

Putting up with Qs & As

Professional quiz master Phanindra Ivatury tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** why being one is fun and fulfilling

FROM the moment you meet Phanindra Ivatury, there's no mistaking his exuberance for quizzes.

A quiz master since 2002, he will helm an upcoming quiz organised by the Indian Cultural Centre on the history of India's Independence and Freedom Fighters between 1857 and 1947. While attendance is open to the public, participation is only for Indian nationals residing here.

Vijay Gokhle, the High Commissioner of India to Malaysia, suggested the topic.

"Learning about all these people like Rash Behari Bose, Subramanya Bharati, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and Sister Nivedita, has been such an emotional journey for me. I want people to see that this quiz gives them the opportunity to re-visit India's glorious past. They'll learn about the greatness and importance of the freedom movement. The seeds of the freedom we have today were sown long ago based on the sacrifices many of these people made."

Ironically, the enthusiastic 44-year-old's day job is in something often perceived as staid — auditing. He is an Attache (Audit) in the India Audit Office of the High Commission of India in Kuala Lumpur and holds a post-graduate degree in Public Personnel Management.

"My job is not just fault finding," says the Hyderabad native. "Let me give you an example. Say the High Commission decides to host a reception. What they might find is that the ground realities in one country may differ from one country to another. It might cost more to host the same kind of reception in one country as opposed to another. What we do is to help streamline all their budgets."

Saying he leads a busy life, he adds: "We're always living out of suitcases. And, I tell you, Pyongyang, in North Korea, has to be the strangest place I've ever visited. Do you know you can't use your

mobile phone there? And, it's the only place I've been to where you won't see any billboards. There's no advertising body and there's no accumulation of wealth. On the plus side, there's zero crime rate."

It's this constant observation of life around him that helps this father-of-

one craft his questions for a quiz. "Look at that Kenny Rogers restaurant," he says. "The kind of question I might come up with would be something like this: Which international music star is lending his name to a chain of restaurants in Asia?"

The questions he asks during a quiz are never very difficult because he feels that sharing of knowledge is the aim of this exercise. "For example, I may ask a question like, 'Which actor recently enacted the role of the man often regarded as the 'Flying Sikh of India?'" The answer is Farhan Akhtar. Then, I will tell them that the name of the movie is *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*.

"I'll also give a little history of Milkha Singh. You see, his story begins around the time of the Partition in 1947. Milkha's parents didn't want to become Muslim when their home became part of Pakistan. Just before his family was killed, Milkha's father said to him, '*bhaag Milkha, bhaag*,' which means run Milkha, run." Once he reached India, Milkha's story is a rags-to-riches kind and he became a world champion runner."

BEGINNING OF A PASSION

Becoming a quiz master started by chance for Phanindra. "In 2002, my wife was working in a bank. During their annual day function, they asked her to do a quiz. I prepared the questions for her. That function didn't happen. But during a picnic another day, I used these questions and it was such an enjoyable experience."

Since then, he's taken part in over 200 quizzes. The most special time for Phanindra as a participant was when he won the ICICI Crystal Trophy for being the finalist who answered the most number of correct questions during the ICICI Quizzical 2010 conducted in Hyderabad, India.

The thing about quizzing, explains Phanindra, is that if a participant

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Phanindra Ivatury



answers and receives an applause, he never forgets the answer or the question. "Even after 10 years," he adds, "people will come up to me and say, 'Sir, you asked me this question years ago. It was such an enjoyable experience.'"

It isn't always serious, though. The most amusing experience he's had was the time he questioned a father and son team.

"The father was in his sixties. He was very serious and insisted that the answers by others couldn't be vague. The son was a young man who rarely spoke. I decided to lighten the mood and asked a naughty question: 'What's the difference between a swimsuit and a bikini?' The son, who was sub-

dued, suddenly spoke up. He said, 'A swimsuit is a one piece garment and a bikini is two pieces.' The father was just quiet."

"Then, there was the time when it was a picture round. I showed them a black and white picture of a woman and asked the participants to identify the person in the photo. The participants said they thought it was the Bollywood actress, Tabu. Actually, it was Kamala Nehru. What shocked me even more was when my relative in India said Kamala Nehru was Jawaharlal Nehru's mother! Even Indians don't know that she was his wife."

This lack of knowledge of history pains Phanindra. He says: "History is today something we study in school

and it's forgotten. I mean, until 1982, there was no worthwhile movie made about Gandhi. That too, it took a foreigner to make that film about an important person in Indian history."

What gives him enormous satisfaction is not the monetary gain from being a quiz master. "When I'm asked what I'd like in return," he says, "I usually tell them that I'd like people to give me their feedback. Give me an honest opinion. Were they really entertained? Did they enjoy themselves?"

Summing up his experience, he says: "Quizzing is unique because it's not about how you look or what you do. It's about what knowledge you have and the knowledge you can gain."