

Decline of pan-indian identity essay

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WalesAbstractThis paper explores the rise and fall of pan-Indianism as the dominant identity narrative amongst the Indian diaspora in Singapore in the mid twentieth century, and its replacement with a normative Indian identity based primarily on Tamil culture.

It will analyse some of the reasons why a Tamil cultural separatism came to dominate negotiations of ethnic identity in early post-war Singapore. This will include an examination of colonial ethnographic representations, the effects of demographic trends in Indian migration to Malaya during the colonial period, transnational political linkages between Singapore and India, and the effects of the Japanese occupation on Indian identity during World War II.

The paper will also focus on the growth of the Tamil reform movement and the ways in which it came to shape the framing of Tamil ethnic identity in Singapore. IntroductionToday, every Singaporean of a certain age has his or her race recorded onto a nationally issued identity card. The available options for an individual's racial classification typically revolve around the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (CMIO) categories, which have been the cornerstone of Singapore's multicultural policies and the organising principle by which the Singaporean government administers and manages the island state's ethnic diversity. ¹ From ¹For an analysis of the CMIO categories in Singapore and their effects on the attempted homogenisation of 'racial' differences in Singapore, refer to B. H.

Chua, ' Culture, Multiracialism and National Identity in Singapore', in K. S. Chen (ed.), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 186–94. Since 1 January 2011, the Singapore government has

introduced double-barrelled race options for the registration of children born to parents of different 'races'. See 'Greater Flexibility with Implementation' ISSN 0085-6401 print; 1479-0270 online/12/020257-25 Ó 2012 South Asian Studies Association of Australia [http://dx.](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2012.667365)

[doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2012.667365](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2012.667365)"258SOUTH ASIADownloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012the perspective of public policy, the consolidation of minority identities streamlines the process by which certain racial integration policies can be enacted, such as the maintenance of racial quotas in public housing that are in place to prevent the development of racial enclaves. The consolidation of ethnic identities into normative categories with clearly defined cultural attributes also facilitates positive public perceptions about the enforcement of multiculturalism and minority protection.

However, the collapsing of the heterogeneity contained within these simple racial taxonomies has resulted in a gulf between the self-definitions of ethnicity that are salient in the everyday cultural lives of Singaporeans, and the wider official definitions of ethnic communities that are dictated by administrative expediency, rather than community agency. 2 Scholars have often commented that a normative identity based on Tamil culture and ethnicity is used to symbolically represent individuals falling within the wider Indian 'racial' category. This has manifested itself in many ways, including in representations of Tamils in official multiculturalism campaigns and the enshrining of Tamil as one of four national languages and the 'racelanguage' of the Indian community. 3 State funding for a Tamil-language

newspaper, radio station and television channel is also used to demonstrate that all the 'races' in Singapore receive equal levels of patronage from the government. There are many reasons why the Tamil language and Tamil cultural symbols are utilised as signifiers for the wider Indian community.

The most commonly cited rationale is the relative numerical superiority of the Tamil community amongst Indians in Singapore for most of the island's modern history. 4 of Double-Barreled Race Option from 1st January 2011', Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (29 Dec. 2010) [http://www.ica.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid¼12443, accessed 15 Mar. 2011].

2This is not to say that official racial definitions have not had an impact upon ethnic groups in Singapore— they have, especially in terms of governing identity relations between majority and minority groups. 3Chua, 'Culture, Multiracialism and National Identity in Singapore', p. 190. 4Except for a brief period in the early nineteenth century, when penal transportation resulted in a more even distribution of Indians from various parts of India, Tamils have been the single largest ethnic group within the Indian community in Singapore, at one point making up 86.

6 percent of the total Indian population. See J. F. A. McNair, *Prisoners Their Own Warders: A Record of the Convict Prison at Singapore in the Straits Settlements* (Westminster: A. Constable and Co., 1899), pp.

88, 122; and E. M. Mereweather, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlement 1891* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1892), p. 46. In 2010, Tamil speakers made up around 54.

2 percent of the entire resident Indian community and still form an ethnolinguistic majority despite a dramatic decline in their numbers due to the recent growth of other Indian ethnic groups through immigration. See 'Census of Population 2010 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion' (Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010), p. 31 [<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010sr1/cop2010sr1.pdf>, accessed 28 Feb. 2012].

TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE²⁵⁹ Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012 Certainly, one of the determining factors for the official decision to continue privileging the Tamil language after independence was the close links between the People's Action Party and one of their crucial support bases, Tamil union leaders and workers as well as Tamil reformers.⁵ Many of these individuals were influenced by Dravidian ideology and the Tamil revivalist movement, and some scholars have suggested that being important opinion leaders in the Tamil electorate, their political leverage enabled policy concessions to be made on their behalf with regard to the Tamil language.⁶ The history of Tamil cultural identity in Singapore, however, cannot be reduced to a linear account of majoritarian impulses manifesting themselves in exclusionary identity politics. Tamil cultural separatism emerged as the dominant identity discourse amongst the Tamil community during the post-war period and superseded a range of other identity narratives that existed within the Indian community.

The most prominent of these was a sense of pan-Indianism that had gained ascendancy during World War II. In theory, pan-Indianism offered a means

for Indians to transcend ethno-linguistic, caste, class and regional identities to focus on membership of an imagined transnational community, defined by genealogical affiliation to the territorial boundaries of a Greater India. The social history that marks the development and promotion of an exclusionary Tamil identity by Tamil leaders in post-war Singapore, therefore, must be understood in the context of its contestation with pan-Indianism during the preceding decades and the subsequent decline of pan-Indianism as an identity narrative after the war. Below, I will briefly explore the historical context behind Tamil cultural separatism in post-war Singapore, with the aim of understanding why a pan-Indian identity failed to develop prominent symbols and institutions in Singapore. This analysis will shed light on the ways in which the Tamil diaspora has negotiated its identities in Singapore. Members of prominent Tamil social uplift organisations such as the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) and the Singapore Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (SDMK) had close links with PAP. The SDMK actively supported PAP during its 1959 election campaign.

Several members of other Tamil organisations were also members of PAP.

Interview with M. P. Samy, 18 Dec. 2011; and interview with V.

Thamizhmaraiyan, 31 Dec.

2011. Tamil was recognised by the government as an official language at the beginning of Lim Yew Hock's term in 1956. 6L.

D/O Sinasamy, 'Tamil Malar: Voice of the Tamil Community (1964-80)', unpublished dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2000, p. 14. 7The first scholar to mention the changing orientation of Tamils from pan-Indian

nationalism to a conscious sense of Tamil separatism was Sinnappah Arasaratnam. See S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 129–30."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012260SOUTH ASIARRepresentations of Tamils and ' Dravidians' in Colonial Society In order to understand the psychological basis for twentieth-century manifestations of Tamil cultural separatism and the Dravidian movement, it is crucial to briefly explore how Tamils were represented within the system of colonial knowledge production, and how Tamil leaders responded to both –vis the other Indianspositive and negative representations of themselves vis-aof the subcontinent. While they had been treated to ethnographic investigation earlier, the Tamils came under the scrutiny of colonial ethnographers from the mid nineteenth century onward.

Decades before Tamil intellectuals such as P. Sundaram Pillai and Maraimalai Adigal would begin developing theories about the value and cultural independence of Tamil civilisation and language, European scholars were already placing Tamils within an evolving discourse of race and civilisation in India, in which northern and southern India were represented in opposition. This was at a time when, despite arguments to the contrary from prominent philologists such as Max Muller, many scholars con? ated linguistic uniqueness with racial separateness and used the evolution of languages as evidence for grand theories about the origins of races. Robert Caldwell and George Uglow Pope, in? uential missionary scholars posted to the Tamil-speaking regions of South India, wrote very positive descriptions of Tamils, their culture and language. In 1856, Caldwell published a convincing argument about the existence of a separate language family for southern

Indian languages outside of Indo-European, which he called the Dravidian, of which Tamil represented the purest in terms of its independence from northern Sanskritic influence. 8 Although this article is primarily concerned with twentieth-century movements, I have chosen the publication date of Caldwell's book as the starting point for my study to highlight the profound influence colonial ethnography has had in shaping so much of twentieth-century Dravidian ideology, particularly its early oppositionality to North Indian culture.

In his book, Caldwell not only argued for the independence of the Tamil language, but also challenged the prevailing sentiment that South Indians represented the savage pre-Aryan aboriginal populations of ancient India, which were tamed and civilised after the Aryan migrations into India from approximately 1500 BCE. Instead, Caldwell not only argued that ancient Tamil civilisation existed independently before contact with Sanskritic culture, he also stressed that it was marked by rationalism, a unique freedom from superstition and was more egalitarian on the basis that it⁸R. Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp., rev. ed. 1974), pp. 4–6, 47.

TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE²⁶¹ Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012 was inherently casteless. 9 Similarly, G. U. Pope argued that the Tamil Saiva Siddhanta religious tradition was philosophically superior to other forms of Hinduism, including the northern

Vedic tradition, in its monotheism and emphasis on personal devotion and morality.

10 Caldwell and Pope's historical narratives of Tamil culture also alluded to its moral and social decline due to its victimisation at the hands of the Tamil Brahmins, who, they claimed, were actually descended from the Aryan visitors from the north. Although it is unclear how many twentieth-century Tamil reformist leaders were directly acquainted with the works of these authors, it is evident that many of their ideas filtered down due to their adoption by later Tamil scholars, who appropriated these descriptions as a basis for establishing a new alternative foundation for Tamil identity. These scholars utilised the legitimacy that these older ideas enjoyed at the time owing to their European authorship and the scientific methodology by which they were argued. 11 One of the major reasons that Caldwell and Pope have had a profound influence on Tamil identity-shaping processes and Tamil reformers is that they were largely alone in their positive accounts of Tamil culture and the Tamil people. By and large, most colonial ethnographers painted an extremely pejorative picture. Ethnographical studies were littered with accounts of Tamils and Dravidians as being weak, having a limited intellectual capacity and being culturally deficient, as was reflected in criticisms of the architecture and folk religious traditions of South India. 12 These descriptions not only influenced British labour recruitment policies in colonies outside of India, they were also influenced by demographic trends that marked free migratory flows of immigrants into colonies such as Malaya. When in 1913 the ethnographer and census organiser, Herbert Risley, wrote that labour was 'the birthright of the pure Dravidian', South

Indian labourers, Tamils in particular, had been travelling to Malaya as indentured or free⁹ibid.

, p. 47. G.

U. Pope, *The Tiruvacagam or ' Sacred Utterances' of the Tamil Poet, Saint, and Sage, Manikka-Vacagar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), p. viii.

¹¹Elsewhere I argue that these missionaries had an acute understanding of the processes by which Indians in the nineteenth century appropriated positive ethnographic descriptions as a basis for improving their community standing through identity construction. See J. Solomon, ' Constructing the Dravidian: Missionary Representations of " Dravidian" Tamils and Tamil Culture in the Nineteenth Century', unpublished dissertation, University of New South Wales, 2009. ¹²Refer to T.

Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 50. ¹⁰"262SOUTH ASIADownloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012labourers for almost a century. ¹³ Tamil migrants into Singapore included many traders, minor business owners and government administrative assistants. Caldwell was one of the few European scholars who based his characterisations of Tamils on the entrepreneurial classes. He wrote that ' wherever money is to be made, wherever a more apathetic or a more aristocratic people is waiting to be pushed aside, thither swarm the Tamilians, the Greeks or Scotch of the east'. ¹⁴ However, unlike their Indian counterparts in Malaya, the entrepreneurial and administrative Tamil classes in Singapore were numerically dwarfed by the vast majority of

Tamil menial workers and labourers involved in municipal authorities and public works, and in plantation labour.

This did not go unnoticed in colonial Singaporean society, which was highly stratified along ethnic lines. Tamil immigrants in Singapore had a high propensity for menial labour occupations and this informed a prevailing belief that Tamils were highly suited to such tasks by virtue of their inferior racial characteristics. ¹⁵ The large number of Tamil immigrants involved in menial labour was the result of a number of factors, including the lower costs associated with recruiting labour near the eastern portcities of the Madras Presidency, such as Nagapattinam on the Coromandel Coast. ¹⁶ Another reason was that the Kangany system of labour recruitment was concentrated in the Tamil-speaking regions of the Madras Presidency.

¹⁷ Geographical proximity and the existence of a sizeable Tamil labouring population in Singapore also served as a strong pull factor for the large segment of Tamil labourers who made the journey to Singapore independently. ¹³H. Risley, *The People of India* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, rev. ed. 1999), p. 45. Indentured and free labourers from the Madras Presidency began entering settlements such as Singapore in the 1830s. Most of these immigrants were low-caste Tamils.

See M. C. Yong and V.

V. B. Rao, *Singapore–India Relations: A Primer* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1995), p. 7.

14Caldwell, A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages, pp. 6–7. 15Commenting on post-war Singaporean society, James Furnival wrote that ‘ in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines. . . there is as it were a caste system, but without the religious basis that incorporates caste in social life in India’. See J.

S. Furnivall, Colonial Policy and Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 304.

16These ports included Tuticorin, Negapatam (Nagapattinam), Karikal, Madras and Cocanada. See E. Thurston, The Madras Presidency with Mysore, Coorg and the Associate States (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), p. 42. 17The Kangany system was a method of labour recruitment that was created to replace the indentured system.

It involved the employment of kanganies or senior Indian labourers as labour recruiters in India. Kanganies would often recruit from their own villages and regions of origin, which in theory was meant to lessen cases of abuse and exploitation by introducing an added dimension of accountability within the recruitment process."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May

2012TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISMINSINGAPORE263From a very early period, even when faced with an incredibly diverse population hailing from parts of Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Middle East, British administrators in Singapore did not regard Indians in Singapore as an undifferentiated category. Nineteenth-century newspapers distinguished between North Indians, who were termed ‘ Bengalees’, and South Indians, who were referred to as ‘ Klings’. 18 The 1881 Census divided the Indians of Singapore

into 'Tamils and Other Natives of India', in which the 'other natives' were described as 'Burmese, Parsees and Bengalis'.¹⁹ It is highly probable that 'Bengalis' at this stage included all Indo-European language speakers from other regions of India and that the 'Tamil' category also included other Dravidian language speakers from southern India.

However, by the 1911 census, Indians were divided by language into no less than nineteen different categories, reflecting the increasing sophistication of the colonial government's fact-gathering apparatus and its increasing administrative knowledge about the community.²⁰ By the next census in 1921, employment, crime and mental health statistics were compared between the much broader Chinese, Malay and Indian racial categories, although separate sections described sub-ethnic employment trends within the Indian community.²¹ This census reflected the continuing administrative tendency to draw a conceptual distinction between North and South Indians.

It was noted that Tamils, Telugus and Malayalis were 'kindred Southern Indian races', and that Telugus and Malayalis were 'cognate races' of the majority Tamils and thus, like the Tamils, were primarily of the 'coolie class'.²² British recruitment policies and the visible socio-economic disparities they created between the various Indian groups in Singapore created pervasive ideas about ethnic and cultural differences within the Indian community, which continued to be manifested in various forms well into the twentieth century. In his authoritative 1969 history of Indian migration to Malaya, for

example, Kernial Singh Sandhu wrote that the low-caste South Indian peasant was the 'Theft of Rice', *The Straits Times* (30 Aug. 1883), p.

2. In 1837, Howard Malcolm, a Christian missionary on a visit to Singapore, also used these terms. See J. Bastin, *Traveler's Singapore: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.

35. See also Rajesh Rai, "'Race' and the Construction of the North-South Divide Amongst Indians in Colonial Malaya and Singapore', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (August 2004), pp. 245-64.

19A. P. Talbot, S. Dunlop, W. A. Pickering, V.

Cousins, H. Hewetson and A. Knight, *Census of the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: Government Printing Press, 1881), pp.

4-6 20H. Marriot, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: J. E.

Tyler Government Printer, 1911), p. 66. 21J. E. Nathan, *The Census of British Malaya 1921* (London: Waterlow and Sons Ltd.

, 1922). 22Ibid., pp.

20, 88."264SOUTH ASIADownloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012ideal labourer, being 'easily manageable' and 'not [as] ambitious as most of his Northern compatriots'. 23The negative portrayal of Tamils in colonial ethnography and by other Indian intellectuals was one of the reasons that in the twentieth century Tamil social leaders and the Tamil

intelligentsia in Singapore stressed the need to highlight specifically Tamil cultural symbols. 24 Nurturing pan-Indian symbols would not have afforded the same imaginative resources that would have been conducive to the creation of an alternative identity for the Tamils vis-a-vis the other Indian communities. This would also explain the later attraction of Tamils to organisations such as the Singapore Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (SDMK or Singapore Dravidian Progress Association), which stressed an imagined Tamil identity constructed in opposition to the perceived negative and ‘Othered’ aspects of an ‘Aryan’ culture from northern India.

Another important factor to consider in explaining the development of separate cultural institutions was the importance of language amongst migrants, not only as a means of communication, but also as a source of class stratification that for a time led to a crisis of representation, before post-war democratisation lessened the influence of the Indian elites in Singapore. Pan-Indianism and Tamil Cultural Separatism in Social Reform Movements in Singapore In 1923, the Indian Association was formed in Singapore. It was the first organisation of its kind that aimed to represent all the Indians in the settlement, regardless of religion, linguistic affinity or region of origin. The association attracted mostly English-educated elites from the Indian community into its ranks. A pan-Indian identity was promoted and this was reflected by the 23K. S.

Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1786–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 56. Sandhu made this statement with particular regard to low-caste and

untouchable South Indians, and not to South Indians as a whole, being aware of the business and civil administrative niches that had been carved out by other South Indian groups such as the Ceylon Tamils and the Chettiars. His comparison with northern Indian labour, however, remains problematic because he makes no mention of the indentured labour recruitment policies in British colonies such as Fiji and Mauritius and the higher proportions in these places of Indian labour that originated from outside the Madras Presidency. ²⁴Some of these later included an educational emphasis on ancient Tamil literary works such as Thirukkural and Purananuru. In 1940, Singaporean Dravidian newspapers began publishing E. V. Ramasamy's plea for Tamils in Malaya to celebrate the Tamil New Year as a holiday and as a symbolic gesture against 'Aryan cultural imperialism'.

He also appealed to Malayan Tamils to 'y ' Tamil ' ags' on the day and to pressure the Hindu Advisory Board into making the Tamil New Year a holiday. 'Celebrate Tamil New Year', Tamil Murasu (10 April 1940), p. 3.

After the war, festivals such as Pongal and the Tamils' Festivals were promoted as public symbols of Tamil culture and identity."

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SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE ²⁶5 ethno-linguistic diversity of the organisation's leadership and members.

The association embarked on a series of programmes that aimed at improving the plight of Indians in Singapore and Malaya. It was inspired by the growth of the nationalist and reformist movements in India, which had been gaining momentum since the turn of the century. R.

B. Krishnan, who was a member of the Indian Association and the editor of its English-language newspaper, *The Indian*, wrote of the growing enthusiasm for social reformism amongst the Indian elites and Indian intelligentsia during the 1920s. He described a new concern amongst them for the welfare of Indian labourers and he claimed that this concern was partly the result of visits to Malaya by prominent Indian reformers. ²⁵ The growing Indian upper and middle classes were also becoming increasingly concerned about the image of the Indian community in the eyes of the other ethnic groups during this period. They were especially concerned about the negative perceptions of the Indian lower classes and the uncomfortable associations that were being drawn with the wider Indian community.

The stories and editorials that ran in *The Indian* are indicative of the ideological stance taken by the organisation. Like many members of the Indian nationalist movement, the members of the Indian Association believed that efforts to socially uplift the Indians in Malaya, which had to a large degree been initiated by the upper classes, should remain under their exclusive leadership. As a result, few efforts were made to give the lower orders any real agency within the movement. Initially this elitism seriously undermined the association's efforts: the labouring classes were excluded from the organisation because some members expressed reservations about mixing freely with them; others fretted that the labourers would turn up to meetings 'half-naked'.

²⁶ There was no significant emphasis placed on laying the groundwork for proportional representation from the different socio-economic sections of the

community. However by 1926, the Indian Association began to realise that it needed to open its doors to a wider membership in order to lay claim to being able to represent the whole Indian community. Moreover many individuals within the association argued that much more needed to be done for the labouring community. Through a concerted membership drive, the association managed to recruit more than one thousand members by the late 1920s. Although this 25The reformers he listed included very distinguished individuals who were well known to the Indian English educated elite and relatively unknown amongst the labouring masses.

His list excluded E. V. Ramasamy, whose visit to Malaya and Singapore in 1929 resulted in the birth of the Singaporean Tamil reform movement.

See R. B. Krishnan, *Indians in Malaya: A Pageant of Greater India* (Singapore: The Malayan Publishers, 1936), p. 28. 26L.

Netto, *Passage of Indians: 1923–2003* (Singapore: Singapore Indian Association, 2003), p. 36."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012266SOUTH ASIAbroadened its base, power and leadership remained concentrated among members of certain socio-economic backgrounds and no efforts were made to encourage the emergence of leadership from the middle class. The lower classes meanwhile were largely held to be incapable of independent self-improvement. One of The Indian's correspondents criticised a proposal to allow Tamil labourers to vote on a proposed ban on the sale of toddy, arguing that they could not be expected to exercise that decision because '[t]he Tamils [are] like little children.

. .'. 27 Members of the association also remained very wary of introducing ethno-linguistic proportionality to the organisational structure of the association. Plans were initially made to allow individuals originating from the Madras Presidency to have a larger representation on the management committee in recognition of the fact that Tamils and other South Indians formed a majority amongst the Indians in Singapore. These plans were scrapped in 1936 due to fears that allowing any one group to have too much power would breed communalism and erode the pan-Indian identity that the association was promoting.

The association argued that insufficient political representation for the Indians in Malaya as a whole was the major problem facing the Indian community, and that lack of unity was its primary cause. A? rming the conclusions of the 1935 Annual Report of the Indian Agent in Malaya, a contributor to *The Indian* wrote: We agree with the Rao Sahib that there are too many Indian associations all over Malaya and that the endless petty differences and disputes destroy any chance of unity and obtaining respect in the eyes of the Government and other communities. 28 The *Indian* laid heavy emphasis on reporting the activities of the Congress Party in India as well as the plight of overseas Indian communities in other parts of the world, including Africa.

Letters from India were regularly published, which demonstrated the clear sentiment that, culturally, the Malayan Indian community was part of a much larger transnational pan-Indian community. 29 The title of a book authored by Krishnan, *Indians in Malaya: A Pageant of Greater India*, is itself indicative

of how prominent figures within the Indian Association sought to advance an inclusive transnational Indian identity. 27 'Ramasamy to Decide?', *The Indian* (18 Jan.

1936), p. 3. 'The Indian Agent's Report', *The Indian* (28 Dec. 1935), p.

15. 29 In one such letter, S. A.

Waiz of Mumbai wrote to the paper to express his displeasure at the fact that the immigration policies of the time favoured Chinese immigration over Indian immigration, and to voice his fear that the Chinese would 'eventually win'. He added that he did not wish to see the Malay Peninsula become part of 'Greater China' as opposed to 'Greater India'. See 'Indians in Malaya: A Message from India', *The Indian* (28 Dec. 1935), p.

15. 28 "Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012 TAMIL

CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE 267 Despite the best efforts of the association, which included numerous social projects and the setting up of a number of schools, a large active divide existed between the English-educated elite of Singaporean Indian society and the labouring masses. Through its newspaper, the Indian Association did manage to help create a popular consensus amongst the Indian elite on the need to defend the rights of labouring Indians as members of a larger imagined Indian community. However, the social and class divides proved too great, and ultimately limited the success of the association in terms of effecting actual change in the living conditions and social attitudes of working-class Indians. Sinnappah Arasaratnam argues that there were insufficient channels of communication

between the educated elite and the lower classes for the dissemination of ideas. The sub-managerial class working on plantations and in government service had little direct contact with the workers.

In other instances, language and ethnic divisions prevented effective communication with the labouring workforce, which was mainly comprised of illiterate Tamils. ³⁰ In one article in *The Indian* that reflected the lack of institutional channels for communication between the educated elites and the lower classes, the newspaper's labour correspondent recommended that the Indian upper and middle classes devote one weekend a month to visiting labourers in their individual capacity and instructing them on the merits of fiscal prudence and personal hygiene, amongst other things. ³¹ However there is no evidence to indicate that the members of the middle and upper classes adopted this suggestion. Arasaratnam also argues that due to limited educational facilities and lack of social mobility, there was no means for a leadership to have arisen from the working-class Tamil community that might have tackled some of these social issues. Such limitations were not restricted to living conditions, poor educational facilities and exploitative work practices, but extended to cultural and social issues that were, in part, the result of the dominant attitudes and practices that existed within the labouring community. These problems included alcohol abuse, physical violence between labourers, caste-based persecution and discrimination, and other ills that were compounded by an extremely loose institutional framework for marriage.

Owing to the demographic characteristics of labour migration, many of these problems, especially caste discrimination against untouchables, became especially Tamil problems. 30 S. Arasaratnam, 'Social Reform and Reformist Pressure Groups among the Indians of Malaya and Singapore 1930-55', in *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 40, Pt. 2 (Dec. 1967), p. 54.

31 'Indian Labour Topics by Our Labour Correspondent', *The Indian* (4 Jan. 1936), p. 15. 268 SOUTH ASIADownloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012

caste discrimination against untouchables, became especially Tamil problems. 32 Individuals such as G. Sarangapany, one of the founding figures of the Tamil reform movement in Singapore, understood that efforts at social uplift required closer engagement with the labouring community. More importantly, reform messages aimed at changing social attitudes needed to be communicated in the Tamil language and in a manner that was consistent with Tamil culture in order to reach out to the labouring community, which was largely composed of Tamil speakers. Although the Indian Association used the Tamil language to convey its messages in letters, and even published a Tamil-language version of its newspaper, it was the later Tamil reform movement that began to use the Tamil language itself as a mobilising cultural symbol. The emphasis on Tamil as a cultural symbol established a pedigree for those educated in Tamil, who previously had been excluded from reformist leadership. This facilitated the agency and participation of Tamil-educated middle-class and working-class leaders, who began to take ownership of grass-roots efforts aimed at social reform, thereby reducing the reliance on

the distant paternalism of the Indian elite. Political and social movements in the Tamil regions of the Madras Presidency had profoundly influenced Sarangapany before he arrived in Singapore from Thiruvarur in 1924.³³ The non-Brahmin movement, which had been gaining momentum after the first decade of the twentieth century, resulted in a new-found confidence in Tamil culture and the Tamil language as the root of, and medium for, perpetuating that culture. By 1925, E.

V. Ramasamy Naicker, a prominent figure in the state of Madras, had left the Indian National Congress after becoming disillusioned with what he saw as the Brahmin domination of the party.³⁴ He began the Self-Respect Movement in the same year, with a large focus on broad social mobilisation from below. Naicker's social programme focused largely on ideological education at the grass-roots level and on harnessing the agency and participation of the individuals that the movement sought to uplift.³² One clear indication of this is that the untouchable associations or Adi Dravida Sangams in Singapore that were registered were almost exclusively named after the Tamil-speaking regions of South India.

See A. Mani, 'The Changing Caste-Structure amongst the Singapore Indians', unpublished thesis, University of Singapore, 1977, pp. 213-4. ³³Interview with V. Thamizhmaraiyan and Thyagarajan Panghanathan, 12 Dec. 2010.

³⁴For a more detailed analysis of E. V. Ramasamy's reasons for leaving the Congress Party, refer to N.

K. Arooran, 'The Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905–44, with Special Reference to the Works of Maraimalai Atikal', unpublished dissertation, University of London, 1976, pp. 180–4."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012

TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE²⁶⁹ Soon after arriving in Singapore, Sarangapany and a few other like-minded individuals, including A.

C. Suppiah, began to import the reformist ideas that were developing in the Tamil-speaking regions of the Madras Presidency. Sarangapany imported Naicker's publications and distributed them in Singapore.

By 1929, Sarangapany had started two newspapers, *Munnetram* (Progress) and *Seerthirutham* (Reform), which expounded the values of the Dravidian movement and aimed at encouraging the uplift of the Tamil community.

Dinesh Sathisan argues that Sarangapany's entry into Tamil journalism broke the monopoly held by upper-class Brahmins, thereby changing the ideological focus of the Tamil press in Singapore.³⁵ He compared Sarangapany's newspapers with another Tamil publication begun by Tamil Brahmins, *The Tamil Nesan*,³⁶ arguing that the differing viewpoints expressed by *The Tamil Nesan* on the one hand, and Sarangapany's papers on the other, formed 'a battleground on which issues of Tamil identity in Malaya were debated'.³⁷ By referring to movements and events concerning Indians in India and in other parts of the world, these Malayan newspapers widened the Indian public sphere. Private letters from India were published regarding events in Malaya and vice versa, creating a transnational

community of readers and contributors and a sense of shared concerns and interests.

The print medium's ability to collapse distances and create a sense of belonging and ideological purpose was utilised by both Dravidianists and those who supported Indian nationalism in their attempts to mobilise public support and create imagined communities based on different sets of values and outlooks. Whereas The Tamil Nesan supported the Indian National Congress and Gandhi, stressing social reform while maintaining a degree of Hindu conservatism or at least accommodating such views, its editors emphasised the importance of the Tamil Hindu identity as a subset of a larger plural pan-Indian identity. By contrast, Sarangapany and his followers and colleagues stressed a pan-Tamil identity based not on religion, but on the Tamil language and a selective interpretation of Tamil culture that stressed an inherent rationalism and compatibility with modernity and European modes of thinking. This aspect of Dravidian ideology was in part a response to the criticisms and affirmations of earlier colonial ethnography and Orientalist 35D. Sathisan, 'Speaking for the Diaspora: Tamil Newspapers in Malaya and Singapore as Instruments of Modernity, Protection, Reform and Change, 1930–40', in The Heritage Journal, Vol.

4 (2009), p. 76. 36The Tamil Nesan was started in Singapore on 10 Sept. 1924 by two Tamil Brahmins, Soundarajan Iyengar and Narasimha Iyengar. 37Sathisan, 'Speaking for the Diaspora', p. 76"Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012270SOUTH ASIAdepictions of India.

During this period concerns about public perceptions of the Indian community and attempts by Dravidianists to reform religious practices continued to be informed by Western critiques. Reformers such as Sarangapany launched scathing attacks on ‘superstition’ and the excesses of tradition, using the prevailing discourse of the movement. Binaries—North–South, Aryan–Dravidian and Brahmin–non-Brahmin—came to infer negative and positive cultural attributes, such as backwardness–modernity. Bringing this together was an overarching historical narrative about the victimisation of the Tamil people and the erosion of Tamil culture at the hands of the Brahmins from the Aryan north. In Tamil Nadu, this narrative provided an ideological basis for non-Brahmin Tamils to first construct a platform against Brahmin political and social hegemony in the region, which later served as a basis for creating mass support against the pro-Hindi-language policies of the Indian Congress Party in the 1930s and 1960s.

38 Reaching its height in Singapore during the immediate pre-war period, this narrative stood at odds with the pan-Indian identity that was being promoted by English-educated Indian leaders and upper-caste Tamil elites. The Dravidian narrative and pan-Tamilianism better equipped the disadvantaged and discriminated-against Tamil groups in Singapore with imaginative resources to construct new identities that were more favourable to social mobility within the Indian community. During January 1936, a widely publicised confrontation broke out over the issue of the representation of the Adi Dravida, or Tamil untouchable community. At the third All-Malaya Adi Dravida Conference held in Kuala Lumpur, a sizeable proportion of the participants objected to the term, ‘Adi Dravida’, being used at the

conference and disrupted proceedings for three hours, before leaving in protest.

They were led by a member of the Selangor Tamil Reform Association, linked to the Singapore Tamil Reform Association (TRA) started by Sarangapany and others in 1931. The group claimed that the 'Adi Dravida' label was derogatory and was being used without the actual consent of the community, which favoured the more inclusive label 'Tamil'. They also argued that the upper castes and elites were overrepresented at the conference, which was convened without input from the untouchable community.

The Brahmin editor of *The Tamil Nesan*, K. Narasimha Iyer, was present at the meeting and his response to the claims was reflective of the fundamental differences that lay between the 38For a more detailed examination of the development and evolution of Dravidian ideology in Tamil Nadu and the unique social circumstances that shaped it, refer to M. S. S. Pandian, 'Notes on the Transformation of "Dravidian" Ideology: Tamilnadu, c.

1900–40', in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, nos. 5/6 (1994), pp.

84–104. "TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE" Dravidianists linked to the TRA and the Congress-influenced Malayan Indian elite. The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor reported that Iyer pleaded Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012 that the Adi-Dravida community should not lose its identity by merging into a bigger community and then

lose its opportunities for self-advancement. It should safeguard its interests by remaining a separate entity and work out its own salvation with the cooperation of other sections of the Indian community. 39 The pan-Indianism expounded by sections of the Malayan Indian elite was coloured by a kind of Gandhian organicism. Reform-minded members of the elite envisioned a kind of hierarchised diversity existing within a greater Indian unity bounded by humanistic principles. The Indian elite aimed at improving the lot of the untouchable Tamils and labourers and nurturing a sense of social responsibility among the middle and upper castes for the former's uplift.

However, this fell short of challenging the status quo and the existing basis of social stratification. The elites were comfortable being seen as the progressive leaders of a stratified Indian community, but shied away from being directly identified with Indian labourers, who, in many ways, occupied the lowest rung of Malayan society. Thus they aimed at reforming the excesses of caste prejudice without necessarily advocating the destruction of caste categories. By stressing a unified Tamil identity, Dravidianists such as Sarangapany offered a more egalitarian vision for Tamil society that was more attractive to the leaders of the untouchable and low-caste groups, which made up a sizeable section of Tamil society during the pre-war period. 40 Seerthirutham, one of Sarangapany's newspapers, featured an editorial in 1939 that reiterated the view that 'the Tamils should be one people without caste'. 41 Ultimately, however, the subtleties of these ideological battles had no relevance for the vast majority of Indian labourers.

Widespread illiteracy was a barrier to participation in the public sphere created by the print communities. The antipathy of Tamil leaders towards the Congress Party could not change the fact that the Congress was at the forefront of the independence movement in India and thus 39' Disorderly Scenes at Conference: Objection to " Derogatory" Description: Strong Opposition of Tamil Reform Party', The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor (1 Jan. 1936), p.

3. 40It must be noted that Sarangapany and his Tamil Reform Association did not directly advocate the destruction of Singapore's Adi Dravida Sangams, recognising the important function of these Sangams as cooperative societies and as dwelling places for communities of untouchable Tamil labourers. The Tamil Reform Association did, however, welcome members of these Sangams into its ranks and only emphasised a united Tamil identity within the organisation.

Interview with V. Thamizhmaraiyan, 31 Dec. 2011. 41' Tamil Reform Society', Seerthirutham (Mar. 1939), p.

1."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012272SOUTH ASIAreceived widespread support from many overseas Tamils in Malaya. The Tamils in Singapore attended the activities and adopted the symbols of groups that were pro-Congress and those that supported Dravidian leaders in India. They attended Dravidian reformist drama performances while hanging portraits of Gandhi on the walls of their homes, labour lines and dormitories. Dravidian interpretations of Tamil identity were not presented through nuanced arguments, but were introduced gradually through the

propagation of certain values and symbols that went hand in hand with social outreach programmes. Sarangapany personally funded Dravidian performance groups while the TRA lobbied for a Civil Marriages Ordinance that paved the way for Dravidian reform weddings, allowing Hindu couples to get married without the aid of a Brahmin priest. 42 The success of these public programmes enabled association members to become important opinion leaders who gained the respect of the community and so enhanced the reach of their message. By the end of the 1930s, the TRA had achieved significant popularity, distinguished by its openness and the approachability of its leaders.

Apart from running a library, setting aside financial contributions for the needy, and organising education and outreach programmes, the TRA was involved in a wide range of hands-on activities aimed at improving the self-esteem of the labouring community. 43 Interviews reveal that on paydays, TRA members, together with the family relations of labourers, would picket toddy shops to prevent labourers with drinking problems from splurging their monthly salaries on liquor. TRA members also set their sights on Chinese coffee shop owners in the Indian enclave of Serangoon Road, who, under the instructions of upper-caste Hindus, had barred untouchables from entering, or would only serve drinks to them in metal tins as opposed to in glasses. TRA members visited all the coffee shops in the area and threatened legal action against owners who continued to discriminate against untouchables. They also visited labour lines and taught labourers, who had previously used their thumbprint to collect their monthly salaries, how to sign their names.

These highly visible activities brought the organisation close to the community and increased the receptivity of the community to its message. At the same time, the Tamil Murasu newspaper began vigorously promoting E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, not only publishing his speeches which espoused Dravidian ideology, but also encouraging all Tamils to celebrate his birthday in much the same way that Gandhi's birthday was celebrated in India.

4442Arasaratnam, ' Social Reform and Reformist Pressure Groups among the Indians of Malaya and Singapore 1930-55', pp. 63-4. 43Interview with V.

Thamizhmaraiyan and Thyagarajan Panghanathan, 12 Dec. 2010. 44' Periyar's Birthday Celebrated in Malacca', Tamil Murasu (2 Oct.

1940), p. 6."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISMINSINGAPORE273In 1940, the Tamil Murasu began carrying articles, speeches and opinion pieces that promoted the idea of a separate state for Tamils, furthering the notion that they should consider themselves an entirely separate people from other Indians. The publication of such articles signalled the endorsement of these ideas by the TRA leaders, including Sarangapany. Titles declared: ' Those Who Call Themselves " Indians" Have Not Realized Tamil Values', 45 and ' We Don't Need the Favours of the North Indians: Why We are Saying that TN (Tamil Nadu) should be Separate'. 46 Yet another appealed to ancient history to cement the idea of a disunited India: ' Can the India that was Ruled by 56 Kings be One Nation: The Tamil Nation that Did Not Bow before Akbar and Asoka'. 47 Nevertheless the escalating promotion of Tamil separateness in Singapore and Malaya was entirely dependent on political developments in India.

It was marked by the attempt to re-align the imagined homeland of the Tamil immigrant with the territorial region that Dravidian politicians had marked out for future political sovereignty. The Negotiation of Pan-Indian Identity during the Japanese Occupation The promotion of Tamil separateness ended abruptly when Malaya fell to the Japanese forces in February 1942. World War II marked a crucial phase in the history of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and Malaya.

Under the patronage of the Japanese Military Administrative Superintendency, Singapore became the central staging post from which the Indian Independence League (IIL) and the Indian National Army (INA) attempted to unseat British authority in India. During this period, Indian identity on the Malay Peninsula underwent a radical shift. Pan-Indianism was heavily promoted by the wartime Indian press at the expense of the regional and ethno-linguistic identities that had thus far marked the furthest boundaries of community experience and self-identity for non-English-educated Indian immigrants. For many Tamil leaders, the Japanese Occupation signalled an abrupt end to a growing sense of Dravidian separatism fuelled by close political and social contact with Tamil Nadu and emerging Dravidian organisations such as the TRA. During the war years, Indian affairs came under the direct jurisdiction of Tokyo through organisations such as the Fujiwara Kikan, Iwakuro Kikan and 45' Tamil Language and Tamil Society: Those Who Call Themselves " Indians" Have Not Realized Tamil Values', Tamil Murasu (24 April 1940), p. 3. 46' We Don't Need the Favours of the North Indians: Why We are Saying that TN should be Separate: Periyar's Views', Tamil Murasu (11 May 1940), p.

1. 47' Can the India that was Ruled by 56 Kings be One Nation: The Tamil Nation that Did Not Bow before Akbar and Asoka', Tamil Murasu (30 April 1940), p. 5."274SOUTH ASIADownloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012the Hikari Kikan, which handled the new Indian press and managed relations between the Japanese military authority and the INA and the IIL. 48 Japanese officers such as Major Fujiwara Iwaichi and Colonel Iwakuro Hideo, who had very limited cultural knowledge about the Indian community, led these organisations. They were geared towards engendering cohesive Indian support for the Indian independence movement. Premier Hideki Tojo had stressed in an earlier speech given to Indian representatives in Tokyo that in exchange for Japanese support for an armed Indian independence movement, the Japanese expected the Indians to do away with communal, caste and sectarian differences. Addressing the Indian community, he said: If you lose this golden opportunity by being.

. . too much involved in mutual antagonisms, you and your descendants would remain as slaves for nobody knows how long. . . . On her part what Japan expects from India is that she should do away with all the retarding ideas of religious and class antagonisms and the various rivalries between political and military ways of thought. .

.. 49During this period, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Japanese soldiers received at least basic instructions to stamp out communal differences through violence and intimidation. 50An oral history interviewee recalled an incident when a Japanese sentry asked him to which ethnic group he belonged. When he replied, ' Ceylonese', the sentry struck him across the

face and corrected him with the term, ' Indo-jin', or Indian. 51 Samuel Dhoraisingam writes that Indians learnt to identify themselves to Japanese soldiers with the phrase, ' Watakushi wa Indojin des (I am an Indian)'. 52 In another incident, a minor scuffle occurred between high-caste Hindu and untouchable workers over lunchtime seating arrangements in the mess hall of HM Naval Base in Sembawang. A Japanese soldier who was present, upon hearing the explanation for the incident from a translator, made the high-caste Hindus go without food and 48A.

Yoji and Y. Mako (eds), *New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, 1941– 45* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), p. 6. 49' War of 1939–44', WO 325/46 NAB1111, Appendix ' V' to S Section CSDIC (I) Report no.

1007 on H/1050 Capt. Mohan Singh 1/14 Punjab, p. 62, National Archives of Singapore. 50The precise instructions are difficult to obtain because the Japanese forces in Singapore destroyed most military documents after surrendering. 51R.

N. Pakirisamy, no. 000827, Reel 11, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore. 52S. Dhoraisingam, *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka: Indian Babas and Nonyas-Chitty Melaka* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p.

21."TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISMINSINGAPORE275Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012made the workers slap them, reserving the first opportunity for the untouchables among them. 53Japanese soldiers also

indirectly imposed their very normative understanding of Indian identity, based on their limited knowledge of the Indian independence movement. Oral history accounts describe that when entering Indian homes and seeing pictures of Gandhi, Japanese soldiers would salute the portrait and leave the occupants unmolested. 54 Another account reveals that soon after entering Singapore, Japanese forces racially divided local inhabitants trying to cross the Singapore River via Elgin Bridge.

Soldiers would beckon to Indians when it was their turn to cross, referring to them as ‘ Gandhis’. 55 Such behaviour from Japanese soldiers encouraged Indian civilians to adopt the easily-recognisable images and symbols of the Congress Party as a visible reminder to the soldiers of their inclusion as agents in the special relationship between the Japanese authorities and the Indian population. In this period, many non-Tamils rose to prominence as important Indian community leaders as the structures of pre-war Singaporean Indian society were replicated in the IIL. The uppermost ranks of the INA were also filled with non-Tamil military personnel. Many North Indian symbols were adopted and were thus imbued with a pan-Indian infection.

At a major rally held on the Padang in the centre of Singapore and attended by thousands, the leader of the INA, Subhas Chandra Bose, introduced the Hindustani slogan, ‘ Dilli Chalo (Onward to Delhi)’. The Young India newspaper in Singapore reported that at a Sunday parade, ‘ the air was rent with lusty shouts of “ Inquilab Zindabad”, “ Azad Hind Zindabad” and “ Netaji ki Jai”’. 56 The women’s wing of the INA was named after the rani of Jhansi. The Hindustani language also rose in prominence in many other ways

during this period. Romanised Hindustani songs and poems were frequently published in the Indian wartime Englishlanguage newspapers. 57 The fact that they appeared in the neutral space of English-medium papers supports the suggestion that Hindustani was being promoted as an embryonic national language for the future independent Indian state. 58 Hindustani was also spoken in the INA and in the Junior Cadet Corps 53Interview with V. Thamizhmaraiyan and Thyagarajan Panghanathan, 12 Dec. 2010. R. N. Pakirisamy, no. 000827, Reel 11, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore. 55J. Singh, no. 000365, Reel 8, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore. 56' War Declaration', Young India (31 Oct. 2603 [1943]), p. 4. 57' Bharat Bhag Hai Jaga' and ' Jan-i-Hind', Young India (21 Nov. 2603 [1943]), pp. 1, 6. 58Some advertisers were far more explicit. An advertisement promoting a Hindustani textbook asked readers if they had ' studied their national language'. See ' Very Important Hindustani Lesson', Azad Hind (7 April 2604 [1944]), p. 2. 54"276SOUTH ASIADownloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012of the INA. Recruits who could not adapt suffered ridicule and were under a lot of pressure to pick up the language. 59 Except for a branch library maintained at Seletar, the TRA ceased all operations. Sarangapany himself enlisted with the INA. 60 Perhaps, a clear indication of how Indian culture began to be linked with a normative idea of Indian identity during this period comes in an oral account of the war from Tobias Pereira, a South Indian who lived in Singapore during the occupation. A young boy at the time, Pereira remembers joining the INA to see ' proper Indians', whom he identified as North Indians and whom he contrasted at the time with the less genuine South Indians. 61It is difficult to

get an accurate picture of Tamil sentiments during this period, although a certain amount of complexity is to be expected given the context. Personal testimonies are split. Some state that mass support for the INA and the IIL was genuinely inspired by enthusiasm for the nationalist cause and admiration for Bose, whose presence in Singapore led to the feeling that the Malayan Indians were, for the first time, at the centre of the Indian independence movement. Others say that most were just glad that the presence of the INA and the IIL gave the Indians special status and a certain degree of protection. Oral history testimonies indicate that many joined the INA to escape the privations of the war or to ensure their protection against Japanese aggression. 62 While the Indian community enjoyed special status and was not treated as badly as the Chinese and the European communities, it was not beyond the reach of Japanese violence. The Kikans in charge of the Indian community were also not above the jurisdiction of the Japanese Secret Police, or Kempeitei, which occasionally called up high-profile Indians for questioning. Based on interviews, the labouring classes in Singapore and the plantation workers in Malaya seemed less likely to be ideologically motivated in their support for Bose and the INA compared to higher socio-economic groups. As the war progressed, many unemployed Tamils and Tamil labourers were forcibly sent north to work on the Thai-Burma Railway, where many died from 59S. V. Lingam, no. 000014, Reel 7, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore; and S. Shinji, 'Interview Documents of Overseas South Indians in Malaysia, Singapore and South India', unpublished document, Department of Oriental History, School of Letters, University of Nagoya, Mar. 1984, pp. 80–1. 60Interview with V.

Thamizhmaraiyan and Thyagarajan Panghanathan, 12 Dec. 2010. One of the reasons Sarangapany did so might have been to protect his Chinese wife, Lim Boon Neo, from the Japanese military forces. ⁶¹Tobias Pereira, no. 003516, Reel 5, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore. ⁶²For one example, refer to the oral account of Dr. Kanichat Menon, who worked at the Indian Information Department in Singapore during the occupation. See Kanichat Raghava Menon, no. 000025, Reel 7, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore. "TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE" ²⁷⁷disease, malnutrition and physical violence. ⁶³As well, female Tamil labourers were sometimes the victims of sexual attacks and violence from Japanese soldiers. ⁶⁴Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012 What is clear about this period is that the Congress narratives of a pan-Indian identity dominated public discourse and that this was further enhanced by coercion and the threat of violence from the Japanese military. In a climate of fear in which it was safer for individuals to stay within the normative boundaries of this definition, there was little space for expressions of sub-ethnic identities in exclusivist terms. The End of the Pan-Indian Ideal and the Growth of Tamil Cultural Separatism during the Post-War Period After the war, numerous factors came together to greatly reduce the significance of a pan-Indian identity and undermine the unity of the Indian community which had been built up during the occupation. With the Japanese gone, and the INA and IIL dismantled, the institutional structures that had produced and propagated the pan-Indian identity during the war were suddenly removed. There was also a climate of fear and uncertainty for those sections of the Indian community that feared being

seen as collaborators. With the threat of deportations and trials and with former members of the INA and IIL under investigation by the British security services, it became safer for the Indian community to direct its energies back into social reform. 65 With the absence of the Japanese soldiers and the deprivations of war gradually easing, caste prejudices and discrimination returned, albeit softened by the many compromises made during the war. Almost immediately after the end of the war, the TRA and other Dravidianist groups reorganised and re-embarked on programmes to address the social problems affecting the Tamil community. The speed at which these organisations returned to their previous operations suggests that the vision of a pan-Indian identity offered during the war had had limited resonance. Indeed for 63' Report on Malayan Labour on Bangkok–Moulmein Railway, 1945–46', CO 273/678/1/51007, British National Archives; M. Fernandez, no. 000076, Reel 2, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore; and R. K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 304–6. 64Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya*, p. 302. 65Ahmad Khan, a member of the IIL and, later, of the British Special Branch, described intelligence gathering on the INA and IIL after the war. See A. Khan, no. 000400, Reel 10, Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore."Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012278SOUTH ASIAthe Tamil Dravidianists, many of the experiences of the war may have vindicated their suspicions of pan-Indianism and its partiality for North Indian languages and culture. Independent Tamil journalism returned and the *Tamil Murasu* was revived, becoming the best-selling Tamil-language daily in Singapore and the rest of

Malaya by 1960. 66 As well, migration routes between Singapore and India re-opened. With the entry of new migrants from Tamil Nadu, the re-establishment of communication channels between Dravidian leaders in Singapore and India, and the exchange of media, Singaporean Tamil culture once again became heavily influenced by political and social developments in Tamil Nadu. Political parties and social groups in Tamil Nadu such as the Dravida Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam began to have mirror organisations in Singapore. Although these groups in Singapore did not come under the leadership of their namesakes in Tamil Nadu, they were influenced by many ideas from that region. Growing radicalisation and continuing demands for a separate Tamil nation-state from leaders in Tamil Nadu such as E. V. Ramasamy and C. N. Annadurai encouraged Tamil leaders in Singapore to see themselves as belonging to a transnational Tamil community, rather than a wider Indian diaspora. More glaring signs of a confident and exclusionary Tamil identity began to emerge in post-war Singaporean society, leading to criticisms that leaders such as Sarangapany were undermining the unity of the Indian community. From 1952, his popular annual Tamils' Festivals received widespread media attention and were attended by thousands in Singapore and Malaya and even spread further afield to Indonesia and Thailand. 67 The Singapore Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (SDMK) also began organising parallel annual Pongal festivals for Tamils that were extremely popular. These public events were a powerful public display of Tamil solidarity and, in terms of public events of the period, had no wider Indian equivalents. In 1952, Sarangapany also formed the Tamil Representative Council (TRC) which absorbed most of the reform-

mindful and Dravidianist Tamil organisations in Singapore under its leadership. Both the TRC and the SDMK became the most influential organisations in Singaporean Tamil society for several decades. These organisations were actively involved in raising the living standards and education levels of Tamils, and they gradually shaped the identity of many Tamils across at least two generations through the ideological emphasis of their newspapers and cultural programmes and through their influence on the Tamil-language education.

S. R. Pugalenti, *Indian Pioneers of Singapore* (Singapore: VJ Times International, 1998), p. 12. A. Mani, 'Indians in Singapore Society', in A. Mani and K. S. Sandhu (eds), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993), p. 796.

"TAMIL CULTURAL SEPARATISM IN SINGAPORE" Downloaded by [UNSW Library] at 15: 54 06 May 2012

curriculum via their networks of Tamil teachers and fund-raising activities for Tamil education. Another important reason for the consolidation of Tamil identity in the post-war period was the increasing democratisation that emerged in Singapore after the enactment of the Rendel Constitution of 1955. With the introduction of voting rights, power began to shift from the English-educated Indian elite to the Tamil reformist leaders who had much better access to grass-roots networks and trade unions and were in a stronger position to influence public opinion. After independence in 1963, although the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) embarked on a vigorous campaign to create a new cohesive national identity, it sought the support of communal leaders and began to absorb ethno-linguistic organisations into its growing grass-roots network. Both the TRC and the SDMK had close links with the party and members of the SDMK

actively lent support to PAP campaigns during election periods. 68 Certain members of PAP were also members of these two organisations. The proximity of these interest groups to the ruling party facilitated the formulation of policies that favoured the Tamil-speaking sections of the Indian community. Conclusion and Future TrendsAs the Indian Association became increasingly irrelevant as an agent of social change, it became clear that the English-educated Indian elite in Singapore had failed to emerge as the leaders of a wider Indian society in Singapore after the conclusion of World War II. The failure of these elites to gain the support of Indian labour stemmed from the fact that a paternalistic top-down approach to social education could not succeed at the time, given the existing ethnic and class divisions in Singapore and the lack of a pre-existing Indian public sphere bounded by a common language. By failing to incorporate the agency and participation of those who had been educated in the Tamil language, the Association failed to gain access to avenues of influence. For the Dravidianist leaders, the colonial ethnographic characterisations of Tamils also made an exclusionary identity and a focus on the Tamil language a far more attractive basis for the foundation of an alternative identity. The demographics of the Indian community in Singapore also worked against the development of a pan-Indian identity. The fact that Tamils formed a clear majority within the community made it particularly easy for majoritarian cultural impulses to take hold once Singaporean society was opened up to democratic reforms. The socio-economic differences between the majority of the Tamils and the other

Indian groups meant that many problems associated with those at the fringes of Indian society were Tamil community problems, which organisations such as the TRA were in a better position to deal with. These social reformist groups, which became the biggest agents of social change in Singaporean Tamil society, were ideologically fertilised by social and political developments in Tamil Nadu which included an emphasis on an exclusionary Tamil identity during this period. Owing to the transient nature of Tamil migrants and the close contact between leaders, Tamil Nadu profoundly influenced the negotiation of Tamil identity in Singapore until immigration restrictions and Singaporean independence resulted in more divergent trajectories. The adoption of Tamil cultural symbols, language and identity as signifiers for the wider Indian community in Singapore has had major cultural and social ramifications for Singaporean society, which warrant further study in terms of the continuing negotiation of Indian identity on the island. Today, the situation has changed significantly, with indications that previously marginalised Indian linguistic groups in Singapore are becoming more assertive. In the early 1990s, the Hindi-speaking community successfully lobbied for the introduction of the Hindi language in Singaporean schools and, today, many other Indian languages are represented in the school system, although they do not have the status of official national languages. At the same time, the use of the Tamil language in homes has steadily declined in the last two decades. New class and educational divisions have also attended the recent and rapid influx of large numbers of Indians. Some 76.7 percent of all university-educated resident Indians in Singapore are listed as having been born in South Asian countries.

70 Many of these educated and skilled migrants are relatively recent arrivals, as indicated by the recent rise in the educational profiles of Indians vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Singapore. This has created tensions in sections of the Indian community in Singapore. Efforts are being made to distinguish between Singapore-born Indians and India-born Indians. Evidence indicates that in some of the emerging narratives, Tamil is being used as a symbol of authenticity by members of other 'racial' communities to distinguish Singaporean Indians from immigrants, who, it is assumed, hail primarily from the northern regions of India. 71 This could be the result of decades of Indian normativity in Singapore being expressed in terms of Tamil cultural symbolism. As significant social changes take place in Singaporean society and as its cultural relationship with India continues to change, Tamil and other Indian identities will continue to evolve in interesting ways that challenge our understanding of the identity-shaping processes that occur amongst diaspora communities in plural societies. 71 '20 Year Old Singapore Indian Feels Threatened and Marginalized by the Rising Numbers of Indian PRs and New Citizens', Temasek Review (26 Mar. 2010) [<http://www.temasekreview.com/2010/03/26/20-year-oldsingapore-indian-feels-increasingly-threatened-by-the-rising-numbers-of-indian-prs-and-new-citizens/>, accessed 1 Dec. 2010]; and 'Percentage of Indian Citizens and PRs Rises with Continued Inflow from India', Temasek Review (2 Sept. 2010), [<http://www.temasekreview.com/2010/09/02/percentage-of-indian-citizens-and-prs-rises-with-continued-inflow-from-india/>].

com/2010/09/02/percentage-of-indian-citizens-and-prs-insingapore-rises-with-continued-inflow-from-india/, accessed 1 Dec. 2010].