

## Encounters with the Public Archives & Collective Memory: Researching the Indian Community in Singapore

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### Abstract:

*The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), a soon to be opened heritage institution under the National Heritage Board, has been actively engaged in researching the history of the Indian community in Singapore. Attempting to overcome tangible voids in the published histories of the community, curatorial research has involved the inspection of the Public Archives and newspaper holdings. Intangible accounts of individual, family, historical and socio-cultural narratives residing in the collective memory of the community have also been collected. The complex weave of the Indian community parallels the complex challenges ahead for the Indian Heritage Centre in preserving/showcasing Singapore's Indian heritage and its social-historical chronicle. This paper brings to light specific curatorial encounters and their outcomes, with special emphasis on press reports and on family memory.*

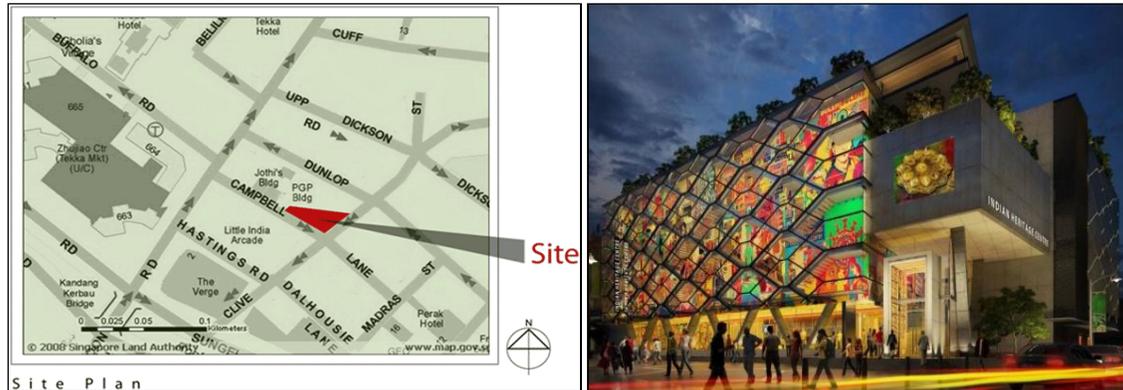
**Keywords:** Indian Community, Singapore Settlement

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The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) is one of three ethnic heritage institutions under the management of the National Heritage Board. Each represents one of the three major ethnic communities in Singapore – the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (Chinese), the Malay Heritage Centre (Malays) and the Indian Heritage Centre, or IHC (peoples from the Indian subcontinent). The IHC, which is to open its doors to the public in February 2015, has already been actively engaged in researching the history of the Indian community in Singapore. Attempting to overcome tangible voids in the published histories of the community, curatorial research has involved the inspection of various public archives and newspaper holdings. Furthermore, intangible accounts of individual, family, historical and socio-cultural narratives residing in the collective memory of the community have been captured to house “voices of the community” in the galleries. This paper attempts to describe such encounters in respect of two predominant themes of the Singapore Indian experience in the pre-independence/colonial era – migration and settlement – as well as in World War II.

Housing small-scale museum and programme facilities, the Centre is to function as a hub for the Indian community in Singapore. Its location in the Little India ethnic precinct affirms this intention (see Fig.1). The Centre's five permanent galleries will underscore the history of Singapore's Indian community, examining it through five predominant themes: the ancient

connections between the regions of south and southeast Asia through religion and trade; migrant roots and journeys of migration; settlement and accompanying pioneering efforts; anti-imperialist and reformist activity under British rule; and finally contributions to the making of a post-colonial country. In addition the Centre's facade offers a glimpse of contemporary images of the Indian diaspora (see Fig.2). The Centre's temporary exhibition gallery, when open, will house community co-curated exhibitions.



**(L to R) Fig.1: Site Map locating the upcoming Indian Heritage Centre. Fig.2: Artist's Impression of the Indian Heritage Centre Building Design (Night Perspective)**

The phenomena of diaspora and migration, following their association with colonialism (perhaps multiple colonialisms), occupy a central place in post-colonial theory. While the narrative of peoples from the Indian subcontinent in Southeast Asia is an area of extensive study, the history of Singapore's Indian community remains an area of marginal research. Some narratives remain more pronounced; for instance stereotypical accounts, based on mainstream colonial records of convicts and indentured labourers, tend to overshadow other sorts of migrant experience.

Pioneering works also note that large numbers of migrants from India were from among labourers in the Indian population. Sandhu (1969)<sup>1</sup> and Arasaratnam (1970)<sup>2</sup> agree in concluding that labourers constituted the majority of migrants from the subcontinent to the region of Malaya. However, Arasaratnam<sup>3</sup> clarifies that while other commercial, professional and clerical groups migrated from India to Malaya, systematic records of their profile and movement were not kept; precise migration data thus are unavailable. More recently, Rai and Reeves in their introduction to *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities* (2009)<sup>4</sup> raise the question of 'old' and 'new' South Asian diaspora and ask if the contrast between them in scholarly discourse conceals alternative narratives of migration and transnational community formation. They go on to question the division between accounts of newer Indian migrant groups made up particularly, though not solely, of

<sup>1</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya : some aspects of their immigration and settlement (1786-1957)*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Arasaratnam, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves, in their introduction to *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities*, ed. Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 4.

commercial migrants who maintained significant connections with the Indian ‘homeland’, as opposed to accounts of the ‘old’ diaspora punctuated with the narrative of indentured labour.

For the purpose of this paper, the motive for delving into holdings of collective memory regarding the Indian migrants in Singapore is restricted to the curatorial prerequisite to unravel narratives of migration – the journey not just of people but of practices – as well as to document the pursuits and places of settlement of early Indian pioneers in Singapore. These are two of the dominant themes in the IHC’s permanent galleries. What follows only presents a few highlights of findings at public archives including the National Archives of Singapore, the National Archives of India, the British Library, and newspaper archives (the *Straits Times* holdings). Also, in pursuit of its curatorial interests the IHC is conducting a comprehensive oral history and artefact collection drive, but only some topical instances of collecting oral history and family memory (inclusive of findings in private and family archives) are discussed here.

The collection of Straits Settlements Factory Records among the India Office Records housed at the British Library includes an illuminating series – the *Singapore Diary (1827–1829)*. *Singapore Diary, 1827* (IOR/G/34/153) in its tabulation of abstract returns of population according to a Census taken on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1827, draws attention to the ethnic composition of residents in the Straits; Indians likely falling under tags of ‘Natives of Bengal’ and ‘Natives of the Coromandel Coast’ as well as ‘Troops and Followers’ (see Table 1). The report also notes imports from India into Singapore including gunnies, opium from Bengal and Malwa, piece goods and saltpetre.

	Males	Females	Total
Europeans	69	18	87
Armenians	16	3	19
Native Christians	128	60	188
Arabs	18	...	18
Chinese	5742	341	6088
Malays	2501	2289	1790
Bugguese	666	576	1212
Javanese	174	93	267
<b>Natives of Bengal</b>	209	53	262
<b>Natives of the Coromandel Coast</b>	772	5	779
Coffries	2	3	5
Siamese	5	2	7
Add	10307	3443	13750
<b>Troops and Followers</b>	492	122	614
Convicts	248	4	252

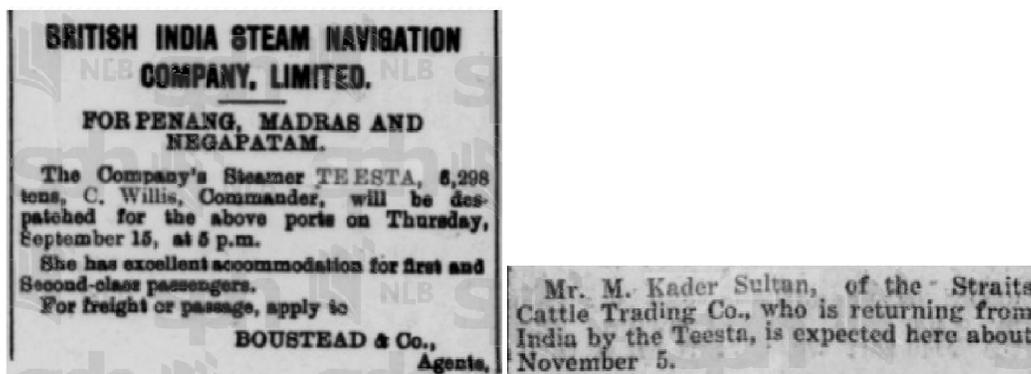
**Table 1: Showing Abstract return of population according to a Census taken on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1827 as extracted from *Singapore Diary, 1827*, IOR/G/34/153**

Later reports of immigration punctuate migration from the ports of Madras and Negapatam (Nagapattinam) in south India, primarily that of labour and convicts. I elaborate on the *Report for Indian Immigration into the Straits Settlements, 1907* (IOR/L/PJ/6/869) as a case in point. The report notes figures of immigration to the Straits Settlement from southern India and specifies only three categories of immigrants – statute immigrants, free coolies and other

immigrants (dependents of statute immigrants). It goes on with comments on communication with southern India during the year in question, an extract of which is as follows:

The regular fortnightly service, under contract with the British India Steam Navigation Company, was maintained without interruption during the year by the steamers S.S. Testa and Thongwa. Extra trips were made by the S.S. Landaura in May and July. The number of deck passengers brought over on these three trips was 2,719 [...] The number of deck tickets at the reduced rate for labourers taken during the year was 29,751 [...] The S.S. Testa arrived at Penang on September 5<sup>th</sup> and reported two deaths from Cholera on the voyage. About 2,200 passengers landed at Pulau Jerejak and the remainder, including all passengers for Port Swettenham, were taken on to Singapore and sent to St. John's Island.

The 1907 report, while revealing particulars of steamships and the phenomenon of quarantine, makes no reference to commercial and/or other migrants even from southern India. However, official reports on convict migration from India and Sri Lanka likewise fail to provide convict profiles; for instance the transfer of Indian opposition political leaders turned prisoners to penal settlements goes unmentioned, Bhai Maharaj Singh being a case in point with respect to Singapore. But an inspection of the *Straits Times* archive shows that first and second class passage on the Teesta was being advertised in January 1910, suggestive of commercial migrants and other travellers communicating between Southern India and the Straits Settlement (see Fig.3). A 1922 notice further offers the precise detail that Mr. M. Kader Sultan, a citizen of French India hailing from Karaikal, who was a pioneer cattle trader located along Syed Alwi Road in Singapore, was returning from India by ship (see Fig.4).



(L to R) Fig.3: A British India Steam Navigation Company, Limited advertisement placed by Boustead & Co., agents for passage on the Teesta to Penang, Madras and Negapatam, as published in the *Straits Times* dated 12 September 1910, p. 9. Fig. 4: Untitled notice of the expected return of Mr. M. Kader Sultan from India by the Teesta, published in the *Straits Times*, 31 October 1922, p. 10. Source: [www.newspapers.nl.sg](http://www.newspapers.nl.sg)

A family photograph album throws further light on early 20<sup>th</sup>-century movement from the port of Madras to Singapore. Mrs. Rosy Nakhoda is a descendant of the Motiwalla family, which established E.J. Motiwalla & Co. as early as 1886 in Singapore. Her family photographs of the early 1920s portray gentlemen of the Bohri community travelling from Surat in western India to Madras or Pondicherry on the east coast by train, then boarding

steamships for the port of Singapore. The album also holds vivid images of cattle being transported to meet everyday needs, milk and dairy products being integral to the Indian diet.<sup>5</sup>

The Chettiars are among the earliest known groups from the Indian subcontinent to have settled in Singapore, their presence there dating back to the 1820s.<sup>6</sup> However, colonial reports on immigration remain silent on this point. Memories secured through oral history interviews then fill the vacuum by providing knowledge of real lived experience. For example, Mr. Subbiah narrates his personal journey from his village in Chettinad to Nagapattinam and subsequent experience aboard a steamship to Singapore.<sup>7</sup> It was a journey much like those undertaken by his predecessors and contemporaries, but for which his family has photographs (see Fig.5).



**Fig.5: A series of four photographs encapsulating the movement of the Chettiars from the port of Nagapattinam to Singapore and Malaya. Source: Rm. V. L. N. Subbiah Chettiar & family.**

The movement of the Chettiars from India, coupled with the observance of the Indian festival of Thaipusam by Chettiar communities in Singapore and Malaysia, also points to the transfer, continued conduct and re-interpretation of Indian cultural practice by migrant communities in Singapore. Their collective cultural identity then remains rooted in their history; a history told and retold from generation to generation.

For example, in the *Unseen Hand - Autobiography of Thaathaa (Grandfather) Suppiah* published in Singapore in 1986 by his family, the patriarch recounted his childhood memory of participating early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a Hindu festival and procession in Singapore – the Pathinettam Padi Perukku, a river festival that fell in the month of August.

We pupils decorated a chariot to carry the image of the Goddess Saraswathi. The children and the elders would then pull it along, dragging it by a thick rope. We began at Tekka and pulled it through Dunlop Street and Kerbau Road; eventually ending at the Red Bridge at Kampong Java

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mrs. Rosy Nakhoda on 7 July 2011. Mrs. Nakhoda is a member of one of the oldest Bohri families in Singapore. I interviewed her and other veteran Bohri families to understand the roots and cultural identity of the community, their memory of movement and community building.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Dieter Evers and Jayarani Pavadarayan, “Religious Fervour and Economic Success: The Chettiars of Singapore” in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and A. Mani, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr. V.L.N. Subbiah Chettiar on 10 June 2013. Mr. Subbiah was a money lender himself and operated his business like many other contemporaries at Market Street. His forefathers are among the earliest Chettiar migrants to settle in Singapore.

[...] It was a holiday for us. We bathed in the river, which at that time was very clean, we rested and we played. And then we would return home, pulling the chariot behind us.<sup>8</sup>

Grandfather Suppiah's recollection is that of a collective experience, a record of a Tamil community religious procession carried in his personal memory and preserved for posterity only by the action of his family in publishing it. The tradition is hardly seen and known in the cultural practice of Tamils in Singapore today. The notion of the festival being of an importance deserving of a school holiday is also long lost. Apart from minor temple processions, the procession of Thaipusam is the only one associated with the Little India area of Singapore today, and processional images of the goddess Saraswathi are absent.

Can it not then be concluded that family members of the Indian community in Singapore retained knowledge of many more unspoken, unrecorded episodes, that the mind of the individual remained witness to collective experience untold, and that much of the community's history remains untapped in the personal memory of members of the community? Here I draw from the assertion of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs that "personal memories [...] are shaped by social circumstances and hence private memory imperceptibly incorporates collective memory. Nearly all personal memories, then, are learned, inherited, or, at the very least, informed by a common stock of social memory".<sup>9</sup>

Early entrepreneurial ventures and activity in Singapore centred on the river front; occupation and settlement intertwined, as observed by Siddique and Puru Shotam (1982).<sup>10</sup> That is, the settlement and occupational patterns of migrants in Singapore evolved together. However, many of the early areas settled from India, such as Cross Street, Market Street, Malacca Street, Raffles Place, have altered in character and now bear little visible evidence of former Indian business occupations; the name in some cases, such as Chulia Street, being the only marker. In this context, Little India does retain much of its historic atmosphere of settlement along the lines of occupation. Take for instance the continued presence of goldsmiths (albeit diminished) and/or jewellers in the precinct. Yet, residential shop houses today have become scarce. Vivid recollections of growing up in such houses along Buffalo Road in the pre-war years punctuated my interviews with Mr. Krishna<sup>11</sup> and Mr. Abisheganaden.<sup>12</sup> Their memories are but illustrative of a much different settlement pattern in which business and residence coexisted, prior to the advent of public housing estates managed by the Housing Development Board.

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<sup>8</sup> Grandfather Suppiah, *The Unseen Hand – Autobiography of Thaathaa Suppiah*, Singapore: Stamford Press [Pte] Ltd, 1986, p. 3. I am grateful to Mr. P.G.P. Ramakrishnan for pointing out this out-of-print publication to me. It offers some rare insights into the life of Indians in Singapore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

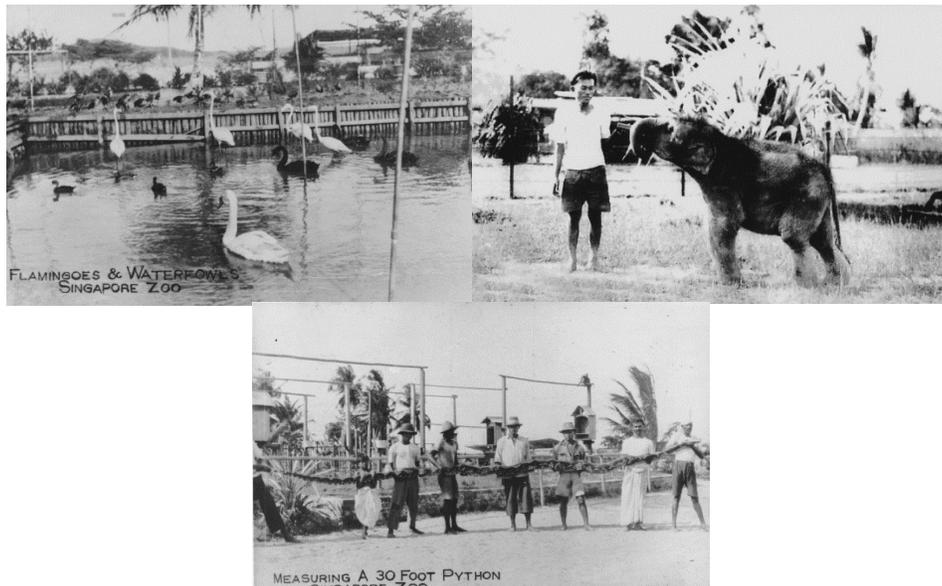
<sup>9</sup> As summarized by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, in his "No Deed but Memory", introduction to *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Puru Shotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present and Future*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mr. V. Krishna on 10 July 2013. Mr. Krishna is a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Singaporean of Indian origin; his family were traditionally ship builders. He grew up living in the Serangoon Road area and retains explicit memories of his times there.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mr. Abisheganaden on 30 July 2013. Mr. Abisheganaden is a much acclaimed classical musician and educator living in Singapore. He grew up in a Tamil Christian family and lived along Buffalo Road in the pre-World War II and World War II period.

The history of Serangoon Road and its surrounding streets was much associated with agricultural activity, cattle rearing, dairy farming and even brick kilns; however it is little known and much forgotten that Serangoon Road also saw the beginnings of one of Singapore's earliest private zoos. Mr. W.L.S. Basapa's Singapore Zoological Gardens and Bird Park opened in Punggol in 1928, the zoo having emerged from his home menagerie located at 317 Serangoon Road. With the zoo having ceased operations during the period of World War II, this much visited pre-war attraction and pioneering enterprise is yet another example of an obscure narrative in the history of Indian Singapore. Photographs from the Basapa family archive are lucid records of the fantastical species housed in the zoo (see Fig.6). Furthermore, the *Straits Times* archive is teeming with inserts and articles on happenings at the Punggol Zoo. They include the zoo importing seals into the British colony of Singapore in March 1930,<sup>13</sup> and the filming at the zoo of a 1933 American movie titled *Dyak*, which highlighted English actor M. H. Kenyon-Slade fighting a dead python.<sup>14</sup>



**Fig.6: Views of Basapa's Zoo in Punggol. Source: Mr. Lawrence Basapa**

The role of film in creating banks of imagery, such as that of homeland, in the collective memory of the migrant communities has been much witnessed in Singapore (see Fig.7, advertising the showing of a film starring the famous Indian actor-politician from Tamil Nadu, M.G. Ramachandran). Velayutham states that “for the Tamils in the diaspora, Tamil Nadu and the specific popular entertainment form of cinema is a key site of Tamil cultural production and resource.”<sup>15</sup> Cinema-going was a regular pastime in Indian Singapore,

<sup>13</sup> “Ponggol Zoo: Seals Imported for First Time in the Colony”, *Straits Times*, 17 March 1930, p. 12. Source: [www.newspapers.nl.sg](http://www.newspapers.nl.sg)

<sup>14</sup> “Singapore Actor Wins Film Contract Suit: Producer on How ‘Dyak’ Was Made: Brave Battle with Dead Python”, *Straits Times*, 3 September 1933, p. 9. Source: [www.newspapers.nl.sg](http://www.newspapers.nl.sg)

<sup>15</sup> Selvaraj Velayutham, “The Diaspora and the Global Circulation of Tamil Cinema”, in *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 173

inciting ardent fan following and hero worship. Mr. Narayana Samy<sup>16</sup> narrates his memory of M.G. Ramachandran's fans arriving dressed up like him for screenings of his films right into the 1970s. Film distribution and owning theatres was, and continues to be, a side business run by Indian entrepreneurs in Singapore (see Fig.8).



(L to R) Fig.7: Capitol Theatre advertises the grand showing of *Marudhanattu Ilavarasi* starring M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) on the following evening, dated 15 July 1950. Fig. 8: Article entitled “Last days of Diamond Theatre” published in the *Straits Times* on 18 November 1977 and noting the ownership of the Diamond Theatre by Indian diamond jeweller Mr. K.M. Oli Mohamed. Source: [www.newspapers.nl.sg](http://www.newspapers.nl.sg)

Films also played a role in arousing within the diaspora emotions of nationalism and ethnic national identity. I refer in particular to the film *Mahatma Gandhi: Twentieth Century Prophet*, “an epic of Indian nationalism” shown in its Tamil version in Singapore and Malaya in 1941 (see Fig. 9). An eyewitness of the film’s premiere there, K. Ramiah,<sup>17</sup> who

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mr. Narayana Samy on 21 July 2012. Mr. Narayana Samy is the proprietor of Kamala Jewellers; he was trained in the jewellery trade at G.C. De Silva, a Sinhalese enterprise in Singapore. Mr. Samy was an avid film goer during his childhood in Malaysia and his passion for films kept him involved in film distribution in later years. He now also runs Rex Cinemas, a theatre showing Indian films in Singapore.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mr. K. Ramiah on 29 June 2012. Mr. Ramiah is a veteran radio and TV producer and broadcaster.

subsequently enrolled himself into the Japanese-backed Indian National Army (INA) to fight the British Raj, drew my attention to the film's part in inspiring nationalist feelings in young Indian men and women abroad in the early 1940s, suggesting that watching the film was perhaps a turning point which culminated in their concerted response to Subhas Chandra Bose's call for enrolment into the INA. Also interesting to note is that the film was made by A.K. Chettiar, backed by a group of Chettiars collectively known as Documentary Films Ltd. Mr. A.K. Chettiar was a man of diasporic experience himself, who lived in Rangoon for a number of years. He had travelled around the world during the making of the film and received a welcoming response from the community in Singapore during his visit in 1939 and talk on Indians overseas at the Ramakrishna Mission (see Fig.10).<sup>18</sup>

**"LIFE OF MAHATMA GANDHI" PREMIERE**  
**At The Cinema**

"The Life of Mahatma Gandhi," Documentary Films, Ltd., Madras. Mid-night premiere at the Alhambra.

**A** FULL house greeted the Malayan premiere of this documentary film, which is more an epic of Indian nationalism during the last 20 years than the life story of the Mahatma.

It starts with the period of Gandhi's visit to London to study for the Bar and deals extensively with his activities in South Africa where he first experimented with his now famous "satyagraha" doctrine.

During this period, among other things, Gandhi is also shown working as an ambulance volunteer both in the Boer War and Zulu campaign.

But the real newscell part only starts from somewhere in 1920. Gandhi's visit to the first Round Table Conference and his tour in France, Italy and Switzerland are all portrayed well. Almost all the important annual sessions of the Congress since then, are also shown, and also the march to Dandi in connection with the salt campaign. There are very interesting "shots" of Gandhi's daily life and activities in Sewagram, his village home in Central Provinces.

The picture is mostly silent, but there are many sound "shots" also, including speeches by Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sir S. Radhakrishnan and others.

There is some good background music and a running commentary in Tamil. The picture is the work of Mr. A. K. Chettiar, who visited Singapore just before the outbreak of the war.

**MAN WHO IS FILMING LIFE OF GANDHI HERE**  
**Chettiar To Exhibit At New York World Fair**

THERE is a great demand for Indian pictures in Western countries, particularly in the United States of America, said Mr. A. K. Chettiar, managing director of Documentary Films, Ltd., Madras, who is now in Singapore on his way to Europe and America.

Pictures featuring Mahatma Gandhi were in great demand and picture corporations were willing to pay high prices for such films, added Mr. Chettiar.

Mr. Chettiar, who is a journalist, was editor of the Thana Vanikan, Rangoon, a weekly Tamil journal devoted to Chettiar interests.

Recently he has taken an interest in photography and the film industry. He took a course in photography of the Imperial College of Arts, Japan, and was attached to the press department of the Tokio Asahi during that period for practical training.

He went to the United States later and was working with Pulse News taking a diploma from the New York Institute of Photography later.

**In Berlin**

He visited various European countries also in this connection and was for a time at the Nazi headquarters at Berlin, working with Karl Voss, one of the chief photographers of the Nazi Propaganda Bureau.

Documentary Films has produced news-reels depicting Indian village industries and Mr. Chettiar himself will demonstrate these at the World Fair to be held in New York next month.

He will also be attending the International Chamber of Commerce convention to be held next month at Copenhagen as a representative of the Burma, Malakottai Chettiars' Association.

One of the pictures on which Mr. Chettiar is concentrating is a film depicting Mr. Gandhi's life.

The picture is almost half ready and Mr. Chettiar will himself shoot some of the scenes in South Africa, where Mr. Gandhi spent several years as a practicing barrister and where he first achieved fame.

Mr. Chettiar stated that the Indian film industry was several years behind Hollywood, but he was of the opinion that it had a bright future. News-reels and educational films had great possibilities in India.

Mr. Chettiar will address in Tamil a public meeting at the Ramakrishna Mission premises this evening at 8 o'clock, on "Indians Overseas."

(L to R) Fig.9: "Life of Mahatma Gandhi Premiere", *Straits Times*, 31 May 1941, p.10; Fig.10: "Man who is Filming Life of Gandhi [is] here: Chettiar to Exhibit at New York World Fair", *Straits Times*, 28 March 1939, p. 12. It is obvious here that it was the uniqueness of his intimate interaction with Gandhi that was the draw of A.K. Chettiar for the local community. Source: [www.newspapers.nl.sg](http://www.newspapers.nl.sg)

<sup>18</sup> For further reading on A.K. Chettiar and the making of *Mahatma Gandhi: Twentieth Century Prophet* see his memoir *In the tracks of the Mahatma: the making of a documentary*, ed. A.R. Venkatachalapathy, transl. from the Tamil by S. Thillainayagam, Chennai (India): Orient Longman, 2006.

On the subject of Gandhi and the response to Gandhi's nationalism from the local Indian community of Singapore I further suggest that in spite of their distance from India, of their never having witnessed him live, the diaspora's experience of Gandhi and his philosophy was very much real. His thoughts, his speeches filtered through to the local community via print and broadcast media. Images of Gandhi, visual and oral, were produced and reproduced for the diaspora's consumption; in fact Gandhi was such a presence in their lives that his photographs and posters adorned the walls of homes, culminating in the construction of a Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hall in Singapore. What is more, after Gandhi's death a fraction of his ashes was scattered in the Singapore River, following a crowd-filled ceremony and parade. Sequential images of this event are in the collection of the National Archives of Singapore (see Fig. 11).



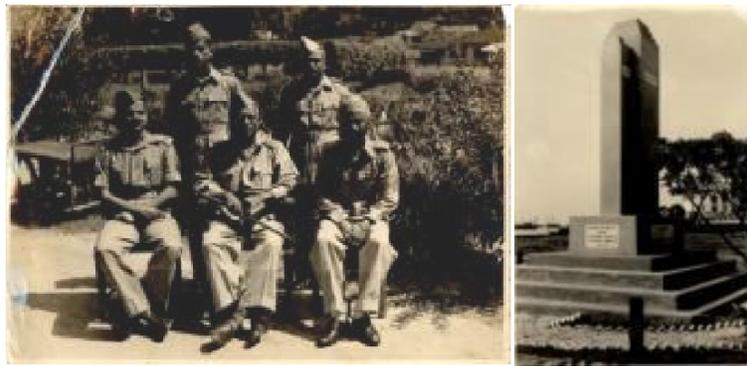
**Fig.11: A pair of photographs dated 27 March 1948, showing Mahatma Gandhi's ashes being taken in a procession in Singapore and being immersed in the Singapore River by John Thivy, then Representative of the Government of India in Malaya. Source: National Archives of Singapore.**

The years of the Japanese occupation of Singapore during World War II generated both collective memory and collective amnesia. The traumatic events of these years either instilled unforgettable images or images that were best forgotten; different facets of memory come to the fore. A significant number of men, women and children were driven either by the anti-British agenda of Indian independence of Bose's Indian National Army (INA), or by the anti-Japanese movement of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).<sup>19</sup> The plantations were beds of recruitment for both the INA and the MPAJA. What is evident, though, is that the majority just strove to survive; they did what they had to do to get through the war. While Singapore's Indian businessmen were stranded overseas their wives

<sup>19</sup> C.V. Devan Nair, a former president of Singapore, in his unpublished memoirs notes that he was deeply influenced by Paramanan Kangany, a labourer in the plantation his father was working at. He goes on to describe the plantation workers' trauma due to Japanese recruitment for the Death Railway, and their consequent support for the MPAJA.

converted gardens into vegetable patches and even cashed their dowry and personal jewellery to support their families.<sup>20</sup>

Resting in the Private Archives section of the National Archives of India are the Indian National Army records declassified by the Indian Ministry of Defence in 1997. These records, seized by the British from INA officers after World War II, contain official and personal papers as well as photographs. Important archival records from the INA trials held at the Red Fort in New Delhi are also present in this collection. It also includes photographs of the Indian National Army's activities (see Fig.12) from the collection of Lt.Col. Loganaathan of the INA's Singapore chapter. A photograph of the Indian National Army memorial of 1945 shows that short-lived tribute in its full height (see Fig.13). What was intended by Bose as a symbol of the collective memory of the INA martyrs was dynamited by the British on re-entering Singapore. In this instance what the colonial government chose not to memorialise, i.e. the spirit of anti-imperialistic nationalism evinced by Indians overseas, is also a significant indicator of how collective memory is constructed.



**(L to R) Fig.12: Photograph showing Lt.Col. Loganaathan (seated in the middle) and INA officers. Fig.13: Photograph of the INA Memorial in Singapore, for which Bose had laid the foundation only in July 1945. It was dynamited by the British later that same year. Source: National Archives of India, Government of India, New Delhi.**

The Indian community's memory of the war also lies in the collective experience of its refugees. For instance, Salma Moiz and her sister Sakina Kagda<sup>21</sup> refer to a bag produced from shredded parachute fabric, woven by their mother during their exile in Bombay during the war years. Several Bohri families like theirs, as well as other ethnic Indians, migrated back to India, displaced by war and Japanese occupation from Singapore. Most returned after the war to salvage their disrupted lives and businesses, by their action perhaps contradicting the myths of homeland and return posited by Safran in his diasporic theory.<sup>22</sup> For these Indian

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the family of Mr. Uttamram Ghelabhai on 29 April 2009. Mr. Uttamram Ghelabhai was stranded in India during World War II and his wife held the fort and provided for the family the whole time.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Mrs. Salma Moiz on 20 March 2012 and with Mrs. Sakina Kagda on 9 April 2012. Both sisters recalled their family's exile in India during the war years.

<sup>22</sup> See William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 83-99.

refugees “return” signified not going back to the India of their ancestors but return to Singapore, the place that was home in their minds.

From early movements of migration to settlement to wartime crises and return, it is evident that the collective memory of Singapore’s Indian community (resting in its monuments, national and media archives as well as in joint and personal recollections) represents real experiences vis-a-vis the more usual paradigmatic narratives and administrative details. Encounters with such real experiences not only enable a comprehensive retelling of the community’s historical experience, but will allow the amalgamation of the intangible and the tangible in the galleries of Singapore’s new Indian Heritage Centre. The collection of such aspects of collective memory also enriches the physical content of the galleries; for instance several community participants in the oral history programme have agreed to loan and/or donate objects intertwined in their stories of family, business or community history. This paper has shared but a few extracts of these encounters; visiting the Centre will bring to life yet more of the collective memory it retells of Singapore’s Indian cultural practice and community history.