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## The accidental diplomat

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Former Ambassador Rengaraj Viswanathan at his residence in Alangudi Mahajanam. Photo: B. Velankanni Raj

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*Being part of the Indian Foreign Service has been a dream come true for Rengaraj Viswanathan*

Alangudi Mahajanam, a tiny village 15km from Lalgudi is perhaps an unlikely place one would expect to find a distinguished former envoy and expert on Latin America, but then the self-effacing Rengaraj Viswanathan likes to refer to himself as 'an accidental diplomat.'

Viswanathan is the former Indian Ambassador to Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay (2007-'12). The career diplomat has also served as the Indian envoy to Venezuela and as the first Consul General of India in Sao Paulo, Brazil. His specialisation in Latin America has seen him head the Ministry of External Affairs' division on Latin America and the Caribbean. Post-retirement, he is Distinguished Fellow, Latin America Studies, at the foreign policy think-tank Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations.

### From village to IFS

For Viswanathan, the journey from Alangudi Mahajanam to the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Foreign Service, has been one marked by hard work, whether in learning English in college after

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a schooling in Tamil-medium instruction, and later, going on to become proficient in Spanish and Portuguese, or in convincing his uncle, his foster parent from early childhood, to be allowed to go for higher studies while helping out at the farm.

The eldest son of a paddy farmer, Viswanathan grew up in the house of his distant uncle in Raramuthirakottai (12km from Thanjavur) since the age of four, visiting his parents and two younger brothers only during vacations. He attended high school in Mariamman Kovil.

It was not an easy life: Viswanathan did his studies under a kerosene oil lamp throughout school. And like his classmates, he helped his uncle with the ploughing, cattle-grazing and field work when not studying.

Admission to B.Sc Chemistry in Poondi's Pushpam College was a hard-won victory, because his disapproving uncle felt he would end up like the lone man in the village who had done M.A. B.Ed: mad!

With the help of his more sympathetic aunt, the young Viswanathan was soon on his way to college, proud to finally own his first pair of sandals, and trousers bought with prize money that he won for standing first in the state-wide Tamil exam.

Viswanathan mulled studying Tamil literature, but was advised by his professors to do his Masters in Chemistry at Pachaiyappa's College, Madras. He married his M.Sc classmate Kasthuri. The couple has two sons.

Asked if he didn't feel intimidated by the new course his life had suddenly taken with higher education, he says, "of course I had the complex about being a small-town guy. I started learning English only after I joined college. It was difficult, but I worked hard, and I had some great teachers. [While studying in Poondi] I used to walk back home rather slowly, and read the portions that were being done in class. In a way that 4km stretch helped me to absorb and revise the subjects more easily."

Teaching assignments in Bishop Heber College (Tiruchi) and Pachaiyappa's College followed, which increased his confidence in the language. Looking out for better prospects, he appeared for the Civil Service examinations along with two of his friends, and was selected for interview in Delhi after passing the written test.

"The first thing we did in Delhi was sightseeing, because we didn't know if we'd come back to the city," recalls Viswanathan. He chose the Foreign Service, over the Indian Administrative Service because "in the prospectus for the exam, you had to secure more marks in the interview for IFS (300) than IAS (200), and I thought I could do it. Now there's no distinction, and more people actually prefer IAS over IFS these days."

After the training period in Mussoorie, where he came across "kids from elite families behaving as if they owned the country," he joined the Ministry of External Affairs.

His first foreign posting was in Lisbon, Portugal, as he had learned Portuguese. Postings in Pakistan, Libya and Mauritius followed, before he returned to Delhi.

How did he feel about leaving Alangudi Mahajanam behind? "Even before going abroad, I got lost in Delhi!" exclaims Viswanathan. "Coming from Tamil Nadu, if you have not travelled outside, going to Delhi is a cultural shock. But I was able to slowly adapt."

## Changing times

The Civil Service exams have become more competitive than before, feels Viswanathan. "In those days, very few people appeared for the exam, and those who did, people like us, never thought we'd get through. Now the students are more aware and better prepared," he says.

The other change has been in the profile of the candidates. "In my time, the brighter students went for medicine or engineering, and they wouldn't join Civil Services. But now, they do medicine, engineering, and then join Civil Services. For example, in the latest Foreign Service batch, of 31 candidates, 15 are engineers, and some have worked for multinationals already. They bring with them expertise from management, professional qualification and engineering, so they enrich the Civil Services," says Viswanathan.

His exposure to the Latin American countries started with Brazil in the mid-1990s, and continues till date through writing and speaking engagements. "In Latin America, people are of European origin and then they got tropicalised. So they've got the virtues and vices of both the First World and Third World," he says. He specialised in Latin America he says, because at the time it was not a region focused on by Indian diplomacy and business.

"Now Latin American countries have a new image of India – as an information technology power, as investor, as an emerging global power and as a market for their exports," says Viswanathan.

"IT has opened a whole new world and has become a passport for millions of Indians. With a laptop and phone, you can connect, collaborate and compete with anyone anywhere. And this is an ideal tool for students in developing societies like ours," he says when asked about the future of education in India.



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"In the older days, you had to get grey hair to become successful and respected. But now you have Bill Gates, who became the youngest billionaire in the world, who earned his wealth purely by his knowledge.

"Young people can achieve unimaginable heights of success and also dream of changing the world," he says.

### At home in the airport

Has his peripatetic lifestyle ever made him feel like an alien at home? "Since 1972, I have not lived for more than four and a half years in any place. This makes you adapt and make new friends. So I'm at home in my village, and then when I'm in Delhi, I find my friends in the golf club. I fit in wherever I am."

He visits his native village at least once a year, and likes to get around on bicycle. "Of course I'm the only guy riding a cycle here, all the others have shifted to motorbikes," he laughs. A swim in the river, and gossip-sessions with his mother are his other pastimes in Alangudi Mahajanam. While returning to his other home in Delhi, he takes ethnic millets like ragi and kambu.

"My home is the departure lounge of airports. I like travel, and get bored if I stay in any place for too long. Luckily I got into a field that allows it," concludes Rengaraj Viswanathan.

Follow Rengaraj Viswanathan's writings and speeches on [www.rviswanathan.com](http://www.rviswanathan.com)

Keywords: Rengaraj Viswanathan, Indian Foreign Service, IFS

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