, remarking that the Guru's birthday celebrations were 'an occasion to learn from the exemplary conduct of the teacher so that we too might be inspired to lead a life of service to our community'.²¹⁷ The Nursing Home was opened the previous year. Dr Ee Peng Liang, the SCSS President, also attributed the

Home to a key principle in the Guru's teachings – to 'do your utmost for the well-being of your neighbours.'²¹⁸

These official comments showed that the government was pleased with the development of the Nursing Home. It wished for voluntary organisations to retain their cultural identity and heritage – things that mattered to their members. This was essential if these groups were to remain socially relevant while serving the needs of the wider community.

The Nation's Needs

One of these needs, the government realised by the 1970s, was for VWOs to provide 'additional and new services', including community

²¹⁷ SNM, *126th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1980), p. 5.

²¹⁸ SNM, *126th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1980), p. 7.

homes for the aged and aged sick.²¹⁹ Singapore's population was rapidly ageing. By 1980, people aged 60 and above made up 7.2 percent of the population. This placed a growing burden on the younger generation to support the elderly.²²⁰ However, demographics was not the only aspect of the problem.

Other social developments in Singapore had increased the demand for nursing homes. By the 1970s, it was becoming difficult for family members to care for their elderly relatives. The public housing programme had split up the traditional extended family, with adult children often living separately from their parents. Women were also joining the workforce – this was a boost to the growing economy but also reduced their traditional role as caregivers.

In Chinatown, the urban renewal programme had improved the overall quality of buildings and sanitation. But historically, many community homes were located there, run by Chinese clan associations, where the destitute aged could rent a little bedspace. Many of these homes were demolished.²²¹ Urban renewal, together with living in high-rise housing, also caused financial and psychological distress for many elderly people.²²²

In 1971, journalist Nada Skerly Arnold wrote about the fall of the proverbial 'Dragon Lady' as Chinese sons and daughters-in-law rebelled against the old social norms. She noted that young women

²¹⁹ SCSS 164A/75, Field Report No. 2, 'Services to the Aged and Chronic Sick', p. 1.

²²⁰ SCSS 13/12, Report, 'Present Situation in the Nursing Care of the Aged Sick'.

²²¹ SCSS 164A/75, Field Report No. 2, 'Services to the Aged and Chronic Sick'.

²²² Dr Tham Kok Wah, *Institutional Care Services for the Aged and Aged Sick in Singapore*, unpublished Master of Science dissertation, National University of Singapore, 1983.

were earning wages in the factories and hotels of fast-industrialising Singapore, giving them a new economic power vis-à-vis their elders.²²³

Because of all these reasons, Singapore needed voluntary organisations to play a bigger role in caring for the sick and vulnerable elderly. Many of them were unable to care for themselves in the community. In 1966, a Ministry of Health study found that 23.3 percent of those aged 60 and above suffered from chronic illnesses. A decade later, the National Survey on Morbidity discovered that the aged sick formed 1.3 percent of the population, which was about 5,000 to 7,000 persons.²²⁴

The figure was small, but much bigger was the need for specialised services and the funding to care for the aged sick. A survey in 1982 deemed that 53 percent of the elderly were physically ambulant, compared to 37 percent who were semi-ambulant and 10 percent non-ambulant. All these elderly suffered from chronic illnesses such as cerebrovascular disease, dementia, hypertension, respiratory and heart diseases.²²⁵ In this light, the Guru's teachings provided moral sanction for a group of volunteers to help some of these aged sick.

87/89 Canberra Road

The Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick – its original name – started operations at 2 p.m. on 18 February 1979, a Sunday. Its first batch of five residents arrived at its premises at the former Naval Base

²²³ Nada Skerly Arnold, 'The Aged In Singapore: Veneration Collides With The 20th Century', December 1971, <https://aliciapatterson.org/stories/aged-singapore-veneration-collides-20th-century>

²²⁴ SCSS 13/12, Report, 'Present Situation in the Nursing Care of the Aged Sick'.

²²⁵ Tham, *Institutional Care Services for the Aged and Aged Sick in Singapore*.

Hospital Annexe at Blocks 87/89 Canberra Road.²²⁶ The two blocks had previously been the quarters for Asian employees of the Singapore Naval Base. They were located in a wooded area at the time. As a young nursing aide at the Home recounted, it was ‘in the middle of nowhere.’²²⁷

In early 1978, President Sreedharan had written to the Bases Economic Conversion Department (BECD) for permission to use the two blocks on a nominal rent. He explained they were ideal premises for the Home.²²⁸ 80 percent of the



Figure 44: Nursing Home at Block 87/89 at Canberra Road.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

residents, he said, would be non-ambulant chronic sick, with the remainder being ambulant cases.²²⁹ The SCSS supported his request, noting that there was no such home for the aged sick in Sembawang. It added that SNM was able to self-finance the project.²³⁰ The BECD granted SNM the use of the two blocks on a Temporary Occupation Licence.²³¹

²²⁶ SCSS 13/08/01, Note on the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick, February 1991. M. Sadanandan stated the number to be four in SNM, *130th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1984), while the SNM executive committee documented that three residents were admitted; see SNM, Minutes of Emergency Committee Meeting, 18 February 1979.

²²⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anonymous 1, 19 July 2022.

²²⁸ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from R. Sreedharan to Commissioner of Lands, 18 April 1978.

²²⁹ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Letter from R. Sreedharan to Commissioner of Lands, 24 April 1978.

²³⁰ SCSS M/88/66 Vol. VI, Memo from S. Vasoo to Wong Wing Cheow, 27 April 1978.

²³¹ SNM, Invitation letter to the Home for the Aged Sick, 14 February 1979; SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from K.M. Basker to Director, Building Control Department, 21 May 1980.

This modest beginning was a catalyst for major changes at SNM. The Mission hired more professional staff with the expertise to administer the Home and care for the aged sick. Clerical and nursing personnel arrived to do what the volunteers could not. At the same time, SNM officials worked closely with the government agencies and SCSS, taking into account their views and suggestions on running the Home.

In the 1980s, the government was concerned with two key matters: to set guidelines for minimum standards of care; and the criteria for admission to the nursing homes. In 1983, S C Tang, the SCSS Executive Director, stated, ‘Our affiliates want to run a humane and dignified service providing adequate service and comfort to the persons served...They cannot compromise their standards for numbers’.²³²

The Advisory Committee was the conduit for these reforms. Its first meeting was held on 14 April 1979, two months after the Home began operations. SNM President R Sreedharan was the Chair.²³³ The members agreed that subject to the overriding powers of the Executive Committee, the Advisory Committee was responsible for the management of the Home and its meetings would be held at 87/89 Canberra Road.²³⁴



Figure 45: The Home at the Naval Base Hospital
Source: Sree Narayana Mission

The Executive Committee was the approving body for Home-related matters, such as the recruitment and deployment of staff. In the two months before the Advisory Committee was formed, it had handled these matters in an ad-hoc manner. It

²³² SCSS 13/12, Memo from S.C. Tang to Ng Yew Kang, 15 March 1983.

²³³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 14 April 1979.

²³⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 14 April 1979.

had to meet in an emergency meeting on 18 February 1979 – the day the Home began its operations. This was to approve the urgent hiring of a former attendant from the former Naval Base Hospital at Canberra Road.²³⁵

There was another emergency meeting on 29 March 1979 when the Executive Committee members learned of another urgent need to have a voluntary doctor visit the Home. Sreedharan agreed to make an appeal to doctors.²³⁶ Five doctors agreed to volunteer their services and visit the residents.²³⁷ In the following year, the number had increased to 14 voluntary doctors.²³⁸ But it was clear that these matters should not be handled in emergency meetings, but by a dedicated subcommittee.

A Question of Authority

Even after the Advisory Committee was formed in April 1979, the division of labour between it and the Executive Committee remained somewhat unclear. The Executive Committee instructed the Advisory Committee to write to the Sembawang Hospital for the services of medical social workers later that month, as well as to hire a nurse and night watchman.²³⁹ In May 1979, the Executive Committee decided that the Home's residents would receive an allowance of \$10 each.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ SNM, Minutes of Emergency Committee Meeting, 18 February 1979.

²³⁶ SNM, Minutes of Emergency Committee Meeting, 29 March 1979.

²³⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 5 May 1979.

²³⁸ SNM, *126th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1980).

²³⁹ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 15 April 1979.

²⁴⁰ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 6 May 1979.

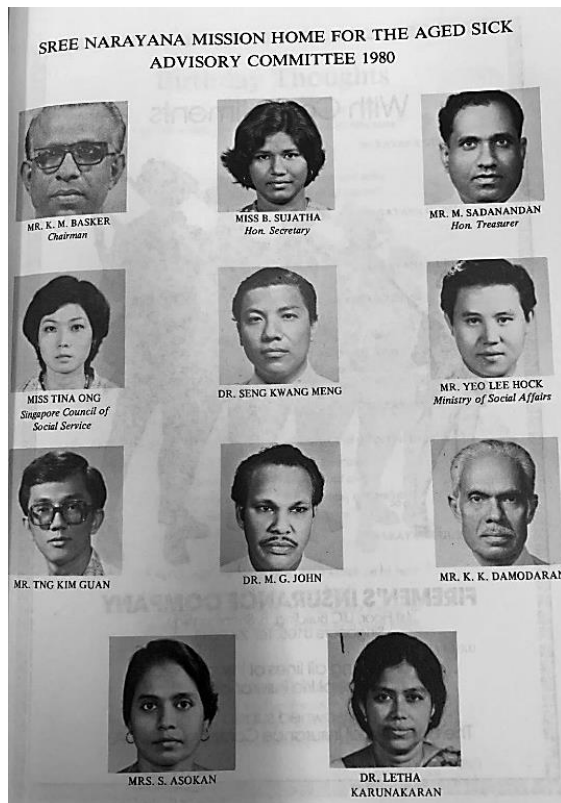


Figure 46: The Advisory Committee, 1980.
Source: Souvenir Magazine.

In another meeting in July 1979, Sreedharan related that having visited the Home, the Guru Nitya Chaitanya urged the Mission to make it ‘a model’ for others to emulate. Sreedharan also suggested that the Home be equipped with recreational facilities.²⁴¹ On 9 December, the Executive Committee decided that 20 percent of the net proceeds of the year’s Flag Day be used for running the Home.²⁴² This was increased to 70 percent in the following year’s Flag Day – a sign of the Mission’s commitment to the project.²⁴³

These were routine matters, but the question of authority had to be addressed. During an Advisory Committee meeting on 22 September 1979, it transpired that a member (who was both in the Executive and Advisory Committees) had independently hired an assistant nurse for the Home. Sujatha told the Committee that as the ‘Supreme Body’ of SNM, the Executive Committee should have been consulted. The member’s action had thus placed her in a difficult position.

After discussing the matter, the Advisory Committee decided that such matters should first be brought to the attention of the Executive Committee and it was not up to individuals to decide. The Advisory Committee agreed to honour the nurse’s employment as it had been

²⁴¹ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 July 1979, p. 2.

²⁴² SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 9 December 1979.

²⁴³ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 28 December 1980.

committed. This was endorsed by the Executive Committee after much debate. Sujatha stressed that such incidents should not be repeated in future.²⁴⁴ The incident helped define the respective roles of the Executive and Advisory committees on matters concerning the Home.

The work of the Advisory Committee might appear mundane. It was absorbed with practical matters such as staffing, admissions, facilities, and residents' well-being. But it was precisely these practical matters that impinged on the success of the Nursing Home. SNM had no prior experience with such a project.

Financially, the operating costs of the Home were supported by donations in cash and in kind from individuals, other charitable organisations, companies, government agencies, foundations in Singapore, from SNM Flag Days and other fundraising activities. These donations had to be properly accounted for. Other matters required expert advice from healthcare and welfare professionals, as well as ministerial and SCSS officials familiar with government rules and regulations. On their part, SNM officials showed themselves to be willing to receive and consider such advice.

Let us take a look at some of these practical matters. In August 1979, the Advisory Committee decided that the Home's female residents, there were four of them, would be housed separately from the men in a single large room as this was important for privacy. The Committee also accepted Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) representative Yeo Lee Hock's recommendation to appoint Fook Sow Undertakers to conduct the funerals of destitute residents who had passed away. Also accepted was his suggestion to admit a 70-year-old lady on public assistance, whose maintenance would be provided by her grandson. As there had

²⁴⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 22 September 1979; SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 30 September 1979.

been a case of theft at the Home, K K N Nair agreed to select a few residents to be responsible for security.²⁴⁵

In the following meeting, government representative Tng Kim Chuan reported that he had conducted a survey of the Home's facilities. He made a number of recommendations to improve them.²⁴⁶ In September 1979, the Advisory Committee decided to install iron grills in the storerooms, seal up seven unused toilets, converting some of them into washrooms, and to construct partitions in the bathrooms.

Sujatha proposed that as more chronic cases were being admitted, the ground floor of Block 87 should be converted into a general ward and that an assistant nurse be stationed there, which the committee agreed.²⁴⁷ This meeting was also notable as it was Sreedharan's final time chairing the committee meeting. When the group met again on 2 December 1979, Basker was the new SNM President and he would chair the Advisory Committee meetings till 1982.²⁴⁸

At the meeting on 28 September 1980, the name of the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick was shortened to the SNM Home for the Aged Sick. It was also decided then that SNM members K K Damodharan and C Shanmugan, together with government representative Tng Kim Chuan, would jointly supervise the construction of a lean-to-roof at Block 89 and a covered walkway between the blocks and the recreation hall.²⁴⁹ The lean-to-roof would allow male and female residents to be housed in separate blocks.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 11 August 1979.

²⁴⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Survey of the Premise of Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick, 28 August 1979.

²⁴⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 22 September 1979.

²⁴⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 2 December 1979.

²⁴⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 28 September 1980; SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from K.M. Basker to Director, Building Control Department, 21 May 1980.

²⁵⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 1 November 1980.

The Advisory Committee also decided that able-bodied residents be trained to prepare their own tea and breakfast, thus reducing the number of staff needed.²⁵¹ A year later, the committee noted that as the Home was receiving more applications for admission, it was necessary to construct another lean-to-roof to increase the number of beds.²⁵² But this project, as we will see, was soon overtaken by other events.

In 1982, government representative T Kulasekaran suggested to the committee that the report by the Nursing Officer V Subramaniam (who sat on the Advisory Committee) should include more information such as: the number of applications approved, the number of applicants admitted and why some applicants did not respond to an offer of admission.²⁵³ This would help the committee better understand the admission of residents and overall administration of the Home. Like Don Mathews, Subramaniam had also been recommended to SNM by S Vasoo.²⁵⁴ Later that year, Yeo proposed that medical bills incurred by residents who went to the hospitals should be waived. He volunteered to take up the matter with the MSA.²⁵⁵

In October 1982, the Committee found out that a group visiting the Home had awakened some residents from their sleep. Sujatha instructed Subramaniam to ensure that religious groups visiting the Home should not carry out activities that would disturb the residents. Government representative Sandra Sin proposed that the visitors should obtain permission from SNM to propagate their religious teachings.²⁵⁶ Subsequently, when a Christian worker asked to conduct

²⁵¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 28 September 1980.

²⁵² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 26 September 1981.

²⁵³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 June 1982.

²⁵⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 20 April 2022.

²⁵⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 21 August 1982.

²⁵⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 16 October 1982.

Bible Study at the Home, her request was granted with such a condition.²⁵⁷ She only turned up once.²⁵⁸

Dr Seng Kwang Meng: Volunteer Extraordinaire

The Advisory Committee's meeting on 2 June 1979 was historically significant. This was when Dr Seng Kwang Meng, an obstetrician and gynaecologist, joined the group. It was the start of his long association as a voluntary doctor with the Home. The committee unanimously decided to appoint him as the Chairman of the group of volunteer doctors with the Home.²⁵⁹

In the next meeting on 11 August 1979, Dr Seng explained that voluntary doctors were unable to provide primary care to the residents due to the lack of facilities, but they could provide supportive and supplementary care. He agreed to work out a roster for the doctors. He also detailed the medical care needed at the Home: to have an assistant nurse during the day, two attendants (one during the day and the other at night), an ambulance, and a first-aid kit.²⁶⁰ He subsequently managed to recruit two more volunteer doctors, while also obtaining the donation of the first-aid kit and two sets of screens.²⁶¹

In mid-1981, Dr Seng submitted a working paper to the committee, proposing to increase the number of residents to 100, of whom a quarter would be non-ambulant cases. The paper also highlighted the need for a full complement of staff and upgrades to the existing services, such

²⁵⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 November 1982.

²⁵⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 11 December 1982.

²⁵⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 2 June 1979.

²⁶⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 11 August 1979.

²⁶¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 22 September 1979.

as having trained physiotherapists, additional drugs and organising recreational activities.²⁶²

The paper further proposed that nursing aides should undergo a systematic training programme, and that generally the staff could be trained at the Mt. Alvernia Hospital. The committee acknowledged that the paper was ‘painstakingly drawn up and thought provoking, thus warranting close examination.’²⁶³ It was adopted as the guideline for running the Home.²⁶⁴

Dr Seng continued to make substantive contributions in subsequent years. In September 1983, he suggested that employees had to pass a medical check-up, for which he volunteered his services.²⁶⁵ In 1988, he represented the Advisory Committee in a Mandarin talk show featuring the activities at the Home.²⁶⁶ Dr Seng was remarkable for his vision for the Home, as well as his concrete efforts. Sujatha, in her dealings with him, had referred to him as a ‘gentleman.’²⁶⁷

The Paying Cases Debate

Finances are never far away from the work of voluntary organisations. They were at the heart of a key matter in the running of the Home which was the admission of paying residents. This was not only a financial matter but a policy issue. In tackling it, the government and SNM moved from initially differing positions to an acceptable compromise. Typically, many self-help organisations in Singapore were formed with

²⁶² SCSS 13/08/01, Working Paper for SNM Home for the Aged Sick for 1981/1982.

²⁶³ SCSS 13/08/01, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 13 June 1981, p. 1.

²⁶⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 August 1981, p. 2.

²⁶⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 24 September 1983.

²⁶⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 November 1988.

²⁶⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Sujatha, 30 October 2022.

a mandate to help the destitute. This was also true for SNM, guided by the Guru's call for his followers to help the poor. Paying cases seemed to be outside the norm.

In the 1980s, this difficult question arose: Should families shoulder most of the responsibility to care for their aged sick, as the government intended? When and how should this responsibility be delegated to voluntary organisations? What happens when families without financial resources are unable to provide the care, Can they transfer their sick relative to a nursing home?

The Advisory Committee deliberated on this in a meeting on 29 November 1980. Yeo Lee Hock (MSA) was the advocate and he proposed that up to 30 percent of the Home's residents could be paying cases. This would, he said, help finance the destitute residents. The payments would also be helpful when donations from the public were not forthcoming. The Committee was unsure and decided to consult the Social Welfare Department.²⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, the latter supported the idea as long as the proportion of paying residents did not exceed 30 percent, as Yeo proposed.

Still, SNM hesitated but after a lengthy discussion on 10 January 1981, the Advisory Committee decided not to accept paying cases, as 'the Mission Home was set up for the welfare of the needy and the destitute aged sick'. But it allowed for exceptions where paying cases would be accepted on compassionate grounds.²⁶⁹ This was a compromise between the government and SNM.

A number of paying residents were slowly admitted to the Home. In August, there were 11 paying cases out of 73 residents (15 percent of

²⁶⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 29 November 1980.

²⁶⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 10 January 1981.

the total, halfway to the proposed quota).²⁷⁰ In July 1982, the question of paying cases was revisited, when the Ministry asked the Advisory Committee if paying cases from Madam Lee Ah Moi's Home could be admitted.

The Advisory Committee reiterated its position – that only destitute cases or those on public assistance were accepted as a rule, but paying cases could be admitted on compassionate grounds.²⁷¹ In April 1983, the committee learned that some of the paying residents were in arrears. Sujatha, as a devout follower of the Guru, proposed that the Mission should admit no more such cases, returning to the principle of accepting only destitute persons.²⁷²

Yeo pressed his point. He said that if SNM admitted only destitute cases, the Home might not be fully utilised to its maximum capacity. Again, he emphasised that the paying cases provided an additional source of income. He noted that there were genuine cases of aged sick requiring institutional care who could pay for it; they should be considered with sympathy.²⁷³ Pragmatism was at the heart of the matter and as standards of living rose in Singapore, the destitute would form a diminishing group of aged sick.

Put this way, Yeo's position was in line with both government policy and the Guru's philosophy. By this time, the government had decided that admission criteria for nursing homes be liberalised to include aged sick persons with family members or those who could afford to pay.²⁷⁴ It had to persuade voluntary organisations to adopt the new policy.

²⁷⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, August 1981.

²⁷¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 10 July 1982.

²⁷² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 30 April 1983.

²⁷³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 28 May 1983.

²⁷⁴ SCSS 13/12, Report, 'Assessment of Needs of Homes Providing Institutional Care for the Aged Sick'.

Amid the stalemate in the Advisory Committee, Dr Seng stepped in. He suggested that the matter be referred to the SNM Executive Committee.²⁷⁵ On 9 July 1983, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Executive Committee had met and approved the admission of paying residents, setting the minimum monthly contribution at \$300 per month.²⁷⁶

This would allow lower-middle income families to pay for the care of their aged sick relatives in an institution. At the next meeting in September 1983, the Advisory Committee agreed to accept a number of hardship cases brought up by Yeo on sympathetic grounds, with their family making a nominal contribution to the Home.²⁷⁷

The decision further eased SNM into the national policy for the aged sick in the 1980s. The tripartite group of SNM leaders, government officials and outside professionals had conferred together and reached an acceptable, pragmatic compromise over a fundamental question in the administration of nursing homes. They had done so while staying true to the Guru's teachings and the organisation's values.

Working with government officials and professionals gradually drew SNM into the orbit of Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) in Singapore. The Mission developed a national orientation and a modern approach to social services. SNM's legal adviser Chandra Mohan K Nair put it well: the welfare programmes, as well as working with non-Malayalees, provided 'good energy' to SNM.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 28 May 1983.

²⁷⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 9 July 1983.

²⁷⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 24 September 1983.

²⁷⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Chandra Mohan K. Nair, 24 May 2022.

Chapter 7

People of the Nursing Home

The SNM Nursing Home comprised three groups of people: the residents, the visitors and the staff. It was a home for the first group, a place where the second occasionally visited and a workplace for the third. Little is known about all three groups – their experiences and their struggles. This chapter sheds some light.

The Residents

The residents were known to the SMN Advisory Committee, which spent much time deliberating over their admission and well-being. The agenda for every meeting in the 1980s and 1990s was to discuss applications, referral cases and incidents. The committee read notes from medical social workers and government officials, becoming acquainted with the applicants' medical conditions, financial situation, family relations, and even personality. The notes were not always comprehensive or accurate. Some – on personality – seemed impressionistic and subjective.



Figure 47: Karupiah Oyaniah, one of the first residents of the Home. Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

What was clear from these documents was that most of the early residents were destitute persons of working-class background, such as

widows and former odd-job labourers. They had no family (or none who could support them) and were on public assistance. This was before 1981, when as we saw in the previous chapter, the Home began to admit some paying cases.²⁷⁹

Half a year after the Home started, the number of residents rose from 5 to 22, consisting of 18 males and 4 females.²⁸⁰ It gradually increased, more than doubling to 55 in January 1981 (37 males and 18 females).²⁸¹ The proportion of women grew steadily, though not quite equalling the number of men. This reflected the well-known phenomenon of poverty among elderly women, who were less likely to be educated or have sufficient savings in old age.

Initially, the Home was under-utilised, with 39 residents against 61 vacancies in mid-1980. This was due to the lack of qualified staff to care for them more than anything else, as will be discussed in the following section.²⁸² Two years later, the numbers rose markedly to 83 residents and 17 vacancies.²⁸³ In April 1984, the Home reached virtual full capacity with 148 residents (84 males and 64 females), with just two vacancies.²⁸⁴ The problem of the aged sick in Singapore was a pressing one.

As with social class, the ethnic composition of the residents showed the influence of the Guru's teachings and the work of a typical Singaporean welfare organisation. The Home was open to all ethnic groups. Though no precise statistics were kept, the ethnic profile could be inferred from

²⁷⁹ The information is drawn from the monthly reports of the SNM Home for the Aged Sick found in the SCSS files 13/08 Vol. 1, 13/08 Vol. II, 13/08 Vol. III, 13/08/01, and 13/08/02.

²⁸⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, August 1979.

²⁸¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, January 1981.

²⁸² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, May 1980.

²⁸³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, May 1982.

²⁸⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, January 1984.

the names of applicants, the residents who received treatment in hospital or were otherwise documented in monthly reports and cases files.



Figure 48: Residents of the SNM.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

What is clear was that the Home's residents mirrored the general population of Singapore – there was a large Chinese majority and small numbers of non-Chinese.²⁸⁵ There seemed to have been very few Malayalee residents. Malay residents were also under-represented. In 1980, there was a single Malayalee out of 37

residents, compared to 21 Chinese, 12 Tamils, 2 Eurasians and 1 Malay.²⁸⁶ In February 1991, there were 75 Chinese residents, comprising 70.7 percent of the total, compared to 30 Indians (28.3 percent) and 1 Eurasian (1 percent). It was not stated if any of the Indians were Malayalees.²⁸⁷

Daily life at the Home in the 1980s was grim. The institution provided shelter and care to the best of its ability and resources, but the quality of care was poor by contemporary standards. Singapore was only beginning to address the issue of the aged sick, when the government introduced guidelines for minimum care standards at Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). Basic services and amenities were provided, but liveability, quality of life and dignity in treating people who were ill and elderly, were lacking to some degree. All three needed time to develop.

²⁸⁵ The information is drawn from the monthly reports of the SNM Home for the Aged Sick found in the SCSS files 13/08 Vol. 1, 13/08 Vol. II, 13/08 Vol. III, 13/08/01, and 13/08/02.

²⁸⁶ SCSS 13/08/01, Particulars of Residents, c. 1980.

²⁸⁷ SCSS 13/08/01, Distribution of Residents by Ethnic Group, 7 February 1991.

Singapore had initially struggled to care for the destitute aged sick. In 1970, there had been a public outcry against conditions in three privately-run institutions caring for about 300 aged sick – Aljunied Road Temple, Dragon Lotus Hill and Yew Tee Homes. It was found that the homes, being profit-driven, had reduced their services when contributions from families ran out.²⁸⁸ The Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS) stated that their motives ‘were not purely altruistic’.²⁸⁹

One journalist likened the Yew Tee Home to a ‘U.S.-style turkey farm’, with its residents housed in ‘long open-side sheds’.²⁹⁰ The temple was eventually closed down while the other two were brought under government supervision. The scandal spurred the authorities to persuade VWOs like SNM to operate nursing homes and ensure a minimum standard of care for the residents.

At the SNM Home, male and female residents were housed in separate blocks. But within each block, they lived in open wards with little privacy, though married couples were given a space to themselves.²⁹¹ In mid-1979, the Advisory Committee decided that the residents should wear uniforms, as hospital patients did, but these should be kept as casual as possible.²⁹² In March 1980, the Committee ruled that the discriminating term ‘inmate’ (inherited from the Colonial era) should be replaced by ‘resident’, though it continued to be used for some time.²⁹³

²⁸⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Vasoo, 15 March 2022.

²⁸⁹ SCSS, *Annual Report 1971*, p. 7.

²⁹⁰ Arnold, ‘The Aged in Singapore’.

²⁹¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anonymous 1, 19 July 2022.

²⁹² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 2 June 1979.

²⁹³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 29 March 1980.

The residents followed daily routines. One of these was the mealtimes. They woke up early for breakfast at 7 a.m. followed by a coffee break at 9.30 a.m. Lunch was served two hours later, with another break for tea at 2.30 p.m. Dinner arrived at 5 p.m. and supper (a cup of Horlicks) came at 7 p.m., which was the last meal of the day.²⁹⁴

However, daily routines belied the unpredictability of events in an aged sick institution. The residents suffered from serious chronic illnesses that were common among Singapore's elderly in the 1980s: hypertension, heart disease, mental illnesses, cancer, and diabetes.²⁹⁵ Some of the residents were blind, wheelchair-bound or bedridden, needing constant care. A small number had to be hospitalised for acute ailments, while an occasional death would occur at the Home.²⁹⁶

As a nursing aide in the early 1980s related, most of the destitute residents, lacking family and friends, were resigned to their fate. They were given medication labelled by their bed number. But it might have been that the tablets were only vitamin pills. They were handed out because many residents expected to take their medication.²⁹⁷

Initially, there was a large proportion of able-bodied residents who did unpaid work or helped with daily chores – handicraft work, gardening, watering the plants, cleaning, doing laundry and working in the kitchen.²⁹⁸ They thus kept themselves occupied while keeping the number of auxiliary paid staff down to some extent. The SCSS's policy

²⁹⁴ The information is drawn from the monthly reports of the SNM Home for the Aged Sick found in the SCSS files 13/08 Vol. 1, 13/08 Vol. II, 13/08 Vol. III, 13/08/01, and 13/08/02.

²⁹⁵ Dr Tham Kok Wah, *Institutional Care Services for the Aged and Aged Sick in Singapore*, unpublished Master of Science dissertation, National University of Singapore, 1983.

²⁹⁶ The information is drawn from the monthly reports of the SNM Home for the Aged Sick found in the SCSS files 13/08 Vol. 1, 13/08 Vol. II, 13/08 Vol. III, 13/08/01, and 13/08/02.

²⁹⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anonymous 1, 19 July 2022.

²⁹⁸ The information is drawn from the monthly reports of the SNM Home for the Aged Sick found in the SCSS files 13/08 Vol. 1, 13/08 Vol. II, 13/08 Vol. III, 13/08/01, and 13/08/02.

was to have a sizeable contingent of able-bodied residents who could shoulder some of the chores in the institutions.²⁹⁹



Figure 49: A resident attended to by a volunteer doctor.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

But as the number of residents rose in the 1980s, the proportion of resident workers fell significantly. This might have been due to the poor health of new admissions, so those who could work were probably the same persons from the early years. Another possible reason was that the paying cases

admitted on compassionate grounds were likely non-ambulant. The increase in paid staff might also have reduced the need for residents to work, but the elderly would still need to be occupied one way or another.

Whatever the reason, it was becoming more difficult to find resident workers. By March 1986, there were only two such workers left, both helping out in the kitchen.³⁰⁰ In February 1991, more than half, 57 percent of the residents were non-ambulant, compared to 20 percent semi-ambulant and 24 percent ambulant.³⁰¹ There were still nearly a quarter of residents who could do some form of work, but the number of resident workers was not stated by this time.

The Advisory Committee also dealt with occasional problems that highlighted the difficulties of running a nursing home. The monthly reports compiled by V Subramaniam, the Nursing Officer in the 1980s, were generally positive, though sparse on details. The residents were

²⁹⁹ SCSS 06/02/06, SCSS Guidelines on Staff-to-residents Ratio in Homes for the Aged and Aged Sick.

³⁰⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Monthly Report for Home for the Aged Sick, March 1986.

³⁰¹ SCSS 13/08/01, Distribution of Residents by Ethnic Group, 7 February 1991.

reportedly happy, contented and even in good health,³⁰² but there were exceptions.

In 1982, the Committee had to transfer a resident to another Home, as he was an alcoholic who frequently used vulgar language at the staff.³⁰³ Another resident who was sometimes violent at night was deemed to be mentally unsound. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) representative Yeo Lee Hock suggested that he be transferred to the Woodbridge Hospital.³⁰⁴

There was a female resident – an old lady – who repeatedly tried to leave the premises.³⁰⁵ This was an old Cantonese woman who occasionally had a grieving fit. She would wait at the gate for her son to visit her, though she was otherwise quite calm.³⁰⁶ In 1987, there was another resident who often left the Home without permission before returning in a drunken state.³⁰⁷

The Visitors

Visitors were an important group at the Home – they enlivened the atmosphere, punctuated the monotony and brought cheer to the old folks. The Advisory Committee knew from the start that the Home should not be a closed institution. Appealing for more volunteers and visitors to engage the residents, in 1982, SNM acknowledged, ‘The

³⁰² The information is drawn from the monthly reports of the SNM Home for the Aged Sick found in the SCSS files 13/08 Vol. 1, 13/08 Vol. II, 13/08 Vol. III, 13/08/01, and 13/08/02.

³⁰³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 15 May 1982.

³⁰⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 21 August 1982.

³⁰⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 11 December 1982.

³⁰⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anonymous 1, 19 July 2022.

³⁰⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 June 1987.

basic problems of the elderly are boredom and loneliness and a feeling of neglect by others'.³⁰⁸



Figure 50: Students visiting the Home.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 51: Visitors from the public.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The residents received numerous visitors, from schools, the Armed Forces, government agencies, multinational corporations, and fellow voluntary organisations. Many visitors praised the Home for its cleanliness and contented residents.³⁰⁹ In April 1980, SCSS representative, Tina Ong informed the Advisory Committee that the DBS Group had adopted the Home, making it one of the first visiting groups.³¹⁰ The Committee learned that visits from the bank's staff lifted the residents' morale.³¹¹

³⁰⁸ SNM, *128th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1982), p. 11.

³⁰⁹ SNM, *128th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1982).

³¹⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 29 April 1980.

³¹¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 26 July 1980.

In 1981, Ong noted that some groups were not properly received when they arrived at the Home. Dr Seng Kwang Meng, the volunteer doctor, suggested that some Committee Members be present to receive them.³¹²

Visitors to the Home



Figure 52: Dr Tony Tan.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 53: A well-wisher.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 54: Ong Teng Cheong.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 55: Yeo Cheow Tong.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

SNM members themselves were among the residents' regular visitors – and often the most enthusiastic ones. A memorable occasion was the Christmas-cum-New Year party held on 28 December 1985. Mission members, both male and female, performed songs and dances for the residents, who also received prizes during the celebrations.³¹³

³¹² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 August 1981, p. 2.

³¹³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 13 March 1986.

As early as May 1979, the Home had approached army camps in the Sembawang area to adopt the Home and for service personnel to befriend the residents.³¹⁴ When the Home moved to the former Sembawang Hospital in 1983, SAF service personnel and other volunteers helped with the move.³¹⁵



Figure 56: Befrienders from the Sembawang Air Base.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

In 1986, following a survey conducted by students from the National University of Singapore, a befrienders' scheme was introduced at the Home. Service personnel from the Sembawang Airbase, including women, joined the scheme and adopted the residents in November that year.³¹⁶ SAF service personnel followed suit in May 1987.³¹⁷

A survey of 80 Sembawang Airbase befrienders in 1987 sheds some light on the lives and minds of the residents and the experiences of the visitors. Some residents were happy to talk about the past and their life at the Home, while others kept silent.

The befrienders gained a composite picture of social life at the institution. A number of residents were ill-tempered, often quarrelling with others. But other residents were caring and generous, willing to share their food and drinks. It was found that some residents were wary

³¹⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 29 March 1980.

³¹⁵ SNM, Minutes of Emergency Committee Meeting, 19 October 1983.

³¹⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 22 November 1986.

³¹⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 2 May 1987.

about using appliances at the Home, fearing they would damage the appliances and receive a scolding from the matron.³¹⁸

A more serious issue at the Home was the perception that doctors were not around when needed.³¹⁹ A nursing aide in the 1980s agreed that though a volunteer doctor came by every day, this was little more than a ‘whirlwind visit’ to ensure that the Home was running smoothly.³²⁰



Figure 57: A volunteer conducting exercises for residents. Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

The residents also complained about the theft of money and the lack of hygiene and food. In 1987, the Advisory Committee decided to open a tuckshop inside the Home to cater to them.³²¹ The befrienders related that the rooms in the Home were poorly ventilated and one said, ‘The air stinks and smelled of medicine’.³²² This was not surprising given that most of the residents were ill.

The language barrier meant that many befrienders could not really engage the residents in conversation. The old folks might not know English or the official mother tongues taught in school, while the younger generation might not know the vernacular dialects. There was a pervasive sense of loneliness at the Home as one elderly resident asked the volunteer not to leave.³²³

³¹⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Report on Sembawang Airbase Volunteers’ Feedback, c.1987.

³¹⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Report on Sembawang Airbase Volunteers’ Feedback, c.1987.

³²⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anonymous 1, 19 July 2022.

³²¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 14 February 1987.

³²² SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Report on Sembawang Airbase Volunteers’ Feedback, c.1987, p. 3.

³²³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Report on Sembawang Airbase Volunteers’ Feedback, c.1987.

The Staff



Figure 58: Nursing staff of the Home.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Staffing was a perennial issue for SNM as it was for other homes for the aged sick in Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s.³²⁴ It was integral to the government's efforts to ensure an acceptable level of care, but it took time before sufficient numbers of staff were trained.

With the help of representatives from the government and SCSS, the Advisory Committee was able to manage, though not fully resolve, the issue.

As a stopgap measure, the Home could request for staff to be seconded from the civil service or for volunteer staff. As early as 5 May 1979, the government representatives urged the Advisory Committee to write to the Director of Medical Services for one or two nurses to be seconded to the Home.³²⁵ But it was inevitable that the Home would have to recruit most of its staff, and to pay them well relative to other employers in Singapore.

Funding, along with expertise, laid at the heart of the staffing issue. In September 1979, the Committee approved a proposal to revise the salaries of the staff.³²⁶ Increments were given out the following year, based on the merit and experience of the staff.³²⁷ On 20 August 1981,

³²⁴ SCSS 13/12, Report, 'Assessment of Needs of Homes Providing Institutional Care for the Aged Sick'.

³²⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 5 May 1979.

³²⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 2 December 1979.

³²⁷ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 28 September 1980.

however, when V Subramaniam wanted to hire two more nursing aides, Dr Seng and representatives Yeo and Ong pointed out that the Home had a lower staff-to-residents ratio than other nursing homes. They suggested that the solution was not to employ more staff but to better deploy the existing staff or improve their efficiency.

Dr Seng urged that the Home make ‘judicious use’ of able-bodied residents, including an educated resident who could do the clerical work. The committee decided to promote the resident to a warden. It also agreed that the night watchman be dismissed and replaced by two able-bodied male residents.³²⁸ These efforts should be seen in context as there was a general lack of trained staff in Singapore.

However, these measures did not resolve the genuine need for manpower, especially nursing aides who had to be adequately trained for their work. In November 1981, Subramaniam again pleaded for more staff. He noted that the number of residents had increased more than thrice, from 28 in the beginning to 88. Of these, 26 were bedridden, requiring constant attention.

Subramaniam wrote, ‘I have noticed the Staff of the Home put in a lot of hard work but nevertheless they are often demoralised’. He requested more nursing staff - one of them a registered nurse and two *amahs*.³²⁹ But nothing was done for over half a year.

In a meeting the following June 1982, the committee heard again from Subramaniam that one of the nursing aides had resigned due to the punishing routine. The committee relented, agreeing to employ two more nursing aides.³³⁰ Several months later, another two nursing aides

³²⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 August 1981, p. 2.

³²⁹ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from V. Subramaniam to the Secretary, SNM, 23 November 1981, p. 1.

³³⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 June 1982.

resigned, one of them after working for a mere ten days.³³¹ The job was a difficult one. The committee agreed to employ two nursing aides to meet the increase in the number of residents.³³²

To illustrate the demanding work of a nursing aide: showering the residents, the first task of the day – was simple in theory but trying in practice. The men and women were showered in their separate blocks. Men, being heavier and bigger, were more difficult to handle and move. The residents, including those in wheelchairs, were lined up in front of the bathroom every morning. They took turns to be stripped and washed inside while seated on the wheelchair. Many of the elderly disliked being showered because the water was cold, and some likely resisted it.³³³

In August 1984, the staffing issue had worsened so much that the Advisory Committee formed a sub-committee, comprising M Sadanandan, B Sujatha, Dr Seng, Yeo Lee Hock and H K Teoh, to study staff welfare.³³⁴ The situation gradually improved. In November, it had eased sufficiently for the Home to consider introducing the night shift as a means to raise staff productivity. This was part of the national productivity movement in Singapore in the 1980s, based on Japanese productivity methods. The SCSS also helped to find a part-time physiotherapist for the Home at this time.³³⁵

The manpower resolution eventually came from another quarter. In early 1986, SNM decided to recruit five nursing aides from the Philippines – the first mention of foreign staff in the archival records.

³³¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 16 October 1982.

³³² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 11 December 1982.

³³³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anonymous 1, 19 July 2022.

³³⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 4 August 1984.

³³⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 10 November 1984.

This would allow the Home to provide 24-hour care for the residents.³³⁶ Three nursing aides eventually arrived and were reportedly doing good work, prompting the committee to hire four more Filipino nursing aides.³³⁷



Figure 59: Staff of various nationalities working at the Home. Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

In early 1987, the third shift (night shift) was introduced at the Home. There was at least one nursing aide and an attendant on duty every night, while the police conducted nightly checks of the premises to ensure its security.³³⁸ In March 1988, there was still a shortage of staff, but the existing staff were reportedly performing well.³³⁹ In 1990, the Home hired three Sri Lankan workers as ward attendants.³⁴⁰

More government funding would enable the Home to hire additional staff, but this was dependent on meeting the official criteria for funding. Such criteria changed the way SNM functioned as a VWO. In a meeting on 23 May 1983, President Sadanandan informed the Advisory Committee that the SCSS was forming a fundraising arm called the Community Chest. It was set up later that year to provide a source of funding for VWOs in Singapore. SNM was invited to join the Chest,

³³⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 13 March 1986.

³³⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 3 May 1986.

³³⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 14 February 1987.

³³⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 5 March 1988.

³⁴⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 19 May 1990.

and did so.³⁴¹ Membership of the Chest, as Dr Ee Peng Siang noted, would help SNM improve its welfare services to meet modern needs.³⁴²

SNM's requests for funding for the Home, including hiring additional staff, were scrutinised by the Chest's Elderly Services Budget Panel. The funding was dependent on the number of residents, which also affected SNM's monthly allocation of supplies and material. The panel also required three quotations to be submitted for capital expenditure purchases.³⁴³

In 1990, the Advisory Committee decided to raise the salaries of staff to be in line with those at other nursing homes, as the pay recommended by the Chest were considered to be low.³⁴⁴ The proposal was approved by the Chest in the middle of the following year.³⁴⁵ This showed that the engagement between the Home and the government was a two-way process.

We end this chapter with a note on Thilagavathi Thanapalam, one of the Home's long-serving staff. She joined the Home as a Staff Nurse in 1986 and later became the Matron. Thanapalam remembered the Home fondly as a cheerful place – of godliness, equality and humanity, not a depressing hospital.

In her memory, the staff was able to uphold high standards of cleanliness and hygiene, while catering to every aspect of the residents' needs. She felt good about working there for over 25 years. For her, the Home was a nexus for good deeds – the donations received, *ang pows*

³⁴¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 28 May 1983.

³⁴² SNM, *130th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1984).

³⁴³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Elderly Services Budget Panel Meeting, 13 April 1989.

³⁴⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 19 May 1990.

³⁴⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 26 January 1991; SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 July 1991.

for the residents and visits by volunteers from a broad cross-section of Singapore society. When Thanapalam resigned due to family commitments, it was a heartbreaking decision for her.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with Thilagavathi Thanapalam, 27 June 2022.

Chapter 8

The Move to Yishun



*Figure 60: Block 89 at Canberra Road.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.*

SNM's premises – be it the Office or the Nursing Home – were never permanent. But they were important to those who used it. The Office at 48 Soon Keat Road was not just a building – it was a place filled with activity, heritage and memories. The Nursing Home at Blocks 87/89 Canberra Road

was, as we saw in the previous chapter, meaningful to its residents and staff – a sanctuary and place of work.

Finding new premises for the Office and Home was one of the challenges that many voluntary organisations in Singapore had to overcome. In this, the work of the SNM Advisory Committee was exemplary. Working behind the scenes, SNM officials, government representatives and external experts in the committee came together to find a new location in Yishun for the Office and Home in 1994.

As the Office and Home would share the same premises, it was also necessary to strike a balance between the needs of the residents and those of SNM members. In other words, while it appears to be an administrative matter, the history of the move to Yishun tells us much about the inner workings of voluntary organisations in Singapore.

In addition to the Advisory Committee, SNM had a key ally in Dr Tony Tan, a long-time supporter of the Mission and the Nursing Home. In 1979, the same year the Home opened, he became the Member of Parliament (MP) for Sembawang. The following year, he was the Guest-of-Honour for the Mission's symposium on 'Youth, Moral Responsibility and the Aged.'³⁴⁷ As the link between the grassroots and the government, Dr Tan's support was instrumental in the search for new premises.

To the Former Sembawang Hospital

It was in January 1982 that the Advisory Committee heard ominous news. The Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS) representative, Tina Ong told the Committee that the Housing and Development Board (HDB) would be redeveloping the Canberra Road area within two years.³⁴⁸ This was the beginning of a long and protracted search for new premises for the Home over the next decade.

The following month, the redevelopment was officially confirmed that the HDB would be taking over the area sometime in 1983 or 1984. Dr Tony Tan, who had become the Minister for Trade and Industry in 1981, assured the Advisory Committee that he would help find an alternative site for the Home. The Committee deliberated on the matter at length before deciding to set up a Building Fund to raise funds for the new premises.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with B. Sujatha, 30 October 2022; *Straits Times*, 11 February 1979, p. 7.

³⁴⁸ SCSS 13/08/01, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 16 January 1982.

³⁴⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 27 February 1982.

Following the AGM in 1982, M Sadanandan became the new SNM President, assuming the Chair of the Advisory Committee for the next five years. On 15 May 1982, he informed the Committee that he had received a letter from Dr Tan's office, approving a site of 2,000 sqm in Yishun New Town for the Home. He said that he and B Sujatha (the Secretary) had asked Dr Tan for a site nearer the SNM Office at Soon Keat Road. He also reported that some musicians were planning to organise a musical show to raise funds for the Building Fund.³⁵⁰

At the next meeting on 12 June 1982, Ministry of Social Affairs' representative Yeo Lee Hock suggested that as the Building Fund had not been formed yet, it could include people outside the Advisory Committee who could contribute to the search for new premises.³⁵¹ In July 1982, he further proposed that a Building Fund Committee be formed according to the government's rules and regulations, so that donations to the Fund would be tax-exempt.³⁵² This thinking would shape the efforts to find new premises over the next decade.



Figure 61: A Building Fund Raising initiative Dr Seng Kwang Meng (with tie). Source; Sree Narayana Mission.

In February 1983, Sadanandan relayed that after he and Sujatha met with Dr Tan to discuss an alternative site, Dr Tan had conveyed SNM's wishes to the Building Control Division. Earlier, on 30 January 1983, Dr Tan had visited the Home during the Lunar New Year celebrations, handing out *ang pows* to the residents as he usually did. He was pleased

³⁵⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 15 May 1982.

³⁵¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 June 1982.

³⁵² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 10 July 1982.

to see that the residents looked healthier and happier than in his previous visit. He pledged his support for the Mission's work helping the poor.³⁵³



Figure 62: The Home at Sembawang Hospital.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

At its next meeting on 30 April 1983, the Advisory Committee received the welcome news that the government had granted the temporary use of the vacated Sembawang Hospital for the Home. This was previously the Naval Base Hospital (more precisely, the Women's, Children's and Tuberculosis Hospital). It was handed over to the government in the 1970s following the closure of British military bases in Singapore.³⁵⁴ Also situated within the Naval Base, it was not far from Blocks 87/89.

SNM formally received the site on 23 May 1983. Sadanandan reminded the Committee that alterations had to be made before the hospital was ready for the residents, but it was important not to waste resources for what was after all an interim site.³⁵⁵ He suggested that the hospital simply be given a new coat of paint, using the existing colour to save costs. On 23 February 1983, with the painting and renovation work completed, the Home left Canberra Road and moved to the new hospital site.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 26 February 1983.

³⁵⁴ SCSS 13/08/01, Note on the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick, February 1991.

³⁵⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 30 April 1983.

³⁵⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 28 May 1983; SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 9 July 1983; SCSS 13/08/01, Note on the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick, February 1991.

A permanent site still had to be found. In the Advisory Committee's first meeting of 1984, Sadanandan related that the maximum capacity of the temporary premises was 150, compared to the target of 200 to 250 residents. Although the capacity could be increased by additional renovations, this was not economical for a site that would be used for only three years. A better solution was to find a permanent site and develop it to meet the capacity.³⁵⁷ This site had to be in Yishun New Town, as there was none available in Sembawang.

Sadanandan said that he had also co-opted a chartered architect into the Advisory Committee, who would draft a plan for a permanent building at the site.³⁵⁸ He hoped that Dr Tan would help find a suitable piece of land for the building.³⁵⁹ By the time the Committee met again on 14 April 1984, the Sembawang Hospital site had reached full capacity of 149 residents and 8 general staff, with a long waiting list of approved cases.³⁶⁰

In June 1984, the committee learned that on behalf of SNM, Dr Tan had submitted a request for a site of 6,000 square metres in Yishun at a nominal premium.³⁶¹ The HDB agreed to this in principle.³⁶² After approval was granted by the Master Plan Committee, the Board found an area of 5,561.3 square metres at 12 Yishun Avenue 5 for the Home. However, there was a snag: the premium was \$185 per square metre, which would cost SNM over a million dollars. In December, Sadanandan and Sujatha again sought Dr Tan's help.³⁶³

³⁵⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 13 March 1986.

³⁵⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 13 March 1986.

³⁵⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 21 January 1984.

³⁶⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 14 April 1984.

³⁶¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 16 June 1984.

³⁶² SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 4 August 1984.

³⁶³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 January 1985.

Dr Tan intervened again and was successful. The fee was made a nominal one at \$12 per square metres for a 30-year lease. The proviso was that SNM would adhere to the minimum standards of care and admission criteria stipulated by the government.³⁶⁴ Sadanandan happily told the committee that this was the first time the Ministry of Community Development had helped an organisation obtain land at a nominal rate.³⁶⁵ The development cost of the project (over \$400,000) owed to HDB would be reimbursed by the Ministry of Community Development (MCD).³⁶⁶

In May 1985, SNM received a draft of the MCD's guidelines for minimum standards of care for homes for the aged sick.³⁶⁷ The Mission asked Wong Kan Seng, the Minister of State for Community Development, if the 30-year lease could be extended. It was told this was not possible³⁶⁸ but Wong was pleased when he visited the Home the following month, declaring the Mission to be deserving of the government's support for the project.³⁶⁹

After the Yishun site had been approved, Sadanandan informed the Advisory Committee that SNM had submitted an application to the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) to establish the Sree Narayana Mission Building Fund.³⁷⁰ This was initially rejected, as the department wanted the Home to be registered as a separate entity from the Mission. This was because only the Home, not the Mission, could obtain

³⁶⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 20 April 1985.

³⁶⁵ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 6 July 1985.

³⁶⁶ SCSS 13/08/01, Annex A: Terms and Conditions for the Alienation of State Land at Yishun Avenue 5.

³⁶⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 25 May 1985.

³⁶⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 25 May 1985.

³⁶⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 6 July 1985.

³⁷⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 25 May 1985.

Institutions of Public Character (IPC) status for the Building Fund.³⁷¹ This was the next issue to be addressed.

A Shared Home in Yishun

In 1986, SNM's need for new premises doubled as it learned that it would also have to vacate 48 Soon Keat Road. When Dr Tony Tan visited the Nursing Home in January that year, he told the Mission informally that the government would also be acquiring the Soon Keat Road site. A new site had to be found for the Office.

SNM officials asked Dr Tan if it was possible to use the Yishun site for the Office. He said that this should not be a problem as long as the Office project had a separate building fund, as only the SNM Home Building Fund was eligible for IPC status.³⁷² Sharing the premises made sense to SNM, which it felt was a matter of 'administrative/management convenience.'³⁷³

Planning approval to begin work on the Yishun site was granted in October 1986.³⁷⁴ The cost of the building was estimated to be \$6 million. SNM aimed to raise the sum over five years through direct appeals for donations, sponsorships and fundraising activities such as Flag Day. It wanted the construction to begin when half the funds had been raised.³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 25 May 1985.

³⁷² SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 13 March 1986.

³⁷³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Feedback for Workshop on 'Towards a Better Co-ordinated Service in Voluntary Welfare Organisations', c. November 1987.

³⁷⁴ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from Chua Hee Tong to Sree Narayana Mission, 3 November 1986.

³⁷⁵ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from K.S. Rajan to IRD, 28 November 1986.

Previously, in 1985, the Home had been envisioned as a two-storey building with 300 beds.³⁷⁶ As it would also have to house the SNM Office, the design was expanded to three storeys the following year, with a reduced complement of 228 beds.³⁷⁷

In his next visit to the Home in February 1987, Dr Tan further discussed the project with the Advisory Committee. He asked them to see him if his assistance was required. Sadanandan related that he, together with Sujatha, Dr Seng Kwang Meng and Chua Hee Tong (from C & C Chartered Architects) had met IRD officers about the Building Fund. They were told to abide by the government's rules and regulations concerning the Institutions of a Public Character (IPC) status for the fund, and to provide a list of projects for raising the target sum.³⁷⁸

The story of the shared premises at Yishun was about addressing such administrative and financial issues. Throughout 1987, the Mission, assisted by Chua, the architect, worked closely with government agencies and the SCSS to allay their concerns.³⁷⁹ In August that year, the Mission became a registered charity, which meant that it had to abide by the rules and regulations of the Charities Act.

In this context, the Community Chest sought confirmation that the structure of the building would meet the needs of the aged-sick and require minimal maintenance. The SCSS and IRD again emphasised that as SNM itself did not have IPC status, funds meant for the Home must not be used for the Mission's own programmes.³⁸⁰ The IRD also wanted assurance that SNM's activities would not spill over to the

³⁷⁶ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from C & C Chartered Architects to David Lim, 28 May 1985.

³⁷⁷ SCSS 13/08/01, Item B: Details of New Building, 30 October 1986.

³⁷⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. II, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 14 February 1987.

³⁷⁹ SCSS 13/08/02, File Note on Meeting with Chua Hee Tong, 4 August 1987.

³⁸⁰ SCSS 13/08/02, Notes on Meeting between SCSS, Inland Revenue and SNM, 13 January 1988.

Home. The building should also adhere to the principles of care for the aged sick, such as housing non-ambulant residents on the ground floor.³⁸¹

The IRD made two further suggestions: that the Advisory Committee, rather than the Executive Committee, should have a say in the use of the Home's premises, and that separate auditors be appointed for the Mission and the Home.³⁸² In addition, the department reminded SNM that while it could solicit funds and donations to the Building Fund, it should not seek to raise loans.³⁸³

In mid-1987, M K Bhasi, as the new SNM President and Chair of the Advisory Committee, wrote to the IRD with these assurances. He stated that there would not be any spillover of the Mission's own activities into the facilities for the residents. To the IRD's suggestion to downsize some proposed facilities, he explained that these were necessary to meet the minimum standards of care stipulated by the MCD.³⁸⁴



Figure 63: Moving to 12 Yishun Ave 5.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission

The planned double-storey multi-purpose hall had to be large enough to accommodate the residents when they were gathered together, particularly as some of them would be in wheelchairs. The stage there would be used for performances by civic organisations and schools visiting the Home, while the small funeral parlour would be used to isolate the bodies of destitute residents

³⁸¹ SCSS 13/08/02, Memo from Choy Kwai Kwin to Ng Guat Tin, 7 August 1987.

³⁸² SCSS 13/08/02, Memo from Choy Kwai Kwin to Ng Guat Tin, 7 August 1987.

³⁸³ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from Choy Kwai Kwin to the Secretary, SNM, 18 May 1987.

³⁸⁴ SCSS 13/08/02, Notes of Meeting with Community Chest Budget Panel, 18 August 1987.

who had passed away.³⁸⁵ Bhasi also explained that SNM's proposal to operate a day-care centre within the Home for elderly people in Yishun was 'a necessary service', as there was no such facility in the constituency at the time.³⁸⁶

Despite Bhasi's efforts, SNM had to make some modifications to the building plan to satisfy the government agencies. The multi-purpose hall was reduced in size to about 300 seats, with the space freed up to be used for a clinic and physiotherapy room instead. The canteen's size was also trimmed by a fifth. The funeral parlour was dropped in favour of three additional wards, while a restroom planned for the residents would be converted to the day-care centre, subject to the IRD's approval.³⁸⁷

These changes did have a benefit, reducing the estimated expenditure for the Home from \$6 million to \$5.25 million.³⁸⁸ Further minor scaling down was made in early 1988, with the whole area reduced to 6,100 sqm while the number of wards was increased from 29 to 32.³⁸⁹ Clearly, the needs of the Home – and the budget – took precedence. The Home received IPC status in October 1988.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁵ SCSS 13/08/02, Notes of Meeting with Community Chest Budget Panel, 18 August 1987.

³⁸⁶ SCSS 13/08/01, Letter from M.K. Bhasi to Comptroller of Income Tax, 1 June 1987.

³⁸⁷ SCSS 13/08/02, File Note on Meeting with Chua Hee Tong, 4 August 1987.

³⁸⁸ SCSS 13/08/02, Letter from Chua Hee Tong to Ng Guat Tin, 10 September 1987.

³⁸⁹ SCSS 13/08/02, Letter from C & C Chartered Architects to Chief Planner, 23 March 1988.

³⁹⁰ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 12 November 1988; SCSS 13/08/01, Note on the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick, February 1991.

Temporary Premises at 100 Kowloon Road

As the Yishun site was being built in the late 1980s, SNM was faced with another conundrum: it had to find temporary premises for its Office as well, as the entire Sembawang area was being redeveloped. The 48 Soon Keat Road site had been donated to the Mission by Lim Chong Pang, but this was not supported by any formal documentation.³⁹¹ SNM was initially offered a small two-storey building that had been the Labour Office of the Naval Base, at 100 Kowloon Road.



Figure 64: Temporary Premise at 100 Kowloon Road.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

SNM deemed this site too small and sought a bigger one in the Yishun region.³⁹² This would mean a pair of separate temporary premises for the Office and the Home. The Mission considered the amalgamation of the two sites to be ‘infeasible.’³⁹³ The SCSS agreed, as there was no land available at the Yishun site for two premises.³⁹⁴

In 1992, SNM left its long-time office at 48 Soon Keat Road, built in 1956, to interim premises at 100 Kowloon Road. It received an ex-gratia resettlement compensation of \$13,000 from HDB.³⁹⁵ A new era beckoned for the Mission.

The previous year, as the Home prepared to move to Yishun, Dr Seng proposed new programmes for the aged in the new town. He suggested

³⁹¹ John Solomon, interview with S. Suganthy 12 March 2022.

³⁹² Loh Kah Seng, Correspondence with R. Asokan, 22 March 2023.

³⁹³ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Background Note on Sree Narayana Mission Home, c. 1989, p. 1.

³⁹⁴ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Memo from Bee Wan Ditzig to Lillian Yong, 26 April 1989.

³⁹⁵ SNM, Letter from Chen Shi Chie to SNM, 2 July 1991.

that SNM nursing staff could visit elderly persons in their homes to provide them medical advice and care. He also proposed that with increasing demand for day-care centres, the Home could help provide transport and food for the elderly.³⁹⁶ These suggestions were in line with the new philosophy of allowing the aged to live in the community.

There was another well-meaning doctor in the Advisory Committee and this was Dr Oon Chiew Seng, Dr Seng's teacher. She also suggested that the Home could encourage aged persons who were not ill to take up meaningful activities that would keep them occupied, such as recreational activities and occupational therapy.³⁹⁷ She also proposed that efforts should be made to encourage more donations to the Building Fund, as this was where donations were most needed.³⁹⁸

Ground breaking Ceremony for the Yishun Building



Figure 65: Official Ground Breaking Ceremony, 1990.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.



Figure 66: Jog-a-thon to raise funds for the building, 1990.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

In early 1994, the 12 Yishun Avenue 5 site was finally completed – the culmination of over a decade of negotiations and painstaking work by SNM behind the scenes. The 200 residents of the Nursing Home were

³⁹⁶ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 27 April 1991.

³⁹⁷ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 27 April 1991.

³⁹⁸ SCSS 13/08 Vol. III, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 7 March 1991.

duly moved into the new premises, as did the Mission Office from Kowloon Road.

The work of the Advisory Committee, together with Dr Tony Tan, in the search for new premises in the 1980s and early 1990s, was exemplary. At an eventful meeting on 9 July 1983, four members of the committee were nominated for the SCSS's Certificate of Appreciation to Volunteer Social Service Workers. The quartet were M Sadanandan, N Divakaran, B Sujatha and Dr Seng.³⁹⁹



Figure 67: The Home was opened in 1994.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Working with government officials and outside professionals helped develop SNM into a modern VWO with a Singaporean orientation. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Mission navigated years of uncertainty over its premises to take major steps forward as an organisation. Dr

Ee Peng Liang observed in the 1989 *SNM Souvenir Magazine*, that ‘Innovative and dynamic social services and service management will be essential to meet the needs of the less fortunate as we face the turn of the decade’.⁴⁰⁰

In the same issue, Sadanandan highlighted SNM's struggles in finding a new home for its Office. But he took comfort in spirituality and history: ‘The Guru's teachings show us a way that is by living with a

³⁹⁹ SCSS 13/08 Vol. 1, Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting, 9 July 1983.

⁴⁰⁰ SNM, *135th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1989), p. 5.

sense of sacrifice, with courage and conviction; a guiding light through the darkness of human misery.’⁴⁰¹

Collaborative Energies

The tripartite collaboration in the Advisory Committee was instrumental to the development of the Nursing Home. This committee was the nexus where the Singapore government’s welfare policy was discussed and adapted at the level of the voluntary organisation. The collaboration between volunteers and government officials was historical, built up over time and in tackling concrete issues.

It was collaboration in the true sense of the word. The work of the Advisory Committee showed that SNM volunteers, government officials and outside experts played equal parts in managing the Home and finding new premises. Though the SNM Executive Committee made the final decisions, it consulted the Advisory Committee and accepted most of its recommendations on staffing, finances, funding, care standards, and admission criteria. These were all key matters that impacted the Home’s growth and success.

The three parties in the Committee offered their own perspectives and suggestions. Spiritually, the Guru’s teachings, articulated by SNM officials, guided the discussions. On the admission of paying cases, the Committee listened to differing points of view from the Mission and the Ministry of Social Affairs before the Executive Committee took the final decision to accept it.

Similarly, when SNM had to find new premises, it worked closely with various government agencies to fulfil the building and funding

⁴⁰¹ SNM, *135th Birthday Celebrations of Sree Narayana Guru* (Singapore: SNM, 1989), p. 7.

requirements. It was also aided by the efforts of Dr Tony Tan, who interceded on the Mission's behalf several times. Professionals such as Dr Seng and Dr Oon provided clinical expertise on healthcare and social work – they constituted another arm of the volunteer group in the Committee.

Inevitably, some pressure was applied on SNM in the Advisory Committee. The perennial need for funds to hire professional staff was linked to the government's desire for VWOs to admit a bigger proportion of paying residents. There was also constant pressure to subscribe to government rules, regulations, standards, and criteria in running the Home. This was true for all VWOs in Singapore, and generally had a positive effect.

Similarly, the stringent criteria for IPC status, tax exemption and Community Chest funding meant that SNM had to abide by modern governance and accounting systems. We saw this most clearly in the talks over the funding and development of new premises for the SNM Home and Office. Significantly, there is no record of any serious disagreement within the Advisory Committee or with government agencies on these matters.

If there was pressure from the government, it seemed to have a doubly beneficial effect – in improving how the Home was run and how SNM operated as a voluntary organisation. The main method used by government officials and external experts was not pressure, but persuasion, dialogue and data. The result was SNM's development into a leading VWO in Singapore, with enhanced systems of governance, fundraising and accounting.

Finally, we should note that the collaboration was significant and impactful for the volunteers themselves. On the one hand, the general membership recognised that the Home was a positive way of putting

the Guru's teachings into practice – to do good and help the underprivileged in the Singapore context. On the other hand, the experiences of managing the Home and finding new premises transformed not only the organisation but also the volunteers. As S Vasoo noted, with these experiences, the Mission was no longer an insular organisation, but had embraced a wider role as a Singapore VWO, helping the vulnerable in society.⁴⁰²

As former SNM Secretary D Sambasivan aptly put it, SNM should carry out welfare services 'the Singaporean way.' Though the Mission had to abide by the government's rules and regulations, this was positive pressure, helping it run the Home better.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰² Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Vasoo, 15 March 2022.

⁴⁰³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with D. Sambasivan, 28 June 2022.

Chapter 9

Spirituality, Community and Charity

Since the 1990s, SNM has grown into a leading Voluntary Welfare Organisation (VWO) in Singapore. Presently, it runs three major lines of programmes as it always did. The original spiritual mission is for the devotees of Sree Narayana Guru, to discuss and propagate his teachings. The devotees, with their families and friends, have also made the Mission a socio-cultural organisation for the Malayalee community. The mainstay of the spiritual and community programmes remains the Chathayam (now Guru Jayanti) celebrations.

The third arm is the charity programme – the direct welfare work that the Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS) intended in the 1960s. This programme is now supported by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), the successor to the SCSS. The Mission provides important social services as part of the Singapore's government's 'Many Helping Hands' policy, helping families care for their aged sick. SNM is now a leading member of the nation's growing voluntary welfare sector.

These three programmes, anchored around the Guru's teachings, are based on three elements: spirituality, community and charity. SNM has been remarkably successful in balancing the trio. Over time, this led to a historical change in the character of SNM as a voluntary organisation. While it remains a Malayalee association revolving around the Guru's teachings, its growing charity work has transformed it into a Singaporean VWO.

Meranti Home



Figure 68: Meranti Home at Pelangi Village.
Source: Sree Narayana Mission.

Since SNM's move to Yishun in 1994, its welfare programme has expanded substantially. In 2002, it accepted the Ministry of Community Development and Sports' (MCDS) request to manage a second institution: Meranti Home@Pelangi Village at 6 Buangkok Green. A newly

built facility, Meranti Home was established to care for destitute men suffering from chronic psychiatric illness. Its four-storey premises, with a capacity for 200 residents, were funded and built by the MCDS. Its first superintendent was M Subramaniam, who was aided by a group of experienced staff.⁴⁰⁴

As M K Bhasi explained, SNM was asked to run the Home due to its strong record in managing the Nursing Home.⁴⁰⁵ The Mission's initial response was similar to being asked to run the latter in the 1970s, - some reluctance. R Asokan related this was because it meant heavier responsibilities, running a second institution and caring for a different group of residents with mental issues. It was Dr Seng Kwang Meng who eventually persuaded SNM⁴⁰⁶ to run the Home. K. Shanmugan,

⁴⁰⁴ SNM, *Annual Report 2002*; M. Subramaniam, 'An Introduction to Meranti Home at Pelangi Village', 1 July 2002.

⁴⁰⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with M.K. Bhasi, 20 April 2022.

⁴⁰⁶ R. Asokan, comments at talk by Loh Kah Seng, 'The Advisory Committee and the SNM Home for the Aged Sick, 1979-1994', Sree Narayana Mission's 75th Anniversary Celebrations, 18 June 2023.

the MP for Sembawang GRC, commended the Mission for taking up the new challenge.⁴⁰⁷

Although the residents were different, there were similarities between Meranti Home and the Nursing Home. ‘Meranti’ is the Malay name for a local tree, while ‘Pelangi’ is a Malay word for ‘rainbow’, standing for the different ethnic groups in Singapore.⁴⁰⁸ Like the Nursing Home, Meranti Home had a multiracial group of residents. In its first year, among the 154 residents, 121 were Chinese, 7 Malays, 25 Indians, and 1 ‘Other’.

In 2002, the Home organised a “Deepa-Hari-Chris” celebration for the residents – an event which Subramaniam had introduced previously at Pelangi Home, celebrating the main religions of the three major ethnic groups in Singapore.⁴⁰⁹ As with the Nursing Home, Meranti Home has become a well-run institution and a source of pride for SNM’s members.⁴¹⁰

The Meranti Home project was also inspired by the Guru’s teachings. One of the supporters was Syamala Senan, who became the Treasurer of SNM in 2000. She had known about the Guru in her childhood in Kerala. She was familiar with the Guru’s call to ‘do good for humanity’ and ‘uplift people through education’. In 1979, she came to Singapore to marry a Singaporean and soon began volunteering with SNM.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁷ SNM, *Souvenir to Commemorate the 148th Birth Anniversary of Sree Narayana Guru*, 2002.

⁴⁰⁸ SNM, *Annual Report 2003*; M. Subramaniam, ‘An Introduction to Meranti Home at Pelangi Village’, 1 July 2002.

⁴⁰⁹ SNM, *Annual Report 2002*; Darinee Alagirisamy, interview with M. Subramaniam, 17 May 2022.

⁴¹⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Premjit, 6 May 2022.

⁴¹¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Syamala Senan, 21 March 2022.

A visit to the Institute of Mental Health in 2000 made a strong impression on her, seeing mental patients huddled in dark corners. She supported the Meranti Home project because she viewed the Guru as a social reformer, whose teachings should be put into practice to help those in need. When Meranti Home was built, it seemed to her like ‘a heaven’ to its residents. Subsequently, she recalled, a young Malaysian man was admitted to the Home because he was lost in Singapore. His parents were grateful to find him there – an example of carrying out good deeds.⁴¹²

New Projects

In recent years, SNM has been further expanding its welfare commitments. Rather than wait for the government to ask, it has submitted proposals to operate additional centres for the aged and aged sick. In 2021, the Mission was successful as approval was granted for it to run a second nursing home at the Riverwalk in Yishun. This would provide economies of scale and savings in staff deployment. SNM would also operate a third senior care centre in Bedok. These projects enable the elderly and elderly sick to age in the community, in line with the government’s present social service policy.

As of 2024, besides the Nursing Home and Meranti Home, the Mission operates two senior care centres in Yishun and Woodlands. As in the past, it continues to provide welfare services for the wider community: assistance for single mothers, bursaries and food rations to needy households in Yishun, and befriender services.⁴¹³ These services also

⁴¹² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Syamala Senan, 21 March 2022.

⁴¹³ Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore), <https://sreenarayanamission.org/>

benefitted many SNM members, most of whom are above 50 years of age and might need financial or welfare support themselves.⁴¹⁴

With this growing slate of welfare projects, SNM has enhanced its governance and processes as a voluntary organisation. An Extraordinary General Meeting in 1994 passed an amendment to its Constitution, that only Singapore citizens can become members. This allowed the Mission to purchase a property at 152A Rangoon Road. A subsequent amendment made the citizenship rule fundamental, not to be altered or deleted except with the prior written consent of the Comptroller of Residential Property or another relevant authority.⁴¹⁵

In 2000, SNM further amended its Constitution, such that the President and General Secretary would serve a maximum of two consecutive terms of four years total at any one time on a continuous basis. This was because it was not healthy for an organisation to have these key offices held by one person for too long.⁴¹⁶

M K Bhasi (2001-2004) was the first President to abide by this ruling, stepping down after two consecutive terms. Subsequent Presidents – Dr G Raman (2005-2006), B Sujatha (2007-2010), Swapna Dayanandan (2011-2014), V Shanavas (2015-2018), and Jayadev Unnithan (2019-2023) have followed likewise.

Across these two decades, SNM officials have continued to introduce governance reforms, as accountability and transparency are key to securing government funding and further welfare projects. In recent years, the Mission has received the Charity Transparency Award by the Charity Council.

⁴¹⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Jayadev Unnithan, 15 July 2022.

⁴¹⁵ SNM, Minutes of the Extraordinary General Meeting, 15 October 1995.

⁴¹⁶ SNM, Minutes of Annual General Meeting, 20 August 2000; Loh Kah Seng, correspondence with Jayadev Unnithan, 3 July 2023, and with R. Asokan, 3 July 2023.

These governance reforms, as Dayanandan told me, do not diminish SNM's rich heritage. The Mission can both have good governance and continue to uphold the values central to the Guru's teachings, as the first builds on the second.⁴¹⁷

A Question of Balance

Despite these improvements, one question has a bearing on the future of SNM - What is the proper balance between spirituality, community and charity? The Mission's welfare commitments have risen substantially since the 1960s. It is not just the numbers that have increased: there is now a national orientation and a culture of growth in SNM's charity work. Compared to this, the spiritual side has largely remained unchanged.

In recent years, this seeming imbalance has led some members to question if SNM has become a welfare organisation. This is also a question whether it serves the Malayalee community specifically or the wider community of vulnerable Singaporeans. Both are legitimate questions with no easy answers.

History can be of some help here. The past does not offer big answers, only a little clarity on the contexts and consequences of change. Whatever the solution, it will have to come from the SNM membership, not a historian. The past is useful rather as a guide to how the Mission can draw lessons and insights from its history.

Historically, the question of balance is not new and can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s. This was the inherent dilemma which SNM faced when urged by the SCSS to undertake direct welfare work: how to keep

⁴¹⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Swapna Dayanandan, 4 April 2022.

its mission and heritage while supporting the government's social service policy.

This dilemma has never truly been resolved. It is a question not only for SNM but all voluntary organisations stepping into the modern welfare sector in post-independence Singapore. Many of these organisations – clan associations, missionary and religious groups – were formed expressly for their members but have adapted to providing social services for a wider group of Singaporeans.

The Nursing Home formed in 1979 was SNM's first step into the 'Many Helping Hands' policy, supplementing the main role of the family. The policy encouraged volunteers, instead of the government or businesses, to contribute to society by helping the nation's vulnerable groups. For the volunteers, it was also a means of fundraising to continue to organise activities for fellow members.

Similarly, SNM's current projects are in line with the government's policy to allow the aged and aged-sick to age in place, rather than live in an institution. This means that the Mission will be even more involved in the community in future. In Jayadev Unnithan's apt words, SNM cannot be an island.⁴¹⁸

This thinking has fuelled a culture of growth in SNM's charity endeavours – more needing to be done. As the SNM's CEO S. Devendran surmised, for a long time till Meranti Home, the Mission was running only a single nursing home. Even now, he said, it could not ill-afford to rest on its laurels but must continue to grow its social services.⁴¹⁹ This view is a world away from the 1970s when SNM was hesitant about managing the nursing home.

⁴¹⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Jayadev Unnithan, 15 July 2022.

⁴¹⁹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Devendran, 13 October 2022.

At the same time, however, SNM was formed as a spiritual society to propagate the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru. Its membership was drawn from the Malayalee community who were his followers. These members have generally supported the welfare work. Indeed, most are very proud of the Mission's achievements in this field, particularly the success of the Nursing Home and Meranti Home.

In the view of one of SNM's trustees Chandra Mohan K Nair, the Mission began as a 'humble organisation' and a 'poor man's Malayalee Association'. He considered its early progress to be middling till the 1980s and 1990s when it embraced welfare work. This triggered a major spurt in SNM's growth as a voluntary organisation.⁴²⁰ Nair's is a common narrative espoused by many older members.

At the heart of the issue is the weightage between spirituality, community and charity, rather than choosing any of them. Historically, the question of balance has been debated before – over the installation of the Guru's statue in 1977. The issue then was whether the Guru should be worshipped like a deity or treated as an inspiration to do good deeds; it had split the members then. The majority decision was to have the statue, but this did not stop the Nursing Home project from starting two years later.

Presently, a minority of members feel that the charity element need not be so pronounced. As Sunu Sivadasan noted, some pioneer members felt saddened about what they perceived to be the dilution of the Guru's teachings. It was a change they did not fully comprehend – because they did not have a real say in it. Change, she said, should not be hoisted upon the members; it is important to raise awareness of the need for it.⁴²¹ Viswa Sadasivan, who is a supporter of the welfare projects,

⁴²⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Chandra Mohan K. Nair, 24 May 2022.

⁴²¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Sunu Sivadasan, 28 March 2022.

acknowledged that some members feel that the Mission has become ‘a shadow of what it used to be’ in spiritual terms.⁴²²

One of the advocates for greater spirituality is V Anilan, the Secretary of SNM in 2002. He has raised concerns about the charity being the ‘core activity’. In his view, the Mission has focused on one of the Guru’s four primary values, *Dhaya* (Compassion), to the relative neglect of the other three. With SNM constantly competing with other VWOs to manage welfare projects, he fears it may lose its independence as a members’ organisation. The Nursing Home, he maintained, is run virtually like a business. Anilan wishes to persuade SNM officials that spirituality lies at the heart of the Mission, as was the case when it was founded.⁴²³

Anusha Senan, a present Executive Committee member, concurs. To her, SNM is a society of members based on the Guru’s teachings. The Mission should decide what it is as an organisation in strategic terms: Is its main work spirituality or charity?⁴²⁴ As the words of Anilan and Senan suggest, the key issue is that SNM should remain a members’ organisation.

Like many established voluntary groups, SNM has an ageing membership belonging to the Pioneer and Merdeka Generations. It found younger members in the 1970s when many Malayalees left Singapore along with the British forces. But membership renewal is a never-ending process. Parents have brought their children into the Mission but this has not been nearly enough.

⁴²² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Viswa Sadasivan, 12 April 2022.

⁴²³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with V. Anilan, 18 April 2022.

⁴²⁴ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anusha Senan, 17 October 2022.

In the 1990s, Dr Letha Karunakaran formed a Youth Wing at SNM, but this had few members and was short-lived.⁴²⁵ In addition, many of the younger members seem less interested in the Guru's teachings than their elders. As Laina Raveendran noted, too great an emphasis on spirituality might alienate these younger members.⁴²⁶

The question of balance is important, as it applies to other voluntary organisations in Singapore. Following the National Kidney Foundation scandal in 2005, a comprehensive system of corporate governance has been implemented in the charity sector. This would ensure best practices, accountability and transparency in the use of public funds. However, an unintended consequence was to separate elected office bearers (and by extension, the general membership) in voluntary organisations from the management team.⁴²⁷

At SNM, where the Nursing Home was previously run by the Advisory Committee, it is now managed by a team of professional staff. S Premjit was the Secretary of SNM in 2005-2006 when G Raman was the President. As Premjit recalled, when the Committee introduced governance reforms, some of the older members were worried about the Mission having to meet government standards, being audited and hiring an external CEO. Raman was careful to explain to the members why the changes were necessary, but it still took years for them to be accepted.⁴²⁸

The creation of a Board of Trustees at SNM in 2021 is another example. This is a positive move to check the power of the Executive Committee, particularly the President, and enhance audit and governance. At the same time, the Board is not an elected body and the trustees need not

⁴²⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Anil Asokan, 28 April 2022.

⁴²⁶ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Laina Raveendran, 27 October 2022.

⁴²⁷ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Viswa Sadasivan, 12 April 2022.

⁴²⁸ Loh Kah Seng, interview with S. Premjit, 6 May 2022.

be members of the Mission. It constitutes another layer of management in addition to the CEO and his officers.

As Viswa Sadasivan recounted, despite speaking to the members in advance, the Executive Committee encountered strong opposition to the Board of Trustees proposal during the AGM. One member claimed that the move was unconstitutional and warned that it would disenfranchise the members. There were also objections to a related proposal to allow non-Malayalees to sit on the Board. The committee was taken aback by the opposition, though the Board was eventually formed.⁴²⁹ As in the past, it would take time for it to be fully accepted by the members.

The question of balance shows that SNM will continue to evolve and change as an organisation. The relationship between spirituality, community and charity first surfaced as a question when voluntary organisations in Singapore were asked to play a bigger role in the nation's welfare policy in the 1960s and 1970s. It has remained to this day as the needs of the aged and aged sick grew, while organisations have to abide by official processes, rules and regulations. The question is one for the members of these organisations to consider and address.

⁴²⁹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Viswa Sadasivan, 12 April 2022.

Conclusion

We have traced the history of Sree Narayana Mission as a Singaporean institution over 76 years. By working through archival documents and listening to people's stories, we found out how the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru were adapted and practised in the Singapore context. In this long and eventful journey, both leaders and ordinary members made important contributions as SNM evolved into one of the country's leading voluntary welfare organisations.

The Mission was independently carrying out charity work after it was formally registered in 1948. In doing so, SNM members were putting into practice the Guru's call to give back to the community and help the poor and needy. These social services were soon recognised by the wider community. When the Mission opened a new office building at 48 Soon Keat Road in 1956, various government officials and spiritual leaders praised its spiritual, community and welfare programmes.

Subsequently, the records of SNM and the Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS) tell us about the pivotal years of the 1960s and 1970s. These were also a formative time for Singapore. Pressure from various quarters pushed the Mission to adopt what were called direct welfare services at the time. Some of these events were memorable and well-known, such as Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's triple visits to 48 Soon Keat Road, particularly when he made his famous 'mudflats to metropolis' speech soon after Singapore left Malaysia.

Other events were less known. The British military withdrawal from Singapore in the late 1960s and 1970s did not only create a crisis of membership for SNM, but also steered it towards the government's welfare policy. As the Mission searched for new leaders and members,

the SCSS nudged it to take small steps to become a VWO. This culminated in the establishment of the Nursing Home in 1979 – SNM’s first major direct welfare project.

The minutes of meetings of the Advisory Committee opened a window into the workings of this crucial committee in managing the Home in the 1980s and 1990s. We felt the positive energies that connected SNM officials, government representatives and outside professionals in the Committee. They worked together to resolve numerous matters related to the Home, making it a better sanctuary for the aged sick. We also caught a glimpse of the daily lives, often grim, of the Home’s residents, the contributions of volunteers who visited them and brought them some cheer, and the tireless work of the staff.

One of the challenges in administering the Home was the question of admitting paying cases. Yet another was the need to find new premises for the Home and the Mission Office in the 1980s and 1990s. Both required working closely with government agencies and fulfilling government rules and regulations. These engagements did not only resolve the problems, they also transformed SNM into a modern organisation caring for the aged sick of Singapore regardless of their ethnicity. This changed how the Mission thought and operated as a group of volunteers. It was no longer an island, as Jayadev Unnithan put it, but actively connected with Singapore’s welfare system. SNM continues to expand its welfare commitments, while maintaining the balance between spirituality, community and charity.

The Members are the Heritage

What can we learn from this rich history? The book suggests that SNM’s heritage is to be found not in services or projects, but in its

members and their efforts. They are the ones who freely volunteered their time, energies and expertise (which includes preparing for the Chathayam lunch) for each of the Mission's spiritual, socio-cultural and welfare programmes. Often, they worked together, though sometimes they did not agree, such as their arguments during the statue controversy of the late 1970s. But all these acts of volunteerism in the past, even the disagreements, are a key resource for SNM in the future.

Senior members of SNM have played a key role in renewing the organisation. Many younger members trace their association with the Mission to their parents' encouragement. Shalini Damodaran, the current Secretary, joined the Executive Committee because she thought it would be 'good to join, to help out'. She was supported by her mother, Indira, for whom volunteering was an important part of being a Malayalee. The encouragement allayed one of Shalini's early memories as a child – of members shouting during an AGM, which had frightened her.⁴³⁰ Similarly, Prasanna Dayanandan supported her daughter Swapna when she became President in 2011, asking Swapna to do good deeds and serve the community.⁴³¹

SNM has done well to recognise its long-serving members. Many of the older members proudly showed me their Long Service Awards from the Mission. One of them was Chandra Bose, who showed me his plaque from 2013, recognising his contributions as a SNM volunteer over 36 years.⁴³² Even more long serving was N Sarasijakshan, whose award thanked him for his work with the Mission for 39 years.⁴³³

Throughout its history, SNM had acknowledged key members when they passed away. This was documented in the minutes of the

⁴³⁰ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Snehaaletha Kuttan and Indira Damodaran, 29 July 2022.

⁴³¹ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Prasanna Dayanandan, 4 April 2022.

⁴³² Loh Kah Seng, interview with Chandra Bose, 18 May 2022.

⁴³³ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Kamala Devi and N. Sarasijakshan, 7 December 2022.

Executive Committee's meetings. It showed that older Malayalees formed a closely knit community, especially in Sembawang. They were aware of other members' well-being (or death), and were always willing to help. When Committee Member Bhaskaran Nair passed away in 1967, the Committee adopted a resolution to send a letter of condolence, and a big sum of \$500, to his family, acknowledging his services to the Mission.⁴³⁴ Nair lived in Buffalo Road in Little India and his son Dileep remembered him making long trips after work to 48 Soon Keat Road in the north of Singapore to attend his meetings.⁴³⁵ When another senior member, Thambapillai, passed away in 1979, his family directed the donations collected for his funeral to the Mission's use.⁴³⁶

SNM can still do more to acknowledge other groups of pioneers who have been under the radar. The research for this book showed that many members were aware of important people who served in other roles, such as the remarkable women behind the Chathayam lunch and other ordinary members who did not seek office. I was encouraged to interview many of the women and I am glad I did. For this reason, I suggested holding a forum for women members in December 2022, where they could talk about what they thought of the Guru and what being a member of SNM meant to them.

The recent debate over the founders of SNM is the sign of a strong and healthy organisation. It shows a genuine interest in the origins and history of the group. It is also natural as the organisation grows, for older members to want to get a better sense of where it came from and how they had contributed. It is timely to do so. Sadly, while I interviewed many older members, some of those from the 1950s and

⁴³⁴ Dileep Nair, Letter from SNM on Resolution Adopted on 25 April 1967, 1967.

⁴³⁵ Loh Kah Seng, interview with Dileep Nair, 8 March 2022.

⁴³⁶ SNM, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 6 May 1979.

1960s had passed on or could not remember well what happened in that time.

SNM is fortunate that it always had a sense of its mission and heritage, which were regularly documented in its *Annual Souvenir Magazines* over the years. It also has a strong oral tradition and institutional memory, which helped fill gaps in the official record. In these archives and memories reside the personal endeavours and contributions of SNM's remarkable volunteers. I hope the Mission will continue to document its history and recognise its members as it continues to evolve as an organisation.

Author

Dr Loh Kah Seng is a historian and director of Chronicles Research and Education. He is interested in all things that happened in the history of Singapore and the lives of its people. His books include *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore*; *Tuberculosis – The Singapore Experience, 1867-2018: Disease, Society and the State*; *Pandemics in Singapore, 1819-2022* and *Lessons for the Age of COVID-19*.

Oral history is a major part of his research, which also includes heritage research projects with the National Heritage Board, Urban Redevelopment Authority and other agencies. He also runs a podcast series on YouTube called *Chronicles of Old Singapore*, where he interviews people on their memories of Singapore before it became a global city.

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