The exhibition, Indians in Singapore: A Picture Story, curated by the author, was on view at the National Museum of Singapore from June 9 – July 27, 2008. It was a visual narrative about the diverse socio-cultural practices of the Indians in Singapore. The story of ten communities, identified predominantly through their languages, was set against the backdrop of Singapore's early history. Vidya Murthy outlines some aspects of the exhibition.

Singapore Indians, a brief note

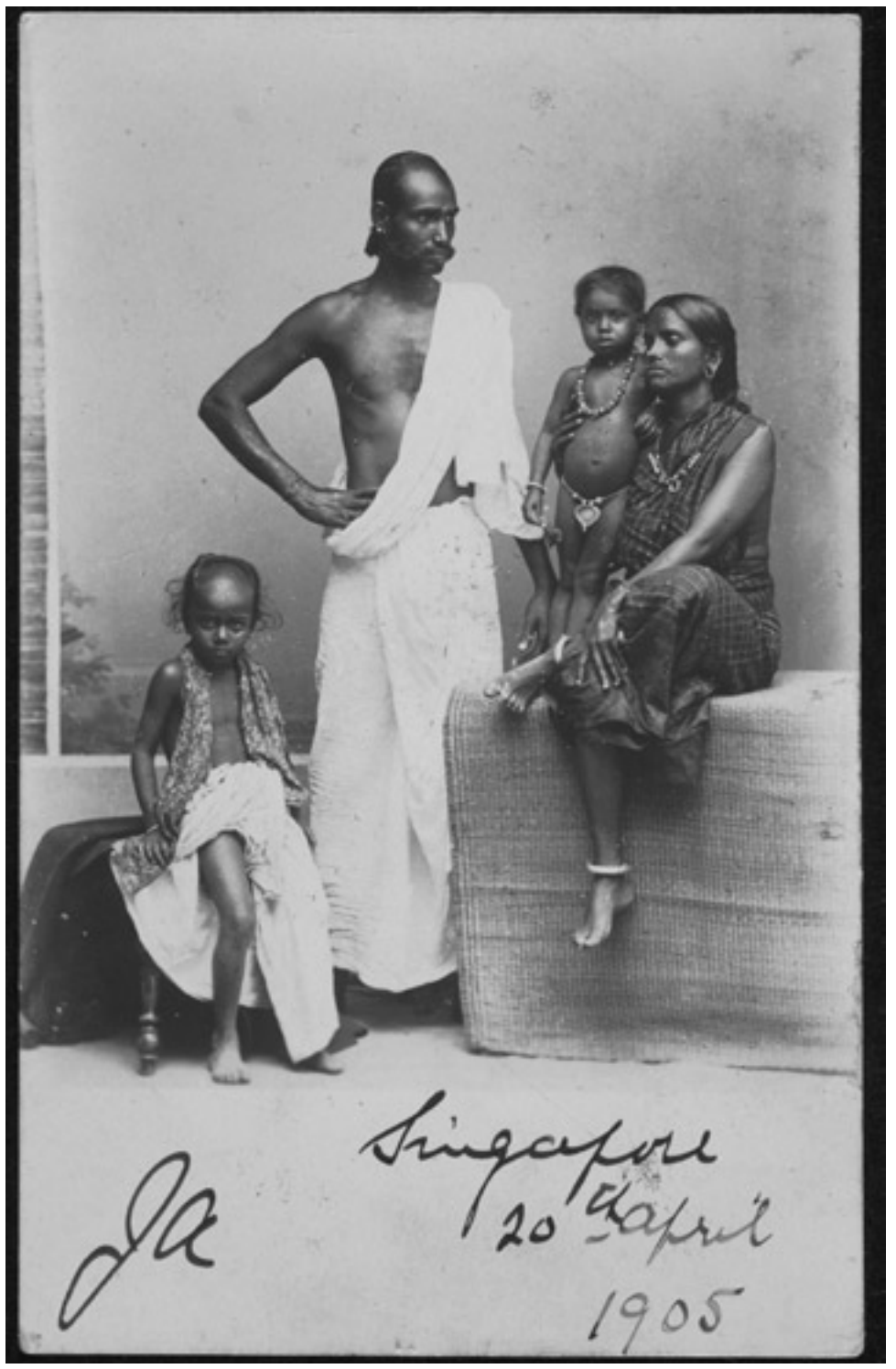

Fig 2: Portrait of a family. 1905. G.R. Lambert & Company. 2001-03515

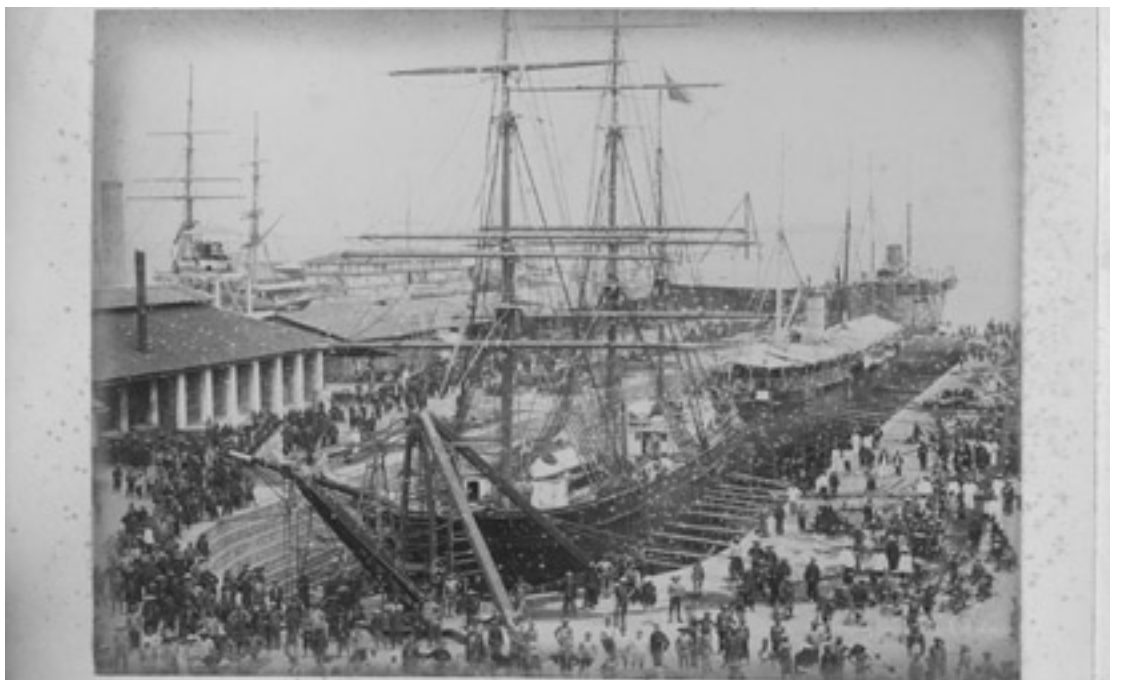

Fig. 1: Tanjong Pagar docks c.1890. G R Lambert & Company 1993-00285-022

Fig 3: A group of Indian and Chinese coolies c. 1870. 1994-05110

Vidya Murthy

The story of the Indian diaspora is integral to Singapore's early history. Stamford Raffles's entourage in 1819 included sepoys, washermen, milkmen, tea suppliers and domestic servants. Following them, several Indians arrived first as prisoners, who were later hired to work on buildings and roads for the colonial empire. The ship illustrated here is typical of the vessels that brought travellers from India to Singapore. *(Fig. 1)* The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company owned the dock, which was opened in 1868. The number of Indians migrating into Singapore was small compared to that of the people from Southeastern China, Malaya and Indonesia.

However, the Indians were a complex and diverse group of people and included labourers, servants, traders and merchants during the colonial period. Moreover, Indian sailors, fishermen and merchants had travelled over the Indian Ocean even before the British rule in South and Southeast Asia. They journeyed from the coasts including Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel, Orissa and Bengal among other places. As a result of these maritime activities, many Indian communities including the Gujaratis, Chulias, Maapilas, and Chettiars had made their presence felt in Southeast Asia. In the early 19th century, with the entry of the British, the nature of these migrations changed. The commercial interests of the rulers began to take precedence.

The colonial government began to make systematic efforts to create a knowledge database, which included visual documentation. This enterprise gave rise to specific representational modes. Stiffly posed, the Indian subjects were presented without reference to any locale or context. Their occupation was indexed in their dress or tools. Thus the people were turned into ethnic types who could be classified. *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress of the races and Tribes of Hindustan*, London, emerged out of one such colonial project. The book was the last among a series of eight volumes that was published between 1868 and 1875. The depiction of a Shanar Christian couple, included in this volume, best illustrates the colonial strategy described above. The Shanars hailed from the Tinnevelly district in Tamil Nadu and southern Travancore in Kerala. Their traditional occupation was extracting toddy from palm and making jaggery. They were one of the many distressed communties in South India who were converted to Christianity in 1800s. Some of the educated Shanars migrated to Malaya among other places where they took up jobs in the colonial government. In the hands of colonial photographers including the well known G.R. Lambert & Company in Singapore, the Indian subjects became exotic types. *(Fig. 2)* The Indians in the colonial period, were represented as either ethnic or exotic types or sometimes both.

Later with the need for workers on plantations including rubber in British Malaya, indentured labourers were brought largely from South India, especially the present Tamil Nadu. Although slavery was abolished in the early 20th century, workers were brought in through agents or foremen known as *Kanganys. (Fig. 3)* There were also free migrations undertaken especially by merchants and entrepreneuers who went on to establish themselves as prominent businessmen. *(Fig. 4)* As the community became more settled, they also intermarried and raised families. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Singapore was still thought of as a temporary home by the Indian migrants. Most of them came and worked for a few years and all the while maintained ties back in India.

Despite this transient nature of their presence, the early Indians built many places of worship. These religious sites extended as centres of social and cultural life, which enabled the migrants to ease their ways into the new land. The Masjid Al Abrar and Nagore *Durgha* on Telok Ayer Street served as a site for the Tamil Muslims who built them. *(Fig. 5)* The *Durgha*, which was a shrine for the important South Indian Sufi, Shahul Hamid Sahib, is in fact a replica of the original in Nagore in Tamil Nadu. The Sri Mariamman Temple in China Town was another important place for the migrants. *(Fig. 6)* It served as a refuge for newcomers who could stay there till they found accommodations. The other temples in Singapore also reflected in part, the village and caste backgrounds of the people. For instance, the major devotees of the Sri Mariamman temple included harbour workers who came from the Tanjore district.

Fig 4: Photograph of a Khoja Muslim family. 1917. Donated by the Jumbabhoy family. 2005-00390

Fig 5: A view of Telok Ayer Street with Nagore Durgha on the right and Masjid Al-Abrar on the left. 1868. 1993-00285-015

Fig 6: Sri Mariamman temple. Late 19th century. xxxx-00297

Fig. 7: *Purandara namana* - remembering the poet saint, Purandaradasa, 2008. Image courtesy of Singapore Kannada Sangha

Today, the Singapore Indians are not discrete entities isolated from each other or from the larger society. On the other hand, they are living groups of people who negotiate their lives every day by selecting and adapting social practices. In the course of such adaptations their native languages, too, have been constantly changing and expanding. Most Singapore Indians are bi-and multi-lingual and are adept at mixing Malay and Hokkien words in their speech. Language is a powerful means for the Indian diaspora in Singapore to define itself: each community tries to ensure that the younger generations learn and speak the mother tongue. The complex linguistic diversity of the Singapore Indians is illustrated by the numerous languages spoken in Singapore including, among others, Bangla, Gujarati, Hindi (Bhojpuri), Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil and Telugu. Although Tamil is one of four official languages, the Singapore state has recognised the importance of several other non-Tamil languages. As a result, five languages including Bangla, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu are offered as second language choices for students who wish to study their mother tongue. This official support extended to non-Tamil languages has strengthened the migrant Indians' commitment to their use of native languages. The numerous language associations and schools in Singapore further attest to this concern.

An enquiry into the linguistic practices will also help to circumvent generic ethnic categories such as "Indian", as employed in formal and popular discourses. Although, any single frame of reference to identify a heterogeneous community remains inherently artificial and inadequate. Still, Singapore Indians constantly select and adapt social practices from the larger society. In the course of such adaptations they have shaped for themselves a highly syncretic culture and simultaneously contributed towards making the Singapore society truly hybrid. This, for instance, can be illustrated in the annual music festival that is organised by one linguistic community, Singapore Kannada *Sangha*. Kannada speakers have been coming to Singapore since the mid-80s, mostly as part of the professional white collar labour force. They have origins in the south western state of Karnataka, where Kannada is the official language. The community organisation, Singapore Kannada *Sangha*, was founded in 1996 and hosts numerous social and cultural festivals through out the year. They also conduct the the annual music festival, *Purandara namana*. Held in memory of the Kannada poet-saint, Purandaradasa (1485-1565), this festival attracts music teachers, students, performers and connoisseurs from all over the island. *(Fig. 8)* One of the important *Haridasas* of the Vaishnava bhakti tradition in Karnataka, Purandaradasa is also credited with consolidating and structuring the South Indian Music system. People from other communities also participate and the festival starts with students and the audience singing the poet's graded compositions, called the *Pillari Geeta*. Not only does the festival bring together people from other communities, but it also ensures that narrow linguistic borders are crossed.

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