



INDIAN  
HERITAGE  
CENTRE

இந்திய  
மரபுடைமை  
நிலையம்



FROM THE  
**Coromandel Coast**  
TO THE **Straits**

REVISITING OUR TAMIL HERITAGE

23 Nov 2019–  
30 Jun 2020

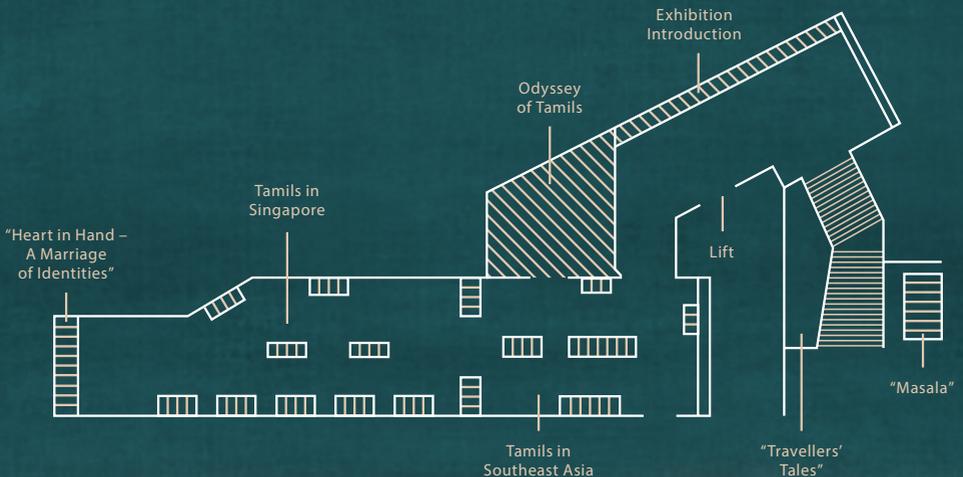
Special Exhibition Gallery,  
Level 2

# Introduction

This year marks 200 years of the uninterrupted presence of Tamils in Singapore. However, Tamil connections with Singapore can be traced to the 11th–13th centuries CE based on recent interpretations of the Singapore Stone. From the Coromandel Coast to the Straits: Revisiting Our Tamil Heritage presents a compendium of narratives that typify the experiences of Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia and Singapore from pre-modern to contemporary times.

Among the South Asian languages, Tamil is perhaps the only example of a very ancient language that still survives as the mother tongue of millions of speakers in south India, Sri Lanka, and of diasporas in many parts of the world. Singapore's Tamil community is distinct as they have adapted and integrated with local cultures. Primarily born out of the colonial enterprise, the Tamil community is today a vibrant part of Singapore's multi-ethnic fabric.

This exhibition is curated in two parts. Part 1 enumerates the odyssey of pre-modern Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia, and Part 2 offers glimpses of lesser known 19th century pioneers and some of the oldest Tamil families in Singapore. In addition to loans from international museums, for the first time, digital showcases featuring holograms of artefacts in the collection of other museums and institutions are also displayed in this exhibition.





DOCUMENTARY FILM

## Odyssey of Tamils

Odyssey of Tamils, a specially commissioned documentary film, dwells on the pre-modern connections between Tamil regions, Southeast Asian polities and Singapura. Tracing rare evidence of Tamil connections at archaeological sites, museums, and other institutions, this film presents the rich legacy of Tamil heritage in the region in contemporary times. It shows Singapore's contemporary Tamils visiting sites of historical importance, reminding us that our heritage is all around us, waiting to be re-discovered.



# Tamils in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia

Part 1 situates the presence and activities of pre-modern Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia, reminding us that Tamils have had long and continuous links with the region.

This section of the exhibition relies on historical evidence in the form of archaeological, epigraphic, cartographic, artistic and literary evidence to showcase this narrative. This exhibition is also a commentary on the challenge presented to a 21st century museum in curating an exhibition reliant on collections scattered across the world as a result of the region's colonial past.



3D models of fragments of the Singapore Stone  
11th–13th centuries CE  
Digitally recreated by Indian Heritage Centre  
and Heritage Conservation Centre



Copperplate grant containing an  
edict issued by Rajaraja Chola I  
1006 CE

Collection of Leiden University Library,  
Digitally recreated by Indian Heritage Centre  
and Heritage Conservation Centre



Ship's bell, with inscription in Tamil  
which may be translated into English as:  
"Bell of the Ship Mohideen Bakhsh"

17th–18th century  
Made in Tamil Nadu  
Discovered in New Zealand.  
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand  
Te Papa Tongarewa, Bequest of  
William Colenso, 1899

Siva Nataraja  
12th century CE, Chola Period  
Tamil Nadu  
On loan from National Museum,  
New Delhi, India





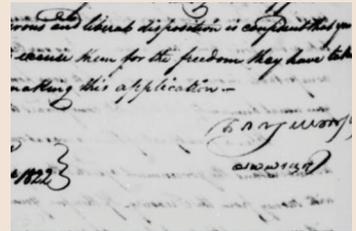
Masjid Jamae Chulia and Sri Mariamman Temple at South Bridge Road  
1860, Singapore  
Drawn by Peter Bernhard Wilhelm Heine  
On Loan from National Museum of Singapore

## PART II

# Tamils in 19th century Singapore

Tamils have been in modern Singapore from its establishment as a British trading port by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. The second part of the exhibition pursues the trajectory of Tamils in Singapore in different walks of life, presenting the picture of diverse Tamil communities in Singapore. In the Straits, the ethnonym Tamil was only used in the late 19th century as a result of a growing consciousness of sub-ethnic identities among the diaspora. Kling and Chulia were demonyms that had long been used to refer to Tamils in the region. The term Chulia referred to Tamil Muslim merchants from the Coromandel region. The *Sejarah Melayu* is the earliest literary work to cite the term Keling or Kling in the context of Singapore while referring to a famous kingdom that had long-established commercial, political, and marital alliances with the Malay Archipelago. As a region, Kling denoted not just Kalinga but the southeastern Coromandel Coast. By the second half of the 19th century, the term Kling had acquired an opprobrious status. The phrase “Natives of the Coromandel Coast” was also used often in early Straits Settlements records when referring to Tamils.

Tamils in 19th century Singapore occupied diverse occupational profiles. They were an influential community of merchants and private financiers; the greater part of labour who constructed much of the public buildings and infrastructure; and formed part of the militia, surveyors, police personnel, and other colonial personnel. The stories of many 19th century Tamil individuals have remained obscure and neglected. By relooking at colonial records and by tracing the genealogy of some of the oldest Singaporean Tamil families we present the little-known stories of early Tamils in Singapore.



A petition submitted by Naraina Pillai  
October 1822, Singapore  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



A Tamil brick maker's mould  
19th century, Singapore  
On loan from National Museum of Singapore

# Artist Installations

## Heart in Hand—A Marriage of Identities

Anurendra Jegadeva

Commissioned by Indian Heritage Centre and partially supported by Anurendra Jegadeva

The story of the female Tamil migrant is often shrouded in anonymity. Little is known of the life of early Tamil migrants to Singapore and Malaya; the narrative remains predominantly male. In response to this gender-imbalance in details of the past, Anurendra Jegadeva explores the journey of a contemporary diasporic Tamil girl. Using the thali, a symbol of the matrimonial bond, Anurendra explores a female migrant's ideas of culture and place.



## Masala

Kumari Nahappan

Commissioned by Indian Heritage Centre

Singaporean artist Kumari's tryst with spice has been ongoing for several decades. In Masala, she creates a spice garden, celebrating the historical importance of spice in the trade networks between the Tamil coast and Southeast Asia, as well as the centrality of spice in Tamil cuisine. The word masala, used widely among Indian communities, refers to a blend of spices such as cardamom, coriander, mace, pepper, nutmeg, clove, fennel and cumin.



## Traveller's Tales

Lavanya Mani

Commissioned by Indian Heritage Centre

In Traveller's Tales, Lavanya Mani recreates the magic of the coveted Indian trade cloths and fabricates her own visual narrative of the colonial interest and acquisition of trade commodities and trading ports in the Coromandel Coast. She contemplates on the fact that early travellers to the East were very influential in disseminating information about the new and unknown lands, perpetuating stereotypes on the marvels and wonders of the East.

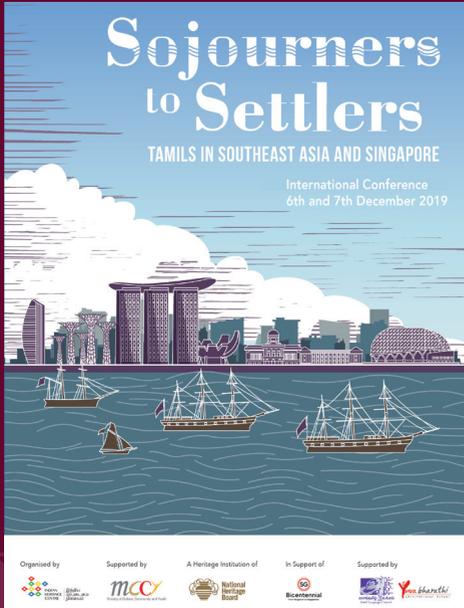


# Exhibition Programmes

## CONFERENCE

Sojourners to Settlers—Tamil in  
Southeast Asia and Singapore  
International Conference

To register for the conference please visit:  
[indianheritagecentre.peatix.com](http://indianheritagecentre.peatix.com)



6th December 2019 | 6pm–8.30pm  
Indian Heritage Centre, Activity Room, Level 2

7th December 2019 | 9.30am–7.30pm  
Asian Civilisations Museum, River Room  
1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555

Sojourners to Settlers Tamil Symposium  
April 2020 | 10am–5pm  
Indian Heritage Centre, Activity Room, Level 2

Singapore's connections with South India date long before 1819. Held in the year commemorating Singapore's bicentennial, the conference pursues a line of enquiry going beyond the 200-year mark in search of interactions between Tamils and Southeast Asian societies from pre-modern times. Keynote speakers at this conference will offer perspectives on pre-modern Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia, and their associations with Singapura by relooking at evidence such as the Singapore Stone, among others. Little is known about Tamils in 19th century Singapore and the pivotal role they played in colonial society. Speakers at the conference will share primary research-based insights on diverse Tamil communities present in early Singapore. Lastly, what are some issues in navigating Tamil identity in Singapore? A concluding discussion at the conference will address these questions.

## CRAFT DEMONSTRATIONS

Kala Sangam

Register for workshops at  
[indianheritagecentre.peatix.com](http://indianheritagecentre.peatix.com)

Join us for Kala Sangam, a collaborative initiative of the Indian Heritage Centre and the High Commission of India in Singapore, which brings craftspeople from the Indian subcontinent to IHC for live demonstrations of their crafts. In conjunction with the special exhibition, crafts from the Coromandel region will be showcased at IHC. Kala Sangam aims to promote this important aspect of Singapore's Indian community's intangible cultural heritage to share this rich heritage, and pass it down through the generations.



## THE STORY OF MY FAMILY

Lecture Series

Last Friday of the Month

January–May 2020 | 6pm–7.30pm

Event ends with a gallery visit

Register at [indianheritagecentre.peatix.com](http://indianheritagecentre.peatix.com)

### We Have Contributed for 150 Years

Dato Paul Supramaniam will share the history and legacy of his family, starting with his relative, Arumugam Annamalai Pillai, who arrived from Jaffna to Singapore in 1875.

### The Dairy King

P Sivaraman, the descendant of Koona Vayloo Pillay and Alamayloo, will recount his family's arrival and eventual establishment in Singapore.

### Accounting for Generations

Lakshmanan Subbiah, community historian and fourth-generation Chettiar, will speak about his family's sojourning, settling and life on Market Street.

### My Food Heritage

Indra Iswaran will narrate the story of her grandparents Meenachi and Eliyathamby, who came from Jaffna in the 1890s, and how Meenachi's love for food has transcended the following generations.

### He Ran a Fleet of Horse Carriages

Join the descendants of Sangoo Thevar to discover his legacy and genealogy.

## JOIN THE EXPERTS

Gallery Visits

Special guided tours of the exhibition with curator Nalina Gopal and art historian Sureshkumar Muthukumar will provide an in-depth exploration of the fascinating history of Tamils in Southeast Asia and Singapore.

Join our curator for a tour:

10 Jan 2020, and 10 April 2020

Join art historian Sureshkumar Muthukumar:

11 April 2020



Sangoo Thevar, who arrived in Singapore in the 1850s, riding a gharri or horse carriage as identified by Pushpa Ramanujan  
Late 19th century, Singapore  
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore

## ORGANISED BY



## SUPPORTED BY



## A HERITAGE INSTITUTION OF



## IN SUPPORT OF



## A COORDINATES PROJECT OF

22 Nov 2019 – 22 Mar 2020  
**SINGAPORE  
BIENNALE  
2019**

## WITH SUPPORT FROM



High Commission of India  
Singapore

Anurendra Jegadeva

## GUIDED TOURS SUPPORTED BY



Mandarin Guides

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Tamil Nadu State Archives

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Family of Sangoo Thevar  
Indra Iswaran ES Muthu  
and Dr Lavan Iswaran  
J Raja Mohamad  
Janamitra Devan  
Kanan Bala and  
Sarojani Pakirisamy  
Malai Arasi d/o Srinivasan  
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PGP Ramakrishnan and  
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R Gangatharan Davar  
Rajam Sarangapany  
Rengasamy Sridharan  
P Sivaraman  
Sureshkumar Muthukumar  
Susheela Sundram Croft  
Vasantha Kumari Magadevan  
Vemala Rajamanickam  
Zaibun Siraj

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T Raja Segar  
P Sivaraman  
Lakshmanan Subbiah  
Dato Paul Supramaniam  
A Veeramani

## ABOUT INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), under the management of the National Heritage Board and with support from the Indian community, traces the history of the Indian and South Asian communities in the Southeast Asian region. The four-storey IHC building is an iconic, unique and sustainable building that blends both traditional Indian as well as modern architectural elements.

The architectural design for the façade of IHC is inspired by the “baoli” (or Indian stepwell), and seeks to create an urban forum for the celebration and appreciation of Indian culture. It houses five permanent galleries, small scale museum facilities, a museum shop as well as programming and activity spaces.

## CONTACT US

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[www.indianheritage.org.sg](http://www.indianheritage.org.sg)

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## FROM TEMASEK TO SINGAPORE

Continue your exploration of Singapore's Bicentennial at these special exhibitions presented by the Heritage Institutions!

### MALAY HERITAGE CENTRE

Seekor Singa, Seorang Putera dan Sebingkai Cermin: Reflecting and Refracting Singapura  
12 October 2019–21 June 2020  
[www.malayheritage.org.sg](http://www.malayheritage.org.sg)

### SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

From Brush to Lens: Early Chinese Photography Studios in Singapore  
2 November 2019–3 May 2020  
[www.sysnmh.org.sg](http://www.sysnmh.org.sg)

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## VISITOR INFORMATION

### Address

5 Campbell Lane  
Singapore 209924

### Opening Hours\*

Tuesdays to Thursdays: 10am to 7pm

Fridays to Saturdays: 10am to 8pm

Sundays & Public Holidays: 10am to 4pm

Closed on Mondays

\* Last admission to the galleries  
is half an hour before closing

### Guided Tours

Join our docents and enjoy guided tours of

From the Coromandel Coast to the Straits:

Revisiting Our Tamil Heritage

### English Tours\*

Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday: 11am

### Tamil Tours\*

1st Saturday of every month: 4pm

\* January 2020 onwards

