

A Planter's Story

# A Heart That Will Forever Be With Plantations

V. Ranganathan, 97, shared that his heart will forever be with the plantations that have granted him much gratification in the sunset of his life. In the hour-long phone interview, this astute nonagenarian lets on nothing of his age, methodically and meticulously laying down the colourful milestones that mark a career spanning eight decades. As he lists the career positions and living localities of his eight children, 16 grandchildren and 16 great grandchildren, one is left in awe at how Ranganathan has embraced life in all its glory and fullness.

## A DAILY LOVE

"By seven in the morning I am in my Jeep driving 40 kilometres to Ladang Mon Repose in Sabak Bernam, Perak. There, I walk two to three kilometres overseeing the harvesting, transporting of the palm oil fruits to the mill and other day-to-day activities such as spraying and weeding; and by noon, I make the hour drive back home to Teluk Intan," said Ranganathan who enthusiastically laid out his daily

routine from Mondays to Fridays. Ranganathan is the Incorporated Society of Planters' (ISP) oldest living member who turns 97 this year.

## EVENTFUL BEGINNINGS

V. Ranganathan was born in 1923 in the Trichinopoly District in Madras India to parents T.M. Venkatesan and T.V. Ramarathanamal. His father left for Malaya to work at the rubber plantations, and thereafter made

arrangements for the family to join him. At nine, Ranganathan began his schooling at the Anglo-Chinese School in Teluk Intan, Perak. After obtaining his Senior Cambridge school certificate in 1939, Ranganathan joined the Cicely Group (estate) Hospital as a probationary dresser. Soon after, the Second World War loomed; and the Japanese occupation in Malaya brought forth both challenging and uncertain days.

## V. Ranganathan

*Supervisor at Mon Repose Estate, Sabak Bernam, Perak and The Incorporated Society of Planters' (ISP) oldest living member.*



During this time, Ranganathan kept busy assisting wherever he could in the wellbeing of those around him. His initiatives were noticed by the Japanese who requested for him to accompany them when they visited other estates, and this he did, until he received a letter that threatened harm to him and his family if he did not stop. “The Japanese masters gave me a revolver for protection, which I politely declined, and wasted no time returning to Cicely Estate,” enthused Ranganathan.

After the war, Ranganathan was appointed hospital assistant at Gloucester Estate and gradually gained more administrative responsibilities. He vividly recalled the post war years 1948 to 1949; a period when the Communist threats were real and imminent. “One night we woke up to gun shots, and before I knew what was happening, a bullet had come through to the bedroom,” shared Ranganathan who explained that the Communists were firing at the house of the Estate Manager, a Scotsman, which was just next to his. “These near death experiences are hard to forget, but it made us so much the stronger having lived through them.”

## CHANGING DYNAMICS

In 1954, Ranganathan was made Cadet Assistant, and soon after was appointed as a Senior Planter, becoming the first Indian to hold the position. He subsequently managed Bagan Pasir Estate and was subsequently transferred to several estates in Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. He was then appointed manager of the Sungai Siput Estate where he retired from in 1980. Post retirement, Ranganathan was offered a position as an Assistant Manager with United Plantations and thereafter to supervise

Dutch-owned Mon Repose Estate, a 300-acre property, which he cares for till today.

Ranganathan opines that the dynamics of the plantation scene today has shifted. “During my time, we had no shortage of labour. It was also easier managing the estate because workers were able to effectively receive instructions, so there were few problems or issues,” shared Ranganathan. “The scenario today is vastly different. The shortage of labour is a threat to the industry,” said Ranganathan adding that he does not see the situation abetting the increasing complexities that surround the plantation industry.

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It is in this respect that Ranganathan draws from the values imparted to him by his colonial mentors. “They (referring to past colonial Planters) would always remind us that when you are happy, your family will be happy,” said Ranganathan who explained that recreational activities such as Family and Sports Days played a huge part in nurturing the bond within a Planter’s direct and indirect family. “This led to a strong

set of Planter values that allowed us to persevere through the challenges over the years.”

## PLANTER VALUES

“The mentorship and guidance I received as a young Planter was invaluable,” said Ranganathan who emphasised that as a Planter, discipline is key. “The managers would not mince words when they met out advice and instructions, but after the day is done, we would gather at the Club for some rest and recreation,” he added. “There is a strong bond between Planters, and a deep appreciation of what the plantation industry entails,” added Ranganathan who shared that the professional and social camaraderie led to a working relationship based on respect and cooperation.

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## THE ISP FACTOR

Ranganathan highlights that the role of the ISP is crucial, as it is pivotal in forging the Planter as a person, and the industry as a profession. “The contributions of the ISP have been crucial in helping Planters upgrade their agricultural knowledge,” said Ranganathan who added that every Planter should seize the opportunity to be a member of the centenary-old association.



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We have to change the perceptions among students regarding the image of plantation life and remove the barriers to enrolling in agricultural courses in universities. This is an area where ISP can step in and collaborate with tertiary institutions

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“I cannot fathom why Planters would think twice about joining the ISP. If only they knew the potential of being a member,” lamented Ranganathan stressing that the technical competencies and certifications afforded by the ISP can take a Planter far in his career. “The ISP qualification propels one’s supervisory career,” he said adding that with the right certification, a Planter can potentially earn a monthly salary of RM12,000.00 to RM15,000.00. “The incentives paid out in the Plantation industry are also generous,” jests Ranganathan who revealed that five to six month bonuses are a norm.

### SEIZE THE DAY

Ranganathan has always been one to seize the day, never allowing a busy schedule to stand in the way of charitable work, which he continues

to be active in even after his retirement. Some of his past initiatives have been for his alma-mater the Anglo-Chinese School in Teluk Intan, the Indian Association of Lower Perak, as a temple committee member and committee member of sports related associations. In 1967 and 1971 respectively, his social contributions were recognised by the Perak State Government through the conferring of the PJK and JP honorary awards.

Ranganathan is pleased that his son Gopala Krishnan has taken after him in the plantation sector and lauds him for the committed and passionate Planter that he is. “It is interesting because we are able to exchange ideas on work. Gopala does a very good job, and I am extremely proud that he has set time

aside for community causes.” This being said, Ranganathan is equally delighted with the accomplishments of his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, making a special mention that everyone should cherish the opportunity to obtain a good education.

It is clear from his daily routine that Ranganathan at 97 is not planning to shift gears any time soon. He lives with his daughter in Teluk Intan and fondly mentioned that he is accompanied by his wife of 73 years, M. Pathma who turns 89 this year. Ranganathan shared that he is happiest when he sees the accomplishments of the members of his family, and that his heart will forever be with the plantations that have granted him this gratification in the sunset of his life.