Balaji’s last labour of love: Book on India

He had spent his last years writing on history of India

By Andrea Ong

He was widely known as a politician and top neurosurgeon, but Dr Balaji Sadasivan’s last labour of love showed he was also a historian with a keen interest in India’s past.

President S R Nathan yesterday launched a book which the late Senior Minister of State wrote during the last years of his life. He died of colon cancer last September at the age of 55.

The Dancing Girl: A History Of Early India is a wide survey of Indian history from the Indus Valley civilisation to the height of the Mughal empire in the 17th century. Its evocative title comes from a tiny 10.8cm-high bronze statue of a young girl found in the ruins of the ancient city of Mohenjo-daro, said Dr Balaji’s wife, Dr Ma Swan Hoo, 54, who helped complete the book for publication.

The 4,500-year-old statue is petite but hinted at the advanced civilisation already present in India millennia ago, she said at the book’s launch yesterday.

Dr Ma, who referred to him affectionately as “Balaji-pedia” for his breadth of knowledge, said he loved history and read voraciously on many subjects.

“Balaji was a very good teacher and it was this desire to share his knowledge that resulted in his writing this book on the history of India,” she told guests, who included Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, Malaysian Human Resources Minister S. Subramaniam, and former ministers S. Jayakumar and George Yeo.

Dr Balaji planned five volumes to cover India from ancient times to the present day, but managed to finish only two volumes, which now make up the 313-page tome published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas).

Dr Balaji selected photographs and painstakingly reconstructed maps of ancient India based on his research, said Dr Ma, who visited India many times with him.

Iseas director K. Kesavapany described the book as “the largest, heaviest and most elegant tome that Iseas has published in the four decades of its existence”.

In her speech, Dr Ma also singled out Workers’ Party MP Priyam Singh, a friend of Dr Balaji’s son Dharma, who had recommended Iseas as a publisher.

“Singaporeans should be quite proud of a Singaporean who has written a book on the history — a very deep and broad-sweeping history — of another country and a very important civilisation.”

President Nathan praised the book, launched at the South Asian Diaspora Convention organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies, for its insights into South Asia’s shared past.

The region’s economic potential excites the curiosity and imagination of its people and diaspora today, he said.

“The history of their civilisations therefore gives us profound insights into why and how they are rising again, and the possible road ahead,” Mr Nathan added.

The book costs $69.90 and is available from Iseas and major bookstores. Iseas will donate all sales proceeds from the next two years to the Children’s Cancer Foundation. The launch raised $61,000 for the foundation.