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The Long History of Little India

By Asif R. Chowdhury

During my many business trips to Singapore, before I started my expatriate life here, this beautifully manicured city-state always somehow reminded me of Disneyland. Every aspect of the city seemed to be immaculately designed; each tree, perfectly trimmed, planted at the right place; each flower bed exactly where it should be, everything neat, clean, and properly maintained; with people queuing up at their local favorite restaurants for lunch or dinner. The only thing that seemed to be missing were the rides. For some of us, who have moved to Singapore from countries with relatively higher degrees of law and order, Singapore feels like a perfect Southeast Asian sanctuary, perhaps even safer, surrounded by the other much-less-orderly, and

a little more chaotic, developing nations. For people who have moved from these surrounding countries, Singapore can simply seem like a paradise.

But after a while, even this pristine paradise can get somewhat monotonous and may seem a little boring at times. However, there is one area in Singapore which can provide its residents and visitors a sometimes much-needed dosage of chaos in this otherwise orderly city: Little India. It is like no other place on the island. Compared to other parts of this city-state, general law and order seem to be somewhat suspended in this noisy, colorful and crowded district with its array of shops and sea of people everywhere, a few choosing to

walk in the middle of the street for no obvious reason, many crossing them at will and at odd locations, seemingly oblivious of on-going traffic even in the main thoroughfares. The prominent Singaporean pedestrian crossings and their orderly use seem to have all but disappeared in the relative chaos of the place. From early morning to late into the night, shopkeepers and street hawkers sell all kinds of desi products, from clothes to spices to food to fruits, in the small shops located in the colorful and the well-preserved shophouse architecture from Singapore's yesteryears. The bright and colorful sights, insistent multi-decibel sounds, along with the aromatic and savory smell of all kinds of local delicacies of this vibrant district can certainly

provide an adrenaline rush for the senses. When visiting Little India, it is easy to forget that one is still in Singapore; one can even mistakenly think that one has been magically transported to some city in the Indian subcontinent.

The history of Little India dates back a couple of centuries to the founding of the Straits Settlement by Sir Stamford Raffles. In the course of its development through its long history, the area had initially served as a lime pit, housed brick-building facilities which helped facilitate much new construction in the new settlement, followed by a place for raising and rearing cattle, a sanctuary for water buffaloes (which was once used as a workhorse for local transportation), before finally transforming into a center of trade and commerce. During most of its existence, Little India was known as Serangoon, named after the first major thoroughfare, Serangoon Road, built around the year 1828, to connect the seaport to the interior areas of the island. It used to be a simple dirt road back then.

Originally, the place didn't have a predominantly Indian settlement. In fact, there was a significant Chinese and Malay presence in the Serangoon area at the beginning. Interestingly, unlike Chinatown or Arab Street, it wasn't even a part of the Jackson Plan, which was the very first urban planning of Singapore. The plan allocated different quarters of the city for the Chinese, Arab and Indian ethnic groups. In fact, today's Chinatown and Kampong Glam, or the area of Arab Street, are offspring of the Jackson Plan. Originally, the plan for settlement for most of the Indian population was down by the Singapore River in the Chulia Kampong area. Known at the time as the Indian Village, it is the location of the present day Chulia Street, off Raffles Place and Boat Quay. Decades later, the area would

eventually run out of capacity and the Indian community would slowly start moving towards the Serangoon area, one of the many reasons as to why the Indian population started to take a strong foothold there.



With the major road going through Serangoon, two major industries, lime pits and brick kilns, started to operate as early as the 1820s to help with early building construction. Over the next few years, the area began to transform as a major business district, primarily trading cattle, attracting local Malays, Chinese, and Indian migrants, as well migrants from neighboring countries. These communities were also drawn into the larger Serangoon area, most likely due to the presence of the waterways of the Kallang River and the Rochor Canal, which also helped to facilitate transportation of goods. As a result, many small villages, known as kampong in Malay, started to spring up in Serangoon. The Chinese, who were mainly farmers and worked in the local plantations, started to congregate around Balestier Road. When the Race Course was completed in the 1840s, it started to attract the local European community to the area, as well.

Any discussion regarding the history of how Little India became an enclave for the Indian community will be incomplete

without understanding the history of the Indian diaspora, which dates back to the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 to establish the Straits Settlement. A Tamil civil servant named Naraina Pillai accompanied him here from India.

Impressed by Sir Raffles' vision of Singapore, Pillai decided to settle down here and is considered one of the key Indian members and pioneering leaders of the local community. He served as the Chief Clerk of the Colonial Treasury and later became the first Indian brick-business owner and contractor. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the British began to bring Indians into the island to work as a sepoy or infantryman, clerks, and labors to help build the island. Around 1825, they also started to bring Indian convicts to help with the accelerated growth of the Straits Settlement. These Indian convicts played an important role in the early development of Singapore as they helped build key infrastructure, including roads, bridges and buildings. In fact, they are the ones who later helped transform Serangoon Road from a dirt road to a paved thoroughfare. Tamil traders from southern India and Sri Lanka also started to come to Singapore. During the following decades the Indian population started to grow as more immigrants from the subcontinent migrated to Singapore looking for a better future, which not

only included Tamils, but also Bengalis, Parsees, and Sindhis, among others.

Having served their purpose of helping with the construction of infrastructure in Singapore, the lime pits and brick kilns were eventually shut down in the 1860s. The area became a perfect place to raise cattle with the abundance of grass and water. The Rocher Canal also served as a bathing area for the water buffaloes. The cattle industry attracted even more Indians, especially from the Northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, due to their higher skills in working as herdsman. It was common to find Bengali and Tamil migrants working as milkmen traveling the area with their goats and cows, providing fresh milk and fresh yogurt to the neighborhood. Over the next few decades, other business activities started to spring up in the area as well, such as rattan works, sesame oil presses, pineapple preserving factories and wheat grinding facilities. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were more than 16,000 Indians living in Singapore, which represented about 9% of the overall population, interestingly very similar to the current percentage.

However, during most of the nineteenth century, Serangoon still wasn't identified by any particular cultural group. But by the end of the century, some key factors increased the presence of the Indian people in the area. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Indian population had started to gain a stronger foothold in the country, and during the 1870s and the following decades, there was an increasing business ownership in the Serangoon area by the Indian diaspora. The increase in concentration of the population in the area created an increased need for ethnic goods and services. Restaurants, tailors, money lenders, goldsmiths, clothing stores, stores selling

Indian spices and ingredients – all catering to the growing Indian population – started to flourish. Additionally, the municipality employed a significant number of Indian migrants during the early part of century. From the 1920s, the colonial government started constructing terrace houses, known as Municipal Quarters and Coolie Lanes, in the Serangoon area to accommodate them. Some



of these quarters still exist today in their original form along Hindoo Road. By the turn of the twentieth century, in about a hundred years' time since it was first established, Serangoon was culturally and ethnically identified with the Indian population of Singapore.

Like other parts of Singapore, the Serangoon area also faced its own share of casualties during the Second World War as it became one of the targets for Japanese bombers. Many of the local buildings and landmarks were damaged or destroyed. Even the local hospital (Kandang Kerbau Hospital) was bombed. The Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, where hundreds of local folks took shelter, was one of the few landmarks that managed to survive. In 1942, the Japanese took control of Singapore from the British. It is widely believed that the conquering "Tiger of Malaya," General Yamashita himself, passed

through Serangoon Road. During the initial months of the Japanese Occupation, New World Park in Serangoon was one of the 28 sites used as a mass-screening center for the Dai Kensho (Japanese for "great inspection") operation to remove anti-Japanese elements within the local Chinese population, known as the Sook Ching (Mandarin for "cleansing through purging") massacre.

The war also transformed the socio-economic landscape of the Serangoon area. During war times, many Indian shop owners fled the island and went back to India. They either sold or gave away their businesses to their workers. As a result, some of the workers moved up the social ladder in the post-war period.

After Singapore gained its independence in 1965, there was a consolidated campaign and effort to clean up and renew the city. Many residents in the Serangoon area had been living in dark, cramped and unhygienic conditions. By the mid-1970s, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) had come with a plan to uplift the Serangoon area, which helped shape the area into what we see and experience today. The preserved shophouses in Little India represent the typical architecture built between 1840 and 1960, not only in Singapore,

but in many Southeast Asian cities during the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. These are typically two to three stories buildings, the facades featuring local cultural décor and color with their famous “five-foot ways,” a covered walkway which is part of the building, providing pedestrians shelter from the elements. One of the key landmarks of Little India is the Tekka Market, very popular today among all ethnic groups and expats living in Singapore for its variety of shops selling a wide range of fish, meat, fruits and vegetables. It was originally built in 1915 to house the retailers and hawkers to avoid cluttering the main streets. In the early 1980s, the Tekka Market was relocated to a new and improved facility. The current Tekka Market was built across the road from the old facility in 1981. A former watchman of the Market named S. Rasoo remembers the place fondly saying that it was a “lively, bustling place with Indian women coming up in their colorful saris, their hair done up in buns or single plaits decorated with fragrant flowers, jostling against the pig-tailed houseboys that served the Europeans and wealthy Asians. The noise was deafening, the atmosphere reverberating with the sound of raised voices bargaining over fresh fish, meats, vegetable and fruits.” The market is still as colorful, vibrant, and lively today as it was back then. Tekka Market’s famous wet market has been featured in international travel shows.



Naming the area “Little India” is a relatively recent phenomenon. The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board first used the name in reference to the Serangoon area during 1979-1980. Today, Little India spans about 32 acres nestled inside the area marked by Sungei Road, Race Course Road and Jalan

Basar. The original Serangoon Road still remains as one of the main thoroughfares of the city.

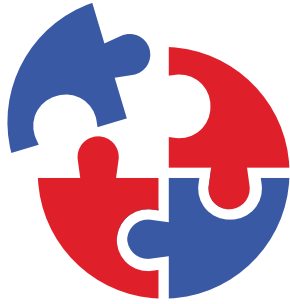
Today, Little India offers something for everyone, from local Indians to expatriates to tourists alike. It provides a glimpse of a truly local Singaporean culture and history, very different from the

well-advertised glitz of the modern buildings and architecture that the city-state is known for. It is a perfect place to buy local Indian goods for very reasonable prices, or try some authentic Indian food while soaking in the rich culture and long past of this historical precinct of Singapore.



Asif is part of the executive management team of a global semiconductor company and has written for various magazines and trade journals. Asif spent four years as an expatriate in Tokyo, Japan, and three years in Seoul, South Korea, which led him to travel extensively in those countries and across the region. He currently lives in Singapore with his wife and son, while his daughter is working in his home state of Texas.

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