

**WORKING PAPER: VIII**

# **INDIAN LEADERS IN SINGAPORE**

**Himanshu Prabha Ray**

**Susan Mishra**



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# Indian Leaders in Singapore

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## 1. Introduction

The maritime linkages of India and South East Asia paved the way for the settlement and integration of Indian communities in Singapore. The Indian community integrated within the socio economic and political fabric of Singapore and contributed towards the growth and development of the city. Conversely Singapore provided migrating Indians with ample opportunities in terms of trade, employment, wealth and business and was a major centre of India's struggle for freedom on international soil. The focus of Indian settlement was what is now known as Little India, whose history is closely linked to the lives and fortunes of the Indian immigrants. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the place was swampy with sugarcane fields, brick kilns and lime pits where numerous Indian labourers worked and toiled. The city was built out of the bricks and lime manufactured here and set in place by scores of Indian convicts who laboured hard in the construction of bridges, canals and buildings. From the 1860's the place became the centre of cattle trade and attracted numerous traders and workers. Over the years it became the hub of commercial activities and many Indians opened restaurants and shops selling spices, cloth, jewellery, dishes and other items of daily use, while others took to professions such as hawkers, dhobis, milkmen etc. Names of streets in Singapore such as Pillai Road, Mistri Road, Angullia Road (now defunct), Veerasamy Road and Angullia Park are reminders of significant role played by the Indian community in the evolution and growth of Singapore into a modern metropolis.

Maritime linkages between India and the Malay world can be traced to an early period, but from the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE they assume tremendous importance in the historical developments of the region. It is mostly traders from south India that established themselves here and were referred to as Benua Keling in many classical Malay manuscripts such as Sulalat al-Salatin, Hikayat Hang Tuah and Hikayat Raja Pasai.<sup>1</sup> "There were three groups of prominent Indian merchants during the Malaccan Sultanate era:- a) Hindu Indians who are also referred to as the 'Kelings'. b) Muslim Gujarati also called the Moors. c) Muslim Tamils."<sup>2</sup> Traders from south India married with the local Javanese, Chinese, Malay and Batik communities, and their off springs came to be denoted as 'Chitty' or the Hindu Peranakans. The mixed Malay community born out of the marriages between the Kelings and women of the Malay nobility had become a part and parcel of the local Malay culture. They carried Malay names and titles and practised Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Mani Purindam the eldest son for Nizam al-Muluk Akhbar Syah and an inhabitant of India played a crucial role in the history of Malacca Sultanate. After a dispute on the issue of inheritance he decided to migrate to Malacca and serve the king there. On his way his ship sank, he was saved and married to the princess in Pasai and continued his long journey to Malacca. Upon reaching Malacca he met Sultan Muhammad Syah who appointed him as one of the Malacca chiefs. He also married the daughter of the Malaccan chief Seri Nara Diraja.<sup>4</sup>

Sultan Muhammad Syah was married to a Tun Ratna Wati, the daughter of the Islamic ruler of Pasai and thus converted to Islam. He was made a Syahbandar of Malacca which wielded him immense control over decisions regarding trading, shipping and commercial transactions in the Malacca Sultanate. He was “in charge of the shipping system and the organization, the chief of all the sea-captains, supervised the system of measurement for all commercial transactions”<sup>5</sup> and also the value of the currency to avoid inflation.<sup>6</sup> This invariably “granted access and increasing influence of the Muslim Tamils who had previously been confined to trade and prevented by the Malay chiefs in playing any political role.”<sup>7</sup>

Mani Purindam’s son, Tun Ali, was appointed as Seri Nara Diraja, one of the important officials in Malacca court.<sup>8</sup> Tun Ali, was a Tamil Muslim and held the post Bendahara (Prime Minister) from 1445 – 1456 by Sultan Muzaffar Shah<sup>9</sup>. Sultan Muhammad Shah was initially succeeded by his younger son Sri Parmeswara Shah, a Hindu, but after a coup by the elder son Raja Kassim with the support of his uncle Tun Perak/ Tun Shah, Raja Kassim became the ruler. Following this a number of chiefs were converted to Islam and the Tamil Muslim community came to yield increasing political influence in the Malacca Sultanate.<sup>10</sup>

“Raja Mundeliar was a chitty and the richest trader in 16<sup>th</sup> century Malacca, He was an Indian trader and was appointed as Syahbandar of Malacca in the reign of Sultan Mahmud Shah. He was involved with the trading activities especially among Tamil traders and represented the Indian traders. In his dealings with the Malay elite he followed the Malay customs, and maintained his identity by staying together with his own immigrant community.”<sup>11</sup> The relationship of the Indian trading community was driven solely by economic exigencies, and so long as their safety and commercial interests were taken care of and they willingly supported the ruler.<sup>12</sup>

The next wave of immigration in Singapore occurred under British Colonial period. In 1819 Singapore was established as trading post of the British East India Company by Stamford Raffles. Sir

Stamford Raffles has been truly considered the founder of Singapore as he established schools and churches in the native languages, allowed missionaries and local businesses to flourish, built a European town carriage roads and cantonments for the soldiers. In 1819, 120 soldiers of Bengal Native Army (Infantry) including dhobis (washer men), doodhwalas (milkmen) and domestic servants accompanied the officer of East India Company, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles.<sup>13</sup>

Raffles was keen on remodelling Singapore into a modern city and conceived a plan which encompassed creation of separate clusters for the different ethnic groups, and building of roads, schools and land for government buildings.<sup>14</sup> In October 1822, a Town Committee was formed with Captain Charles Edward Davis of the Bengal Native Infantry as president and a civil servant George Bonham and merchant A. L. Johnston.<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant Philip Jackson was tasked to draw up the plan according to Raffles’s instructions, and the resultant plan was published in 1828.<sup>16</sup> Raffles also turned his attention to higher learning and education of the sons of the Malay chiefs; teaching of the native languages to officers of the East India Company, and collection of literature pertaining to the traditions, and laws and customs of the country.<sup>17</sup> The foundation stone of such an institution was laid by him on 5 June 1823.<sup>18</sup> Singapore was made a British penal station in 1825 and a large number of convicts were sent to work here and 1840s they housed at the Bras Basah Road Goal<sup>19</sup> and in the 1860’s there were 2275 Indian convicts in Singapore.<sup>20</sup> It is the Indian convicts who provided the labour force for the various constructions projects such as canals, bridges and buildings. They were also taught variety of occupational skills and later many became nurses, firemen and bridge builders.<sup>21</sup>

The first wave of migrants from India settled in the Serangoon Road area and worked in kilns and sugar plantations. from the Bay of Bengal worked on Balestier’s massive sugar plantation,<sup>22</sup> and on spice, tapioca and coconut plantations in Penang and Province Wellesley.<sup>23</sup> In the 1820’s Indians Serangoon Road was called ‘Soonambu Kambam’, or ‘Village of Lime’ as the Madras chunam, kind

of brick introduced from India was made here and widely used in the construction activities of Singapore. The Serangoon Road contained brick kilns and lime pits where many Indians were employed and the first Indian brick business was started by Naraina Pillai in 1819.<sup>24</sup> In the 1860's these brick kilns shut down and the cattle industry became the next major attraction as a business venture and an avenue of employment.<sup>25</sup> "From the 1860s, the development of the Serangoon area was intricately linked with the cattle and buffalo trade that flourished as a result of the abundance of water and fodder, crucial to the trade. The buffaloes were also most crucial means of transport for the agricultural enterprises in the interior of the island."<sup>26</sup> The early movement of migrants to the Straits Settlement was facilitated primarily because it was part of British India until 1867.<sup>27</sup> Indians who migrated during this period were closely linked to the growth of Singapore as an urban centre. They worked as "labourers, stevedores, traders, shopkeepers, hawkers, shop assistants and as clerks."<sup>28</sup> The Indian diaspora in Singapore consisted of people from various regions and economic backgrounds. The Bengalis were employed for menial work while the trading community belong mostly to south India. Indians also worked as petty shopkeepers, boatmen and servants<sup>29</sup>. The transportation of goods and people from Tanjong Rhu to Telok Ayer, and into the Singapore River was carried out on boats manned by Indians.<sup>30</sup> Over the years Singapore witnessed increasing migration of Indians – in 1836 there were an estimated 2,157 Indians which increased to 12,973 by 1860<sup>31</sup> and by 1931, the community had grown to 51,019.<sup>32</sup> This invariably resulted in further settlements in Singapore of the Indian diaspora- and the pioneering Indian migrants of the early 19th century first settled along Chulia Street, then High Street, Arab Street and finally settled along the Serangoon Road.<sup>33</sup>

A number of Punjabi Sikhs were employed in the Police Force or as watchmen, bullock cart drivers and security guards. A Commission of Enquiry into the state of the police force in 1879 led to the establishment of Sikh Police Contingent (SPC) in 1881. On the recommendation of the Commission a

Sikh contingent formed in the local police force and 54 Sikh recruits arrived from Punjab on 26 March 1881. With the arrival and induction of another 46 Sikhs from Punjab the strength of the SPC grew to 100 and by 1898 there were 300 men. Sikhs also served in the Tanjong Pagar Dock Police Force as guards ensuring security of the docks, harbours and godowns. They also were part of the police force at the Naval Base in Sembawang and the Royal Air Force Base in Seletar.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to those recruited in the police forces a number of Sikhs hailing from Majha, Malwa and Doaba regions, arrived in Singapore in the early 1900's and worked as clerks, storekeepers, court interpreters and teachers.<sup>35</sup> "Non-Jat Sikhs also came as tailors and set up shops in New Bridge Road, Jalan Besar, Cecil Street and Serangoon Road."<sup>36</sup> "In 1924, the Sikh community came together to establish a halfway house on Silat Road where new migrants could stay until they found employment and accommodation. It was known as the Police Gurudwara and it was built using donations from Sikh policemen in Singapore and the Sikh communities in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Thailand and Malaya. It later became known as the Gurudwara Sahib Silat Road, or the Silat Road Sikh Temple."<sup>37</sup> The community was involved in numerous economic activities, for instance Bhai Teti (Surain Singh arrived in Singapore in 1890 and joined the Sikh Police Contingent post retirement he opened a provision shop selling atta (wheat flour), ghee (clarified butter) and lentils.<sup>38</sup>

Chettiar played an important role in the economy of Singapore as money lenders. "The influence of the Chettiar factor cannot be underestimated when studying the impact of Tamil business on the modern commerce of Singapore."<sup>39</sup>

The arrival of chettiars in Singapore is traceable to the 1820s, closely following the footsteps of Stamford Raffles, founder of the Port city of Singapore. The first Chettiar money lending firms were founded in 1823 in Singapore, and "the Chettiars financed the opium trade and acted as agents or middlemen between banks and Chinese traders."<sup>40</sup> Even though the number of firms of Chettiars was lesser than the European banks in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

but they were crucial for the Asian commerce and industry. “During 1825, Singapore was handling over three-fifth of the total trade of Southeast Asia.<sup>41</sup> The geographical location of Singapore made it as an entry port point to the whole of Southeast Asia within a short span of time. By 1870s, the chettiar financed most of the opium trade in Singapore and the Chinese businessmen from Straits Settlements who opened up new tin mines in Malaya. During 1880s, the chettiar were strongly placed in the banking services of Singapore, with the cooperation of the Singapore and Penang Branches of Chartered Bank.”<sup>42</sup> Chettiar started two Joint stock Trading Companies in Singapore and in 1928, they opened up Chettiar Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.<sup>43</sup> “They provided working capital loans and investment capital as venture capitalists, syndicated loans for large undertakings, took deposits (with interest) and safekeeping of valuables, organised funds transfers to regional cities like Rangoon, Saigon, Medan, Kuala Lumpur, Chennai and Calcutta. They also issued demand drafts and discounting of demand drafts.”<sup>44</sup> It is estimated that in the 1920s there were seven kittingis on the Market Street that had 300 to 400 chettiar money lending firms.<sup>45</sup>

The Tamil kitanggi is derived from kidangu meaning warehouse and is a two-storey building and is designed like most shop houses found in Malayan towns. “The business operations were carried out from the ground floor and the upper floor served as accommodation. The number of occupants in a kitanggi ranges from 10 to 20 individuals but depends on the size of a firm and the number of agents appointed by the principal.”<sup>46</sup> Narayan Pillai Chettiar was a prominent merchant and amongst the pioneers of Singapore who established his business as a building contractor<sup>47</sup>. He also founded the oldest Hindu shrine Mariamman Temple at New South Bridge Street of Singapore in 1823<sup>48</sup>

Thus by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the population of Singapore constituted of a sizable number of Indian immigrants. These immigrants came from diverse region and socio economic backgrounds and served in various capacities ranging from the labouring class, to clerks, bankers, and rich traders. This

immigrant population proved to be the backbone in the initial years of the development of Singapore from a marshy are to an important trading and commercial centre.

## 2. Struggle Against Colonialism

The substantial Indian diaspora in Singapore was crucial in the city becoming the focus of the Indian national movement in Southeast Asia. Singapore stood witness to two major events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century pertaining to India’s struggle against colonialism. The mutiny of 1915 by Indian soldiers and the formation of the Indian Independence League with support of Indian soldiers on Singapore’s soil highlights the might, strength, determination and longing of the Indian diaspora to contribute towards India’s fight against colonialism.

The 1915 Singapore Mutiny, also known as the 1915 Sepoy Mutiny or the Mutiny of the 5th Light Infantry involved up to half of a regiment of 850 sepoy (Indian soldiers) against the British in Singapore during the First World War. The mutiny that broke out on 15 February 1915 and continued for seven days, seems to have had links of the mutiny with 1915 Ghadar Conspiracy and after its outbreak on 15 February 1915 and lasted nearly seven days. Casualties included death of eight British officers and soldiers, two Malay officers and one soldier, 14 British civilians, five Chinese and Malay civilians. The mutiny was put down with the help of British forces and Allied naval detachments.<sup>49</sup>

On 27 January 1915, Colonel Martin announced that the 5th Light Infantry was to be transferred to Hong Kong. Rumours started circulating amongst the sepoy of the possibility of their being sent to Europe or to Turkey to fight against their Muslim co-religionists. The main conspirators were identified as Subedar Dunde Khan, Jemedar Christi Khan, and Jemedar Ali Khan. In a speech addressed to the sepoy, the General Officer Commanding Singapore complimented the sepoy on their turn out, mentioned about their departure but failed to inform them that they were being sent to Hong Kong. When the ship Nile arrived in February 1915 soldiers were given the order to sail without being informed about

their destination. On the same day the four Rajput companies of the eight companies making up the 5th Light Infantry mutinied at 3:30 pm. The mutineers divided themselves into groups and attacked at various points in Singapore- about a 100 went to the Tanglin Barracks to acquire ammunition, where 309 Germans were interned by the British. The mutineers asked the Germans to join hands with them, but the Germans by and large refused and did not accept rifles from the mutineers.<sup>50</sup> The other mutineers moved towards Keppel Harbour and Pasir Panjang, killing 18 European and local civilians. The third group laid siege to the bungalow of the commanding officer of the 5th Light Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel E. V. Martin and blocked the route into Singapore Town.<sup>51</sup>

This mutiny was not sporadic in nature and was preceded by careful planning and was influenced by the Ghadar Movement. The leaders of the mutiny were Muslim sepoys in the 5th Light Infantry. Kasim Mansur an Indian Muslim merchant in Singapore, and Nur Alam Shah were instrumental in providing the ideological base of the mutiny and fostering anti British feelings amongst the Muslim sepoys. Mansur hosted the members of the 5th Light Infantry in his where he would ask them to support the cause of the Ottoman Sultan and contribute towards the war against the British and assist their Muslim brothers in defending the Caliphate.<sup>52</sup> “The 5th Light Infantry was all-Muslim and made up of Ranghars, or Rajput Muslims, and Muslim Pathans. When the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on Germany’s side. Mehmed V, the empire’s Sultan, was widely regarded as a leading authority in the Muslim world, so when he issued a fatwa calling for all Muslims to oppose the British”<sup>53</sup> the Muslims became the target of Ghadar Party propaganda and influenced the 5th Light infantry in Singapore. The event also brings into the forefront the role of the Ghadar ideology and philosophy in creating a common cause for uniting Muslims across the globe, but equal credit goes to the Indian officers and men of the Fifth Light Infantry who took the bold step the basis of their daily consciousness of the war and freedom.<sup>54</sup>

This mutiny of 850 soldiers from the 5<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry against their British officers was a nail on the coffer of the British rule in Asia.<sup>55</sup> This event highlights the role of the overseas Indian sepoys in the struggle against British Imperialism and colonialism, and also the might and strength of a few of a few Indians whose actions stirred the foundations of British rule in colonial Singapore. The episode made the British community in Singapore realise that they could no longer depend on Indian soldiers to garrison the colony. The British passed the “Reserve Force and Civil Guard Ordinance” to ensure security of Singapore, in August 1915, requiring “all male subjects between 15 and 55 years of age who were not in the armed forces, volunteers or police to enlist for compulsory military service.”<sup>56</sup>

The second round of events of India’s freedom struggle from foreign soil pertains to the establishment of the Indian Independence League in Singapore. Most major decisions pertaining to the INA were taken in Singapore which provided a conducive atmosphere for growth of nationalist feelings amongst Indian diaspora. Events such as handing over the reins of INA to Subhas Chandra Bose, formation of the Rani Jhansi Regiment, and broadcasts of speeches by Subhas Chandra Bose took place in Singapore.

In late December 1941, Captain Mohan Singh, the highest ranking Indian officer in the British Indian Army was captured by the Japanese troops. After the surrender the Allied forces in Singapore, some 65,000 Indian prisoners of war and 600 Malay Regiment soldiers assembled at the old Race Course at Farrer Park and were addressed by Captain Mohan Singh and Major Fujiwara from the Japanese Army.<sup>57</sup> Giani Pritam Singh asked for volunteers to fight for India’s freedom under Captain Mohan Singh A large number of volunteers came forward and Captain Mohan Singh established his headquarters at Neeson in Singapore with Lt. Col. Niranjan Singh Gill as Chief of Staff, Lt. Col. J.K.Bhonsle as Adjutant and Quarter Master General and Lt. Col. A.C. Chatterjee as Director of Medical Services.<sup>58</sup> “By September 1942, 42,000 Indian soldiers had pledged their

allegiance to General Mohan Singh and the INA. Mohan Singh was arrested on 29 December 1942 and exiled to Pulau Ubin. Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore on 2 July 1943 and took over the reins of the IIL as President and Commander-in-Chief of the re-formed INA.”<sup>59</sup>

In addition to these soldiers were other Indians who entered Singapore from Malaya and from the neighbouring colonies in order to escape the oppression caused by the Second World War. There were those who supported the INA primarily because of the inappropriate treatment meted out by the British colonial government such as the Punjabi Sikhs in Strait Settlement Police Force who were disbanded on suspicions of collaboration with the Japanese and their role in freedom struggle.

Lakshmi Swaminathan (1914–2012) was a doctor by profession was born in Madras arrived in Singapore in the middle of 1940. She is most remembered as an important member of the Ranji Jhansi regiment of the INA, who worked relentlessly to forward the cause of Indian freedom. Bose addressed 12,000 soldiers of the first INA at the Singapore Padang, on Monday 5 July 1943. Amongst the civilians who attended one was Dr Lakshmi Swaminathan, a 28- year-old doctor and member of the women’s section of the Indian Independence League. Bose expressed his desire for the involvement of women in the Army of Liberation and to name the women’s regiment the Rani of Jhansi Regiment after Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi who fought so valiantly against the British in 1857. For Lakshmi, ‘this was the highlight of his speech,’ even though most thought that this could not be achieved,<sup>60</sup> she took it upon her to create the first all- woman combat regiment in the world.

She was not deterred by the fact that convincing women and their family was a mammoth task as it required that women leave behind their traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers and take up arms against the British Raj. Her door to door propaganda and follow ups succeeded and the first female guard of honour was established on 12 July 1943. The Regiments main camp was located in Singapore and she was formally put in charge by Bose.<sup>61</sup> “Bose made her the commander of the

Regiment and a few months later, on 21 October 1943, appointed her as the Minister in Charge of the Women’s Organisation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India).<sup>62</sup>.. By 22 October 1943, 156 women and girls from among the Indian communities in Singapore and Malaya from a wide range of ethnic, social, religious and language backgrounds had joined the regiment that was part of Bose’s plan to liberate India from British domination.”<sup>63</sup>

“Attavar Yellappa, a barrister, consequently took upon himself the task of finding a home for the Regiment. He persuaded some of his wealthy Nattukottai Chettiar banker clients to fund the refurbishment of a dilapidated building. The property was enclosed with a high fence to shield the female soldiers and several new barracks were erected. The standing buildings were fitted with new plumbing, and bathing facilities were installed. After three weeks of around-the-clock activity, the Singapore Central Camp, the Ranis’ first training centre, was almost ready for the first contingent of volunteers to move in on the birth anniversary of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi.”<sup>64</sup>

Subhas addressed the all-women’s regiment “The opening of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment Training Camp is an important and significant function; it is a very important landmark in the progress of our movement in East Asia. To realize its importance, you should bear in mind that ours is not a merely political movement. We are, on the other hand, engaged in the great task of regenerating our Nation.”<sup>65</sup> Bose went on: Since 1928, I have been taking interest in women’s organizations in India and I found that, given the opportunity, our sisters could rise to any occasion. ... If one type of courage is necessary for passive resistance, another and more active courage is necessary for revolutionary efforts and in this too, I found that our sisters were not wanting. ...<sup>66</sup> . Unfortunately, Jhansi Rani was defeated; it was not her defeat; it was the defeat of India. She died but her spirit can never die. India can once again produce Jhansi Ranis and march on to victory.<sup>67</sup>



In the Town Hall of Singapore, Subhas Chandra Bose for the first time gave the war cry of “Chalo Delhi” and asked for “total mobilization” from the civilians. The Provincial Government of Free India was formally set up in Singapore in October 1943, and Bose’s speeches, lasting over a month, to the Indian national leaders dissuading them from accepting the Wavell plan was broadcast from Singapore.<sup>68</sup> Subhas Chandra Bose’s act of laying the foundation stone of a memorial dedicated to the “Unknown Warrior” of the Indian National Army at the Esplanade on 8 July 1945 authenticates the pivotal role of Singapore in the life and history of the INA. The words inscribed on the memorial were the motto of the INA: Unity (Ittefaq), Faith (Etmad) and Sacrifice (Kurbani).<sup>69</sup> The deep rooted connection between the Nationalist struggle and Singapore can be ascertained by the request of J A Thivy to Mahatma Gandhi’s son to send his father’s ashes to Singapore. The ashes arrived in Singapore at Kallang Airport on a Malayan Airways flight on the night of 15 March 1948.<sup>70</sup> The procession of two motorcycles and 50 cars carrying the official guests made its way through Kallang Road, Lavender Street, Serangoon Road, Selegie Road, Bras Basah Road and Connaught Drive. The urn went on a tour of Malaya and returned to Singapore on 26<sup>th</sup> March when it was immersed in the sea.<sup>71</sup>

### **3. Indian Business Community - Key Components of Singapore’s Economy and Philanthropists**

The commercial opportunities offered by Singapore during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning 20<sup>th</sup> century attracted the business communities of the Gujaratis, Chettiars, Marwaris and Parisis. Singapore became a land of fortune for many who established businesses and became wealthy patrons. In 1849 there were 17 Indian merchants and by 1860’s there were Tamil, Bengali, Sindhi and Parsee merchants houses in Singapore.<sup>72</sup> The Namazis ancestor Mohamed Javad Namazie emigrated to Singapore in 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are credited with the building of the Capitol Theatre

in 1929. Mohamed Namazie “was involved in the formulation of Administration of Muslim Law Act of 1966. And their law firm Mallal and Namazie is well known in Singapore.”<sup>73</sup> The Parsi community’s contribution towards health services, social causes and religious establishments are visible on the landscape of Singapore- Mistri Wing in the Singapore General Hospital, the Central Sikh Gurudwara, the Capitol Theatre and the Srinivasa Perumal Temple, to mention a few.

The Punjabi migrants in the 1920’s undertook textile trading ventures and the Chettiars and Punjabis established moneylending business spanning across Southeast Asia, and lent money to Indians, Chinese and Europeans. Sikhs also established themselves in the trading business. Pargat Singh upon arrival in Singapore in 1901 initially tried his hand at dairy farming arrived in Singapore in 1901, but later established a textile business with shops at Armenian Street, Bras Basah Road and Queen Street. He was joined by his son Tara Singh came to Singapore in 1906 as a child in 1906. He did his engineering apprentice and later worked with the Singapore Harbour Board but when offered the post of Fifth Engineer with the Straits Steamship Company he refused and preferred to join his father’s textile business. He made a fortune by becoming a leading contractor for the British Armed Forces in Singapore. He used his wealth for the betterment of his community and established of three Sikh institutions- the Singapore Khalsa Association, the Sikh Partinidh Sabha and the Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha in Katong.<sup>74</sup> Baba Gurdit Singh originally came from Amritsar and while the date of his arrival in Singapore is not exactly known, he set up building construction companies in Singapore and Malaya, and travelled extensively in the region.<sup>75</sup>

The Sikhs were also involved in the cattle rearing and business and supply of milk. Jiva Singh was a cattle dealer in the early 1900s and his son Mall Singh and brother Hari Singh started a dairy farm in 1921 in the Serangoon area. Mall Singh diversified into money lending business along with Ajit Singh and they functioned from a tyre repair

shop at 245 Serangoon Road.<sup>76</sup> The Sikhs operated as small moneylenders and loaned out money to those desirous of starting a small business. Mohan Singh Brahmputra together with his brothers Bachan Singh (father of Central Sikh Gurudwara Board and Singapore Khalsa Association Patron Naranjan Singh Brahmputra) and Bhola Singh who arrived to Singapore in the 1920's from the Punjab's Majha region started a moneylending business in Singapore in the 1920s. In case of smaller loan requirements the debtors had to sign promissory notes and if the amount involved was high the property title deeds were required to be submitted.<sup>77</sup> "The Japanese Occupation of Singapore saw a significant decline in Sikh moneylending activities."<sup>78</sup> The Sikh money lenders played a crucial role in the economy and business of Singapore as they not only provided loans to those wanting to start small businesses, but also utilised the money to improve the Indian religious and cultural establishments.<sup>79</sup>

Hardial Singh (also known as Hardial Singh Bajaj) was only 17 years of age when he and his four brothers - Inder Singh, Harbans Singh, Hira Singh and Balwant Singh left their home in Punjab in 1920 and ventured down to Ipoh in Perak State to set up shop trading in spices, grains and foodstuffs. They came to Malaya mainly because their family in India was in debt owing to business losses. "They ventured to Singapore in 1934 and established a successful business trading in foodstuffs and textiles. A three-storey shop house at 4 Battery Road (where the present Bank of China now stands) housed their firm Gian Singh & Company, which served as a department store, wholesale office, and living quarters all rolled into one. They moved later and established a department store in Raffles Place opposite the Robinson & Company Limited department store, against which it competed successfully. Hardial Singh and his brother Hira Singh went on a business trip to Shanghai in 1949, and before too long, Gian Singh and Company became a family oriented multinational company with offices in Japan, Indonesia and Thailand."<sup>80</sup>

The establishment of the Central Sikh Temple in 1912 at 175 Queen Street brings out the co-ordinated

efforts of diverse Indian communities. The money for the purchase of the building was provided by a Sindhi merchant Wassiamul Assomul, who donated \$6,500. He purchased it along with Sergeant-Major Punjab Singh and Corporal Ganda Singh of the Singapore Police Force to be used as a Gurdwara<sup>81</sup>

The Khojas and Sindhis who migrated to Singapore established themselves as leading traders and merchants, and many were also philanthropists who contributed to the betterment of the people. Wassiamull Assomul was a Sindhi textile merchant who brought textile business to Singapore in 1864 and had extensive trading networks outside India. The Sindhi Singapore Association was formed in 1921 under the chairmanship of Mr T Naraindas. It bought its first property in 1938, "at Enggor Street, which was used to lodge Sindhis in transit to various destinations via Singapore. Even "Veesi" (contract meals) service was run by Mr. Hashumal. The Association donated \$400 for war-time evacuees from Japan to facilitate their transit through Singapore. The Sindhi ladies made Collections for the building fund for Ramakrishna mission – 1948."<sup>82</sup>

Rajabali Jumbabhoy was born in 1898 in Lakhapur and belonged to a Khoja Muslim trading family based on the west coast of India. He came to Singapore in 1916 to establish a firm in Singapore which eventually became the largest coffee and sago traders in Singapore. In the post war period he diversified into shipping and real estate and founded the Indian Chamber of Commerec. From 1918 the firm exported coffee, black pepper, gambier, gum jamin and sago flour. Over time Rajabali Jumbabhoy shifted his focus on imports of wheat flour, cotton yarn and dates.<sup>83</sup> On 2 January 1922, Jumabhoy launched his own business after a fall-out with his brother, and by 1924, had opened offices in Hong Kong, Java and Bombay, trading in produce such as coffee, sago flour, gum benjamin, rattan and gambier.<sup>4</sup> In 1924 he ventured into property business and in the post-war years he diversified into the shipping . Jumabhoy had escaped to India on 7 February 1942, fearing retribution by the Japanese but after the end of the war he returned to Singapore and helped rehabilitate important industries..<sup>84</sup>"The Parsis,

began to grow in Singapore from the mid-19th century and the earliest known Parsi in Singapore was a convict named Muncherjee, who arrived in 1819. An enterprising group of people, the Parsis in Singapore included Cursetjee Framjee, the founder and partner of John Little & Company a large retail store and Mr. Phirozshaw Manekji Framroz who started the Framroz Aerated Water Factory in 1903<sup>85</sup>, which manufactured carbonated drinks with fruits imported from California and his factory was located at Allenby Road in Jalan Besar. Navroji Mistri, is the most cherished Parsi in Singapore who established the Phoenix Aerated Water Works. Mistri worked as engineer with the Royal Indian Marine Dockyards in Bombay and travelled to Singapore in 1909 where he was employed by Sir John Aird & Co., in the building of the graving dock at Keppel Harbour, and thereafter at Riley, Hargreaves & Co. He then joined P. M. Framroz as a manager in the aerated water business in 1913 and in 1925 he branched out and started his own soda water factory called Phoenix Aerated Water Company.<sup>86</sup> “After the Japanese Occupation, Mistri fell ill, and during his time in the hospital, he saw sick children sleeping along the corridors due to a lack of space. His friend and doctor Professor Ransome jokingly asked Mistri to give him money to build a children’s ward. Mistri, however, took the comment seriously and donated a sum of \$950,000 to SGH, stating that he “cannot bear to think of sick children, and their mothers lying on the floors of hospital wards”.<sup>87</sup> He donated \$950,000 to the General Hospital (later renamed Singapore General Hospital) for a new building, the Mistri Wing, for sick children. Even after his death, Mistri left behind \$1 million for the use of charities in Malaya and Mumbai “which held in a trust fund by the Mistri Singapore Trust and the Mistri Bombay Trust. Funds in the Mistri Singapore Trust were set aside for the benefit of indigent children, scholarships, and also to aid patients with tuberculosis.”<sup>88</sup> He was known as the godfather of the poor due to his liberal donations towards the welfare of children and provision of medical facilities. His cousin Pesi Daver on his death left his entire fortune to both Zarathushti and non

Zarathushti recipients to be utilised for educational and charitable purposes.<sup>89</sup> Byramjee Hormusjee Cama, established a school in Tanjong Pagar in 1864 which tended to Chinese and other children and the expenses for running the schools were paid and taken care by him.<sup>90</sup>

The contribution of the Parsis towards Singapore’s development is apparent in the existence of road named after them. <sup>such as the</sup> such as the Parsi Road which runs parallel to a part of Palmer Road and is linked to Palmer Road by Mistri Road. <sup>.<sup>91</sup></sup>

Amongst the south Indians the most well known is P Govindasamy Pillai who was a philanthropist and donated generously from the fortune he made through his business venture in Singapore. He hailed from Tamil Nadu and sailed to Singapore arriving at Tanjong Pagar in 1905 only with his clothes and 13 rupees on him. Upon his arrival he worked at a provision store surviving only food and accommodation as remuneration. He sailed back to India and returned with his wife to Singapore. He took a loan from the Chettiars and brought over the provision store and began selling grains, oils and spices. He named the store Dhanalakshmi and through hard work and business foresight he had a string of stores along the Serangoon road in Singapore by the 1960’s which was popularly known as PGP stores. He is remembered for his donations towards the construction of the five-tier Gopuram Srinivasa Perumal Temple and donations towards Ramakrishna Mission, India Association and Gandhi Hall.

“Pillai donated money and land to help construct the Ramakrishna Mission’s current building in Bartley Road. He also contributed to the construction of the temple and the library within the building complex. Through his contributions the Mission could carry out many charitable works were carried out. For example, during the war, the Mission helped to give shelter, food, water and medical attention.”<sup>92</sup> Pillai’s played a significant role in the Singapore Indian Association and from the money donated by him, the Association created a fund for those unemployed due to old age or poor health. He also personally oversaw the collection of money to

construct a hospice for those under the Association and also donated a room in the Mount Alvernia Hospital.<sup>93</sup>

From the region of Gujarat it was the Angullia family that made their fortunes in Singapore and contributed towards the construction of mosques. The first person to have arrived in Singapore was Ebrahimjee Mohamed Salleh Angullia in 1837 where he opened a shop in Kling Street. His son Mohammed Salleh Eussoofjee (MSE) Angullia, amassed a fortune by trading in spices, sugar, timber, pins and cutlery with countries in the region. By 1900, MSE Angullia had become a successful and prominent figure in the local Indian Muslim community. They used the wealth to construct a mosque for the Indian Muslim community in Singapore. On 23 April 1890 they acquired the land for the mosque and the first Angullia mosque was built before 1892.<sup>94</sup> On his death in 1904 Mohammed left 34 pieces of property, some included plantations in Singapore and India, to the Wakf Am which was a charitable trust, and from this two additional mosques were constructed in 1933- one at Orchard Road and the other at Serangoon road.<sup>95</sup> Mr. Ahamad Mohamed Salleh Angullia was born in 1873, and received his education at Raffles Institution and the Anglo-Chinese School. He entered his father's business at an early age, and has been a partner since 1897. The firm traded as general merchants and commission and estate agents. Their trading network was expansive and included most of the Asian and southeast Asian countries and Europe and America as well. From India they imported yarns of all kinds, cotton, teas, curry stuffs, rice from Rangoon, Saigon, Bangkok, and other centres, rice ; native products from China and Japan; rough and soft goods, hardware and from Europe and America They exported tin, betel-nuts, gambier, pepper, tapioca, rubber, copra, gutta, to India, Burma, Egypt, Arabia, Syria, China, Japan, and the Netherlands Indies. The stores and godowns of the firm were located in in Robinson Road, Collyer Quay, Market Street, and Malacca Street testify at all times to the large trade done. Their branches were located in Bombay, Calcutta, Bangkok, Sama-rang, and Kobe (Japan).<sup>96</sup>

#### **4. Social Cohesion and Uplifting of the Masses**

Indians from diverse region and socio economic backgrounds migrated to Singapore, but amongst these the poorer sections of society, the labourers from south India far outnumbered other communities. According to records of the Straits Settlements of 1794 an estimated 1300 or 2000 men came annually from the Coromandel Coast<sup>97</sup> and by 1860's almost all labourers, boatmen, caulkers on board ship and in town, watermen and a large number of hawkers, traders and domestic servants are men from the Madras coast.<sup>98</sup> In 1821 the number of Indians in Singapore was 132 and by 1921 this increased substantially to 27755.. The substantial presence of the south Indian labouring class could be ascribed to the fact that were the most favoured class for menial jobs under the British for light, simple, repetitive tasks since "he was malleable, worked well under supervision and was easily manageable, accepted low wages and cost less in feeding and maintenance."<sup>99</sup>

Initial attempts at highlighting the plight of these labourers and bringing about socio economic reforms was undertaken by the Indian Association was formed in 1923. This was the first attempt at forming an organisation that would represent the Indian community in Singapore.<sup>100</sup> The members of the Indian Association belonged mainly to the English educated class and decisions were largely taken by the elite and intelligentsia.<sup>101</sup> This Associations elitist nature denied the representation of both the middle class as well as the labouring class, which proved to be a handicap in gaining popularity and appeal amongst the masses. The members avoided mingling the labouring class<sup>102</sup>, and its elitist attempts at reforms offered little aid to the suffering working class. The association made no attempt at working out a proportional representation from the different socio-economic sections of the community.<sup>103</sup> They propagated their reformist ideas mostly through the English print media which invariably had a selected readership thus restricting their reach to limited number of English educated Indians.

Arasaratnam argues that since “the educated middle class did not give the lead in these matters but went on conducting affairs in a manner largely irrelevant to the greater part of the people, then a different category of leadership had to be thrown up so that the social advancement of the people may be affected”<sup>104</sup>.

This leadership came from Thamizhavel Govindasamy Sarangapany and his supporters. Sarangapany arrived in Singapore in 1924 and secured a job as an accountant. Sarangapany was amongst the few educated Tamil Indians in Singapore and he took it upon himself to carry out social and educational reforms amongst a vast majority of Indian labour who “came from the coastal regions of South Eastern India, or the hinterland around Tanjavur, from a variety of backgrounds, including but not limited to lower-caste and ‘untouchable’ (Dalit) communities”<sup>105</sup>. He vigorously promoted Tamil literature and language in Singapore and his efforts led to the language being recognised as one of the four official languages of Singapore.

He was deeply influenced by the ‘Self Respect’ movement, founded in India by EV Ramasamy Naicker who also known as Periyar. Periyar’s visit to Singapore and Malaya was aimed at spreading the reformist ideas among the Indian immigrants of British Malaya. According to S. S. Amrith, “Periyar’s visit brought about a political awakening and enlightenment. He not just visited the capital cities of Penang and Singapore but also travelled to rubber plantations and interacted with the workers. He addressed large crowds on social and caste reforms. It sparked off the development of local Tamil movement. He acted as a stimulus to develop organisations and institutions such as Tamil Reform Association. He was the real stimulus to a number of local Tamil newspapers, which were starting to sprout up in 1930. His visit, directly or indirectly, started labour activism in Tamil workers. In 1941, strikes in rubber plantations spearheaded by radicals were a part of the Tamil movement.”<sup>106</sup>

With an aim to rid people of superstition, caste system and addiction of toddy, and promoting Civil Marriages which would allow Hindus to get

married without the necessity of a Brahmin priest, he set up the Tamil Reform Association in 1930. Sarangapany along with like-minded individuals, such as A.C. Suppiah, spread reformist ideas by importing Naicker’s publications and distributing them in Singapore.<sup>107</sup> The association undertook numerous activities for the uplift and betterment of the Tamil Indians such as running a library, setting aside financial contributions for the needy, and organising education and outreach programmes. The Association took on hands on activity to ensure the success of the Self Respect Movement. On pay days they would join hands with the family members of labourers in picketing toddy shops to prevent labours from wasting their salary. They ensured that the Chinese coffee shops along Serangoon road would not bar untouchables from entering their Cafes or discriminate by serving them in tins instead of glasses, which was much against the instructions of the high caste Hindus given to the owners of the coffee shops. They also threatened legal action against those who would discriminate against those discriminating against the lower castes.<sup>108</sup>

The Tamil Reform Association also busied itself with fostering education among the children of labourers and fostering Tamil education successfully founding and managing schools.<sup>109</sup> An umbrella body, the Tamil Education Society, was formed which unified poorly run Tamil schools and provided funding for the teaching of Tamil at primary and secondary levels. He also made sure that adequate government grants were given to cover the operational costs of these Tamil-language schools. Tamil Reform Association took the initiative to start up Tamil schools so that children would have the opportunity to study Tamil as well, It also ran adult classes and lectures for labourers, promoting basic literacy and social awareness.<sup>110</sup> At one point in time there were ten Tamil schools such as Kalaimagal Tamil School, Vasuki Tamil School and Valluvar Tamil School, distributed across the island and schools were to be seen wherever Tamils could be found.<sup>111</sup>

The newspaper and the Tamil Reform Association also made efforts in the field of labour rights of

Tamil community. In the interest of representing the Tamil community, Malayan Self-Respecters took a firm stance on the issue of labour rights. The TRA initiated a sub-committee with labourers to discuss their concerns<sup>112</sup> due to mounting labour grievances and a “Murasu editorial in 1938 recommended that the only way to stop labour strikes was to take heed of labourers’ needs well in advance, instead of scampering to rectify problems after they had arisen.”<sup>113</sup>

Sarangany’s movement was not an elitist as he used Tamil language in his publications and afforded easy accessibility of these to the poorer classes as well. Through his writings and publications he spread his message amongst different strata of society- the labouring class, the educated Tamils as well non Tamil Indians <sup>114</sup> He was the editor of the weekly magazine called Munntram (meaning Progress) and editor of Seerthiratham (meaning Reform) a monthly magazine. In addition to this in 1935 he began a weekly magazine Tamil Murasu. These magazines “expounded the values of the Dravidian movement and aimed at encouraging the uplift of the Tamil community.”<sup>115</sup> His entry into Tamil journalism is a landmark as it broke the monopoly of Brahmins in the field of journalism and also addressed a different set up issues and ideologies in Singapore.<sup>116</sup> In 1935 with the pricing of the Tamil Murasu newspaper at a mere 1 cent, he ensured that it was easily accessible to the Tamil labourers who would be motivated through the articles to join the Malayan Self Respect Movement. Additionally the Indian Daily Mail was published in English from 1940 aimed at spreading spread the message and ideology of the self respect movement amongst the non-Tamil populations as well.<sup>117</sup>

Other key contributions by him included efforts that resulted in Tamil being named one of Singapore’s four official languages. To unify all the Indian immigrants, he started a yearly gathering called Thamizhar Thirunal to showcase his love of the Tamil language, its arts and its rich culture<sup>118</sup>. The event saw some renowned poets from Tamil Nadu, India, being brought in for discourses and seminars while also recognising upcoming local

talents in literature. The expenses of these vents were financed by him personally. To promote Tamil literature and language he also founded a youth organisation known as Manavar Mani Mandram, which motivated Tamil students to write poems, essays and short stories.<sup>119</sup>

In 1957, after attaining Singapore citizenship he encouraged other Indian immigrants to apply for citizenship. He personally filled up the necessary application forms and saw to it that Indian immigrants had a stake in nation building. In 1955 he was awarded the title ‘Thamizhavel’ for his enormous contributions to Tamil literature, followed by other awards such as the Thamizh Kavalur in 1963 and Muthamizh Kavalur in 1966.<sup>120</sup>

## 5. Jamiyah- A Humanitarian Religion

“Jamiyah is one of the oldest and forward-looking Muslim organizations in Singapore, well-known locally and internationally for its multifarious services and activities for the benefit of the community encompassing da’wah, education, welfare and social services.” (His Excellency Mohammad Al Abdullah Al Hamdan Ambassador, Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Singapore Source: 65th Anniversary cum Opening of Building Extension -1997)<sup>121</sup>

The Jamiyah, earlier known as All Malaya Muslim Missionary, was established in Singapore by Muhammad Abdul Aleem Siddiqi (3 April 1892 – 22 August 1954) who was an Islamic scholar from Meerut, India. He was taught by Ahmad Raza Khan. In 1913 he graduated in Theology and went on to pursue the study of modern subjects and law at the Divisional College in Meerut. Under his mentor Hazrat Maulana Shah Ahmad Raza Khan Bareilly he acquired knowledge of Quranic rules, Hadith, Tawassufa nd the four Islamic laws in Mecca and Medina. His utilised his knowledge of medicine in his humanitarian missions in many countries. He visited Singapore in 1930 and in 1932 he established the All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society, now known as Jamiyah. He delivered numerous lectures spreading the message of the beauty of Islam and attracted many people to Islam. He was driven by a zeal of service to the community

and providing welfare services to the less privileged and disadvantaged of all races and faiths.<sup>122</sup> During the 1950s” the Jamiyah became one of the leading religious bodies in Singapore and Malaya which provided welfare, pilgrimage (hajj) and religious guidance services.”<sup>123</sup>

“Over the decades, Jamiyah has expanded with several enhanced programmes and services to address the ever-changing needs of the community. As such, Jamiyah’s history is marked with achievements in services including welfare homes, education centres, and welfare services.”<sup>124</sup> Jamiyah Education Centre (JEC) is one of the organization’s pioneering project since 1970s. JEC provides Islamic education to all Muslims in Singapore ranging from pre-schoolers to adults.<sup>125</sup>

Jamiyah Singapore is recognized both locally and internationally for its community service involvement and leadership.

“Jamiyah opens its welfare services to non-Muslims. This enlightened approach helps our different communities to integrate. By reaching out to the other races in a spirit of service, cooperation and partnership, Jamiyah makes a valuable contribution to strengthening the broader Singaporean community.” (The Honorable Lee Hsien Loong Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore Source: 65th Anniversary cum Opening of Building Extension -1997) <sup>126</sup>

His interest in fostering greater understanding amongst various faiths and spreading the message of peace in Singapore were the driving factors behind the establishment of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO). He is also often referred to as the Roving Ambassador of Peace as he brought together people of different races Malays, Indians, Arabs, Bugis, Javanese, Bengalis and Chinese - to form Jamiyah Singapore. These pioneers also led the way to establish the Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore and Johore in 1949 with the support of the non-Muslim religious leaders.<sup>127</sup> The Inter Religious Organisation was inaugurated on 18 March 1949 at Victoria Memorial Hall, Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddique said, “As far as the common evils

and accepted moral principles were concerned, no religion could have any difference, and in the spirit of tolerance and sympathy and the desire to establish peace, all of them were as one. The task of the religious leaders was to let the followers of each and every religion know the teachings of other religions, so that a spirit of fellowship could work together to spread the accepted moral principles and to fight the common evils.”<sup>128</sup>

“During his visits to various parts of the world he urged Muslims to build orphanages for the helpless youths, infirmaries for the destitute, hospitals for the suffering, spiritual assemblies for spiritual discipline, libraries for the preservation of the Islamic traditions and intellectual heritage, several masjids, organizations of Ulemas for the coordination of Islamic forces, Muslim youth Brigade & Muslims scouts for the physical and moral discipline of the youth. He also encouraged the publication of several magazines such as Muslims Digest and the Ramadaan Annual (South Africa), The real Islam (Singapore) and the Prophets Birthday Annual (Mauritius). He himself compiled his missionary works in terms of books or articles under the following titles – History of the Codification of Islamic Law, The Universal Teacher, The Islamic Ideal, Quest for True Happiness, The Meaning of Worship.”<sup>129</sup>

“Jamiyah’s show of kindness and compassion to the less fortunate is well known among Singaporeans and others in the region. Its work has been to help children in need of care, assist recovering drug addicts, help families in need, as well as care for senior citizens. Jamiyah is also known for these beyond our geographical boundaries...” (His Excellency S. R. Nathan President, Republic of Singapore Source: 75th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine of Jamiyah -2007)<sup>130</sup> Personal charisma, scholarship in religious areas, interfaith dialogue and humanistic approach paved the way for establishing long lasting support base for Jamiyah Singapore.<sup>131</sup>

The Indian diaspora in Singapore included a mix of people from different regions of India who came as convicts, labourers, shopkeepers, traders, merchants, sepoys, policemen and religious and social reformers.

They were key components in the economic, social, recreational and religious aspects of 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Singapore. The relation between the migrants from India and Singapore was mutually beneficial- while Singapore provided many Indian immigrants prospects of a better life and living conditions and fertile ground for propagation of Indian nationalist ideals, Singapore too benefitted from the contribution of labourers, merchants and wealthy traders during its transformation into a major trade entrepot and a highly developed market economy. In the post-Independence era of Singapore second generation Indians occupied important positions and this signalled a fusion of the Indian diaspora with social, political and economic dimensions of Singapore. For instance- Devan Nair Chengara Veetil was the third President of Singapore, (came to Singapore at the age of 10 years); Choor Singh Sidhu served as a Judge of the Supreme Court (came to Singapore at the age of four years); Kishor Mahubhani was the first Singaporean President of the United Nations Security Council (Singaporean of Indian Sindhi decent); and Shunmugam Jayakumar served as Deputy Prime Minister from 2004 to 2009, Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1994 to 2004, Minister for Home Affairs from 1988 to 1994, Minister for Law from 1988 to 2008, and Minister for Labour from 1984 to 1985. He was a member of parliament (MP) for the constituency of Bedok ( has Indian Tamil ancestry).<sup>132</sup>

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