

The perfectionist in a hurry



tabla! talk
with Patrick Jonas



He writes poetry, is trained in Hindustani classical music and wants to master Kriya Yoga... Prof Singh sure exemplifies the can-do spirit. PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR

THE can-do spirit is pretty obvious throughout our conversation. Dr Jitendra V. Singh believes in himself a great deal. And that spirit has taken the dean of Nanyang Business School places.

His fascination with mountains saw him go up to the base camp of Mount Everest and trek to the sacred heights of Mount Kailash in Tibet, which is 5,791m above sea level.

He challenged two tennis players ranked by the Association of Tennis Players (yes, the same association that ranks Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal) to raise his game and he did it.

It is also that spirit which has seen him achieve academic excellence. Professor Singh, who graduated from the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, has a PhD from Stanford and taught at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School for 20 years before he moved to Singapore in September last year.

His aim now is to make Nanyang one of the top business schools in the world.

Coming to Singapore is something of a return to his Asian roots. He was born and raised in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, and left India for the United States a few years after he finished his MBA in 1975.

He had been visiting India and China, attending seminars and giving lectures, but had no serious plans to move to this part of the globe till a chance meeting with a close friend a couple of years ago.

Prof Singh was in transit in Singapore when he called on Mr Philip Yeo, the chairman of Spring Singapore. "Philip is the only person who calls me Jit. And he told me: 'Jit, go and meet Su Guanng. He is looking for a new dean for the business school'," he

recalls.

Even though he was not very keen, Mr Yeo's insistence took him to the meeting with Dr Su, the president of Nanyang Technological University. They chatted and realised that both were once students in Stanford at the same time but pursuing different subjects. At the end of the meeting, Dr Su told him: "I hope you will apply."

Prof Singh did not make any promises then. Later, a head-hunting firm contacted him about the job and, after nearly a year of discussions, he took up the dean's post.

That meant a big move, not only for him but also his wife Marliez and daughters Ambika, 16, and Katherine, 13. And it didn't go down too well. After six months here, the girls missed their friends and returned to the US.

Prof Singh misses them and keeps in touch with them every day. When time permits, he hops onto an SIA flight – an airline which he praises to the skies – to be with them. He was last there for the Thanksgiving weekend.

Does that mean his stay in Singapore will be short? "No. I have a job to do: To build a world-class business school. One that Singapore and all of Asia will be proud of," he states. After all, education in Singapore is not new to him. Prof Singh was associated with the Singapore Management University in its early days when he was working at Wharton.

He confessed that he is extremely fond of Singapore. It is expensive but offers a high quality of life and modern living in the Asian context, he said.

He met Marliez, who is German, while they were students in Ohio. Their marriage, he likes to believe, was destined.

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She holds an MBA degree but gave up her career to care for the children. He calls it a "traditional agreement".

"We made a conservative choice and we have done well. Whatever my professional achievement, my greatest contribution will be my children," he says.

In a kind of Indo-German collaboration, as he put it, the couple gave the children both Indian and Christian names. The older is named Ambika Stefanie and the younger Katherine Anjali.

Prof Singh loves to collect paintings. His office is adorned with originals from Japan and China. As he points out the paintings, I notice a tri-metal bangle on his arm. It is part of his latest challenge. He is trying to master Kriya yoga and has been preparing himself for the past six months for it. The bangle, made of 24-karat gold, silver and copper in a particular proportion, is supposed to balance the energy of the body.

So what keeps the stocky professor fit and healthy? He works out and meditates twice a day.

Before we wind up this conversation, he lets me know two little-known facts about his life. He has been writing poetry for the past 35 years. He also loves to sing and even trained in Hindustani classical music for two years under an ustad in the US. But he gave it up after he realised that achieving perfection would take at least 20 years of regular training.

That's too much time for the perfectionist in a hurry.

But the can-do spirit surfaces again. In his re-birth, he jokes, he will start training while in his teens!

I have a job to do: To build a world class business school. One that Singapore and all of Asia will be proud of.

– Prof Singh on his stay in Singapore

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