

Gopal's Aim: To touch the heart of every employee every month!

It's not many that can lay claim to such a bold statement; but Chakkamalayath Venugopalan — known to one and all as Gopal — is quite clear about his role.

As Group Payroll Manager, his job is to ensure that every member of staff — 6679 at the end of August 2006 — is paid not only on time, but with his correct salary.

"We are all here to earn money," Gopal explains, "and so payroll plays a vital part of the company's relationship with its employees. People expect — rightly — to be paid their correct dues in a timely fashion."

Gopal has been with the company for almost as long as anyone can remember. Originally from Trissur in Kerala in southern India, he got his BSc in Maths at university, followed by a diploma in Accountancy. From there he moved to Bombay — nowadays known as Mumbai — for four years.

But an old village friend of his who worked at the Indian embassy in Manama suggested he try his hand working in the Gulf, with the result that he worked for six years in a construction company in Bahrain.

In 1984 he moved to Riyadh and joined Almarai as an Administration



Assistant working in payroll and personnel. He was the first Indian to join the company — though nowadays there are over 1,250.

Gopal remembers that in those early days Almarai was much smaller than it is today. "We were based in a villa



in Malaz district (we didn't move to the new headquarters at Izdihar until 1998) and in those days there were only around 1,500 employees. Amazingly, when I joined, all the payroll calculations were done by hand and I filled in the pay slips by pen. There was no system of staff i.d. numbering and that's one of the things I introduced.

"We all worked in the office which dealt with passports and I worked for the Almarai side of the company which dealt with operations and sales as opposed to Masstock which dealt with the farming and financial payrolls. However, in 1986 these two departments were amalgamated into a new corporate services department and I worked on the team that pulled together the two systems into one — which we had up and running by 1988."

With the steady increase in staff numbers, and with time sheets and payroll details sent in hard copy from Almarai's different regions, one of Gopal's priorities is now to introduce a new payroll system which will allow electronic entering from all remote locations making for speedier turnaround of the data.

"The company has increased its staff numbers fourfold since I joined and with over 360 new starters last month alone, we are set to reach around 6,800 employees by the end of this year. From having only around seven or eight core nationalities working in the company then, we now have people from 36 different countries on the payroll. Obviously we have to have a payroll system that will be able to cope with any future surges in demand. It's a condition of joining the company that an employee opens a bank account and around 94 per cent of the salaries paid are done so by electronic bank transfer."

Gopal describes his job as 'never boring' with different challenges facing him every day which he says he thrives on.

But one thing he appears to have



a reputation for wherever he goes is his wonderful collection of ties. "I have over 50 in my wardrobe and I am often told how colourful I am. Each is hand picked. I like to choose them all myself."

Something else that he is not so well known for — inside the company at least — is his love of drama, short story writing and reading. In fact, during his college days some 20 of his short stories were published in leading Malayalam periodicals. When he worked in Bahrain he was awarded the distinction of best actor in a Bahraini drama competition in 1981. And when he returns on leave to his native Kerala he regularly meets up with his cinematic, literary, artistic and media friends and supports traditional Kathakali performances which combine acting, music and dance.

"I keep in regular contact with my friends in Kerala. I think it's important that when we eventually leave Saudi Arabia — whenever that may be — that we do not find ourselves strangers in our own countries."

He is certainly no stranger in head office — and the next time you see a flash of colour sailing along the corridor, the chances are that it will be attached to Gopal in the shape of another of his fabulous ties.

