

LIFE & TIMES FAMILY



Kalliyani's huge family in a pose for posterity

100 years of love passed down

Maghat Kalliyani Kutty defies the passage and ravages of time to celebrate her 100th year in existence, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**

SHE has lived through some of the most significant events in history — the World Wars, the Japanese Occupation, the Communist Insurgency, the country's independence celebrations and a gamut of natural disasters. And she's taken them all in her stride.

Yet today, Maghat Kalliyani Kutty, better known as Mrs PS Nair of Kuala Kangsar, is looking decidedly defeated sitting on her wheelchair, unsettled by the bursts of light coming from the photographer's camera, which is religiously trained on her animated face. "Look, he's hiding. He's got something," she says in barely audible voice, her lips pursed in suspicion

towards the photographer who is indeed hiding behind the sofa in his attempts to capture this remarkable centenarian in candid poses.

Kalliyani, looking serene in her simple cream sari with jade green lining along the edges, had the day before celebrated a century of life in a lavish birthday celebration thrown by her family, which was held at the Subang Golf Club. The event brought together her many children, grandchildren (the oldest is 65) and great grandchildren (the oldest is 42) in commemoration of their mother, grandmother and great grandmother, the root of strength and love in their lives.

"Don't worry, amma, he's just taking your pictures. It's a camera, not a gun," jokes her daughter, Indira Nair, the youngest of the grand dame's nine children.

Pangeel Sreedharan Nair or PS Nair. Mukundan says that the journey across the sea from Kerala, India, took more than six days by ship. Upon her arrival in the country, she was struck down with malaria.

"My mother came from a very big (there were 13 siblings) family and a comfortable life in India. Suddenly, she was whisked away from all that and put into a big house on an estate alone, with only a single helper. My father was an estate manager in Kuala Kangsar. Her first sight of the country was its jungle, which was what the estate was at the time. My father had come earlier in 1920 before he brought his bride. Then the white men came and said: 'OK, Nair, you cut all these trees and plant rubber trees in their place.' And that's what my father did."

At 18, a year after her wedding day, Kalliyani had her first child, with the second coming into the world the following year. The third came in 1933. "She had pre-war children and three post war," shares Mukundan.

Home for the family was a huge old wooden house in the estate. "It was a typical Malay kampung house with lots of rooms, lots of windows...very airy," recalls Mukundan. The place was never short of visitors — from friends and family to outsiders. "Everybody would gather there and my mum would feed them. She'd wake up at 5am to do the cooking and washing."

She used to work like crazy, adds Ramadas, her soft-spoken fourth son, a former Director of Prisons. "Those days she ran the show. And that kept her fit. She would pound rice using a giant pestle and mortar."

It wasn't easy trying to take care of so many kids as well as other people, making sure that there was enough food to go round. Thankfully, the family never had to endure any untoward incidences.

"If I'm not mistaken, my eldest brother used to be an interpreter during the Japanese Occupation and because of this we were left pretty much undisturbed," continues Rama-

"The secret (to her longevity) is hard work and plenty of coffee."

Mukundan Nair

SECRET TO LONGEVITY

"I think the secret to her longevity is hard work and plenty of coffee!" pipes Mukundan, Kalliyani's eighth son, when I ask members of her family who have gathered for this interview about the recipe for her long life.

"She's not a vegetarian like many Indians and, in fact, has never been too particular about her diet. She loves to drink coffee with plenty of sugar, at least four tablespoons, with milk. She must have her cuppa three times a day, minimum. If you reduce her sugar, she'll know and make a big fuss."

Sensing the disclosure, Kalliyani throws me an engaging toothless smile, all the while happily popping small crumbs of cake into her mouth with the same abandon as you would when faced with a bowl of peanuts.

Hard work came naturally to Kalliyani, who was brought here in 1929 as a young 17-year-old bride by her then 29-year-old husband,



Reminiscing the good old days are (clockwise from top left) Segaran Nair, Mukundan Nair, Ramadas Nair, Kalliyani and Indira Nair



Kalliyani (seated third from left) with some of her pre-war children



An old photo of Mr and Mrs PS Nair



Mr Nair in the front passenger seat, with the family



The traditional wooden Kuala Kangsar house that brings back plenty of memories

das. "He was paid by way of gunnies of rice for his interpreting services and we were given a sticker to stick in front of the house as 'protection'. Whenever Japanese officers came, they'd leave us alone."

THE MATRIARCH

Kalliyani was a full-time housewife. She saw to it that her kids had their education and food on the table. The house ran like clockwork. She was the matriarch of the family, especially when her husband passed away in 1967. Not only did she preside over her own children, she also presided over her extended family and visitors to her bustling home.

"She was a strict but loving mother," recalls Ramadas. "She did all the disciplining in the house. When the boys got naughty, she never used to hit them, that was our father's job, which he did with his belt. She would scold to discipline us. She was always concerned with whatever we did and very vigilant with our movements. We had to come back on time so that we could have the meals that she'd prepared for us — on time. She was also very particular with our studies."

Patting her mother's shoulders affectionately, Indra adds: "There was not much money to go round after our father lost his job in 1952 but she still managed to juggle the budget. We don't know how she managed to do it. Fortunately, things got lighter for her when the elder ones got married, had children and gave her some money for looking after their kids."

PRACTICAL ABOUT LIFE

She has seen the passing of familiar faces, of friends and family members, and the world she knew well blur into a distant past. But what has been constant is the love that she enjoys from her family. They're still there for her.

Is she bothered about death at all, I ask, curious.

"She's very practical about death," shares Segaran Nair, Kalliyani's son-in-law. "She says people are born every day but they must also eventually go."

When people tell her she's 100, she's amazed. She looks at life positively and only ever gets depressed when there's nobody around her because she's so used to company."

Another thing that could ever get Kalliyani down is discord in the family. Adds Mukundan: "She has always imparted the values of family and kinship to all of us. She would again and again remind us to always love the family and to keep in touch always so that the bond remains strong. She'd be very unhappy if it were otherwise."

Looking at Kalliyani, her snowwhite hair tied back in a motherly bun, her face serene as she enjoys the simple pleasure of tucking into a piece of cake, I silently pray for many more good years for her so that she may bring more joy to her family — and those who come after her.

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