

THE INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE:

A Discourse on the Representation of Identity, Diversity and Aspiration Regarding The Indian Community's Heritage in Singapore

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Figure 1.

The IHC's building façade during its inaugural performance. Image courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.



People from the Indian subcontinent have been an integral part of Singapore's economy and society since the British East India Company established a free trading port on the island in 1819 and made it part of the British Straits Settlements thereafter. In the earlier centuries, during the reign of the Malay polity in Southeast Asia — Chulias, Mapillah, Parsee and Gujarati sojourners were engaged in positions of power as ministers, financiers,

religious teachers, traders and commanders in many Malay states.¹ In the post-World War II period and with Singapore's gradual pre-eminence as a global entrepôt for trans-shipment since the 1970s, many waves of new migrants have arrived and continue to contribute towards its growth.

Indian contact with many countries in Southeast Asia goes back several centuries — there are archaeological, epigraphical, religious, artistic

and literary references to confirm that people from the Indian subcontinent have been regularly travelling to port cities in Southeast Asia, especially from the Gujarat and Malabar coasts in the west, but also from the Coromandel, Kalinga and Bengal coasts in the east as well as Sri Lanka, and their culture, polity, language and food have been absorbed by the royalty and nobility in many Southeast Asian countries.

Figure 2.

Map showing the Indian Ocean and a showcase with Buddhist artefacts from Theme 1 in the IHC Permanent Gallery. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Center, National Heritage Board, Singapore.



This article will examine how the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) dealt with the representation of the Indian² diaspora in Singapore through museum displays that showcase the community's diversity by adopting an inclusive approach to dealing with minorities within a predominantly Tamil diaspora.

The IHC's galleries largely convey its narratives through material culture which is further augmented with ritual, cultural, social and architectural artefacts, documents, photographs, memorabilia and other ephemera, oral narratives and interactive technology. The curatorial team, along with community-based committees overseeing content and building development, as well as the IHC's Steering Committee worked closely with the National Heritage Board (NHB), Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth (MCCY) and other government departments as well as the Indian community to develop a thorough documentation and feedback process. The technical work of planning the building and gallery design was left to the professionals. How the curatorial team negotiated and played the role of a significant conduit with multiple stakeholders, professionals, community members and the government was a unique arrangement with robust and wide-ranging ramifications. Most significantly, it managed to garner near unanimous support and overall positive feedback from all quarters for the IHC.

A Heritage Institution in the heart of Singapore's Little India

The IHC is one of the three Heritage Institutions managed by Singapore's National Heritage Board (NHB) along with the Malay Heritage Centre and the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, which are conceived to be focal points for their respective communities and developed into sustainable destinations of cultural and historical significance for both local and foreign visitors.

It is the first heritage institution in the Asia-Pacific region to showcase the heritage of the

Indian community, which comprises diverse migrant groups from the Indian subcontinent, in multicultural and multiethnic Singapore,³ the IHC was opened on 7 May 2015 by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Hsien Loong.

Rooted in sound museological principles, the IHC's key objectives are to collaborate with key stakeholders to promote Indian culture and community-rootedness; conduct research to promote a deeper understanding of the IHC and its values; as well as establish strategic partnerships with regional and international counterparts.

This environmentally friendly and energy efficient building (which is rated Green Mark Gold Plus by Singapore's Building and Construction Authority) was largely funded by the government of Singapore with a significant contribution by the Indian community, and cost nearly S\$21 million dollars to build and fit out. Following an open call design competition, an architectural design submitted by Robert Greg Shand Architects in collaboration with Urbanarc was selected in July 2011.

Located at a prime location in the heart of Singapore's Little India historic district, at the junction of Campbell Lane and Clive Street, the IHC provides a focal point for the local community and tourists alike. Together with other ethnic heritage centres, it complements the various national museums in Singapore by focusing on the ethnic, cultural, local as well as global histories of the various South Asian communities of multicultural Singapore. It is conceived as a sanctuary for the reflection and understanding of Singapore's multicultural society and the contribution of Indians over two centuries to its development.

Content development and curatorial direction

The process of content development for the IHC was a long drawn one – it began in 2007 when the author was a senior curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) building momentum toward planning a new permanent gallery for the Indians in Singapore that would

complement the South Asia gallery of the ACM. It meant drawing up the storyline; assisting NHB with the approval papers; negotiating with the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), Land Transport Authority (LTA) and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for the site; scoping research required through primary and secondary sources for content; planning and sourcing for collection development; sourcing resource persons as well as the IHC team; and facilitating master planning of the heritage centre which was detailed further with inputs from the curatorial team of the IHC and the chairman and members of the IHC's Concept and Content Sub-committee. It ranged from several consultation sessions with community organisations through sectorial interaction sessions, to the digitisation of countless historical and personal documents, photographs and records as well as oral interviews.

A seminar involving academics and community veterans was organised in 2013⁴ to identify how the narrative of the South Asian Diaspora in Singapore could be viewed from different lenses. This event also involved community organisations who shared their historical origins and development through time and validated the origins, migration patterns of their community members as well as their professions, lifestyles and settlement experiences in Singapore. Many veterans were identified by the community organisations

to speak to the curatorial team to share their origins, migration and initial experiences of settling down in Malaya and Singapore⁵.

There are shared histories and personal experiences that are woven together with world history. Parallel world events were mapped alongside local, personal and community histories to evolve a shared perspective on the community organisation's own development, adaptation to a changing landscape in Singapore as well as the demands from the new migrants. A large interactive map, charting the geographical locations within India and South Asia from where communities have migrated to Singapore, was developed with inputs from community organisations, which gave them a stake in the content accuracy at the IHC as well as ownership of the information shared with the wider world. Another such community-based engagement exercise resulted in the development of a digital interactive timeline in the IHC's Theme 3 gallery of organisations and individuals who have contributed to Singapore since the late nineteenth century to the present. The interactive map and timeline are on-going projects which will see more information being added and updated as time progresses and fresh information is processed by the curators.

The curatorial direction⁶ addressed the usual clichéd views of the early Indian community's convict past and indentured labour histories; however, the IHC's five thematic



Figure 3.

An interactive station in the Early Pioneers Gallery from Theme 3 in the IHC Permanent Gallery. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre.

Figure 4.

Indian luxury goods traded with Southeast Asia and Europe, from the Early Contact Gallery in Theme 1 of the IHC Permanent Gallery. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre.



galleries address these issues squarely as well as engagingly to highlight issues of diversity, multiple identities, migration, displacement and citizenship, cross culturality, industrialisation, modernisation and impact of media on identity formation and social change. Using artefacts as denotative referents to a syntactical and semantical interpretation of meaning, the collection on display operates to uncover meaning at several levels. Many of the artefacts refer to a particular period, moment or practice in history and may or may not belong to Singapore – however, symptomatically, they convey a meaning that is relevant to Singapore's Indian heritage.

There are multiple perspectives and conduits through which a visitor can experience the galleries, which range from hand-held multilingual audio/media guides, docent or curator led tours or a self-guided tour through bilingual exhibition panels, captions and interactive monitors with edited interviews, documents, and games. Every visitor is encouraged to first view a short conceptual film in English and Tamil that gives a quick overview of the five themes of the permanent galleries as well as contextualises them, starting with the early contacts between South and Southeast Asia through trade and religion

to European contact, expansion of global trade, industrialisation and modernisation. With a background score by Bollywood composer Shankar Mahadevan (b. 1967), the film takes the visitors on an experiential journey which will unfold through the museum displays, information panels, captions and standalone interactive monitors.

Representation of the diaspora through material culture in a chronological framework

A museological framework had to be developed for a permanent gallery display illustrating the multiple identities that comprise the typical South Asian diaspora living in Malaya and Singapore from at least the late nineteenth century. Tackling the historical experience of the diaspora and drawing parallels with world events, this narrative emerged as a representation of multiple voices and shared experiences that shaped the development of Singapore from a trading and penal colony to an independent nation-state through an Indian perspective. Indians from all walks of life had been drawn to this island, from its establishment and development as an entrepôt by the British East India Company, to

its later status as a Crown Colony and eventual journey towards self-rule and independence after the Second World War.

By adopting a chronological approach, the material culture of Indians from “everyday” items to luxury goods produced mainly for export to Southeast Asia and Europe were collected and displayed as illustrative or symbolic representations. Even cultural artefacts, religious relics and archaeological material finds were displayed as touch points of art history that bring to life an era gone by but whose relevance can be palpably sensed to this day. This approach to collection development and display technique hinted at what the IHC expected its audience to indulge in – namely to appreciate the relevance of their past and the present day to their future. The target audience ranged from locals to tourists, with a special focus on younger students who would have missed out on understanding their rich heritage if these objects had not been collected, annotated and preserved for future generations. Tangible as well as intangible artefacts, from oral histories to actual objects of worship⁷, heirlooms⁸ as well as everyday items including architectural fragments of their built heritage, were collected. These artefacts serve to document various aspects of Indian social and cultural identities such as rituals and rites of passage; military, professional and economic pursuits; arts, crafts and entertainment as well as philanthropy for religious, education and healthcare goals.

The objectification⁹ of the artefacts was another phenomenon the curatorial team was constantly grappling with. This ranged from identification, selection, cleaning and mounting for display in the galleries following strict conservation guidelines, which calibrated their value several notches higher for a museum “in the making”. Pens, looking-glasses, medals, implements, headgears and the traveling belt of a Haj pilgrim, for example, became artefacts. Objects confiscated from a Sikh revolutionary in Punjab by a British Deputy Commissioner of Police in 1849, kept in storage in the British Library in London for decades, made it to the IHC gallery for a year-long display on loan that brings to life the personality of the convict Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji (1780–1856), his contribution to the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the veneration he receives amongst the Sikh community as a martyr.

Multiculturalism and syncretic cultures

Many regional and ethnic Indian groups have travelled to Singapore and Malaya, ranging from convicts and indentured labourers to itinerant merchants and professionals. There were several waves of migrations from the Indian subcontinent to Singapore through pre-modern, modern and post-colonial times, the latest being driven by demand for expertise in Information Technology (IT) and finance, although much construction labour still comes from South India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.



Figure 5.

The Early Pioneers Gallery
in Theme 3 of the IHC
Permanent Gallery.
Image courtesy of Indian
Heritage Centre.

Figure 6.

A view of the Indian National Army display in the Social and Political Awakening Gallery in Theme 4 of the IHC Permanent Gallery. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre.



Singapore has adopted a policy of multiculturalism to address its racial and religious diversity and maintain harmony between the island's diverse communities. Within the local Indian community, that has strong divisions across regional, linguistic, religious, and nationality lines among others at practical as well as conceptual levels, the IHC tried to maintain an inclusive approach to celebrate diversity. This was to acknowledge the fact that many smaller communities have also made long-lasting and significant contributions to Singapore.

At the IHC, regardless of the size of the community, these groups have been featured in the "Roots and Routes" section of the gallery where beautiful ritual objects, traditional costumes and jewellery, traditional paintings and objects of ritual processions, especially from Hindu temples and mosques, some of them used in Singapore, have been put on display. There are also efforts to document and conduct further research into lesser-known communities such as the Jawi Peranakans and Chitti Melakas to showcase their syncretic cultures and uniqueness on an on-going basis. Many of these communities and organisations have come out in recent times to openly grapple with their identities as well as acknowledge their shared past heritage. Even Indian Muslims who have joined mainstream Malay-Muslim culture have acknowledged their Indian ancestral roots.

Ethnicity, individual and collective identities, and rootedness

The Indian community, whether or not they were aware of their distinct identities, have not been deterred from forming their own associations or practicing and modifying their cultural, religious and social customs and traditions to integrate with the larger Singapore society. Many of these practices, including visible manifestations of one's own faith, reflect rootedness and identity at a national level through festivals like Thaipusam, Theemithi (the fire-walking ceremony), Vaisakhi (the Sikh New Year), etc.

As a museum, our predicament was to observe, document and present, while maintaining objectivity. We documented major social and religious customs and festivals with an open mind as well as showcased these practices in our galleries on a loop, giving all communities sufficient airtime. Many collective practices, such as language, religion, food and lifestyle, even business and professions, emphasise collective identity (sometimes based on linguistic, regional or village kinships or sometimes caste) and rootedness which essentially are good and serve to bind a community together against the contemporary westernising influence on traditional societies. Singapore's Indian community is no exception



Figure 7.

Contribution of G. Sarangapany to the rejuvenation of Tamil identity, in the Social and Political Awakening Gallery, Theme 4, IHC Permanent Gallery. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre.

and communities in this regard include the Nattukottai Chettiars, Kandaynallur Muslim League, Dawoodi Bohras, Parsees and Malabar Muslim Jama-ath, to name a few.

It is good to map collective memories against time and space for the younger generation to appreciate how things have evolved over time especially in the rapidly changing twentieth century. A case in point is the interactive Precinct Game in the IHC gallery, which features content and learning objectives developed by the IHC team. It showcases through a game, four distinct streetscapes of Singapore – Market Street, Arab Street, Serangoon Road and High Street – across a period from 1900 to the 1970s, to address the fact that Indians have been practicing their businesses in many parts of Singapore and were not confined to Little India.

International, global, local: Transnationalism and simultaneity of identities

A socio-political thematic narrative was evolved to keep historical moments in Singapore's history as key landmarks while examining the simultaneity of events and identities of Indians in Singapore and Malaya between the two World Wars as well as plugging in events related to the struggle for India's freedom from British Imperialism. These

milestones were further layered with visits by Indian Nationalist leaders to Singapore as well as Singapore's growing identity in relation to the Malayan Federation. Many Indians born in the early part of the twentieth century living in Malaya or Singapore were British subjects who began to identify themselves with India as their motherland, were committed to do something for its independence and felt patriotically connected to take part in its freedom struggle. Many sacrificed their wealth, career, youth, family as well as personal comfort to participate in the Indian Independence movement inspired by the writings and speeches of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and their direct rapport with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose (1897–1945).

Writings of leaders such as Gandhi and visiting dignitaries such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in 1927, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) in 1937, 1946 and 1950, and finally Bose in 1942–45, left lasting impressions, leading to the enrolment of several thousand Indian men and women in the Indian Independence League (IIL) and the Indian National Army (INA) including the Rani Jhansi Regiment. Much attention has been paid to the INA and its ethos and the life-changing experiences many Malayan Indians had when they came in contact with Bose. Awareness of the importance of religious harmony and understanding between the diverse Indian communities and the other

Figure 8.

A view of the Nation Building Gallery, Theme 5, IHC Permanent Gallery. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre.



racess evolved into a more balanced view of society that Singaporeans wanted to build for themselves. Issues of race, language, caste and class were tackled with care against the backdrop of communism and ethnic cleansing during the years of Japanese Occupation. Seeds of interfaith and religious harmony were sown at this time. Modern media such as radio broadcasts and print along with photography and film played a significant role in documenting the shift towards modernisation and an awareness of rights, political process and the right to expression. These trends are explored by the IHC curatorial team through pioneering publications, newspapers and periodicals displayed in the Social and Political Awakening Gallery to depict multiple and simultaneous identities.

Singapore's post-colonial Indians, especially the Tamils and other linguistic groups, invested significantly towards the development of their language, education, socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices by establishing organisations such as the Tamil Reforms Association and newspapers such as Tamil Nesan and Tamil Murasu, which was strongly inspired by the Self Respect Movement of Periyar E.V. Ramasami (1879–1973)¹⁰ (who visited Malaya in 1929 and 1954) in Tamil Nadu through the print culture widely promoted by G. Sarangapany (1903–1974) in Malaya and Singapore¹¹. Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu,

Malayalam and other Indian languages were taught at Sunday schools and huge efforts were underway to convince the education ministry to teach them as mother tongue languages at mainstream schools in order to preserve their cultural identities.

Nation building and home away from home

The issue of nation building and ethnicity versus citizenship in the context of Singapore as the permanent home (away from home) for the diverse Indian community plays a significant role in assessing its contribution to Singapore's nation building. It was only since the 1960s that the Indian and especially the Tamil community under the leadership and encouragement of Sarangapany that many became Singapore citizens – this was shared by many veterans of the community interviewed by the IHC team. Many Indians moved from sojourner and Malayan status to a Singaporean identity in post-independence Singapore, creating new rigour and grappling with the “being and becoming” of their new identity.

Their professional, personal or voluntary contributions to Singapore's nation building efforts have been identified and classified through research, interviews and consultations across various sectors such as education, medical, legal, political to business, social

work, government, media, sports, arts and culture. This gave the curatorial team the opportunity to showcase robust and extensive Indian contributions to every field or profession in Singapore. This effort also gave a parallel view of the community's development compared to other races and mainstream communities in Singapore. Much discussion, criteria and assessment were put in place to evolve a credible list which will evolve with time, giving room for younger contributors as well as lesser known pioneers who come to light to be added to the list. Digital technology has been incorporated to enable multiple accesses, sorting and editing possibilities.

Here, objectification is not limited to documents and everyday objects or memorabilia but encompasses people and objects used or received by them. This process brings to the fore new meanings, implied meanings as well as aspirational meanings to some of the objects. Even quotes of spoken or written words by some of the veterans have been included as part of the decor in the Nation Building Gallery which gives some of them an inspirational intent and a "larger than life" aura.

In conclusion, a word on the concerted effort to bring content to the visitor through technology is essential. It was a well-coordinated decision of the curatorial and steering committees of the IHC that clearly underscored the IHC as a contemporary and futuristic organisation that is willing to embrace new technology¹². After considering many technologies available in the market, Augmented Reality (AR) technology was adopted which has enriched and enhanced the discovery and experience of the IHC's collections, memories and information by its visitors. The self-guided media guide contains audio tours in three languages – English, Tamil and Hindi with the possibility of adding seven more language options, a Young Explorer tour for children and AR experience as well. This embrace of the new culture of digital and virtual technology as part of its museum experience is in sync with the new revamped museums in Singapore and museums abroad. It is hoped that IHC continues to grow into a repository of tangible and intangible heritage, a laboratory of exploration and learning for the educational institutions in Singapore as well as a focal point for community and audience engagement through innovative programming to facilitate a deeper understanding between the communities living in Singapore.

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion on the involvement of Gujarati and other Indian traders in Nusantara in the pre-modern and modern eras in Kedah, Penang and Aceh, see my forthcoming paper "Gujarat, Coromandel and Nusantara: Trans-Regional Trade and Traders in the Indian Ocean" in Edward Alpers and Chhaya Goswami (ed.).
2. According to the 2010 census, Singapore's total Indian population is 9.2%, Malay 13.3%, Chinese 74.2% and others 3.3%; 5% of the total population is Tamil. IHC has explained in its introductory panel that "Indian" refers to the Indian Subcontinent which is also called South Asia to avoid ambiguity or sensitivities.
3. For more details about the IHC project's content and design development, involvement and roles of the various committees as well as the contributions of the community, see my paper "Singapore's Indian Heritage Centre: Curating & Negotiating Heritage, Diversity and Identity" in the forthcoming volume *50 Years of Indian Community in Singapore* (ed.) Gopinath Pillai.
4. "People, Ports and Places: The Narrative of Indian Communities in Southeast Asia" was the inaugural seminar organised by the IHC at the Gandhi Memorial Hall on Race Course Lane on 20-21 September 2013 as a lead-up to its opening in early 2015. At this seminar, academics, scholars and community members discussed the theme of "Roots and Routes" from historical and community perspectives. The academic sessions focused on migration and settlement of the South Asians in Malaya while the community members shared their collective memories. The seminar also focused on "Little Indias" as precincts and their history while focusing on Singapore's Little India. A seminar booklet with the programme and abstracts of the speakers was published while the seminar papers are being edited for future publication.

5. An example of shared history is the story of journey on ship and invariably most of the Tamils had travelled by the S.S. Rajula which plied between Madras–Penang–Port Klang–Singapore from 1926-1972. Realising the wealth of shared memories S.S. Rajula had left, curators designed an installation of suitcases and embedded artefacts along with an interactive station that has layers of information, interviews, films and photos related to their memorable and life changing journey.
6. The Concept and Content Committee appointed by the MCCY and the curatorial team led by myself discussed the curatorial direction through many sessions of mind mapping and discussions which included inputs from the engagement sessions with various community organisations as well as veterans of the communities identified by them.
7. A large collection of gold, silver and diamond jewellery used to adorn the deity in the Chettiar Temple in Saigon, Vietnam, has been loaned to the IHC by the Saigon Chettiars Temple Trust, while a flag used in the Nagore Durgah festival on loan from the Indian Muslim Heritage Museum in Singapore enrich the collection in the "Roots and Routes" section. Other artefacts such as the Aravan utsavar from the Sri Mariamman Temple and fragments of old Shivan temple sculptures from the Hindu Endowments Board in Singapore play a significant role in contextualisation.
8. The donation of a *kasumalai* (gold coin necklace) from the family of pioneering retailer Gnanapragasam Pillai (1872–1915), donation of jewels and a violin from Dr R Gangatharan Davar's family, objects of everyday use in a Bohra Muslim home from Salma Moiz, and badges and medals from Sarjit Singh's collection are some of the highlights of the community loans and donations to IHC on display.
9. Henry et al. 2013. <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau3.2.004/750>
10. <http://new.modernrationalist.com/2014/12/singapore-shines-in-the-light-of-periyar-dr-veeramanis-visit-to-singapore/>
11. Sathisan (unpublished)
12. <http://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/how-museums-are-using-technology/>

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