

Raffles Institution's first Asian principal, Ambi — as his students affectionately called him — supported extra-curricular activities and promoted interaction among teachers, students and himself. The result was a school which buzzed with activity and students who enjoyed spending more time there.

## Principal in Profile

By SUSANNA KULATISSA

# 'Life is work and work is life'

A TRUE-BLUE Rafflesian — that's Mr V. Ambiavagar, former student, teacher and principal of Raffles Institution.

Having risen from the ranks, Mr Ambiavagar, 78, can claim to know all aspects of life at the school.

"I identified myself with the school — not for years but for decades. My life was RI," he said.

Students and teachers who worked with him remember his determination to get everyone working together for the good of the school.

But his role as the school's first Asian head was not an easy one. Soon after he was appointed acting principal of RI, Mr Ambiavagar found that he had a cultural barrier to cross before he could start tackling school matters.

Many teachers resented him, and some were even hostile, he recalled.

"Ironically, the trouble was from some local teachers, rather than from the many European ones in the school then."

But his hard work and determination to get the best for his students soon won the staff over.

A former RI teacher said: "We could see what he wanted was to give the best to the students. He was tough on teachers who neglected their duties — and he did this for the good of students."

After the initial teething problems were overcome, it was plain sailing.

Born in 1907, Mr Ambiavagar attended Kuala Lumpur's Methodist Boys' School and then Raffles Institution here.

In 1928, he became a teacher, and this was the start of a 33-year career in education. Four years later, he was posted to RI.

### Example

"I learnt a lot about teaching by picking up tips from good teachers. I asked myself what I admired most about certain teachers. And I tried to remember to do the same in my dealings with others."

"I also noted what made other teachers unpopular, and I tried to avoid doing those things," he said.

Mr Ambiavagar, a father of five, said he used this approach on principals too.

Among the pointers which came across loud and clear were that a strong dose of discipline was necessary, and that the principal and teachers had to set an example for students to follow.

"I had to be very strict about boys who came to school late. But it was difficult when some of the teachers were not punctual," he said.

promoting greater interaction among himself, the teachers and the students.

"Both teachers and students like to be consulted on matters relating to the school. I found that by involving them in decision making, they responded to rules very well."

A former student said: "He used to call some of us into his office to talk about a special school function coming up."

"In those days, it was a big thing to be invited into the principal's office and be asked for an opinion."

Mr Ambiavagar noted that the teachers appreciated this too.

"Teachers started thinking of the school as a whole, and not just of their own teaching subjects."

Mr Ambiavagar and his teachers were then able to embark together on more pupil-centred activities.

School assemblies were one of the first areas of attack. Instead of having only the principal making speeches, teachers and students were invited to take the stage.

### Interests

The response was good. Both teachers and students tried to discuss thought-provoking as well as educational issues.

And Mr Ambiavagar was very pleased, for he believes that learning should not be confined to the classroom.

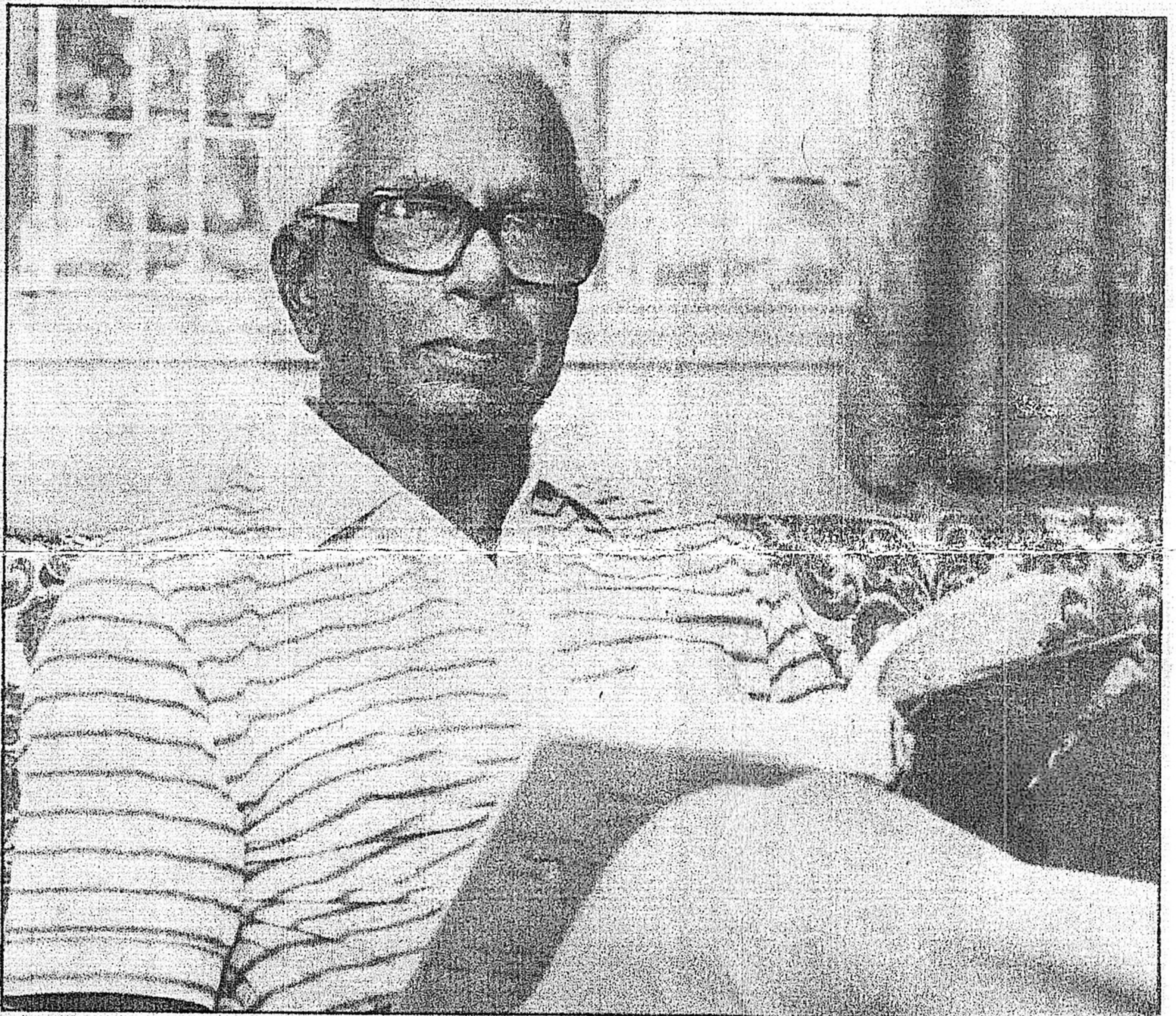
The present principal of RI, Mr A.K. Sigamoney, recalled: "Mr Ambiavagar was a sportsman himself, with a wide range of interests."

"He wanted the boys to develop interests in as many areas as possible, so they could get a well-balanced education."

One of Mr Ambiavagar's innovations was to extend physical education classes to all students. (PE was taught only in the lower classes at that time.)

He found that many boys could not take part in games because only one game was played each day. And the time allotted for games was very short.

He talked with his staff about having longer game times and more activities. Doubtful at first,



Mr Ambiavagar: "Teachers and students like to be consulted on matters relating to the school, to be involved in decision making." Photograph by NGHAI CHEE WAH

the teachers soon realised the advantages of the scheme — many more boys could now take part in games and enjoy the school's sports facilities.

Up to 12 teams of students could play tennis, basketball and volleyball during the week, instead of only two teams.

The school buzzed with activity, and the students looked forward to spending more time there.

To further boost sports at RI, Mr Ambiavagar

made it a point to attend as many inter-house and inter-school games as possible.

"This not only encouraged teachers to attend too, but also kept up the sporting spirit," he said.

A former student, now a doctor in private practice, recalled: "I still remember 'Ambi' at the games. He enjoyed them so much, and you knew his presence there was not just for show."

Mr Ambiavagar feels

that principals today have a tougher job, with more pupils in their schools.

"Interaction in the old days was much easier. A principal could get to know his students better, and then shape his administration so that he had personal contact with a great number of them."

His advice to principals today: get to know both teachers and students well — so well, indeed, that everyone enjoys working hard.

"The main focus of a human being's life is his work. And a person dedicated to his work will get the most happiness out of life."

"My ambition has always been to inculcate in my students the philosophy that life is work and work is life."

"Work is the basis of true happiness and true morality."

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— Mr V. Ambiavagar.