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Interviewee: **SARAVANAN GOPINATHAN**

Interviewer: Sabrina Chua

Date: 12 February 2016

Location: Singapore

0:00:21

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Professor S. Gopinathan, thank you very much for joining us this morning. I'd like to get a sense of your motivations and your influences so if we could move back to your early life, were there key moments that you think shaped you?

0:00:36

[S Gopinathan](#)

I like to think of myself as being a sort of post-war child, if you'd like. I was born in the middle of the Japanese Occupation. The other interesting thing is I'm the child of migrants. My parents came from Tamil Nadu in the late 1930s, and I was born in Singapore in 1942. I was born in the naval base, and the naval base was obviously the centre of British military power, that was Churchill's impregnable fortress, which wasn't supposed to fall to anybody. So, there's a sense in which I have one foot in the colonial history of Singapore, and another foot in the post-war, the post-colonial history, and this whole sense of who are we as Singaporeans? Is Singapore viable as an independent state? This whole discourse around vulnerabilities. This is something that I was very conscious about. I went and did my uni (university) studies in the Bukit Timah campus, and this was in the early '60s. So, in that sense I suppose one strain in my background and my thinking has always been a little bit of a political animal. Academics or educationalists are not often very politically-oriented, but I have a sense of that as part of my upbringing.

A second aspect is really my own sense of having, in particular, looked at, participated in, benefitted from education and education expansion. So both an opportunity for me to be educated and for my siblings to be educated, and for me to contribute for over four and a half decades to education, is I think perhaps quite unique. I'd like to see it as me being rather unique, and so it's really been an amazing journey for me. It's almost, if you'd like, front row seat of the evolution of the Singapore state, and Singapore where it is now. Also, a front row seat in terms of education, education policy, education development, helping to train teachers and school principals, being involved in some policy making, and even internationalising the Singapore brand of education.

0:03:14

[Sabrina Chua](#)

How do you think the education system has evolved over the years?

0:03:21

[S Gopinathan](#)

The education system has had... if you like, two twin pillars. One pillar has always been economic, and it's understandable that the facts are: lack of natural resources, small population, larger neighbours. Therefore, potentially cheaper labour. Labour scarcity generally means high wages, right? So, the question then becomes, if you're going to survive on your own without a big hinterland, without a big market that Malaysia offers, how would you do it? The only asset we had was human capital. So, rigorous, high standards in education, a meritocratic model of education was what was chosen. That stood us in good stead over that fifty years, because we probably have one of the best educated labour forces in the world. In the economic dimension, it was directed towards making sure that school leavers, that the needs of the labour market, would be met by students coming through the system. Going forward, the post-industrial knowledge economy is going to require very different types of skills, and the question therefore becomes: how do we retain what is best in our system? Because if you say that we are moving into something called the knowledge society, then you have to have a certain level of numeracy and literacy, and that might mean ten years of education for everybody, to give at least that level. Beyond that, what do you do? Increasingly, a lot of more Singaporean students are going to post-secondary education, whether it's the ITE (Institute of Technical Education), the polytechnics, or the university. A big challenge since probably about Mr. Goh Chok Tong's 1997 "Thinking Schools, Learning Nations" speech, we have got to recalibrate our education system. The policy rationales, "Thinking Schools, Learning Nations", "Teach Less, Learn More", "Innovation and Enterprise", all these things are there, but the system has certain rigidities still. Part of the rigidities has to do with the high-stake exams. Because there is a certain rigidity in what we need to learn, and the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination) and the 'O' levels are not... as in some of the systems, are assessments of achievement, but they are selection mechanisms as well.

So, what is happening is, still some work to be done around... if we believe that, and policy makers are very clear, we are moving into a very different economic environment. It may even be that when you leave school, or when you leave education, you're not talking about employment, you're talking about employability. That employability could be self-employability. The government no longer obliged to create a job for you. Some jobs will be available, there will be competition for it. Those who seem to have a particular talent, can fit what the employers want, probably will be selected and highly rewarded. Those who don't will have to figure out what they want to do. Do they retrain? Do they move in another direction? Do they self-employ? Some of the tools of self-employment are available, so we are moving in a very new territory. But culturally, institutionally, we are sort of caught in a time wrap, right?

0:07:25

[Sabrina Chua](#)

It's interesting because you mentioned Goh Chok Tong in 1997, and very recently Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said that he thinks we need to overhaul, rejuv (rejuvenate) the entire education system to retool for the new economy so...it's still the same concerns about...

0:07:39

[S Gopinathan](#)

It's still the same concerns, but you see, the difficulty from a policy maker's point of view is, and paradoxically, our system is held up all over the world as a high performing system. NIE (National Institute of Education) and the Ministry probably get visitors every week from all over the world, from Bolivia, from Colombia, from... the UK, from Europe, said, "How do you guys, three, four million people, how do you do this? You have about what, six universities and two or three universities are within the top hundred. You have one university top in Asia. How is it possible?" So, ours is an admired system, but within the national context, people are saying, "Hey, it may be so, but we still have to be preparing for the next leap." The next leap is even more difficult. One advantage we have is this is a very credible system. Parents don't really want to exit the system, except when they feel that the stresses are getting to be too great. We have strong foundations. We have a strong work ethic, everybody internalises that if you work hard, if you perform, if you show that you have talent, you will be rewarded. So those are virtues to have. In our system, the other extreme, an over anxious desire to perform, and to be top of the heap, which then loads pressure and that might stifle the creativity, the entrepreneurship, the risk taking that everybody is telling us is what the new economy requires. That's what I meant by saying that we are moving into a new economic environment. Will the old model of schooling, which worked well for us, which has given us some fundamentals, how will it need to be tweaked, and what sort of a cultural shift, because government can't do everything, right? To what extent do parents have to say, "I have to accept that the old notion that you're only successful if you're a doctor, or an architect, or an accountant no longer holds. Because we know that people who drop out of school can be very creative, can create jobs not only for themselves... wealth for themselves, but also for others. So, we are facing this phenomenon that you could... you have to think of employability. You have to almost re-mould yourself, which is what Skills Future is about. Training opportunities are there, cash is there, but you have to tell yourself that you're not going to be in one job for thirty, forty years, that's gone. You're going to be in multiple jobs. Today you don't know what that job might be. So are you open to learning? Are you open to new experiences?"

0:10:32

[Sabrina Chua](#)

You mentioned some successful national education policies. Could you go into detail about a few of them? What were the key drivers you think? Who were the key drivers behind some of the successful policies?

0:10:48

[S Gopinathan](#)

Many, many governments say education is important, but in very little of the policies that they implement is that manifested. In Singapore, investment in education, investment in high standards, investment in the quality of teachers, investment in the resources that you see at

schools is very clear. With regard to the bilingual policy, particularly Mr Lee Kuan Yew put his own reputation and stature behind that policy, because it was not an easy thing because it was very highly... language policies were very highly politicised in the '50s. He had to himself basically said, at the risk of losing the Chinese vote, to say, "No, our survival is going to depend on our ability to build an industrial economy." If that was that logic, then English was going to be an important medium, right? Balance that off by saying, "We have the Mother Tongues too" to basically root people in their culture. He himself, by example, learnt Malay, learnt to speak Mandarin, and right until the last few months of his life he continued to learn. By example, they basically set the standards for themselves. He sent his children to Chinese schools. Some of that quality of walking the talk resonates with people, and says "Well, we have seen the evidence of this and therefore this is going to be important." We didn't just basically say, "Bilingualism, I am doing this, I have given you the answers, let's go on with it." They were in it for the long haul, and because they understood, not immediately but later on, that massive language shift, which is what in a sense the language policy predicated, is going to take time. The reason why it was so traumatic in the '70s was really that the languages of the home were not the languages of the school. It was dialect and no English. School - English and Mandarin. That is a horrendous challenge for children coming in. Teachers didn't know what norms were to be expected. Were we looking for equilingualism as opposed to bilingualism? How would we justify a certain standard for English across speaking, writing, listening, and how would we do that for the Mother Tongues? What was the evidence? There's no experience. That's one aspect of it.

If you look at, say policies like streaming, over time that they have changed. One of the virtues of this government is that when they see it doesn't work, they don't. A lot of us objected to ranking. Because ranking of schools was basically something that was borrowed from the commercial sphere. Competition makes you better, because if you lose in a competition, you are out. Therefore, you will strive harder, you would be more persistent in your goals. But is education something that ought to be ranked in that way, and have we created a sort of a hierarchy of schools? You are at the top of it. If you signal somebody as the top of it, everybody wants to go to that school. If you say this is the top company, everybody wants to work for the top company. In the commercial sphere where profit motive is the reason for being, then that's fine. But education is not about... education starts off with the assumption that every child is valuable, every child is unique and therefore it's the system that has to be flexible, adjustable, and not that you shoehorn differences into a system, because it makes for greater efficiency, and then you have a certain number that says, "You're a top school because in the exam..." I think ranking basically strengthened this notion that exam results were the best indicator of quality in education. They are one indicator, but they're not everything.

0:15:21

[Sabrina Chua](#)

You mentioned there were objections and you were among those...

0:15:25

[S Gopinathan](#)

I was among those who basically argued, but Dr Goh Keng Swee would have none of it [Laugh]. He basically thought that we were all sort of softheaded because we couldn't see the enormity of the problem, which was basically kids were leaving school, huge attrition, and the labour force was being weakened because kids were leaving school without the necessary learning and literacy and numeracy skills that would take us...

0:15:54

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, he thought that ranking would address these issues?

0:15:58

[S Gopinathan](#)

No, no. The ranking was something that we... Streaming was what his solution was, ranking was again something else that I think it was Teo Chee Hean who basically introduced ranking much later. But if you step back and you ask me what makes the system successful, it's those sorts of things. In many, many countries that I have studied, the problem is not with the policy, the problem is with the implementation. In Singapore, across the board, when government makes policy, it is very, very likely that that policy would have been thought through. What are the resource implications of that policy? Do we have people trained to implement that policy? Are we clear as to what the indicators of success for that policy might be? Implementation, generally across the board in civil service, but in education has been a key strength. In most systems, teachers will say, "Alright, new minister, new policies, wait five years something else will come." In Singapore, teachers know, well so and so says this is the policy, we will do something about it. I think one, the signal that we make policy, we explain why that policy is important, we resource that policy, and we make sure the policy is implemented. Secondly, because we're small, an alignment between ministry, the NIE, and the schools. The NIE is the only education body. Now you go to almost any country, even a small country, there are numerous teacher training agencies, and because they're located in universities, they tend to be independent. We choose this model of teacher preparation, we choose that model of teacher preparation. NIE, there is only one. So, there is a strength and weakness in that, in the sense that if that model works, then it works across the entire system. If that model is not working or is behind the curve, then the whole system is impacted. But faculty in NIE know exactly where the ministry wants to go, and we know that we serve the schools, because there is no difficulty for a Singapore school principal or a superintendent to pick up the phone and talk to the Director of Education or the PS (Permanent Secretary) and say, "This new cohort of teachers not so good." There's no hiding. That alignment gives us a certain coherence that other systems don't have.

0:18:44

[Sabrina Chua](#)

But were there times when NIE were, was, at odds with the ministry?

0:18:49

[S Gopinathan](#)

Not really. Truth to tell, not really. Because we saw in the ministry highly competent individuals making policy. The other thing is, many systems, the education system is discredited. In fact, you will find the phenomenon of private schooling. Singapore is one of the few countries where there isn't a big private sector. You only can, if you're a citizen, you only can send your child to a private school if you have been abroad, child coming back, cannot master Mother Tongue, yes, you can send, but otherwise you got to go to a public school. The Prime Minister's son goes to a public school. Public schools had better be good. In that sense, very credible, no major disruptions, built up incrementally and change was incremental. The sense of those of us who were working within NIE was that these people knew what they were doing. It made sense to us. They were credible, they were legitimate, and they were in for the long haul. That synergy, that alignment gives a strength to the system.

0:20:03

[Sabrina Chua](#)

But you mentioned ranking and streaming that you...

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[S Gopinathan](#)

Yes, we disagreed but we knew that the government had decided. There are many things that one might disagree with as an individual or as a community, as a group of scholars. We wrote about it in our academic articles. We might have told the students, "Well, the minister says this is desirable because of this, our view is this." It's for you to make up your minds because we do want teachers to be reflective, to think. We're not here to subvert the system. We want to hear all of us collectively make this a stronger system. But we can have legitimate differences of how to get there.

0:20:43

[Sabrina Chua](#)

You spent more than forty years in education, who do you think were the ministers that actually made a difference, that really pushed policies?

0:20:52

[S Gopinathan](#)

The minister that I worked with most closely was Mr. Tharman, because he headed the committee to look at JC (Junior college)-Upper secondary education which led to the IP (Integrated Programme) schools. I served on that committee. I found that again, he was very clear in what the objectives were, willing to listen to a whole range of issues, very persuasive. He knew in a sense what he wanted but didn't force it. I didn't have much of a chance to work

with Goh Keng Swee, but I would have thought it would be pretty stressful to have worked with Goh Keng See. Tharman was a different sort of person. He's the one I had most contact with. Others would come to NIE. They would be guest of honour at our convocations and all the rest of it. By and large, it would be the director of the institute who would interact most with very senior officials in the ministry. Those of us who were fairly senior would be known to the minister. I organised a thinking conference at which I... when I was at NIE, when Mr Goh Chok Tong came to the NIE campus to actually give his "Thinking Schools, Learning Nations" speech. So brief encounters of that... Tharman I worked with, and I think that for me, somebody who was thoughtful, somebody who could be persuaded, but somebody who could be very persuasive himself. It was a real pleasure to work with.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

In that sense, are those qualities you would appreciate in a leader?

0:22:42

[S Gopinathan](#)

Certainly. I think there is a time and space for strong charismatic leaders, a Mandela, a Churchill, a Lee Kwan Yew, a Roosevelt, but there are times when the imperatives are not so... it's not life or death, like a war situation. Where a better, more highly educated population, invariably leads to a plurality of views. What's the point of educating a population if the purpose of that education is not a much more enlightened citizenry? An enlightened citizenry is one that asks questions, right? It needs the capacity of a leader, who can show that he's in charge, he's looking ahead, but who's also sensitive to the people he serves. There's no leadership without followership in my view, but the nature of that followership is changed. In the Singapore context, '50s, '60s, '70s, that notion of survival, we have to close ranks. Even if we disagreed, we're not really sure that other choices were going to be far more viable, but trust the leadership, and hopefully it works. We're in much more different times now. Trust has got to be earned, and trust has got to be continually earned. You can lose trust very quickly, and the population at large, I'm one of those old-fashioned persons. I don't much use social media, but I think social media is got some positive qualities but there are some negative qualities. Twitter is a disaster, I think...

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

How so?

0:24:34

[S Gopinathan](#)

How so? Because I mean... you can't compress everything into what... 140 words or something like that.

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Sabrina Chua

Characters, not even words [Laugh].

0:24:40

S Gopinathan

Characters. Characters! Not even words. I mean, how can you, how can... I was brought up in a generation where reading, argumentation, following the logic of an argument was really what made you educated. Yes, you can have an opinion, but what is the basis of that opinion? If opinion itself only mattered, then even an unlettered person would have an opinion. I like it, I don't like it. But why don't you like it? What is your alternative? You can't have a discussion, it seems to me, without some thinking. It's always the joke I make that... they always say that the Singaporean student, when he goes overseas, is very quiet but all his peers are very loud and quick. It's true, the Americans are very eager to give you their views, but they haven't done their reading. When the Singaporean finally speaks, you'll know that he's done the reading, so he's able to poke holes in what that person is saying. It's not a matter of preferences, "I think so." It's why do you think so? If we can get a leadership that sees the value in it, then we... this whole notion of leaders and led, would be... it would be a much more diffused thing. The notions of participation, of co-ownership, of collegiality, those things matter. When I think of my own self, I was a lecturer, I was a Head of Department, I was Vice Dean, I was professor, and now I'm an academic director at a think-tank, how do I lead? I have to lead by example, because I'm working with people who are intelligent, qualified, accomplished in their own way. I have always learnt that a problem shared is a problem solved, or at least on its way to being solved. If I think the burden is mine, because I'm the leader, I'm supposed to a) define the problem, b) solve the problem, then I'm just taking on an unnecessary burden. If you build a team, you're going to be able to do... the problem definition itself may be an extremely interesting exercise. What you thought, what I thought was a problem, may not be the problem, right? Because if I think that's a problem, and I have a solution, and I want them to implement it, but they have no ownership in it, then it becomes: well, I'll do it because you asked me to do it and you're the boss, quote, unquote. But if I shared it with you, if I have collegial, and I think academics tend to be more of that because we are all... we all tend to recognise we are experts in our own field. I may be a policy or a teacher education expert, you may be somebody who's very knowledgeable about skills, you may be very knowledgeable about higher education, I can't take your class, you can't take my class. But if the institute or the director says, "Hey guys, we got a problem to solve." Sit around the table, nominally I might be the leader, because I'm a Dean. It's got to be a collective thing, because we are dealing with something which is multifaceted and complex. That's where I would want to be, and if you ask me how would you want to be, would people subsequently if they had a choice still want to work with me? That's the only thing. There are times when you take responsibility, when you report up. You can't say, "Well, we are collegial, and I gave it to this person, and it didn't..." No, I'm going to take responsibility for that. But I'm hoping that when that MD (managing director) goes to that person and says, "Hey, you all came up with something good." They're able on their own to say yes, it was a very collegial sort of thing. I'm constantly finding... because always the

temptation when you're rushed for time, when you're older, you're more senior to think, "Right, I got the answer to this." But if you took the time to solicit opinions, and they genuinely saw this as capacity building for them, then if for any reason if I'm not in the office for a week, you guys will know what to do. I want to be able to leave that, I mean that situation.

0:28:57

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Have you been in a situation where you gave them this exercise that you brainstormed together about the solution, but in the end, the solution that you adopted was your own? Did you have any problems selling that idea to the rest of them?

0:29:14

[S Gopinathan](#)

Yes, there are occasions when somebody wants something badly, and senior management gets into a huddle and says we don't have enough money for this, we have to make some choices. As long as those choices are rational, and the person is able to see that it was not a favouritism sort of thing, or so and so liked this project, therefore funded this project but didn't fund the other project, no. Because subsequently, if in fact you weren't able to persuade that person that you all acted with integrity, then you wouldn't get the best out of that person the next round. Because that person would be embittered, would not feel that she got a fair shake. So, even in some selfish sort of way, if you want... if you were there for the long term, and you knew you had to depend on them, and you knew you had to build their capacity and their trust, then you have to do that. If you weren't successful, then in a sense, you failed. At least in that aspect, you failed as a leader, unless you can subsequently win that person over.

0:30:19

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Are there particular people or leaders that you admire in any sphere: politics, education, and the social sphere, business?

0:30:27

[S Gopinathan](#)

I... the persons I admired most I think are my academic mentors. They're not conventionally leaders in that sense. Dr Gwee Yee Hean, I still remember him after almost what, sixty plus years? Not so many, maybe fifty plus years. Phillip Altbach was my thesis supervisor. A wonderful mentor who never... he was a professor in a distinguished university, but I never felt that he was a professor, and we have maintained a friendship to this day. So those are the people who basically I have admired in my...

0:31:05

Sabrina Chua

Were there common traits that they all shared?

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S Gopinathan

Open. They were open, they didn't carry their expertise around as if I'm the expert and you are here to learn. There are others who I admired for their achievement, their scholarship, so not a political leader, not an economic leader, but more an academic leader if I wanted to be like... I wanted to be like that, if you'd like. Role models, if you'd like, more than leaders. I suppose I would wish that in the various... how many students would I have taught? I would have taught several thousand students, that they would remember those qualities in me, that's all I would ask for. But I don't know that they would, I don't know... But I do occasionally come across someone who comes up and says, "Sir, you don't remember me, but I was in Swiss Cottage in 1968. This is my grandchild. Yes. [Both laugh] They come up and introduce, "You taught me literature, I remember." I don't remember but... So, for me, if they don't cross the road when they see me coming, they come up and shake my hand, okay, that's been a good life.

0:32:26

Sabrina Chua

But what would you say was the biggest challenge that you faced throughout your career?

0:32:33

S Gopinathan

I honestly can't say. I'm sure there were challenges, I'm sure I was annoyed and frustrated, but it didn't last with me a long time. I, I...

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Sabrina Chua

Because you reconciled yourself with the situation?

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S Gopinathan

Yes. I was both a realist and an idealist. I was a realist in the sense that I knew this was the structure, this was the system, that there was legitimate authority, and that legitimate authority had a position it had already taken, and we had to do the best we could to implement it. In that sense, I was a realist. I wouldn't say, "Hey, I have got a PhD, you're just a Deputy Minister, why should I listen to you?" Never, but I never forgot that I could impact the views, and the lives, and the aspirations, and the values of those that I taught. There was a sacred trust as far as I was concerned. I like to think that they saw some of that in me, which

has led them to acknowledge, and keep in touch with me, and so on, so forth. I wouldn't say this is very challenging, and by doing this, or by dint of that, or by some superb act of courage, I overcame it, no. I couldn't honestly say that. Almost an easy run in some ways. But I enjoyed the work. I was able to bring some quality and talent to the tasks at hand. I progressively went up the system. I still continue to work. I'm now academic director at the think tank, where most people would be looking after their dogs, and gardens, and grandchildren.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Thank you very much, Sir, for spending your time with us.

0:34:37

[S Gopinathan](#)

I hope it was useful.

0:34:37

[Sabrina Chua](#)

It's very enlightening. Yes. Thank you.