

**BECOMING SINGAPOREAN INDIAN:  
IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND THE MATERIAL WORLD**

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2025

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.

## Abstract

This thesis argues that 'Singaporean Indian' is not a fixed identity or static form of belonging, but one that is continually in the process of becoming—emerging through responsive, skilled attunement to Singapore's material and social world. Rather than taking 'Indian' as predetermined by Singapore's racial-administrative classifications, or as a transposed, essentialised diasporic identity, I propose that 'Singaporean Indian' emerges through a dynamic process of dwelling in a plural and entangled society.

Through studies of Indian migration and settlement in Singapore; identity cards and home collections of documents; practices of cooking and eating; the consumption of smells; and the sounded custom of Thaipusam, each chapter in this thesis demonstrates how identity and belonging unfold in everyday life.

Centring a 'dwelling perspective', I also draw on the approach to the material world as a meshwork of 'things'—leaky bundles of relational flows. This focus on 'things' offers a critical counterpoint to the dominant representation of Singapore's multiculturalism and its race communities through the reliance on token objects.

This research is grounded in a year of ethnographic fieldwork—primarily workshops and walking interviews, supplemented by archival material—and informed by my own positionality as Singaporean Indian. As a contribution, this thesis seeks to reframe how race, identity, and belonging are understood in Singapore, particularly by intervening in prevailing discourse around migration and 'Indians' by offering the view that 'Singaporean Indian' is not a matter of birthright or bureaucratic classification, but an active, ongoing process of attuned dwelling and becoming.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to record my gratitude to all who have contributed to the completion of this thesis, in particular:

The late Prof Marcus Banks, who supported my decision to switch research topics in a time of uncertainty and encouraged the earliest iteration of this idea. His passing will remain a deep loss but I treasure the year of supervision I had with him. I hope to soon have good answers to his questions for my initial work on Punjab (or Panjab?).

My supervisor, Dr Elizabeth Hallam, for agreeing to take me on as a student after Marcus's passing. Her gentle hand and encouragement through all the precarity of this process has been most reassuring and reenergising.

My examiners on the Transfer and Confirmation examinations—Prof Elisabeth Hsu, Dr Christopher Morton, and Dr Chihab El Khachab—whose questions and critiques I have found most motivating, and whose intervention ignited a much needed analytical redirection of this thesis.

All my research participants and interviewees, for entrusting me with their time and life experiences, for walking with me in this unfolding journey. Their own enthusiasm for this topic has continued to fuel the work long after our year of fieldwork together.

Brown Voices, Centre 42, and the Indian Heritage Centre for the venue and promotional support in my conduct of the research workshops.

The alumni and board of Linacre College for the award of the Linacre Anthropology Scholarship.

The administrative staff at SAME and Linacre, and friends in Anthropology and the Beeches who've made this a much smoother, joyous process.

Colleagues at SASP, NUS for taking an interest in my development, i.e., for their gentle goading to complete. In particular, Rajesh Rai, Darinee Alagirisamy, and Siddharthan Mounaguru for listening when I needed to think out loud.

For influencing my interest in 'things' via the visual, the late Prof Frederick Asher, and my interest in teaching with things, Dr Jim Harris at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

My many professors across my time at NUS, Columbia, and Oxford for their part in laying this path.

There will be no 'becoming' if my parents and brother had not always encouraged a curiosity of the world around and crafted the environment for *knowledge* to emerge; if my grandparents had not made the choice of Singapore and citizenship; if my great grandparents had not first got on that ship to Malaya.

In the world my ancestors and teachers have walked, I become.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Identity, Belonging, and the Material World

'Indian' in Singapore is an officially prescribed administrative 'Race' category, it is also a socially ascribed cultural identity. Neither has neat, uncontested boundaries nor indicates a homogenous community. Yet, to be 'Indian' has meaning in the everyday, and implications in the national. The sociopolitical emphasis on multiracialism as one of the nation-state's foundational ideologies centres race as the means to Singaporean-ness—one is not solely 'Singaporean', but 'Singaporean Chinese', 'Singaporean Malay', or 'Singaporean Indian'. These identities are not simply the sum of two parts but rather an entanglement of the two. To be 'Singaporean Indian' is far more and different from just being ethnically Indian in Singapore. With that differentiation, I ask with this thesis: what then is the 'Singaporean Indian'? I argue that Singaporean Indian is an identity and belonging that is in a process of becoming, ever emergent through 'dwelling' in Singapore's material world. I hold that one is continually becoming Singaporean Indian in a process of emergence and regeneration; that this identity and sense of belonging are also in a process of becoming through dwelling with skilled perception and attunement to the environment; and that these processes emerge with a social and material world that it itself a continually unfolding meshwork of things and people in multiracial, multicultural Singapore.

In holding this position, I argue against several extant approaches to understanding 'Singaporean Indians'. In popular discourse, who is a Singaporean Indian and what this identity entails is largely treated as 'pre-existing', fixed, and imported. I take the counterpoint that the Singaporean Indian is responsive to and engendered in its

environment, and so is in a process of becoming over time and over generations. As such I recognise that identities and a sense of belonging are relational, being responsive to the social and material world around. The focus on things at the centre of this thesis offers the analytical and methodological grounds from which I consider everyday life and entanglements with Singapore's plurally social and material world through and with which Singaporean Indian-ness emerges. This approach of centring entanglements with things is also informed by my position against the prevalent mode in Singapore's multicultural discourse of representing and explaining the identities and practices of its races through the essentialising of token objects. In recognising how identity, belonging, and everyday lives are constitutive and consequent of the material world, I also urge the reconsideration of identities as something simply cerebral or constructed 'in the mind'. Rather, everyday encounters with the material world, and with a society informed by this material world, have real implications on identities and experiences of belonging. As such I also argue for a conception of Singaporean Indians beyond the confines of a diasporic frame that seems to present these community and their identities as transposed, an approach that separates human lives from the grounds in which they dwell.

At the centre of this thesis are Singaporean Indians, who occupy the paradoxical position of being recognised as one the nation's three foundational races and commemorated as part of the national social fabric yet are continually described as 'diasporic' and implicitly, therefore, not 'native'. Characterisation of Singaporean Indians as diasporic forefront a 'migrant' narrative for this local community creating a popular imagination at odds with its history of settlement, labour and development of the landscape, sociopolitical involvement in the state, and such entanglements in the fashioning of Singapore's social and material world. Singaporean Indians are not a

homogenous group either. This is arguably the most diverse of the three racial groups in Singapore in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion. There are then further internal tensions over questions of new migration, the dominance of Tamil ethnic culture, and official language recognition. That said, 'Indian', formulated as an umbrella racial category, has accrued meaning and identification in itself such that it is an identity and label more vehemently dissected and defended than the ethnic terms positioned under it, as I have found in the response from my research participants. Therefore, in this thesis, I discuss the becoming of 'Singaporean Indians' per se, and detail other relevant ethnic and religious identities and ways of belonging where they come up. This thesis thereby seeks to draw attention to the 'Singaporean Indian' as an understudied anthropological case.

Singapore itself offers a distinctive amalgamation of factors that make for compelling study. Singapore is tightly wound up with the global economy and resultant migrations; embraces 'race' as an official social metric; and weaves a national identity through three 'founding races' none of which are truly 'indigenous' to the island nation. This intersection of a modern urban city, culturally plural society, and continuous migration also engenders a dense and entangled material environment with which Singaporean Indians dwell, emerge, regenerate, and become. The discussions in this thesis are therefore informed by a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore focused on identifying the entanglements of this dwelling. Between June 2021 and June 2022, I conducted a series of workshops, including a session in the Indian Heritage Centre, and walking interviews with self-identified Singaporean Indians. These are supplemented with primary material such as published cookbooks and school textbooks; newspaper archives from the National Archives Singapore and National Library Board; videos published on YouTube; as well as two creative productions—a

short film and a ‘sonic walk’—whose makers I also interviewed. I also recognise that the concerns and research design of this work are very much informed by my own positionality as a Singaporean Indian who has lived in Singapore all my life, barring a few years of graduate school overseas. But just like the subject at the centre of this thesis, this study is itself a process of becoming, emerging with my research participants and methods.

In preparation for the later chapters and their development of the argument that ‘Singaporean Indian’ identity and belonging is in a process of becoming, ever emergent through ‘dwelling’ in Singapore’s material world, this introductory chapter expands on the key themes of identity, belonging, and the material world. The first thematic discussion unpacks what encompasses the material world, how material ‘things’ draw people and environments together in meshwork, and how becoming emerges with dwelling as skilled perception and attunement to such a material world. The second thematic discussion takes up the question of identity—a sense of who one is. This thesis argues for a view of ‘Singaporean Indian’ as engendered and regenerated in Singapore, as opposed to a fixed category simply transposed. The discussion examines what shared social identity entails, the primacy of race and ethnicity in informing identity in Singapore, and how the material world features in the emergence of identity. Thirdly, this thesis argues that belonging—a sense of where one is accepted and included—is engendered also through a process of becoming with the social and material world. This third thematic discussion presents how belonging is relational, ‘sensed’ in tune with others and the environment, how belonging is inherently spatial, and how everyday things and entanglements with the material world weigh on belonging. The chapter concludes with an overview of the chapters that follow and how they expand the argument of this thesis.

## **1.1 THE MATERIAL WORLD**

In arguing for a recognition that Singaporean Indian-ness is itself a process of becoming, I draw from ideas that the material world around it is itself ever-emergent. Such a world entails 'leaky' things that draw people and environments into relations, and a dwelling of skilled perception and attunement. As I argue over this thesis, dwelling in such a material world with leaky things engenders the 'becoming' of Singaporean Indian identity and belonging.

### **1.1.1 Material World**

We live in a material world. There is no point in the lives of humans that is not marked by an incessant intimate interaction with endlessly varied artifacts (Schiffer 1999: 2; Ingold 2012: 429). These things don't just make up the world around us but reflects upon us. Drawing from Hegel (1977), Daniel Miller (2005: 8) recognises that 'we cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us.' We would be remiss to study human life, culture, and identity without regard for the things that make up our world and who we are.

There is a diversity of approaches to this ubiquitous relationship between humans and material things, previously lead by 'material culture studies' (see Hicks and Beaudry 2010: 2). One new dominant approach, influenced by Miller and his studies on the processes of consumption, focuses on vernacular practices where people engaged objects in social relations (Hicks 2010: 68-9). Miller's (2005) focus on 'materiality' sought to reject the separation between material and cultural domains and to recognise the interconnectedness of persons, things, and cognition that shape culture.

This approach stands counter to the Durkheimian duality that naturalises the idea that things are not significant in themselves but are necessary vehicles of the essential ideas for the maintenance of collective consciousness (Racleş 2021: 11). For Miller, the material forms of things, such as clothes, are not subservient signifier-object to a signified-(human) subject or (social) idea but are rather part of the integral phenomenon of clothing/person (Miller 2005: 32). Human selfhoods are then always appropriations of the materiality by which they are constituted (Ibid. 37). Indeed, Miller positions his concerns with materiality as a critique of definitions of humanity as purely social and of 'approaches which view material culture as merely the semiotic representation of some bedrock of social relations', seeking thus to redress the 'tyranny of the [human] subject' (ibid. 3).

Although Miller and Tim Ingold ultimately argue for different understandings of what ought to be the prime focus in the study of the material world, they both agree on this 'tyranny'. Ingold decries how 'society and history are rendered as exclusively human achievements, brought about by way of the enrolment of objects and things' (2010: 431). Miller's 'materiality' is unsatisfactory for Ingold because it seems to reproduce the division of nature and society and so 'the world is presented to us both as a physical bedrock of existence and as an externality... open to comprehension and appropriation by a transcendent humanity' (Ingold 2017: 60). In the same vein, Ingold expresses frustration with the focus on things already made, rather than their processes of becoming, and seeks therefore to take the properties of materials seriously (Ingold 2007a: 14). Drawing on James Gibson's tripartite division of the inhabited environment into medium, substances and surfaces, Ingold follows that the forms of things are continually generated and dissolved within the fluxes of material across the interface between substances and the surrounding medium (ibid. 1). To

focus only on the fixed, complete, and final form object is to ignore and obscure this living process. For Ingold, the properties of materials are not fixed attributes of matter but are processual and relational—so materials carry on, overtaking formal destinations that had been, at one time, assigned to them (2007a: 1; 2012: 435). It is materials that ‘partake in the very processes of the world’s ongoing generation and regeneration’, and seemingly final-form objects ‘such as manuscripts or house fronts are impermanent by-products’ (Ingold 2007a: 9). Such an approach lends to a *longue durée*, non-anthropocentric view of the material world before and beyond human production and use, accounting as well for degradation, corrosion, and wear from and beyond human engagement.

The main criticism of Ingold’s call to focus on materials over materiality, is that it misses a key consideration in the ethnographic encounter and anthropological study—people, human environments, and the significance to people of materials made or encountered (Miller 2007: 27; Tilley 2007: 19). On the other hand, Miller holds that his approach does in fact consider the material, not ‘by tracing them back to some natural state of inherently bundled attributes’, but as dynamic processes always in the context of the ethnographic encounter (Miller 2007: 24). So, from Miller’s position, the concept of materiality does not ‘deaden’ or cut objects from flows but, based in Hegel’s dialectical process and exemplified through ethnographic encounters, has been used to show why objects often considered as mere things, such as the Internet or indeed persons, emerge in ethnography always as processual and relational (ibid. 25). On first reading, the positions of Ingold and Miller seem to be beyond reconciliation, but Carl Knappett argues that ‘materiality may still be a useful way of understanding the conjunction or intersection of the social and the material, without the former swallowing the latter’ (2007: 20). Knappett calls for a way of combining the two, of having materials *with*

materiality, and positions Ingold's encouragement to take materials seriously not as an alternative to materiality, but as a 'powerful corrective' (ibid. 23). The approach this thesis takes draws from both Miller and Ingold in recognising material things in the ethnographic encounter and how they emerge as processual and relational. So while I do not centre the material properties of things, I take Ingold's emphasis on things as not-fixed and ever-in-flux as a key premise in my approach to the material world.

The question of how to conceptualise material things and people, and study their relations is important for several of this thesis' concerns. In general, these approaches agree that human life and the significance drawn from it are not above and separate from the material world. This non-dualist conception grounds this thesis' position against the prevalent employment in Singapore of token objects in representing and explaining Singaporean Indian-ness. The recognition of the living process in Ingold's materials approach particularly supports the recognition in this thesis of Singaporean Indian-ness as processual and as relational in its process of becoming. While Miller's focus on how both materialities and people emerge in the ethnography anchors this thesis' ultimate anthropological focus on Singaporean Indians.

### **1.1.2 Things in the Material World**

Having established the world of human lives as integrally material, this section expands on the understanding this thesis takes of material things, informed primarily by Ingold's conception of 'thing' and the constituent 'thingness' of the material world.

The sole focus of early material culture studies was 'artifacts'—things made by humans, rather than things that exist or grow in nature (Miller 2005: 4; Ingold 2012: 439). But the materials of our world are more than these man-made 'artifacts'. Ingold

argues for engagement with 'things' over 'artifacts' and even over 'objects'. Drawing from Martin Heidegger (1971), Ingold argues that the 'object', in being complete and ready-made, is closed in upon itself and so is defined by its confrontational 'overagainstness' in relation to the setting it is placed (2012: 436). Even as it may be looked at or touched, the object remains affectively distant, prohibiting 'correspondence' (ibid.). In contrast, the 'thing' is a 'going on', or a place where several goings on become entwined. Such that 'to observe a thing is not to be locked out but to be invited in to the gathering' and into participation 'in the thing thinging in a worlding world' (Ingold 2010: 4). In contrast, the object 'ruptures the flows of materials by which it came into being' and presents the world as ready-made (Ingold 2007b: 314-5, as cited in Hicks 2010: 78). Whereas things appear 'as specific confluences of materials that, for a moment at least, have mixed and melded together into recognisable forms' (ibid.). A house, for example, is a thing, but not quite a completed object. The real house—'a complicated machine in which every day something breaks down'—is a gathering of lives, and is never finished (Ingold 2010: 5, citing Siza 1997: 47). Instead, it calls for unremitting effort to shore it up in the face of the comings and goings of its human and non-human inhabitants, and wear from the weather and time (Ingold 2010: 5). Our encounters with a house 'consist not of encounters with objects—the façade, doorframe, window and fireplace—but of acts of approaching and entering, looking in or out, and soaking up the warmth of the hearth' (Pallasmaa 1996: 45, as cited in Ingold 2010: 5). As inhabitants, we experience the house not as a completed object but as an ongoing thing. Rather than occupy a world full of objects that appear to the occupant as locked in their final forms and closed in, to inhabit the world is to join things in the processes of formation (Ingold 2010: 5-6).

In such a world the thing is 'a certain gathering together of the threads of life', it is 'a knot whose constituent threads, far from being contained within it, trail beyond, only to become caught with other threads in other knots' (ibid. 4). In other words, things leak. Like a living organism is sustained only through the continual exchange of materials with its surroundings, things too exist and persist only because they leak (Ingold 2017: 65). This shift of perspective from stopped-up objects to leaky things distinguishes Ingold's approach from studies of material culture that focus on supposedly 'finished' objects (ibid.). It is also in this way that people are present in Ingold's conception of the material world for people, as living organisms, are also complex bundles constituted by the flows and transformation of materials between their bodily substances and the surrounding media (Ingold 2007c: 31). They are not 'some superorganic dimension by which the life of people exceeds their organic life' his critics seem to look for (ibid.). Rather the human organism-person's immersion in an environment is an inescapable condition of existence (Ingold 2000: 153). In the same vein, I see the Singaporean Indian as a complex bundle of flows immersed in an environment of similarly leaky things, all joining in on the other's process of becoming.

Ian Hodder argues for a concept of 'entanglement' in which humans and the environment are always already entangled (2016: 2). This is not an environment that is separate and exterior that impinges on cultural systems (ibid. 2, 7). Rather, the view that the environment has involved the production of an heterogeneous multiplicity of forces in which humans have played their part, and so the human being is always already dispersed and distributed into the world (Ibid: 5, 7). While Hodder's work on 'entanglements' recognises that human-thing relationships are asymmetrical and that it is this asymmetrical tension that directs daily practices down specific pathways drawing humans in specific directions, he recognises that the potentials and

constraints created are because things have affordances that are continuous across contexts giving rise to historically contingent dialectical tension of dependency (ibid: 2, 9, 18). Ingold takes it further. It is not just that humans and things are entangled, but that everything itself is an entanglement linked to other things by way of flows (2007b: 35). Rather than the image of a network of interacting entities, Ingold reveals the meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth, and movement (Ingold 2011a: 63). Ingold borrows the term 'meshwork' from Henri Lefebvre who saw how 'practical activity writes on nature in a scrawling hand' (Lefebvre 1991: 118). For Ingold, meshwork consists not of interconnected points but of interwoven lines—each a line of relation, not between but rather along which materials flow, mix, mutate and come into being (Ingold 2007c: 35; 2008: 211; 2010: 3, 12). They are indeed lines of life (Ingold 2011a: 65). Beings do not propel themselves across a ready-made world but rather issue forth through a world-in-formation, along the lines of their relationships (ibid. 63). Thus, the world, for Ingold, is not an assemblage of heterogeneous bits and pieces but a tangle of threads and pathways (Ingold 2008: 212). In their shared premise of connectedness, what Hodder sees in the possibilities of 'entanglement' offers a helpful application of Ingold's meshwork. 'Entanglement', Hodder suggests, invites us to trace the threads that spread out entangling that action within wider socio-material realms, to see large-scale and long-term issues solidly grounded in the socio-material practices of daily life, such that only by considering the small-scale everyday practical dependencies between humans and things can the larger-scale transformations be adequately understood (2016: 8, 9). This thesis builds on the same impulse to study larger and longer-term ideas such as identity and belonging as grounded in everyday socio-material practices and relations recognising that each thing and persons come into being along interwoven lines of relation.

The concepts of things, and people, as 'leaky' bundles drawn together in meshwork where each continually in the process of becoming, besides providing a framework for approaching human-thing relationships, helps this thesis make sense of the everyday lives of Singaporean Indians in Singapore's plurality of communities, cultures, and therefore things. Singaporean Indian-ness issues forth not in isolation but immersed in a material world with things from other cultures as much as in a plural social world with people from other communities. In other words, and as this thesis holds, the Singaporean Indian person is then not simply an Indian occupant on the surface of Singapore but is an inhabitant—immersed and emergent with the environment of Singapore, 'dwelling' in its material world.

### **1.1.3 Dwelling in the Material World**

Human lives are certainly not passively lived amidst such lively leaky things. They are rather actively attuned, engendering movement and meaning in response to the material world. Humans thus 'dwell' in a world of unfolding relations and are themselves then in a process of becoming.

Ingold seeks ultimately 'towards reanimating the environment as the space of human dwelling' (2017: 22). This move first entails reconceptualising the human being not as a composite, discrete, bounded entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, and relate to others along lines of external contact that leave its internally specified nature unaffected (Ingold 2000: 3). Rather, Ingold argues that 'the person *is* the organism,' a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships (ibid.). Human identities and characteristics are 'not bestowed upon them in advance of their involvement with others' but are 'condensations of histories of growth and maturation' within such fields (ibid. 3).

Several implications follow from Ingold's conception of the organism-person. First, cultural variation is in fact a variation of skills. For Ingold, skills are not techniques of the body but 'the capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being situated in a richly structured environment' (2000: 5). Skills are then as much biological as cultural and account for cultural variation as human organisms develop in different environments. Second, skills are not pre-furnished to be transmitted down generations, but are rather regrown in each, incorporated through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks (ibid.). Third, this learning of skills demands a perspective that situates the organism from the beginning in a context of active engagement with the constituents of their surroundings (ibid.). This is the 'dwelling perspective' (ibid.).

Ingold, inspired by Heidegger (1971), argues against a 'building perspective' wherein people inhabit a world to which form and meaning has already been attached, a world they must 'construct' in consciousness before they can act in it (Ingold 2000: 153). 'Practice theory', initiated by Bourdieu, also challenges this 'building perspective' and argues that cultural knowledge is constituted within settings, rather than imported, through the development of specific disposition and sensibilities that lead people to orient themselves in relation to their environment and attend to its features in the particular ways they do (ibid.). With the emphasis on responsive skills, Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' is expressed in SPIDER: 'skilled practice involves developmentally embodied responsiveness' (Ingold 2008: 215). A skilled practitioner is then one who can continually attune their movements to perturbations in the perceived environment without ever interrupting the flow of action (ibid.). Such skilled attunement also calls for skilled perception.

An involved and skilled perception is what Ingold deems critical of the human-organism's dwelling. This is a perception that is not the achievement of a mind in a body, but of the organism as a whole in its environment, tantamount to the organism's own exploratory movement through the world (Ingold 2000: 3). Drawing from Gregory Bateson, the mind of Ingold's dwelling perspective is not limited by the skin, so rather than being 'inside the head' it is 'immanent in the network of sensory pathways that are set up by virtue of the perceiver's immersion in his or her environment' (ibid.). Even the mind leaks because the processing loops involved in perception and action are not interior to the creature, rather perception and action have to be understood as part of the unfolding system of relations comprised by the creature's embodied presence in a specific environment (Ingold 2011a: 86). Organisms, like spiders or humans, live in a world where to perceive is to align one's movements to modulations in the environment, to feel currents and textures (ibid. 88). In short, to perceive the environment is not to look back on the things to be found in it, but to join with them in the material flows and movements contributing to their—and our—ongoing formation (ibid.). The question then follows if perception should be conceptualised as purely physical or if culture has any role.

David Howes and Constance Classen argue that perception is informed by personal meanings of particular sensations as well as by the social values it carries, positioning the sense as 'culturally attuned' (Classen 1997; Howes 2003: 49; Howes and Classen 2014: 1; Howes 2019). But Howes' programme of comparing varying sensory hierarchies across culture was attached to a comparative anthropology that was increasingly rejected by the 1990s (Pink 2010: 332). Ingold's critique of Howes and Classen's work includes suggesting that separating out sensory modalities situates them in disembodied 'culture' and 'is incompatible with an anthropology that

understands learning and knowing as situated in embodied practice and movement' (ibid.). Ingold rejects this culturalist or representationalist distinction between the cultural and physical dimensions of perception, refuting the notion of externally induced sensation and the idea that these induced sensations must be cognitively assembled (or 'constructed') in terms of received cultural categories in order to 'make sense' of the world (Ingold 2000: 282; 2011b: 314). Instead, for Ingold, it is because the skill of perception and action differ from being to being, having emerged through varying ontogenetic development in varying environments, that they perceive the environment in different ways (Ingold 2011b: 314). So 'in its movements and responses...the body may furnish symbolic resources for projects of cultural cognition, but it is not from these bodily processes themselves that culture springs' (Ingold 2000: 283). Sarah Pink confers that 'perception is integral to the very production of these [cultural] categories: culture itself is not fixed' (2015: 32). Culture then, does not pre-exist perception, but is furnished by movement through the world and the varying perceptions of the sensing body.

Just as the 'things' in an enmeshed material world, the Singaporean Indian is not pre-formed ahead of involvement with the social and material environment of Singapore but is rather responsive to and engendered through the field of relations that encompass the meshwork that is Singapore. Neither is Singaporean Indian culture, identity, and belonging, pre-formed or determined by this environment, because 'skilled practice involves developmentally embodied responsiveness'. In this understanding of dwelling, the Singaporean Indian is neither pre-made or made, but ever in a process of becoming—becoming *with* a meshwork where everything is becoming something. A dwelling perspective, informed by a conception of things as leaky bundles of flows, then offers a view of the Singaporean Indian in the grammatical

form of the verb, just as 'to human' is a verb. 'Wherever and whenever we encounter them, humans are humaning' (Ingold 2011a: 175), 'humaning' is a way of carrying on just as 'to Singaporean Indian' is a way of becoming. This active view accounts for and returns some agency to the Singaporean Indian in the matters of identity and belonging.

## **1.2 IDENTITY**

'Singaporean Indian' is primarily a racial identity, informed by how race itself is understood and objectified in Singapore's environment. Though this category encompasses a number of ethnic identities and qualifies religious identities, this thesis is primarily focused on the overarching shared Singaporean Indian identity. I argue that this is an identity, and way of becoming, that emerges and regenerates through dwelling, and it follows that the constituent ethnic, linguistic, religious identities are engendered likewise. This second thematic discussion unpacks identity as it pertains to the material world of Singapore, examining what identity and 'becoming' entail; the primacy of 'race' in identity in Singapore; and how material objects and things inform identity.

### **1.2.1 Identity and 'Becoming'**

Identity is a sense of membership in a social group, personally held by the subject as well as by fellow members and others outside the group. When understood in 'naturalist' terms, 'identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation' (Hall 1996: 2). Stuart Hall offers a second, discursive approach seeing identity as

always 'in process', a construction never completed (1996: 2.). As such, identity is not determined or inalienable for it can always be reconstructed, won or abandoned (ibid.). Identity then is a matter of 'being' as well as 'becoming', framed by two simultaneously operative vectors of similarity and continuity, and of difference and rupture (Hall 1990: 225-226). In 'being' identity has continuity, it comes from somewhere, having histories; but far from being fixed in some essentialised past, it is subject to continuous transformation in its 'becoming' (ibid. 225). Hall recognises then that identity 'belongs to the future as much as to the past' (ibid.). Following from the previous discussion on dwelling, this thesis aligns with Hall's approach to argue that identity as a matter of 'becoming' is engendered through a processual material world that is likewise in flux. While recognising its simultaneous operation with 'being', I highlight 'becoming' to foreground the shared processual aspects between identity and dwelling in an ever-emergent material world. Also, the emphasis on 'becoming'—which highlights identity's instability and ongoing transformation—allows this thesis to address the paradox between the rhetorical and imagined stability of the 'Singaporean Indian' and the lived experience of this identity's instability.

On the surface, identity underscores group similarities, but it is constructed through difference. 'Identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render those "outside", abjected' (Hall 1996: 5). It entails the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries and the production of 'frontier-effects' (ibid. 3). For Hall, identities are 'always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate—identical—to the subject processes which are invested in them' (ibid. 6). Rather than mistake identity for some fixed essence that can be 'recovered' from the past, Hall instead sees identity as a 'positioning' by the narratives of the past, the

unstable points of suture made within the discourse of history (1990: 226). As 'positioning', identity is recognised as momentary and unstable. But for identity to have meaning, it depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop in the endless repositionings (ibid. 230). In popular discourse we mistake this arbitrary 'cut' of identity as natural and permanent, whereas meaning continues to unfold beyond that arbitrary closure (ibid.). Identity is never complete and never complete-able. People nevertheless mobilise identity as fixed even as they participate in boundary-shifting discourse and practices every day. These tensions underlie Singaporean Indian identity too when it is discussed as fixed even as practices and group conceptions of the community itself are in flux.

This notion of identity as fixed and natural is further compounded by Singapore's approach to 'race' (expanded in the next section). In this way, race has a persistent but not unchanging 'presence' in Singaporean Indian identity. Hall (1990) employs the metaphor of 'presence' to rethink the positionings and repositionings of Caribbean cultural identities in relation to *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Europeenne*, and *Presence Amercain*. I offer a similar tracing of positionings in Chapter 3 in my consideration of the Singaporean Indian becoming 'local', 'Indian', and 'Singaporean'. Though, while I seek to trace the processes of identity becoming over this thesis, I recognise that I can only capture part of the picture as it is unfolding in and informed by concerns of the present.

Hall's underscoring of 'becoming' helpfully recognises identity's processual properties. However, identity for him is 'constituted, not outside but within representation' (Hall 1990: 236). Here, I agree with the critique that Hall has been overly reliant on the discursive, giving little attention to how 'becoming' is also entangled in regimes of

power and value (Ong 1999), and embodied practices (Csordas 1994, Mahmood 2005). Hall does recognise that identity 'is *something*—not a mere trick of the imagination' (emphasis in original), having its histories and that 'histories have their real, material and symbolic effects' (1990: 226). In this thesis, I expand on this impulse to recognise that identity is something, to add that identity is not only sutured to the past but also sutured to and entangled with the material world. My approach is to trace the 'becoming' in the 'positionings' that come up in living with the material world, i.e., in dwelling; and not only as constituted within representation. In doing that though, I must first acknowledge the hegemony of 'race' in the discursive understandings of identity (section 1.2.2), so as to situate these positionings as encountered in things as examined over the rest of this thesis.

In anthropology, 'identity' entered the lexicon in the 1960s and 1970s through works influenced by symbolic interactionism and social construction like Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) (Mitchell 2010: 368). Since then, identity had primarily referred to community identity along ethnic or race lines, with a focus on the boundaries between groups. While this conceptualisation emerged in part from the 'identity politics' of the 1970s and influence from subaltern and postcolonial studies, detractors argue that its ethnocentrism and concerns for qualities of sameness and boundedness are not sustained across societies (ibid.). Where Singapore is concerned though, race and ethnicity most certainly dominates the conception, discourse, and everyday experience of identity.

### **1.2.2 Race and Identity in Singapore**

Plurality has increasingly become the norm across many societies around the world today. John Furnivall (1944) introduced the term 'plural society' to describe a society

where there is a medley of peoples who mix but do not combine, who tend to be organised for production over social life. Barth (1969) similarly picks up on the economic relation between groups defining a plural society as one combining ethnic contrasts with economic interdependence and ecological specialisation. More recently, Steven Vertovec (2007) called attention to 'superdiversity'—the increasing and multifaceted diversification of populations. Across all these ideas, race or ethnicity is the primary category demarcating society, its diversity, and its internal borders. Singapore stands out for its institutionalisation of race and formalisation of plurality, as this section unpacks.

Race had been an explanatory tool first introduced in the late 18th century for understanding biological variation across the global human population (Rohrl 1995: 89; Billinger 2007; Sanjek 2010: 584). Anthropology today rejects the idea of scientifically determinable racial categories, arguing instead that the concept was the product of biased ways of thinking about other groups of people (Rohrl 1995: 85). In an age of exploration followed closely by colonialism and Darwinian influenced ideas of cultural evolution, race was the framework with which to categorise the human physical and cultural diversity encountered; make sense of the differences in 'social progress' as local environmental adaptations; and thus justify colonialism and its 'civilising project' (ibid. 89-90). As the most immediate difference, physically ascertainable features were deemed the source of cultural difference (ibid. 89). Linguistic differences, for instance, were laid in part in the ability to shape the mouth to make certain sounds; or as Samuel Morton argued in the 1830s and 1840s, intelligence and therefore superiority was commensurate with the size of the cranium (Rohrl 1995: 89; Sanjek 2010: 585). Franz Boas' critique of racial ranking and his study of adopted children delinking race, language, and culture finally broke anthropology's

entanglement with racist anthropometry in the early 20th century (Sanjek 2010: 586). From the 1960s, alongside developments in genetic testing and greater understandings of genotypes and phenotypes, geneticists and anthropologists saw that genetic variability did not correspond with race and are rather even greater within one race than across races, thereby firmly invalidating race as the framework for human bio-variability (Sanjek 2010: 586; Rohrl 1995: 96; c.f. M'charek 2013).

Nonetheless, visible physical differences remain and continue to inform social differentiation amongst people, alongside linguistic and cultural differences—all features previously thought determined by race. Race, as physical and cultural, has been and continues to be the primary means of social organisation and identification in Singapore ever since it was employed in British colonial administration of the island. Singapore's diverse population—partly free migrants from India, China, and the neighbouring Malayan and Indonesia islands, partly colonial labour of various classes recruited from British India—were categorised based on the view of people as being from six main blocs of the world (Lian 2006: 222; Purushotam 2000: 30, 32). Those from the Indian subcontinent together with Burma were thus categorised 'Tamils and Other Natives of India'. These blocs were further divided into regions such that people were subcategorised as 'Tamil', 'Telugu', 'Punjabi' and so on (Purushotam 2000: 32). In line with social Darwinism that underscored the colonial project, such categorisation sharpened an essentialist idea of the population entangling 'homelands', racial character, and occupational utility (ibid. 31). For instance, Tamil labour from south India were seen by British administrators as docile and ideal for the plantations, while Sikh men from Punjab were deemed to have innate martial qualities making them suitable for security roles. Such ideas defined colonial recruitment and immigration policies such that these communities largely persisted in the colonies just as imagined

and creating a situation of ethnically determined economic interdependence and 'ecological specialisation' (Barth 1969) in the local context.

From early in its usage in Singapore, the term 'race' had an imprecise application leaning close to the term 'ethnicity'. In the formal application of the term for census taking, 'race' was effectively 'a judicious blend of the ideas of geography and ethnography, origin, political allegiance and racial and social affinities and sympathies' (1931 Census Report, pp. 73-74, para 260). This conception of 'race', in its reference to allegiances and affinities, reads similarly to anthropological ideas of 'ethnicity' as a shared, learned identity (Montagu 1964, 1971, 1982). The term 'ethnicity' also carries the meaning of a relational system produced through interaction between groups (Shneiderman and Amburget 2022: 1). Ethnic groups are relative in several aspects. First, Fredrik Barth argued that the content of an ethnic group has no *a priori* existence or stability, and that it is instead the *idea* of the group that endures (Barth 1969; Banks 1996: 12). Because the idea of each ethnic groups exist relative to other ethnic groups, they cannot exist in isolation but only in contrast to other such groups (Banks 1996: 12). Second, ethnic identity is relative to the situation. 'Situational ethnicity', Barth recognises, is the variation in the expression of ethnic identity by a social actor who choose features which legitimate their location and status in any given situation (Banks 1996: 13; Barth 1996: 33). Third, ethnicity is relational to fellow group members who ought to also recognise your membership. However, as much as ethnicity may be situational and fluid, the choices are limited. Philip Mayer (1961) argues that one cannot identify with a group other than that with which they are born and A.L. Epstein (1978: 11) argues that people in plural settings have 'cognitive maps' to distinguish groups from one another (Banks 1996: 30). Max Weber (1978) also recognises how 'race' and 'ethnicity' work in similar ways in that members of both groupings 'must

recognise their shared distinctiveness and align with others who share a perceptible common trait or phenotype' (Shneiderman and Amburget 2022: 2). Weber further notes that these terms are not precise analytical concepts but vague vernacular terms whose meaning varies over place and time (ibid.). Some opt to maintain a distinction between 'race' as fixed and ascribed at birth, and 'ethnicity' as fluid and culturally constructed (Banks 1996: 31). In Singapore, 'race' and 'ethnicity' are rather conflated.

As a new world order after the second world war saw 'nationality' shift in meaning, the census and administrative categories previously termed 'nationality' were renamed 'races' in the 1947 census. Further shortened for ease, 'Chinese', 'Malay', 'Indian', and 'Others' were henceforth the categorical 'races' of Singapore under which were the previous 'races' now newly minted 'dialect groups' (Purushotam 2000: 33). 'Race' in Singapore now means something closer to the earlier biological concept of race in being determined by ancestral origin from one of the global blocs. Discrete origins and the largely endogamous practices of the three 'founding races'—Chinese, Malay, and Indian—mean that these groups largely retain distinct phenotypical features. Although anthropology has dismissed the utility of biological race and its phenotypical determination, looks continue to matter and inform understandings of 'race' in Singapore. In the realities of its application, 'race' in Singapore is more akin to 'ethnorace' as proffered by David Goldberg (1992). 'Ethnorace' combines the ideas of phenotypical and cultural characteristics in determining group identity wherein the biological becomes a possible cultural criterion, and the choice of the natural as criterion is a social choice (Goldberg 1992: 553). This better accounts for how Singaporeans frequently rely on phenotypical features such as skin tone and facial structures to determine someone's racial identity, and express surprise when one does not 'look like' their race. Of the three, Indians are most phenotypically distinct and

cannot as easily pass for another, leaving them especially identifiable and identified by race (Lian 2006: 224). But 'race' is not only a socially held construct in Singapore, the term also refers to an administrative category giving rise to a context wherein social and administrative constructions of 'race' mutually inform each other.

The post-colonial state of Singapore retained the colonial racial administrative categories and further reified the racialisation of the population through the principle of multiculturalism and associated housing, educational, and political representation policies (as I detail in Chapter 3). Such moves accord race greater visibility, presents it as the natural order of this society, and cements its centrality in Singaporean identity. But as an identity learned and shared, what the races of Singapore entail has to be shaped and communicated to all. Here is where identity meets the material world.

### **1.2.3 Identity and The Material World**

With this thesis, I argue for recognising that identity emerges through engaged dwelling in the material world, ever in flux and in the process of becoming in the entanglement of flows with things. The literature on the role of material things and identity has moved towards this view as well.

A previous foundational approach to cultural meaning has been to see objects as symbols on which cultures shape their worldview and practices. Clifford Geertz, advocating an interpretative approach saw culture as 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life' (1973: 89). This view takes objects as completed and onto which significance and meaning can be mapped.

It is akin to the present operation in Singapore of representing racial identities and cultures through the use of racial symbols or token objects such as the *sari*, peacock feathers, and oil lamps to stand for 'Indian-ness'. This is an approach to the material world I argue against for its failure to recognise the real, lived ways in which meaning and identity emerge in the mutual unfolding of things and people in dwelling. Ignoring the ways materials flow, the tokenisation of things in Singapore also seem, mistakenly, to position these objects as akin to 'boundary objects' meant to mark one group against another. Barth (1969)'s argument for focus on the boundaries of ethnic groups also calls for considering the negotiation of 'boundary objects'. With ethnic groups as self-defining entities that seek to maintain a sense of ethnic boundedness, some objects and practices become 'boundary objects'—issues by which they define themselves in relation to other ethnic groups—while other practices or objects might be shared over large areas and not become boundary objects for any of the communities sharing them (Fowler 2010: 7). These boundary objects change as groups are 'selective and situationally responsive in their selection of what to make matter' (Barth 1969: 35). In the largely fixed ways token objects are positioned in Singapore, it fails to account for the lived and responsive ways groups define themselves. Against this, I argue for a recognising the ways Singaporean Indians actually engage with things, and to see that instead it is attunement with things shared across the racial groups that best demonstrate the process of Singaporean Indian becoming in the material world.

Anthropological approaches to consumption represent one such engagement. Influenced by the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Mary Douglas, the study of consumption greatly expanded in the late 1980s and 1990s. Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) built on his earlier 'theory of practice' (1977) and continued to assign 'objects a particular role in the naturalisation of ideology' (Miller 1995a: 142). In his analysis of

taste in France, Bourdieu illustrated that the more mundane the object, such as food, the greater its significance in making ideological assumptions, such as being of good or bad taste (ibid.). Focusing on the objects consumed, Arjun Appadurai (1986) explored how as objects circulated through different 'regimes of value', their meanings and value were situationally specific and shifted over time, thereby calling into attention the 'social lives' of objects. With *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Miller argues that contemporary mass culture is key as 'the dominant context through which we relate to goods' (Miller 1987: 4). He criticises a 'sociability fetishism' in which 'social structure is often treated as both prior to and ontologically superior to its appearance in goods', and instead placed emphasis on consumers, who, in using material things, produced their own identities in the context of the material world they lived in (ibid: 146). In considering consumption, anthropological views have moved from seeing objects as illustrative of social positioning, to a recognition that objects themselves have 'social lives' in their circulation in and beyond market exchanges. Identity is then not simply reflected in objects but actively made with things.

The duality of thing and identity is collapsed further in the idea of 'distributed personhood'. In this, the 'human being is always already dispersed and distributed into the world; there is no environment separate from human culture and society' (Hodder 2016: 5). Using the term 'enchainment', Marilyn Strathern (1988) observes this of Polynesian and Melanesian cultures where an artefact is not a 'thing-in-itself', neither acquiring nor giving identity through use by people, but rather a part of a chain of obligations and desires as things circulate, passed around as gifts (Hodder 2016: 15). So 'enchainment is a condition of all relations based on the gift,' and 'the general enchainment of relations means that persons are multiply constituted' (Strathern 1988: 161, 165). Influenced by Strathern, Alfred Gell argues that personhood may be

understood as 'distributed' outside of human bodies, thus persons are seen 'not as bounded biological organisms, but . . . all the objects and/or events in the milieu from which agency or personhood can be abducted' (1998: 222). In this way a person and their mind are not confined to spaces and time, or even to their living body, but consist of a dispersed category of material objects which persist and can have lives and agentic capacities of their own (Hodder 2016: 222; Bauer 2019: 339). Extant ideas like these set up the possibility for acknowledging the ways Singaporean Indian-ness is not simply held within such persons, but also constitutive of Singapore and its material world, and likewise of the person as a process of becoming through such an environment wherein others in the plural society are also distributed.

Identity, as this section has established, is social and relational, not removed from others nor from the environment. Singapore's institutionalisation of race in administration and reinforced socially, also shows that identity is not removed from history as well. Though, it is not fixed in history either. Rather, identity too is fluid, being learned and shared in the becoming of the material world. As this thesis will demonstrate, Singaporean Indian identity is itself ever emergent through responsive attuned dwelling in a material world wherein the self, 'us' and 'others' are distributed, wherein identities may be constituted in the circulations of consumption, and even where objects are made to stand as symbols of race.

### **1.3 BELONGING**

Over the years, the question of belonging has been salient to Singaporean Indians for various reasons. An earlier generation of Indians had to decide on taking up Singapore citizenship and, by extension, decide where their loyalties and belonging laid. Today's Singaporean Indians find themselves wrapped up in discourse against new migrants,

including many from South Asia. Questions of belonging meant to push back against the state's liberal migration policies have also embroiled Singaporean Indians who find themselves having to both defend their national belonging and define themselves against their co-ethnic 'new migrant' counterparts. This tension is compounded by recent discussions around racism and the position of Singapore's Indian minority. In essence, the official status of Indians as one of the three founding races of Singapore and an equal part of the national fabric does not always stand commensurate with Singaporean Indians' feelings of belonging. This third thematic discussion examines how belonging is relational and 'sensed'; an inherently spatial concept; and emergent with the material world, unpacking this concept with respect to Singaporean Indian becoming.

### **1.3.1 Sensed Belonging**

Belonging is essentially relational, coming up where the self meets the world around. Following from the discussion so far, I argue that belonging is neither given nor fixed but is instead in a fluid process of becoming. The sense that one has of belonging emerges with the emerging world and is inextricable then from other inhabitants of the world.

Belonging is typically described as a feeling, but this personal or informal 'sense of belonging' stands in duality with more formal designations. Often defined as synonymous with national or ethnic identity, belonging is associated with citizenship (Antonsich 2010: 644-5). Legal status, or 'formal structures of belonging' (Fenster 2005), alone do not however automatically engender a sense of belonging (Gammeltoft 2018: 87). Ares Kalandides and Dina Vaiou conceive of belonging, in the tradition of Lefebvre, as the 'rights to the city' which reorients membership and

participation towards inhabitance ('habiter') (2012: 262). Recognising citizenship on paper as insufficient, they however continue that citizenship as 'right to the city' includes constant social inventions and informal practices that provide residents/inhabitants with the resources to access what Saskia Sassen (2003) calls 'de facto citizenship' (Kalandides and Vaiou 2012: 262).

While legal status is on one hand a precondition to participate in and shape one's environment, a process deemed important for generating feelings of belonging, to feel that they belong people must also be met in ways that maintain their sense of self, they must feel recognised and accepted by fellow inhabitants and group members (Mee 2009: 844; Antonsich 2010: 649; Wood and Waite 2011: 201; Gammeltoft 2018: 87). In this sense, belonging to a place, say a nation-state or a neighbourhood, becomes one and the same as belonging to a group of people—belonging becomes synonymous with identity, both social and individual (Antonsich 2010: 649). Just like identity, belonging can also become a resource in in/exclusion discourse employed towards 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' (Crowley 1999: 30, cited in Antonsich 2010: 649). Belonging is then relational, contingent on recognition by social peers and social others.

Elsbeth Probyn (1996) argues that the notion of longing should be regarded as the core dimension of belonging itself. Probyn's 'be-longing' aims to instil movement within a condition of essentialised stability, exposing the impossibility, in a postcolonial world, of 'ever really and truly belonging' and to displace belonging as a taken-for-granted and stable condition (Probyn 1996: 8, 19; Antonsich 2010: 652). Crucially, the belonging as process involves two opposing sides: the side that claims belonging, and the side that has the power of 'granting' belonging (Antonsich 2010: 650). There is

here already a power imbalance. The 'granting' power crafts requirements in their own favour, typically seeking applicants who already have the 'national cultural capital' (Hage 1998: 53, as cited in Skey 2013: 89). Ghassan Hage, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, argues that 'nationality can be understood as the sum of accumulated nationally sanctioned and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions' (ibid.). Belonging then entails some correspondence with extant norms.

Andreea Racleş (2021) similarly recognises these standards and advances the idea of 'sensed belonging'. Shifting from a view of belonging as being socially negotiated to a view of belonging as sensed, 'sense belonging' refers to everyday experiences derived from the interplay between people and everyday materialities (objects and spaces) that enable people to make and sense their place in the social world, and to concretise their capabilities as social actors and bodies (Racleş 2021: 181). Belonging, as a set of capabilities, encompasses individual's knowledge and competences to identify the socially approved standards of organising life and space; to evaluate themselves according to these standards; and to critically appraise them (Ibid. 182). Racleş thus recognises belonging as a dialectical movement between the individual and the collective, in which a set of capabilities are sensorially experienced and mobilised, so as to be competently in tune with the practices and values relevant for the different 'others' that are significant at a particular time and space (ibid.). In foregrounding such adaptive capabilities, 'sensed belonging' strongly parallels Ingold's ideas of skilled practice in moving and dwelling with the given environment. Belonging, as Racleş positions, is then relational, responsive, and a process of becoming that emerges with the material and social world.

With this relational quality, belonging is then not simply a matter of personal choice. 'There is often less choice than we might imagine as to whom and where we belong' (Wood and Waite 2011: 201) when 'acquiring a sense of belonging is neither solely agency-driven, nor merely structurally produced, but fuelled by relationalities' with established powers (Racleş 2021: 6). Even where one is able to adopt these dispositions, one's inalienable bodily features like skin colour can also prevent full 'sameness'. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe reminds, 'belongings are conditioned by our bodies and where they are placed on the globe', which means that not every form of belonging is possible (2005: 21, as cited in Antonsich 2010: 652). We might easily imagine these scenarios playing out in monoethnic or monocultural societies, but already pluralised societies do not necessarily guarantee recognition and belonging for all. As several have observed of Singapore, having a recognised racial identity is *sine qua non* of effective citizenship as every Singaporean or Permanent Resident is required to 'have' a race (Benjamin 1976: 131; Clammer 1985: 142; Rocha and Yeoh 2021). In the eyes of fellow Singaporeans too, 'belonging to Singapore is inextricable from belonging to one of the CMIO categories' and, as discussed earlier, the primacy of phenotypical identification of the races means legible belonging is tied to the visibility of one's race. This 'ethnorace' application already leaves communities such as Eurasians feeling alienated from claims to Singaporean-ness despite similar histories of settlement and their essential synonymy with the 'Others' race bracket (Rocha and Yeoh 2021: 889).

Yet, sometimes neither the founding status of 'Indians' nor official documents are sufficient when faced with social others who misrecognise one as non-belonging. While the sources and degrees of attachments may vary, as Doreen Massey points out: 'feeling you belong to a place in no way necessarily entails that it belongs to you'

(2011: 16). This sense of belonging is then constituted by both relations with the social world around, and the physical landscape in which the Singaporean Indian dwells.

### **1.3.2 Feeling at Home**

Implicitly or explicitly, belonging is spatial. Kathleen Mee and Sarah Wright (2009: 772) argue that belonging is an inherently geographical concept. The image predominantly conjured of spatial belonging might be of a nation-state's territorial limits and associated border practices letting in those who 'belong' and keeping others out. But practices and politics of belonging run across the land and are inscribed into the landscape.

Richard H. Schein's (2009) study of the post-Civil War landscape argues that a politics of belonging is naturalised when incorporated into the landscape. This process writes some people into the story of places, positioning them as belonging, while the contributions of other people are left out of the story (Mee and Wright 2009: 776). Similarly, Daniel Trudeau demonstrates, with land use policies, how landscapes are constructed through a territorialized 'politics of belonging' that establish and maintain discursive and material boundaries that correspond to the imagined geographies of a polity and to the spaces that normatively embody the polity' (2006: 422). Landscapes are not *a priori* or neutral but are constructed to appear a certain way in turn normalising those relations, values, aesthetics and ways of seeing the world that orthodoxy represents (ibid. 435). Landscapes are therefore representations of what belongs, they codify membership to a polity and its territory. Those who do not belong are simply not represented (ibid.). But Trudeau's study also argues that landscape may be used to recapture a sense of place and the seemingly objective and stable

status of a landscape can be contested or contravened (ibid. 437). Landscapes, just as belonging, are always then in the process of becoming.

Where belonging is commonly expressed as 'feeling at home' in a place, it follows that the home is a key site for investigating belonging. The home, as site and enmeshment of belonging, has been examined in terms of material practices from cooking and resting to pursuing hobbies and curating home décor (Tolia-Kelly 2004, 2006, 2008; Miller 2008; Racleş 2021). But the home also quickly exceeds its own material space. As suggested earlier in Ingold's conception, the house is not itself a finished object but an 'impermanent by-product' of the world's ongoing generation (2007a: 9). It is a thing, a gathering of lives, encountered in the movements of dwelling (Ingold 2010: 5). In this way, the 'home' is conceived as a network of social relations with family, friends, and neighbours (Blunt and Dowling 2006). It is this leaky exceeding quality of the home, in entangling its materiality and flows with the world around, that also makes it fraught with challenges to belonging, as the next section suggests. The home space and its material flows, in disrupting the hard binary between private and public, makes it key to the examination of belonging and its process of becoming.

As essentially spatial, belonging should be understood in relation to the landscape. But people also have a hand in making their material environment, and in that attune their ways or the world in shaping their belonging, becoming with the becoming of the landscape. In a world of social and material others, and 'leaky' things, belonging is not a solo or internal operation untouched by the flows and fields around.

### 1.3.3 Belonging and the Material World

Belonging, while relational and located, is also not pre-determined or passively gained. In its process of becoming, belonging can be actively engendered through responsive attuned dwelling. The material world can then be recruited into kindling a sense of belonging. Though, recognising that Singaporean Indians dwell in a world with the tastes and things, perceptions and propensities of others, this material world can also be fraught with challenges to belonging.

The mundane everyday thing or household item is particularly potent in engendering belonging. Racleş (2021: 10) points out how studies of ceremonial or prestige objects have been interested in material presences and absences that 'materialise differences'. In contrast, the everyday materialities she considers assist her Roma participants in negotiating belonging and allowing commonalities with non-Roma to surface (ibid. 1). Everyday objects thus contribute to the maintenance of a sense of familiarity and ordinariness yet are not impeded from practices of self-identification, resignification, or ascription (ibid. 14). Divya Tolia-Kelly (2004) finds a similar operation in the home decor of her British South Asian interlocutors. Tolia-Kelly argues that in importing 'other' landscapes, displays of family photographs and landscape images of left homelands 'refract connections to landscapes of value and meaning, forming a body of material cultures in the home that are important to senses of cultural and individual identity' and so 'assist the new configurations of identity in Britain' (ibid. 676, 685). These cultures situated in the home-space offer a sense of inclusion and belonging, which has aesthetic, sensual, and psycho-sociological dimensions (ibid. 685). As these studies imply, the engendering of belonging happens not with a single item in isolation, but in a collection of things (see also Miller 2008). This is not though

a matter of amassing quantity but rather in a particular quality of being collected together in the home space. As Sarah Wright argues, 'it is possible... to understand belonging as materially performed by messy, complex, human and more-than-human assemblages of things, people, beings, processes and affects' (2015: 402). Things in the home and curated home collections then offers a potent entanglement through which belonging may be emergent.

The sensorial features of mundane things also play a role in 'sensed belonging'. Lisa Law examined how Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong carved out a temporary space each weekend in which they could gather and share a sense of belonging with fellow Filipinos through the aurality of language and song, the visuality of favourite products on sale, and through the cooking and sharing of food (2005: 226). 'Food is significant for its ability to evoke a multifaceted experience of place, for by cooking and eating Filipino food on Sundays, domestic workers consume different experiences of Hong Kong, home and nation' (ibid.). Belonging is also attuned through recognising local sensibilities and moderating food and cooking practices accordingly as Comorians in the diaspora do with *ntsambu*, a uniquely pungent Ngazidja foodstuff (Walker 2012). The sensory properties of everyday things thus entangle the self with the world around, proving a challenge to but also an opportunity for attunement in the active engendering of belonging.

Belonging, as this section has unpacked, is itself a process of becoming, emerging with the unfolding of the fields of relations in the world. It is thus relational, sensed, and spatial. Belonging is also not pre-determined or a given but emerges with a world that is unfolding with one's movements but also that of others. Singaporean Indians, as I argue in this thesis, have a hand in shaping the material world of Singapore, as

do their social others. As a process of becoming with such a material world, Singaporean Indian belonging is thus variously enabled and challenged in this entanglement but emerges from the active, responsive attunements of dwelling.

#### **1.4 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

Over the next seven chapters, I expand the argument that Singaporean Indian identity and belonging has and continues to be a process of becoming, emerging through dwelling with active, skilled and responsive attunement in this material world. I begin by drawing out how the community has become ‘Singaporean Indian’ through historical processes of representation. This is followed by four primarily ethnographic chapters that examine the becoming of Singaporean Indian in the present, through documents, food, smells, and sounds. But first a discussion of the research methods sets the stage for those historiographic and ethnographic discussions.

#### **Chapter 2 Workshops, Walking, and Other Methods**

Informed by the conceptual approach of this thesis, my method centres an anthropology that seeks to study *with* people, over making a study of people. This informs the methodological objectives of collaboration and cultivation that then shape my execution of the various methods. The discussion here then draws out and rationalises the two main methods at the heart of this thesis—workshops and walking—and how these draw on ideas and impulses from ‘object-based learning’ and ‘walking interviews’, respectively. Two pieces of creative production—a short film and a ‘sonic walk’—produced by Singaporean Indians offer another avenue for making sense of this identity and belonging through their eyes (and ears). These sources of ethnographic data are then complemented with resources from the newspaper, photograph, and video archives as I detail. Ultimately, this chapter recognises that

these methods are informed by and inextricable from an underlying autoethnography and have emerged with my own dwelling and becoming Singaporean Indian.

### **Chapter 3    Becoming Local, 'Indian', and Singaporean**

With the view that the Singaporean Indian is ever emergent, this chapter offer a historical consideration of this process arguing that this identity comes through the processes of becoming local, 'Indian' as understood in Singapore's administration, and Singaporean. Drawing on Ingold's (2000) relational model of inhabitation, I argue for a view of becoming local through entangled dwelling. With this I also argue against the limiting frames of the Singaporean Indian as 'migrant' or 'diasporic'. I lay out the colonial and post-colonial administrative categorisation of the Singapore population and how the idea and reality of 'Indian' emerged through that, supported and communicated with the popular discursive employment of token objects. I expand on that approach to objects which this thesis is, in part, set against. Becoming Singaporean, as this chapter demonstrates, emerges in the entanglement with local society and politics and then with the formalisation of Singaporean citizenship. Becoming Singaporean Indian has thus emerged with the contexts of these processes, not as a simple sum of the parts, but as an identity in its own right.

### **Chapter 4    Identity Documents, Documenting Belonging**

This first ethnographic chapter tackles the legibility of Singaporean Indian belonging through state documents and official museum collections. The question here is with whether such official representations enact ideas of belonging for Singaporean Indians as one might expect. In short, this discussion recognises that the document or artefact alone is insufficient, rather it is the things that are enmeshed in social relations with other things and other people, especially one's own family, that most significantly

ground Singaporean Indian belonging. Where expectations are that the museum display in the Indian Heritage Centre ought to stand as 'material mirror' for the viewing Singaporean Indian public, my participants instead feel distant from this and rather locate their Singaporean-ness in their own familial collections of entry permits and photographs kept in unassuming bags at home. Where expectations are that the National Registration Identity Card (NRIC) and its inscription of 'Race' would support feelings of legibility, authenticity, and rightful belonging, the study reveals how everyday encounters with such documents instead raises further questions that call for skilled intervention or the deployment of other documents and material attestations of one's Singaporean Indian-ness. This chapter begins with a consideration of becoming Singaporean Indian through the structures of the state's documentary regime and concludes that becoming emerges with the positionings people make for themselves vis-à-vis documents.

## **Chapter 5 Eating and Cooking Across**

This chapter argues against taking the race-specific foodways in Singapore at face value. Instead, the chapter argues for recognising the skilled and attuned ways Singaporean Indians eat and cook 'across' the 'raced' cuisines in Singapore. The study begins by recognising how cooking is a skilled practice of attunement to material and environment through a close examination of making *thosai* (a crepe-like southern Indian dish) at home. The study then discusses Singaporean Indian eating habits when dining out and how such exposure to other tastes, ingredients, and cooking techniques are then incorporated in home preparations. Where dwelling in Singapore means eating across the 'raced' ways food as presented and sold in public eateries, it also engenders skilled ways of cooking and eating at home 'across' these race-lines. However, with the recognition of eating and cooking 'across', I argue that the racial

identification of foods is maintained. Through this consideration of how Singaporean Indians cook and eat, this chapter shows how attunement to the culinary environment informs the everyday food practices through and with which Singaporean Indian identity is positioned in its becoming.

## **Chapter 6 Smells and Scents of Belonging**

The leaky property of smells, just like the leaky quality of things, draws Singaporean Indians into relations with their material and social surroundings influencing how Singaporean Indians attune their practices and adapt their ways in taking pleasure and comfort from scents while being weary of smelling foul to others. This chapter examines how smells ‘other’, mapping stink onto Indians in Singapore. Such foul attribution and rejection of their smells weigh on the ‘sensed belonging’ of Singaporean Indians. On the other hand, this study also recognises how smells can gather community, and how the consumption of scent commodities makes and gathers the space of Little India as one where Singaporean Indian olfaction belongs, and from which scented belonging may be sought through acquiring scents for the home. But leaky smells cannot be contained by homes that are themselves ‘leaky’. The scented comforts of home are then potentially dangerous when perceived negatively by neighbours, but also offer potential for camaraderie when it draws together those who share in these scent practices. Such leakiness of smells and its social potency calls for the constant attunement of scent consumption by Singaporean Indians, and as such the active positioning of their belonging in becoming Singaporean Indian.

## **Chapter 7 Regenerating a Sounded Custom: Thaipusam**

In this final ethnographic chapter, I examine how becoming Singaporean Indian—an identity that ‘belongs to the future as much as to the past’ (Hall 1990: 225)—persists

with customs of the past in ensuring that it is regenerated for a future. In examining the Tamil-Hindu religious procession of Thaipusam, I argue for a recognition that this is a walk entangled in and emerging from the urban, social, and regulatory landscape of Singapore. This walk has become a sounded custom that engenders Singaporean Indian belonging in its responsive skilled negotiations of the changing landscape and sonic regulations. Where Thaipusam sounds have largely been discussed in conflictual terms, I argue instead for recognising the polyphonic ‘coming together’ in the ways sounds are actually made on the path. Through the regulation and making of sounds, the Singapore Indian community—represented synecdochically here by primarily Tamil Hindu processors—also expresses its heterogenous identities, which are each an ‘authentic’ retrieval from the possibilities of the past. The ‘coming together’ of these various ways of sounding Thaipusam and other practices of regenerating the walk ensure a perdurance of this custom into the future, ensuring that becoming Singaporean Indian continues.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

This synthesis of the preceding chapters reiterates the argument that Singaporean Indian identity and belonging is ever-emergent through attuned, perceptive, responsive, and skilled dwelling . It refocuses attention on the approach to the material world as one of ‘things’ and its bundles of relational flows, emphasising how this and a ‘dwelling perspective’ underscores the reframing this thesis offers of Singaporean Indian as a process of becoming. The discussion then accounts for some limitations of this study, and future lines of inquiry including a consideration of language as a ‘thing’, and the possibilities this framework of ‘becoming’ has for a recognition of ‘unbecoming’ Singaporean Indian.

## Chapter 2

### Workshops, Walking, and Other Methods

My interest in the entanglements with things started when, as an undergraduate, I sought to study Punjab without having yet acquired the language skills to engage with people, let alone texts. Seeking access where I could, I paid attention to Punjab's visual and material culture. This was my introduction to the relationships between people and things, identities and material environments. With this thesis, I turn this lens onto Singapore and Singaporean Indians. Making sense of the material world in which I am myself entangled calls for an expanded methodology that would leverage my positionality to access the experiences of other Singaporean Indians.

In all, my methodological approach—using workshops, walking, reviewing creative productions, and the archives—is meant to draw out relationships Singaporean Indians already have with their things and material environment. In so doing, I am primarily concerned with accessing and getting to understand experiences other than my own, experiences that may corroborate or challenge the initial ideas drawn from my own positionality. I therefore sought two primary objectives in selecting and designing my main methods: 1. to collaborate with fellow Singaporean Indians and, in support of this; 2. to cultivate my interlocutors' recognition of the entanglement of material things in their identities and belonging. These objectives align with the broader approach in this thesis of recognising that the world, and knowledge of it, is a dynamic process of ongoing creation and discovery. Rather than a detached analytical stance, I seek instead to understand the becoming of Singaporean Indian as lived and experienced. Thus, I take from Ingold's position that 'in anthropology, we go to study *with people*' (2013: 2, emphasis in original).

The following sections expand on my methodological objectives (section 2.1); detail the rationale and considerations informing my main methods of workshops (section 2.2) and walking (section 2.3); and explain my approach in analysing supplementary creative (section 2.4) and archival materials (section 2.5). Finally, this chapter recognises how auto-ethnography inevitably underscores and informs this thesis and its methods (section 2.6).

## **2.1 METHODOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES**

### **2.1.1 Collaborate**

In my creative projects outside of academia, I have found myself seeking collaboration with the communities the works represent. This was most clearly the case with *Thamizhachi: a digital museum of Tamil women under construction* (2021) and the *Migrant Workers Community Museum* (2021). These projects in museum-making were informed by the desire to represent ‘things’ as it appears to the people who live with them—Tamil women and migrant workers in Singapore. For both, I worked with representatives from the named subject communities through a series of workshops in co-constructing the collections. I was putting together the details of my methodological approach for this thesis around the time and had quite inadvertently applied the same to these other works. These museum projects then fortuitously served as experiments in this thesis’s collaborative participatory research approach in general, and the workshop method in particular.

Approaches to research that prioritise collaboration and participation of subject communities have variously been termed ‘Participatory Research’ (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Cargo and Mercer 2008; Vaughn and Jacquez 2020), ‘Participatory Ethnography’ (Winstanley 2022), ‘Community-Based Participatory Research’

(Wallerstein 2006; Auemaneekul 2010; Israel, et. al. eds. 2017; Jessee et. al. 2015), or its derivative 'Community-based Participant-observation' (Roque et. al. 2024). These methodological approaches emerged from public health studies but share many of the same impulses as an ethnography built on engaging with participants in the field (see Hurtig 2008; Roque et. al. 2024). At their core, these approaches centre understanding communities on their own terms; engaging the community's priorities and perspectives; recognising communities as stakeholders in studies about them; and seeking to redress the power imbalances of top-down research paradigms by involving stakeholders in research design (Jessee et. al 2015; Vaughn and Jacquez 2020; Roque et. al. 2024). Though I have not set out to strictly apply a participatory research approach in my methodology, this body of work has been useful in helping me recognise and articulate some of the shared methodological impulses and practices.

One commonality is consulting with the subject community at multiple points in the process. Vaughn and Jacquez's model of 'participation choice points in the research process' for instance, recognises that there are multiple points across the phases of research where community partners may get involved and that a choice must be made about the degree of participation (2020: 5-6). As I will detail later (in section 2.2), I had bookended the research workshop process with community participation. Including participants at both ends of the process was highly productive in ensuring that the eventual workshop activities were effective. What I had not anticipated was just how necessary they were in highlighting potential pain-points to be redressed and how that would also shape my analysis. This informed and responsive evolution of methods is also a recognised feature of participatory research whereby methods 'are expected to

be fluid and focus on active discussion and...evolve with the project's changing nature, goals, and values' (Roque et. al. 2024: 82).

Having the participants involved in part of the research design was also critical in reaching my second methodological objective—to cultivate recognition of our entanglement with material things.

### **2.1.2 Cultivate**

Participatory research approaches acknowledge that participants are not necessarily trained in research (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020: 1). Likewise, I recognised that my participants begin the process largely unfamiliar with the inquiry into human-thing relationships, and that I needed to help cultivate this way of seeing so that my participants could effectively get involved in the inquiry of this thesis on closer-to-equal terms with me.

Inculcating a recognition of the social relationship between people and things is also important given the popular representation of objects, practices, and places as 'raced' and vice-versa, of race identities as represented by particular token objects (see Chapter 3). Enabling my Singaporean Indian participants to begin to recognise for themselves the actual things in their own lives is therefore a crucial intervention needed to surpass that entrenched superficial assignment of 'race' to objects in Singapore. At the same time, when participants identify such connections in their own lives, they would be better able to articulate their actual relationships with these 'raced' things as opposed to parroting received representations. Engaging material things to elicit original expressions is a frequent and favoured approach of other researcher-teachers too (see Lester 2001; Peck-Bartle 2020).

I found that the structured nature of workshops, being much like the undergraduate classes I am familiar with teaching, lent best to cultivating this new perspective. I therefore drew on my teaching experience and pedagogical interest in teaching with objects in planning the workshop activities to systematically guide participants through thinking about human-thing relations. I now detail my workshop method, including its inspirations from Object-Based Learning (section 2.2.2).

## **2.2 WORKSHOPS**

As my first main research method, I ran a workshop series with participants who self-identified as 'Singaporean Indian'. 24 participants signed up to one of three group sessions based on their preferred timing and we met for 2 hours at a time over two weekends (27/28 August 2021 and 3/4 September 2021). I had initially planned on just these 2 weekends of sessions, but in developing the method I recognised that I needed more input from the community of participants. So, in addition to this 'Main Workshop', I also organised a prior 'Online Trial Workshop' (25 June 2021) and a later 'Closing Workshop' (18/19 June 2022). The details of these three workshops follow below (sections 2.2.3–2.2.4).

### **2.2.1 Participants**

Participants were recruited through posts (Figure 1) shared on my personal social media accounts, those of Brown Voices (a Singapore-Indian playwriting group I am affiliated with) and of Centre42 (my venue partner for these workshops). To help participants see the thrust of the discussion and also offer an attractive marketing angle, the Main Workshop was titled 'More than a Red Dot: Survey of SG Indian Things'. These posts called for participants who are '18 years old or older & self-identify as Singaporean Indian'.

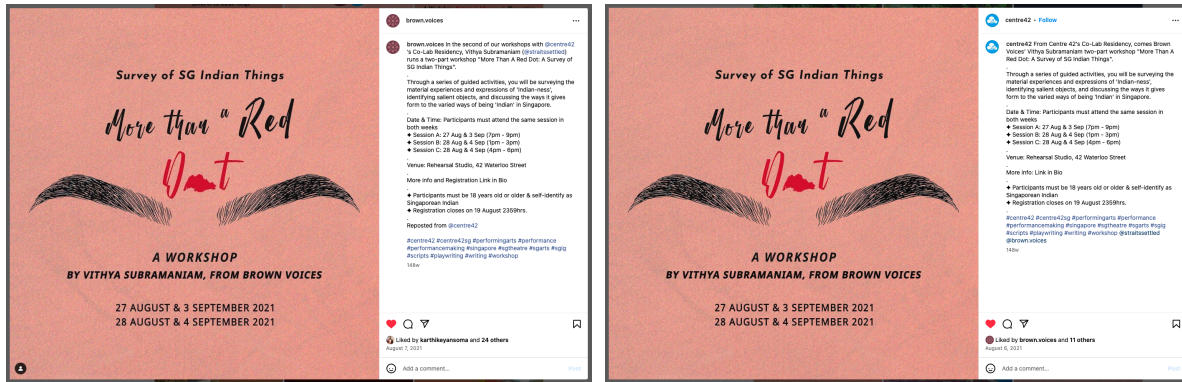


Figure 1: participant recruitment posts on Brown Voices and Centre42 Instagram pages.

I limited my participants to the subject community of ‘Singaporean Indians’ simply because it was their relationships with things that my research is concerned with. I did not engage others in Singapore because my approach to dwelling is not immediately concerned with removed perceptions nor received representations. For similar reasons I asked for Singaporean Indian participants who ‘self-identity’ as such. One, I wanted participants who felt attached enough to this identity to want to do the work of unpacking it with me. Two, my research is interested in identity beyond official status categories, and so I did not want to reproduce this framing. Simply including this requirement though brought up an interesting point of observation. I had received enquiries from people expressing interest in participating but who wanted to clarify if they qualified since they held Permanent Resident (PR) status. Though I replied that their self-identification was sufficient, these enquirers ultimately never signed up. This response was, for me, an early confirmation that ‘self-identification’ helps single out those who were certain enough of their ‘Singaporean Indian’ identity to examine it without reservation.

From this recruitment drive, 31 signed up and ultimately 24 attended. The participants were primarily between the ages of 25 and 34, female, and of Tamil ethnicity (Table 1). This is not a representative sample of the population, and I did not seek to recruit such a group but rather noted these details to see if individual and group demographics

shaped the resultant discussion and data. However, points raised and objects suggested were broadly similar across the three groups, even with a gender balance in Group A and significant Punjabi ethnic representation in Group C.

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Total
Number of participants	6	9	9	24
20-24 years old	0	3	1	4
25-29 years old	1	3	4	8
30-34 years old	4	2	3	9
other ages	1 (42 y.o.)	1 (59 y.o.)	1 (70 y.o.)	3
Male	3	1	0	4
Female	3	8	9	20
Tamil (incl. Ceylonese Tamil)	4	8	5	17
Punjabi	1	1	4	6
Sindhi	1	0	0	1

Table 1: demographic breakdown of participants in Main Workshop

### 2.2.2 Drawing from Object Based Learning

For this, I also drew on literature on ‘Object Based Learning’ (OBL)—a teaching approach that uses tangible objects to facilitate active learning—for how to structure the workshop activities and overall workshop process so as to cultivate thinking with and about objects; create opportunities for participants to exercise this thinking; and for me to be able to draw data from these exercises.

Works from museum anthropology were especially helpful in recognising the utility of OBL and its natural place in anthropological thinking. Nineteenth century anthropological theory-building had hinged on the study of objects and museum collections, and though this fell away in the early twentieth century, a more recent return to material cultures highlights the active force of objects in social meaning and

relations (Adams 2015: 89). Advocates of OBL recognise several productive aspects of the process including encouraging students to evaluate the material, sensory, and emotional aspects of the relationship between objects and humans (Adams 2015; Peck-Bartle 2020; Bell et. al. 2025), in a manner that combines 'elements of mundaneness and mysteriousness into a provocative cocktail of educational opportunities' (Laist 2016: 3).

I found OBL aligned with my methodological requirements in at least three aspects. First, objects help document the history of ordinary people who largely did not leave much textual evidence but did leave the things they made and used (Shuh 1999: 84). OBL helped expand, for my participants, the list of what things they could recognise as significant to identity and go beyond the initial impulse to locate identity in just official documents (see Chapter 4). Second, engagement with objects has no prerequisite of literacy level or conceptual development (ibid. 82). This accessibility pairs well with public workshops with no training or educational prerequisite. At the same time, the act of decoding objects can help develop the original critical thinking and communication (Laist 2016: 3; Schultz 2018: 282). Through OBL exercises, participants are also attuned to the ways knowledge is constructed and disseminated and they learn to distinguish interpretations from other perspectives (Schultz 2018: 283). This is well aligned with my methodological objective to move away from received representations and instead cultivate original reflections on how objects are entangled with Singaporean Indian lives. Third, working with objects often evoke feelings of ownership, intimacy, reverence, and care; arouse curiosity; evoke memories and associations; motivate participants to ask questions and seek answers (Laist 2016: 3; Schultz 2018: 282). This intimacy that OBL evokes can be of great

pedagogical and research value in encouraging participants to reflect deeply and share openly with others in the group workshop format.

Some shortfalls identified in the literature were instead constructive in my application. One such instance is the suggestion that encouraging students to apply their own logics with objects may be seen as empowering students to speak for material items from other cultures thereby ignoring the authority of creator communities (Schultz 2018: 292, 283-4). Given that my participants are from the community under study, the reverse would be true. In my application, I am making space for the 'native voice' in encouraging my participants to recognise and articulate the affective relationships they already have with the things of their own culture. There are though other considerations that were helpfully flagged, such as the use of familiar objects from the students' own culture. The advice in this case was for instructors to help students distance themselves from what they might see as an ordinary object and thereby fall back on preconceived notions and meanings, 'to simply accept their familiar world rather than see it deeply', missing the point of trying to engage an object with consideration and curiosity (Shuh 1982: 15; Causey 2015: 136). Given the ways objects have been 'raced' in Singapore, it was especially important that my participants be able to break away from these familiar, entrenched ways of seeing.

As I planned the activities for the Main Workshop, the first and last exercises I had in mind found alignment with some sample exercises outlined by Andrew Causey (2015), reaffirming the OBL impulses of my pedagogy. I planned to start with having participants unpack their wallet or bag to begin the process of confronting one's things and thinking about how they speak to one's identities. Causey had a similar exercise with keychains and likewise noted that people tend to respond positively to their own

possessions and that it 'shows students how strongly we bond with objects that are so ordinary yet so personal, [forcing] them to start thinking about how objects convey meaning' (2015: 137). To close the Main Workshop, I asked my participants to plan a time capsule, selecting a limited collection of things to store as well as introspecting on their selection and imagined audience. In somewhat a reversal of this, Causey details an exercise in which he calls for students to act as consultants to a future archaeologist by critically reporting on mundane objects from the present (2015: 141-2). Where Causey's writing exercise had students go beyond a subjective perspective, I instead tried to encourage that subjectivity with my participants in order to understand how they conceived of representation and what representations of 'Singaporean Indians' they prioritised. OBL considerations and exercises largely aligned with my pedagogical approach and methodological objectives of collaboration and cultivation but needed further customisation for my research inquiry to prioritise the subjective and personal.

### **2.2.3 Online Trial and Main Workshop Activities**

As I was finalising the main workshop sessions, the venue's administrators reminded me about abiding by Covid pandemic safe distancing measures and to be mindful of potential restrictions on non-essential group gatherings. I thought to prepare for this scenario and to test-run my planned activities with an online trial workshop. I invited a small group of seven participants drawing from acquaintances who I already knew to self-identify as Singaporean Indian and whom I could count on for constructive feedback on the workshop process because of their own background in leading similar discussions. The 4 hours planned for the Main Workshops were condensed into a 2-hour session for the online trial with some key activities played out and others simply

described (see Appendix A). Running this trial online was not only convenient for my test participants, it gave me a sense of possible tools (see Appendix B) and potential considerations for an online alternative. Ultimately the main workshops were conducted in-person but the feedback I gathered from collaborating with this trial group was extremely helpful in highlighting blind spots and fine-tuning my activities to better match my research questions. I highlight three key modifications that resulted from the online trial.

One; having participants introduce themselves by explaining how they relate to the label of 'Singaporean Indian'. This emerged by complete accident when I had initially forgotten to have the online participants start with introductions. Seeing as how most of them were already acquainted, I instead merged their quick introductions with another planned discussion on the label of 'Singaporean Indian'. In feedback, one participant found this start helped her open up now that they knew how others in the room were positioned.

Two; the trial reaffirmed that participants were better able to reflect and respond when given the space to act on their first impulses followed by an opportunity to revisit the question. This was clear in the quick listing exercise where I saw that most of the suggestions centred on food and smells. When I pointed this out to the group and asked if other aspects like sound mattered, they agreed that it was an oversight to leave sounds out so we continued with a second round of listing. I found this two-step approach, with space to examine initial impulses, productive in encouraging participants to introspect. Additionally, I also saw how giving participants space to contribute individually meant gathering more and varied contributions giving space to individual experiences that might have been overshadowed in group discussions that

tend to continue in the same thread of thinking. This affordance was also important in the next activity, a modification of 'the walk'.

Three; influenced by the popularity of the 'privilege walk' activity at the time, I had planned on a version where participants suggested, in turn, a continuation to the line 'Being Singaporean Indian is...' and others who concurred would also take a step forward. I had not fully conducted but only described this planned activity during the trial. In feedback, a participant pointed out how the activity, that would result in participants becoming arranged relative to each other, could end up being exclusionary, making some feel like they were 'not Singaporean Indian enough'. This would of course be diametrically opposite of my research purpose and intentions. I instead removed the walk altogether and turned the prompt into another round of individual submissions.

The changes I made following feedback from the trial workshop proved effective as the main workshop sessions ran smoothly and elicited productive discussions. The order of activities in the Main Workshop; their research or pedagogical objectives; and the format of data collected are detailed in Appendix C. Broadly, the first session of the Main Workshop started with introductions of my research and with participants suggesting how they related to the label of 'Singaporean Indian', they then unpacked their wallets or bags to consider how the things they carried moved their everyday lives, this laid the foundations to thinking about things that then informed their listing of 'Singaporean Indian things'. I then wrapped up the first session with a homework assignment to bring an object from their lives that spoke to their Singaporean Indian identity. In the second session held a week after, we begin with suggestions to complete the statement 'Being Singaporean Indian is...', then participants shared the

objects they had identified as homework, before we concluded with making time capsules in smaller groups. In all, running the online trial afforded greater collaboration with the subject community as my trial participants helped me understand their concerns and priorities and my dependence on their feedback partly reversed the hierarchical researcher–participant dynamic, ultimately co-producing a workshop approach that was better aligned with my research questions and intentions.

#### **2.2.4 Closing Workshop**

Though object-handling is central to OBL pedagogy, it was not an initial priority for me. I thought that it would distract from the research objective by reinforcing and limiting the potential pool of objects with any sort of suggestion of a predetermined collection of things and moving the discussion away from things actually personal to my participants. While reviewing the data I was gathering, more questions came up and I wanted not only to try and fill those gaps but also, in the spirit of collaboration, to run some of the initial ideas I was developing by the same group that inspired them. The opportunity came up to organise something in the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), and so the idea for a ‘Closing Workshop’ was born. Though we did not handle museum objects per-se, participants could closely examine the museum’s collection in situ. I was also especially interested in hearing their response to this key collection and official material representation of the Singaporean Indian identity. So, on 18th and 19th June 2022, some nine months after the main workshops, I met 12 of the previous participants again. This time they were organised into two groups that met for a single 3-hour-long session.

Three objectives shaped the activities and format of this closing workshop: to collaborate further, this time by gathering reflections and sharing nascent points of

analysis; to gather data on questions that had emerged in the preliminary analysis of data; and to see how working with tactility, visuals, and the official collection of IHC might inform the response from this group of participants. The order of activities, research objectives, and format of data collected are detailed in Appendix D. Some activities were targeted to better understand priorities between issues raised earlier, such as having participants make the almost impossible choice between one object or another as ‘more Singaporean Indian’ (see Appendix E). Some activities were more effective than others in eliciting personal reflections from the participants, which highlights for me the importance of having collaborated with a preliminary group to trial the main workshop activities. The ‘object dominos’ activity—adapted from a summary activity I use in my academic classrooms—was not as productive with the workshop participants. Here participants are asked to build a web of relations by laying out a physical deck of picture cards featuring some of the ‘Singaporean Indian objects’ they previously listed in the main workshops. Instead of eliciting competing interpretations and debate amongst participants, as I had intended, both groups quickly settled into simply categorising things. Food dishes, spices, and kitchen tools were amassed together; any type of document was put together; and so forth. On the other hand, an activity inspired by my walk in IHC with a participant was just as productive with the workshop participants who had much to say in our ‘gallery discussion’.

Ultimately, the choice to have a closing workshop was a highly productive move. Not only was it a nice culmination of our collaboration, it was also satisfying to hear from my participants that they had continued to ponder our initial discussions and to see them apply the lens that they had since cultivated.

### **2.2.5 Reflections on Workshops as Method**

Looking back, the workshops have been for me a highly productive approach to unpacking identity and human-object relationship, especially where collaboration with the community being studied and cultivation of new ways of seeing are key methodological objectives. This collaborative workshop format allowed my participants and I to explore our shared positions being Singaporean Indian and experiment with different perspectives or articulate less popular ideas without the default expectations of speaking as representative of the community.

Having the conversation as a gathering of equals was also helpful for my own thinking. Isabelle Stengers (2005) draws attention to collective thinking 'in the presence of others', where collective thinking demands 'that we don't consider ourselves authorised to believe we possess the meaning of what we know,' and where thinking 'in the presence of others' creates a space for hesitation and resistance that produces new modes of relating, where it is about the 'unpredictability of opening ourselves to possibility' (Instone & Taylor, 2015: 146, as cited in Springgay and Truman 2018: 1). The questions participants flagged gave me pause and gave me room to switch off 'expert' mode and take time to think along with them. A clear example of this occurred during the 'object listing' activity when a participant asked if 'only tangible things counted, or if smells could count too' and another asked if 'people, named individuals' were considered objects. These questions highlighted to me that I had to take note of how my participants conceived of objects or things and re-evaluate how I was going to understand objects and things in my study. In answering their questions and commenting on what I was observing in their responses, I found myself working out

some preliminary thoughts in the moment too without worry or expectation that I was to already have the answers.

Several of my participants pointed to the minority position of Singaporean Indians and the feeling of having to always explain one's sub-ethnic identities and/or justify one's belonging as Singaporean. In contrast to those situations, they pointed to our workshop setting as a welcome relief. The rare availability of a group where only Singaporean Indians are present and they need not explain themselves, offered my participants space to discuss ideas and anxieties freely. One participant explicitly noted this difference when he said that he was happy to discuss the finer points of his identity in this setting but would avoid the topic when speaking with non-Indians. Recognising that others in the room shared one's experiences and perspective was productive in eliciting deeper and nuanced contributions from participants. They often added their views without need for prompting. Though the converse is also possible, where common group identity is so centred that dissenting views are held back, this was not quite the case for my participants. Perhaps in credit to their personalities or to the way activities were set up, participants with dissenting views were not reserved in expressing them. Perhaps too, participants felt a sense of duty to put their views on record because of the way the workshop had been framed to establish that each person's experience of Singaporean Indian-ness was valid and important, and that participants were to represent themselves and not some preconceived idea of 'the community'.

There were, however, some limitations to this workshop method and the group dynamic it fostered. Our discussions were largely silent on the basic sociological factors of class, gender, and caste. In contrast, the group did articulate ethno-linguistic

distinctions, and religious distinctions to a smaller extent. Several compounding factors may account for the silences. The shared middle-class makeup of all my workshop participants created an environment in which socio-economic others were not represented or thought of as much. Similarly, matters of gender were at best implicitly suggested but not explicitly discussed. The composition of two of the three sessions were entirely female and taking into account my own positionality as a female researcher, this perhaps fostered a room wherein that experience was assumed to be shared and well-understood and need not be further spelled out or debated. The silence on caste is not as all surprising given the commonly-held, but false, impression that caste does not exist or matter amongst Singaporean Indians. My own observation has been that most Singaporean Indians are not versed in noticing the ways caste still shows up in our everyday, from family names and spoken language to favoured temples and marriage practices. This silence on caste in society-at-large was echoed in our workshops. These silences are perhaps also indicative of how group discussions tend to emphasise collective explication of matters deemed to be shared with others, and encourage self-conscious reflection on matters seen as too private or even crass to bring up. Thus the same group that was happy to dissent on simpler questions on food and scents, or the well-established pain-points of migration, citizenship, and ethnic identity, still had reservations in articulating views on class, gender, and caste. Ultimately too the workshop's focus on material things perhaps drew attention away from these finer considerations of the sociological self. Acknowledging these dynamics and outcomes of the workshop method should help situate these discussions when they are referenced over the rest of this thesis.

Despite its limitations, the workshop nevertheless became a productive space beyond what I had set out as my research method. It became a space for my participants to

articulate their hopes and fears and find solace in an empathetic gathering. As we wrapped up the main workshops or as we caught up at the start of the closing workshop, a couple of my participants described the workshop experience as having been 'like group therapy' and the opportunity to have these discussions freely as feeling 'therapeutic'. Such moments highlighted for me the real weight of the question at hand, and that my investigations are not removed from the real lives of both my participants and me.

## **2.3 WALKING**

Walking, as my second main method, came quite organically into the process. In the early months of the Covid lockdown and subsequent easing of restrictions I, like many others, took frequent outdoor walks. On longer walks, I would often have the company of a friend, who is also one of the participants invited to the online trial workshop. As friends would, the walks were occasion for catching up on our work, observations about current affairs, and general chatter about life. These discussions continued over breakfast and onto the bus ride home, sometimes got picked up over texting and returned to on our next walks. Our entwining of walking and talking was as Ingold and Vergunst (2008: 1) observed of how 'life itself is as much a long walk as it is a long conversation, and the ways along which we walk are those along which we live.' Between the natural way walking eased talking and how these walks helped me talk through my early ideas for this thesis, I came to see walking as a fruitful method to build a connection with my interviewees, access parts of their everyday acts of dwelling, and as it turned out, access their literal dwellings too. In this third section of the chapter, I lay out the influences from literature on walking as method (section 2.3.1); and how the collaboration with my walking participants reshaped my approach

from 'walking' per se to one of 'being with' (section 2.3.3)—which I further detail in three modes recognising the slight variation in how participants and researcher relate to the environment, and how that informs the collaborative knowledge production of walking.

### **2.3.1 Walking as Method**

Across the works, advocates for walking as an ethnographic method point out how it affords access into participants' everyday, their experiences of space and mobility, and ultimately that walking, as an embodied act and method, centres being over 'expert knowledge' in the shared movement dismantling the hierarchy between researcher and participants. For these reasons, walking as a method fit organically with my research interest in dwelling and being, and lends to my methodological objective of collaboration.

#### **Walking With, Being With**

Walking has been the subject as well as method in studies of urban planning and practices (Vergunst 2010); mobility (Middleton 2021); place-making and mapping (O'Rourke 2013); writing and thinking (Lucas 2008; Gros 2014); and more. In ethnographic methods, the 'go-along' (Kusenbach 2003) or the walking interview (Evans and Jones 2011; Winstanley 2022) recognise the ways lived experiences, perception, and meaning-making are constructed through place and spatial practices of sociality and positionality (Springgay and Truman 2018: 3). Walking has also been a productive way to make sense of racial, ethnic, religious, and gender identities as experienced in the everyday environments of study participants (O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; Warren 2016; Winstanley 2022).

A key feature of walking as method is seeking to understand participants by 'walking with', or being with them in their everyday lives and in their world. Maggie O'Neill and Brian Roberts characterise the walking interview as 'following' someone ethnographically, getting a sense of their day on a routine trip as well as understanding how their past experiences or childhood shape the way they relate to spaces and places (2020: 17). They thus recognise walking interviews as an excellent biographical method for entering the biographical routes of others in a deeply engaged and 'attuned' way (ibid. 15). 'Walking with' also orients the study of individuals as both socially located and 'mobile'. A feature of O'Neill and Roberts' Walking Interview as Biographical Method (WIBM) is accounting for how people are 'involved subjectively in "passing" through social and material circumstances (buildings, streets, trees, and gardens, people met and left behind)' (ibid. 17). Traditional, sit-down interviews do not afford the same opportunity to see the respondent's relationship with their environment. Such access is not however solely determined by the number of steps taken together but is rather afforded in 'being with' which, I contend, is the essence of 'walking with'.

I refer to the method I have adopted as 'walking' for a couple of reasons. One, I thought of our chats more as conversations and not as interviews. While I continue to use the term 'walking interview' across this thesis for its directness, I do also find the term limits the imagination even though the associated literature recognises the broad breath of the method. Two, the general idea of 'walking' affords space for 'being with' research participants, particularly underscoring the co-creation of knowledge and disruption of researcher-participant hierarchy. Simply put, 'walking' centres being over knowing.

## **Being over knowing**

Sarah Pink et. al. recognise walking as ‘in itself a form of engagement integral to our perception of an environment’ and so, ‘we cannot but learn and come to know in new ways as we walk’ (2010: 3). But coming to know is first premised on being ‘in’ the world and perceiving it. Coming to know others socially is also principally tied to walking as Ingold and Vergunst recognise ‘that in their timings, rhythms and inflections, the feet respond as much as does the voice to the presence and activity of others’ (2008: 1). Further, they hold that ‘social relations... are not enacted in situ but are paced out along the ground’, ‘and not in some ethereal realm of discursively constructed significance, over and above the material world’ (ibid.: 1, 2). Given that entanglements with the world and with social others emerge in walking, walking itself offers a productive method in encountering and coming to know these relations.

Those who have considered its methodological implications identify embodiment as a major theme in walking research, recognising how this affective and bodily methodology seeks beyond the logics of representation (Springgay and Truman 2017; 2018). But moving need not only be the bipedal pedestrian act of walking. O’Neill and Roberts maintain that the method should be inclusive and participatory—open, interactive, dialogical, processual (2020: 18). Walking as a method meets people where they are. It seeks to first and foremost ‘be with’, ‘coming to know’ is a consequence of the moving body. The researcher’s body therefore not only walks with or talks with, but eats with, laughs with, cries with, sweats with, and all in all, be with. In the next section (2.3.2), I explain how my collaboration with my walking participants shifted the method and my thinking about ‘walking’ to centre ‘being with’.

### 2.3.2 'Being With' on The Tour, The Journey, and The Wander

While participation in the workshop was based on public signups, the selection of who to walk with was more deliberate on my part. I chose the 12 walking participants because their work entails making representations of Singaporean Indians; they were positioned to fill in specific gaps in my research; or they were workshop participants who had shared observations I was interested in expanding further. I also had some existing prior relationship with all 12 of the walking participants, mostly as collaborators on previous community and creative projects. Our prior acquaintance helped dissipate the typical hierarchy and distance between researcher and participant, but ultimately it was the modes of 'walking' we got into that afforded our collaboration on how we walked and how we 'came to know'.

Walking worked well for the casual dynamics of the relationships I had with most of these participants. As O'Neill and Roberts highlight, walking research disrupts the researcher-'subject' relation as it is dialogical and the experiences of both sides, the personal biographies of both researcher and 'subject' are implicated and they both have a living presence in the social world, physically and mentally engaging each other and their environment (2020: 19). The walking researcher is—as O'Neill and Roberts (*ibid.*) put it—a 'companion' for the journey, and that bode well for my walks with people who were already companions of some vein or another in my life. This levelling of the relationship also paved the way for collaboration in unintended ways. Intending for my interviewees to shape the path of our walk, I asked each of them to pick where we should meet and the route we would take. Given the casualness of our prior dynamic, several invited me to their homes to meet their families and an, often unsaid, invitation to a home-cooked meal. Other times I was invited to chat at their place of business

while the busy-ness continued around us. Being with them in these varied ways, at the dinner table or in the middle of a work day, had me rethinking what it meant to 'walk with'. If the crux of the walking methods is to experience someone's world with them, then that is what we did, without always having to be on our feet. With their various responses to my requests to 'walk', my interviewees unintendedly also collaborated on reshaping the idea of walking as 'being with' rather than just the movement of 'following along'. I suggest that there were three broad types of 'walks', and thereby, ways of being with: the tour, the journey, and the wander. Each session with a participant was not always restricted to just one of these three, but I suggest this trifold classification to highlight the productive differences offered with shifts in the dynamic between researcher and participant; in how both relate to the material environment of the walk; and in the collaboration on knowledge production, or the 'coming to know'.

### **The Tour: Coming Home**

Three of my participants had invited me to 'come home', to go over to their house for their discussion. With Vishal, this was preceded with a tour of Changi Village, the small seaside neighbourhood he grew up in. Whether at home or in their childhood neighbourhood, with such tours, the interviewee is the domain expert. I, as researcher, am to be introduced to and explained things, like a keen tourist dependent on their tour guide. Though we did not cover as much distance walking around the house as we did in the neighbourhood, both were still walks of the same fashion. I still followed my participant-guide around as they pointed out things collected and inherited; recounted anecdotes; and explain how they, 'the locals', did things around here. As Pink found with her guided tour of Mold, the tour was an 'invitation to share the imaginings of the committee', enabling her to attune her imagination to their own imaginings of their town, by 'sharing their gazes, rhythms, sounds, smells and more'

(2008: 193). I am aware that my presence shifted the movements in their home and do not presume to have walked in the same rhythms as my participants would on an average day. But the difference with the tour-type 'walks with' is that the participant is in charge—certainly more than the researcher—of the environment, path, and pace of the conversation and of the thinking. It is the participant–guide who decides when the conversation should move to the dining table and continue over food; when and which family artefacts should be brought out to show the researcher; and if certain rooms or spaces are allowed entry and photography. Though my position as researcher meant that the families I spoke to were keen to bring out things they would not for an ordinary house guest—like Maria's family did with their collection of obituaries and funeral cards—the same position also made some weary of my recording—like Vishal's mother's gentle rejection of my request to photograph her kitchen. In other ways, I was treated as a usual houseguest. I was typically informed that there would be a meal, not for my input, but as notice to come hungry. My 'walking' now included eating, smelling, and tasting. Their choices over what to cook had a direct hand in shaping much of my thinking (as seen in chapter 5). In taking the invitation to 'come home' to an interviewee's house or childhood neighbourhood, my 'coming to know' of the things that informed identity and belonging was hence left largely to my host and what they chose to show, tell, and feed me.

### **The Journey: Finding Out**

Lovepreet and I walked through the ACM and IHC together, and Ramesh and I met at a restaurant to share a meal. In these, my participant and I were sharing an experience of a third space together, on equal footing, neither one the 'guide' nor 'tourist'. On such walks researcher and participant go on a journey together, attuning themselves to the space and to each other, co-producing the thinking about relations and materials.

Encountering spaces and situations together as such, was when I most experienced the casting of walking as several do, as ‘a way of becoming responsive to place’ that ‘activates modes of participation that are situated and relational’ (Springgay and Truman 2018: 5). It is in encountering together, in the back and forth of finalising meal orders and discussing museum displays, in catching the other’s response to noises in the background, that ‘walking’ feels relational. As Pink argues ‘it is by attuning her or himself to other people’s practices that the ethnographer might be able, through her or his embodied experience, to make and thus comprehend the places she or he seeks to analyse’ (2008: 175). On journeys together, recognising the relations with things is co-produced in the conversations about a present and shared encounter with the environment, as well as in the researcher’s attunement to her walking companion’s embodied responses. ‘Coming to know’ on the journey-type walk is about ‘finding out’ together.

### **The Wander: Popping In**

A critique Ingold and Vergunst (2008) levy on ethnography is its tendency to focus on the destination despite of how much of walking happens in the field. Even multi-sited fieldwork focuses on the sites, ‘as though life were lived at a scatter of fixed locales rather than along the highways and byways upon which they lie’ (ibid: 3). I hope to remedy this by recognising ‘the wander’ in my simple typology of ‘walks’ and ways of ‘being with’. By ‘wandering’ I mean to recognise the times engaging and thinking with participants continue past the walk—when they casually make a useful observation as we share the train ride back; when I am mindlessly scrolling through social media and see Vasun’s post on a new private dinner menu; when notifications ping on my mobile phone and a quiet bus ride alone turns into an excited text exchange with Lovepreet who is sending images of familial documents from her home. Thinking and ‘being with’

my participants do not simply start and stop where we planned. My entanglements with their relationships with things continue long after, the thinking carries on, and ‘coming to know’ with my participants certainly does not stop when fieldwork ‘ends’. Long after and beyond our walks, both I, the researcher, and my participants continue to wander along our own paths, entangled as they may be, there is no destination we seek. O’Neill and Roberts too acknowledged the need for allowances for alternative understandings of WIBM outcomes, arguing that they must be regarded as ‘provisional’, recognising ‘that research always remains to some extent unfinished’ (2020: 21). Things continue to pop up and into mind.

## **2.4 CREATIVE PRODUCTIONS**

In the time of fieldwork, acquaintances had released two productions which I recognised as making representations of Singaporean Indian identity, belonging, and dwelling. I approached the two pieces as such and ‘walked with’ their creators in an effort to understand these pieces as produced out of the maker’s own being Singaporean Indian.

*Partitions* (2021), is a short 16-minute observational documentary by Vishal Daryanomel. The film draws together enduring practices of the present and fragmented recollections of the past through a recorded interview, family photographs, official documents, and shots of movement in the home. Through this collection of things, memory, and movement, the film presents a Sindhi woman’s post-Partition migration to Singapore from Sindh, Pakistan, via Tamil Nadu, India. *Vel Vel: A Sonic Walk* (2021) an audio experience of the Thaipusam procession was produced by sound designer Ramesh Krishnan and team. While incorporating performed text written by members of Brown Voices—a collective of Singaporean Indian

playwrights—the soundscape was designed by Ramesh entirely out of his personal collection of field recordings of the Thaipusam festival made between 2011 and 2016.

My first engagements with each of these pieces had been consuming them as intended and then writing reflective reviews for various local art publications. Having had the time to think with these, I came back to both these pieces in this thesis research process as reflections of their creators' individual being as Singaporean Indians. While Vishal does not make it explicit in the film, from our discussions, I know that the subject of the piece is his own grandmother and thereby also collects the story of his family's migration and settlement in Singapore, and is a statement—even if implicitly—of his being Singaporean Indian. Ramesh made *Vel Vel* as a substitute for the Thaipusam experience in the year the procession was cancelled because of the Covid pandemic. But that he had been collecting audio recordings of it all this time was, for me, telling of the place the festival had for him. As he and I discussed, Thaipusam was something he had grown up participating in and learning the various roles and responsibilities from elders in his family (see Chapter 7). His creative production was thereby an extension and reflection of his lifelong doing of Thaipusam and dwelling in this way as Singaporean Indian. As both creators expressed, these pieces are documentary collections of a part of their life. That is how I approached both these pieces, as creative products that capture part of the dwelling as Singaporean Indians, made by Singaporean Indians who are also thinking about what this way of being entails, looks, and sounds like. I do not take this film and audio piece then as simple representations of a Singaporean Indian-ness meant to explain the community to itself or to others. They are rather outcomes of two individuals thinking about their identity and belonging, reflected in their media of choice.

As I re-watch and re-listen, I sought to understand the relationship between things, people, and environments intrinsically captured in both. The initial threads that had caught my attention became even starker. I saw in more detail how Vishal tied official and family document together, and how Ramesh captured and included the urban soundscape and social exchanges of Thaipusam. Just like with the walks, the thinking about these relationships was co-produced in embodied movement as I too walked the Thaipusam route with *Vel Vel* playing in my earphones, wrote reflective essays on both pieces, and spoke to both Vishal and Ramesh in our ‘walking interviews’ about the thought process and logistics behind their works. I also visited Vishal, met his family, saw the prayer altar and family photos that featured in the film, and saw the paths of mundane movements through the house that he captured in his frames. Much like with the walks, I approached these creative productions as another way to experience their worlds, to see and hear how these two individual creatives saw, recorded, and re-presented their identities and being as Singaporean Indian, through their material worlds, and their media.

## **2.5 ARCHIVES**

To supplement the workshop and walks, I turned to the archives, particularly to gather a sense of how consumption and Thaipusam looked like in the past. I detail these two archival inquiries below:

### **2.5.1 Product Advertisements in *Tamil Murasu***

I sought to understand what consumer products had been marketed over time to the Indian community in Singapore as a way to understand its consumption. While consumer advertisements would have reached the Indian community through multiple media, I chose to focus on the Tamil language newspaper *Tamil Murasu* because it

had a primarily, if not solely, Indian audience; it has been in circulation for multiple decades thereby capturing shifts over time within one medium; and had an almost complete and accessible archive of its prints. *Tamil Murasu* is the sole national Tamil language daily newspaper and has an entrenched presence in Tamil media consumption in Singapore since its first print in 1935. Though it faces a decline of regular readers today, going the way of most print media, it was nonetheless the premiere site for communicating to Singapore's Tamil reading public and therefore of visual advertising, at least up until the 1990s when free-to-air television in Singapore included Tamil programming time belts and then a dedicated Tamil channel in 2008. I am cognizant that the Tamil-reading public does not represent all Singaporean Indians, but the *Tamil Murasu* serves as an important archives of the times, concerns, and consumption of a significant and indicative segment of the Indian community in Singapore, especially given that there is little accessible alternative source of the same.

I systematically skimmed through the archived collection of the *Tamil Murasu* that has been digitalised and made available online (May 1936 to Dec 2008) and on microfilm accessible at the National Library (May 1936 to Dec 2021). Prioritising getting a sense of the types of products advertised and how these changed over time, I looked at the first two weeks of papers in the months of April and October. I picked these months not only for an even spread over the year but also because these are key festive periods—with the Tamil New Year in April and Deepavali in October/November—and more likely to feature consumer advertisements in this period of festive shopping. Initially I looked through the April and October papers of every year from 1936 to 1969. From then I found the number of advertisements reduced and largely repeated, so looked at the same two months in 3 year leaps (1969, 1972, 1975, and so on until

1996). By the 1990s, the number and quality of advertisements waned quickly. I checked this by returning to the yearly frequency between 1996 and 1999. It was clear that newspapers were no longer the primary medium for advertising consumer products. I thus stopped perusing the archived prints after October 1999.

In looking through the prints, I looked mainly for advertisements of consumer products that included images, and paid attention to the type of imagery employed and messaging in the accompanying Tamil, and occasionally English, texts. Besides seeing what was marketed to the Tamil reading audience, I was interested in what concerns and references were being invoked and how the products were being positioned for the everyday lives, needs, and wants of the readership. Most of these advertisements were of beauty soaps and hair oils; medical supplements and medicated oils; and food items like ghee and instant malt beverages. Perusing such messaging over six and half decades also offered a long view of the consumption concerns of the Singaporean Indian consumer (as I expand in Chapter 6) and helped contextualise some of the discussions over consumption and childhood memories shared by my workshop participants.

### **2.5.2 Thaipusam in Official and Public Archives**

To understand how the Thaipusam procession had looked and sounded in earlier decades, I turned to newspaper reports in English language newspapers, National Archives of Singapore's photograph collection, and videos posted onto the video sharing platform, YouTube. Each offered different perspectives on the proceedings and together were important in piecing together a sense of how Singaporean Indians participated and how the procession moved in Singapore's changing urban environment.

Newspaper articles were useful for tracking participant numbers over the decades, procedural instructions for participants and the public, and to follow responses to policy shifts. Newspaper articles reported official statements while ‘Letters to the Editor’ captured public sentiment in the heat of these debates. I sought out these articles through the National Library Board’s catalogue of digitised local English language newspapers and shortlisted 112 articles from between 1917 and 2024. These articles were also a source of photographs of proceedings and maps of the routes or plans of the temples.

The National Archives of Singapore’s photograph collection is likewise digitised and available online with an easy-to-use search function. I organised by date the 1300 images returned by the search term ‘Thaipusam’. My goal with this collection was to get a sense of who participated and spectated; what else was going on along the procession route; how the the procession was organised, especially traffic arrangements; and to spot the use of instruments. Looking through all 1300 images, I shortlisted 111 photographs that ranged from the 1920s to 2013.

To see how people interacted and moved in procession, and most importantly to hear them, I turned to YouTube. Where newspapers and the collections of the national archives would entail images that had been screened, curated, and categorised into an official imagination of Thaipusam, videos on YouTube were primarily filmed, edited (if at all), and uploaded by lay users who mostly looked to be participants or spectators themselves. Aided by growth in mobile phone camera technology and the YouTube platform itself, most videos I found had been uploaded from 2005 onwards. There were a few uploads of earlier footage including some from 1996, 1986, and a documentary from the 1970s. I prioritised videos that were shot and uploaded by participants

themselves, who from their practice and accents I would identify as Singaporean Indian, so as to avoid the curated lens of the professional or the exotic gaze of the outsider. Such videos also tended to include the moments that only an insider would recognise as key—such as minor rituals en route—and still had the ‘raw footage’ quality that caught mundane moments such as social chatter between participants. In perusing these videos, I kept an eye out for who attended and participated; the use of musical instruments; the way groups organised their music making; the choice of song and when to play; and how participants respond to the physical space and to other people; in all, the relationships between people, environment, movement, and sound-making. I largely allowed the platform’s algorithm to suggest videos to view and kept a shortlist of the ones that capture an observational point of interest. Noticing a bulk of videos from 2011 onwards, I also intentionally searched for videos of Thaipusam for the years between 2000 and 2010. In all, I shortlisted 37 videos that I found especially poignant.

YouTube was also critical for accessing a point of view not captured in newspapers or even by the lay participant, but that was key to understanding the larger movements around the Thaipusam foot procession. ‘Raja Towing Service Pte Ltd’ is the company that has been commissioned to tow almost all temple chariots in Singapore, and their eponymous YouTube channel archives videos of the chariot procession of Lord Murugan that precedes and inaugurates the Thaipusam foot procession. Their uploaded videos capture the chariot route from 2017 to the present and, as one of the key organisers, their cameras offer continual access and clear close shots of proceedings in the temples and along the chariot route. I looked at all 13 of their available videos on the night-time and day-time portions of the chariot procession for

a sense of the route, the location and choice of pit stops, and who participated at which points.

## **2.6 AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY**

Underscoring the initial design and eventual execution of these methods, and the very conceptualisation of this thesis is my own being Singaporean Indian. My whole life I have dwelled as Singaporean Indian, in Singapore, with older generations of Singaporean Indians. I cannot, nor want to, escape my own ways of being, and that has shaped the fundamental impulses of this project. Objects lie at the centre because these are what I have always noticed around me and could reach for. Language was not as much a means of access for me given that I studied Mandarin all through school even though my mother tongue, Tamil, was an option. Text and other linguistically informed ways of knowing and being were thus not what informed my sense of being Indian. Nonetheless the sounds of Tamil were always around in my home, as were the tastes of all manner of local food and the smells and gestures of a Hindu domestic life. Without as much language, it was in the things we had at home that I noticed my being Singaporean Indian, and this position as more than just 'Indian' in Singapore.

In an environment of material flows and entanglements, where the self and world unfold in interplay, autoethnography offers a means to capture this relationality, particularly the embodied knowledge that may escape language. Recognising, with Ingold (2013), that the process of learning is a process of becoming skilled, I draw on the skills and knowledge I have accrued through my own dwelling as Singaporean Indian to inform this exploration with others who have similarly become skilled. My methodological emphasis on collaboration seeks to diversify and expand from my own individual position, but not to escape from or erase my own footprints. Admittedly, it

has taken me time to shed my own antiquated stigma of the 'native ethnographer' label. But it was in having this work reflected back to me, in seeing how important the conversation was for my workshop and walking participants, that I have been led to embracing this position and acknowledging the reality that auto-ethnography underscores this thesis and its methods.

## **2.7 CONCLUSION**

In line with this thesis's broader approach, the methods I have adopted seek to 'study *with* people' and centre the objectives of collaboration with fellow Singaporean Indians and cultivating in them a recognition of the material flows in their processes of becoming. The first main method of using workshops have been collaborative in the design of its activities that seek to cultivate ways of seeing anew the things in the material world. Walking, my second main method, centres 'being with' as a collaborative way to experience my participants' world and to 'come to know' with them. Likewise, I've approached the creative material produced by two participants as being made out of and reflective of their own processes of becoming Singaporean Indian, and thus offering a different medium through which I may experience their worlds with them. These ways of studying with my participants have then been further supplemented with the newspaper, photograph, and video archives. In all, I also recognise that 'coming to know' with my participants has also fundamentally been informed by my own dwelling and process of becoming Singaporean Indian.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Becoming Local, 'Indian', and Singaporean**

In preparation for the closer material engagements of the later chapters, I lay out in this chapter a background to how communities from South Asia started becoming 'Singaporean Indian' through key historical and social shifts in their relations to the land, state, and society that initiated becoming local; 'Indian' as understood in Singapore; and Singaporean. As this chapter concludes, I recognise the present-day entanglements of becoming Singaporean Indian when a new wave of migration shifts ideas of being local, being a Singapore citizen, and being 'Indian' in this nation-state.

A discussion of what being Singaporean Indian today entails would be remiss to ignore the very real strains around racial identity and national belonging that hang in the milieu. Talking about the Singaporean Indian today almost always evokes the co-ethnic 'other' known variously as 'new migrant Indians', 'new diaspora Indians', 'expat Indians', or simply the 'India Indians'. This last term clearly positions the group of newer arrived migrants from South Asia in direct contrast with the longer settled community of 'Singaporean Indians'. Popular public and some academic frames are quick to draw clear hard distinctions between the two groups, attributing period of arrival into Singapore as the primary marker of difference and determinative of whether one lives by local sociocultural ways, is loyal to the Singapore nation-state, and has sufficient claims to being Singaporean. In practice, these hard lines of distinction frequently fall apart when applied to individual lives and biographies.

With my thesis, I do not seek to reiterate this 'date of arrival' qualification to Singaporean-ness, nor do I seek to offer a new formulation to sorting the 'Singaporean Indians' from the 'India Indians'. Rather, I recognise that 'Singaporean Indian' is

something one may be on a process of becoming, just as those who came before have. In this regard, I also seek to take seriously the strong sense—held by self-identified Singaporean Indians as well as Singaporeans from other racial communities—that there is a kind of ‘Singaporean Indian-ness’ different from other ways of being, and to examine how that emerges in everyday living in the plural social and material environment of Singapore. I do not, however, seek a comparative study for that requires presupposing such a binary. Moreover, I hold that the ‘Singaporean Indian’ predates this more recent juxtaposition against the ‘India Indian’. Instead, I seek to recognise that the Singaporean Indian is introspective of their own relationships with and place in the evolving society, state, and environment. Or as one of my participants succinctly put: ‘being Singaporean Indian is having to always define yourself to others’. In this thesis, I argue for a recognition that the Singaporean Indian is ever becoming in dwelling in Singapore; is one whose identity emerges out of this material environment; and whose belonging is a process negotiated in relation to this environment.

Beginning with an overview of colonial migration that saw communities from South Asia become ‘local’ to this island, section 3.1 also briefly contrasts this positionality of the Singaporean Indian community with more frequently studied South Asian diasporas in Euro-American contexts. As part of the founding and initial settling population of modern Singapore, ‘Indians’ here are not simply migrants and should be recognised as local. I draw on Ingold’s (2000) relational model of inhabitation to help with this reframing. The term ‘Indian’ also has a particular history in Singapore, informed in colonial ontology by the British Indian experience and by local conceptions. So, section 3.2 examines how this group becomes ‘Indian’ alongside the entrenchment of ‘Race’ as a means of administrative, political, and social management of the local

population in colonial Singapore. Section 3.3 examines the WWII and post-war period, the emergent possibilities of exclusive citizenship in independent nation-states, and the choice the Indian population in Singapore was faced with in officially becoming Singaporean. With independence from the Crown then from Malaya, a young Singapore nation-state responds to the perceived challenge of governing a plural population by declaring ‘multiculturalism’ a guiding principle, entrenching ‘Race’ further as administrative category and as primary framework through which to understand and govern its diversity. In section 3.4, I unpack how the ‘CMIO’ framework presents being ‘Indian’ in largely essentialised ways and pay particular attention to the enrolment of token objects into this task of signalling ‘Indian-ness’—a mode this thesis is, in part, positioned against. With section 3.5, the chapter concludes with an examination of other communities in Singapore against whom being Singaporean Indian is examined, defined, or challenged in today’s evolving plural social environment. In all, this chapter would have laid out the becoming of Singaporean Indians through historical, epistemological, and social changes that inform the contemporary examinations of the more ethnographically informed chapters that follow.

### **3.1 BECOMING LOCAL**

The South Asian community in Singapore is quite unlike other South Asian diasporic communities around the world. Where others arrive in lands already settled by native or earlier arrived groups and into an established state, the early South Asians in Singapore were part of the inhabitation, political establishment, and development of Singapore as we know it today. They are neither ‘native’ in terms of indigeneity, nor

are they akin to ‘settlers’ for there was not a significant resident population to displace.<sup>1</sup> Neither of these terms reflect this unique position of being foundational to an emergent polity and society, so I will use the idea of being ‘local’ to underscore this position instead. ‘Local’ captures the idea of having become part of the land—just like local flora and fauna may not always be native—growing, reproducing, thriving off the land in ecological balance with other species. ‘Local’, as opposed to the ‘global’, also locates the subject with specific territorial and political belonging. Thus ‘locals’ are marked out in opposition to ‘expats’ and ‘new migrants’, who embody a global presence in Singapore and its economy. In late colonial discourse too, South Asians and other settled Asian communities were referred to as ‘local’ keeping them distinct from European country traders and the British officers administrating the colony (Mehrotra 2022). Through a history of migration and settlement, Singaporean Indians have over time become local, of the land, enabled by the particular structures of Empire in Singapore.

### **3.1.1 Colonial Migration**

The connections between South Asia and Southeast Asia predate European colonisation of either region. Though trade, political, and social links have not been continuous, this ‘Indianisation’ of Southeast Asia (Coedes 1948) is evident in the Hindu and Buddhist influence on monuments, place names, languages and practices across the peninsula and archipelago. Singapore—located off the southern tip of the

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<sup>1</sup> Recent decolonisation discourse had sought to argue for a settlement of Singapore predating British colonial rule. However, considering that the island of Singapore was part of archipelagic empires with nomadic seafaring groups native to the region but not the island per se, a claim for nativity to Singapore itself would be an overstatement. The island was underdeveloped, but with little direct dominion by the powers that lay claim to the region. Under the British flag, Singapore was marked out for the first time as a distinct political and territorial entity.

peninsula and at the heart of the archipelago—lies in a region that has seen the reign of the Hindu influenced Srivijaya empire (7th–13th century CE) and Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit empire (13th–16th century CE), as well as the invasion and cultural influence of the Cholan and Pallava empires from south India. Though these brought political, trade, and religious influence, there was no large settlement of South Asian populations from this period (Sinha 2015a: 10–11). Those who count themselves as Indian in Southeast Asia today claim their ancestral entry into the region to, at the earliest, the late 19th century migrations between British colonies.

The start of continuous Indian presence in Singapore can be dated precisely to the British founding of Singapore in early 1819 (Rai 2014: 3). The unbroken presence of Indian communities began with the *lascars* and sepoys of the Bengal Native Infantry who arrived with Stamford Raffles—then Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen looking to expand the East India Company’s strategic presence in Southeast Asia—and the subsequent ‘bazaar contingent’ of camp attendants (ibid.: 5). These men were broadly identified as ‘Bengalis’, possibly for their associations with the Bengal Native Infantry, but were drawn from present-day eastern Uttar Pradesh and northwestern Bihar (Rai 2006: 76). The persistence of a *dhobi* (washermen) community after the early militia’s tour suggest that some members of the bazaar contingent stayed on as civilian immigrants in the new settlement (ibid.). The second source of Indian presence, the Indian convicts transported to Singapore between its 1825 establishment as penal colony and 1876 closure represented various regional, caste, and religious communities of the subcontinent, including the Sikh *sant* and anti-British revolutionary Bhai Maharaj Singh. These convicts were a critical labour source and catalyst for Singapore’s rapid development in the 19th century with their work laying key infrastructure for the town centre and settlements across the island. After their

sentence, many convicts chose to remain in Singapore and 'few were known to have returned to India.' (ibid: 77) With the end of penal labour supply, Singapore once again turned to India. Plantations recruited Indian labour through indenture then the *kangani*—both systems of short-term contracts under tight fiscal, work, and living conditions. Indian coolies for public works were hired by colonial authorities through direct labour recruitment, while other labourers came to Singapore supported by schemes like the Tamil Immigration Fund (ibid. 78-79). Indian ethnic composition in Singapore begin with military personnel from a few north Indian regions, then became more diverse in the penal colony until eventual labour recruitment patterns saw Tamil communities from south Indian dominate South Asian population numbers.

British colonial rule of Singapore underscores Indian presence here through two key facts. One, that both India and Singapore were connected not only as fellow British colonies, but that Singapore was governed between 1826 and 1867 under British India, as part of the Presidency of the Straits Settlements under direct control of the Bengal Presidency. This common control made highly populated India an administratively logical and easy recruitment source for underpopulated Singapore. Two, the Government of India held superior status and when it sanctioned indentured emigration to Singapore from the Madras Presidency only, it effectively determined the Tamil-majority demographic of Indians in Singapore (ibid. 78). India was also recruitment grounds for educated workers who were familiar with the Crown's administration and could be trusted to continue its work in another colony. Thus English-educated junior clerks, teachers, doctors, and administrators were drawn from amongst Malayalis from Kerala and Sri Lankan Tamils, and police and security personnel from the Sikh 'martial race' of Punjab. Singapore's rapid development as a free port, the expansion of Indian communities, ease of travel and entry between the

two British colonies also quickly attracted a diversity of commercial migrants in the second half of the 19th century. The Nattukottai Chettiar moneylenders from south India; Parsi, Marwari and Gujarati traders from west India; and later Sindhis and Sikhs established communities in Singapore connected to an extensive trade and kinship network across Southeast Asia. The presence and composition of South Asians in Singapore was thus shaped by these various colonial-era connections and flows.

### **3.1.2 Settlement**

Becoming local though entails more than migration. Settlement of families and the establishment of organisations demonstrate a community's plans for long-term regeneration. The early 20th century saw the influx of women and children from India either migrating with or joining male family members who had arrived prior. Their presence indexes a sense of financial and social security in Singapore, and the ability to bear a new generation who would be born and raised in this new land—both contributing to a nascent sense of belonging. From the early 19th century, but especially picking up in the early 20th century, the pooling of financial, human, and political capital to establish institutions that oversaw the needs of the Indian communities also point to a longer-term incorporation into the local environment. When the South Asian community was smaller and resources were scarce, institutions served a broad swath of the population. Sri Mariamman temple, established in 1827, is a key exemplar in the way it houses both Saivite and Vaishnavite Hindu deities serving the needs of the two dominant (and at times oppositional) sects of popular Hinduism. Such a collaboration would be hard found in India. Then as numbers and resources grew, institutions became specialised in their functions and reflected the diversity of the community. The North Indian Hindu Funeral Association (1921), the

Dakshina Bharata Brahmana Sabha (South Indian Brahmin Association, 1925), and Sikh Moneylenders Association (1932) are just some examples of the twentieth-century distinctions drawn on regional, caste, religious, and occupational lines. This is not however indicative of a complete fragmentation of the South Asian communities in Singapore. Pan-Indian organisations such as the Singapore Indian Association (1923) and Indian Chamber of Commerce (1924) demonstrate a social and political cohesion in the same period.

Escalating nascent patterns, population and institutional developments in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate that the South Asians in Singapore had both ethno-religious specificity as well as a shared sense of commonality with other Indian groups. This was in part because of the structure of administration of Singapore's population and an understanding from below that this broader group identity can be better leveraged. I take this up again in section 3.2 but will first offer a brief comparison with other Indian diasporas in considering how the early Indian communities in Singapore were able to become local and beyond 'diaspora'.

### **3.1.3 'Diaspora'**

The primary and root difference in the Singapore Indian experience is Singapore itself. Unlike other 'migrant nations' like Australia and the United States, Singapore was intended from the outset of its colonial history to be an ethnically plural society, populated not by natives and colonising settlers, but by a mix of migrants who will collectively become local and form the foundations of the new nation's population and polity (Solomon 2019: 94). This position sets Singaporean Indians apart from their diasporic counterparts in North America and Europe who are expected to assimilate to an extant settled population and culture. For this same reason, the experience of

Indians in Singapore is set apart from Indians in Malaysia (with whom Singapore shares migration and colonial history as British Malaya). Malay ethnic groups, indigenous to the archipelago but not necessarily the territories of Malaysia, as well as its indigenous peoples are recognised as *bumiputera* (son of the land) and accorded preferential rights, setting the Malaysian Indian and Chinese populations apart as always already 'not native'. Other countries share a history of significant Indian indentured migration, including the West Indies, Jamaica, Trinidad, Mauritius, Fiji. The experience here has since been of inter-marriage with other migrant and native communities leading to a diffusion of Indian parentage, culture, and influence in the local culture. While inter-racial marriage is on the rise in Singapore today and have previously led to the formation of separate ethnic groups such as the Chetty Melaka, this is still a minority position (see Dept. of Statistics. 2024: 8). Most Indians in Singapore still marry within their ethnic community, if not the racial community, and importantly make a claim for a distinct Indian identity and not only Indian ancestry.

Also unique to Singapore and a key contributor to persistent Indian distinction in Singapore, is the largely unbroken stream of migration of South Asians from the subcontinent to Singapore. This bolsters both cultural renewal and population renewal through marriage and migration. From those arriving post WW2 and post Partition to join family already settled here (in chain migration, not as refugees); to the Indians from Malaya escaping the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and the stream of brides, wives and children from India allowed entry despite Singapore's tightened migration policies in the 1970s; to the boom of economic migrations from the 1990s till date, Singapore has not stopped receiving immigrants from South Asia since 1819. This renewal has afforded sustained kin, cultural, and economic connections with South Asia and, resultantly, the maintenance of a distinct identity and community. But it is

also in the face of these patterns that those who identify as 'Singaporean Indian' reject the label of 'diaspora' (Sinha 2021: 97).

The experiences of diasporas, simply those who have settled outside of their lands of origins, is now far varied from the term's initial referents. So too, the experiences now captured in popular and academic employment of the concept of 'diaspora'. A contemporary push is to see 'diasporas' as not just in terms of a political and territorial situation, but as 'an act of imagination... held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination' (Cohen 1996: 516). Sinha (2021: 96) argues a similar relocation of 'diaspora' not in the groups of people, but 'to conceive of "diaspora" as a *context* and a *critical site/space/locale* for forging and enacting belongings and building solidarities.' However, the struggle with building solidarities off a shared imagination is as Benjamin (1976: 11) argues of culture: that 'although any one culture viewed in the abstract as an idea system may appear finite and well-integrated, the bits and pieces of culture as present in any real person's mind do not necessarily add up to a single uniform system.' Singaporean Indians imagine themselves as distinct from those seen as 'India Indians', and have a strong sense of this divide as apparent and tangible even if the markers fall short in actual application. What is key in my argument though is to take seriously the Singaporean Indian imagination of themselves, of what being Singaporean Indian entails for the group that sees itself not as 'diasporic' but as 'local', where Singapore is something more than a diasporic context for enacting belonging. In rethinking this relationship to land, Appadurai's (1996) conception of locality and Ingold's (2000) relational model offer helpful frameworks to locate the identity and belonging of the 'local' as emergent through dwelling.

### 3.1.4 Local Through Dwelling

In acknowledging the Singaporean Indian as 'local', I draw on a combination of Appadurai (1996) and Ingold (2000) to account for the ways the 'local subject' emerges from dwelling in 'locality'. Though the two do not seem to have engaged with each other's works, there is nonetheless much affinity between their ideas. Together, they support my conception of becoming local as processual, as actively regenerated, and as materially entangled.

Appadurai conceives of 'locality' as a 'complex phenomenological quality...which expresses itself in certain kinds of agency, sociality, and reproducibility' (Appadurai 1996: 178). 'Locality' is thus an aspect of social life, and does not pre-exist sociality nor is it a natural given. It is 'primarily relational and contextual', but 'an inherently fragile social achievement' that must be maintained and reproduced (ibid. 178,179). Appadurai points to rites of passage in particular as examples of such 'complex social techniques for the inscription of locality onto bodies' or, put simply, in the production of 'local subjects' (ibid. 179). Ingold offers a similar conception of 'originality'—having to do with ideas of 'origin' in relation to land—as continually regenerated.

Ingold (2000: 132) considers two models through which contemporary generations may partake of the 'originality' of their predecessors—the genealogical model in which the 'idea of originality can be passed on by descent' and an alternative relational model. Applied to the community at hand, the genealogical model would at best describe an 'Indian in Singapore'. But the relational model requires a relationship beyond 'blood' or 'history', making way for an understanding of identity and of belonging as emergent from dwelling *in* the land, not just on it. This is a model that

recognises skilled movement with/in the environment in recognising the 'originality' of inhabitation.

The genealogical model, that informs most popular understandings of indigeneity and adopted by organisations like the United Nations to define the same, centres the following assumptions: 'that original ancestry lies at the point where history rises from an ahistorical substrate of 'nature'; that the generation of persons involves the transmission of biogenetic substance prior to their life in the world; that ancestral experience can be passed on as the stuff of cultural memory, enshrined in language and tradition; and that the land is merely a surface to be occupied, serving to support its inhabitants rather than to bring them into being' (Ingold 2000: 133). Ingold argues that such a model 'fundamentally misrepresents the ways in which the peoples whom we class as indigenous...actually constitute their identity, knowledgeability, and the environments in which they live' (Ibid.). This classification, Ingold acknowledges, comes from a 'sympathetic, anthropologically informed perspective' (ibid.), which I share and seek therefore not to misrepresent how Singaporean Indians actually constitute their identity and environment.

Ingold's alternative relational model offers that framework to recognise the ways Singaporean Indians see themselves as being of this land, even if they cannot claim 'indigeneity' in the conventional sense. This relational approach 'is more consonant with people's lived experience of inhabiting the land... [wherein] both cultural knowledge and bodily substance are seen to undergo continuous generation in the context of an ongoing engagement with the land and with the beings—human and non-human—that dwell therein' (ibid.) Here, originality or indigeneity is not something alienable that can be passed down like inherited property, but is rather recognised as

something that must be lived, moved, actively and skilfully inhabited. As such the ancestor's contribution to successors is in 'creating the environment in which people now live, and from which they draw their sense of being' (ibid.: 140). In this model, 'every being is instantiated in the world as the line of its own movement and activity' so culture is not transmitted as some kind of biogenetic substance already inscribed prior to life in the world but is 'progenerated' with the continually unfolding field of relationships (ibid. 140-142). The relational model sees each person as centres of progenerative activity from which a person perceives, acts, and draws the substance of their being (ibid. 144). Where ancestors may contribute by creating the environment in which one lives, substances of being like identity and culture are not simply inherited but progenerated with an individual's movements and action in and with their environment.

Ingold's relational model thereby revises the genealogical model's approach to land as 'no more than a kind of stage' (2000: 139). The relational field of the alternative model is the very ground from which things grow and take the forms they do (ibid. 149). With this view, 'inhabiting' the land 'should not be taken to imply mere occupancy', but is rather 'to inhabit the land is to draw it to a particular focus, and in so doing to constitute a place' (ibid.). Land, being comprised of these relations between human and things, is itself imbued with the vitality that animates its inhabitants. Land figures as 'an immense tangle of interlaced trails...continually ravelling here, and unravelling there, as the beings of which it is composed...' 'issue forth', along the lines of their relationships' (ibid. 149-50). Originality is not then a matter of having been *on* a piece of land, but rather a matter of continuing to 'issue forth' *with* the land.

Complementing Ingold's view of the environment as more than a stage on which life plays out, Appadurai draws the distinction between 'neighbourhoods'—his term for the actually existing situated communities with their potential for social reproduction—as context-providing and context-generative (1996: 179, 188). Seeking to go beyond the approach to places and spaces as 'unproblematised settings for the technical production of local subjects in a regular and regulated manner,' Appadurai instead calls attention to how local subjects contribute, in their everyday acts of production and reproduction, to the 'creation of contexts that might exceed the existing material and conceptual boundaries of the neighbourhood' (ibid. 185). Social acts like marriage, trade, hunting, and conflict extend the neighbourhood by generating further social contexts. This view of the neighbourhood as 'context-generative' thus recognises that 'as local subjects carry on the continuing task of reproducing their neighbourhood, the contingencies of history, environment, and imagination contain the potential for new contexts to be produced' (ibid.). Ingold and Appadurai both thus share the sense that the socially substantive concepts of culture and identity do not simply carry on with time but are actively reproduced through the activity and agency of 'local subjects' whose activities are shaped by their context—environmental, material, and social—and whose activities in turn (re)generate their context.

In laying out context-generative practices, Appadurai largely relies on the discursive and the symbolic, particularly marking out rites of passage (ibid. 179). Though he does recognise the processes by which locality is materially produced—in the building of houses, organisation of paths, making of gardens, mapping of terrain, etc.—and calls for the study of these as context-generating practices and more than just the spatial production of locality (ibid. 180), that approach is underdeveloped in his own work (c.f. Larkin 2013; Harvey and Knox 2015). Ingold's focus on dwelling in and attuned to the

material world fills that gap. On the other hand, Appadurai's explicit framing of 'locality' as a 'structure of feeling' also makes room for my considerations of identity and belonging through such dwelling with/in the material world.

With his revised relationship to land, Ingold's relational model offers an alternative to the genealogical view of 'indigeneity' as exclusive to groups who were 'first' on the land. The relational model offers a way to recognise, as Singapore does, the originary status of a plurality of communities and cultures. Appadurai's conception of 'locality' as 'always emergent from the practices of local subjects in specific neighbourhoods' also foregrounds the view that 'locality'—and by extension, being local—is a dimension of social life and 'not a transcendent standard form which particular societies fall or deviate' (1996: 198). Their emphasis on culture and identity as accrued through life lived *with* this land, and not pre-formed ahead of inhabitation, also helps account for the quick development of a Singaporean Indian identity—even within a single generation—and the cross-cultural influences afforded by Singapore's particular plural society that mark being 'Singaporean Indian' apart from being 'Indian in Singapore'. Taken together, Ingold and Appadurai offer a model through which we can make sense of how Singaporean Indians become 'local' through dwelling *with* this environment, including retaining the cultural distinction of 'being Indian' which is sustained precisely through the fields of relations afforded by this land of Singapore.

### **3.2. BECOMING 'INDIAN', PART 1**

For the earliest South Asian migrants to Singapore, the idea of being 'Indian', individually or collectively, had not always been a given. In the 19th century, India as a united polity was only just emerging by way of British India though this national identity quickly foments over the early 20th century. The groups coming to Singapore,

including some from British Ceylon, saw themselves primarily in religio-caste or ethno-linguistic terms, and would then form alliances often through ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic proximity. Though Indian nationalist discourse shaped a sense of shared ethno-national identity later, becoming 'Indian' in Singapore was primarily shaped by the structural experience of this colonial administrative unit. Two ontologies mutually inform the idea of 'Indian' here: British colonial ontology and administrative organisation of local Asian populations, and the interpretations of these structures by local populations themselves. Both work in dialogue to carve out an understanding of the 'Indian' that is shared amongst the plurality of European administrators and Asian locals, including the Indian subject communities themselves.

### **3.2.1 'Race' in Malaya**

As with its other colonies, the British empire in Singapore sought to make sense of the population through categorisation and enumeration. Recognising the migrant nature of the population, the initial primary categorisation was based on countries of origin, or what was then termed 'nationality'. This matrix is later renamed 'Race' but as C. A. Vlieland, superintendent of the 1931 census, explains in his census report, the term entails much more:

...the word "Race" is used, for lack of a more appropriate term, to cover a complex set of ideas of which race, in the strict or scientific sense, is only one small element. ... It is, in fact, impossible to define the sense in which the term "Race" is used for census purposes: it is, in reality, a judicious blend, for practical ends, of the ideas of geographic and ethnographic origin, political allegiance, and racial and social affinities and sympathies. The difficulty of achieving anything like a scientific or logically consistent classification is enhanced by the fact that most Oriental peoples have themselves no clear conception of race, and commonly regard religion as the most important, if not the determinant, element. (pp. 73-74, para 260)

Colonial classification clearly prioritised 'practical' value even as it recognised the scientific inconsistency of its approach. This matter of 'practicality' also meant that

local understanding became an important element in the work of categorisation, one that shaped how the empire itself had to navigate 'Race' via proxies legible to both the people counted and those doing the counting.

Census reports from the early 20th century are replete with complaints of common errors made in filling out forms. A 'common error' noted amongst Indian census returns in 1921 was the entering of religion in the 'race' column with 'Hindu', 'Muhammadan,' and 'Sikh' being of fairly frequent occurrence. As rectification, 'in practically every case, however, there was no difficulty in ascertaining the race from the entries under 'birthplace' and 'language' (14, para 35). Here though the concern was not just with determining 'Indians' from the other races such as the 'Chinese' and 'Malays', but also in ascertaining their ethnolinguistic classifications—ambiguously also termed 'race' in the reports such that the three most numerous 'Indian races' in 1921 were the Tamils, Telugus, and Malayalis. By the next census exercise in 1931, 'the value of the Birthplace entries... as a check on (or in some cases almost a criterion of) 'Race' was perhaps more considerable at this time than at any previous census, in view of the special effort made to discriminate between the peninsular Malay and other Malaysians, and of the endeavour to obtain a more satisfactory classification of Indians' (67, para 238). The concern here was with discerning 'race' as before, but also carried a judgement on intentions as the same paragraph cautions of 'the fallacy of assuming that [someone] who happens to have been born in Singapore, has any intention of remaining there for life' (ibid.).

These notes are highly indicative of the clear sense British administrators had of not just the determinants of identity, but also of the hierarchy of biographical data in informing 'Race'. For the most part, 'place of birth' was the greatest determinant of

'Race', but there were limits to recognising 'jus soli' claims. These biographical markers were thereby simultaneously and selectively treated as both determinative and accidental, such as in the note that 'the actual place of birth is in many cases a matter of chance' (67, para 237). What also emerges through these reports is how while the Malays and Chinese in Malaya were coming to be understood anew through their populations in the Malayan context (see Manickam 2009), Indians were largely determined as already known and knowable through the British experience in South Asia. However, this understanding was also forced to attune to local ways of knowing.

### **3.2.2 Local Understanding**

The mechanics of empire is evident in the direct ways colonial knowledge of British India was applied in the Malayan census exercises. The 1947 census report noted how Malayan census officials 'took the precaution of enlisting the help of Mr M. W. Yates, I.C.S. [Indian Civil Service], Superintendent of the All-Indian Census of 1940, who undertook to supply [them] with lists of Zillahs and Riasats as well as of the principal communities known to emigrate to Malaya' (77, para 302). This step was deemed necessary for the 'correct ethnographical classification of the Indians' 'due to the widespread ignorance of the nature of the distinctions involved' (77, para 301). The complaint was of the ignorance of local enumerators: 'to the average Malay enumerator—and for that matter to almost everybody except the Indians themselves—every Southern Indian is a "Kling"...and almost every other Indian, irrespective of his geographical or racial origins, a "Bengali"' (ibid.). This 'unreliability' of local enumerators also saw, in the 1931 census exercise, 'the sorting of northern Indian slips...not left to the ordinary sorting gangs, but carried out entirely by the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent, with constant reference in doubtful cases

to maps and authorities' (85, para 298). The sense that the local population, including local census takers, did not have the 'correct' conception of race, unlike Europeans, is again reflected in the characterisation of European estate managers and employers of labour—who recorded the largely south Indian labourers under their employment—as 'responsible persons, whose reliability in such a matter was greater than could be expected of the average Malay or Chinese enumerator' (1931 Census Report: 82, para 292).

Despite the above exaltation that the Indians themselves could draw the expected distinctions, the reports also note Indians in Singapore identifying themselves via the vernacular classification. Officials note that 'the term "Bengali" is not only used loosely by the Malays, but has become of such common use that many a local Punjabi will, and does, describe himself as Bengali' (1921 Census Report, 86, para 321). In a bid to educate Indians on their 'correct' classification, 'the police also kindly undertook independent propaganda instructing northern Indians as to the replies they should give,' and had further 'broadcast a standard list of serially numbered Zillahs, and get the northern Indian to respond with a number, instead of a name which was liable to defeat the enumerator' (1931 Census Report, 84, para 298). In this way Indians in Singapore were taught to construct themselves in line with colonial categories of place and people in British India, even as these Indians sought to make themselves legible to their fellow locals in the Singapore context. This attuned self-construction is particularly noted in the way an Indian respondent may adjust his answer according to the enumerator at hand, so 'even a native of the United Provinces, an Afghan or a Punjabi, if he has been any length of time in Malaya, is as likely as not to describe himself as a "Bengali" in speaking to a Malay enumerator' (ibid: para 297). Ultimately,

the colonial officials would themselves make compensations on their rigid distinctions on account of local conditions and practicalities. Thus in 1931, the report notes:

In consultation with the Inspector General, ...the writer decided to adopt a primarily geographical basis of classification, absorbing in major classes the inhabitants of certain parts of India who are but slightly represented in Malaya. The result was a classification which, ...possessed the advantages that there was a reasonable prospect of practical success in assignment, and a comparative certainty that the results would have a definite meaning, even if that meaning was rather geographic than ethnographic. (83, para 294)

This now meant that the class of 'Punjabi' was now retitled 'Punjabi, etc.' and included immigrants from the Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, North West Frontier Province, and Baluchistan—or generally North Western India in short (ibid.).

Thus, in practice, the colonial census exercise was not simply a top-down imposition of identities imported from British India on the enumerated subjects in Singapore. Indians in Singapore not only constructed their own identities via aspects they themselves deemed more significant, such as religion; or prioritised local ontologies in adopting locally legible terms; but also recognised the political implications of these categories and numbers and actively pursued their own self-construction in the exercise. This is most evident in the 1947 Census, the first after the British return to Singapore post WW2 and conducted on the night of 23 September 1947, just six short weeks after the Independence of India and Pakistan. Many South Indian groups were returned as 'Dravidian', 'there being both in Malaya and in South India a vaguely-secessionist movement whose object is the restoration of the Dravidian peoples to independence and their ancient greatness' (78, para 304). Other Indians had the tendency to return their 'race' as 'Indian,' 'Union of India Citizen,' or 'Pakistani', a move the census report deemed an 'unpredictable effect' of recent political changes (ibid). Both these situations led to a relatively large proportion of Indians sub-classified as

'other or indeterminate' (ibid). While these groups sought to use the census as a protest site to demonstrate new political identities that were ultimately not recognised in the subsequent census exercises, other groups managed to get the colonial administration to legitimise their own identity constructions leveraging the extant vague conceptualisation of 'race':

As for the Sikhs, it was originally intended to have them returned on a racial basis (they are mostly Punjabis) but some time before the census was held various Sikh Associations pointed out that the Sikhs were now not only co-religionists but also formed a very definite social, economic and political community. The instructions to enumerators were accordingly altered just before enumeration commenced and enumerators instructed to enter all Sikhs as such. (1947 Census Report: 78, para 306).

The census exercises sought to cement who and what qualified as 'Indian', drawing from categories, lists, and maps produced in British India in order to make sense of the Indians in Singapore. However, these ideas could not be simply transposed or kept detached from local grounds for long. Local ways of seeing and classifying people informed both the enumerators and the enumerated. Becoming 'Indian' in Singapore meant then learning these colonial expectations of where one falls while also attuning and actively crafting one's identity to be legible to both other locals and the state. The amenability of these classifications also made it a site of active self-construction for some groups of 'Indians'. These early negotiations continue to inform the sub-category classification of 'Indians' today (see Annex F).

Colonial construction of identity, instructed in significant part through the census exercise, worked on multiple fronts to inform being 'Indian' in Singapore. It brought the name, along with the people, to Singapore; collected them under a single umbrella category; and had a fixed idea, drawn from British India, of what its constituent aspects were and how they should be recognised. But this was not completely removed from local practicalities. In an already plural population, identities had to be simplified and

made knowable. The complexity of the 'Indians' (as well as the 'Malays' and 'Chinese') was funnelled into that singular term. What we must recognise in the Singapore context is not just a top-down classification of 'Race' by the state, but also a concurrent horizontal 'racialisation' by others in Singapore's society. I return to the question of 'racialisation' in section 3.4, after this next examination of how a sharpening of the community's consciousness in becoming 'Indian' also shaped their becoming 'Singaporean'.

### **3.3. BECOMING SINGAPOREAN**

The 1920s to 1960s was a key period in the settlement of Indians in Singapore and a coalescing of national consciousness. Becoming Singaporean was not foregone conclusion as the community grew a greater sense of being Indian and being local. We see in this period developments that point to both positions, including an expansion in Indian immigration, the rapid development of Indian organisations, the influence of Indian nationalist concerns on lives in Singapore, and the instating of Singapore citizenship. These instigated a greater consciousness of community and of collective agency in the nascent nation-state enabling a sense of becoming Singaporean and belonging here.

#### **3.3.1 Particularism**

The early 20th century was marked by an exponential growth in Indian population numbers. The number had doubled between 1891 and 1921, with a further 60 per cent increase recorded in 1931 (Rai 2014: 168). Shifting the demographics and with ramifications on settlement, this period saw a significant uptake in Indian elite and middle-class immigration to now make up about 30 per cent of the total Indian population in Singapore (ibid.). Unlike the sojourning labour classes before, the middle

classes had a greater tendency to migrate with families, boosting female numbers; have the resources to acquire property; be more inclined to build permanent institutions; acclimatise themselves generally to local society and administration; and in all, be incentivised to settle in Singapore (ibid). Greater numbers also meant that the diversity of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups now had a critical mass to support the collective expression of these particular and intersectional identities.

As seen above with the census exercises, Indian communities held strongly to religion in their self-identification. This is reflected in the mushrooming of organisations reflecting ethno-religious particularism (ibid. 167). Within the 1920s alone, the religious diversity of the Malayalee community supported the establishment of three new associations—the Malayalee Hindu Samajam (1926), the Malabar Muslim Jamaath (1929), the Syrian Christian Association (1929). Even amongst the Sikhs who essentially all share a Punjabi ethnic and regional identity, new religious institutions emerged in this period that reflected further subregional specificities. The Gurudwara Sahib Sri Guru Singh Sabha (1918) was constituted by Sikhs from Punjab's Malwa region, the Khalsa Dharmak Sabha (1924) for those from the Majha region, while the Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Sabha (1926) represented those from the Doaba region (ibid.). Even on secular matters like business, associations gathered and represented interests along ethnic lines—the Sindhi Merchants Association (1922); the Indian Merchants Association (1924), which despite its name initially only represented the Gujaratis; and the Chettiars' (Nattukkottai) Chamber of Commerce (1931) (ibid.).

With their numbers and organisations, the mobilisation of the middle-class also saw Indian middle-class social values shape Indian society in Singapore. On one hand, this meant a push for vernacular education which took various forms including Tamil-

medium primary schools; Tamil and later Hindi language classes in organisations such as the Ramakrishnan Mission and Arya Samaj respectively; and private tutors instructing from their homes (ibid: 170). The flip side of middle-class values though is the conservatism that sought to reproduce the hierarchies and social distinctions of the Indian village in Singapore. Caste maintenance was reinforced by the rapid influx of lower-caste and Adi Dravida labourers in the early twentieth century, and the fact that Indians lived in enclaves (ibid: 171). Enclaves meant that everyone easily knew and reinforced each other's place in the hierarchy, allowing residents to organise space in practice of 'distance maintenance' and 'untouchability', as evident in Serangoon Road, Tanjong Pagar, and at the Naval Base (ibid.). These practices were not removed from the rest of Singapore's society either. In areas of Indian concentration, Chinese stall owners learnt to recognise and reinforced caste differences by refusing to serve or marking out different sections for lower-caste Indians, aiding in their upper-caste Indian clients' practice of non-commensality (ibid). Though some Adi Dravidas resisted, 'the sojourning tendencies of lower-caste labourers also generated pressures towards conformity' (ibid: 172). But by the late 1920s, Adi Dravida groups had also begun to organise themselves, petitioning the state for land to build their own temple, and forming the Adi Dravidas Association in 1928 (ibid.).

Even in recreating social practices from India, these had still to be attuned and moderated to the Singapore context be it in the active creation of new organisations to reflect and maintain particularisms that would have seemed always-already present in India, or in recruiting non-Indians in Singapore into aiding the continuation of caste practices. For both the Indian middle-class and lower-castes, these moves, especially the formation of particularised organisations, would have helped made life in

Singapore somewhat more familiar as they found belonging and a voice amongst extended kin and community.

### **3.3.2 Localising Indian Nationalist Influence**

The Indian population in Singapore were not aloof of nationalist developments in the subcontinent either. Though, communities here took inspiration from those movements in advocating for local concerns, in effect entrenching their political involvement and agency in Singapore.

Amidst the wave of particularised organisations was a concurrent recognition of the need for united pan-Indian collaboration to secure representation in local municipal issues. In 1921, key organisations were granted the privilege to nominate representatives to the Municipal Commission, but in 1923 a body that brought Indians together was perceived as more useful to this end resulting in the formation of the Singapore Indian Association (SIA) (ibid: 178). The Association's early constitution ensured representation of the diversity of Indian ethnic and religious backgrounds and was deemed by state officials as 'the first known attempt to unite Indians, including Hindus and Muslims, in Malaya' (as cited in ibid: 179). Though colonial authorities had some suspicion of Indian nationalist sympathy amongst SIA's leadership, there was little to suggest so. The 1930s and effects of the Great Depression however ushered clearer affiliation and influence of Indian nationalist values, especially in paralleling pan-Indian co-operation and advocacy for labour rights. The Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) was formed in 1936—constituting 18 Indian Associations and Chambers of Commerce and Merchants' Associations—and by 1938, was able to convince the Indian Government to ban all forms of assisted Indian emigration to Malaya, ending the systems that kept Indian labour in Malaya bound to

dreadful employment contracts and poor conditions (ibid: 183, 185). CIAM leaders had close connections with and took inspiration from Indian nationalist leaders in getting more involved in Indian trade union activities in Malaya (ibid). In Singapore, S.C. Goho and K.P.K Menon, also deeply influenced by the Indian nationalists, actively acted in the interest of Indian labourers including representing the interests of 13,000 Indian workers of the Municipality and Harbour Board when a major strike broke out in 1936, and of Indian workers of the Singapore Traction Company in 1938 (ibid.). Both Goho and Menon would later become key players in the Indian National Army's (INA) operations in war time Malaya.

The Indian experience of WW2 would however be cause for pause and re-evaluation of pan-Indian identity and their place in Singapore. In popular memory, the wartime cause of the Indian Independence Movement to oust Britain from India via Malaya and lead by Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, has been recognised as the zenith of Indian nationalist fervour amongst Indians in Singapore (ibid: 239). The community looked to be united in supporting the INA's campaign as soldiers and fundraisers, or in having benefitted indirectly from the INA alliance with Japanese forces in Singapore, with Indian POWs and civilians reportedly getting better treatment compared to the other communities. But amidst these valorous histories are also counter experiences of those 'who saw the demands imposed on them as excessive, and felt that the pan-Indian unity that was fostered was not necessarily the outcome of a genuine transformation in consciousness but rather forced upon' (ibid: 239–240). Additionally, economic scarcity for all in this period and extensive Indian recruitment to work on the Death Railway under treacherous and often fatal conditions—subsequent to the Japanese distrust of Chinese civilians and European and Australian

POWs—left a deep imprint (ibid.: 240, 266). The pan-Indian unity conjured by the INA quickly fell apart by the end of the war.

The war and Partition of India and Pakistan that followed soon after exposed the Empire's fallibility and undermined attempts to foster Indian unity in Singapore where there was increasingly manifest divisions influenced by developments in India. As news of communal violence in India spread, battles between Hindus and Muslims erupted in areas of Indian concentration in Singapore (ibid.: 270). Revival of links with the subcontinent also sharpened ethnolinguistic cleavages. The Dravidian Movement, though present in Singapore before the war had been suppressed during it. This movement for the social, moral, and political reform of Tamils once again re-emerged as a potent force drawing together an even larger segment of the community under the Tamil banner (ibid.). Where the pre-war labour advocacy led by nationalist-oriented, educated, middle-class leaders (described above) represented a top-down connection to Indian labourers, a contemporaneous leadership influenced by the Dravidian Movement and speaking in the vernacular were seen as more proximate to the labouring classes (ibid: 187). With their concerns of social equality—including gender equality, an anti-Brahmin stance, and denouncing of caste practice—the movement's leadership propagated these aspects of Tamil 'Self-Respect' in Singapore through associations like the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) (1932), Tamils Representative Council (1933), and local leaders like the Tamil journalist and later editor of *Tamil Murasu*, G. Sarangapani. Critically, this movement saw in Singapore an out for lower-caste Tamil groups, an opportunity to break from entrenched caste structures in the homeland. Even before the war, the TRA was already encouraging Tamils to settle permanently in the colony, a position that that also been adopted by the movement's doyen E. V. Ramasamy Naicker (a.k.a. Periyar)

during his 1929 tour of these parts (ibid.: 190). Post-war, bolstered by a steady flow of Tamil labour from the Madras Presidency and connections with the Tamil Muslim community as well the Chettiars, these Tamil leaders continued to work for the upliftment of Tamil labourers and argue for Tamil leadership of the overall Indian community in Singapore (ibid. 270–271).

Inspiration from movements in India took several forms in Singapore but were ultimately and most successfully manifest where applied to the concerns and particularities of the local population. Recognising the need for Indian representation in the Singapore state drove pan-Indian collaboration across ethnicities and religions. The advocacy for Indian labour conditions afforded the Indian community a united mission across classes. Despite the multiplicity of organisations, internal divisions and competition, the concerns were ultimately one: making a claim to life in Singapore. Out of a varying sense of Indian unity and particularism emerged a sense of agency in their own lives, including the choice between India or Singapore for their future.

### **3.3.3 Citizenship**

The 1940s to 1960s saw a hardening of borders with the independence and formation of the nation-states of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Singapore. With this came the need to decide where to permanently sink roots and pledge national loyalty. In 1941, the possibility of a Japanese occupation of Singapore saw several Indian commercial groups and some professionals choosing to return to India (Rai 2006: 181). In the aftermath of Partition, Singapore experienced a substantial increase in the number of northern Indian commercial migrants, particularly amongst the displaced Sikhs and Hindu Sindhis (ibid.: 183). Faced with a prolonged period of instability during the Malayan Emergency, some 40,000 Indians between 1947 and 1957 migrated down

the peninsular to Singapore for safer conditions and better prospects (ibid.). But Singapore's borders were quickly hardening too. The Immigration Acts of 1952 and 1959 limited migration into the island. The 1959 Act in particular restricted admission to higher wage earners and the wives and children of Singapore citizens (ibid.). In this period a new legal category came into play that required all residents in Singapore to make a commitment, and decide on Singapore Citizenship.

A citizenship registration campaign, Operation Franchise, ran from November 1957 to January 1958 to mobilise the 1957 Singapore Citizenship Ordinance. Not only was this a crucial step in establishing a clear national identity of people as Singapore citizens, it also required that people make a single choice in nationality and renounce all other national allegiances. The overseas Chinese in Singapore largely felt that they could never return to China following the 1949 establishment of the communist People's Republic of China (Hill and Lian 1995: 52–53). The Indian population though was faced with a hard choice between the young nation of India and a Singapore that had only just been granted partial self-government in 1955. Prominent community leader and the first president of the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce, Rajabali Jumabhoy, had advocated for the Indian community to take up citizenship in order to have political rights and franchise in the colony, but found resistance because people had been moved by the experience of WW2 and the nationalist sentiments for India it stirred (Solomon 2023: 444). Sticking to their pre-war position, Tamil leaders of TRA and the Singapore Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (SDMK) campaigned hard to encourage Tamils to choose Singapore. They used the language of loyalty and belonging to mobilise communities towards Singapore citizenship and ran an oath-taking and registration booth on their premises, as well as engage in a door-to-door registration drive (ibid. 446-447). The Tamil associations' successful citizenship

registration campaign though demonstrate the strong sense of belonging this section of the Indian community was already feeling at that time. In 1957, this option was taken up in a time of quickly shifting meanings and repercussions of citizenship; though it would also seem that many chose Singapore citizenship out of uncertainty over their ability to stay in Singapore and retain their jobs (Dharan 1966).

For many, there were uncertainties about the implications of citizenship on any property or inheritance claims in India, or even the possibility of a visit. Such uncertainty was reflective too of this general period Sunil Amrith terms the 'golden age' of the nation-state in Asia (1950s to 1970s), where restriction on entry and exit became more widespread and passports and visas began to govern mobility of Asians across borders (2011: 8). Thus, a community previously accustomed to leveraging the ease of travel within the Empire were now anxious about losing that mobility. This question of mobility was compelled by transnational family networks and the obligation to fund and care for family members in other parts of the Empire. In this state of insecurity, many ultimately took up Singapore citizenship to guarantee their stay and employment in order to provide for their families, whether in Singapore or in India. As Santha Dharan observed of Indian port workers, 'others who married later, after 1957 and before the 1965 Singapore Citizenship Rules came into force, often did not bother to register themselves until they felt the added burden of having to support a family.' (1966, 78) For Indians in 1957 Singapore, family was their primary consideration in navigating the uncertainty of citizenship.

The story of becoming Singaporean is thus not a simple teleological tale of disparate Indian communities finding common ground and simply making the shift from migrant to citizen. From the beginnings of the citizenship ordinance through to Singapore's

independence in 1965 and further tightening of immigration in the decades after, the percentage Indians made up of the total population of Singapore fell from 9 to 7.1 per cent between 1957 and 1990. Where some took up citizenship and stayed, others chose to return or were repatriated following the closure of British military bases (Rai 2006: 185). As Indians in Singapore navigated a new world order of nation-states and borders and the status of being Singaporean became more tangible, some found where they belonged.

### **3.3.4 Belonging in a new nation**

Belonging is a relative position requiring an engagement with the world outside of one's self. It is variously social, spatial, and relational. In the rapid development of institutions and organisations, the early twentieth-century Indian communities in Singapore demonstrated a nascent sense of belonging and desire to extend this by investing in the long-term maintenance and representation of their various ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities. By extending beyond kinship networks, collaborative pan-Indian organisations put into action a shared view of the disparate groups as 'Indian', seeking to claim their place in Singapore's sociopolitical landscape. The new world order of borders and exclusive citizenship called on the community to examine not only a national allegiance but a territorial one as well. Some saw themselves well entrenched in and part of the local landscape—not only through property acquisition but also through the labour of their bodies in developing the city. Finally, as relational, belonging is contingent also on the recognition of others, including state and society, of one as 'local', as 'citizen', as part of the whole. Actively fostered from the 1960s, today the shared Singaporean understanding of 'Indian' cannot be removed from the

principle of multiculturalism encapsulated in the 'CMIO' (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) model.

### **3.4. BECOMING 'INDIAN', PART 2**

The colonial administrative category of 'Indian' collected groups with different ethnicities, languages, and religions together under a single umbrella identity. The influence of Indian nationalism inspired greater participation in local politics and Indian causes in Singapore, giving these groups common cause while greater population numbers also supported identity particularism. The experiences particularly of political participation, war, nation-state formations, and citizenship determination inspired many in the Indian community to find belonging in a pre-independence Singapore. Independent Singapore, faced with uniting a plural society, adopted the structuring principle of 'multiculturalism'. As this section explores, 'multiculturalism' would work not only to cement the place of 'Indians' in the foundations of the new nation-state but also shape what 'Indian' entails in the shared national imagination. Works of representation recruited objects into the public education of Singapore's foundational races, and into the idea of what it means ostensibly to be 'Indian' in Singapore. Being 'Singaporean Indian' then, in part, entails dwelling in the plural material world of Singapore where this image of the 'Indian' prevails.

#### **3.4.1 CMIO Multiculturalism**

Where the modern nation-state is built on ideas of shared civilisation or tradition, nations like Singapore have the problem of finding a 'common bond' and shared 'cultural substance' that can lend to the 'imagined community' called a nation (Chua 1995: 51). As a new nation grown out of a port city with little hinterland, Singapore's

economic viability as an independent state was in question but the government reconceptualised any apprehension into an issue of 'survival'. From the outset, the 'reason for the state' was thus defined in economic terms rather than symbolic ones (ibid: 53). But capitalist economic success, with its inherent class differentiations, serves weak grounds for building bonds of national identity. To decentre an economy-determined everyday life as culture, the state foregrounded the 'cultures' of the three Races through the concept of 'multiculturalism' as national cultural policy (ibid: 55–56). Here, multiculturalism—as a principle of the state and basis of the nation's culture—requires that its constituent parts be known and knowable by observers so they may recognise their fellow 'other' countrymen as equally part of the nation.

Multiculturalism then is not just a shared morality but works to define the Singapore population as one divided into this particular array of races (Benjamin 1976: 115). Tellingly, the colloquial shorthand for the principle is 'CMIO' representing the fourfold Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others race categories. 'CMIO' thereby works as a 'summarising symbol', summing up what the system means to its participants (Ortner 1973: 1339). Multiculturalism taken this way has the following structural characteristics: that all the 'races' which comprise Singapore are equal; that multiracialism is the fundamental social principle (Benjamin 1976: 116); and that racial identity and ethnic culture are somehow the same (Clammer 1985: 148). The argument is not that this structure creates these racial identities, but that it structures the meaning of these identities in and for the plural society of Singapore, thereby also informing meaning held by the racial subject themselves. Ethnic labelling does not explain the patterns of fine-grained interactions but rather 'these patterns of interaction, taken together, performed consistently and expressed collectively, constitute what is *meant* by ethnicity: the praxis points to the concept' (ibid. 144).

A consequence of this approach to multiculturalism—in order to make its constituents knowable and equal—is that each ‘race’ must be distinct with unchanging ‘typical’ characteristics that mark it out from the others (ibid: 148; Chua 1996: 56). These distinctions are curated and made observable through a number of select cultural markers and reinforced in public policies. In these set frames, what each race comes to mean is an essentialised reduction obscuring its true diversity and leaving many ‘unseen’. Under this rubric, the ‘typical’ imagination of the ‘Indian’ in Singapore is one who has ancestry from India—specifically south Indian with darker complexion—is Hindu, and Tamil-speaking. This picture does not account for the ethnic, religious, or linguistic plurality of the Indian community noted earlier. But ‘summarising symbols’ do not encourage reflection on the logical consequences as they are played out (Ortner 1973: 1340). ‘CMIO’ is part of Singapore’s ‘national culture’, used to rationalise policies and political practices, informing and reinforced by spatial strategies and symbolic orders, in order to appeal to a shared sense of being Singaporean while deferring related anxieties within the context of official multiculturalism (Benjamin 1976: 116; Siddique 1990).

### **3.4.2 A Naturalised Order**

John Clammer summarises the features of ‘the Singapore Model’ of multiculturalism:

the deliberate enhancement of ethnicity as the primary mode of social classification; a set of political, social and cultural policies designed to cope with the stresses that this sets up; a very low level of overt ethnic conflict; a widespread belief in the organic connection of culture and ethnicity; little or no emphasis on the assimilationist model; and a high degree of acceptance of an ideological system which allows for very few, if any, alternative formulations of the structure of reality (1985: 152).

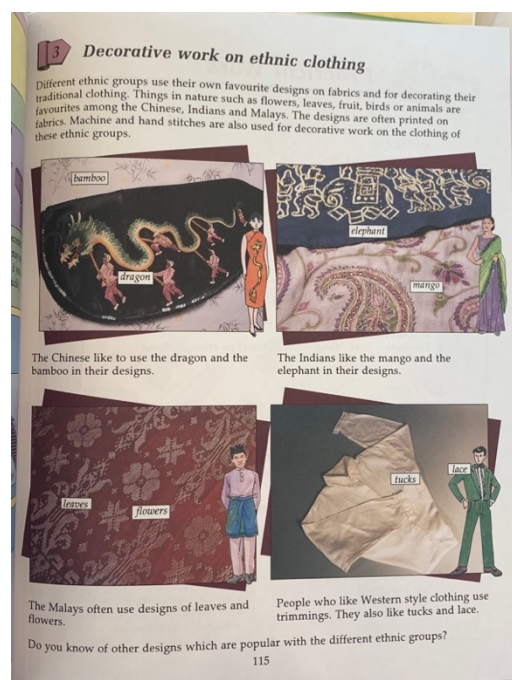
In effect, the success of this model lays in how it readily accepted by most Singaporeans as a universal, unproblematic, common-sense, and natural reference

point in everyday relations with the state and with others in Singapore society (Benjamin 1976: 119; Clammer 1985: 152; Lian 2006: 230).

This naturalised order informs and is reinforced through all manner of state-citizen interaction. Beginning from birth, all Singaporeans must be documented in the national registry under one of the four recognised races. This marker follows them for life reflected not only in state-issued identity documents like the National Registration Identity Card (NRIC) but also in forms linked to any state body. With automation, as I found when signing up for a yoga class at my local community centre, the 'race' box may also come pre-filled and unalterable once I had keyed in my NRIC number. Yoga classes aside, one's racial category has consequential bearing on important life decisions. With the public housing board's Ethnic Integration Policy, homebuyers may be limited in choices if their racial quota is met in their neighbourhood of choice. In school, a student's Mother Tongue subject is determined by their registered race since 'culture is taken as determined by race' (Chua 1996: 56). Until 1990, this largely meant that 'Indian' students were expected to take up Tamil, even if this was not the language of their forefathers. State sponsored welfare is also organised first via race-based self-help organisations, 'a process that can be rationalised as both constituting and constitutive of the racial groups as communities' (ibid: 58).

The fourfold racial distinction is actively reinforced from young. A popular series of local children's books meant to help their readers in 'Understanding Singaporeans' forefronts this quadrotomy by publishing their material as four separate booklets: 'Why do the Chinese shout Yum Seng?', 'Why do Malays avoid pork?', 'Why do Indians dot their foreheads?' and 'Why do Eurasians love sugree cake?'. As evident in the second title, such educational materials repeat the conflation of race and religion that is part

of the essentialisations of CMIO multiculturalism in Singapore. School books too implement this structure in their instruction. The image below (Figure 2) features a page from a Secondary One Home Economics textbook identifying different fabric styles with race, ascribing the races with discernible cultural aesthetics. Beyond the textbook, schools also commemorate ‘Racial Harmony Day’ meant to warn the younger generations of the dangers of ethnic conflict for a plural society like Singapore’s. For the most part though, this day is marked through the practice of ‘exchange’ where students wear the clothes and try the foods of an ‘other’, reinforcing not just difference but a necessary line of distinction across which exchange can happen. Importantly (as I expand in section 3.4.3), this practice works to reduce the experience of race to certain authorised objects that stand as tokens. Such ‘tokenisation’ does not end with school. The annual National Day Parade consistently



includes a segment featuring the ‘traditional’ dances and costumes of the fourfold, employing even four hosts who each represent their racial community while serving the same function of hosting in English.

Figure 2: Raced fabrics in Home Economics Textbook, from Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (1995) *Home Economics Today*, Secondary 1 Normal (Technical). Revised Edition. Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications

Though the early nation-state strived to avoid racial politics, even outlawing race-based political parties, race still features in politics today. Group Representative Constituencies were introduced in 1988 as a means to ensure minority representation in parliament. In effect, this move identifies candidates in racial terms especially Malay, Indian, and Eurasian candidates who must submit a 'Minority Community Certificate' and have their identity as a racial 'minority' verified and approved by the Elections Department. Similarly, in 2019 an addition of the 'Reserved Presidency' policy 'meant to ensure multi-racial representation' in the seat of the head of state necessitated that the racial identities of past presidents and of potential candidates come into play. While there is some pushback on both these policies, their persistence means that Singapore's politics will continue to 'see' race, specifically in this quadrotomy, reinforcing the sense that this is the natural and only viable order of Singapore society.

In the collective education of the fourfold classifications and constitutions of each, it is not just that Singaporeans learn of the other races but also of their own. They become aware of how they are seen and known by others. But CMIO is 'not merely a "structure" in some external, imposed sense' (Clammer 1985: 149), it is also cultivated by racial subjects themselves. It is a social system maintained and invested with meaning by the on-going activities of the actors involved (ibid). Participants in my research workshops reflected this internalisation of what 'Indian' in Singapore entailed even as they remained aware of its source. When asked to list 'Objects of Singaporean Indian-ness', participants in the first instance often turned to objects that would be recognised as the 'typical' representations, such as the sari, *pottu* (dot worn by women on their foreheads), bangles, Little India, the gesture of greeting with folded hands, and food

items like briyani, prata, and thosai. When asked to explain their choice, they agreed that these were the objects typically used in public communication, in the education system, and by non-Indians. When asked to retrospect if they had an imagined audience in mind as they listed objects, participants acknowledged that it is 'the non-Indians that think this is Indian' and that they had made these selections because 'it is safe to claim these icons' and that the 'majority of society benefits if we abide by and claim these icons'. Singaporean Indians are keenly aware not just of how they are represented, but of the mass communication value in the use of essentialised objects in that work. Some of my participants also recognised that through the operation of this social system, the relatively small Indian community have place: 'as a minority we are denied spaces so we accept that in some way we are represented'; 'something is better than nothing, I am a small percent represented'.

In this structure, the symbols of culture and ethnicity continue to be transmitted and perpetuated, but in a way in which the elements mutually reinforce each other (Clammer 1985: 151). Though in such structures of knowing, the danger, as Lavanya Kathiravelu (2017: 162) warns, is that social constructions are taken as natural, that 'race' is held to be biological and pre-existing, meaning that 'fellow citizens are always seen as raced, rather than as classified so by the state'. This way of seeing extends as well to and recruits into its transmission not only people, but their bodies and the material world of Singapore.

### **3.4.3 'Raced' Bodies and Objects**

In the popular representations of Singapore's CMIO multiculturalism, bodies and objects are recruited in ways that serve to visualise and essentialise race difference and boundaries. As such, objects are considered only in so far as they occur in the

essential cultures of the racial groups and not considered in the fullness of their flows within and across these boundaries. Objects, of which the body is primary, are thus 'raced' in the popular imagination, meaning that they are ascribed to a race category.

To be 'raced' is not quite the same as to be 'racialised', the former is an act of classification while the latter is an act of characterisation. When racialised, a subject is ascribed characteristics based on assumptions or stereotypes of its perceived race and is typically followed by actions informed and justified by such an ascription (Kathiravelu 2017: 162). To be raced though is simply to be ascribed a race. With such a view, people in Singapore are seen as naturally and necessarily having a race and therefore can and must be identified by an officially approved racial identity (*ibid.*; Clammer 1985: 142). As I argue of Singapore, select objects too are ascribed a race and made a symbol of that racial community. Importantly, this ascription is largely exclusive, meaning any significance or connections with other communities are obscured or downplayed. The classification of something as 'raced' precedes a racialised characterisation. While many have called attention to the latter, I seek to recognise the work of classifying, especially non-human objects, by race as a key and distinct epistemological move informing identity. To be 'raced' or 'racialised' share the important feature of being prescribed and legitimated by an external source and is not simply intrinsic. Just as a person's race is not simply self-identified but decided by the state based on paternal lines of descent, objects too are prescribed race by external agents. To revisit what my workshop participants had said of their initial list of objects: it is 'the non-Indians that think this is Indian'.

But to get a national population to come to a shared picture of each race requires a complex system, what Stuart Hall calls a 'regime of representation'—'the whole

repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which “difference” is represented at any one historical moment’ (1997: 232). Everyday life in Singapore is replete with such images and opportunities for ‘seeing’ race. Here I draw also from Joshua Babcock’s account of how Singaporeans have developed a habit of ‘seeing’ race such that racialised perceptions get mediated via ‘habits of looking’, through ‘the activities that mediate between sensation and aesthetic categories to project and construe both image tokens and their regimented types’ (2023: 3). This habit is inculcated by the repeated and abundant use of raced visual representations that not only teach viewers the associations but train them to make those connections for themselves. There is in Singapore then ‘a visual epistemology of race, an ocularcentric ideology according to which non-visible phenomena at various scales, from the category of “race” as such to the particular status of a single racialized subject, get rendered as knowable in and as visually perceivable signs’ (ibid.).

The primary object of raced vision is the body itself. Pictures like that in Figure 3 are typical of those employed in demonstrating ‘multiculturalism’ in Singapore, so much so that it is reproduced even in attempts to call out the ‘myth of multiculturalism’ as it was in this instance. Several characteristics make for a typical representation. One, the use of four figures to unambiguously represent each of the four recognised races. Two, skin tone (and to a lesser degree, hair colour) is employed as part of the distinction. Though one may argue that the complexions of the four children in Figure 3 are natural to them and not explicitly drawn out, the illustration in Figure 4 demonstrates the explicit choice to render difference through colour. Such representations highlight how racial meaning is relational, marked by oppositional difference (Hall 1997: 234–235). Thus, the third character in Figure 4 is known to be ‘Indian’ because it has the darkest skin tone, and the second is ‘Malay’ because it has

a darker but not darkest complexion. While the difference between the 'Chinese' and 'Eurasian' characters on the ends is marked by hair colour. Three, clothes, particularly those recognised as culturally specific 'traditional' 'ethnic costumes', reinforce the classification of raced figures. Used in this way, clothes are 'not just superficial cover'. Rather, such images demonstrate a collapsing of the duality making a representation akin to what Daniel Miller calls 'an integral phenomenon which was the clothing/person' (2005: 32). Taking the rightmost character in Figure 5 for instance, we know it is meant to 'be Indian' even without a markedly different skin tone because 'the subject is the product of the same objectification that creates the clothing' (ibid.).



Figure 3: Photograph of four children representing Singapore's CMIO multiculturalism. Bella (2017) 'The Myth of Multiculturalism'. *Medium*. <<https://medium.com/@patcheezie/the-myth-of-multiculturalism-in-singapore-d0712706db4>> Accessed 24 Nov 2024.



Figure 4: Racial Harmony Day Facebook post. Media Literacy Council (2018)  
 <<https://www.facebook.com/MediaLiteracyCouncilSG/posts/happy-racial-harmony-day-from-all-of-us-at-media-literacy-council/1677045182363664/>> Accessed 24 Nov 2024.



Figure 5: Racial Harmony Day Instagram post. National Institute of Education Singapore (2024)  
 <[https://www.instagram.com/p/C9ql-E\\_q8fT/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/C9ql-E_q8fT/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==)> Accessed 24 Nov 2024.

Beyond the clothed, coloured body, objects too are recruited into multicultural representation. Figure 6 is demonstrative of this composite use of bodies, objects, and cultural practices in demarcating the four racial groups in Singapore into neat, distinct boxes. These objects are not simply props setting a scene for festive practices but are themselves made to stand as tokens for their racial types. Thus, from Figure 6, it is not just that Indian families light oil lamps, but that oil lamps themselves are Indian.

The raced value of non-human objects is most profoundly evident with food. The scene in Figure 7 is from a preschool's celebration of Racial Harmony Day in which the class teachers have categorised snack items into four distinct and labelled categories. Presenting food in this manner elides all realities of consumption 'across' racial lines (as I argue in chapter 5) but is also demonstrative of the fallacies involved in attempts to use objects to make multiculturalist representations in this manner—the pineapple tarts positioned as 'Malay' are in fact a popular snack during all the cultural festivals in Singapore, and the placement of Vitagen (a probiotic drink founded by a Malaysian company) as 'Eurasian' simply confounds me. Objects are in this case made to stand for a race even where the indexical relationship is not exclusive, or is tenuous. Nonetheless, this example in Figure 7 is helpful in highlighting the curatorial work at hand in selecting and representing objects as being determinately of 'a race'.



Figure 6: Image attached in promotion of an exhibition of 'Festival and Festivities in Singapore'. Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (2018) <<https://www.sysnmh.org.sg/en/whats-on/exhibitions/travelling-exhibition---the-more-we-get-together---woodlands-regional-library>> Accessed 24 Nov 2024.



Figure 7: Classroom activity for Racial Harmony Day. Society for the Physically Disabled (2017) <<https://www.spd.org.sg/celebrating-racial-harmony-day-with-friends/>> Accessed 24 Nov 2024.

In the way multiculturalism is summarised as 'CMIO' and represented in visual media, public pageants, and educational settings, it is clear that Singapore's plurality is celebrated in ways that work to perpetuate that plurality. That in itself is not a negative, for it ensures that a smaller group like Indians, who make up only 9% of the total population, is equally (and, arguably, disproportionately more) represented. But in this

form where ‘differences [are] heightened, similarities underplayed, and expressive forms have to be developed to display their separate-but-equal status’ (Benjamin 1976: 121), we must also recognise the reconstitution of culture at hand. Such reworking is also not removed from the subject communities themselves for it also has the consequence wherein ‘each “culture” turns in on itself in a cannibalistic manner, struggling to bring forth further manifestations of its distinctiveness’ (ibid.: 122). ‘Culture’ is then increasingly understood as a sort of ‘projective fantasy’ something that can be shown, staged, held, and eaten, and less as ‘the patterns that lie behind the contemporary everyday life of ordinary Singaporeans’ (ibid.).

With this thesis, I write against this reductive approach to understanding the objects in Singaporean Indian lives, paying ethnographic attention instead to processual and relational flows, to take notice of the ways things inform the Singaporean Indian identity and belonging that emerges with this material world including its raced objects and raced ways of seeing.

### **3.5. CONCLUSION: BECOMING SINGAPOREAN INDIAN**

Becoming Singaporean Indian emerged out of several historical, political, and social processes that played out in Singapore, first under empire then under its own flag. Through these, becoming ‘Indian’ has come to be an integral part of becoming ‘Singaporean’, where a recognised race identity is an essential component of national identity, ‘a *sine qua non* of effective citizenship’ (Benjamin 1976: 131), where ‘a sense of belonging to and conformity with the norms of one of the CMIO categories, cannot be considered as conceptually separate from Singaporean identity’ (Siddique 1990: 37), and crucially where ‘Indians’ are recognised as one of the ‘founding races’ of Singapore, its culture, and its society (Lian 2006: 229). With this too comes a particular

'Singaporeanisation' of the CMIO categories creating multiple separate-but-equal identities such as Singaporean Chinese, Singaporean Malay, and Singaporean Indian (Siddique 1990: 237). This has instigated the process of becoming 'Singaporean Indian', not as a simple addition of being local, Indian, and Singaporean, but as a unique way of being in itself.

Where before 'Singaporean Indians' emerged in distinction from fellow raced countrymen, demographic shifts in the 21st century present another group against which the 'Singaporean Indian' identity must be defined—the co-ethnic 'other' referred to as the 'India Indian'. In this context, 'local', 'citizen', and 'Indian' take on new meaning and importance. Seeking to understand the 'Singaporean Indian' today must recognise this development and the new relational flows that have emerged from it in Singapore's social and material environment to move the everyday lives, identity, and belonging of Singaporean Indians.

To be 'local' today is defined now in opposition to the co-ethnic new 'migrant'. Singapore had pursued a policy of attracting and naturalising migrants from the same ethnic homelands as its extant population to maintain its racial proportions and on the belief that the inclusion and assimilation of these groups into Singapore society would be relatively unproblematic given their shared racial culture with settled populations (Lian 2006: 230; Kathiravelu 2017). But this assumption of commonality has proven insufficient as Singaporeans see themselves as markedly different culturally and socially from the new arrivals. Consequently, citizenship is not deemed sufficient in making one 'truly Singaporean' in the eyes of the local population. Where previously taking on Singapore citizenship was an active demonstration of loyalty and belonging in taking a gamble on an emerging nation with an uncertain future, taking on Singapore

citizenship now is largely seen as an opportunistic move taking advantage of an already established powerful economy and safe society hard-won by pioneering 'locals'. With this view in society, becoming 'Singaporean Indian' then entails far more than ethnic ancestry or citizenship status. What is centred instead are practices, modes, and ways of being already recognised in Singapore by both Indian and other locals.

Becoming 'Singaporean Indian' today entails then drawing a distinction from the other 'Indians in Singapore', those who are perceived as 'foreign to' the established environment. Put in other terms, the 'Singaporean Indian' is one in the ever-emergent process of becoming from dwelling *in* this environment, in contrast to the image of the mobile economic migrant who is seen as only living *on* this land. Drawing this distinction has been simplistically marked as xenophobic, but such accusations presume fixed, fully formed identities, and foreclose on closer examinations of lived ways and their entanglement in a meshwork of flows. Rather, I see the desire to draw these lines as being in continuation with the ways 'Singaporean Indian-ness' has been a process of becoming, ever emergent with an unfolding world where identity and belonging have always been external and relational.

## Chapter 4

### Identity Documents, Documenting Belonging

In thinking about identity and the things that move it, state-issued identity documents come immediately to mind. In Singapore, that foremost document is the National Registration Identity Card (NRIC) not just for its role in identification but in explicitly marking its bearer as Singaporean and as Indian. I approached the field with this seemingly simple premise but found instead that Singaporean Indians bore a much more complex set of relationships to the NRIC and other documents. Examining these relationships and the active ways people deployed documents revealed far more about their definitions and sense of belonging than it did about identity, as I had initially assumed. In this chapter I begin by asking how official identity documents enact Singaporean Indian identity but land ultimately on the ways Singaporean Indians actively deploy identity documents in their lives so as to locate their belonging, formal and otherwise, in a documentary regime full of the documents and gaze of others. Following the ‘thinging’ flows from these official papers, I expand the consideration of identification ‘documents’ to include a part of the collection of the Indian Heritage Centre—which as a state museum holds an officially sanctioned documentation of Singaporean Indian history and identity—and continue then to my participant’s home collections of family documents, photographs, and other papers that they take as attestations to belonging in *longue durée*. This chapter concludes with the argument for recognising, as part of dwelling in the modern documentary regime, the active ways Singaporean Indians position identity documents, both their own and their family’s, alongside other forms of documentation in defining, asserting, and making legible their belonging.

#### **4.1 IDENTITY DOCUMENTS, LEGIBLE PEOPLE, AND 'AUTHENTIC' BELONGING**

The first activity I had participants in my research workshop do was an unpacking of their wallets or bags as a way to lay out and take in the things that move their lives. The 'wallet museums' they displayed featured the usual assortment of cards, keys, make-up items, and necessities like umbrellas, phone chargers, and tissue packets. I started with this unpacking to help my participants begin to take notice of the relationships we have with our material world but also anticipating a seamless segue into a discussion of the NRIC. With my follow-up invitation to share how these things spoke to their identity my participants enthusiastically discussed almost every other possession but the NRIC. When I finally asked why they had not offered this despite my repeated emphasis on 'identity', one dispassionately remarked that they 'thought that it was too obvious to say'. Yet as we continued with the workshop, I found my participants keen on discussing their experiences around other types of documents including those issued to other family members. Where I had assumed that the NRIC's ubiquity and stated purpose as identifier would be simply mirrored by its bearers, my participants showed me rather that some documents are more alluring and others more fraught in the ways they are seen to attest to complex identities. In this first section I trace the introduction of state identification documents in Singapore from their origins in security and legibility to later attestations of citizenship, racial identity, and ideas of formal belonging. In so doing, this section underscores the ways people are 'leaky', entangling the self, its papers, others and their documents in this material world, and how this affords Singaporean Indians agency in repositioning their documents in order to attest to an identity on their own terms.

#### **4.1.1 A Brief History of ‘Material Citizenship’ in Singapore**

Documents are ubiquitous in any modern bureaucracy, including the highly regulated and orderly administration of Singapore. In this system, documents play a fundamental role of creating ‘legible people’. Following James C. Scott, legibility is the central problem of modern statecraft and states sought to make society easy to decipher, ‘to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion’ (Scott 1998: 2). Such legible arrangements become the ‘hallmark of modern statehood’ and conversely, ‘the paraphernalia and personnel necessary to operate systems of standardized registration, have contributed in large part to the character of the modern bureaucratic state’ (Caplan and Torpey 2001: 1).

But it was identifying the traveller that necessitated developing the portable identity document to identify and track those who travelled beyond the areas and social circles in which they were personally known (Caplan and Torpey 2001: 2). In the nation-state’s operation, the identity document’s immediate mark distinguishes the citizen from the foreigner; the one with rightful belonging from the one with temporary permissions; the legitimate subject from the illegal trespasser. Identification is therefore ‘the starting point of surveillance’ (Lyon 2009: 4). Identification documents, particularly those expected to be carried on one’s person at all times, are a firm feature in the ‘surveillant assemblage’, which ‘operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows’ that are ‘then reassembled into distinct “data doubles” which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention’ (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 606). As non-human objects made to render humans knowable, identification documents make individual citizens legible to

the state by generalising the person and reproducing key points onto a physical object produced and issued by the state authority and alienable from the subject's body in order to attest to the legitimacy of the subject for the state's purpose of knowing who's who and picking out potential bad-faith actors. This too is the origin story of Singapore's NRIC.

The personal identification document—today materialised in the NRIC—has its origins, relatively late in Singapore's colonial history, in a 1948 security ordinance. On 24 June 1948, a state of emergency was declared in Singapore, a week after the same was launched in the Federation of Malaya, in response to a spate of violence by 'anti-British' communist parties (HistorySG 2015; Deery 2007). As part of emergency regulations to weed out communist sympathisers and regulate the resident population's movement, the 1948 Emergency Regulations legislated compulsory registration and issuing of Identity Cards for all persons above 12 years old (HistorySG 2010; Tan 2020:1). The colony had had prior experiences with registration and identity documents, notably with 1937 Registration of Birth and Death Ordinance and corresponding issuance of Certificates of Life and of Death; and the 1941 Defence (Security Registration) Regulations that required all non-military residents of Singapore carried identity cards (History SG 2010). However, the 1948 Emergency Regulations on registration stand apart from these for being a nationwide exercise for all regardless of place of birth; a far more thorough 73-day exercise covering the Municipality as well as rural areas and surrounding islands; and in the active enforcement and use of the 1948 card in interactions with the state (HistorySG 2010; Tan 2020: 7, 12). This document was primarily a surveillance tool and the state confirmed as much when in announcing the 1948 registration scheme, Colonial Secretary P.A.B. McKerron stated that Identity Cards would be used to 'establish at

once and on the spot, the identity of anyone... who came into contact with the police' (ST, 20 October 1948, p7).

This portable Identity Card sowed the inception of the Singaporean citizen-subject, one individually identified and made legible to the state on an individualised level, experiencing regulated movement and a nascent sense of rightful belonging in a period where the question of territorial and national attachment were abound following the shared brutal experiences of Japanese Occupation in Singapore, anti-colonial nationalist discourse and news of post-colonial independence, including India's. These cards were thus the first in the Singapore population's experience of 'material citizenship' for the card 'simultaneously embodies and produces citizenship, framing how the concept of citizenship is articulated in everyday life' (Tan 2020: 20). Correspondingly, the population had to adapt to this new bureaucratic and material way of life. Working-class communities in particular had to become accustomed to a culture of bureaucracy that was not only alienating for the unlettered, but also considerably inconvenient. For instance, working-class garments featured no pockets to carry Identity Cards, and many manual workers were charged with 'defaced' cards when both card and person were frequently exposed to sweat and wet weather in tropical Singapore (ibid.: 17). Maintaining documents was thus hardest on working-class communities, and traces of that apprehension around care for identity cards may be still seen in practices of older Singaporeans today who rather carry with them a photocopy of their card so that the original may be stored at home safely away from potential loss or damage.

Despite opposition (including from Lee Kuan Yew, who would later become Singapore's founding Prime Minister) to keeping the Identity Card arguing that 'it would

make permanent a “product of war” that was against the “normal traditions of a liberal civilized society”, Singapore’s newfound ‘material citizenship’ was here to stay (Legislative Assembly Debates 1955: col. 804, as cited in Tan 2020: 23). The 1955 Registration of Persons Ordinance replaced the 1948 Regulation but maintained the place of the Identity Card. The card’s ease of use ‘resulted in a function creep’ embedding it as a fixture of everyday life, used at road checks and causeway stations, and for administrative procedures like applying for licences. Even private entities checked Identity Cards, though without formal authorisation (Tan 2020: 29). Identity documents are therefore points at which the state passes into material form, where the state–individual relationship becomes most visible and tangible (Chhotray and McConnel 2018, 122). In perhaps its most significant role, these 1948 Identity Cards would be called into making material a Singaporean citizenry from a population of foreign-born migrants; subjects of the Empire born in other colonies; Singapore-born children of these latter groups; and those native to Malaya and the surrounding peninsula.

In the 1950s, a then partially self-governed Singapore took steps towards establishing legal status for its resident population. After various drafts and negotiations, the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance was executed in 1957 via a nationwide citizenship registration exercise led by then Chief Minister, Lim Yew Hock. Operation Franchise was carried out from 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1957 to 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 1958, over which time 325,000 new citizens of Singapore were created (Lo 2021: 22). There were four means of qualifying for citizenship—by birth; descent; registration; or naturalisation. The regulations by far prioritised place of birth. Thus those born in Singapore were granted citizenship automatically without requiring an official registration process (*ST*, 9 November 1957, p8, as cited in Tan 2020: 38). Further, those born in the Malayan Federation or who

were citizens of the UK and its colonies, only needed to demonstrate two years of residence in Singapore. Those born elsewhere could still qualify for citizenship but needed to have resided in Singapore for at least eight years (ibid. 21). The principle of *jus soli* practiced here also underscores a concern over split loyalty. Thus all applications had to take an oath of allegiance to the crown and pledge loyalty Singapore. Additionally, those born outside of the Empire had to denounce their foreign nationalities and loyalties (Lo 2021: 21-22; Ang 2020). Yet, recognising that perhaps the accident of birth was not enough to engender loyalty and allegiance, an exhibition was set up during the registration period to 'stimulate pride in Singapore... to make the citizen by birth proud of the city of his birth as well as to stimulate in those eligible for citizenship by registration the wish to become a citizen' (National Archives Singapore n.d. b, as cited in Lo 2021: 22).

In exercising Operation Franchise, government officers however found themselves up against the limits of a young documentary regime, particularly around verifying length of residence in Singapore. Though the initial policy was for those born outside of the Empire to have to prove residence of ten years in Singapore to qualify for citizenship, this would have been difficult to do in a standardised manner. For administrative efficiency, the 1948 Identity Cards were to be used, but at the time of the legislative debates in 1956 these could only prove up to eight years of stay. Hence it was suggested and adopted that the residential requirement be reduced to eight years in order for applicants and administrators alike to be able to demonstrate verifiable qualification (Lo 2001:18–19).

The Identity Card's place in the citizenship question had been reversed within a decade. In 1948, as matters of Empire subjecthood, the possibility of British

citizenship, or the dream of independence lingered, pains were taken to emphasise that the Identity Card was not meant to distinguish between citizen and non-citizen. McKerron made this explicit by renaming the registration exercise from 'National' to 'Singapore' Registration two weeks after its announcement 'so to remove false impression that the identity card would confer legal status on individuals as British citizens' (*Morning Tribune*, 9 October 1948, p3, as cited in Tan 2020: 24). From its origins in civil security, the Identity Card was now a document of citizens and vouched for this status in their exercise of electoral franchise in 1957 and 1959, and in taking up civil responsibilities such as when military conscription was introduced in 1964 (Tan 2020: 31).

After a brief merger with Malaya (16 September 1963–9 August 1965), the new Republic of Singapore chose again to retain the identity card system in its pursuit of knowing its citizens, governing their affairs, and administering their public services. A need for a renewed registration exercise and issuing of national identity cards arose over questions of legitimacy of the 1948 card and the fact that those qualifying for automatic citizenship by birth did not get citizenship certificates in 1957. The Lim government in 1957 had initially sought to circumvent the latter issue by using the 1948 Identity Card as proof of birthplace (Tan 2020: 38). But by 1960 there were fears that the Identity Card alone should not be taken as legitimate as they were issued in a haphazard manner with 'no investigation whatsoever... made to ascertain whether the applicant for an identity card was born in Singapore or elsewhere'. (Legislative Assembly Debates 1960: col. 553, as cited in Tan 2020: 39) Although such documents were officially issued through due process of law, the 1960 government had reservations as the 1948 cards were based on oral testimony given by a non-official person (Legislative Assembly Debates 1960: col. 556, Tan 2020: 41). In other words,

registrants were not to be simply taken at their word. Instead, a new assemblage of documents were to serve as substitute for the Certificate of Citizenship Registration's attestation to citizenship—

The (1965) National Registration Act required that citizens without proper birth certificates provide both a statutory declaration as well as supporting documents such as baptismal certificates, school leaving certificates, birth certificates of siblings, or vaccination certificates. (Parliamentary Debates 1965: col. 763, as cited in Tan 2020: 41–42).

Citizenship was tied to place of birth, but that relationship to land, as far as the government was concerned, was something that had to be legible in a network of paperwork, in order to then be authorised on paper. The generation of a documentary regime was complete. To be a Singaporean Citizen was now a matter of material reality. For those without these papers, citizenship by registration was an alternative, but an unstable one leaving them open to the possibility of denied applications (Tan 2020: 42). One of the first orders of business for the new state was therefore to correct the flaws in previous documentary regimes, crafting its own systems and standards of documentary attestation, in order to satisfactorily endorse and make legible the citizens of an independent Singapore.

In the process of the national registration exercise in 1966, each citizen was provided with a new identity card and unique alphanumerical serial number that is also repeated on birth and death certificates, license applications, school registration, bank accounts, medical records, and more. Newly minted Singaporeans were thus legible to all corners of the state administration. This handy identity card, or 'I-Card' as it was now styled, was this time truly national. It also took on a new materiality suitable to everyday handling. The new laminated German-made card sported the Republic's new crest and featured measures to ensure it was 'forgery-proof, tamper-proof and water-proof'

(HistorySG 2010; Tan 2020: 35). Another significant design update would further cement the I-Card's attestation to citizenship. The National Registration (Amendment) Regulations 1969 legislated two types of cards—a pink card for Citizens and a blue card for Permanent Residents. The connection between the identity card, the card-carrying body, and the citizen-subject was now cemented. Citizenship was no longer just a legal status, it was made plain each day as the I-Card mediated people's engagement with state and private entities. This role carried bureaucratic specifications and personal knowledge of the individual gave way to a standard set of biographical details. From the first identity cards in 1941, these identifying details included one's name, address, race, age, and a photograph. (National Archives Singapore, n.d.) The list has since expanded with far more details fitting onto the new polycarbonate cards (now known as the 'NRIC', or 'IC') first issued in the 1990s. The list now includes one's date of birth, sex, country of birth, thumbprint, and even the optional inclusion of their name in Chinese, Jawi, or Tamil script.

Beginning in the 1940s, Singapore's residents were asked to adapt to a new culture and materiality of bureaucracy, as this new way of being became commonplace and a convenient mode of civil engagement so begun a shift in the Singaporean's understanding of their personal identity and place vis-à-vis this state and society. The identity card scheme necessitated 'that citizens reproduce rigid self-identities contained within the 4.5 inch by 2.5 inch plastic card' and 'took away individuals' rights to identify themselves, imposing state-ascribed identities upon citizens' (Tan 2020: 47). This is the cost of legibility, but a price deemed necessary in order to access the benefits of citizenship. Singapore's NRIC system makes this a breeze by integrating all public (and until recently some private) services, and one need only show their NRIC to verify rightful access to public resources.

The contemporary Singaporean's experience with documents and the state is however not shared in other parts of Asia (see Scott 2009; Hull 2012a; Mathur 2016; Chhotray and McConnell 2018). The South Asian experience for instance overturns the expectation that 'citizenship enables the acquisition of documents certifying it' (Jayal 2013: 71 as cited in Chhotray and McConnell 2018: 112). Instead, other identity papers of various types—birth certificates, school registers, electricity and water bills, etc.—are frequently called upon to authenticate claims to citizenship (Chhotray and McConnell 2018: 112; see also Hull 2012b and Mathur 2016). Whether through an efficiently integrated system or the profuse collection of papers, the ability to demonstrate and document citizenship can be incredibly empowering for many seeking to exercise their freedoms and responsibilities as citizens. In the context of continuous migration flows and the rise of majoritarian politics, the same ideas of legibility and legitimacy invested in documentary lists and materials can be conversely restrictive, even dangerous for those deemed to be on the margins of the state (Chhotray and McConnell 2018: 112; see also Scott 2009 and Mathur 2016). While not everyone as readily recognises the ease of movement and identity afforded by Singapore's particularly efficient documentary regimes, some do.

Inder Singh, one of my interviewees, was quick to turn to his IC on the question of identity, but also positioned it alongside other attestations to identity he bears on his body:

Wherever I go in the world, that's my first identity and I thank God [for it]. Even though I wear the Sikh identity on myself (gesturing to his turban), and my Singapore identity is really in my wallet (gesturing to his back pocket), in my IC, or in my passport, but somehow, that is front and centre in my consciousness. That I'm Singaporean. I'm very proud of this.

With this tribute to his state-issued identity documents Inder's statement also begins to point to documents as ethnographic objects in themselves, serving to advance the ethnographer's understanding of various aspects of citizenship (Greenhouse 2018). Here, Inder demonstrates the habituation, over time, of the Singaporean citizen into a 'material citizenship' as he locates his national identity in alienable things like his IC and passport, even as he simultaneously locates his religious identity on his body. Underscoring both these attestations though is the unspoken imagined viewer, an 'other' to whom the self is made legible.

Having traced the induction of documents in attesting to identity in Singapore, I next examine the ways Singaporean Indians actively and creatively deploy their identity documents for the viewing 'other' in asserting their belonging. With this, I also consider how these practices must be attuned to a material world where race in effect is an entanglement of body and paper.

#### **4.1.2 Singaporean Identity and Race-Legibility**

Papers may record legal status but that alone is insufficient in making a claim to belonging recognised by others in society. In Singapore, this legibility of belonging emerges in the entanglement of legal, social, and racial legibility. Being seen as Singaporean Indian therefore comes with recognising how others 'see' and 'showing' yourself in turn. Such is the active and creative attunement to a material world full of identity documents my Singaporean Indian participants describe dwelling in.

In our workshop, Mano described two scenarios wherein he deployed different identity documents to demonstrate his belonging as a Singaporean Indian. The first took place in Little India, a neighbourhood where shops and services catering to Indian needs are

concentrated. On the weekends, this place is a popular haunt for the South Asian (primarily Indian and Bangladeshi) transient workers. Mano describes being there on a weekend when he was asked by auxiliary security officers to produce his work permit, an identity document issued to migrant workers. Mano recounts that he was miffed by the officer's assumption, but looking back he locates the mis-identification in the checked button-down shirt he was wearing, a sartorial style he characterises as typical of the young male workers from India. Mano tells the officer that he did not have a work permit because he is a Singaporean and took out his IC to demonstrate the point. In this encounter, Mano held out his IC to prove that he rightfully belonged and had the freedom to move as he pleased, unlike the foreign workers who were being asked to demonstrate, even on their rest day, their authorised presence. In his second recount, the IC was deemed insufficient. Speaking of having been questioned whether he was 'born in Singapore or a naturalised citizen', Mano instead pulls out another type of identity document to demonstrate belonging:

So whenever they ask that question I just show them my 11B.<sup>2</sup> I say 'I have served my NS (National Service), I know exactly what the point of your question is, this is proof that I've served NS'. So even though there is no utility for it right now at all (having completed NS), it's not like my IC, I still carry it with me because I never know when I will need to show it and say 'look, just shut up ok I've got this card'.

Mano's examples of selective and creative deployment of his identity documents demonstrate two key points. One, as discussed in the Introduction chapter, that formal structures of belonging—such as the legal or citizenship status printed on documents—alone do not engender a sense of belonging because belonging is

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<sup>2</sup> Officially known as the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Identity Card, the '11B' gets its moniker from the eleven basic points of information it carries. This card is issued to all Singaporean men at the start of their conscription into compulsory National Service (NS).

relational, it must also be recognised in the eyes of the other. In order to demonstrate his belonging, Mano employed different documents in attunement to the gaze of the other in question but recognising as well that this gaze operated in different frameworks of 'rightful belonging'. The gaze in the first instance was not simply that of para-official of the state, but one looking to monitor the actions and movement of migrant workers. Here the documentary materials Mano's claims had to be made against was the work permit, a document of the non-Citizens and non-Resident. For this, the IC's marking of Mano as a Singapore citizen was a sufficient enough claim to make in asserting his 'right to the city', his right to be there freely and not be questioned further. Expanding from the Lefebvorean conception of belonging as 'inhabitation', Kalandides and Vaiou argue that this right includes constant social inventions and informal practices in order to access 'de facto citizenship', or effective claims to belonging (2012: 262). Mano's deployment of his 11B is demonstrative of this innovation and informal practice. It is also indicative of the second key point.

Two, in their selective deployment of identity documents, Singaporean Indians also author their definition of belonging. With his use of his 11B, Mano defined the (male) Singaporean Indian as one who has served NS. Explaining this choice he clarified that because 'anyone can get an IC', including newly naturalised citizens, he saw the IC as not making enough of a demonstration of the fact that he was born in Singapore to older generations of Singaporeans, and that he had served the nation through conscripted military service—something naturalised citizens did not necessarily have to do. By his definition then, belonging as Singaporean Indian was premised on grounds of *jus soli*, drawing a commonly applied distinction between citizens 'by birth' (only granted to those born in Singapore to Singaporean parents) and naturalised citizens, a binary that is also mapped onto the concept of 'old' and 'new' diasporas of

Indians in Singapore wherein the line is drawn at the 1990s. This dichotomy is arguably problematic in its selective periodisation of Indian migration to Singapore and its silences on the continued granting of citizenship to Indian migrants between 1965 and the 1990s (see Solomon 2019; Sinha 2021). In the question posed to him, over being Singaporean by birth or by naturalisation, Mano recognised this popular construction of a notion of 'authentic citizenship' (Solomon 2019: 97–98). Therefore in response to that gaze that would not be satisfactorily convinced by the possession of an IC, Mano instead deploys his 11B not just as a document not just of his having served NS but as a demonstration of his belonging as someone who would implicitly have been Singaporean by birth, as someone who has served the nation, and as someone who was therefore an 'authentic' Singaporean.

I sought to explore this association between documents and ideas of 'authentic citizenship' further in the closing workshops. I presented my participants a pair of objects and asked them each to pick the one they thought was 'more Singaporean Indian'. I left it to them to decide how they would make that assessment, and most generally found the choice difficult to make. In the pairing of a 1957 Certificate of Citizenship Registration and a Birth Certificate from 1959, they had a great debate between origin and agency. A few argued that choosing to sign up for citizenship in a new nation calls for far greater agency and courage than the accident of birth. Indeed, the option to sign up to a new nation and be amongst its first cohort of citizens is rarely afforded. When my participants finally landed on a choice, there was a clear stance: that one born in Singapore was more Singaporean. *Jus soli* grounds were further buttressed by their argument that one born here would have had no exposure to other cultures thus knowing and being only Singaporean. This formulation almost suggests a Singaporean-ness by nullification of any other possibility, or from another

perspective, an untainted purity. Their selection was also made in recognition of the popularly held *jus soli* premise for 'authentic citizenship' in Singapore. Another participant, having been on the receiving end of repeated inquiries of 'where were you born?', argued that the Citizenship Registration certificate was therefore lacking in its ability to demonstrate one's Singaporean-ness, implicitly underscoring the document's silence on place of birth and therefore attesting to *jus solis* belonging. In the choice presented here, I also suspect that most of my participants were personally invested in selecting the birth certificate because they personally had one. As one participant attributed, 'it's the first thing I have that states I'm Indian'. This familiar intimacy with documents also features in the ways documents are selected and deployed, as I expand in section 4.3. From this exercise and Mano's recounts, my participants demonstrate that state-issued documents are not always seen to simply attest to the statuses they were intended for. Rather they showed me that Singaporean Indians are keenly aware of the popular constructions of identity and will deploy identity documents in creative ways to make claims beyond simple identification, but also to assert an 'authentic belonging' of their own definition. Key in both the popular construction of identity in Singapore and my participants' definitions of belonging is the legibility of Race in ascribing Singaporean-ness.

To feel that they belong people must also feel recognised and accepted by fellow inhabitants, such that belonging to a place becomes synonymous with belonging to an identifiable 'local' group (Mee 2009: 844; Antonsich 2010: 649; Wood and Waite 2011: 201; Gammeltoft 2018: 87). We see this in part in the above discussion where my participants sought to demonstrate their belonging through a congruence with the popular *jus solis* definition of Singaporean-ness. Identity documents also speak to a concurrent group-identity through which one's Singaporean-ness is qualified and

legitimised—Race. It is not administratively possible to be a Singaporean without a racial or ethnic qualifier, nor is it socially acceptable (Rocha and Yeoh: 882). The entrenchment of Singapore's multicultural identity in the simple CMIO quadratomy means that to be 'visible' to Singaporeans, one must be identifiable by 'Race' (Babcock 2023). And to be recognised and accepted as Singaporean, one must be especially identifiable as belonging to one of the three main 'founding races'—Chinese, Malay, and Indian (see Rocha and Yeoh 2021). Identity documents like the IC play a part making 'Race' legible, but as my participants argue that legibility to the essentialised gaze of the state and others comes at the cost of self-definition.

This classification began with the colonial era documents but Colonial Singapore was not the only regime to employ identity card systems to facilitate 'social sorting'. The practice also featured across colonial and postcolonial Africa where political authorities used official documentation, as Timothy Longman argues, as a means of attempting to fix group identities (2001: 346). During the nation's devastating genocide, soldiers, the militia, and civilians alike used state-issued identity cards and registration lists to identify Tutsi, then Hutu targets in the campaigns of mass violence. These registers and cards conversely became sites through which families sought to protect themselves by having their ethnic group listing changed, albeit illegally and for a fee (ibid.: 355). Perpetrators quickly came to distrust these documents and sought instead to verify one's identity by checking with neighbours or applying ideas of morphology in distinguishing Tutsi from Hutu, or vice-versa (ibid. 356). Nonetheless, the categorisation of society was fixed in the minds of the people. Though Rwandan identity cards no longer carry an ethnic label, the principal was accepted—'that identities were fixed and unchanging, that everyone in the country could be clearly classified into one of three categories based on their parentage' (ibid.). Likewise, the

persistent marking out of race on the documentary network of identity cards, forms, and reports in Singapore work to create a similar fixity of race—both in the rigidity of the state’s categorisation, and in its prominence in Singaporeans’ self-identity.

Despite the government of independent Singapore’s assurances to take into consideration the multiracial and multilingual structure of society, the postcolonial identity card and registration regime simply reproduced and entrenched the colonial state’s rigid categories based on ethnic origin determined by paternal parentage. (Tan 2020: 45-46) In 1966, the newly independent nation removed the category of ‘nationality’ from the I-Cards of citizens, but maintained it for Permanent Residents, underscoring a newfound Singaporean nationality (Tan 2020; 32). However, the government of this new republic adapted previous parameters of legibility to its new interests. ‘Nationality’ was replaced with ‘Race’, and what had been termed ‘Race’ was now ‘Dialect Group’. (ibid.) With this administrative and documentary regime, what race meant regardless of one’s parentage or socialisation was standardised, and individuals had to simply accept their state-ascribed race as printed on their identity cards.

Standardisation in this context also meant that discrete ethnic and kinship systems across China, South Asia, and the Malay Peninsula were mapped onto one order. Given the original interest in screening the Chinese, and perhaps buttressed by their majority, the Race–Dialect Group format was adopted for the whole population. Interested in the specific origin of Chinese individuals, the 1948 exercise required that they declared their ‘dialect group’ such as Hokkien, Canton, etc. (Tan 2020: 14). The same category of ‘dialect group’ was thus made applicable to everyone else filling in the standardised form, including the South Asian population. Although official

instructions dictated that Indians should specify a particular cultural and geographic ancestry in their racial description (e.g. Punjabi, Telugu, Sikh). The effect today though is some confusion over the 'dialect group' and 'race' listed for some. There is the occasional argument that 'Tamil', 'Malayali', 'Punjabi' and the like are languages not dialects. These arguments are perhaps unaware that 'dialect group' was an oversimplified substitution of the previous 'race' heading for these ethnolinguistic identities. There is also the recurrent vexation over listing 'Sikh' under 'race', or of people marked 'Pakistani' or 'Ceylonese' being filed under the 'Indian' race bracket.<sup>3</sup>

The identity document purports to be a record of uniqueness, but it also has to be an element in a classifying series that reduces individuality to a unit in a series. Identification as an individual without categories of collective identity would make for a highly ineffective system, but is also simultaneously deindividualizing (Caplan and Torpey 2001: 3, 7) In a plural society, Singaporeans are made legible through identification with a racial-type. In this material world, individual identity documents also make its bearer legible through the type of document—differentiating the Singaporean's pink IC from the migrant worker's work permit for instance—while also marking them as a token of their racial type. Here lies the tension between the document as attesting to belonging via group membership and fomenting the individual's sense of belonging by meeting their desire to be seen as they see themselves. Some of my workshop participants demonstrate this conflict in their exasperations with the ways their ICs locate them in Singapore's taxonomy.

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<sup>3</sup> As per Singapore's census exercises, the term 'Indians' 'refers to persons of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan origin such as Tamils, Malayalis, Punjabis, Bengalis, Singhalese, etc.' (Dept. of Statistics 2011: 185)

One Punjabi Sikh participant illustrates the confusion over how she is meant to be classified:

'I question whether I'm Indian enough, because I don't fit in that [idea]. My IC says Sikh, but when I fill up forms do I tick 'Indian', do I tick 'Others'? Like what am I?'

She recognises how because of the essentialised understanding of Race in Singapore, the primary association of 'Indian' is of a Tamil Hindu identity and wonders how to square this with her own ethnolinguistic and religious identity and whether she therefore 'counts' as Indian or not. Her statement also points to the fact that some Sikhs have been categorised as 'Others', further compounding the confusion. She struggles over how she ought to make herself legible by the terms of the extant system. Another participant though had sought to challenge the system, demanding he be recognised on his terms.

I have a problem with my IC because I never liked the race. When I had to renew my IC at thirty, I had an argument with the ICA [Immigrations and Customs Authority] officer asking why can't my race be 'Tamil', because I think 'Indian' is not my race.

His request was denied. Although this Tamil participant's identity is exactly that which is most conjured by the essentialised meaning of 'Indian' in Singapore—and therefore the documentary system deems that no further qualification is needed—he finds the 'Indian' label on his IC insufficient in capturing the Tamil identity he holds closer and wants spelled out. Although both hold ICs that recognise their belonging as Singaporean vis-à-vis a place in the system of racial classification, the IC's 'Race' label also becomes a contentious site unsettling their sense of belonging engendered by a right to self-definition.

This question of legibility through self-definition was similarly a concern for Malminder Singh, President of the Sikh Advisory Board. In Singapore, 'Sikh' is also an

ethnolinguistic community, or 'dialect group', enumerated under Race giving rise as well to ICs which print 'Sikh' as its bearer's race. This categorisation finds its roots in the 1947 Census exercise which adopted the argument put forth by various Sikh Associations that 'the Sikhs were now not only co-religionists but also formed a very definite social, economic and political community' (1947 Census Report: 78, para 306). Given the earlier dependence on self-reporting, lack of strict standardisation, and multiple waves of migration and registration, the community of people who are Sikh by religion and belong to the Punjabi ethnolinguistic community have come to be registered, listed, and counted varyingly as 'Sikh', 'Punjabi', 'Indian', and 'Others'. For Malminder, this put the community in a dangerous administrative blind spot. Inaccurate demographic data, which in effect underrepresents the 'Sikh' population, may obscure the community's demographic significance and erode the religious privileges and freedoms they now enjoy but still struggle to retain.<sup>4</sup> To remedy this, Malminder had attempted to coordinate a mass rectification exercise wherein those who wanted to get their race changed to 'Sikh' could do so in a community event facilitating the process with ICA. Such an event was not possible, but members of the community were reminded that they could still enlist existing avenues to make the change.<sup>5</sup> That campaign however had little up take, suggesting that perhaps Malminder's fears are not yet recognised by the community, or deemed important enough for busy Singaporeans to warrant a trip to ICA's office. Nonetheless his concern points to a

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<sup>4</sup> These freedoms include the right to maintain the external symbols of the faith, including wearing the turban in the uniformed services as well as when riding a motorcycle, and the conceal carry of a small ceremonial dagger. Additionally, the community enjoys a special recognition by leading politicians who have celebrated them as a 'model minority'. (See McCann 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Per regulations, changes to one's 'race' is allowed with sufficient supporting documents—primarily copies of parents' or siblings' documents bearing the 'race' label one seeks to switch to. (Immigrations and Checkpoints Authority, n.d.)

recognition that these 'Race' labels have consequences, and his campaign further underscores an understanding of how standardising this 'Race' identity would be the optimal means of securing legibility and accessing public resources—both key to engendering a community's belonging in the nation-state.

Singaporeans have thus so adapted to this 'governance by taxonomy' (Rocha and Yeoh 2021: 891) that they have themselves come to accept it as the way and the terms on which to engage the state and to see themselves as citizen-subjects. Historically and presently 'belonging to Singapore is inextricable from belonging to one of the CMIO categories; in other words, citizenship cannot transcend race' (Rocha and Yeoh 2021: 889). If race, the foundation of national belonging and citizenship, is located and exercised through the IC, we have also seen how the IC's 'Race' label can be a creative site of seeking legibility and asserting belonging. Ultimately neither document nor bearer enact the work of attestation or identification alone. Both must be moved, together, selectively, in view of social expectations and bureaucratic processes. Paper and person are entangled in themselves as they are with this environment. As this next section expands, it is this 'leakiness' of both that affords the creative agency and requires skilled perception in the deployment of documents.

#### **4.1.3 Documents as 'Material Mirror'**

In this section, I reiterate that documents necessarily work in entanglement with other things, other documents, lists, and systems; the documentation belonging to others and the self; and the body of the self in order to attest and make legible. It is this entanglement, premised on the 'leakiness' of documents that opens them up to creative deployment. It is also this entanglement of relations that leaves a lasting

presence in the material world positioning documents as a 'material mirror' through which one sees their belonging.

Works on the social lives of documents benefit from the broader concerns with materialities. As Matthew Hull summarised, the new approaches to materiality and sociotechnical process set forth by Appadurai (1986), Gell (1998), Henare et al. (2006), Latour (1999), Miller (1987, 2005) have opened the space to explore 'the socially consequential role of documents as something other than "fetishes," objects misrecognised as powerful.' (Hull 2012b: 254) While work on documents per se may have started with Goody (1986) who addressed the role of writing in relation to organisations, the field has since broadened from there to explore a range of document qualities in relation to the discourses and other social actions they mediate. (Hull 2012b: 254) Hull (2012b) identifies three approaches in these studies of how humans encounter documents, variably ones that emphasize aesthetics, affect or emotion, or signs. At the core of these are the relationships between humans and non-human objects, relationships that in their quotidian course connect multiple agents in any number of directions. These relationships are possible because documents too are 'things' in the Ingoldian (2000) sense, they leak lines of life, growth, and movement. It is in this meshwork of bundles of relations that the document is able to document, where the person becomes legible as document/person (drawing from Miller's 'clothing/person', see Miller 2005: 32). Because neither documents nor persons are stopped-up objects but 'leaky', this affords an expansion of what constitutes a document and how things may be moved to document for the person similarly entangled in and constituted by a material world.

For the most part, we think of documents as textual, as material to carry the written or printed word. But given that the task to document ‘any expression of human thought’, some like Paul Otlet have argued for an expanded definition of the document to include the three-dimensional, like sculptures and museum objects (Buckland 1997: 805). Like today’s identity cards, objects like merchant seals, signet rings and articles of dress too have been employed towards the same operation of attesting to identities and affiliations. Thus, as Suzanne Briet (1951) argues, an object becomes a document when it is treated as one. Ron Day suggests of Briet’s use of ‘indice’ in the original French ‘that it is indexicality—the quality of having been placed in an organized, meaningful relationship with other evidence—that gives an object its documentary status’ (as cited in Buckland 1997: 806). In other words, an object can be positioned as evidence by the way it is arranged or presented, and that the indexical property of a sign is not a natural property, but a given one, an assigned relationship (ibid.: 807). While Day turns to semiotics, the point remains even in a meshwork framing for the emphasis on readily available relationships that are then highlighted and moved into action. This is just as we saw earlier with the examples from my participants. Their selection and creative deployment of documents moves extant relationships and materials in the documentary system, where the agency to do so is afforded by the leakiness of people and things that gathers a wide range of documents that can make the various attestations.

So far, the discussion on how things may make us visible to ourselves and to others has focused on largely contemporaneous relations. On matters of identity, belonging, and documentation, a sense of history also matters. But we ought to seek a history that does not privilege the human or cognitive imaginations of the past. A Millerian

materialist approach that dethrones the human subject turns our attention instead to the very material world that has emerged through our own history:

We cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as a material culture and continues to evolve through us. (Miller 2005: 8)

Miller draws this idea of the 'material mirror' from Gell who illustrates it with the example of the Maori meeting house. As an object built to last, and with future occupation in mind, the material meeting house seeks durability. More so, the meeting house is an index of the 'agency of the ancestor', which here is equally future-orientated (Gell 1998: 256). Where others might easily suggest and accept that the meeting house *holds* memory, for Gell, it is 'a "memory" in objectified form, of meeting houses anterior to this one' (ibid.: 257). So in the future-oriented intention of its makers, and in its material property and function; in its indexing of earlier meeting houses like it; and as 'a "sketch" towards a series of as yet unbuilt houses', the Maori meeting house 'carries with it the whole thickness of *durée*, and belongs not just to a "now"' (ibid.). The identity documents discussed so far hold a mirror up to its bearers, reflecting their state-legible identities back to them. But not only do these documents make legible as present iterations in a history of 'material citizenship', as I discuss in the next sections (4.2.2 and 4.3), the documents of ancestors too reflect a history and future of belonging to today's descendants. Such is an account of durability, an account of relationships that reach back and forwards in time afforded but not limited by the physical life of material or the legal validity of documents.

In a similar call for attention to time, Pinney cautions against misidentifying contemporaneity for significance or for membership in a network. He denounces the current dominant mode of addressing objects within anthropology and historiography

wherein 'empty objects will only acquire "meaning" as a consequence of movement through (or more precisely by habitation within, in a moment of stasis) culture or history—as something perceived as being structured by the possibility of contemporaneity' (Pinney, 2005: 266–7). Rather, he calls for abolishing "contemporaneity" as a contextual alibi within historiography' (ibid.: 260). Instead of perpetuating a trope of homogenous empty time, Pinney instead suggests making time 'uncontemporaneous,' that is, to insist on its multiplicity and difference (ibid.: 264). 'Time, was not a single river or mighty cascade, [but] a series of cataracts, each pursuing their own uncontemporaneousness in incoherent trajectories' (Siegfried Kracauer, 1969, cited in ibid.). A simple matter of being in the same place at the same time is insufficient cause for membership in a network of relations. Rather, as we pay attention to the 'thickness of durée' in objects, we ought also to look for the agency that moves an object, and its relations in and through time. As Pinney summarises: 'as with the "over-stuffed interiors of the second half of the nineteenth century" and the "thoughts born in them," cultural phenomena may inhabit "the same epoch" and yet may not be each other's "contemporaries"' (ibid. 264–5).

Likewise not all things in a plural material world are drawn into relations with each other, nor should all collections of things be taken as similarly entangled. Instead, we look not for contemporaneity but for the thickness of time and the agency that moves things through time. This is how we might begin to recognise the 'material mirror' of our ancestor's making, especially out of the 'over-stuffed' material world of Singapore. In this section, I have laid out how Singaporeans have been habituated into a 'material citizenship' that not only fills the environment with various types of documents and legitimizes their deployment in making Singaporeans and others in Singapore legible to the state and to each other. I have also demonstrated how documents do not

autonomously move identity but are rather creatively deployed by Singaporean Indians in defining their belonging. Such innovation in effecting claims to belonging are afforded by leaky people and documents in meshwork. In the next two sections, I focus on *durée* in these entanglements and turn to how Singaporean Indians see their belonging through the potential 'material mirror' of museum and home collections primarily built around documents. With this I recognise the same creative employment of collections in locating belonging, this time reaching backwards and forwards in time.

## **4.2 MUSEUM COLLECTIONS**

Expanding the discussion of documents, this second section examines the displays in the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) for its deployment of documents and other artefacts in its documentation of Singaporean Indian history. As one of the state-run 'heritage centre', IHC's collection makes an officially endorsed representation of Singaporean Indians legible to both the in-group and other visitors. Here, I examine how this official collection is seen by members of the subject community, and therefore how it holds up and fails as material mirror of Singaporean Indian belonging.

### **4.2.1 The 'Indian' Museum**

IHC located on Campbell Lane, in the heart of Singapore's Little India, opened its doors in 2015 'to showcase the Indian community's heritage in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic Singapore' (Krishnan 2016: 19). From the outset, the museum is primed as a site of Singaporean Indian representation in a racially-informed ecology with the Malay Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall serving as sister institutions. Together, the three 'heritage institutions' are operated under the National Heritage Board, but developed in collaboration with representatives from the Indian, Malay, and

Chinese communities respectively (IHC 2015). Thus even as this collection of artefacts of the Indian community appears self-contained, it in fact exists as part of larger material collections of objects made to be representative of one of the three main racial groups in this plural society.

One of its stated key objectives is to ‘connect and collaborate with key stakeholders to promote Indian culture and community rootedness’ (Krishnan 2016: 19). In reality, the main audience of the museum is not the Singaporean Indian, the subject of its representation. IHC’s place in the material world is reinforced by its de facto position of speaking to the gaze of the ‘other’. This ‘heritage institution’ primarily functions as an accessible showcase of ‘Indian-ness’ in Singapore to tourists, school groups, curious non-Indian Singaporeans, and occasionally new citizens<sup>6</sup>, many of whom visit the museum as part of their tour of Little India. As communicated to me by several of IHC’s staff, Singaporean Indians rarely show up in the museum despite being regular visitors to Campbell Lane and the Little India neighbourhood.

For most of my workshop participants, their first visit to IHC was made in attending our closing workshops. Despite the seeming indifference of Singaporean Indians to the museum it nonetheless served my research purpose in providing a ready collection curated around the Singaporean Indian identity that would be helpful for my purposes of object-elicitation while not being overly curated through my own lens and biases. My participants’ lack of familiarity with the collection also made it pedagogically fresh for our unpacking together. Additionally, I was interested in how the museum setting

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<sup>6</sup> ‘The Centre has applied to be one of the public institutions that new citizens can choose from whilst completing the ‘Singapore Citizenship Journey’ component of their naturalisation process and therefore will likely constitute a new site of integration.’ (Solomon 2019: 104)

shaped how my participants saw the displayed artefacts—things that would have been, at least in type, familiar to them.

#### **4.2.2 ‘Material Mirror’ in the Museum**

Before deciding on using the IHC collection in my closing workshop, I took a walking interview with Lovepreet in the galleries. Her responses to these displays that I had been long familiar with helped me see them afresh, and confirmed the need of returning with the workshop participants. The visit to this display of the Singaporean Indian begins with documents and a question of identity. ‘Hello, Singaporean?’ asks the staff member at the ticket counter, ‘Scan IC please’ she instructs. Lovepreet and I flashed our pink cards in front of a digital reader. Here the Singaporean status grants us free access into the museum, our pink ICs demonstrates that status to the staff who hands us entry stickers while the scanned barcode authenticates the transaction in the institution’s records. This is how our journey started as Lovepreet and I continued our walking interview into the galleries.

We had just been in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) before, so walking into the IHC Lovepreet thought that the first displays of some Chola bronzes and stone temple sculptures was reminiscent of ACM’s South Asian galleries’ collection of ‘impressive’ religious imagery. The next section features glass cases of ornate jewellery and fabrics, which Lovepreet quickly characterises as ‘shiny stuff’ but pays no further attention to. She homes in on a display set up just after these glass cases, pointing out that it was full of ‘not shiny stuff’ but rather mundane things. ‘That looks like it’s for making tea’, Lovepreet points out before we both look closer and realise it’s a *murukku* (spiral fried snack) press. ‘Ok this is actually like very cool because it like home stuff’ Lovepreet observed. ‘But you know when we saw all those pretty plates in ACM,’ she

continued referencing a collection of glazed ceramics, ‘those don’t really look like things people eat off, maybe they were, but they look very ornamental, this one looks very functional like somebody used it before.’ She declared pointing to a metal spoon on display, ‘you see, confirm somebody used this spoon before.’



Figure 8: ‘Journeys and Transnational Migration’ display in Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore. Photo by author, April 2021.

Lovepreet and I were looking at a display of stacked metal trunks, document cases, cushions, rolled mats, baskets, cloth bundles, and crates with clear fronts revealing the brass and metalware within, all of which were put together in a *mise-en-scène* marked ‘Journeys and Transnational Migration’ (Figure 8). Lovepreet’s recognition of this display and its artefacts as being ‘like home stuff’ begins to reveal its potential as ‘material mirror’, as material world of our predecessors. This tableau caught the attention of this Singaporean Indian visitor in ways unlike the sections before of ‘shiny stuff’ that seem to recreate the ‘over-stuffed interiors’ Pinney describes of objects from different times and places displayed together—though no doubt the museological objective was in demonstrating diversity within shared South Asian practice.

Inspired, I later showed this display to my participants in the closing workshop. Like Lovepreet, the workshop participants quickly found their familial things and histories

reflected in this assemblage. The thin cotton blouses were just like a grandmother's; a grandfather had a document case too that now sits in a shelf at home; the *murukku* press evoked memories of trying to help mother in the kitchen; the photos of the S. S. Rajulah elicited a recount from one participant of how her grandmother hid her pregnant belly under the folds of her sari as she set out on the steamship for Singapore. Without reading the wall text or captions, my participants immediately recognised this as a representation of migration, specifically by ship, and without prompting, located their own family's migration in this 'material mirror'. Like Gell's Maori meeting houses, this scene thus carried with it a whole 'thickness of *durée*', belonging not just to a now nor to a then, but both and beyond (Gell 1998: 257). Some participants saw their history in this scene so strongly that they felt that this should have been the starting point of IHC's gallery, 'since it's the start of our story'. Thickening time in the other direction, others recognised that the specification of passenger travel by sea put an endpoint on migration and suggested that the display be expanded to include the artefacts of today's migrant and their journeys by air.

That this display of 'journeys and transnational migration' of Singapore's Indian community selects only sea passage and pegs the story there corroborates Solomon's argument that public historiography narrows who the 'authentic citizen' is. Ethnic heritage museums are cultural resources for the understanding of Singapore's society and can influence public understanding through their inclusions and exclusions, particularly 'reinforcing definitions of who authentic Singaporeans are, and whose histories are a legitimate part of the nation's broader history, whilst obscuring the existence and growth of new diasporic communities on the island' (Solomon 2019: 101). This display in IHC reflects and legitimises popular understandings of the authentic Singaporean Indian citizen as someone of the 'old diaspora' whose

ancestors came and settled in Singapore before Independence in 1965 and who would have travelled by steamship with colonial documents. The IHC galleries do not go on to reflect the circular nature of some pre-independence migration nor of continued migration from South Asia after 1965. For Solomon, 'this absence of immigration into Singapore as a theme in recent history is significant, as it appears to suggest that Singaporean national identity emerged further in the past, through the common historical experiences of the population under colonialism, Occupation and the politics of decolonisation' (ibid. 103). Where this museum tableau effectively held up a mirror for some of my workshop participants, they were also able to see where it might fail for others.

The durability of its representation could perhaps also be restrictive even for those it recognised. I wondered if this display worked to cement the Indian community in Singapore as one of migrants, fixing this position as always having been from elsewhere and denying any possibility of being local, let alone native to these lands. My participants, perhaps more optimistically, saw in those crates and trunks the story not just of migration but of Indian settlement:

'We came from somewhere'

'We left permanently'

'It's a new life, they brought all their prayer things and all their household things'

'It's not a holiday'

'They didn't know if they could find these here or if they had the means to buy them again so they brought it all'

'There's the *paanai satti* (pots and pans)'

But, as they took in the details further, my participants recognised that the presentation was not of a monolithic story but in fact indexed various classes of travellers. Mira sums up the assemblage:

For me it tells a story of different levels of people who came to our part of the world. So those who didn't have much would have tied up all their belongings in a cloth, they

might have carried it in the basket. It's almost as if different levels here show that: this is the biggest chest, this would have been someone with a lot to carry and bring. And in terms of the assemblage, I see it very literally, the collection here. Literal as in terms of the documents, the travel documents, and then the bags you took, the mats you would take to sleep on, the things to cook with, the things to pray with. It's like the connections spiral going down.

The connections did indeed spiral on from one part of the displayed scene to another, and from the artefacts to similar things the participants have kept at home. It was not any suggestion of class identity that they latched on to, but familiar things. The bags and cooking vessels were vaguely like those in their mother's or grandmothers' kitchens, but travel documents were especially potent as 'material mirror', eliciting excited exclamations of recognition and proud claims to possession: 'I still have my grandmother's Entry Permit', 'I've seen my grandparents' passport somewhere at home', 'I made sure I took my grandfather's papers for safekeeping when he passed'. Once again, the ubiquity of 'material citizenship' shows up, but this time working not just to make an individual legible to authorities, but as I develop in section 4.3, as potent in making legible belonging through the document as 'material mirror' for the family. But first, a continued discussion around the documents in museums prove that on closer-inspection, these become 'stopped-up' objects too.

#### **4.2.3 Stopped-up 'Shiny Stuff' of Museum Collections**

The initial 'leakiness' of the familiar mundane things on display in the 'Journeys and Transnational Migration' tableau set it apart from the 'shiny stuff' in glass cases displayed in the gallery sections before. The flows of relations of these mundane things were easy to notice and quickly elicited connections to things my participants themselves had at home. Such connections encouraged my participants to offer all manner of reflection on the identities on displays and claims to belonging represented

unprompted by me. However, as we looked closer and the documents in particular were seen to make legible a specific individual, the lines of connection faded and these museum artefacts became, for my participants, not unlike the other stopped-up 'shiny stuff'.

Returning to my visit with Lovepreet, we continued looking over the display and her attention was caught by the open case in the centre with its collection of passports, ticket stubs, and photographs of steamships (Figure 9). At once, she makes the connection with her family's collection of documents:

This actually looks like some papers I might have in some drawers at home. This one, like all the entry permits...I can distinctly remember that I have things that look like that at home. Like I have all the entry permits or re-entry permits of my dad and his siblings. It looks like that, like your face is here. And yea, they all seem to have very sombre expressions.

I ask what effect it has on her to see things like this in a museum, as opposed to the 'shiny stuff' from before.

It makes the museum less alienating because there are artifacts from my life that are here. It feel like, yea maybe the story's about me, about people like me and that it's not some super abstract story that is only tangentially related to me.

These documents on display, particularly the passports with their black and white photos and lines of information that make them so discernibly familiar as identity documents, present a universality about them. Lovepreet and several of the workshop participants were reminded of similar documents of their own. To paraphrase Gell on the Maori memory house (1998: 257), these displayed travel documents appear to be a 'memory', in objectified form, of documents anterior and posterior to these ones.

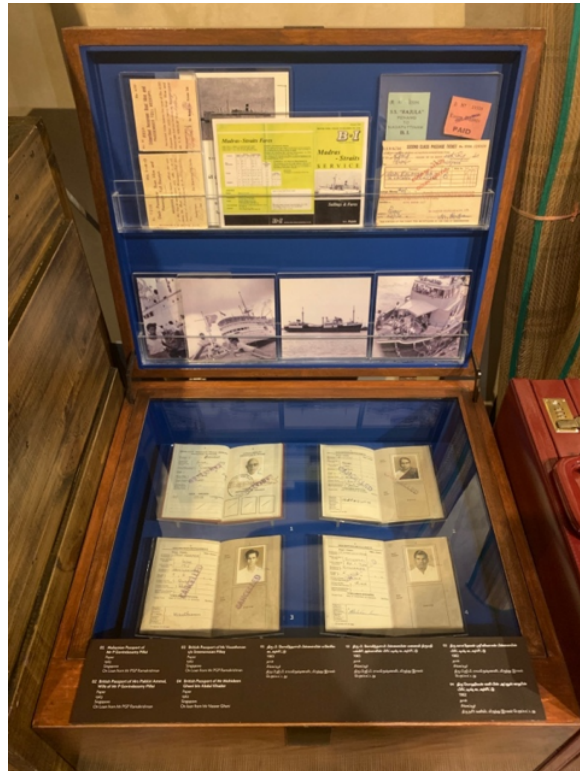


Figure 9: Display case of travel documents, ticket stubs, a fare card, and photographs of steamships, positioned in the center of 'Journeys and Transnational Migration' display in Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore. Photo by author, April 2021.

As a thought experiment, Lovepreet and I discuss the possibility of swapping out one of the four passports with her father's entry permit:

I think it'd be telling a story about a different person. I guess it depends on if the museum thinks that my dad's face is, or my dad's name, which is not a not a Tamil name, will help them tell a story. I mean... they don't need two Tamil-sounding names. They could quite smartly just take out one and put a Punjabi person to show the diversity of the Indian community.

Lovepreet was thus already recognising the specific in the universal, recognising that the documents on display with Tamil names failed to capture the non-Tamil Indian population. Though, the personal identity document of one Punjabi person would also seek to make a universal representation of non-Tamils from this specific instance. Nonetheless, the identification function of the documents now worked to disrupt the efficacy of this display as 'material mirror'. The illusion falls apart with the specificity of the bearer of the first passport.

Pointing out the names on the passports, I ask Lovepreet if any are familiar. ‘Yes, Govindasamy Pillai, he was some guy right, I am supposed to know’ Lovepreet replies, recalling Ponnosamy Govindasamy Pillai, a.k.a. PGP (1887–1980). PGP was an eminent Indian businessman, philanthropist, founding member of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, and a Justice of the Peace in 1939 (Arunasalam 2018). Without that recognition, the passport on display was ‘just another passport’ and their bearers ‘were ordinary people’ to Lovepreet. But recognizing the specificity, the identity documents were no longer as exchangeable as they were before for Lovepreet. Further, the whole display on migration had taken on a different slant: ‘Oh, this was actually about migration by a particular milieu of people right, maybe? Like the wealthy affluent people moving to other parts of the world.’

The museum setting and known historical context recast these ‘once mundane’ documents as specific highly significant instances, losing their previous universalizability and reflective capacity. The documents were less ‘like what I have at home’ and the display became less reminiscent of my participants’ own familial history. Recognising the specific individuals identified in the documents also raised further questions around museum objects and privilege. Thus Ganga, who on seeing these same documents had recounted taking steps to safekeep her grandparents’ documents on their passing, now saw her collecting practice as separate from the IHC’s collection: ‘The passports right, those are the rich guys. It’s not just because it’s PGP, my grandparents have those [passports] as well, but it’s about what are the steps to donate to the museum.’<sup>7</sup> This rejection recalls Pinney’s caution against

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<sup>7</sup> In development, IHC had put out calls for contributions of artefacts. Of the 443 artefacts on permanent display, 203 are from the community. 368 artefacts in all were loaned or donated by the public. (Krishnan 2016: 28)

misidentifying contemporaneity for significance, or membership in a network. In this instance, my participants found that PGP's passport enacted a different identity from the ones they had empathised with, in effect seeing his passport as 'uncontemporaneous' with the other familiar objects in the scene. Thus, as Pinney (2005: 264) suggests of time, i.e., insisting on its multiplicity and difference, documents too should be recognised here as capable of associations in multiple trajectories.

The displays in IHC were initially received differently by my participants. Some sections were immediately seen as displaying distant closed-off objects, set away as simply 'shiny stuff' typical of museums. The tableau showcasing migration was different on first look. Its collection of familiar things that were like those at home elicited responses that demonstrate that my participants saw in this display a 'material mirror' of the world made by their ancestors, drawing easy connections between these things in the museum and those at home. But ultimately, documents and the specificity they carry in making an individual legible, also worked to close them off. In the museum, documents ultimately appear positioned to speak to a past, and a selective exalted one at that, but for the participants who have kept family members' documents at home, these are positioned to enact a future as the next section unpacks.

### **4.3 HOME COLLECTIONS**

Having traced the beginning of Singapore's documentary regime, I demonstrated in section 4.1 how Singaporean Indians creatively deployed their own identity documents to demonstrate and define belonging on their own terms. In section 4.2 I then explained how official museum collections, specifically documents on display at IHC, may stand as material mirror to Singaporean Indians but ultimately fail in their specificity of identifying well-known individuals. This third section draws both these observations

together with its examination of how Singaporean Indians position their own collections of familial documents in defining a belonging in *longue durée*, demonstrating as well how the documents of ancestors may stand as material mirror. I begin with a look at relations with individual documents; then at the collection of documents and other documentary material in enacting a collective claim to the family's belonging; and finally expands this role to other types of collections that document and represent the family's belonging as Singaporean Indian.

#### **4.3.1 Expired Family Documents and 'Authentic Belonging'**

In their everyday circulation, identity documents work in network with other documentary and administrative systems, to enact access to services and spaces for their named bearer. On display in the museum, travel documents like PGP's passports worked not to grant him access into Singapore, but rather to index the historical migratory movement of the broader Singaporean Indian community. My participants initially saw in the passports on display a reflection of the documents they had at home, not just as items of the same type but in the ways these documents spoke to a history of migration. The ability of PGP's passport to speak to this aspect of my participants' own lives was however cut when they recognised the named bearer and deemed the passport as attesting to a specific person and his individual migration. In the museum, the individual identification of documents fails it as material mirror, but this same property is key to documents at home. The identity documents that once belonged to named individuals recognised as grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts now operate to make legible not only their individual identity, but that of their family. These documents kept at home are now positioned to make attestations not to the gaze of state authorities, but to that of descendants. As (mostly) voided documents, they no

longer hold authority in making legible their named bearer's categorical identity, but are given renewed authority by descendants in making plain their family's 'authentic belonging' as Singaporean Indian.

Getting home after our walk through IHC, Lovepreet sent me photographs of the family documents she earlier recalled in the museum. The main document she had in mind was a 'Certificate of Status' (Figure 10) that vouches for its bearer's status as a Singapore citizen and is therefore to be granted free (re)entry into Singapore (Singapore Statues Online 2022). The main named bearer on the document was Gurdev Kaur, Lovepreet's oldest aunt, under whose care were listed her three younger siblings including Lovepreet's father, the youngest of the lot. In the space at the bottom of the page, a line is added noting that these are the 'children of Jehal Singh' with his NRIC number provided in brackets. This document issued in 1966 connecting these four children to Singapore as citizens with right of entry, and to their father who is also marked as Singaporean with his NRIC number, is for Lovepreet today a document of her family's legal status, early presence, and place in Singapore. It is, in her own words, an 'artefact of the family's history'. Rather than marking them out as travellers or migrants, this travel document, for Lovepreet, speaks of her family's history in a way to mark the family's Singaporean belonging and identity today.

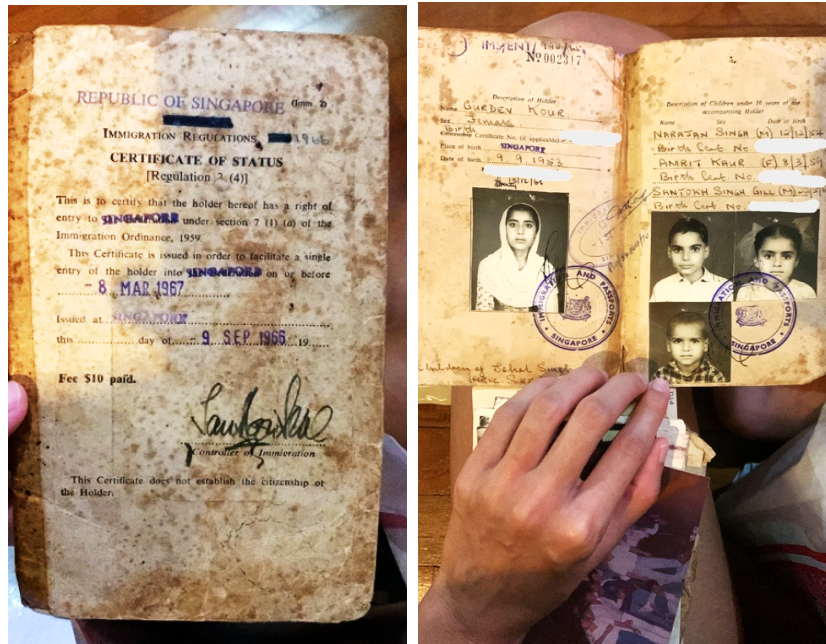


Figure 10: Cover (left) and inside pages (right) of 'Certificate of Status' issued to Gurdev Kaur (Lovepreet's aunt) in 1966. Photo by Lovepreet, March 2022.

Lovepreet had not actively kept this and other family documents with much intention. She admits 'I have no idea why we kept them and continue to do so; their purposes have been outlived a long, long time ago.' Mano, on the other hand had deliberately repositioned a similar family document towards the future. Mano told us about his grandmother's Entry Permit in the workshop discussions. It was issued to her in the 1960s when her husband, Mano's grandfather, sponsored her move to Singapore together with Mano's mother, a then three-year-old dependent listed in her mother's travel document. Mano explains:

To me this is important is because I've seen over the last 15 years how the idea of Singaporean-ness changes. 15 years ago, no body questioned what the Singaporean identity was, but now they ask whether you are Singaporean or not, and then they ask whether you're born in Singapore or not... So to me this [Entry Permit] is a very important piece of information that I scan and send to everybody in my family because you never know, 5 to 10 years down the road people might start questioning 'how many generations have you all been here'.

Where Lovepreet implicitly makes the connection, Mano explicitly positions the entry permit as a document of his own Singaporean-ness and that of his extended family's.

He even multiplied it with digital scans so that this Entry Permit may serve multiple family members and remain available in the future. With his decision to make scans, Mano imagines that the entry permit will make him legible and legitimate to an imagined future society with a narrower conception of the 'authentic citizen', and is also mitigating against the limited material life of the single paper document by digitalising and multiplying it.

In the ways they positioned the travel documents of their predecessors, Lovepreet and Mano demonstrated the 'thickness of *durée*' documents can hold for the family. Even as these documents were not crafted by their ancestors themselves, they index the future-oriented agency of the ancestor in settling in Singapore and in building the world and life today's descendants dwell in with the ability to lay claims to a conception of 'authentic belonging'. These familial documents do not always work alone though, but in assemblage with other 'documentations' of the family, as the next section unpacks.

#### **4.3.2 Bags of Family Documents and Photographs**

As with the keeping of documents, the assemblages into which family documents fall may be intentional or not. Regardless, these collections reveal the ways their collectors explicitly or implicitly imagine both state documents and family photographs as connected in the ways they 'document' the family and its history.

Vishal, a filmmaker and one of my workshop participants, saw in family documents the possibility of making legible a family's migration, settlement, and belonging in Singapore, and positioned them towards that end in his short film, *Partitions*. With this film, Vishal had also wanted to make visible the story of Sindhi migration in Singapore in the post-Partition period. In that process, he turned to state-issued documents for

two main reasons. One, the clear headings like ‘Registration of Citizenship’ and ‘Entry Permit’ lent well to the visual storytelling of the filmic medium and got to the point of showing the chronological journey quickly. Two, the use of state documents addressed, though is not meant to validate, the popular imagination of the ‘authentic citizen’ and the question of who rightfully belongs:

Why documents; it’s to show that relationship between participants in the film to the state. Those are the things I have with which I can show that relationship. And of course, one of the reasons for showing that relationship is also what we see in today’s context in Singapore, where, I see instances of xenophobia in terms of questioning one’s belonging to this country, and then also questioning how long someone has been in the country. So using documents is not to say like, ‘Oh, someone has been here for so long,’ but it was the way that we chose to tell that story.

In *Partitions*, the opening sequence (Figure 11) expands the collections of papers that document a family’s settlement beyond the authority of states. Officially issued documents—a certificate of registration for Singapore citizenship, a spousal entry permit, a cancelled Indian passport issued in Madras and a certificate of Singaporean citizenship—are spliced with family photographs of weddings, dining at gatherings, and portraits of children and parents. As Vishal explains, including those photographs were important ‘because you don’t just take your existence through your documents, it’s also how you spent your life, who you’re with, and the things you chose to capture; I wanted to show that life too.’ With this statement, Vishal implicitly points to the ways family photographs archive and document everyday life (Benjamin 1936, Sandbye 2014, Bainbridge 2018); may recontextualise or produce memories (Hirsch 1997, Sontag 1997, Wilton 2018); and may supplement textual and/or official documents (Barthes 1981, Evans 2021). Together, the photographs and official papers in this opening sequence visually document the becoming of a family’s ‘Singaporean-ness’, not just in their legal status but in their everyday dwelling.



Figure 11: Stills from opening sequence of *Partitions* (2021), a short film written and directed by Vishal Daryanomal.

Lovepreet too had collected her family documents with family photographs, albeit less intentionally. The Certificate of Status she showed me was kept in a repurposed plastic shopping bag from a sari shop (Figure 12) and stored in a closed shelf under the TV unit. Unlike the museum artefacts, these documents were not for display. Various kinds of papers inhabited this shopping bag—browned and spotted state documents

with handwritten entries and newer laminated printed birth certificates, both having outlived their use, piled in with decades of family photographs printed in black and white, sepia, and colour. This bag contained a collection, curated even if unknowingly, that together make the family visible to themselves and their history legible and tangible to its curious members.



Figure 12: Bag of family documents kept by Lovepreet's family. Photo by Lovepreet, March 2022.

Family photographs particularly inflect the collection such that these documents at home are unlike the stoic closed-off passports on display at the IHC. Even as the family travel documents attest to an individual's journey, family photographs trace migrations of flesh and blood over generations. Such a collection expands its indexical relationship beyond those named in the documents or even pictured in the photographs. Following Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes insists on the photograph's connection to life:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will

touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze. (Barthes 1981: 80-81)

Family photographs thus evoke the literal umbilical cords, marking not just the corporal relations of the photographed and viewing body, but also the history and journeys of one to another. Photographs disrupt the 'having-been-there' of the subject and its death, enabling the life of the photographed to 'haunt' the life of the viewer. (Hirsch 1992: 6) When collected and looked at together, this umbilical connection of photographs leaks and extends to the documents of family members. In assemblage, both text and visual records of ancestors past and their journey to become Singapore Indian continue to inform the viewing descendant's sense of self, history, belonging. In the next section, another collection documenting deaths in the family is moved into a similar role of making visible and legible the family's belonging.

#### **4.3.3 Documents of Death and Generational Belonging**

Obituaries are another documentary object collected in the home that my participants have positioned as carrying family histories and belonging into the future. Combining both a visual record of the deceased and a textual record of their life and relations, obituaries are written, read, and collected in ways that also position them as 'material mirrors'.

In the workshop, some participants recalled watching then joining their grandparents' morning routine of looking through the newspapers' obituaries section. They learned to scan through the listings to pick out the Indian ones, those most likely to be family or kin. Faces in the photos were a starting point. Race, reflected through religion, was then located in design as motifs such as lamps, flower garlands, the Tamil or Sanskrit symbol for 'Om' or the Sikh Khanda signalled that the deceased was likely Indian.

Where the deceased was of a faith shared by non-Indians, it was their names that marked them out as Indian. Non-Hindu Indic names, like Raj, signalled a Tamil Catholic's Indian-ness. Most significantly, the use of 'd/o' or 's/o' in their names confirmed someone as specifically Singaporean Indian. In this way, the design of obituaries reflected shared imagery and imaginaries of the 'Singaporean Indian'.

Obituaries also play a social role in informing extended family and friends of a demise. Occasionally, the deceased's previous workplaces, neighbourhoods, military ranks, and club associations are listed to help identify as well as commemorate. The list of family members works to do the same. These social roles get extended into a future time past the funeral when obituaries are clipped and collected with other commemorative materials. When interviewing Maria's family in their home, her sister brought out a collection of their late grandfather's belongings. What the family had hoped to show me rather was his photo album of clipped obituaries. It had been, as Maria put it, a 'reminder of who's who in the family' not just in collecting names and images of those passed but in how the list of spouse, children, grandchildren, and in-laws names mapped branches of the family tree. Unable to find the album, Maria's mother, Rani, brings out instead an assortment of papers in a small clear polythene bag. As she unpacks the bag, it is clear this is a similar collection of obituary clippings and invitations to commemoration services (Figure 13). These invitations also served to gather some documentation of deceased family members, but also to identify the family as Tamil Catholic particularly through the image of one of the community's favoured saints, Our Lady of Velankanni. Curation was not strict though as we found medical appointment cards and the children's passport photos in the bag. Rani defended the inclusion saying she had nowhere else to keep them. Implicitly, Rani perhaps recognised that the passport photographs as well as the obituaries and

invitations to commemoration services operated similarly, as a material way to collect the family. The family was thus gathered across time and space, including invitations sent from Malaysia. Rani explained that they kept those, even though they could not attend, in memory of the deceased.



Figure 13: Small polythene bag (left) of clipped obituaries and invitations to commemorative services (right) kept by Maria's family. Photo by author, February 2022.

On any other day, this bag of invites and clippings was tucked behind the statue of the Holy Family in the family's hallway niche. On All Souls Day however, Rani lays out these invitations and obituary clippings for the family to look over in memory of late family members. As with the photographs captured through life's events, obituaries too evoke umbilical connections to the living viewer, here with the additional textual documentation of the familial relation in the accompanying listing of family names.

Documents of death especially carry the 'thickness of *durée*' in the way they mark the passage of generations. Because of this, such documents also make visible the regeneration of family, and particularly of a belonging in the material world of Singapore. In Ingold's relational model, 'ancestry' is conceptualised not as the passing down of genetic material, but 'in creating the environment in which people now live and from which they draw their sense of being' (Ingold 2000: 140). His rejection of the

'genealogical model' includes the characterisation of ancestry as unconnected to land which is 'there to be occupied but does not itself contribute to the constitution of its occupants' (ibid. 135). Obituaries remember as well, the deceased's connection to the land of Singapore and their part in creating the environment with the inclusion of their neighbourhoods and workplaces. Neighbourhood names like 'Jalan Besar' or workplaces like 'Naval Base' that are associated with established Indian communities carry further connotations of early settlement and generational presence of the family. For the living viewer, the obituary is therefore also speaking to the family's Singaporean Indian belonging that is well located temporally and spatially.

In this section on home collections of documents and other materials that 'document' the family, I have examined how documents of predecessors are kept and seen by Singaporean Indians today as attesting not only to the identity of the named bearers but also to the belonging of descendants. This view of family documents is particularly coloured by popular conceptions of 'authentic' Singaporean citizenship as marked by the period of first migration, and therefore of 'authentic belonging' as one traceable through multiple generations to an early first migration. My participants have also been active in deploying their family documents in this light, whether through making scans or films. But their collection practice is not solely aimed at the gaze of an 'other' to whom belonging must be demonstrated. The common assembling of documents and photographs has also shown the treatment of both as similar in the way they make forebearers visible to descendants. This practice of collecting the family is also extended to obituaries demonstrating a breadth of 'documentary' materials Singaporean Indians have and keep. Across these things, the ancestral connections documented are not seen apart from their potential to attest to and make legible a Singaporean Indian belonging across generations, both forwards and back in time.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION: DEPLOYING DOCUMENTS OF 'AUTHENTIC BELONGING'

The colonial state's need to make legible the Singapore population and monitor its movement initiated a series of portable personal identity documents and habituated a 'material citizenship' wherein later citizens of Singapore would come to see themselves in and through these attestations on paper. The systems of registrations, lists, and cards fitted complex identities into standardised formats including the use of ID numbers and importantly a fixity of categorical markers. Prime amongst these is the standardisation and printing of Race that worked not only to mark individuals by a legible 'Race' label but also reiterated the popular imagination of a Singaporean as legitimised through membership in one of the three primary Races. As demonstrated through my participants' creative deployment of their own identity documents, I have shown that documents do not make their attestations in a vacuum. Rather, such documents are moved into their legibility and attestation roles by bearers who are themselves perceptive of the gaze and expectations of the viewing 'other'. These bearers creatively deploy the variety of identity documents at hand, attuned to how each makes legible a different aspect of their lives as citizens, in order to demonstrate not only an identity but more importantly a belonging that by their definition is most reflective of their 'authentic citizenship'.

This creative deployment is possible because people as leaky organisms are connected in meshwork with their documents in a material world of other types of documents and that of other people in Singapore's documentary regime. Recognising the appeal to *durée* in my participants' vision of the person/document, I then turned to the museum displays in IHC as potential 'material mirror'. This collection, being part of a trio of heritage institutions structured on racial lines, is positioned as

representative of Singaporean Indian identity, history, and belonging. On first look, the documents displayed as part of a tableau of early migration by steamship elicited excited recollections of similar travel documents my participants had at home. In that way, the museum display operated like a 'material mirror' reflecting the agency of ancestors in shaping the world we live in today, beginning with that act of migration to and settlement in Singapore. On closer look, my participants recognised the specific claims of these travel documents to the identities and journeys of known figures. With that, these once seemingly 'leaky' things turned into just another stopped-up museum object. But this encounter was important in revealing the potential and presence of home collections of documents.

The nullified documents of older or deceased family members no longer served their original purpose of attestation to a state authority, but for the descendants who keep them these documents serve to make legible the family's history of presence in Singapore and therefore of an 'authentic belonging' premised on early migration and multigenerational presence and citizenship status. Kept away in bags with family photographs, such documents too have an umbilical connection with the living or younger viewer who sees in the collection a 'material mirror' of their family's and their own belonging and identity as Singaporean Indian. Obituary clippings, similarly collected, likewise reflect this with a clearer 'thickness of durée' reaching both backwards to generations past but also forwards to the descendants named in print and present in the viewing.

Singaporean Indians do not simply inhabit an established documentary regime, nor is Singaporean Indian belonging unproblematically ensured with the right papers. Rather, Singaporean Indians actively dwell in a world filled with a plurality of

documents and other things that 'document' life, perceptively positioning themselves as belonging. As this chapter has shown, becoming Singaporean Indian entails an attunement to the possibilities and perceptions of such a world. In becoming, Singaporean Indians creatively deploy their own identity documents as well as home collections of family documentations in actively defining and making legible an 'authentic belonging' thickened through papers, time, and generations.

## Chapter 5

### Eating and Cooking Across

Whether enthroned as national heritage, heralded as a tourist attraction, or the favoured subject of conversation, eating and taking pride in good food is frequently touted as core to Singaporean identity and culture. Paying attention to foodways and practices can be highly productive in understanding the engendering of identity in Singapore, but in this chapter, I challenge the highly 'raced' and compartmentalised ways in which food is presented as representing Singaporean Indian identity. I argue instead for recognising that Singaporean Indian practices of cooking and eating emerge out of skilled perception and attunement to Singapore's culinary environment and the material world that that engenders. Such practices of dwelling are evident in everyday practices of eating and cooking 'across' the racialised classifications of food which both subvert and reinforce these distinctions in ways that shape the becoming of Singaporean Indian identity.

Food is 'a highly condensed social fact' (Appadurai 1981: 494). Food highlights all manner of relations, including those of production and exchanges, of field and market, of producer and consumer (ibid.). The discussion over the next three sections of this chapter reveals such relations in the foodways of Singaporean Indians by examining eating and cooking as skilled and creative tasks that are responsive to the environment. In section 5.1, I examine how food engages the senses and how cooking in particular entails skilled sensory perception of the material world. I unpack my ethnographic participation and observation of a *thosai* cooking class in illustrating the ways cooking this South Indian crepe-like preparation from fermented batter is a

multisensory process that calls on attuning the body and senses to ingredients, tools, and the kitchen environment.

Appadurai also recognises that food is 'a marvellously plastic kind of collective representation' (ibid.). In Singapore, food is largely unquestioningly presented in raced terms that essentialises food and food practices in presenting evidence of multiculturalism. In section 5.2, I demonstrate how this discourse of distinction is trained through schools and public eating spaces but also show how consideration of equally visible spaces such as markets or popular dishes themselves challenge the simplistic categorisation. Nonetheless, the categorical approach to food holds and is a feature of Singaporean Indian identity in practice, but not from adherence to categorical limits.

Finally in section 5.3, I examine real practices of eating and cooking 'across' raced food categories, and how this entails creative adaptations to dishes or to dining practices to fit dining and flavour preferences of Singaporean Indians. Influences from eating 'across', the exposure to and availability of other ingredients, dishes, and cooking techniques in turn flavours Singaporean Indian cooking at home. I underscore that attention to practices of cooking 'across' involves more than noting the emergence of 'Singaporean Indian food' but also the practices of cooking non-Indian dishes and preparing 'hybrid meals' at home, all while maintaining raced ways of thinking about these foods and ingredients in the Singaporean Indian home.

Social science discussions of food in Singapore frequently focus on commercially available dishes and dining habits in public eating places like hawker centres (see Duruz and Khoo 2015; Heng 2015; Lai 2015; Duffy and Ng 2019), and little is said about home cooking (cf. Sinha 2015b; Loh 2020). Instead of approaching the two as

separate practices, this chapter also contributes to the study of food in Singapore by examining both sites as co-constructive. After all, eating out is commonplace in Singapore and easily accessible across classes, and while some note a recent decline in home cooking (see Sinha 2015b), home recipes and leisure cooking at home are still key aspects of familial and social relations. Exploring both practices in tandem therefore offers a fuller sense of how food informs identity in Singapore.

## **5.1 COOKING THOSAI WITH SKILLS AND SENSES**

I begin with food practices in the home, with an examination of cooking as a skilled and sensed task trained through exposure, attention, and practice. In this section, I unpack my participation and observation of a thosai cooking class to show how the Singaporean Indian home cook is socialised into ways of eating, learns to cook through enskillment of the senses and the body, in attunement to the material environment including manipulating cooking utensils. Establishing that making food is indeed an attuned skill of dwelling lays the foundation for the rest of this chapter that details how Singaporean Indian food practices emerge through dwelling that is perceptive, attuned, and skilled.

### **5.1.1 The Social and Senses in Food**

Vasun is a home-based chef in Singapore who rose to popularity after her participation in the 2021 season of MasterChef Singapore, the local iteration of the popular US television cooking competition. She specialises in South Indian cuisine but is keenly interested in the ways Tamils in Singapore and Malaysia cook and how this amalgamates tastes and techniques from both South India and Southeast Asia. Vasun also hosts private dining experiences featuring South Indian dishes and teaches a

Thosai Masterclass out of her home kitchen. *Thosai* is a staple made by lightly frying a fermented rice flour batter. South Indians typically eat this as the main carbohydrate of the meal pairing it with some chutneys and *sambar* (a lentil curry) for a light breakfast, or with vegetables and meats for a fuller lunch or dinner. In Singapore, thosai is easily found in Indian vegetarian restaurants and is occasionally prepared in South Indian homes. Ready-made Thosai batter is also available in some Indian grocers and is a time-saving alternative to the day-long process of making it from scratch. Thosai can also be part of celebrations with many Tamil Hindu families in Singapore typically starting Deepavali morning with thosai and chicken or mutton curry. Consumption of thosai in public eating spots is by no means limited to South Indians and this is reflected in Vasun's masterclasses. Most of her students are non-Indian Singaporean who became interested in learning how to make *thosai* having eaten it in public stalls. Vasun's students are overwhelmingly women reflecting how in Singaporean households, regardless of race, women remain primarily responsible for preparing the family's meals (Sinha 2015b).

In March 2022, I joined in on a Thosai Masterclass session booked by Rose. A Malayali Catholic from Malaysia, Rose grew up accompanying her mother and late grandmothers to markets in Malacca and Kuala Lumpur and helping in their kitchens. Now living as a newlywed in Singapore and away from her mother in Malaysia, Rose sought out Vasun's class to learn how to make thosai 'like her grandmother'. We met in Vasun's home and started the four-hour session at the dining table with masala chai that Vasun had earlier prepared. Vasun had a slide deck she presented off her laptop and had printed notes ready for us. She was after all a schoolteacher before focusing on food full-time. This structured start to the session would be unlike the typically informal ways younger generations learnt to cook by observing, assisting, and

practicing in their mother's or grandmother's kitchen. But Vasun deemed this highly structured approach necessary given that most of her students were not Indian and had limited exposure to homemade thosais and the Indian kitchen. Further, a formal structure also helps represent Indian cooking as 'serious and complex,' in Vasun's words, supporting her broader efforts to raise the perception in Singapore of Indian food from pedestrian to sophisticated.

The slide presentation begins with Vasun sharing how living with both sets of grandparents exposed her to the breadth of Indian and Singaporean food. She characterised her maternal grandparents as strict traditionalists. Her maternal grandfather migrated from India in his early adulthood and maintained a strict preference for mostly plant-based south Indian food. Her maternal grandmother was born of a Chinese family and raised by an Indian family and maintained a strictly south Indian menu in the home both to cater to her husband's tastes and, as Vasun suggested, to 'make up for her lack because she obviously looks Chinese'. Cooking only south Indian food was this grandmother's way of asserting an Indian social identity not otherwise afforded by her genetics and facial features. The one exception to this 'South Indian only' home menu was the occasional Nasi Lemak which Vasun's grandmother learnt to cook either from friends or her own mother. When Vasun later lived with her paternal grandmother, she was exposed to more local Indian flavours from Malaysia and Singapore including sardine curry, *sothi* (a mild vegetable curry with coconut milk), *karuvadu* (dried fish) curry, and the particular combination of *rasam* (an aromatic tamarind-based soup) and *ikan bilis* (dried anchovies). With this personal culinary history, Vasun revealed not just the varied ways Singaporean Indians cook and eat, but how tastes and preferences are socialised through familial and generational culinary practices.

Anthropologists have highlighted the social significance of food since the nineteenth century with early examples in Garrick Mallery's 'Manners and meals' (1888), William Robertson Smith on the rituals of commensality (1889), Frank Cushing's on Zuñi breadstuffs (1920), and Franz Boas' (1921) 300-page list of Kwakiutl salmon recipes (Mintz and Dubois 2002: 100). Food was also a key medium for the shifts in anthropological approaches. The seminal structuralists Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983) and Mary Douglas (1971) both grounded their arguments for systems of social codes through characteristics of food (Sutton 2010: 210). Lévi-Strauss and Douglas are also frequently recognised as inaugurating the discussion of food and the senses in anthropology, as is Pierre Bourdieu's highly influential essay *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984). However, the structuralist abstractions these works employ are critiqued by proponents of more recent sensory anthropology.

David Sutton, for instance, advocates for greater theorising through ethnography with a focus on the sensory aspects of our engagements with food (2010: 220). In this turn, critique also falls on previous trends in sensory ethnography that sought to isolate and/or forefront a single sense and explained cultural difference through differences in sense hierarchies (Sutton 2010). Howes (2003) for instance argues for how tastes and other sensory experiences can be central to cosmologies suggesting culturally different balances of the senses. Similarly Mintz (1985; 2005) focuses on 'the causal force of a particular flavour and the way this can be found at the heart of our understanding of society and its transformations' (Sutton 2010: 215). Instead of looking at conformations of the hegemonic, Sutton advocates 'tracking the ways that sensory aspects of food... releases or escapes from dominant sensory regimes, creating and re-creating identities through sensorily distinct experiences' (Sutton 2010, 214). In Vasun's brief familial history with food we see how she herself maps

the distinct experiences of flavours on both sides of her family to each set of grandparents' identity and history of dwelling between India and Singapore. Her recount also importantly underscores how social positions and experiences inform the tastes of her grandparents and herself.

More recent scholarship on food have shifted towards synesthetic contributions in examining the union of the senses including the social production of these. Synaesthesia demonstrates that sensory experiences are not simply registered but actively created between people (Sutton 2010, 218). As Adam Yuet Chau illustrates through a festive scene, 'the process of socializing cannot be done without human sensorial productions of noise, heat, taste, smell, spectacle, etc.... In other words, we sensorialise our world, especially through engaging in intense social activities' (2008: 490). Food, cooking and eating it, is an especially fruitful vehicle for observing the synesthetic aspects in these social practices as Sutton has shown in his own study of food memory in Greece (2001) or Meneley (2008) in her exploration of the sensuous qualities of olive oil. Certainly, with much socialisation happening over food, such synaesthetic scenes of noise, heat, taste, smell, and spectacle are part of the Singaporean everyday. This union of the senses and the social is also very much part of cooking, especially learning to cook from another. As the session with Vasun begins on the practical elements, I learn how preparing the thosai batter entails paying attention to multiple sensorial feedback and attuning the body to this skill.

### **5.1.2 Attuning the Senses and Body**

To begin, Vasun guided Rose and I through the process of rinsing and soaking the split urud dhal and rice. She showed us bowls of these that had been soaking overnight and pointed out that we should look for bubbles on the water surface as a sign that

the grains are fresh and that the first part of fermentation has taken place. We then moved to the kitchen counter where Rose practiced blending the grains. Here the seemingly simple task of filling the blender jug and turning on the machine was shown to be far more than disembodied mechanisation but instead calls for a good measure of skill and attention. Vasun, understanding the way grains move in a blender, showed us how adding water to the jug first leads to a smoother blending process. Rose was then asked to blend the next batches of grains by herself, this time attuning her ear to the sound of the blender to determine if the process was going smoothly (Figure 14). Rose and I continued listening to the blender with some uncertainty. In a minute or so, Vasun, who had busied herself with washing the teacups from before, turned off the tap and told Rose to stop the blender. She explained that the sounds we had just heard suggested that the blender was struggling and that it needed more water. Rose added water and tried again, this time we both heard the distinct difference. Rose continued to blend the rest of the grains, and now better attuned to the desired sound, she managed to make the necessary adjustments on her own.

In learning to blend the grains, Rose had to train her hearing to perceive minute changes to the sounds made by the blender, further attuning this sense to know if and when to act on making adjustments to the process. In this act, Rose experienced how cooking is an attuned skill calling on an active perception of the environment. Ingold characterises dwelling as an immersion in the world that is not a mental reconstruction but directly accessed with perception (2000: 166). Perception is not an 'inside-the-head' operation performed onto the raw material of sensation but consists in the intentional movement of the whole being in the environment (Ibid. 166, 244). Perception is then reliant on how people practically look, listen, touch, taste, and sniff as they go about their activity (Ingold 2011b: 315). Rose was not just mechanically

performing next steps but actively listening to the material environment that is also entangled in the blending process. Vasun could pick out the changes in the blender's sounds even as she had her back turned and was busy with the washing. She was clearly far more attuned not only to this task with the blender, but also with the space and multiple sensory outputs of her own kitchen. Sarah Pink (2015; 2012) expands from Ingold and extends the anthropology of the senses to include movement in her examination of the process of cooking, amongst other household activities. She considers how the process of cooking involves creative movement and adjustments to kitchen environments (Pink 2017: 76-81). Paying attention to movement brought to fore how 'participants had to negotiate different flows of often intangible things, like cooking smells, steam, light and lighting, or sounds' (Pink 2017: 80). The mundane task of cooking is thereby one immersed in the environment, reliant on perception as an active exploratory process of information pickup, and responsive to the flows and feedback of the total environment of the kitchen.

Besides listening, the blending process also called on our sense of touch. Vasun instructed Rose to feel the outside of the blender jug to check that the jug was still cold and that the machine was not generating too much heat. Vasun also showed us how to check if the grains had achieved the right consistency by smearing a bit of the blended product across our palms so that we could feel and look at the coarseness of the grains (Figure 15). 'You need to feel the batter so that you can replicate it at home with the same consistency' Vasun instructed but also characterised this approach as 'not scientific'. With this step Vasun was training our hands to memorise this texture so that we may reproduce it later. Blending the grains is thereby a matter of bodily judgement, not simple or 'scientific' mechanical reproduction. It is, as a task of dwelling, an act of sensitive perception and skill.

Skilled practice is an attribute of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in their environment and involves care, judgement, and dexterity in application (Ingold 2000: 291). This fluency and dexterity of movement is a function of skills that are developed into the *modus operandi* of the body, through practice and experience in an environment (ibid.). In other words, a novice learns skills through practical practice grounded in an attentive, perceptual involvement with things, such that they master attuning their senses and movements to making 'sensory corrections' and continual adjustments in response to an ongoing perceptual monitoring of the emergent task (Ingold 2000: 353, referencing Bernstein 1996). One learns to perceive skilfully in the manner appropriate to a culture by 'hands-on' training in everyday tasks, not through transmission of information, but through an 'education of attention' (Gibson 1979: 254) in practicing and learning alongside a skilled practitioner (Ingold 2000: 200). Sutton reframes Gibson's 'education of attention' as an education of memory, 'a training of the total person into practices that make certain things and events in the environment memorable' (Sutton 2006: 92). An emphasis on memory is key for Sutton 'as it connects the senses to skilled, embodied practices through the habits that...require apprenticeship and repetition, and through the comparisons necessary to judge the successful dish' (2006: 88). Under Vasun's guidance, our novice ears, hands, and eyes worked to attune our attention to sounds and textures as we tried to form a bodily memory that could then be recalled and replicated in our subsequent attempts. Repetition, embodied practice, and sensory memory would also be key in the final step of batter preparation—judging when the batter is sufficiently fermented.



Figure 14: Rose practices with the blender.  
Photo by author, 2 March 2022.

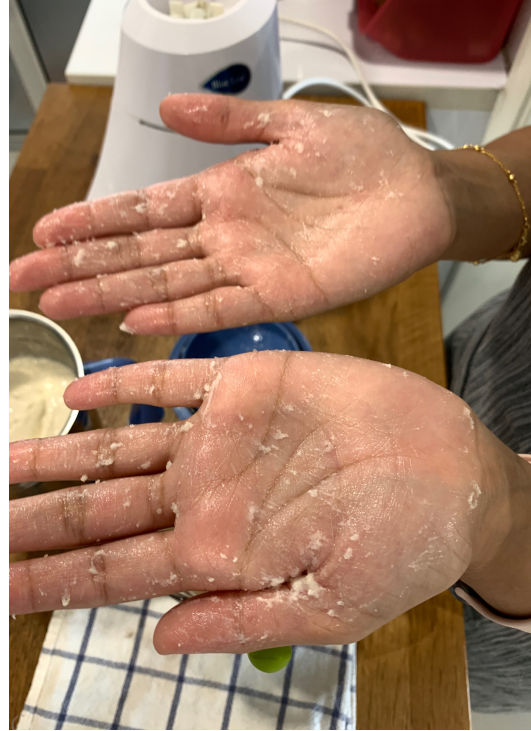


Figure 15: Rose checks grain consistency.  
Photo by author, 2 March 2022.

With the dhal and rice ground separately, we mixed the two portions and transferred it into a two-litre container Rose had brought. No additional yeast is needed because the lactobacillus found on the surface of the dhal and rice is the main driver of this fermentation. Rose took this batch home to ferment a further ten to twelve hours. Vasun took out a batch that she had made the day before to show us how to determine when the mix was satisfactorily fermented. The first method was to dip a long stick into the bottom layer of fermenting rice and taste this for sourness. Vasun explained how Rose and I would be more adept at this step since we've had many a homemade thosai and so have a sense of the degree of fermentation or sourness we like. Having had repeated practice tasting this, Rose and I were expected to have developed a preference, and be able to recall the taste memory in order to judge for the 'right' sourness. Her non-Indian students, Vasun explains, would not have the same reference point having only had thosai in restaurants with big batch processes that do not produce as much fermentation. For those students, this point in the lesson would

be an opportunity to attune their tastebuds to this degree of sourness. Characterising the experience of taste as 'subjective' though, Vasun taught us another method to check for sourness—using litmus strips (Figure 16). Ultimately the recourse to this 'scientific' tool was framed as a supplementary check for the novice cook who has not yet mastered remembering this taste and replicating it.



Figure 16: Vasun demonstrates using a litmus strip on fermenting *thosai* batter.  
Photo by author, 2 March 2022.

The fermentation process and judging when to stop it calls for skilled judgement and Vasun suggested that Rose be experimental by dividing her batch of batter up to leave them fermenting for different lengths of time from ten to twelve hours so that she could taste for herself how the flavours change and decide which level of sourness, and hence fermentation period, suits her tastes. With this recommendation, Vasun was encouraging Rose to further attune her judgement and tastes through repetition, practice, as well as developing her own tastes and flavours, demonstrating again that cooking is not about mechanical reproduction but rather about skilled perception and an attunement of attention and memory. Vasun further explained that the fermentation time is highly dependent on the environment and changes even across the landscape

of Singapore. Even as Singapore's tropical warmth is ideal, students who live in sea-facing apartments in the east or close to the nature reserves in the centre of Singapore report taking up to sixteen hours to ferment their batter because of cooler local temperatures. The environment within the house matters too, so Vasun reminded Rose to leave her fermenting batter in the same spot in the same room each time. In teaching Rose how to experiment with the variables to find the optimal fermenting conditions in the environment of her own home, Vasun implicitly underscored how fermentation is a process collectively enacted by the person, ingredients, microorganisms like lactobacillus, and the environment of the home in Singapore's climate.

Cooking, as a task of dwelling, is not removed from its environment or the body. Sutton's reframing of such tasks as an 'education of memory' similarly draws together the environment with the training of the total person, and has common grounds with Ingold's relational model wherein memory is part of the embodied feeling acquired in dwelling (Ingold 2000: 146–147). What is especially useful here is Sutton's reminder that not only are skills attuned through sensorial perception, but that these embodied skills must be repeated to successfully go about the day-to-day activities of dwelling. With each repetition, the skilled person is attuning and adjusting to the environment. The observations from the thosai-making lesson are not just about the novices learning to perceive and attune, but also about the expert's practiced, skilled judgements and fluent movements which the novice also picks up on. For Rose and I, the expert was not only Vasun but also our mothers whom we have grown up watching make thosai. As we later practice frying the batter, Vasun makes this connection too when she remarks that it is clear Rose had been watching her mother's moves and that they were now 'very instinctive' in her own movements and swirling of the thosai

batter. Even as Vasun clearly believes that anyone can learn to make good-quality and tasty thosais, she recognises that the person who has grown up in a thosai-making household has a head start from the sensory and embodied knowledge accrued in such an environment and is able to translate this deep familiarity into practical action. Daily tasks, such as cooking, are therefore not mechanical repetitions, but rather as a continued practice in attunement always unfolding with the world just as ‘the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant’ (Ibid. 153). This perspective also helps us make sense of changing cooking practices over time, not just in the dishes made, but also in tool use.

### **5.1.3 Attuning to Tools**

As with soaking, blending, and testing for optimal fermentation, frying the batter well is also premised on ‘taking feedback’, as Vasun described, from the ingredients and tools. Vasun seems to recognise the flows with these non-human things in co-performance of the task and so trains the human cook to attune themselves to and harness these relationships. As we turned to frying the batter, Vasun showed us how we should watch for smoke from the pan, use the sound of the sizzle when the batter hits the pan, and note the tactile ease of swirling the batter to determine if the pan is at the right temperature. Rose and I then took our positions at the stove and tried to make some thosais ourselves. As well as attuning to the sensory experiences involved in this process, cooking thosai was also about training the movement of our bodies. Vasun reminded me to hold the scoop by the end of the handle to minimise the pressure on the swirl. She also noticed that Rose’s thosais were consistently oblong and unevenly thick and pointed out to Rose how she was standing to one side of the pan. Adjusting her position to stand square with the pan solved the issue. As we

continued working on our swirling technique, the pans were getting too hot to maintain a smooth swirl, so Vasun showed us several methods to cool an overheated pan. The options are to remove the pan from the stove completely; or sprinkle a handful of water onto the pan; or simply adjust the preparation to the heat and make *uttappam* instead. This thicker variation, much like with making pancakes, requires simply pouring a ladleful of batter onto a hotter pan without swirling. Such attunement to the tools in the kitchen is part of every step in the thosai-making process as we also saw above with the blender.

Before we started on the hands-on elements of the lesson, Vasun reminded us that the first practical thosai-making step was acquiring the necessary appliances, utensils, and ingredients. The right grinding equipment, as Vasun explained, changes not just the time spent but the quality of the grind and therefore the fermentation process, and eventual batter. Though Vasun has a wet stone grinder, available in an electric model, and holds it as superior, she teaches all her students how to make the thosai batter with a blender. This is for the simple reason that blenders are cheaper, easily found in stores in Singapore, and that most homes probably already have one. However not all blenders are created equal and Vasun advocates purchasing an Indian-made blender if students want to make thosais more frequently, because the blade and motor are specifically designed to deal with harder grains without overheating. She fully realises that most of her students will likely not be serious thosai makers and so works with each student to get the best results with whatever blenders they already had at home. Likewise, Vasun suggested that a cast iron flat pan offers better results and uses these during her sessions but also gave copious tips for adjusting the process for non-stick pans. She explained, for instance, how the rice should be ground finer to ensure better hold on non-stick pans. Vasun does not however blindly advocate only the use of

traditional or Indian-made utensils and opts instead for the available tools that best serve the task. She recommends using a fish turner over the traditional thosai flip since the wider surface and angled handle of the former makes it easier to handle when folding and lifting the ready thosai. Some traditional utensils though are indeed best suited so she still recommends the Indian scoop ladle. Vasun explained that the smaller scoop end and long flat handle ensures that it is easy to manipulate with little effort ensuring a light pressure when swirling the poured batter. In this way, Vasun reflects Pink's research participants whose movements through their kitchens reveal 'the kinds of "affordances" (cf. Gibson 1979) that kitchen design and positioning of tools and gadgets invited or restricted' (Pink 2017: 78).

In highlighting these considerations, Vasun demonstrates how the process of cooking picks up on the 'affordances' of things in the kitchen and extends the attuned sensory skills of the practiced body to skilled movement with these tools and machines. Ingold initially dismisses engagement with modern technology such as machines, as disembedding the tool from a social context and context of skilled practice such that the workman becomes a mere operator, in contrast to a traditional tool that is 'not a mere mechanical adjunction to the body, serving to deliver a set of commands issued to it by the mind, rather it extends the whole person [into the environment]' (Ingold 2000: 319). He however later recognises that the experience for workers themselves is different, that machines are substantial components of the workers' immediate environment and engaging with them an inevitable part of their business (Ingold 2000: 332). The task is not simply operating a technology but consists in *coping* with machines that still entails a good measure of skill and attention (ibid.). The task of cooking is entangled with and responsive to the environment of material things and involves practiced sensory attunement to a range of tools, from electric blenders to

cast iron pans, that also 'require many reasoned judgements [and] new skills to manipulate' (Sutton 2006: 96).

Over a late lunch of the thosais we had made, Rose, Vasun, and I talked about how we started cooking. We all started out of necessity, Rose and Vasun when they got married and lived with just their husbands, and I when I moved overseas for graduate school. We each recalled never fully cooking a whole meal when we lived with our parents but somehow piecing together recipes and techniques from having watched our mothers in the kitchen, smelling dishes come together as the aromas fill the home, helping out with some chopping or stirring, tasting along while they added spices and adjusted salt levels, and also from phoning home for recipes and guidance. This unstructured manner of learning cooking skills was more typical of Singaporean Indian home cooks, compared to the structured lesson of Vasun's Thosai Masterclass. Across both though, the pattern of exchanges remains: the novice watches the expert as they both move around the kitchen, the expert demonstrates certain tasks and the novice copies, the expert offers tips and corrections, the novice is exposed and attuned to the sensorial 'feedback' from ingredients and kitchen tools, and the novice practices the task over and over each time recalling the desired tastes, sounds, textures, colours, etc. and making adjustments along the way. Cooking is thus as embodied as it is highly engaged with and responsive to the environment, from the heat of the kitchen to its utensils and appliances.

This ever-responsive, ever-attuning, ever-adjusting process is also what enables culinary innovation as one picks up new tastes, flavours, ingredients, tools, and techniques from the environment around them. For 'dessert', Vasun brought out a 'surprise thosai'. Earlier while showing us common thosai variations like egg thosai

and *podu* (spiced powder) thosai, Vasun also made her take on eggs benedict with a thosai base instead of English muffins (Figure 17), so I was expecting a similar playful spin with this ‘surprise thosai’. On first bite the taste and texture of crushed peanuts and sugar sandwiched between the crisp thosai was somewhat familiar, but I could not quite place it. ‘Min Jiang kueh’ Vasun offered, revealing the popular Chinese-style peanut pancakes as her inspiration. Even in this session on making thosai, a preparation from south India, Vasun demonstrated how the skilled and attuned chef continues to cook in engagement with her environment. Just like the other Singaporean Indian home cooks and food stall operators in the next sections, Vasun’s ‘Indian cooking’ is constantly unfolding as it draws from the tastes, tools, and techniques of Singapore’s material world.



Figure 17: The assortment of *thosai* (top left) and *thosai* variations we made.  
Photo by author, 2 March 2022.

In this first section of the chapter, I have demonstrated how cooking, as one of the food practices and an everyday task of dwelling, is a multisensory, skilled, and attuned field of activity which calls on constant perception, judgement, and response to environment including material things like ingredients, utensils, and appliances. As such a responsive task, cooking unfolds with the possibilities afforded by the

environment. Next, in section 5.2, I take stock of the culinary environment in Singapore and challenge the way food is presented in raced terms, thereby instantiating a plural material world full of the foods of racial ‘others’. With this prevalent discourse established, I then unpack in the section 5.3 the actual food practices of Singaporean Indians in the context of this material world of raced foods.

## **5.2. RACED FOOD**

In this second section, I examine the way food in Singapore is ‘raced’—ascribed to a racial category—as representative of Singaporean racial identities and thereby establishing a culinary environment full of things ascribed to one’s race or an ‘other’. I begin by examining how the Singapore public is educated into this way of seeing food and how that informs the relationship between food and racial identity in local discourse. This approach is reiterated in the organisation of public eating places, epitomised by the *kopitiam*, yet the same is not true of marketplaces. Recognising how categorisation of food across these two types of spaces informs a raced view of food, I then address the aspects of hybridity elided in such a view. Despite limits on its claims, a raced approach is nonetheless fundamental to the imagination and discussion of food and identity in Singapore. This section unpacks this prevalent approach to food in Singapore to set the grounds on which the ethnographic discussion of the following section (5.3) argues for recognising that Singaporean Indian identity emerges in eating and cooking ‘across’ these raced categorisation of food.

### 5.2.1 Food and Identity

Indicative of the place food holds in Singaporean identity, the 2024 National Day Parade show featured a segment celebrating favourite dishes and the night market culture of the 1960s. The dances and songs in this chapter titled 'We Embrace Our Diversity' was preceded by a short film in which the screen is split into four boxes of concurrent scenes of food preparation, laying dishes on the table, and eating in four homes (Figure 18). Even without the title, the attuned Singaporean viewer would immediately recognise this as a narrative of Singapore's cultural diversity, here told through food. Such public representations are part of the citizen's education not just of the national principle of multiculturalism but more importantly, an ingraining of what Singapore's multiculturalism looks like. In this formulation of the nation's constituent ethnoracial identities, the 'raced' imagery of food is key, as this section examines.



Figure 18: Stills from opening film of Chapter 4 'We Embrace Our Diversity', 2024 National Day Parade Show Segment. Screengrabs from streamed broadcast by Mediacorp, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/live/lpFRmTv6MaQ?si=mFOtke5LeMKibhO4>>.

The short film above effectively presents its point about Singapore as multicultural and racially diverse through recognisable visual tropes. First, the four boxes immediately call to mind the fourfold classification of Singapore's foundational races. This is confirmed in the last scene where the characters are clearly marked by their racial identities through the actors cast, their facial features, and dress. But in between the visuals around food—ingredients, preparation techniques, serving dishware, and even the use of hands or specific utensils to eat—already draw on and reiterate the common associations of these food images with each of the four race communities. In this celebration of Singapore's food culture, food is first used to mark out distinct racial identities, which then come together to form the common national culture around a love for food. Food as an identity marker is not unique to Singapore, but it is particular in the repeated and naturalised classification of food as token representations of the official racial quadrotomy.

As anthropologists have demonstrated, food practices are extensively revealing of personal and social identities. What we eat or shun, who we eat with or cook for, where and how we eat, how we procure and prepare ingredients, and what tools we cook with can say a lot about a person and community. Several anthropologists recognise these possibilities in studying food (see Holtzman 2006; Slocum 2011; Tierney and Ohnuki-Tierney 2012; Fox 2014). Most who recognise the place of food in delineating ethnic identity and membership especially make this argument in the context of migration or diasporas. Pointing to the American melting pot 'when various ethnic groups are forcibly thrown together', Fox suggests that 'ethnic food preferences only become identity markers in the presence of gustatory "foreigners"' (Fox 2014: 2). He characterises the numerous once-migrant communities as 'foreigners' to America and to each other leading to 'both an intensifying of food identity and a growing mishmash'

of hybridity across food cultures (ibid.). Other studies of migrant communities likewise illustrate how food is a source of identification with a shared cultural community, and examine how migrants find space to share food from home with each other (Law 2005); how they share food with others to acquire 'social capital' (Wise 2005) or bond with other migrants similarly placed (Johnston and Longhurst 2012); adapt their eating practices so as to not offend in their new locations (Walker 2012); change their diets amidst new foodways (Lockwood and Lockwood 2000); how the diets of migrants have influenced the foodways and diets in receiving countries (Goody 1998; Çağlar 1999); and how food also becomes a nexus for diasporic identity and nostalgia through gastronomic memory (Mankekar 2002). These studies focus on communities marked as 'migrant' with diasporic nostalgia for a homeland and approach their food as 'foreign'.

As I argue in Chapter Three of this thesis, Singaporean Indians should be recognised as neither foreign, migrant, or nostalgic diasporic subject, but as having become local to the Singaporean nation and environment with which their lives and identity are intrinsically entangled. In the same vein, Reddy and van Dam recognise that for Singaporeans, 'cultural food practices are integral to identity preservation and identity continuity,' and that 'this is different to other multicultural societies such as Canada where communities preserve their cultural food practices, in part, due to fear of cultural identity loss' (2020: 1). In thinking about culinary relations vis-a-vis 'others', the approach offered by Mintz and DuBois (2002: 109) is better suited for the Singaporean Indian case:

Ethnicity is born of acknowledged difference and works through contrast. Hence an ethnic cuisine is associated with a geographically and/or historically defined eating community. But ethnicity, like nationhood, is also imagined (Murcott 1996)—and associated cuisines may be imagined, too. Once imagined, such cuisines provide added concreteness to the idea of national or ethnic identity.

This focus on contrasting and imagined eating communities fits the ways in which food in Singapore is associated with and made evidence of the distinct foundational race communities and is discussed in comparative terms between races without defining any one as local and/or foreign, native and/or migrant. Food is then as integral to conceptualising racial identity in Singapore, as race is in categorising food.

Thinking about food in raced ways is naturalised through multiple media, from the public pageantry of the National Day Parade to school textbooks. For instance, the secondary school Home Economics textbook (Figure 19) teaches students to see in terms of 'Ethnic Food', and its pages illustrate the 'distinctive food items', 'herbs and spices' and 'other flavouring' that are presented as characterising and distinguishing a Chinese meal, an Indian meal, a Malay meal, and a Western meal. This approach not only instructs viewing foods as distinctly racially associated but instills a way of seeing food as necessarily racially distinguishable. Beyond schoolbooks, this now naturalised way of seeing is replicated even in publications celebrating Singapore's multicultural culinary influences. Cookbook projects frequently publish recipes and culinary histories in serialised volumes separated along racial lines (see Epigram Book's *Heritage Cookbook Series* (2006-2022) and Marshall Cavendish Cuisine's series of *Singapore Heritage Cookbooks* (2011-2012)). It is unsurprising then that anthropological and sociological studies repeat and reiterate such racial categorisations in their examination of food in Singapore (see Chua and Rajah 2001, 2003; Kong 2007; Duruz 2011; Tarulevicz, 2013; Duruz and Khoo 2015).

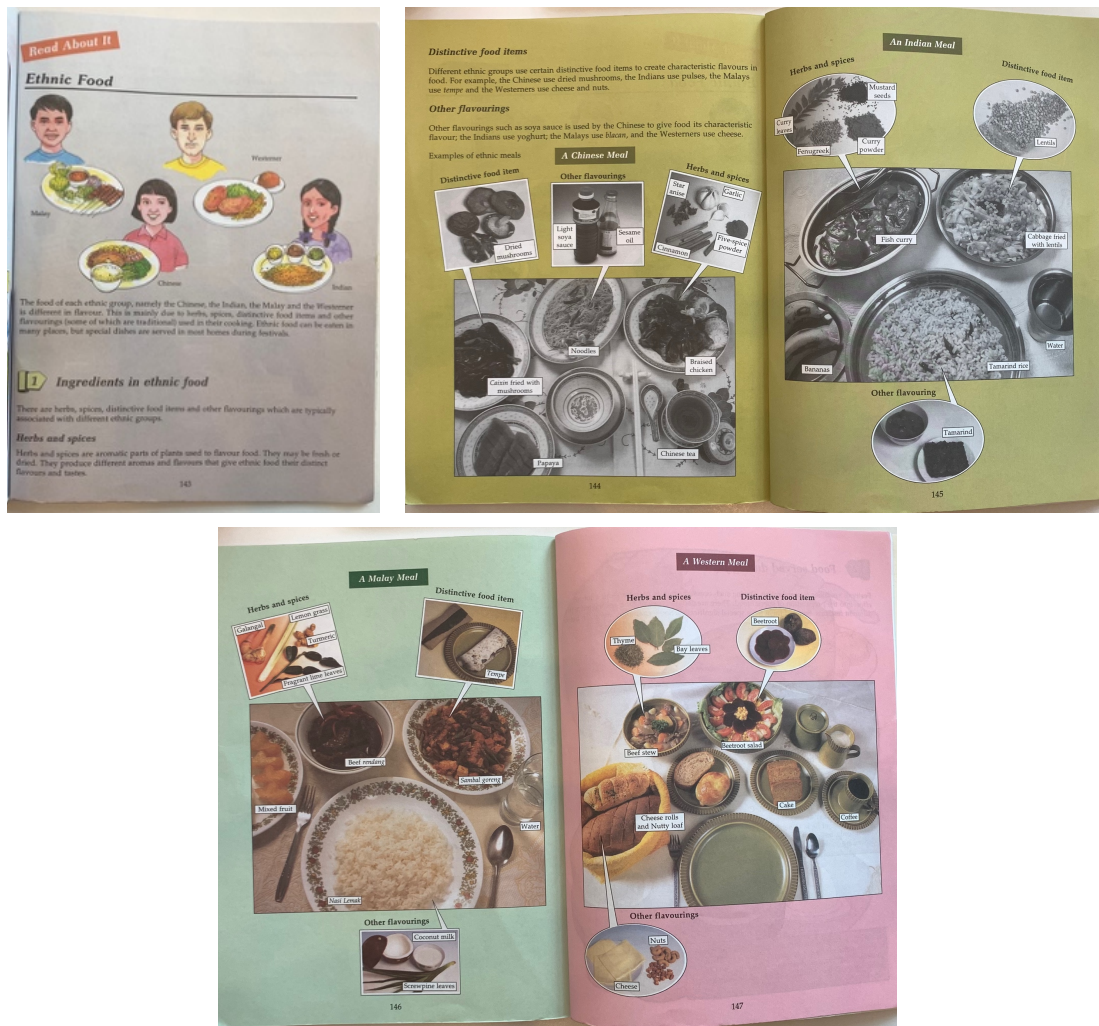


Figure 19: 'Ethnic Food' presented in Home Economics textbook (CDIS 1995).  
 Photo by author, 29 April 2022.

Unlike the above books' focus on home cooking, academic studies have primarily taken food commercially available 'outside' the home as their key site. As Sinha (2015b) observes, the commodification of cooked food makes it easily and affordably accessible from numerous hawker centres, food courts, and restaurants in Singapore. In addition to the resulting decline in home cooking and consumption of home cooked food (ibid), public eating places remain important to the understanding of eating in Singapore. With this chapter, I argue for greater ethnographic attention to food practices in the home but maintain that these should not be taken as separate from food practices outside. The ways food is understood in the home and as part of personal, familial, and ethnic identity, is also informed by food discourse, practices,

and habits learned outside the home. In the everyday environment, the raced ways we see, talk about, and understand the multitude of food is most clearly represented in public eating spaces known as *kopitiams*. In the next section, I examine how the kopitiam space naturalises the raced view of food, especially what constitutes 'Indian food', and contrast this with the marketplace where such categorisation is absent.

### **5.2.2 Race in *Kopitiams***

Affordable cooked foods are easily accessible in public eating places in Singapore. These include numerous operations of varying sizes across the island from large hawker centres, medium-sized food courts and canteens, to smaller operations known as *kopitiams* ('coffee shop'). Such spaces feature several stalls hawking dishes from various cuisines. This aspect of Singapore's hawker centres as 'a microcosm of Singapore's multicultural society, with stalls selling Chinese, Malay, Indian and many other diverse types of dishes' (NHB, n.d.) has since 2020 been inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In this section, I examine the way food is organised and labelled in such spaces cementing a raced categorisation of food, especially Indian food, then compare this with the organisation of produce and groceries in marketplaces. The contrasting approaches, I argue, demonstrate the Singaporean ability to approach food in both ways laying grounds for hybridity which I discuss next (section 5.2.3), and practices of eating and cooking across (section 5.3).

*Kopitiams* started as small-scale enterprises in early settlements in the 19th and early 20th century. They catered initially to low-wage migrant workers and were operated by individuals or small teams of men, and later by families (Lai 2015: 105). These establishments assumed a strong ethnic dimension as they were located in or near

ethnically homogenous settlements and worksites serving their culturally familiar foods (ibid. 106). Given the Chinese majority in Singapore by 1900, Chinese 'eating houses' became numerous across the island. *Kedai Makan Mamak* (Malay for 'Mamak food shop') were set up in Indian and Indian-Muslim enclaves serving prata, thosai, and rice meals. Likewise, areas settled by the various Malay ethnic groups hosted stalls selling Malay food. In more heterogenous areas in or around the town, a variety of food stalls catered to the plurality of settlers and workers as well as to increasingly diverse tastebuds (ibid.). Thus eating out in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century largely meant eating the food of one's own ethnic culture, but also offered some occasion for eating beyond this (ibid.).

With rural resettlement and urban renewal from the mid-1960s till mid-1980s, street hawkers and food stalls were moved into the Housing Development Board's (HDB) estate and new town plans. Out of this was born a new type of *kopitiam* that now served a multicultural population mirroring the multi-ethnic composition of the new estate (ibid. 111). Stalls selling Chinese, Malay, and Indian cuisine may now be found side by side under the same *kopitiam* operator, making these sites of multiethnic eating (ibid.; Duruz and Khoo 2015). With newfound access and exposure, 'residents themselves also began to develop a multi-ethnic and cross-cultural taste for foods' (Lai 2015: 111). Today, as Lai observes, 'it is common practice for individuals to rotate different ethnic dishes among their meals and for a family to be eating different dishes together' (2015: 113). Putting these stalls and dishes side by side, however, works also to reiterate and reinforce the view of food as being culturally distinct and as ethnic identifiers.

For Chua and Rajah, the public imagination that inscribes food items with ethnicity is 'itself the result of a social process in which a style of cooking and its results come to be a representation of an "ethnic" cuisine' (2003: 93). The inscription process begins when the food item is represented to a consuming public by vendors through a menu which codifies that dish along with recognisable other dishes as similarly 'ethnic' and as 'generally an extension of the ethnicity of the cook who produced it' (ibid.). Heng (2015) observes further how ethnic markers and distinctions are plain to see in the signages and language scripts used, in decor items, and in the bodies of the stall operators themselves. The peculiar way these food stalls are named also works to reinforce the ethnic identities of 'minority' food even further. While discernible in hawker centres and food courts, the distinction is plainest in school canteens and food courts where stall headers name the foods that are available rather than carrying the names of the business. Thus, for example, stalls may be labelled: Drinks, Economic Rice, Yong Tau Fu, Chicken Rice, Prawn Noodle Soup, Indian food, Malay/Muslim food.

In effect this presents 'Indian food' and 'Malay/Muslim food' as natural categories, and the dishes sold as unquestionably 'Indian' or 'Malay'. Further, most canteens and food courts host only one 'Indian food' stall and one 'Malay/Muslim' food stall. These single stores, in their bid to offer variety, would cook up an extensive menu inevitably presenting all the dishes as equally 'Indian' or 'Malay', in effect eliding hybridity or regional variation within these broad cuisines. In contrast, across *kopitiams* and the like, Chinese dishes are sold in stalls specialising in a single preparation and regional style. Thus, dishes like Hainanese Chicken Rice, Lor Mee from Zhangzhou, Hokkien Mee with origins in Fujian, and Teochew style Yong Tao Fu would be sold in separate stalls. Stepping into these public eating places, the division and naming of stalls

immediately present food in raced terms, and especially 'Indian food' and 'Malay food' as singular cuisines easily mapped onto the corresponding racial community. These spaces present the culinary world of Singapore as plural, as the coming together of racially different foods but with each contained to its own stall, maintaining distinction.

But marketplaces like wet markets and supermarkets do not organise their goods on similar raced terms. These are instead organised along a different, practical logic separating market stalls or supermarket aisles by the type of produce—vegetables, fish, meats, sauces, dried packaged items, canned goods, etc.—and the logistics of storage—frozen, chilled, fresh produce, and shelf items. Ingredients that would be labelled a racially 'distinctive food item' in schoolbooks are shelved alongside ingredients associated with other ethnic cuisines with little hint of these racial relations. Even packaging now almost entirely employs English text eliding any ethnolinguistic associations too. Where the *kopitiam* presents a material world of marked plurality, the marketplace offers the same access to this range of food products without the same raced identifiers. Nonetheless, the Singaporean shopper already informed by a greater 'interocular field' (Appadurai 1992) trained in *kopitiams* and books may still apply raced approaches to food to market produce. Several of my interlocutors shared the observation that it is easier these days to get 'Indian vegetables' from heartland markets and supermarkets, where before one would have to travel to Little India. While their characterisation of those vegetables stem from its use in Indian cuisines, the use of a collective term instead of specific vegetable names point to this trained raced categorisation.

In this brief exploration of public eating spaces, we see that the racialisation of food extends into the visual and material organisation of food stalls, in turn reiterating such

distinctions and raced ways of thinking of food as the natural order. Though markets and *kopitiams* are not organised along the same lines, they share an important role. Just like *kopitiams* offer the opportunity to eat and acquire tastes beyond one's own ethnic cuisine, markets afford access to the ingredients to cook beyond extant ethnic recipes giving rise to cooking 'across' raced boundaries at home (section 5.3) and to hybridity in popular and publicly available dishes, as I discuss next.

### **5.2.3 Hybrid Food, Raced Dishes**

Like its identity, Singaporean Indian food practices emerge out of dwelling in the culinary environment attuning to the tastes and techniques afforded by this material world. Extant work on food practices in Singapore offer a broad view of the ways food is entangled with identity, society, heritage, and the economy. Such works have examined the 'hybridity' or inter/multi-cultural aspects of food in Singapore and how that informs identity (Chua and Rajah 2001, 2003; Lim 2019; Abdullah 2020; Reddy and van Dam 2020); its spaces as social institutions (Kong 2007; Kong and Sinha 2015; Heng 2015); its place in heritage and memory (Low 2015, Xiong and Brownlee 2018 ); and its role in the economy and culture of consumption (Duffy and Ng 2021). In preparation for my argument for recognising eating and drinking 'across', I lay out in this section how Singaporean Indian food practices too involves degrees of 'hybridity' obscured in the prevalent raced culinary imagination.

Focusing their analysis on 'Chinese food', Chua and Rajah demonstrate the multiple directions of transformation cuisines in Singapore have taken through daily contact with other cuisine cultures on the island to the extent that some of 'the food consumed by Chinese in Singapore would be unrecognisable to Chinese in China' (2003: 98). Hybridity within 'Chinese food' may be seen in the considerable criss-crossing of

culinary influences over regions and dialect groups such as the Cantonese, Teochew, and Hokkien, or in Peranakan cuisine born out of Chinese-Malay intermarriage. For instance, the ubiquitous and complex use of a variety of chili dips alongside various noodle dishes underscore the Hokkien influence of serving dips as well as the local influence of using chillies. Chili is now so essential to Singaporean Chinese cooking that this 'complex taste for chilli may be said to be a marker which distinguishes Singaporean Chinese from others in the Chinese diaspora' (ibid. 104). As detailed later (section 5.3.1), the love for chili dips is shared by, and would arguably distinguish Singaporean Indians too.

Culinary influences are multi-directional and the incorporation of noodles, a Hokkien staple, in both Malay and Indian food in Singapore demonstrates this. Indian cuisine does not typically include noodles. Even with all the accessibility afforded by globalisation, noodles are still absent from Indian cuisine in India, excepting the consumption of instant noodles and *chow mein*, a stir-fried noodle dish in Indianised Chinese cuisine. Indian food in Singapore, and Malaysia, particularly those found in Indian/Indian-Muslim Mamak stalls heavily feature a variety of stir-fried noodle dishes such as *mee goreng*, *bee hoon goreng*, or *kway teow goreng*. The names of these dishes underscore hybridity since 'mee', 'bee hoon', and 'kway teow' are Hokkien terms for three noodle variations, and 'goreng' is a Malay term meaning fried. The preparation of these dishes also marries the Cantonese method of stir-frying in a wok over high heat with the use of masala and chili powders from the Indian pantry and Southeast Asian garnishes like bean sprouts. Despite the clear hybridity, *mee goreng* and other noodle dishes like it are still popularly imagined as firmly 'Indian'.

Despite the hybridity in styles, techniques, and ingredients there is still an assumption in Singapore of 'pure' cuisines and a tendency to 'racialise' even hybrid food, which Chua and Rajah argue, is a form of 'misrecognition' in Bourdieu's (1977) sense of the word (2003: 95). This imagination of foods in racial terms is a false understanding reinforced by the state's 'regimes of classification... pivotal to the way in which styles of cooking and their products finally reach their own essentialised, ethnic representations in Singapore' (ibid.). The unambiguous identification of foods as Chinese, Malay or Indian while ignoring their culinary hybridisations creates a 'fantasmatic [sic] fixing of definitive and defining foods and cuisines to these ethnicities' that 'only serves to show that ethnically pure cuisines are imagined, just as pure ethnic groups are, pace Benedict Anderson's imagined communities' (ibid. 114). Despite knowledge to the contrary, the imagined pure ethnic cuisine and ontological approach to food in race terms holds strong, carrying implications on food practices and racial identity.

In this second section of the chapter, I have laid out the extant understanding of food in Singapore as primarily determined in racial terms, engendering raced food as integral to racial identity. I have also shown how this view is reproduced and perpetuated through education and public eating places, and that these classifications elide the many instance of hybridity in common dishes. This discussion establishes the grounds on which I make the argument for recognising that Singaporean Indian practices around foods are not simple translations of food practices from South Asia but rather engendered through dwelling in Singapore's culinarily diverse environment and the tastes and techniques that it affords. As I expand in the next section (5.3), it is in such an environment that affords hybridity yet maintains discursive adherence to

lines of racial identity that I argue a Singaporean Indian identity around food practices emerges.

### **5.3 EATING AND COOKING ACROSS**

This final section of the chapter builds on ethnographic observations to draw attention to Singaporean Indian food practices as emergent practices of dwelling, drawing on skilled perception and attunement to the flavours and techniques afforded in this material world. I characterise these practices as being done ‘across’—crossing raced culinary lines while maintaining raced ways of imagining food. I draw on my observations and workshop conversations to discuss the ways Singaporean Indians eat, taking flavours and practices, across raced lines (section 5.3.1). I then examine how Singaporean Indians cook ‘across’ cuisines based on meals with interviewees in their homes. Exposure to flavours and ingredients available in this plural culinary environment have shaped dishes deemed uniquely Singaporean Indian as well as practices of meal planning and cooking in the Singaporean Indian home (section 5.3.2). I also briefly examine the amassment of kitchen tools from across culinary cultures (section 5.3.3) which demonstrate that cooking across is supported by the material environment of the Singaporean Indian home. In all, this section and the chapter argue for recognising that the identity of Singaporean Indians is in part engendered in such attuned practices around food that are themselves emergent from perceptive dwelling and movement with this material world.

#### **5.3.1 Eating Across When Eating Out**

Much is made of how the variety of raced foods available side-by-side reflects Singapore’s multiracial character. Less attention, however, has been given to how this

plurality of commercially available dishes translates into daily eating practices and consumer decisions. Though foods may be clearly raced, eating itself is less bounded and more creative. In this section, I draw attention to consumer decision-making in the sea of options, looking at what Singaporean Indians choose to eat when dining out and how they attune dining habits in response to the food option and dining location.

I have suggested the term eating and cooking 'across' in contrast to ideas of 'cross consumption' that are premised on the eating or cooking of foods deemed 'foreign'. Roger Owen, for instance, sees the cooking of foreign foods, e.g. from following a cookbook recipe, as reminiscent of cross-dressing, hence coining the phrase 'cross-cooking' (2006: 357, as cited in Tarulevicz 2013: 107). In Singapore, the foods attributed to the other races are by no means 'foreign' to the land or the people. The same ease of access to these dishes in public eating places, familiarity with these taste profiles, and their mundane daily consumption means that the dishes of 'others' are neither alien nor 'exotic' to Singaporeans. To eat or cook 'across', as I have termed it, instead acknowledges the raced distinctions between foods and the race identities of Singaporean diners while accounting for the consumption of such foods attributed outside of one's race. Additionally, I use the term 'across' to highlight the use of practices predominant in one's dining culture in the eating or cooking the food of another racial group. For instance, taking the Indian practice of eating with hands 'across' in application to eating Chinese dishes (see below).

For Singaporean Indians, several factors encourage eating across when dining out. As described above, many smaller kopitiams host only one 'Indian food' stall if at all. Thus Chinese and Malay options are simply more accessible. The most frequent halal option comes in the form of 'Malay food', thus it is the more accessible option for Indian

Muslims. Food taboos are absent for Indian Christians and lax for Indian Hindus (Mani et al. 2018: 241). Though some from both these communities may eschew pork and beef, they do not practice a strict taboo and would easily choose non-pork or beef options from stalls serving these meats. This lax taboo means eating from Chinese or Malay food stalls is always a viable option. Further, many practice space-differentiated food taboos, and so would refrain from cooking or consuming pork or beef in the home, but happily tuck into these when eating out. Such practices allow for eating across the raced food categories to please the palette and avoid monotony. This taste for experiencing different culinary profiles throughout the day is now characteristically Singaporean. Rotating through the ethnic cuisines in a day and ordering dishes across several stalls and cuisines to share as a family is very common in how Singaporeans eat out. Eating across is not only commonplace, it is highly creative as a person attunes their habits to the options available as well as modify those foods to their tastes.

In my research workshops, I invited participants to suggest 'objects of Singaporean Indian-ness' as we compiled a collective list. Food dishes dominated the list with suggestions such as curry; briyani; thosai; Bru coffee; banana leaf meals; and *prata*. These are all typically recognised in Singapore as 'Indian' dishes and suggest that my participants also shared in the imagination of these foods in raced terms. Other suggested food items included things found only in Singaporean and Malaysian Indian cuisine—Indian *rojak*; *appam jala*; Mysore mutton; prawn *vadai*; and *tahu sambal*. Cooking utensils such as the south Indian-style coffee filter; pressure cooker; spice box; *tawa* (flat pan); *chapati* board; *belan* (rolling pin); and metal saucepan for making chai were also included in the listing exercise and featured again in another exercise where I asked participants to identify a 'Singaporean Indian object' from their homes.

This short research exercise affirms that for many of my research participants their identity as Singaporean Indian is in large part located in food, primarily in food already popularly seen as 'Indian'. Further, the items they later brought from home suggest that, from the point of view of my participants, the kitchen or the task of cooking is where the home might most tangibly represent their Singaporean Indian identity (see section 5.3.3). Some participants explained that they chose these items because other options felt too personal or specific to their own family and that the chosen options might be more commonplace and reflective of a shared identity. Thus food and the tasks around it are understood as shared pursuits and sites of collective identity.

Besides these dishes, some participants also recognised particular ways of eating as an 'object of Singaporean Indian-ness'. Thus having 'prata without sugar' was an indicator of the Indian diner who did not wish to avoid or dull the spice of the curries that accompany a serving of *roti prata*, and a comparative reference to Chinese diners who would have *prata* with sugar. The popularly imagined Singaporean Indian love for spice is again reflected in participants' suggestions of 'spicy food' and 'really spicy Chinese food' in the listing exercise. The latter reference to Chinese food reflects the most frequent creative adaptation Singaporean Indians make when eating across. Where many Chinese dishes are served in Singapore with an accompanying chili dip, Indian diners would ask for more of this to raise the spice levels. One participant also suggested that Chinese hawkers automatically add more of the chili component of dishes when they see that the customer is an Indian person, suggesting that the Indian spice-loving trait is popularly conceived by non-Indians as well. Besides adapting Chinese dishes in everyday consumption to Indian spice preference, these foods have also become part of Indian consumption on special occasions.

In the listing activity, one participant succinctly conveyed the distinct taste that has emerged from Singaporean Indian dwelling in this plural culinary environment—'chicken rice at weddings'. The participant explained:

That's what's served at weddings in my family. Because [in] Punjabi weddings, there're many events and we'll be eating a lot of rich Indian food for consecutive days. There's always a day when we're like 'we cannot [have that] anymore or we'll get diarrhoea or something.' Usually the event that is after the temple wedding, when you go back to the house [before the big dinner reception], we'll serve Chinese food like chicken rice. We'll literally buy from the chicken rice stall downstairs and say, 'can you make a lot' and they'll usually give us a huge tub of everything. Yea, so that makes us feel very Singaporean.

Chicken rice, explicitly flagged as a Chinese dish here, serves a complementary role against the richer Indian celebratory feasts, to ease the stomach and bring variety to the palate. This incorporation of a Chinese dish into the flow of wedding celebrations replete with Indian, in this instance Punjabi, flavours and practices is thus recognised as marking this family out as 'very Singaporean' and entrenching their identity as Singaporean Indian through this practice of eating across even on a day marked by ethnic cultural practices. Chicken rice, per other participants, also offers the opportunity to creatively incorporate their Indian eating habits:

I feel Singaporean Indian when I rather *ta pao* [Mandarin for 'takeaway'] the chicken rice to go back to my house to eat with hand. Because the feeling is just a lot more shiok [Singlish term for 'enjoyable'].

This contribution drew excited responses from the group with another participant adding that she does the same, taking chicken rice home so that she can add her own chili sauces. Eating rice dishes with one's hand instead of with cutlery is typical of Indian and Malay communities in Singapore, so it is not uncommon to see this way of eating in hawker centres and food courts where the provision of washbasins facilitate the practice. However, when asked about this, the participant explained:

I'd feel very exposed. It's the eating chicken rice with hands. It won't bother me when eating briyani. It feels like I'm not supposed to be doing that [with chicken rice] in public, in my house I can do whatever I want.

With this the participant made a marked distinction between Indian and Chinese dishes and the 'appropriate' ways they should be approached. This concern signals how my participants are perceptive of accepted social norms and that their sense of propriety in public and belonging entails abiding by these norms (see Chapter 6). There are therefore limits to eating across outside but the home, for Singaporean Indians, affords space for dwelling more creatively, for eating Chinese food the Indian way. Singaporean Indian homes further support such creative attunement in the everyday practices of cooking across raced cuisines, as I explore in the next section.

### **5.3.2 Cooking 'Across' at Home**

This section argues that in Singaporean Indian homes there are frequent practices of cooking outside of one's raced culinary boundaries, or more accurately, of cooking across these lines as home cooks demonstrate a great deal of attunement and creative adaptation afforded by dwelling in Singapore's plural culinary environment.

I do not seek to argue simply for a distinct 'Singaporean Indian cuisine'. This point has been made (see Sanmugam 2011, Arumugam 2023) and I agree with the assessment, but I expand beyond the components of dishes in my argument for cooking across. Indira Arumugan makes the case for a 'distinctly Singaporean Tamil cuisine', arguing that 'innovations'—like adding 'Malay ingredients like shrimp paste, dried anchovies, and dried shrimp' to 'classic curries'—were not accidents or responses to scarcity but the result of an expanded culinary repertoire because Singapore 'offered new ingredients, techniques, and tastes to play with' (2023: 66, 67). Implied in her assessment is my point that Singaporean Indian practices with food emerge from

dwelling in this culinarily plural environment, from perceiving what other flavours are possible from the ingredients available here, and then skilfully attuning one's senses to 'play with' these flavours in cooking. In her cookbook, *Indian Heritage Cooking* (2011), Devagi Sanmugam comes closer to the point I seek to make. She recognises that cooking also entails technique, and that Singaporean Indian cooking has picked up 'techniques and textural preference from Chinese cooking like stir-frying vegetables to retain crunchiness, as with [the dish] Chap Chye,' 'or deep frying and the use of chicken wings alone to create the home favourite fried chicken wings' (ibid. 40, 44). Not only is Singaporean Indian cooking about adding locally available ingredients, it is also about picking up on technique and even the tools that afford those methods. Left unsaid but evidenced in both these works though is my next point about eating or cooking across raced foods—that the raced origins of a dish, ingredient, or technique remains known and acknowledged.

In the organisation of her cookbook, Sanmugam (2011) marks out a section on 'Singaporean Indian Food' distinct from sections on 'South Indian' and 'North Indian' dishes. Recipes under 'Singaporean Indian Food' are further sub-categorised by racial influence—Indian Muslim Hawker-style Dishes; Chinese-influenced Indian Dishes; Malay-influenced Indian Dishes; and Chitty Melaka Dishes. The average Singaporean Indian home cook too knows of these influences in their cooking. Continuing to use the original ethnic names for dishes, such as *chap chye* or *nasi lemak*, reiterates for all the dish's origins in culinary traditions outside of Indian cooking. Similarly, Singaporean Indians would still refer to ingredients from Chinese or Malay cuisine in those ethnic terms. Words like 'taugeh' (Hokkien for beansprouts), 'serai' (Malay for lemongrass), and 'ikan bilis' (Malay for dried anchovies) have become part of the Singaporean Indian vocabulary and would be used in the home just as they would in

the multilingual market space. Cooking across not only recognises what goes into the pot, but also the cognitive ways of seeing and speaking of ingredients and dishes in raced terms.

Singaporean Indian practices around food emerge from being attentive to the environment as one moves through it in the day to day. Dwelling as such entails perceiving, being sensorially attuned, picking up words in languages spoken by others in the world, as well as the flavours, textures, and techniques in their food. But dwelling is a two-way process. Singaporean Indians do not simply perceive from the world around them but also attune their ways and adapt their practices onto the world. My argument for attention to cooking across therefore extends beyond how the flavour marketplace of Singapore shapes Indian cooking, to include as well how Singaporean Indians cook food from the other racial cuisines, albeit with modifications.

Having tasted and enjoyed dishes from the other races, from eating across, many Singaporean Indian home cooks are open to attempting these recipes in their own kitchens. Recipes are also easily accessible and learnt through Home Economics classes in school, television cooking shows, shared between friends and neighbours, or simply tasted and experimented with. Dishes, like *chap chye*, a Chinese/Peranakan dish, and *nasi lemak*, a Malay dish then become frequent features of the home menu, as Sanmugam (2011) also notes. But such cooking is rarely a simple replication. Instead, cooking across also entails incorporating personal taste preferences and Indian cooking techniques. A dish may be made spicier or have chilis added even if absent from the original recipe, or meats washed or marinated with a touch of turmeric, an antimicrobial characteristic of Indian cooking. Food taboos or aversions also inform creative adaptations in Singaporean Indian home kitchens. Mutton *rendang*, instead

of the Malay-style beef *rendang*; or chicken *bak kut teh*, instead of the pork preparation from Chinese cooking, may be prepared in Singaporean Indian homes. Given the lack of taboos around fish and vegetables, these dishes would be easiest to adopt. Thus, steamed fish served with rice porridge in the Chinese style; *sayur lodeh*, a coconut-milk-based vegetable stew from Malay cuisine; and various versions of fried rice and fried noodles are frequently served. The key point here is that cooking across happens, frequently and creatively. But it does not end with preparing the dishes of 'others', cooking across is also seen in the practice of preparing 'hybrid meals'—a single meal of dishes from across the racial cuisines.

Hybridity, as Chua and Rajah recognise, is not a simple matter of blending but a matter of reconstituting, in part and in whole (2003: 102). Meaning that culinary hybridity may be found in individual dishes as much as in the totality of the meal (ibid.). The dining table may be laid with dishes each particular and faithful to a culinary tradition, but the variety across them offers a hybrid meal. This permutation fits most Singaporeans' home dining format where several meat and vegetable dishes are served 'family-style' to be eaten with individual servings of rice. In Singaporean Indian homes it would not be uncommon to find a meal of chicken curry, *chap chye*, and an egg omelette; or a meal of *kicap* (soya sauce) chicken, fried *tempeh* (fermented soya beans), and *ikan bilis* served with *rasam*.

*Nasi lemak*, a Malay dish of coconut-milk-steamed rice served with a chili sambal and any number of meat and vegetable side dishes, is especially ripe for preparation as a hybrid meal. It is a favourite of Singaporean Indian home menus and would be included in the repertoire of even the most traditionalist of home cooks, as Vasun recalled of her maternal grandmother (see section 5.1.1.). While still recognised as a Malay dish,

Nasi Lemak is deemed appropriately representative of the Singaporean Indian home to be prepared for guests. When I visited Maryanne's home to interview her and her family, they had prepared Nasi Lemak for our lunch (Figure 20). The hybridity of the meal quickly became apparent as they laid out the dishes on the dining table. The coconut-milk-steamed rice was served with modifications to some of the standard sides like fried chicken wings with a marinate of Indian spices; onion and green chili omelette, instead of fried eggs done sunny side up; peanuts and *ikan bilis*, additionally spiced with chilis; and a prawn and quail egg *sambal*, instead of the usual plain chili *sambal*. Instead of Beef Rendang that would be served with Nasi Lemak in Malay stalls and homes to make a richer meal, Maryanne's family made Mutton Rendang friendly to the Indian aversion to beef. Though Malay style Nasi Lemak is not typically had with cooked vegetables, Maryanne's family included chili *kang kong* (water spinach), a Chinese preparation. With this spread, it is evident that cooking across entails several 'crossings' that may be compounded. On top of serving a dish from Malay cuisine in their home, Maryanne's family had added a Chinese dish to the meal and made flavour, seasoning, and ingredient modifications to the side dishes to suit the Indian palate. That we all chose to eat this home meal with the use of cutlery, as

one would when eating Nasi Lemak outside, further demonstrates that culinary practices may be translated across raced ways in any direction.

Figure 20: *Nasi lemak* prepared by Maryanne's family. Photo by author, 13 February 2022.

As with eating, cooking across is also mindful of the embodied practices of consumption and this is inflected back onto Chinese or Malay-influenced Indian dishes. Fried bee hoon (thin rice noodles) prepared in Singaporean Indian homes is often prepared with the typically long noodles cut much shorter to about 1-centimetre strands. This creates a dish that may then be easily eaten by hand, instead of with a fork or chopsticks, since the shorter pieces are easier to pick up in a small lump and



kept contained within the fingers to then be neatly pushed into the mouth. The taste for these thin rice noodles from Chinese cuisine, seasoned with the flavours of Malay cooking, and prepared to facilitate Indian eating practices accumulates in a dish that is so favoured by Singaporean Indians that it is also frequently served in Hindu temples and Sikh Gurdwaras where it is made vegetarian. Vegetarian meals, at home and in

temples, host another dish that is so quintessentially Singaporean Indian yet has no discernible Indian element—*tahu sambal*.

On occasions when Singaporean Hindus and Sikhs observe a vegetarian religious fast, *tahu sambal* is a frequent feature and crowd favourite. The dish is enjoyed with rice, alongside other Indian vegetable and lentil dishes, where its chili-based spice and firm texture offers a welcome contrast for the palate. It is so entrenched in Indian vegetarian meals that it is served in Hindu and Sikh temples, and many Indian caterers in Singapore offer it in their vegetarian sets. Yet, neither its name nor preparation draws from Indian culture. ‘Tahu’ is the Malay term for tofu, a soybean curd from Chinese cooking; ‘sambal’ draws from the Javanese word ‘sambel’ though this Indonesian preparation of chili paste is ubiquitous across all Malay cooking. Despite its largely Malay name and influence, *tahu sambal* is not typically found in Malay cuisine. Instead, despite the lack of Indian elements, *tahu sambal* is integral to a vegetarian meal for Singaporean Indians. Oddly, none of the cookbooks I surveyed included a recipe for *tahu sambal*, perhaps indicative of how this is a dish celebrated within the in-group but not publicly claimed because it does not fit the popularly recognised markers of an Indian raced dish.

I have argued in this section for attention to cooking ‘across’ that entails and exceeds the emergence of ‘Singaporean Indian food’. Cooking across recognises practices of reconstituting Indian dishes, serving modified Chinese- and Malay-origin dishes, and preparing hybrid meals in Singaporean Indian homes. Cooking ‘across’ also draws attention to the crossing of techniques, of stir-frying in Chinese woks and eating noodles with hands. It further accounts for the continued recognition of non-Indian origins and influences, such as using Malay and Chinese food names, marking them

out in raced terms and as not 'Indian' in the Singaporean Indian home. To enable these ways of cooking, the material environment of the home kitchen too become becomes attuned, as I next examine.

### **5.3.3 Assembling a Singaporean Indian Kitchen**

In this final section, I expand on a brief observation shared by Maryanne's family and consider how kitchens in Singaporean Indian homes reflect the plural culinary world of Singapore outside the home and materially afford eating and cooking across at home.

Maryanne was one of the participants in my research workshops, and I had decided to interview her further in her home because, in response to the assignment to 'bring an object that says something about you/your family as Singaporean Indian' she had described how they could not find anything in their home they thought was sufficiently Singaporean Indian. After the lunch of *nasi lemak* that Maryanne and family had prepared for my visit, I asked them again what they would consider 'Singaporean Indian' about their home. After some discussion, about how 'neutral' their home looked, the family decided on two somewhat connected things: their kitchen, and the smell of *sambrani* (benzoin resin). They decided on the kitchen because that was where they had some 'Indian appliances', by which they meant an electric pressure cooker, and where they made Indian food, which entailed the emission of 'Indian smells,' from the tempering of spices, that would then perfume the home (see Chapter 6 for further discussion on smells). These observations encouraged me to return attention to the material space of the home kitchen to think about how Singaporean Indians stock and equip their kitchens to support their day-to-day practice of eating and cooking across.

A simple observation can be made of keeping chopsticks readily available to facilitate eating across, of Chinese dishes in the Singaporean Indian home. In the same cabinet where they kept their pressure cooker, Maryanne's family also had a wok (Figure 21). This cooking utensil ubiquitous in Chinese cooking for stir-frying is now commonplace in Singaporean Indian kitchens. The Chinese wok is even listed as a 'basic and essential item' for Indian home cooking in the cookbook *Indian Food Today*, by Singaporean cookbook author Dherhini Govin Winodan (1990: ix). The wok is not exclusively used for Chinese dishes either. Maryanne's mother explained that she prefers using the wok even for Indian dishes like chicken curry, because its wider opening affords easier mixing and stirring of heavy ingredients like chicken. Just as Vasun had adopted the fish-slice for flipping thosais (see 1.3 above), Singaporean Indian home cooks recognise the practical utility of kitchen tools from other culinary cultures in cooking Indian dishes. Returning to Vasun's kitchen, I noticed that instead of the heavier and bigger Indian grindstone, she had a variety of smaller stone mortars and pestles with which to carry out the same task of mashing ingredients (Figure 22). These smaller grinding utensils are commonplace in Malay and Southeast Asian cooking, and more easily available in Singapore.



Figure 21: Maryanne's kitchen cabinet  
Photo by author, 13 February 2022.



Figure 22: Vasun's mortars and pestles  
Photo by author, 2 March 2022.

In making my argument that Singaporean Indian practices of eating and cooking across emerge out of attunement to the material world of Singapore, I also want to recognise that Singaporean Indians likewise attune their intimate material world, their home kitchens, to facilitate these practices (see also Pink et. al. 2017: 45–67; Arcidiacono and Clotilde 2019; Vilar Rosales 2023). Eating and cooking across is not then something Singaporean Indians simply partake in, but practices that are part of their dwelling in this world, practices that entrench feelings of belonging and identity as Singaporean Indian.

In arguing for recognising how Singaporean Indians cook and eat 'across' in this section, I have sought to debunk the popular conception of food identity that narrowly limits food and the Singaporean Indian identity only to food distinctly seen as 'Indian'. Instead by turning ethnographic attention to the ways people actually eat, cook, talk about food in their everyday, and stock their kitchens, this section has demonstrated

that the Singaporean Indian identity, as far as food goes, is constituted in taking taste, techniques, and tools across racial lines in everyday practices around eating and cooking while still acknowledging, and hence maintaining, those borders.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION: THE RACED TASTE OF IDENTITY**

Food—in its preparation, cooking and eating—is a highly productive field of inquiry in understanding Singaporean Indian-ness. In examining how food is imagined and discussed in this context, and observing how it is produced and consumed, both within and outside of the home, this chapter has demonstrated how Singaporean Indian dwelling in this plural culinary environment is sensorially attuned, creatively adaptive, and racially aware. This entanglement with and attunement to the larger material world informs Singaporean Indian identity as emerging from, natural to, and recognised in this meshwork of relations made visible in the mundane discourse and practices around food.

As I demonstrated with the preparation of thosai, cooking in Singaporean Indian kitchens calls on the body, trained over time through observation and practice, to make seasoned judgements from sensory engagements with the material assemblage and environment of the kitchen. Even with cooking a dish ‘from India’, the body and process must be attuned to the conditions and material affordances of Singapore. The home kitchen is thus not a bubble sealed off from the greater culinary and consumption context. Singaporean Indian palates are attuned both in and out of the home, with each informing the other. Flavours and dishes experienced and enjoyed through eating in hawker centres and school canteens inform what Singaporean Indians want to taste and what they add to their home menus. Yet, despite the hybridity prevalent

in home cooking and in public eating venues, dishes are still presented, discussed, and imagined in raced categories regardless of who ultimately cooks or eats them.

Maintenance of these racial boundaries, through discourse and language, while Singaporean Indians continue to eat and cook across is what informs becoming Singaporean Indian—its positionings and repositionings inextricably entangled in and unfolding with this specific social, material, and culinary environment. Singaporean Indian identity, as demonstrated here through food practices, is emergent from the material world of Singapore, skilfully perceiving and creatively attuning tasks of dwelling like cooking and eating from a culinary environment informed by fellow Singaporean communities. This identity nonetheless remains distinct from those it shares tastes, techniques, and tools with precisely because this same environment entrenches the imagination of its food cultures as plural and distinct, where hybridity serves to highlight and reiterate a multiculturalism and not an amalgamation. Becoming Singaporean Indian entails knowing your food in raced terms, while eating and cooking across but not erasing the distinctions.

## Chapter 6

### Smells and Scents of Belonging

'When you smell it, you know it. Every day at a certain time in the morning and evening, the smell hits. It's my entire neighbourhood, the smell wafts through from every Indian house whether they are Singaporean PR [Permanent Resident], whether they are Singaporean Indian, whether they are expats here. The smell hits twice a day every single day. The curry smell too maybe, but for me this incense smell is more emotive.'

Malligai draws us an olfactory picture of her neighbourhood; several other participants in the research workshop session quickly recognise this scene for it plays out around their homes too and suggestions come in further detailing the scene: the accompanying sounds of handbells, the orangey tinge of the predusk light, the additional smell of smoky *sambrani* (benzoin resin). This sensorial memory, though of our different neighbourhoods across Singapore, was a shared (and perhaps somewhat romanticised) image of how Singaporean Indians are made present in the spatiality and temporality of the Singapore everyday. From this picture, several key points emerge: that smells have an affective quality shaping the way we remember and think of spaces and social relations; that certain smells are attributed to and held indicative of specific communities, in this case an Indian racial community inclusive of but qualified by their varying citizenship status; and most fundamentally, that smells leak across the private–public divide entangling people, their practices, identities, and the environment. For Malligai and other participants, these qualities of smell index presence and belonging in the neighbourhood and in Singapore. This potency of smells in colouring Singaporean Indian belonging is the concern of this chapter.

In the previous chapter, I argued for recognising the ways Singaporean Indian perceptions and attunement of tastes, tools, and techniques shape the community's identity around food practices. That largely positive, additive approach however does

not extend to all aspects of Singaporean Indian dwelling. In this chapter's concern with smells, I recognise that dwelling in Singapore's plural society also entails the negotiation of negative perceptions and interactions. Smells are especially leaky things. Unhampered by boundaries, smells entangle peoples and environments in ways that exceed the normative divides of private and public, of personal and community. Such diffusion and entanglement necessitate then not just a perception of the senses but also of attitudes and acceptable norms, and concomitantly an attunement to such structures. Belonging, as I argue, partly emerges in the ability to recognise such norms and adjust to them. But attunement need not always mean adherence. As I further expand in this chapter, Singaporean Indian belonging emerges not so simply with perceiving and reflecting norms, but also in the agency to redefine them. While in exceeding boundaries, leaky smells draw Singaporean Indians into some oppositional olfactory relationships that inflect on belonging, equally the same 'thing-ing' quality of smells draws together community and place. Here, the consumption of scent commodities permeates the making of home and neighbourhood, bringing together community, and engendering belonging.

The next three sections lay out the argument that the leaky quality of smells inform Singaporean Indian practices of dwelling in this material world, such that the material and social implications of smell weigh on their sense of belonging, and with the effect that Singaporean Indian dwelling—including scent practices and consumption—while taking pleasure and comfort from smells remains aware of and attuned to the perceptions of others. Section 6.1 connects the leaky property of smell with Ingold's (2000) idea of 'leaky things' and lays out the implications of such transgressions on drawing people, things, and the environment into relations. Section 6.2 examines how smells other. Olfactory codes serve as a boundary marker dividing 'us' from the

odorously and morally foul 'them'. In racially determined Singapore, smells too are mapped onto raced bodies and practices. This section examines how such attitudes play out in the everyday attitudes to Indian bodies and their dwelling in Singapore, how this establishes norms and shape 'sensed belonging', and how Singaporean Indians attune practices in abiding with such norms or in redefining them and community boundaries. Section 6.3 examines Singaporean Indian consumption of scent products to argue that smells also bring together community and spaces, gathering a sense of place in Little India and the home, even as its leakiness out of the home necessitates mitigating measures. Thus, where shared tastes and consumption of smells inform the process of belonging as it pulls together the comforting idea of Little India and of the home, the leakiness of smells still poses a challenge to this 'becoming' and necessitates constant attunement to a material world full of the smells and smell-perceptions of others.

## **6.1 SMELLS LEAK AND ENTANGLE**

On 8 August 2011, this example of community mediation, reported in *TODAY* newspaper, left a stink nation-wide:

Case 1: A family, who had just moved here from China, had resorted to mediation because they could not stand the smell of curry that their Singaporean Indian neighbours would often cook. The Indian family, who were mindful of their neighbour's aversion, had already taken to closing their doors and windows whenever they cooked the dish, but this was not enough.

"They said: 'Can you please do something? Can you don't cook curry? Can you don't eat curry?'," said Madam Marceillina Giam, a Community Mediation Centre mediator. But the Indian family stood firm. In the end, Mdm Giam got the Indian family to agree to cook curry only when the Chinese family was not home. In return, they wanted their Chinese neighbours to at least give their dish a try. (Quek 2011: 18)

This minor piece in the local free daily enflamed passions around two hot-button issues—foreigners and food. The public characterised the settlement as unfairly

forcing the local Indian family to adjust their practices to the whims of the foreign Chinese family and took the latter's revulsion to curry as an affront not only to a favourite local dish, but also to Singaporean ways of being (Teng 2015). Although K Shanmugam, Minister of Law and a prominent Singaporean Indian politician, clarified that the resolution was suggested by the Indian family themselves, that did little to shift public perception of the case (*Today*, 17 August 2011, p6). A Singapore-style protest was thus born. Disparate online campaigns culminated in what is variably known as 'National Cook Curry Day', 'Cook and Share a Pot of Curry Day', or simply 'Curry Day' which called on Singaporeans to cook any kind of curry on 21 August 2011, and share a portion with neighbours, including foreigners. Propped up in part by the airs of national pride and patriotism that waft through the island every August, many participated in the cooking, sharing, and eating of curries of all sorts. With this event, 'curry serves as a catalyst for Singaporeans to express anxiety and fear towards what is perceived as foreign' during a politically charged period when the ruling class's commitments to 'Singaporeans first' was being questioned amidst growing economic migration into Singapore (Montsion and Tan 2016: 210, 216). Curry Day, as 'the cultural symbolic organisation of a social crisis into a resolution-producing confrontation between an "us" and a "them"', intersects with the 'politics of foreignness' to present tolerance for the smell of curry as the Singaporean way, while olfactory intolerance to it is associated with foreignness (ibid: 216, citing Honig 2001: 34). From this moment in the national discourse, we see how smells can entangle communities and identities, effecting ideas of rightful, 'Singaporean' ways of being simply from the fundamental attribute that smells leak.

Like 'things', smells leak. For Ingold, the 'leakiness' of things is a key trait in its 'gathering together of the threads of life' (2010: 4). Building loosely on Heidegger

(1971), the thing (as opposed to the completed object) is a 'going on', having the character of a knot whose constituent threads trail beyond only to become caught with other threads in other knots. (ibid.) Things are 'forever discharging through the surfaces that form temporarily around them', interchanging materials across the ever-emergent surfaces by which they differentiate themselves from the surrounding medium (Ingold 2010: 4; 2012: 438; 2017: 65). The organism-person (see Ingold 2000: 3-4) is no different. Gregory Bateson (1907) and Andy Clark (1997) initiated the idea that cognition did not solely happen within the confines of the mind but had to be understood as one aspect of the 'unfolding of a total system of relations comprised by the creature's embodied presence in a specific environment' (Ingold 2010: 12-13; 2011a: 86). Ingold expands this 'to suggest that as a nexus of life and growth within a meshwork of relations, the organism is not limited by the skin. It, too, leaks.' (ibid.) Things endure—can carry on—because they leak continually (Ingold 2012: 438; 2017: 65;). Likewise, organisms, people, and their bodies leak continually. This leakiness of things, the flows and entanglements with other things is what generates a gathering, of 'things thinging in a worlding world' (Ingold 2010: 4). People, with their leaky bodies and minds, are too drawn into relations with other things, people, and the environment.

Smells, from people's bodies, everyday practices, consumption and dwelling, are just as leaky. Continually effusing from surfaces with little regard for boundaries, smells also trail on only to become caught in the olfactory senses of another, being perceived and so drawing peoples, things, and environments into relations. Smells have been studied as the sense of transitions and thresholds (Howes 1991), that 'always escapes,' that is not bound nor easily governed (Montserrat Degen 2008: 44, in Montsion and Tan 2016: 211), that crosses borders, linking disparate categories and

confusing boundary lines (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 204). For its particular leakiness, smell is also unlike the other senses. Smell is 'proximate', like touch and taste, in that they yield the world closest to us. (Tuan 1995: 35) But unlike taste and touch, and much like sight or hearing, smell can be perceived at a distance and does not require intimate contact to be experienced. (Classen 1992: 160) Smells are registered, for the most part, not consciously (Classen 1994: 2) and cannot be directed the way sight can, leading at times to the impression that smells *happen to* the perceiver. For all these properties of its leaky ways, smell is fundamentally material.

Smell is perceived and registered through its material presence, when odorant molecules carried in the air make direct contact with odour receptors in the nose (Moeran 2007: 157). Unlike sight and hearing which rely on the perception of light and airwaves, smelling perceives micro particles of the odorous source itself (Jonaitis 2006: 160). Smell thus stands as proof of a material presence, a trail of existence which can be traced to its larger, ordinary source (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 205). For this reason, smell cannot be simply recorded and replayed via an intermediary medium as with visuals or sound. Rather smell can only be preserved with samples of the source, or simulated as with commercially produced synthetic odours (ibid: 204). The uncontainable quality of smells also means smells become part of an environment and its atmosphere as scent particles fill the air. The atmosphere is fundamental to any setting where breathing organisms dwell and as such is not an absence but a positive medium through which we move and are enabled to live (Reno 2016: 49). Smell is thus inextricable from the material environment and our experience of it. But smell is also so inextricable from its material source that representing it, such as with language, becomes a highly elusive endeavour.

Odours, unlike colours, cannot be named not without recourse to metaphor or in reference to another object, taste, or value (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 3). Thus things 'smell like' roses for instance, or they smell sweet, or smell bad. This paucity of terms to describe smells also mean smells cannot be disassociated from their causes and/or effects (Sperber 1975: 116, in Moeran 2007: 156). Despite the linguistic ineffability, smell still exerts an unconscious influence on our behaviours and moods, influencing our perceptions of people and places (Moeran 2007: 157). Smell is then largely 'associative' for there appears no inborn olfactory preferences amongst humans except for an aversion to smells of decay (ibid.). Its 'associative' quality underscores another noteworthy property—its intimate and immediate link to personal memory (ibid: 156). Memory becomes crucial in the aid of our recognising smells precisely because the language of smell has no autonomous domain to itself, and we cannot usually recall smells independent of an external stimulus (ibid.). Perceiving smells consists then both of its material basis and the associated experiences and emotions (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 2).

Given smell's dependence on the immediate availability of its source material, smells directly index presence and not only represents it. As in the scene Malligai draws in the opening of this chapter, smells then work to make known the presence of Indian people and their practices even when they are not in sight. Smells are thus potent in effecting the presence of Singaporean Indians and the things they use in this material world full of the things, and smells, of the various communities in Singapore. In such an environment, and given that smells are largely associative, there are also then multiple perceptions and valuations of the smells around. Smell is not then experienced simply as a biological and psychological phenomenon, but is rather socially, historically, and environmentally informed in its perception and implications.

Invested with cultural values, smells are employed by societies as a means of and model for defining, categorising, and interacting with the world (ibid: 3).

Shared olfactory codes and values may serve to identify and gather communities along shared consumption, practices of dwelling, and identity, as I expand in section 6.3. On the other hand, the highly emotional nature of smells and strong base reactions, of repulsion and disgust, means olfactory differences are often evoked to distance and delineate distinction from dissimilar practices, things, bodies, and communities. In the next section (6.2), I examine how smells ‘other’—how the leakiness of smells pull Singaporean Indians up against the perceptions held by others in Singapore, and thus into confrontation with ideas of odorous belonging.

## **6.2 SMELLS OTHER**

This second section lays out how the smells of the other is perceived, projected, and almost always valued as foul in both olfactory and moral terms. This scent and value mapping is examined in the context of Singapore where the racialising of smells carry implications on Singaporean Indian dwelling (section 6.2.1), sense of belonging (section 6.2.2), and smell-practices to either meet or redefine norms (section 6.2.3). This section thereby makes the argument for a Singaporean Indian belonging that is perceptive of the smell-perceptions of others in this plural society, and that actively attunes to the way smells leak across and both hardens and diffuses communal boundaries.

### **6.2.1 Indians Smell**

As established in the previous chapter, public discourse and social actors adopt essentialist categories for food in Singapore along the ubiquitous CMIO lines. The

nose knows no differently and smells are also similarly mapped onto raced bodies and practices. Such appraisals though are not based on direct olfactory experience of someone but rather attributed through socialised associations that other races smell differently, often badly, and expectations of other's socioeconomic backgrounds, nationalities, practices and consumption (Low 2006: 615; 2009: 86). Smell, or the stereotyped perception of smell, is in this way employed for differentiation and social stratification of odorous bodies that signify race constructs (Low 2006: 626; 2009: 86). In the racialisation of smell in Singapore, the Indian reeks.

To the others in Singapore, Indians smell, Indian bodies smell, Indian places smell. Explicitly or implicitly the 'Indian smell' is attributed to consumption, specifically food. In Kelvin Low's work on smell perceptions, his non-Indian interlocutors report their olfactory observations, and locate the source of the 'Indian smell' in 'the food they eat, the spices they use' or in an observation that 'they eat a lot of lamb meat' (Low 2009: 87, 105). The smell of 'Indian food' thus carries a negative valuation though, as we had seen above, Singaporeans at large were quick to defend the smell of curry. The latter though was largely enabled by an erasure of the Indian origins of the smell. In Curry Day's representation of curry as a cultural symbol of 'Singaporean-ness', the 'Indian-ness' of curry was quietly elided. While purportedly acting in solidarity with the Indian family, with 'Curry Day' the act of cooking curry was reframed as an all-Singaporean practice to be defended by all Singaporeans. A commenter on a local online forum pointed out the erasure and subsequent emptiness of the gesture, observing that:

'practically all who participated were cooking Chinese style curry ... [it is] not like there were any local Chinese who made it a point to cook Indian style curry. Basically... [it is] just to post in their social media that they were there.' (CCCustom 2022)

In failing to remember the Indian origins of the smell and cooking practice this event sought to defend, Curry Day parallels the ephemeral nature of smell which in diffusing from its source can easily be dissociated from its material origin. What is less easily disregarded though is the negative olfactory valuation of Indian bodies held by racial others in Singapore.

Olfactory codes pervade all human communities, serving as a basis for recognition and misrecognition, affiliation and ostracisation, to classify and divide people across societies both those characterised as 'exotic' olfactory-conscious and as 'deodorised' Western society (Classen 1992: 133; 1994: 5; Manalansan 2006, 44). This ubiquity led Alain Corbin to hypothesise that olfactory affinities and antipathies are an important means of group preservation (1986: 210, in Classen 1992: 134). The odours of a group come from natural bodily processes, their practices within their environments, or may be selectively and purposefully applied in the active curation of their scent. Whether any of these smells are deemed pleasant or foul is primarily cultural and social, as Uri Almagor's (1987) study of the Dassanetch of southwestern Ethiopia demonstrates. The Dassanetch believe that humans are naturally inodorate and that their odours are acquired through contact with their environments. Divided into cattle-rearing pastoralists and fishermen, and given the practical and symbolic importance of cattle in Dassanetch society, the smell of everything associated with cattle is considered good and prestigious (Almagor 1987: 115, in Classen 1992: 138). The pastoralists would thus intentionally reiterate their cattle association olfactorily, by washing hands with cattle urine and smearing their bodies with manure or ghee (Almagor 1987: 109, in Classen 1992: 138). The fishermen who do not make extra effort to smell of fish but happen to acquire those scents through their typical activities of fishing, are deemed foul-smelling and inferior by the pastoralist. Fish are symbolically suspect for existing

outside of natural cycles of weather that pastoralists perceive fish, the smell of fish, and correspondingly, the fishermen as threatening decay that, like odours, is capable of transgressing boundaries (Almagor 1987: 111, in Classen 1992: 139). This example of the Dassanetch demonstrates several broadly universal attributes of smell: that smells mark out groups; that the value of a scent is cultural and largely determined by the dominant group and their practices; that the other almost always smells bad and is held suspect; and that smells are acquired through the environment, everyday activities, and intentional application of odorous products. Smells stick, and so do the impressions they leave, giving rise to distinctions and mediating interactions between groups.

The 'thing'-like leakiness of smells and bodies that pulls people, things, and the environment into relation also extends to perceptions. Homes in Singapore are also characterised as smelling along racial lines (see Low 2005: 410). Andreea Racleş notes this in the ways the non-Roma often mention smell as the main element enabling them to distinguish a Roma-inhabited house from a non-Roma inhabited one (2021: 131). Houses make material and visible the matter of contention. Racleş explains that 'as the racialising repertoire comprising these representations often has to do with elements that are 'visible', the discussions about the houses inhabited by Roma people allow the non-Roma to operate with 'the smell of [Roma]' as something material that can be seen, and thus proved (ibid: 132). Even though variations in conceptions of cleanliness and smelliness may be culturally informed, as Sarah Pink (2004: 75-76) argues with the different attitudes to dust between the English and Spanish, perceptions in Singapore of how race 'naturally' permeates into the material and olfactory conditions of a house have serious and direct repercussions on dwelling for Indians.

The idea is so prevalent that Indian people and their practices smell and will stink the house, that rental discrimination has been an issue for several decades now. Most Singaporeans own their homes, so potential tenants have been overwhelmingly foreigners including students, young professionals, and families (BBC News 2014), though recent trends also see more young adult Singaporeans moving out of the family home before marriage and looking to rent as well. Rental listings used to unabashedly spell out 'no Indians, no PRCs' but even if unstated, renters still experience prejudice (ibid.). Housing agents say that owners 'prefer not to rent to tenants from India or mainland China because such tenants "are not people who are house proud"', the impression is that they 'don't clean weekly, and they do heavy cooking, so dust and oil collect over the months; they may use a lot of spices that release smells people don't like' (Coconuts 2021). 'Cooking curry' is overwhelmingly cited as a house-fouling practice and reason Indian tenants are undesired (BBC News 2014; Coconuts 2021). Such discriminatory practices are so ingrained that they persist even amid unfavourable market conditions (CNBC 2017). Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, locates these discriminatory ideas in 'stereotypes that people have about different immigrant groups and how responsible they are in terms of the upkeep of a rented apartment, [and that] cooking supposedly leaves permanent smells in the house [which people believe] would devalue the property' (cited in BBC News 2014). The transgressive nature of smells are thus not only seen as fouling the air, but corruptive of the material house and permanently fouling its value.

This perception not only assumes all Indians smell and will smell the same by virtue of being identifiably Indian, but that the perceiver *knows* what Indians and their practices smell like. With the Dassanetch, the scented differences between both

groups were observable and located in different odorous materials integral to their everyday trades. Sometimes, the reported distinction is less discernible and is perhaps projected. Referencing Stuart Hall's 'regimes of representation' (1990, 1997), Rascals recognises how smell 'is involved in acquiring and reproducing "racialised knowledge" (Hall 1997: 244)' operating much like a part of 'the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which "difference" is represented at any one historical moment' (Rascals 2021: 129, 136). Racleş observes how non-Roma make olfactory projections and 'substantiate them by mobilising racialising and racialised knowledge about the Roma, which they assume to own and share with "everyone" who is a non-Roma' (Racleş, 2021: 144). Such racialised knowledge need not be based on direct experience either, such as when trying to explain 'that specific smell' they claim Roma have by talking about Roma smoking in their homes even without having been in the private sphere of the Roma (ibid.). As part of such regimes and engrained in the circulations of power and race, smells offer visceral, gut-level grounds on which to justify and legitimise personal intolerances and emotional responses to racialised and racially projected olfactory biases (Slocum 2011: 317; Montsion and Tan 2016: 215). Projecting a negatively value-laden smell onto racialised groups as part of a greater regime of representations is something Low (2005, 2006, 2009, 2015) has also extensively observed in Singapore. Low observed that 'reading the racial other is predicated not merely upon the visible/visual such as skin colour, clothes, or other markers,... rather racial categorization transpires, also, via the olfactory... through processes of stereotyping, arising from an individual social actor's expectation of person/place and smell, and thereby, arriving at a perception of the racial other' (2005: 411). Smells in this material world are thereby not only perceived, but projected.

But given the proclivity here to essentialise any perceived difference into race, identifying bodily odours as racially distinct compounded with ‘naturalising’ these differences through food habits and bodily processes works to reiterate Race as a biological category. In Racleş’ study, her non-Roma interlocutors hint at the unchangeable nature of Roma habits and smell. ‘This impossibility is said to reside in that “something specific”, which is not only in “the blood”, but emerges from the way in which “they” are socialised; “what they saw [in their environment]”, and what they subsequently internalised, is supposedly unalterable’ (Racleş 2021: 135). These ways of locating smells as emitted through what is physically and morally ‘in the blood’ reaffirms that the malodour is ‘not thought of simply as the result of external conditions, such as filthy conditions, but as an intrinsic characteristic’ (Howes and Classen 2014: 69, in *ibid*). ‘The logic of naturalisation produces representations of difference as being fixed and permanent, implying that the sociocultural features of people’s lives are hereditary’ (Racleş 2021: 134, referencing Hall 1997: 244-245). This quality of smell, particularly stink, as biologically innate and determined reiterates a bio-scientific conception of race,—that aligns with the way ‘Race’ is popularly understood in Singapore—further compounding perceptions of difference and unchangeability.

When racialised smells leak, they are additionally potent in being pollutive of other bodies. In one sense, smells pollute by bringing harm onto the other. The Dassanetch believed that the bad smell of fishermen can infect the cattle (Almagor 1987:111, in Classen 1992: 139). Such attitudes manifest in Singapore too as in the instance of a Chinese complainant who deemed the ‘pungent smell of oily smoke’ from the cooking in their unidentified neighbour’s house dangerous as she was ‘worried about the effect of the smoke on the foetus of her pregnant daughter’ (Mothership 2021). In another sense, smells pollute by diffusing across boundaries and rendering them moot, such

as with the housing rental issue above where the olfactory habits of some Indians are taken for that of all Indians. Yet, note that these perceptions of the Indian renter, one who would most likely be a foreigner, is premised on an olfactory image built through essentialising the culinary habits of Singaporean Indians. As with Racleş' non-Roma interlocutors who had had no direct experience of Roma homes, these assumptions that 'Indians cook smelly curries' is also highly unlikely built on any direct experiences of Singaporean Indian homes, let alone the actual culinary habits of the potential foreign Indian renter. Not only are smells racialised and projected, they leak boundaries of national identity to club Singaporean Indians and non-Singaporean Indians into the same olfactory category.

For Singaporean Indians, the reverse association poses a particular threat. For instance, one of Low's respondents reports that 'her impression of Indians is more often than not associated with occupations such as labourers or domestic help' (2006: 621). Both these groups entail foreign workers but are taken as analogous, in this respondents' imagination, with Singaporean Indians. Compounded with the association of such low-skilled labourers with poor hygiene and odour management, the conflation of race with this socioeconomic status not only accounts for a social but also smell hierarchy wherein the malodorous 'Indian', caught up in the 'smelly immigrant trope', ranks lowest (ibid.; Manalansan 2006: 42). Smells are thus corruptive in this way when 'they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes' and threaten distinctions held by Singaporean Indians between themselves and foreign Indians, including foreign workers (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 4). In response, Singaporean Indians work to reinforce these distinctions through attunement of their olfactory habits.

Singaporean Indian dwelling is in part scented by the negative olfactory associations, expectations, and projections on them, their bodies, homes, and practices. Dwelling in this material world then entails not only knowing of these associations, but being able to perceive and attune themselves to norms and acceptable standards in order to claim belonging.

### **6.2.2 Sensed Belonging**

Mary Douglas' (1966) influential thesis that 'dirt is matter out of place' underscores how something causes offence and is rejected when it is deemed to have transgressed boundaries. Not only do smells transgress boundaries because of its uncontainable nature, but when something is deemed to 'smell bad' it is marked out as being 'out of place', as being alien to the environment or desired conditions, as not-belonging. Marking someone or a group out for their smell similarly pushes them to the edge of non-belonging. My participants report being aware of the expectations that Indian bodies smell, that smelling is taken as innate to the Indian body, and reflect these perceptions in the workshop group's inclusion of smells—specifically body odour here—as an object of Singaporean Indian-ness:

'I feel very cognizant of body odour and being Indian. Just the idea of if there's an Indian person walking into the MRT at Little India station, there might be body odour. And that's a common thing I hear among non-Indian Singaporeans. I also heard this from my mum, she said it's because they eat a lot of spices so naturally, just trying to explain why there might be body odour. And the struggle of always trying to mask it. ...it is a very sensitive issue or topic that you don't really talk about in schools when we are discussing racism during CCE [Character and Citizenship Education] lessons. So I think it's quite interesting to see how body odour is attached [as a] Singaporean Indian object.'

The recognition Singaporean Indians have of how they are perceived to smell (bad) weighs on their sense of belonging, and perceived non-belonging, in this plural social and material environment.

Racleş notes how olfactory politics not only racialises bodies but sets Roma bodies up as non-belonging (2021: 126). Olfactory politics are ‘a set of smell-related practices, norms and discourses, historically and locally contingent, which contribute to the constitution of otherness through the attribution of malodours and socially denigrated smells to those constructed as “others”’ (ibid: 127). Olfactory politics is thus ‘about the role of smell in the formation of the social imagination (Corbin 2004: 136)... [and] the ascription of olfactory identities that mark distinctions between socially creditable and discreditable odours’ (Racleş 2021: 128). For instance, a mayor’s quote that ‘there is a specific Gypsy smell’ works first to separate Roma-Gypsy from the rest of the population (ibid: 126). Then, drawing from Hall (1996: 2) who asserts that subjectification to discursive practices has to do with politics of exclusion, Racleş argues that ‘subjecting Roma people to such discursive practices means representing them not only as ‘the smelly ones’ but, by that means, as the ‘non-belonging’ ones’ (2021: 129). Discursive practices may be blatantly voiced or take the form of unvoiced gestures. My participants recount various instances of remarks passed such as being told that ‘you’re Indian but you don’t smell bad’, or being asked ‘why do you smell like curry?’ by a Chinese person. They are also perceptive of the unvoiced judgements, listing experiences of having non-Indians refuse to sit or leave their seats if an Indian person sat next to them, or of non-Indians pinching their noses or fanning their hands in front of their nose when walking pass Indians—gestures that loudly perform olfactory displeasure and communicate that the body and person is offending the atmosphere and so ‘out of place’. Singaporean Indians are keenly aware of such voiced and unvoiced discursive practices which plays greatly on their ‘sensed belonging’.

Racleş introduces the notion of 'sensed belonging', advancing the understanding of belonging from being socially negotiated to a view of belonging as sensed, in everyday experiences derived from the interplay between people and everyday materialities (objects and spaces) that enable people '(a) to make and sense their place in the social world, and (b) to concretise their capabilities as social actors and bodies' (ibid: 181). The notion of 'sensed belonging' is 'attentive to the socio-political and material context in which (non-)belonging is sensed, accounting concomitantly for people's social and bodily capabilities to make and evaluate their and others' belonging' (ibid: 182). Such an understanding of belonging as a set of capabilities encompasses individuals' knowledge and competences that enable them to identify the socially approved standards of organising life and space; to evaluate themselves according to these standards; and to critically appraise them (Ibid.). Racleş thus recognises belonging as a dialectical movement between the individual and the collective, in which a set of capabilities are sensorially experienced and mobilised, so as to be competently in tune with the practices and values relevant for the different 'others' that are significant in individuals' lives at a particular time and space (ibid.). In forefronting such adaptive capabilities, Racleş' notion strongly parallels Ingold's ideas of skilled perception and attunement in moving and dwelling in the given environment.

Racleş' approach expands extant approaches to belonging as emotional investments by 'revealing the corporeality and materiality of these investments on the level of the domestic sphere', by forwarding the view on belonging as a concern with home-space and asking what investments people make and the challenges they deal with in the process of fostering social and physical connections to 'a place called home' (ibid). This chapter is similarly concerned with the olfactory making of home and the negotiations in that process, recognising how the home is made alongside and in

conjunction with experiences of other spaces, such as Little India, and of the body that goes between the 'outside' and home. In section 6.3, I lay out how 'sensed belonging' is manifest in the other direction, in how smells gather community rather than 'other', and in how Singaporean Indians take pleasure in consuming scents and perfuming the home while balancing against social standards. But first I examine how Singaporean Indians carry out capabilities of belonging when seeking to 'deodorise' their bodies in accordance with approved social standards.

### **6.2.3 Smelling to standards and defining boundaries**

'Sensed belonging' recognises that belonging is not simply negotiated but perceived in the everyday interplay of people and the material environment, and emerges in attunement to recognised socially accepted standards. I argue that this attunement entails not only meeting and conforming to these standards, but also in having the capabilities to redefine these—whether in meeting different standards, recognising when they need not apply, or in defining new standards and boundaries altogether.

Racleş recognises the skill and knowledge acquired through dwelling that enable people to identify socially approved standards, including olfactory benchmarks; evaluate themselves against these standards; and do something about it. Cognizant and weary of the perception of Indians smelling afoul, one participant actively ensures that she has the right things in her mobile material collection to mitigate against that eventuality:

'I'm always concerned with how I project to non-Indians. Like I always need to smell good. Always got to make sure that my face is not oily. I didn't even use this [perfume bottle] today but it's always in my bag, it's just a safety thing you know. What if a Chinese person thinks I'm smelly.'

Seeking to meet olfactory standards is then as continuous a pursuit as the concern that she may fall to the margins of non-belonging should 'a Chinese person think [she's] smelly'. With that final statement, this participant also makes clear who she, and most Singaporean Indians, recognise as setting the normative standards, though not by themselves upholding these qualities per se but by their voiced and unvoiced perceptions of Indian bodies.

Sometimes, meeting standards come by way of acknowledgement, as another participant demonstrates:

'I think the body odour thing might be a Singaporean-Indian thing too, or is seen to be. Growing up, even up to today, I'm very mindful about not smelling bad and I feel like when I'm sweaty, I really hate it when people want to hug me, and I always caveat that I'm really sweaty and I might smell bad, because I want to be the one who says I'm smelly and not someone else says it. Yea, I think maybe it's a scarring thing that maybe some of us carry.'

By pre-emptively warning of her potential foul smell, this participant demonstrates the capabilities to recognise socially approved standards and evaluate herself accordingly, as well as mobilise these capabilities to remain in tune with the value standards, even if olfactory standards fail. Even as she speaks of being aware of the perception of Indians as smelling afoul which generates a sense of non-belonging, her attempt to realign with the standard olfactory values nonetheless demonstrate that because belonging is a dialectical movement, the socially accepted norms are open to shifts and redefinition by the perceptive and attuned dweller.

Another strategy in attunement to socially accepted standards that emerged in our workshop discussions though suggests that belonging can also be asserted in redefining olfactory standards and thereby defining the lines between 'us' and 'them'. In an 'olfactory reversal' (Classen 1992: 153), some Singaporean Indians, particularly

Singaporean Tamil women, articulate distance from newer Tamil female migrants through rejecting the practice of oiling the hair with coconut oil. Not only would she stop oiling her hair or use lighter scented and cosmetically packaged oils from 'western brands', the Singaporean Tamil woman would also comment on how new migrant Tamil women used inferior 'Indian brands' or use 'too much' coconut oil, not realising how the heat in Singapore reacts with the denser oil to elicit a pungent odour. While comments like this perhaps conveniently disregard that the southern Tamil regions of India get just as hot, these perceptions are nonetheless formed, rationalised, and articulated through dwelling in Singapore.

Explicitly, Singaporean Tamil women recognise that thicker oils like coconut feel stickier and rancid in Singapore's humid tropical heat. Implicitly, Singaporean Tamil women reject the association with coconut oil in part because they had grown up being called 'smelly' for using the oil, whether or not they actually have. The stereotype of the coconut oil-smelling Indian is thus something Singaporean Indians have suffered and now seek to disassociate from, thus distancing themselves from those who do or are perceived to 'smell of coconut oil'. Several of my participants also pointed out the irony of their own rejection of coconut oil because of the experience and stereotype and name-calling when today 'western' brands and popular haircare trends on social media extol its benefits. Nonetheless olfactory boundaries can be drawn through a racial community along other lines such as nationality or class as in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe where the light delicate scents of the upper class were set against the heavy, coarse scents of the working classes (Classen 1992: 136). Boundary drawing not only seeks to mark out the other, it is also about distancing the other so as to strengthen the claims of the 'us' to its distinct identity and belonging. Just like identity, belonging can also become a resource in in/exclusion discourse employed

towards 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' (Crowley 1999: 30, cited in Antonsich 2010: 649).

Over this section, I have laid out how smell, or rather the perception of smell, informs Singaporean Indian belonging and dwelling in Singapore's plural material world beginning with establishing that, by the nose of some social others, Indians smell. Singaporean Indians themselves are aware of these perceptions having developed the abilities to recognise the voiced and unvoiced judgements and the norms and standards of such others. Recognising these perceptions and projections though weigh on a sense of non-belonging, against which the Singaporean Indian musters capabilities and attunement honed in dwelling to meet accepted norms or redefine them. 'Sensed belonging' is a dialectical movement and, as I have expanded from Racleş (2021), also affords the Singaporean Indian agency as well in their capability to redefine standards and define boundaries against their olfactory 'others'. Smell, or stink, is then not only something projected onto the Singaporean Indian against which they must mitigate, but also a thing whose 'leakiness' the Singaporean Indian can leverage in defining boundaries and asserting belonging over an 'other'. This leaky quality of smell may leave boundaries potent but, as I examine in the next section (6.3), works also to positively define the group as the pleasure of smells can gather a community in shared taste, consumption, and comfort. This gathering though is not untouched by the dangers of leaky boundaries nor removed from necessitating the skilled practice and capabilities set out in this section.

### **6.3. CONSUMPTION AND A SCENT OF BELONGING**

In the discussion thus far, smelling—the act of emitting an odour—has been discussed in largely passive terms for the odorous subject, smells are either perceived as

biologically and racially determined, or are projected onto the subject by the perceiving 'other'. The odorous Singaporean Indian subject is then on the receiving end of olfactory judgements that weigh on their 'sensed belonging'. But just as responding to accepted scent standards involves active perception and attunement (as discussed in section 6.2.3), Singaporean Indians also choose to smell and perfume their bodies and homes in active ways. In this final section of the chapter, I argue for recognising the place of shared smell preferences and of scent consumption in fostering belonging in the way smell consumption and practices diffuse through the domains of self, community, neighbourhood, and home. I start with a brief discussion of how consumption gathers individuals under larger social units of community (6.3.1), then expand this through an examination of how Little India as a neighbourhood facilitates scent consumption and taking shared pleasures in smells (6.3.2), and end with a look at how the consumption of smells in perfuming the home leaks through domains and brings about a scent of belonging.

### **6.3.1 Commodity and Community**

At the start of my workshop, I have my participants unpack their wallets or purses to confront the material collection that moves their day. What emerges as well in this exercise is a picture of each person as a consumer, which my participants characterise as reflective of their habits, socialisation, and identity as Singaporean Indian. The goods and services one consumes is not then an individual pursuit nor an unconscious one, but rather an intersection of social relations and longing that underpin a sense of belonging.

The receipts and store membership cards my participants laid out immediately indexed their consumption patterns. Thus one participant declared that his collection would

unmistakably mark him out as Indian given the receipts from 'Indian shops', mostly in Little India, including one that specialises in Tamil books. Recognising a familiar card across their individual collections, several female participants noted how most of them carried membership cards to a popular beauty salon in Little India, characterising the regular need for the salon's eyebrow threading services as indicative of them and their bodies as Indian in Singapore. As one noted of her salon membership card, 'I think it's something a lot of like other Indian women might have in their wallet but maybe not my Chinese friends', marking out this consumption practice as boundary marker between Indians and Chinese. Little India also shows up here as a key site for consumption, as I will take up in the next section (6.3.2), but what I will briefly explore first is the close relationship that emerges in this exercise between individual consumption and identification with a community.

Calling for an approach to consumption that 'that goes beyond seeing consumption as a terminus for production and a footnote to its social logics' (Appadurai 2005: 61), Arjun Appadurai argues for recognising that a commodity is a 'thoroughly socialised thing' (1986: 6). The meaning and values of commodities are not inherent but rather shaped by social interactions in their exchange and circulation. Consumption then is eminently relational and active, rather than private and passive (ibid: 31). Consumption therefore not only speaks to how people see themselves as individuals, but how they see themselves as part of a larger social unit. As Douglas and Isherwood (1996) argue, consumption is a social process that expresses social relations, creates meaning within communities, and reinforces social norms. Daniel Miller likewise views consumption as a domain through which projects of value are objectified, as simultaneously a domain of practice in the world and a domain in which individuals construct their understandings of themselves in the world (1995a: 156; 1995b: 30).

Consumption, as a practice of dwelling, is an active practice of individuals attuned to shared social mores and values.

One productive site reflective of these values of a community objectified in commodities is the advertisements they consume. As one dominant strand in the study of advertisements argue, advertising reflects society's existing values, mirroring and reinforcing these beliefs back onto society, rather than creating values that were not already there (Pollay 1986; Holbrook 1987; Lantos 1987). With regard to the Singaporean Indian consumer, the advertisements in the *Tamil Murasu*—the Tamil language national newspaper in Singapore—offer a glimpse into the prevailing values of at least the Tamil-reading public. While a comprehensive study of how these advertisements mirror the value shifts over time is beyond the scope of this thesis, my scan of printed advertisements between 1936 and 2021 indicates a sustained interest in scented commodities particularly body soaps, hair oils, laundry detergent bars, and medicated balms. Across these products the quality of fragrance is variably underscored as providing comfort (Figure 23) or even prioritised over affordability (Figure 24). In some, being 'fragrant' works in tandem with its 'cooling' properties (Figure 25), a practical concern in attuning to the climate of the tropics (Figure 26). These advertisements suggest then that the consumption of scent products is popular amongst Singaporean Indians and a competitive field for their retailers. Even products that have a natural smell from their primary ingredient, such as coconut oil, are promoted for the addition of an, arguably more socially accepted, lighter floral fragrance like lavender (Figure 27). While serving practical needs—of cleaning, moisturising, and affording comfort in the tropical heat—these products are also sought out for their scent properties demonstrating that for the Singaporean Indian consumer, smells matter and pleasant smells are especially valued. Advertisements,

when recognised as 'mirrors', demonstrate that consumption is 'produced at the intersection of a range of social relations and longing' (Appadurai 1986: 29).



Figure 23: Advertisement for Cuticura Talcum Powder. *Tamil Murasu*, 2 October 1950, p4.



Figure 24 (left): Advertisement for Lifebuoy. *Tamil Murasu*. 4 April 1962, p4.



Figure 25 (right): Advertisement for Gull Bahar Hair Tonic. *Tamil Murasu*, 5 May 1936, p1.



Figure 26 (left): Advertisement for Margo Soap. *Tamil Murasu*, 5 May 1936, p7.



Figure 27 (right): Advertisement for Swastika Perfumed Coconut Oil (Lavender). *Tamil Murasu*, 1 October 1972, p13.

The Singaporean Indian consumer actively consumes to smell nice, to meet social olfactory standards for belonging as discussed in the section above (6.2). This pursuit of fragrance is not only outwardly concerned but works also to gather the Singaporean Indian community in shared consumption preferences, patterns, and places, as I will now turn to.

### 6.3.2 Little India, Scent Consumption, and a Scent Community

While olfactory boundaries may inform communal distinctions as discussed above (6.2), smells also work to gather a community who share in the pleasures and identification with certain smells. In this section, I examine how smells and their consumption in Little India gather a shared sense of place, community, and belonging for the Singaporean Indian consumer.

In listing objects of Singaporean Indian-ness during my workshop, several participants not only listed 'curry' but articulated a sense of renewed cultural ownership and identification with 'curry' because of the negative olfactory associations made in the dispute over the smell of curry recounted at the start of this chapter (section 6.1). They report a renewed, defiant identification with the smell of curry precisely because of that incident and the negative association of Indians in Singapore with a negatively valued smell of curry. With this, they show how 'the intimate emotionally charged nature of the olfactory experience ensures that such value-coded odours are interiorised by the members of society in a deeply personal way' (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 3). Smells thus bring about an affective identification with a community of people who feel the same way. Shared smells can give partakers a strong 'we' feeling such as when participants unite in the scent of incense at a religious ritual, or bring about a 'tribal feeling' as in the case of the Tukano-speaking tribes of the Colombian Amazon who believe all tribe members share the same general body odour said to mark the tribe's territory (ibid: 160, 135). In these ways, community can coalesce around a shared proclivity or even sense of ownership, over particular smells and the practices that evince such scents. Smells also work to mark out spaces, and work to locate, territorialise, and ground belonging for a community and their (olfactory) ways. For Singaporean Indians, Little India is such a space.

Smells centre the imagination and experience of Little India. Odorous activity had defined the settlement and economy of this neighbourhood since the main Serangoon Road was first cut through the jungle in the 1820s 'leading across the island' from the city in the south to granite quarries in the northeast. The early landscape here was a mix of mangrove swamps, betel nut gardens, and commercial plantations of sugar, nutmeg and coconut (Siddique and Purushottam 1990). As the area quickly developed

over the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the scents from lime pits, working buffaloes, horse races, slaughterhouses, pineapple tinning factories, and oil presses would have hung in the air alongside smells from everyday living as Indian settlement expanded (Ibid.). In the 1930s, the cattle industries gave way to more residential settlement and commercial enterprise. With these shifts, the air changed too. Grocers and provision stores, garland-makers, confectionaries, and public eating houses meant the air carried more 'pleasant' odours of everyday consumption. This now is the way Little India is largely imagined and presented to the visitor through publications (see Rae 2003), guided tours, and 'Heritage Trails'.

Official 'Heritage Trails', drawn up by the National Heritage Board, promote exploration of local spaces and history as shared 'heritage' while simultaneously reiterating certain city spaces as raced. In this invitation to explore, such heritage trails convey sensory ways of understanding history as well as race relations, by offering 'sensory encouragement' in enticing people to 'feel, see, smell and hear' (Low 2015: 206). Low further recognises that such sensory experiences make the past relevant in embodied ways (ibid). Sensory experience of Little India as the place of Indian culture and practice may make the past relevant in embodied ways (ibid.), or work to reduce Indian culture and practice to simple consumption, to something accessible for the right price and dispensable after use. This imagination of Little India as 'consumable' is reinforced with a 'Heritage Trail' route titled 'Shop Till you Drop':

Start along Campbell Lane and experience the kaleidoscope of sights, sounds and smells along this street. You can visit the Little India Arcade and enjoy some Indian sweets or have a henna design drawn on your hands. Or you can head to the Jothi Store & Flower Shop where locals shop for everyday Indian goods ranging from incense sticks to copper utensils. (NHB Little India Heritage Trail)

To the visitor, Little India is presented as a commercial experience, but one underscored by its 'naturalisation' with Indians and Indian consumption (see Chang 2000). Even where the non-Indian regular customer of Little India is recognised, their exchange 'across the culture-gap' is mediated by smell, as described in this piece on the performance of a 'Singapore Scent Trail':

In the absence of a sales patter, smell becomes a correspondingly more crucial way of deriving information about the produce, and the bargaining process begins with the customer's post-sniff reaction. ... The undeniably performative quality of the transactions is clearest to you because you are a stranger here. Their mundane repetition is inaccessible to the casual observer, likewise the gradual "naturalisation" of the scent-scape to the nose of the daily visitor. (Rae 2003: 48-49)

The Little India broadly imagined by and presented to the non-Singaporean Indian is one where consumption is central and smells are heavy in the air but 'natural' to Indians.

Racial enclaves, as Little India is imagined, make for spatial and olfactive boundaries that 'act as an extended metaphor of racialised smells and racial identities' (Low 2009: 104). Racialised smells are mapped and made 'visible' vis-à-vis racial enclaves, producing a picture about race mediated by smell (ibid.). Little India then becomes, for the other, the place where Indian smells are located and where they belong. Low recognises how the notion of the racial/olfactory other extends ethnic enclaves as they conjure immediate and repulsive olfactory perceptions (2005: 410). Little India carries a further 'other-ing'. It smells both of the 'Indian', as contra to the dominant 'Chinese', and of the foreign given that Little India is a popular space for migrant South Asian labourers. As Low records from his participants, the smells noticed by the perceiving other stem from Indian consumption, in the food, produce, and goods sold, and are deemed negative and undesirable—perceptions that easily leak onto the people themselves (ibid. 406). Spatial boundaries then become particularly pronounced in the

face of such leakiness of smell, such that 'Indian smells' are 'acceptable' in Little India but not elsewhere (Low 2009: 105). Distinctive odours that assail the nostrils make a place seem real, gives it character (Tuan 1995: 62). But as Tuan recognises of 'city people [who] gladly bring home pictures of the countryside's views, [but] have no desire to bring home traces of its organic odours,' the non-Indian visitor to Little India not only has no desire to bring these odours with them, they would not welcome it if encountered outside Little India (ibid.). This is not at all the case for the Singaporean Indian who actively seeks to consume the smells of Little India and its scent commodities for their home.

The Singaporean Indian in Little India is not nose-blind to its many strong smells. Rather the fact that it has smell at all is what they recognise, celebrating the odorous availability in contrast to Singapore's otherwise (seemingly) odourless environment. For my interviewee Mr Rajkumar, proprietor of Jothi Store, this odorous, and multi-sensorial, availability makes present a living past unavailable elsewhere in Singapore:

Little India has not changed to the modern Singapore, it is not like Orchard Road or elsewhere. It still stays the same. We still have the shops along the road, selling vegetables, flowers. The essence of the five senses are still around. *Agarbatti* [incense] smell, flowers, Indian music in every shop. And your hands can touch and feel a lot of things, including the food. All the five senses you will find in Little India

Preethi similarly associates Little India's odorous availability with a liveliness and would like to be even more immersed in it:

I would like to stay in Little India, it's the only neighbourhood in Singapore that has a smell. And it's a very beautiful smell that no other part of Singapore or the world smells like. And different parts of Little India have different smells. You know when you exit the MRT station. And you if you exit [the station] onto Buffalo Road, you actually walk past these shops selling vegetables and flowers and it's very fragrant. And it's the only neighbourhood in Singapore where when you exit the MRT, you are immediately buffeted by all these smells.

Little India is thus a space imagined and experienced through its smells, particularly those that tend towards sweet, pleasant, and desired scents originating from the very scent commodities sought and sold. This dual-consumption of the space and its smells is perhaps best embodied in another consumable. Elephant Room, an Indian-inspired cocktail bar founded by a Singaporean Indian mixologist, offers a signature cocktail named 'Jothi Store' after the famous flower store in Little India's Campbell Lane. Their take on a Gin and Tonic, made from three types of jasmine curdled with milk, recreates the scents of the shopfront, primarily marked by the smell of the jasmine garlands for sale. The experience of Little India is so nose-forward that its place in Singaporean Indian consumption can be effectively suggested to the Singaporean Indian consumer simply through scent. Where others might portray the smells of Little India as exotic or essential 'of the strange other', Singaporean Indians experience these smells as part of everyday consumption, as something to buy, eat, use, have, or to enjoy for familiar pleasure and comfort, as something to share in community with. In this way Little India gathers a community around a shared desirability of certain scents. It is where traders and shoppers come together, beyond the commercial-exchange relationship, in a community of shared values and practices around the pleasurable smells of scent commodities that circulate in Singaporean Indian lives.

Flower garlands are one such valued scent commodity and are a recurrent image in the positive olfactory experience and representation of Little India. On one hand, this olfactory consumption is required in religio-cultural practice. Many practices of South Asian religions in general, and popular Hinduism in particular, are dependent on ritual objects, leading to the commodification of *pūjā* items and devotee/consumers' reliance on marketplaces such as those concentrated in Little India (Sinha 2019: 165). Aromatics play a prominent role in perfuming the prayer setting and as offerings to the

gods (see McHugh 2007), as such everyday religious consumption is predominantly of flowers and incense which lose scent or are used up and so need to be replenished often. On the other hand, this recurrent everyday consumption also comes to inform identity, such that for my participants, the smell of 'incense reminds [them] of being Indian here and it's just a very strong memory,' while another pronounced that 'it is so quintessentially us... it just hits a different spot'. Indeed, no other group of products triggered as impassioned involvement amongst my participants as much as those that evoked 'smell' first immediately followed by nostalgic memories, including *odikolon*.

Despite its name, *odikolon*, an Indianised take on 'Eau de Cologne', was marketed as a headache and cooling ointment. As one participant recalls its use, older Singaporean Indians 'will tie a knot in their hankie, put some drops of *odikolon* on the corner and sniff it over the day'. Consuming the smell of *odikolon* was not removed from the consumption of its material form either as my participants recount how 'because this bottle is cut-glass, it was also seen as more *attas* [Singlish for high-class],' and how its physical materiality was entwined with its olfactory memory: 'that particular bottle, the green one, the bottle has never changed, it's the same font, the same cut glass textured bottle'. For several, the 'soothing' smell and green textured bottle was 'a memory from childhood' of adults in the family applying it for all purposes. For others, buying *odikolon* was the link between their childhood memory of family and Little India: 'I didn't know you could buy it elsewhere because I remember my grandfather asking my parents to get it for him whenever we were going to Little India.' While such ointments and other scent products like incense sticks were sold elsewhere, memories of buying them in Little India was a key part of their consumption, as were the consumption of their smells in familial memories, and in 'being Indian'.

As Appadurai (1986) and others have argued, the values of commodities are created in their exchange and circulation, between the marketplace and home, between the retailer of cultural commodities and the cultural practitioner. These shared values and complicity of Little India as consumption space of Singaporean Indians in the practices of Singaporean Indian dwelling is clearly captured by Mr Rajkumar, proprietor of Jothi Store & Flower Shop, one of the largest and amongst the oldest retail stores in Little India:

I would say that Jothi has actually kept the tradition, the Indian culture is intact because the type of products we sold actually kept this, the culture [going]. That's the most important thing I would say because if all these items are not provided, I don't think all these prayers will be there; the younger generation would have forgotten it by now; and the necessity of buying all these products will not have been there. I think since the availability of these products have been there, the customs and traditions and the culture still continues in Singapore, for the Hindu population.

Consumption in Little India generates community as traditions and practices, not just passed down familial generations, but learned from traders skilled in the material requirements of the traditions. Whether it is the buying of such *pūjā* items, incense, flowers, *odikolon*, groceries, or availing of services like eyebrow threading, to shop in Little India is not to do 'India Shopping' wherein one partakes in a construction of a distant and/or remembered 'India' (see Mankekar 2002). Rather it is about 'doing Indian' (see Purushotam 2016), it is part of a Singaporean Indian dwelling that does not entail having to go to select shops in order to 'consume Indian'. For the Singaporean Indian, Little India is an entanglement of belonging, where one is seen as 'natural' to the landscape, where one can share in the pleasures of smells with a likeminded 'scent community', where one can gather the materials and knowledge to aid in the cultural, including olfactory, production of their Singaporean Indian lives and home, as I expand in the next section (6.3.3). To consume in Little India is to then

share in a community of knowledge, as well as a community gathered around shared olfactory values. To consume in Little India is not removed from consuming Little India as shared values, identities, and scents circulate in the social and commodity exchange.

### **6.3.3 Scenting Homes, Leaky Pleasures, and a Scent of Belonging**

Belonging begins at home, it is where, typically, one can move and act freely without having to conform to socially held expectations and standards. Homes are then highly personal and personalised, including the way they smell. But as we have seen in the opening examples of this chapter, the smells of home are not limited to the boundaries of the home. While on one hand, leaky smells entangle the private pleasures and practices of home with the olfactory values of others in this material world, on the other, practices of scenting the home and the consumption that it entails afford a diffusion of home and community. In this final section, I examine how such leaky homes are negotiated in Singaporean Indian dwelling and how this can be productive of belonging.

The home is a key point of orientation for members of a given society, the material house is then extraordinarily important in anthropology for understanding how people are actually made up socially and materially (Buchli 2010: 503). But the house is not just a container but is itself a thing—a coming together of familial, social, economic, and material relations. Lévi-Strauss notes how the house is ‘the objectification of a relation: the unstable relation of alliances which, as an institution, the house functions to solidify, if only in an illusory form’ (1982: 155). For Gell (1998), the Maori meeting house is such a gathering of relations materialised over time. He saw the living members of the community, gathered in the house, as only ‘furnishings’ who would be

absorbed into the solid enduring structure as 'fixtures' (Gell, 1998: 253). The Maori meeting house, the ultimate expression of a distributed artefact and agency, is thus where living family and past ancestors were collected in relations and in the material. While Lévi-Strauss and Gell recognised the social and familial in the material home, more recent studies of the home call attention to how the materials in the home reveal larger entanglements beyond its walls.

Buchli cautions against reifying the dwelling in our intellectual projects and losing sight of the local conditions and meanings and the nature of the wider productive work that dwelling is engaged in (2010: 503). Instead, approaching the home through its material culture is a useful way to understand the complex entanglements of relationships of homes and people, and to consider their consumption (Buchli 2013: 118). Just as how in archaeology, consumption is what ultimately determines where and in what state most excavated objects are found (Dietler 2010: 211), the home offers a snapshot of life and consumption unfolding. Home decoration was one aspect taken up by structuralist studies of the home (see Emission and Smith, 2000) as useful to 'decode' social norms and values (Pink 2004: 63). Works such as those by Daniel Miller (2001, 2008) argue that home decor could neither be read as text nor as reflecting normative values, but rather that these aesthetic qualities of the home were the results of complex relationships between identities, agencies, resources and relationships in the home, and so representative of their situatedness in a set of economic and power relations with the state (Pink 2004: 64; Pink et. al. 2017, 47). The personal, private home then is already entangled with the social, public sphere.

From Lévi-Strauss and Gell, there is also the recognition that the house is a process continuously in the making. In other words, the house unfolds with dwelling. Heidegger

(1971: 161) too had noted the endless and continuous renegotiation of ‘the real dwelling plight’: ‘that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling that they must ever learn to dwell’. Dwelling has to be learnt and re-learnt constantly, and as such ‘creates people as a process without end’ (Buchli 2010: 506). In this, people participate in what Buchli (2013) refers to as a ‘continuous revision’ of their domestic interior, drawing from Pauline Garvey (2001) and Anthony Giddens (1991). Pink et. al. likewise argue that the materiality of home is always in progress itself and conceptualise the home as a continually changing environment, ‘a moving ecology of things and processes’ wherein ‘the material, sensory and digital elements of home are also involved in processes of decay, damage, repair or renewal’ (2017: 48). Home, its environment and materiality, unfold with dwelling and is thus constituted by the material and sensory elements that are generated from the practices of dwelling.

My participants too pointed to these material and sensorial elements of their homes in listing their ‘objects of Singaporean Indian-ness’. In general, the first rounds of listing churned out objects and materials that a public, non-Indian audience might recognise as ‘Singaporean Indian’. After some introspection about what has been left unsaid, my participants were more willing to explore their everyday and intimate relations to objects, at which point the new listing was overwhelmingly about the things in their home-dwelling. One participant explains her thought process in the second round: ‘for me I was thinking of home, like what I wake up to the *oothapatti* (incense sticks), that whole smoke and the smell, no need alarm clock; so it was more intimate within my own house.’ Another more pointedly turned to her senses: ‘I felt like I wasn’t just thinking with my eyes but with my ears and my nose; I sort of re-live my day which starts with the smell of *laung* (clove) and *elaichi* (cardamom) because I make *cha* (tea) in the morning.’ This more intimate approach thus elicited listings of sensorial

experiences around everyday dwelling practices of cooking; around prayer rituals including the smokiness and smells of incense and *sambrani* (benzoin resin), the smell of fresh jasmine, marigold, and rose, the sounds of the handbell, and of devotional songs playing on the CD player; and also around everyday media consumption including recurring jingles and voices of popular presenters on the local Tamil radio and television channels. The use of incense sticks and *sambrani* was particularly reiterated across the workshop groups, as a distinct experience of the home, as a core memory of their childhood home, and as a practice shared across Singaporean Indian homes regardless of religion. One participant, who had found it hard to 'identify something Singaporean Indian' at home as part of their takehome assignment and even recruited her family members into the exercise, ultimately found her and her family's 'Singaporean Indian-ness' in their use of *sambrani*. Her family later shared how their home was considered racially 'empty' or neutral enough that it was used as location for a Chinese family's home in the filming of a local television production. The exception to this apparent visual neutrality would be the olfactory trace from their weekly burning of *sambrani*.

These sensorial experiences of home, informed largely by the smells of cooking and praying, anchor the place-making of the home space as one of familiarity and comfort in the ease and certainty of routine. The home as a place to bring back, make, and enjoy smells is then a gathering of several entangled strands of consumption in the objectification of the Singaporean Indian belonging. In this way, consumption is less about the production of self-identity through processes of appropriation (see Miller 1988) but is entangled in producing 'the ways that home feels', something theories of atmosphere draw our attention to (Pink et. al. 2017: 55). The atmosphere of home though always already there, is always changing through the movements and

practices of dwelling, as connected to the theorising of home as processual (ibid.). As the atmosphere of the home shifts with dwelling, it becomes attuned with everyday routines such that one feels familiarity, comfort, and belonging in being able to just 'be themselves' at home.

My participants report a similar duality of their home and public self, where in the private confines of the home is where it is safe and acceptable to 'be Indian', and the 'outside' is not. This is sometimes taught and reinforced by well-meaning parents who have had more practice with dwelling as Singaporean Indian:

[Singaporean Indian] people have given up a big part of their Indianness to secure a socially acceptable position. Like when growing up, my mum raised us to speak correct English, be proper conversationalist, just have proper behaviour. [We could] be Indian at home, just not outside.

Likewise with smell: the home is where it is safe and acceptable to produce and partake in some of the dearer olfactory practices. That though, is also one of the threats of the home. For where the home is where one enjoys 'Indian smells', it is also where one prepares their bodies for the outside where 'Indian smells' are less appreciated. The leaky, tricky thing about smells is, they stick. So, the home wherein one seeks to deodorise is also a source of 'stink'.

Low notes how olfactive management techniques (e.g., perfuming and cleaning), presented by Goffman (1956) through the dramaturgical concepts of 'backstage' and 'front stage', reveal how the body undergoes different stages and regions of preparation on a continual basis, which therefore reveals the body not as a passive object for analysis but rather as an active and acting subject situated within social/olfactory dynamics of appraisal, acceptance, and rejection (Low 2006: 626). Singaporean Indians, aware of the socially accepted olfactory standards actively

prepare themselves 'backstage', in the home, through all manner of hygiene and cosmetic practices including showering frequently, laundering and sunning clothes, applying scented talcum powders and perfumes. My participants, on top of describing how they would carry perfume in their bags, also included in their listing exercise soaps and grooming products like Hamam Soap, Vico turmeric cream, Yardley talcum powder, Fair and Lovely face cream, and Brylcreem. These are Indian cosmetic brands or otherwise products favoured by Indian consumers in India as in Singapore, and are most easily and frequently purchased from shops in Little India. The use and associations made with these demonstrate Classen's point that 'olfactory management takes place on numerous levels: the body, the home, the workplace and the marketplace' (1994: 8). The home is a liminal space facilitating this bodily transition of smell and, with it, identity (see Reno 2016, 56). But unlike the homes of landfill workers that 'become second skins to facilitate purification' (Reno 2016: 48), the homes of Singaporean Indians stick onto their bodies like a second skin threatening to undo the purification.

Martin Manalansan recognised a similar predicament amongst his Asian American informants in New York City. Where 'specific [native] food smells were not only nostalgic fuses that triggered memories but they also provoked anxiety,' because 'these odours adhered to clothes, to walls and to bodies' and would then mark or index their bodies as 'immigrant' (2006: 45). Food smells are a particular hazard in most Singaporean Indian homes because of the layout of most public housing flats, as one of my participants explains:

We hang the clothes inside, and usually [the ceiling racks for clothes poles] is in the kitchen, and they cook there. So it's the clothes that end up smelling, especially like *vendiyam* (fenugreek seeds). So that's my understanding. Because our homes, we're cooking with these spices and it just gets stuck to the clothes.

*Sambrani* smoke also poses another hazard. As much as my participants share in how this smell makes the homes 'feel' Indian, when it sticks to clothes and one ventures outside the home it marks one out as 'Indian', or as another participant comically shares, with some other kind of deviance:

Once when my mum did the smoky *sambrani* thing in the morning, then my brother Jasdeep went to Junior College and his teacher said to his friend "I smell smoke on Jasdeep, is he smoking?"

Through its smells, the home leaks and sticks to the body, betraying the olfactory pleasures and identities one might have sought to shed in their preparations for the socially accepted standards of the outside. The home is not a sealed container, and neither does it seal away from the outside world the identities that entangle and emerge from it.

The leakiness of smells most clearly reveals the entanglements of the home, and is where the practices of home come up against the material world and its olfactory values. This chapter began with just such an example with the smells of curry cooking from an Indian household. Mr Rajkumar of Jothi Store recounts how similar encounters and consideration for neighbours informed a customer's choice of incense sticks:

There are many who still prefer strong smells in *agarbattis* (incense sticks). They like to come back home and have that fragrance out there. And you know they're surprised that the smell also travels to the neighbours and the neighbours will say "Wah, very nice smell" but there are some sticky neighbours that will say "horrible smell, smell so Indian" and all that. We get feedback like that also, customers come and say "Oh my neighbour is not a good neighbour, the smell of the *agarbatti* was very nice but then they commented it smells, the whole corridor smells". So this person changed to a lighter smell, the *agarbatti*. "Don't give me a very strong one, I like it but you know my neighbour's complaining."

When the perfuming pleasures of the home exceed its boundaries, leaky smells entangle the Singaporean Indian in conflict with (implicitly non-Indian) neighbours. In

attuning to different judgements of scent value and in mitigating against 'sensed non-belonging', the Singaporean Indian consumer makes adjustments to the scent-commodity sought and to the smell of their home. Home-making then is not removed from the greater environment outside its boundaries, nor is the private scent practices of the Singaporean Indian removed from the material world in which they dwell.

But the very leakiness of smell beyond the home can also bring together a 'scent community' across homes, bridging belonging through shared practice and olfactory tastes. Rani, whom I interviewed in her home, describes her and her neighbours' exchange of 'smoke signals':

Like you see, Tuesdays and Fridays my Hindu neighbour downstairs, 17th floor, she will put *sambrani* then she will do the clink clink clink [handbell singing] sound. Every Friday, I'll put *sambrani* same time. Plus 25th storey, my buddy, another [Indian] Catholic family, she will put *sambrani* also. So my *sambrani*, her *sambrani* will be the same [smell]. If Friday I completely forget, I'll smell her *sambrani* and I'll feel guilty about it then I'll put *sambrani*.

Their shared schedule coalesces a sense of community and of acceptability (even expectation) around this smell practice. But note how Rani's recount only includes other Indian families, albeit of different religions, who shared in the practice of burning *sambrani*. Leaky scents then are not unbounded in the ways they bring people together. Here, it is in the shared scented pleasures and practices that a community already racialised on their olfactory values comes together. Where most other experiences of neighbourly interactions around leaky smells have turned negative for the Singaporean Indian, it is in finding common ground with fellow Singaporean Indian neighbours and their same leaky smells that one shares in the scent of belonging.

Consumption is an active means of generating belonging for the Singaporean Indian, through continued consumption of scent commodities that enable smell practices. In the circulation of such commodities, olfactory values of the community too are

circulated and reinforced. Little India is a key site of this market exchange but is also itself consumed by Singaporean Indians for its own smells, their cultural connections, and the nostalgic relations of familial scent consumption. In the way commodities are highly socialised things, the commercial and social relations that emerge between buyers and sellers of scents in Little India give rise to an important sense of belonging and place where these desires to partake in scents and shared olfactory affinities draw together a 'scent community'. The exchange then is not only of commodities, but of cultural knowledge and practices around shared olfactory values as Singaporean Indians bring these products back to scent themselves and their homes. But homes, as with smells, are leaky. Both are not contained by boundaries and instead entangle the private and public. Enjoying the pleasures of scented practices at home also draw Singaporean Indians into entanglements with neighbours. This may be antagonistic in which case the attuned Singaporean Indian may respond with changes to their scent consumption and practices so as to mitigate against 'sensed non-belonging'. Or, these leaky smells may bring together a 'scent community' amongst neighbours who share in a scent of belonging.

#### **6.4 CONCLUSION: LEAKY RELATIONS AND SENSED BELONGING**

This chapter has considered the ways smells leak, other, and gather to demonstrate how smells, as part of practices of dwelling in this material and social world, materially and sensorially weigh on the sense of belonging of Singaporean Indians. Racleş' (2021) notion of 'sensed belonging' as a set of adaptive capabilities in response to socially accepted standards, and akin to Ingold's (2000) skilled practices of dwelling, provides a conceptual model for making sense of Singaporean Indian olfactory habits, practices, and consumption patterns. The leakiness of smells, like the leakiness of

'things', draw attention to the entangled relations of self, the 'other', body, community, market, the home, and neighbourhood.

Smells gather the community and space of Little India as one where the scents of Indian practices and consumption have belonging. In studying scent consumption, I have shown how smells also draw together the marketplace of Little India with Singaporean Indian homes. Smells and homes though, leaky as they are, transgress the private/public boundaries to entangle private practices with the world beyond. Where these come up against negative perceptions, it weighs on 'sensed belonging' and informs its becoming. Though, the capability to make adjustments to their scented practices in response is also demonstrative of active and skilled attunement to the material and social realities of Singapore. Singaporean Indian 'sensed belonging' is then an ever-emergent process—a becoming with and through scented presences—responsive to ascribed olfactory judgements and actively produced in the continuous attunement and skilled practice of making and minding smells.

## Chapter 7

### Regenerating A Sounded Custom: Thaipusam

In 2021 and 2022, the years of my fieldwork, Thaipusam had been put on hold. Cancelling the 4km long foot procession through the city was not unforeseen given Singapore's pandemic protocols in this period. The Singaporean Indian, specifically Tamil Hindu, community seemed to be largely acquiesced in the decision in the interest of public health. The community's silence on the matter though, was for me a loud juxtaposition to the uproar a decade before. In 2011, an enthused campaign of online posts and articles, letters to the newspapers and parliamentarians, and meetings between organisers and participants saw the rescinding of restrictions on the playing of instruments on the procession route published that year. With the memory of that demand—to be allowed to walk with sounds—in my mind, I wondered if others similarly thought about the absence of these sounds and footsteps. In response to the cancellation of the 2021 Thaipusam procession, *Vel Vel: a Sonic Walk* was launched as a recreation of 'the experience of walking the pilgrimage route through a multidisciplinary audio-visual-text experience' (The Arts House, 2021). On 28 January 2021, the day of Thaipusam, I walked the route listening to *Vel Vel* with my earphones in. As I listened to the recorded sounds of Thaipusam in my ear, I could still hear the sounds of mundane goings-on around me from the same streets. In my ear, a group of people sang songs to Murugan while Bollywood film songs blared from a shop along Serangoon Road. In such moments of sonic meshing, *Vel Vel's* returning of Thaipusam sounds to the space not only highlighted the procession's absence but also drew my attention to just how entangled the processors' walk and their sounds were with the air and grounds of the urban space on, in, and with which it moves.

Thaipusam is a Tamil Hindu festival dedicated to the deity Murugan. While celebrated in Tamil Nadu, India, Thaipusam is far more spectacularly marked in Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius—countries with significant settled Tamil diasporas. As part of the observations, these communities of devotees take on foot processions carrying elaborate *kavadis* (lit. ‘burden’) of several sizes and shapes to meet Murugan at his temple. In Singapore, the Thaipusam observation includes two major processions: a silver chariot procession of the deity Murugan between three temples, and a foot procession of devotees and their supporters between two temples. Both these paths are cut right through the heart of the city, drawing many spectators, necessitating the permission and cooperation of state authorities, and requiring that participants attune their practices to the urban space. Being in the heart of town has also raised all manner of concerns around security, decorum, and congestion, all of which are frequently returned to the question of sound. This chapter is about Thaipusam’s sounds and sound makers, how both are entangled in Singapore’s material world and attuned to it in ways that seek to ensure a future for this sounded custom.

Thaipusam is perhaps one of the best-known and most referenced events associated with Singaporean Indians. This is unsurprising given its very public nature, the participation of tens of thousands of people, and the spectacle of devotees with pierced tongues and cheeks, men baring highly decorated 4-metre-high *kavadis*, and women and children carrying milk pots on their heads that would otherwise not be expected of disciplined, reserved Singapore. It is however, surprisingly understudied. The few extant studies have approached Thaipusam as a religious observance, examining the social aspect of vow-fulfilment and pilgrimage (Babb 1976, Kong 2005), the legitimation of Hindu popular practice (Sinha 2011), and the labour and creativity that go into making *kavadis* (Sinha 2017). Though study of the sounds of Thaipusam

(Sykes 2015a) has been limited, it is this element that has seized public attention. For reasons discussed later (section 7.2.1) sound has come to be centred in popular discourse around Thaipusam, but this is largely imagined in antagonistic terms: pitting state sonic regulation against a minority community's religious sounds, or the pious respectability of traditional music against the ill-disciplined carnival of rowdy drumming. This chapter is, in part, a response to this limited view. To re-collect Thaipusam in an extraordinary period where it went unseen, unwalked, and unsounded, I draw on a multi-modal approach bringing together my own experiences walking Thaipusam with that of two frequent participants and sound-makers—Ramesh, creator of *Vel Vel*, and Thiru, a prominent practitioner and promoter of Indian percussion,—online videos of the procession shot and uploaded by participants between 2011 and 2024, and the photograph and newspaper archives covering the event since 1927 and 1917, respectively.

I begin with the recognition of Thaipusam as a Singaporean Indian thing (section 7.1)—its movements entangled and attuned with a material world of urban and sonic spaces shared with non-participants, available to the gaze and perceptions of social others, and also open to the heterogenous approaches of its participants. Where this plurality of ways to walk and sound has been framed as discord, I argue instead for paying attention to how these chords actually play out on the path (section 7.2.2). The polyphonic realities of Thaipusam, I argue, are demonstrative of the attunement, creative improvisation, and collaboration that underscore a sounded Thaipusam, and that ultimately is the sound of a coming together of various approaches in ensuring a future (section 7.3). It is in these entanglements that the identity and belonging of the Singaporean Indian community, primarily the Tamil Hindu community, perdures as they seek to regenerate the sounded custom of Thaipusam.

## 7.1 THAIPUSAM: A SINGAPOREAN INDIAN THING

In this section, I argue for a view of Thaipusam as ‘thing’, as an entanglement of flows between devotees and spectators, their sounds, the procession path, and the urban environment of Singapore. In this way, Thaipusam is an attuned movement through and ever-emergent out of the Singaporean material, policy, and social landscape. Rather than conceive of this religious procession as simply a recreation of a Tamil Hindu festival in a diasporic space, I argue for a recognition of Thaipusam as enacting a unique Singapore Hindu sacred geography in a material world shared with and in sight of social others. As the most publicly visible religious rite, Thaipusam is a key site for seeing and presenting the Singaporean Indian— synecdochically through the majority Tamil Hindu community and, to a smaller extent, also with the participation of other non-Tamil, even non-Hindu communities. Both in its spectacular nature and in its conduct, Thaipusam should also be recognised for more than its religious aspects. I draw attention to the ways Thaipusam is as much what happens along the path as on it, in the ways social and sonic participation exceeds the barricaded lane and the urban environment of downtown Singapore is drawn into the walk. Entangled in these ways, Thaipusam is a ‘thinging thing’, entrenched in the material world of Singapore, and not merely walked on its surface.

Thaipusam is the most visible religious rite in Singapore today. Observed on the full moon day of the Tamil month of *Thai* (between January and February), devotees process from Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road along a 4-kilometre route through the city to meet the Hindu deity Murugan at Sri Thendayuthapani Temple on Tank Road. The *kavadi* and bodily piercings dominate the popular visual spectacle of Thaipusam, but these are accoutrements to a simpler task: to bring a pot of milk (or

sometimes sugar) to Murugan in penance, plea, or gratitude. Male devotees may do so with the *alagu kavadi* (spiked *kavadi*), *thol kavadi* (shoulder *kavadi*), or *ratham kavadi* (chariot *kavadi* pulled via hooks pierced in the bearer's back). There is also the *karumbu kavadi* or *thottil kavadi* (sugarcane or cradle *kavadi*), which supports an infant and is carried at both ends by parents in gratitude for the child's birth. The *paal kudam* (milk pot) may be borne by anyone and is typically seen carried by women and children, as well as many of the male Indian foreign workers in Singapore for whom this is a lower-cost option to perform their devotion. Across the milk carrying schemes, devotees essentially seek to re-perform Idumban's 'burden walk' from Tamil Hindu mythology. Tasked to carry two hills from the Himalayas to South India, the demon Idumban tied them to either end of the god Brahma's staff and carried this in the form of a *kavadi*. When he took a break at Palani, he found the *kavadi* he had put down stuck to the ground. Murugan, appearing as a young ascetic boy claimed the hills as his own and defeated Idumban in battle. Humbled, Idumban devoted himself to Murugan and is figured in Murugan temples today as a doorway guardian carrying his *kavadi*.

Thaipusam processors recognise their re-performance of this myth with a *pūjai* (prayer session) dedicated to Idumban conducted in the home immediately following the procession, as well as on first taking on the burden. All through the day of Thaipusam, the grounds of Perumal Temple rings with the invocation '*idumban kadamban vara / ettukudi velan vara*' as devotees receive their first piercings and the *kavadi* is lifted onto their shoulders. This call-and-refrain raised by the *kavadi* bearer's entourage of friends and family roughly translates as: May Idumban and Kadamban (epithet for Murugan) arrive / May the Velan (epithet for Murugan) of Ettukudi (site of a Murugan temple) arrive too. As this invocation and the myth point to, this practice has its origins

amongst the Tamil Hindus of southern India. Yet, Thaipusam in Singapore is not a mere replication of a 'homeland' practice. It is rather an attunement to the Singapore landscape enacting, through its paths and flows, a Singapore Hindu sacred geography (Eck 2011).

As much as devotees take part in Thaipusam with vows and pleas for a nominal Murugan, they do so in pilgrimage to the operational Murugan (see Babb 1976) installed in the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple on Tank Road (also known colloquially as Tank Road Temple). Chants of 'Singapur Sri Thandayuthapani Muruganukku Arogara' (trans. 'salutations to Sri Thendayuthapani Murugan of Singapore') further flag this specifically located Murugan as important. Even as the Tank Road Murugan and his temple is held in trust by the Chettiar community, the collective ritual of Thaipusam produces him as a deity belonging to the whole Hindu community in Singapore and 'a divine embodiment of the identity of the South Indian Hindus within the setting of a culturally plural national society' (Babb 1976: 14). But participation drew from all quarters of local Hindus, including higher caste Hindus as well as north Indians (Sinha 2011: 230; Rai 2009: 10). Non-Hindus too have been seen to take part, and until the hardening of Sikh distinction in the 1980s and 1990s, it was not uncommon to spot Sikhs carrying *kavadis* and milk pots (see *ST*, 7 February 1974, p7; 10 February 1979, p17). Jim Sykes too recognises the importance of Hindu religious festivals for the promotion of a pan-Indian identity, noting that by the 1920s Thaipusam had transcended 'its roots in Tamil Hinduism to become a display of Singaporean Indian identity in the public sphere' (2015b: 502). Embraced by the wider Singaporean Indian community, Thaipusam here must be understood as a home-grown movement. It is not a transposition of 'homeland' practices that seek authenticity in an ability to achieve 'completeness and exact likeness' of homeland practices, as is

the case of Tamil Hindu festivals conducted by Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in Norway (Jacobsen 2009: 189) or in Britain (Jones 2020).<sup>8</sup>

The day before the foot procession, a processional image of Murugan is installed in a silver chariot and set off on a one-day excursion to visit the temples of his brother, Vinayagar, and his mother, the goddess Shakti whose many forms includes Mariamman. Before dawn, Murugan's silver chariot leaves Tank Road for a stopover outside Sri Mariamman Temple on New Bridge Road before continuing on to Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple on Keong Siak Road. The processional image of Murugan is brought into this temple—where Murugan stays with his brother, Vinayagar—for the day before he is set back in the silver chariot for the return journey. Before dusk, Murugan's silver chariot, preceded by a few dozen Chettiar men and boys carrying the shoulder *kavadi*, heads back to his temple in Tank Road taking a route through the Central Business District to receive offerings from devotees at designated stops (see section 7.3). This mode of processional journey, in traditional South Indian practice, serves as a means for the expression of socio-spatial relationships (Babb 1976: 14). The silver chariot is also referred to as a *nadamaadum kovil*, or 'walking temple', that brings god to the people (Sinha 2008: 171). In his 'walking temple' Murugan not only sees his devotees, and temples of his mother and brother, but also sees the town of Singapore which he is entrusted to watch over. This route through town locates the Shaivite divine family in the landscape of Singapore, but also re-traces and recharges sites of early and present migration and financial connections of the Indian, particularly

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<sup>8</sup> There have been, in recent years, Hindu processions in Singapore that seek explicitly to recreate the event in India with little to no engagement with the Hindu sacred geography of Singapore. See for instance, the 2006 Ratha Yatra in Sinha (2008).

Chettiar, community in Singapore, entangling a sacred geography with global commercial and kin networks (as I detail in section 7.3). The return of Murugan's 'walking temple' to his Tank Road temple sets off the Thaipusam foot procession, the second leg of the journey, from Perumal Temple through Little India to Tank Road. Here the image of the walking temple takes on a different shape as the *kavadis* are themselves temple shrines in miniature (Figure 28), and devotees carry Murugan himself (and other gods) on another walk (Babb 1976: 9). Seeing these as part of the same journey underscores how Thaipusam is a collection of paths and points in a Singaporean Hindu sacred geography, one that is moved by both gods and people.



Figure 28: A kavadi bearer carries a uniquely designed kavadi making literal the idea that kavadis are temple shrines in miniature. The more typical tiered kavadi structure may be seen in the background.  
*Still from 'Thaipusam 2012 @ Singapore (Night Kavadis)' 0:51.*

The Thaipusam foot procession is clearly marked as a movement of Singaporean Indians with tens of thousands of devotees and participants stretched out across the 4km route in town. Such a movement involves a binocular vision of the world where 'movement and knowledge [is] gained from a coordinated use of the senses in carrying out various tasks', as opposed to the monocular perspective of maps, conquest, and ownership that is fixed and distant from the body (Olwig 2008: 81). This binocular

modality 'engenders a sense of belonging that generates landscape as a place of dwelling and doing in the body politic of a community' (ibid. 81, 84). The Thaipusam procession is a collective movement of the Indian community with 'feet on the *ground*, not in space' (Ingold 2008: 29), with a sense of belonging emergent from this entanglement with the environment. Studying Walking Days in the industrial towns of North West England, Julia Bennett argues that these embodied practices of walking 'create people of the place, "local subjects" who belong here through incorporation into the body of the rhythms' of movement, time, and music (2017: 57). As part of the making and marking of Singaporean Indian subjectivity, the Thaipusam procession, like the walk of Walking Days, 'stems from the community who participate...by organising, walking and watching; being part of a network that exists...not only [for] the day' (Jenkins 1999, as cited in Bennett 2017: 67). Thaipusam in Singapore should be understood in these terms, as a walk of 'local subjects' (Appadurai 1996: 179) who exist beyond the walk, who are on other days still part of the rhythm of the land. Though there is significant participation of migrant Indian labourers and professionals in Thaipusam, they are typically understood as joining in on an established local practice and must follow the customs and rules of Singapore's Thaipusam. As the long-standing practice organised and walked by Singaporean Indians, Thaipusam in Singapore is not the same as newer practices of Thaipusam in London or Germany where increasing visibility of Tamil ritual practices are seen as evidence of increased confidence of a non-native community claiming their own place (Jones 2020; Luchesi 2008; David 2009).

Like Walking Days, Thaipusam is a liminal event outside the everyday or mundane, which heightens the senses and makes such occasions more memorable (Bennett 2017: 60). Thaipusam is then not only a walk of 'local subjects' but a key site for

informing their subjectivity, where ‘this very public display of Hinduism has the power to shape public perceptions about the Hindu community’ (Kong 2005: 7). Though there are other festivals associated with the Indian-Hindu community, none are as public, as concentrated in one area, or come close to the spectacle of Thaipusam. The attendance at Thaipusam of key political figures have thereby over the years been a key means of demonstrating mutual support and endorsement between the state and the Indian community. Proceedings have been attended by representatives of the colonial state such as Major-General Sir Neil Malcolm and Sir Cecil Clementi (*SFP*, 7 February 1923, p91; *Malaya Tribune*, 1 February 1934, p10; *SFP*, 25 January 1940, p5). The continued presence of state representatives post-independence demonstrates just how this annual walk ‘is a public assertion of the importance of the Hindu community within the Republic’ (Babb 1976: 14). Recognising the place of Thaipusam in Singaporean Indian subjectivity is also a reminder of the importance of the social aspect and collective mode (Babb 1976) of Thaipusam participation.

This social air of the day’s walk is evident in several ways. A *kavadi* bearer’s entourage plays important ritual and practical roles in supporting his journey—transporting, assembling, and adjusting the *kavadi* en route; conducting rituals before, during, and after the procession; singing songs or just walking in company to keep morale up. In recent years, organisers have also mandated the appointment of a ‘Kavadi Representative’ for each *kavadi* bearer who will help in liaising with organisers (STT and SPTT 2024). The individuals who take up these roles are typically family and friends who are not removed from the social aspects of the day. *Kavadis* frequently move in packs including women and children carrying milk pots, and other kin including young children who are there to support the effort and participate in what is essentially a family gathering (Figure 29). This familial involvement also serves a longer-term

purpose: socialising and en-skilling younger members in the practice of Thaipusam (section 7.3). It is in this coming together of families and the community at large that Thaipusam also features as a fun, social event. Up until the outbreak of World War Two in Singapore, Thaipusam was a three-day festival complete with street performers, and road-side vendors (Figure 30). This carnival-like atmosphere, on top of the visual spectacle of the procession, also drew non-Indian spectators (Figure 31). It would seem that wartime interruptions permanently put an end to the three-day stretch of festivities including a culminative firework display (Singapore Free Press 1938: 3), but the festive and social nature of the day continues. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was not uncommon for families to picnic along the route (Figure 32). Today, ice-cream vendors may be found along the path, reminiscent of earlier mobile snack vendors. Various Hindu organisations and family groups take up officially mounted stands to distribute free drinks and vegetarian food packets to participants and spectators, enabling ad-hoc picnics alongside the procession. This social aspect of the day is often obscured from writing on Thaipusam. Unlike the steady march and unswerving gaze of occupying forces who simply march along roads, inhabitants more usually step across them because 'for inhabitants, the business of life lies not at the end of the road but in the lands on either side of it' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 13). Participants at Thaipusam do not simply walk uninterrupted on the path but constantly respond to goings on along it, whether that takes the form of heeding traffic-crossing signals, joining in on music playing from the sides, pausing to chat with an acquaintance spotted in the crowd, or even hopping off the path to get supplies, snacks, a replacement drum, or to locate a friend seeking to join in on the group's walk. Walking Thaipusam then is an attuned practice, a rhythmic rather than metronomic activity, that calls for a consciousness that is not confined within the head

but ‘reaches out into the environment along multiple pathways of sensory participation’ (Ingold 2011a: 18). I wish to draw attention to this aspect of the walk and remember that Thaipusam is as much what happens alongside the processional path as on it.



Figure 29: A family of kavadi bearers and their supporters in 1977. Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. PCD0494 – 0044



Figure 30: Street vendor on the sidelines of Thaipusam in 1965. Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 19980000572 - 0087



Figure 31 (Left): Spectators across races watching street performers on the sidelines of Thaipusam in 1955. *Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 20210000761 - 0454*

Figure 32 (Right): Family enjoying a picnic on the sidelines of Thaipusam in 1955. *Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 20210000761 - 0448*

In line with that, it is also worth remembering how the processional path we know today came to be, and how this annual walk had and continues to entangle itself with other lines and flows of Singapore's emerging urban environment. The observation of Thaipusam with a foot procession of *kavadis* may be dated to the foundation of the Tank Road temple in 1859 (HEB 2005: 79). In the initial decades, the procession was not made on a singular path as it is today, but rather had 'kavadi bearers walking from temples all over the island and ending their devotional procession at Sri Thandayuthapani Temple at Tank Road' (ibid.). By 1931, these radial lines were consolidated into a singular path, and *kavadis* were prepared at and set forth from Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road (*SFP*, 3 February 1931, p10). Perhaps the clearest indicator that Thaipusam here is truly Singaporean is the pragmatic choice of Perumal Temple as starting point. In practice, each devotee should carry their 'burden' over a certain distance to the deity and therefore would have to begin their journey somewhere other than the Tank Road temple (Babb 1976: 8). Perumal Temple, some

4km away, was chosen for reasons of convenience alone (ibid.). There is no underlying Hindu cosmological or mythical rationale for this choice, unlike the chariot visits to the temples of Mariamman and Vinayagar. To casually connect the two major (and previously oppositional) sects—Perumal being a Vaishnavite deity and Murugan a Saivite one—would be unthinkable in India but in true Singaporean standard, pragmatism is paramount. That a Sivan temple was on the procession route, until 1983, but —perhaps deemed too near being only 800m away—was not chosen as the starting point further underscores how the procession is not a simple transposition of a processional practice but the enactment of a uniquely Singaporean Hindu sacred geography informed by its urban landscape and its pragmatic principle.

The same considerations also shape *kavadi* design. Singapore is also a site for the design and manufacture of *kavadis*, particularly the multi-tiered spiked *kavadis* which are made by small groups of men, often linked through kinship, who each have their own specialisation in production (Sinha 2017). The end product is a *kavadi* design that is ‘easily flat-packable and re-assembled, like IKEA furniture’, as an informant of mine characterises. Just as the path is practically attuned, the Singapore-made *kavadi* meets the practical limitations of storage in the average Singaporean home. The landscape of the walk also directly shapes *kavadi* design. Since the 1980s, organisers had ruled a height restriction of 4 metres on *kavadis*, though this was not strictly enforced until 1995. The limit was deemed necessary for the safety of devotees negotiating the ceilings and doorways of the temples but also necessary for the safety of the city when taller *kavadis* ‘risk getting entangled in wires, tree branches and overhead bridges along the route’ (ST, 16 December 1994, p31). Even the previously bullock-drawn silver chariot had to become motorised to meet changing road regulations (Sinha 2008: 162), and later also revert to a shorter model when the newly

made chariot was too tall that its top would touch the trolley bus wires on the route (ST, 23 January 1932, p12). The eventual dissolution of trolley buses in the city would resolve this issue but the laying of another transport line would permanently alter the processional path and en-route practices.

In 1983, the 'Orchard Road Sivan Temple' had to move to make way for the construction of underground train station now known as Dhoby Ghaut (ST, 10 January 1983, p6; Figure 33). While this Sivan Temple was neither start nor end point of the procession, it was a key pit stop where processors paused to pay obeisance to Siva, father of Murugan and prime deity of the Saivite sect. With its removal, the procession route would no longer take up a lane on the busy Orchard Road. For ten years, until its new premise was built in Geylang in 1993, the Sivan Temple was temporarily housed at Perumal Temple which allowed Thaipusam participants to 'visit' before setting off on their procession (The Straits Times 1986: 20; Kong 2005: 13). Continuing to afford this practice today, organisers bring a processional icon of Siva from the Geylang Sivan temple to the premise of Perumal Temple. So while Lily Kong is right to observe that 'the state's control of the processional route and the resultant modifications to religious practice suggest that significant priority is given to secular needs over the symbolic meanings invested by a religious community' (2005: 14), we should also recognise the organisers' and community's abilities to attune symbolic practices in response to the shifting urban and regulatory landscape. Perhaps part of this attunement and dexterity is afforded in Hindu spatial and ritual practice.



Figure 33: Workers observing the passing procession from the construction site of Dhoby Ghaut station, in 1985. *Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 19980006100 - 0037*

Hindu ideas of positively and negatively charged spaces are also mapped onto Singapore's secular geography. As the *kavadi* bearer commences their procession, a member of the entourage breaks a coconut at the threshold of Perumal Temple, symbolising an auspicious start. Where the processional path crosses in front of the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple on Serangoon Road (and the Sivan Temple previously), the act is repeated as a symbolic act of offering oneself. Though the Thaipusam path takes the lane on the opposite side of the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, devotees still imagine being right on her doorstep, ignoring the three lanes of traffic that pass between. Organisers provide large metal bins to break the coconuts in and put up netting and station volunteers to keep stray coconut fragments from the road and off the processional path. Conversely, intersecting paths are spiritually dangerous and highly inauspicious in Hindu geography. Major road junctions thus require ritual remedy. Where the path crosses junctions with Kitchener Road, Bukit Timah Road, and Middle Road, and turns onto Orchard Road and Penang Road, a member of the *kavadi*'s entourage cuts a lime in half, circles the halves in front of the

*kavadi* bearer and tosses them to the sides. With these rituals, the urban landscape is drawn into a sacred one and its dangers are made safe.

That said, the path is never entirely sacred nor profane. Mundane elements of walking through town constantly come up against the flows of a religious procession. Junctions are additionally charged for these reasons. They are where one is likely to hear processors complaining about having to wait at traffic light signals (see *ST*, 22 February 2008, p59), where traffic police or ushers urge processors to cross quickly or stop late attempts to cross, where one is reminded that this sacred walk is still subject to secular regulation. As with attunement to urban development, Thaipusam participants have also attuned to changes in traffic management over time. In the early years, lanes were not barricaded to separate processional and vehicular traffic as they are today. From my perusal of photographs and videos of the events, the practice of putting up traffic barricades begun in the mid 1990s, first laid intermittently and now fully lining the path. These images also show how before barricades, the *kavadi*'s entourage would encircle it to form a human barricade (Figure 34), or participants simply spilled over the lanes and got close to traffic (Figure 35). Now an entire lane on Serangoon Road, Selegie Road, Penang Road, and Clemenceau Avenue is closed off from traffic for the duration of the foot procession. These form the main path, but numerous streets that connect onto these major roads are also closed to traffic. Such measures while ensuring participants' safety and smooth passage also underscore the Singapore state's highly regulated approach to public movement. Regulation of movement is not then limited to walking on the processional path when the effects of road closures and resultant traffic jams are felt across town, drawing even non-participants into the shifted tempo of the day. In its entanglements with multiple other paths and rhythms, this procession walk to Murugan is made 'through the country, not

through space' (Ingold 2008: 29), it is entangled with and emergent from the grounds and flows of Singapore.



Figure 34: A kavadi bearer's entourage encircles him forming a barricade from passing traffic, in 1955. Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 20210000761 - 0453



Figure 35: Participants and spectators spill over several lanes of Serangoon Road getting up close to traffic, in 1965. Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 19980000572 - 0080

Recognising the foot procession as a walk through Singapore also calls to attention the stark image of bare feet on tar roads. What I remember most viscerally from when I walked alongside my uncle's *kavadi* was the initial heat and pain of bare feet on the hot urban roads which then gave way to a feeling of proprietary belonging. Walking around the Perumal temple grounds without shoes on was normal, expected, given Hindu regard for footwear as pollutive. But stepping over the threshold onto Serangoon Road, the heat and the sharp poke of the rough tar road was matched with an initial uncertainty over what felt deviant in civil Singaporean society where we are rarely encouraged to be without footwear outside of the home. But as my feet and I got accustomed to these sensations and I found myself thinking how nice it was that 'we' could do this, to take a practice reserved to private and sacred spaces to the streets, to treat the path like it was hallowed grounds simply by applying our unmediated feet to it, and in that moment, be the ones this path belongs to and share in that feeling that a part of Singapore's sometimes alienating urban landscape becomes intimate through the simple act of walking bare footed. This parallels Kenneth Olwig's description of the English tradition of 'beating the bounds'—a custom that hefts people to the land, maintaining a sense of belonging (2008: 89). With each Thaipusam too, the community 'continually walk[s] and wear[s] a path, and thereby maintain its appearance and structure as a path' and in persisting with the procession, Singaporean Indians 'maintain [their] prescriptive right to use that path' (ibid, 87). Further, rituals involving 'doing the landscape' with the body—such as knocking boys' heads on a boundary marker during 'beating of the bounds'—reinforce the sense of place through bodily pain (ibid). While the idea of bodily pain immediately evokes Thaipusam's pierced *kavadi* bearers, I argue that the more pertinent pain in yoking body and land is the walking of bare feet on hot urban roads. Anyone can participate

in walking barefooted, and many (though not all) do, unhindered by age, gender, or whether they are carrying a kavadi. This collective bodily discomfort reinforces the sense of a collective movement as well, forming a 'community body' (Bakhtin 1984). Of course, walking on the hard surface does not leave visible footprints, but it does not matter if the road does not bear marks of wear or the trail, because walking is not just between feet and surface, but with being and land' (Ingold 2004: 333). Walking bare feet at Thaipusam enacts more than religious piety, 'through walking landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape, in a process that is continuous and never-ending' (Tilley, 1994: 29–30). This yoking of Singaporean Indian lives and the Singapore landscape ultimately affirms my view of Thaipusam as a thing, a gathering of other things and flows.

In the way Thaipusam moves a Singapore Hindu sacred geography, the way it overflows the processional path to include the social gatherings happening alongside, the way this walk is entangled with other paths and in the rhythms of the city, and is ultimately entangled in the perceptions and presentation of Singaporean Indian identity, Thaipusam is a gathering of flows, a 'thinging thing'. I return to Ingold's conception of 'things' as a 'going on' (2010: 4), 'as specific confluences of materials that, for a moment at least, have mixed and melded together into recognisable forms' (2007b: 314–315). We experience things, like we do a house, not through its materials or just in encounters with objects like the window and door frame, but through flows of coming and going, and the acts of daily domestic life. A 'thing' then is an entity that draws other entities together, and for that reason I approach Thaipusam, not only as a ritual or festival, but as a 'thing', a particularly Singaporean Indian thing. It is in the ever-emergent flows and entanglements of this thing that I locate and make sense of

Thaipusam's 'going on', its perdurance through the polyphonic 'coming together' of sounds.

## **7.2 COMING TOGETHER ON A SOUNDED CUSTOM**

Where the processional, *kavadi*-bearing mode is an enactment of Idumban's journey, the sounded mode of walking Thaipusam in Singapore is a custom that has come to be entrenched over time. As I lay out in the first half of this section (7.2.1), moving sound is invested with potency by the colonial and post-colonial state, add to that the racialisation of public sound-making and sound becomes a central custom of Thaipusam in popular imagination. But the question remains of how Thaipusam should sound. The Singaporean Indian community of organisers and participants are not homogenous. Their different concerns with identity and belonging, and ideas for ensuring a future for this walk, see them 'retrieving' variously from 'heritage' resulting in a polyphonic Thaipusam. But, as the primary contribution of this chapter, I argue that in recognising Thaipusam as thing, as an entanglement of 'goings on', and therefore in paying attention to sound practices on and along the path, we see the improvisations and creative attunement in the 'coming together' of this polyphonic ways in ensuring a future for Thaipusam and a plurality of conceptions of Singaporean Indian identity and belonging (7.2.2).

### **7.2.1 A Sounded Custom**

As the previous section demonstrated, Thaipusam in Singapore is not just 'enacted on the stage of a landscape transformed into the frozen geometrical space of scenery' (Olwig 2008: 88). It is instead a custom in that it is 'something one does as part of an ongoing process of dwelling' and 'through which a lived landscape and its ways are

continually shaped' (ibid.). This shaping includes a centralising of sound, over time, in the conduct of the procession, one that I detail here, as shaped through policy regimes concerned with regulating civil society and its movements by controlling sound-making. In these, moving sound is also entangled with racial communities concretising the sounds of Thaipusam as 'Indian' sounds, regulation as racially-informed, and counter-practices as expressions of racial identity and belonging.

Studying processional sounds in colonial Singapore, Jenny McCallum (2017) draws attention to inhabitants' defence of their sounding traditions as well as the colonial authorities' attempts at regulation. When it came to the regulation of sound in the Straits Settlements, the basic principle 'was that the colonial administration could do as it pleased' (ibid: 321). Singapore was a newly established British settlement and as such 'the natives coming here must submit to the laws they find in force' (ibid. citing Straits Times Overland Journals 1872). The first legislation explicitly governing sound was passed in 1856 focusing on sounds made in public places and gave the Commissioner of Police power to allow or restrict certain activities (ibid. 321). That the permission to parade sounds was hard fought for points to the power and usefulness many communities saw in the act (ibid. 328). It was, for groups like the Chinese secret societies, 'a powerful way of loudly promoting its might in and through the public spaces of the city' (ibid. 327). Therefore, the power to permit sounds, and thereby allow any 'native' community's proclamation of ownership of public space, was used strategically as a tool of control by the British (ibid.).

Though not the only sound-making and processing group, these activities by certain Indian populations was especially marked out by the British state as well as other inhabitants in Singapore. Between 1825 and 1873, Singapore was a Penal Colony

and the Indian convicts were managed through an unusual self-supervisory system (see Pieris 2009), and afforded a high degree of freedom including celebrations of Dusserah and Muharram with processions and music (McCallum 326). Drawing a counterposition, 24 Chinese petitioners wrote to the Recorder of the Straits Settlements in 1837 appealing a rejection of their bid to beat gongs and set off fireworks at the wedding procession of a wealthy Chinese family (ibid. 323). The Chinese petitioners argued that they, being 'good and quiet subjects', should be allowed the same as the 'sepoys and convicts [who] are allowed their procession' (*SFP*, 27 April 1837, p1, as quoted in McCallum 2017: 323). Other letter writers were more explicit in their characterisation of the Indian processors as 'the offscourings of Indian jails, armed with swords, spears, etc., and infuriated with arrack and bang' and their sounds as thereby 'metonymic for danger' (*SFP*, 20 April 1837, p2; Sykes 2015a: 395). Though to other inhabitants of Singapore Indian sounds in the streets 'signified criminals were on the loose' (Sykes 2015a: 395), the state's permitting of this group's processions and sound-making accounted for other considerations. As McCallum argues, Indian convicts in Singapore were a useful source of labour, so 'the British authorities were loath to interfere with these traditions for fear of upsetting a profitable relationship; their noises were *allowed* in order to keep the peace' (2017: 326). From its early days, sound regulations were entangled with perceptions and positions of racial communities.

The impressions of other inhabitants of Singapore had little effect on the state's position on Indian sounds, but events in British India did. Following news of the 1857 Mutiny in India, the colonial attitude to the Indian populations in Singapore, especially Indian convicts, shifted considerably. The small and already nervous population of Europeans in Singapore became extremely fearful of the convict population, worrying

as well that the approaching Muharram celebrations would lead to riots but also to disturbances if restricted (Rai 2013: 369). The Indian convicts themselves decided not to hold the procession to dispel tension, but colonial state attitudes had already been altered (McCallum 2017: 326). In the subsequent years, the Muharram processions were intermittently banned and permitted and in 1875, it was Indians writing to complain about uneven treatment and suppression of their processions (ibid. 327 citing *Straits Observer* 1875). What emerges over this period is a clear sense that sounds are not deemed a 'danger' in themselves but in the combination of sound, movement, and race. This is observable in the policy shifts of the colonial state. In 1855, the Governor restricted convicts' processions to their own camp (McCallum 2017: 326). In 1856, control over moving sound was something to be policed via licenses (DeBernardi 2004: 44, cited in Sykes 2015a: 396). Police-issued permits named which instruments were allowed, the procession path, and where musicians should remain silent (Sanmugam 1996: 71). The policing of sound was not restricted to documents with instrument confiscations already recorded from the 1896 Thaipusam festival at Tank Road temple (Sykes 2015a: 397). The colonial state had thus set a precedent in marking processional sounds as dangerous and requiring regulation through a system of permits and enforcement.

Events in 1964 would be taken by the post-colonial Singapore state—two years out of colonial rule and on the brink of separation from Malaysia—as confirmation that the combination of public procession, sound-making, and racio-religious identity was indeed deadly. During a procession to commemorate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad clashes occurred between Malay and Chinese youth. Remembered as the 'Racial Riots of 1964', the unrest culminated in loss of life, damage to property, and extremely tense relations between the racial groups. In the state's efforts to secure

its legitimacy and the project of a harmoniously multicultural society, a general ban on religious foot processions was passed (MHA 2015). In parliament, the then Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Chua Sian Chin outlined the guidelines for religious processions that continue to be applied today. Religious foot processions to be held beyond the grounds of places of worship may be granted permits subject to these limitations:

- a) only vehicular processions are allowed.
- b) distances travelled must be the shortest possible route from point to point
- c) no music, gongs, drums or cymbals shall be played en route.
- d) the procession will be restricted to small groups in vehicles, and
- e) there shall be no stoppage en route.

(Ministry of Home Affairs 1973. Col. 948, Budget, cited in Sinha 2008: 162)

Despite the restriction on non-vehicular processions, Thaipusam, as well as the foot procession that starts off Thimithi (the Hindu fire walking ritual) have been the only foot processions allowed (Sinha 2011, 226). Observers would recognise that the preceding Silver Chariot procession (detailed in section 7.3) has also been permitted a small accompanying foot procession; not necessarily travelling the shortest distance; and making several stops en route. In Singapore's system of regulations on moving sounds, Thaipusam is a permitted exception. When conflict over sound-making arises from time to time, state actors remind of this.

Casual observers and even participants of Thaipusam since 1973 might have assumed that the sounded custom they saw was a permitted one. This was certainly the impression when in 2011, HEB issued guidelines barring 'playing recorded music or sounding gongs or drums' that lead to large scale public outcry (*ST*, 7 January 2011, p12; 13 January 2011, p13). The case rather was that inconsistent enforcement of the prohibition and the consistent presence of music and drumming in Thaipusam had created the impression that this sound-making had been an authorised part of the

procession. Attempts to return the walk to the sonic limitations of the permits have been made sporadically, including the police seizure in 1981 of '62 musical instruments sized (including tambourines, whistles and cardboard drums) and 12 improvised ones (such as tins and petrol cans) as well as taped music machines' (*Sunday Nation* 1 February 1981, p7). Observers beyond the Singaporean Indian participant community have also bemoaned such attempts at muting the procession (*ST*, 24 January 1981, p21) and calling out the inconsistency when 'for the past three years the police had turned a blind eye' (*Sunday Nation*, 1 February 1981, p7). There is also inconsistency in the communication and parameters of guidelines. In 1981, the police banned all music instruments, but the press statement issued by the Hindu bodies organising Thaipusam 'had said no musical instruments "other than the traditional Hindu instruments" would be allowed on the roads' (ibid.). What has been consistent is the script that plays out every few years—police and organisers issue guidelines on permitted sounds and banned instruments; participants and members of the public respond with complaints about the 'strict' measures; and the state reiterates their position with a reminder of the Thaipusam exception to a ban on religious foot processions.

The foot procession in Thaipusam is given exception 'because of the religious rite where devotees carry the *kavadi* in fulfilment of their vows' (*ST*, 24 March 1981, p9). But sound-making was not similarly seen as integral by state authorities, though a discretionarily admissible element. In 2011, Minister of Home Affairs, K. Shanmugam, explained the continued presence of unpermitted music by saying that 'policing requires that rules be applied firmly and fairly, but also sometimes to exercise discretion' (*Today Weekend* 15 Jan 2011, p1). In response to backlash when guidelines were publicised in 2011, HEB clarified that these 'were set by the police

and were not new, even if it was the first time they were compiled and made public' (ST, 13 January 2011, pB13). Pointing out that the rules that year had in fact been relaxed to now allow the singing of hymns, Minister Shanmugam reiterated that the public order guidelines applied to all religious processions (ST, 15 January 2011, pA6). In a 2015 statement, he once again made a point of the exception and privilege granted:

'[Hindus] need to realise they are the only ones here allowed to hold not just one but three religious foot processions [Thaipusam, Panguni Uthiram, and Thimithi]. No other religious is given this privilege.' (ST, 7 February 2015, p.A8)

Not only is the procession a permitted privilege, sound-making in this walk had also been a *de facto* permissible element of this walk, at least up to the extent that enforcement and organising authorities deemed the sounds acceptable. It is this threshold of acceptability that is tested each time guidelines are printed, instruments played, confiscations made, and statements issued.

From the branding of the violence in 1964 as 'Race Riots' in official discourse, to the way the selective permitting of the Thaipusam foot procession and disciplining of its sounds are discussed in public discourse, processional sound-making has clearly gone the way of many issues in Singapore—where matters of minority religions are seen as issues of race. Online commenters, particularly around 2011, frequently characterised the banning of music at Thaipusam as 'racist', while participants themselves voice this on the path. The YouTube video 'Plainclothes police officers stop amateur drummers from playing' captures such a moment when, in response to orders to cease drumming, supporters of the drummer retorted 'lion dance *na* allow *pannuvangaē*' (trans. 'They will allow if it was lion dance') referencing the public performances of the Chinese 'lion dance' and its drumming. Addressing this frequent

racial comparison, but inevitably reiterating racialised ways of discussing and categorising music, Minister Shanmugam clarified that ‘while Thaipusam is a religious event, the Chinese lion dance and the use of the Malay hand drum [at weddings] are for social and community events’ and that ‘religious foot processions...carry a particular sensitivity—the risk of incidents is estimated to be higher’ (*ST*, 7 February 2015, pA8). Each time the question is raised, sound and race are further entangled, and importantly, further entrenched in the popular imagination of Thaipusam. As Kong surmises: ‘that Thaipusam occupies aural space and derives significant meaning from the manufacture and consumption of sound may not have been so apparent if that aspect of the event did not become subject to policy and policing’ (2005: 10). Further policy shifts in 2015 would demonstrate that sound itself has now been imbued with such significance that it is a site of negotiation between participants, organisers, and state authorities, each with an interest in permitting and regulating a sounded Thaipusam.

Following calls for public consultation on the rules around the playing of musical instruments, Thaipusam’s organisers—the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB) and Hindu Advisory Board (HAB)—held feedback sessions in 2015 with members of the Hindu community (*ST*, 10 February 2015, p23; 14 February 2015, p2). Following this, HEB and the police announced new arrangements that would officially permit musical instruments in the procession for the first time since the 1973 ban (*ST*, 3 December 2015, p8). While the permitted instruments remain limited to ‘traditional instruments’, provisions for these continued to expand over the next decade with added live music points for hired *nadaswaram* and *tavil* musicians and for registered *urumi melams*, and broadcast points playing recorded music on loudspeakers (*ST*, 18 January 2016, pp1-2; *ST*, 24 January 2017, p4). In 2019, moving sounds were officially permitted for the

first time since 1973 as percussion instruments were allowed to accompany the *kavadi* bearer on the processional path (*ST*, 21 January 2019; *ST*, 26 January 2024). The list of admissible ‘traditional instruments’ also expanded from the initial three—*nadaswaram*, *tavil*, and *urumi melam*—to now include the *ganjira* and *dhol* (*ibid.*) Making more space for permitted sounds along and on the processional path demonstrates that all parties now recognise sound-making as an inalienable aspect of the Thaipusam foot procession, giving authority to what has become custom over the decades of walking Thaipusam.

In entangling walking, sound-making, and racial identity, the decades of policy discussions and permit regimes work to underscore Thaipusam as not just a day out of the ordinary, but as a potent thing with which Singaporean Indians negotiate the way they move in the city, the sounds they make, and the future they strive towards. The persistence of communities of Indians over the years in ensuring their ability to walk and to make sound, and to work with and around the state in doing so, demonstrates just how much Thaipusam is entangled in Singapore Indian being. But as with the development of custom with the continual process of dwelling, ‘people’s interests both meet in agreement, and clash in dissention’ (Olwig 2008: 87, citing Thompson 1993). Within the Indian community; between organisers, participants, observers, and spectators; at meetings, in letters to newspapers, and on the processional path, there is clearly disagreement over how Thaipusam should sound. In the next section, I lay out the debate over the ‘right sound’ of Thaipusam and demonstrate that despite the expressed differences, the ground realities of sounds on and along the processional path show that sound-making is indeed collaborative, and that ultimately, all parties share interest in ensuring a sounded-future for Thaipusam.

### 7.2.2 Discord and ‘Coming Together’

With the above contestations over permitting sounds and how these conversations have dominated headlines, the idea of discord has commanded popular discourse on Thaipusam’s sounds. This division is seen on the grounds because the community of Singaporean Indian organisers and participants are not homogenous either and have a plurality of ideas for what the ‘right sound’ of Thaipusam should be. Each of these directions is informed by different concerns in the present and ‘retrieve’ variously from the possibilities of ‘heritage’. But what the community share is the desire to ensure a future of a sounded Thaipusam. As I argue with this chapter, Thaipusam is a ‘thing’ in the ways it is an entanglement of flows between participants, community organisers, state regulations, the urban environment, and others in Singapore. And in line with that, when we pay attention to the actual sound practices on and along the path, as I do in this section, we see instead of discord a ‘coming together’ of polyphonic practices.

Indian music, broadly informed by the ‘classical’ Carnatic and Hindustani traditions, does not have a sense of ‘harmony’ in the way Euro-western music does. The artistry in Indian music is not in harmonising between notes or within chords, but in creative improvisation within the structures of *ragam* (set of notes) and *talam* (beat pattern). Without a principle of ‘harmony’, there is also no sense of ‘discordance’. There is, in Indian music, a sense of being ‘out of tune’ and ‘out of beat’, but even the introduction of an *anya swara* (note foreign to the *ragam*) can be taken as creative intervention. Where multiple musicians improvise around a *ragam* in turn, what is important is that they land on the *samam* (the first beat of a *talam* cycle) together. The word ‘*samam*’ may be translated as ‘equal’ or ‘alike’, while in musical practice denotes a ‘coming

together' of creative free flow with the structures of *talam*. With this perspective—that Indian music prioritises creative improvisation within some permitted structures—I argue for a recognition of sound-making at Thaipusam as one that is polyphonic but attuned in making creative improvisations to 'come together'. Over this section, I lay out the organiser's strategies for sonic control and locate these ideas of the 'right sound' in larger ideas of the desired and undesired projections of Indian identity; examine how improvised ways of sounding that are deemed 'non-traditional' stem from other ideas in the participant community about belonging; spell out how both approaches emerge from 'retrievals' from 'heritage', that ultimately 'come together' to create a sounded Thaipusam that is firmly attuned to Singapore and the Singaporean Indian community.

Grand public events like Walking Days or Thaipusam do not simply occur, there is a considerable amount of work that goes into making them happen (Bennett 2017: 58). Amongst the tasks of managing costs, logistics, and manpower, HEB also makes a permit application to the police for the conduct of the foot and silver chariot processions, on behalf of the organising temples—Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road and the Tank Road Temple—as well as participating devotees (Kong 2005: 5). The police then convenes a meeting with the organisers to discuss rules, previously encountered problems, and remedies (*ibid.*). As devotees seeking to carry a *kavadi* register with the temples, they are informed of the rules and regulations, including an undertaking that 'the *kavadi* bearer and the *kavadi* representative shall take responsibility for the conduct of the participants in the[ir] entourage' (STT and SSPT 2024). There is an emphasis on proper conduct, but what this entails involves an assemblage of authorities, standards, traditions, and expectations, all informed by their take on past experiences. Different views over the acceptable way to walk and

sound Thaipusam lie not only between state and civil society, but also within the community of organisers, participants, and observers.

Soon after the 1973 ban on music during foot processions, Hindu organising bodies wanted permission for a sounded Thaipusam. But they also presented a clear view of what the 'right sound' should be. Hindu organisers drew clear lines between instruments that are considered 'traditional' or 'classical' from those that are deemed 'alien'. In 1981, the HEB restricted their plea for musical instruments in the procession to 'classical instruments' such as the *tavil*, *nadaswaram*, and *jairah* (hand cymbals) (*NN*, 1 February 1981, p7). Classical instruments were allowed in the temple grounds then, but not on the roads. Decades later, when processional music was allowed, permission was limited to specified 'traditional instruments'—the *nadaswaram*, *tavil*, and *urumi melam* from 2016; and additionally, the *ganjira* and *dhol* from 2019 (*ST*, 3 December 2015, p.8; 21 January 2019). These demarcations of space—first the temple grounds, then the processional path—and limitations of instruments in those spaces parallels the first of three strategies of power in controlling the 'soundscape' identified by Lorenzo Ferrarini (2020). Examining sonic devotion at the Madonna del Pollino pilgrimage in Italy, Ferrarini noted the ways organisers demarcated and distanced orthodox sound practices of official Catholicism from those of unorthodox folk religiosity by fencing off an area facing the church to keep the music of encamped pilgrims apart from the sanctuary (*ibid.* 94). On the day of Thaipusam, the separation is reiterated with frequent announcements broadcasted over loudspeakers that only traditional instruments may be played. The use and control of technologies of amplification along the path also 'establish an asymmetry in the production of sounds' (*ibid.* 97). The 'music points' and loudspeakers along the path are managed by organisers and broadcast only devotional songs that have been deemed acceptable.

This parallels the second strategy Ferrarini identified where fixed PA systems broadcast the audio of the mass, sermon and liturgic songs around the grounds, silencing the musicians in the encampments with its volume (ibid. 95). Such strategies work not only to differentiate and drown out, but also to mark the ‘non-traditional’ sounds as ‘out of place’ and undesirable.

Sounds are not material and the regulation of sound must effectively be a control on sound-makers—the instrument and the musician. Sound, as Ingold (2007d) argues, is a phenomenon of experience, a medium through which we hear. In discussions over the ‘right sound’ for Thaipusam, sound is the medium through which elements already deemed undesirable are experienced, entangling extant ideas of undesirable bodies and their movement with ideas of undesirable sounds and ‘alien’ instruments. Over the years, several non-traditional instruments have been seized by police ranging from tambourines, whistles, and cardboard drums, to improvised ones such as tins and petrol cans. Amongst the lot, the bongos have been especially singled out as not only non-traditional and ‘alien to the occasion’, but as entangled with ‘outsiders’, ‘undesirable elements’—who have come to ‘turn the day into a song and dance carnival’—whose ‘misbehaviour’ is scorned by organisers and leave other participants ‘disgusted’ (ST, 10 February 1978, p20). In letters to the newspaper, other participants contrast the ‘nuisance’ of those ‘playing drums, bongos’ as against the desirability of ‘classical instruments’ like the *mridangam* (ST, 22 February 1979, p13) or *bhajans* (Hindu hymns) as the ‘only music’ for this ‘divine act’ (ST, 15 January 2011, pA45). Just as ideas of the right sound are implicitly mapped onto conceptions of the right ways to walk the procession, the call to remove bongos and non-traditional instruments is not made distinct from the call to remove the ‘rowdies’ (NN, 4 February 1979, p2).

Used frequently in newspaper articles between the late 1970s and early 1990s, and entrenched in Singaporean Indian vocabulary, 'rowdy' was a measure of one's lack of class as evident in their 'fancy costumes' (*NN*, 4 February 1979, p2), and of decorum in 'turning the procession into a "comic opera" or "carnival"' (*ST*, 5 February 1979, p9). More fully, the rowdy was measured by, and denounced for, his sounds and movement:

...rowdy youths have taken advantage of the festival to render to a disapproving audience their pop version of the holy phrase—"let's go Vel Vel" and "disco Vel Vel". And this is to the improvised beat of their own bongos and drums as they pranced about (*NN*, 1 February 1981, p7).

Such improvisational sound also include whistling and the use of tin cans as percussive instruments, as well as singing songs from Tamil movies (*ST*, 31 January 1991, p10; 15 January 2011, pA45). These beats are not appreciated by organisers who maintain that the day 'does not call for a "celebratory spirit"' and by extension, 'the beating of drums, bongos, tin cans...should not be associated with Thaipusam' (*New Paper*, 11 February 1991, p7). Along with a sense of the 'right sound' for the occasion, organisers and other participants express the idea that there is 'right movement'—that is not 'vulgar dances' (as quoted in Sinha 2011: 226) or any dancing at all. Alongside disallowing bongos, a 1979 'warning to rowdies' issued by HEB and the ministry of Social Affairs listed that 'those accompanying kavadis will not be allowed to dance' (*NN*, 4 February 1979, p2). Such movement and the people who do them are marked out as being 'on the fringe' of society, described as '*kaatu-poochigal* or jungle insects' annoying and out of place in the orderly urban space (*ST*, 4 February 1991, p2). Making sense of their displacement from civility, the then chairman of HEB described them as coming from difficult familial situations probably seeking to work off their frustrations (*ibid.*). Xygalatas et. al. (2021), observing Thaipusam in Mauritius,

argue that low-status participants were more likely to engage in ‘signalling modalities that require somatic costs... in the form of body piercings’ while high-status individuals were more likely to use financial capital in their participation, such as with more elaborate material offerings. These ‘rowdies’—through their flashy clothes, sounds, and dance—signal their participation through highly somatic means, a modality that does not sit so well with the higher-status participants and organisers. Attempts to control ‘rowdy’ movement parallels the third of Ferrarini’s strategies of control—‘encouraging a passive experience of sound to create ethical listeners’ (2020: 96-7). The organisers’ position against such dancing makes clear to all what the ‘right sound’ and ‘right movement’ should be, reinforcing the right civil demeanour and ethical way of sounding and walking Thaipusam.

Organisers frame the need for such regulation as ensuring a future for Thaipusam in Singapore. For one, organisers’ own submission to state regulations ‘ensure self-policing and discipline such that the rules are strictly adhered to’ (Sinha 2008: 174). Their communication and attempts to enforce the rules—through published regulations, having participants sign an undertaking, and having officials and volunteers stationed along the path to advise and dissuade rule-breakers—should be seen as the organisers’ keen attempt to ensure that permitting authorities are satisfied enough to grant future permits for the Thaipusam foot procession. In that vein, organisers recognise that the exception granted to Thaipusam is a ‘privilege’ not guaranteed, that must be safeguarded against ‘what happened to the Mohammed procession’ (quoted in Kong 2005: 6). Organisers also hope that ‘If everyone cooperates, the rules might be relaxed even further’ (ST, 3 December 2015, p8). Public communal processions like Thaipusam ‘reinforce group cohesion by emphasising belonging’ (Kong 2005: 4), but enforcement of rules informed by ideas of

a 'right sound' and entangled in ideas of right movement necessarily marks some people out as 'non-belonging'. This bid to manage the public presentation of the Singaporean Indian community and their identity entails obscuring a part of Singaporean Indian identity, alienate a section from their participation in community, and risks misrecognition.

This case of misrecognition and sense of 'non-belonging' is what Thiru experienced at the 2015 Thaipusam, and what drove him to start his own Indian drumming group to challenge part of the idea of the 'right sound' at Thaipusam and to recoup the 'image of Indian drummers'. Thiru had been playing the *kanjira*, a tambourine type instrument used in accompanying *bhajans* (devotional singing), when he was picked out of the crowd by plain clothes policemen. He was pulled aside and shouted at and his instrument confiscated, but as he recounts, the group of 'anjadis' (Tamil term synonymous with 'rowdies') 'whacking' away on bongos ahead of him were left unchecked by the same policemen. As Thiru rationalises, the policemen had let the other group be

because they are scared of them, those guys are very aggressive so the police don't go directly. So who suffers? People like me.

Riled up by a sense of injustice and the authority's misrecognition of his drumming as indexing him as an 'undesirable element', Thiru decided: 'the only way to change things was to educate people, [that] instead of having [the *anjadis*] becoming the representation of our culture, me and my team should become the true representation of Indian culture.' Thiru formed Damaru Singapore in late 2015, teaching drumming and holding showcases to expand the retinue of 'Indian drums' and present an alternative view of 'Indian drummers' beyond those associated with disorderly conduct at Thaipusam. With their orderly performances at ticketed events or when invited by

organisers like the Indian Heritage Centre, with each drummer uniformed in tradition-inspired costumes, and showcasing a variety of 'Indian drums' but limited to those deemed 'traditional', Thiru's vision for Damaru Singapore is a clear denunciation of those he holds responsible for his negative experience at Thaipusam.

In Thiru's response we see a demonstration of Assmann's proposition that cultural memory 'is reflexive of its own image insofar as it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system' (1995: 132). Organisers and participants like Thiru share a sense that Thaipusam should be walking in an orderly, civil fashion. Though they diverged on the place of drums in 2015, both were concerned with removing the image of the 'rowdy Indian drumming' as the predominant image of the Singaporean Indian community and of Thaipusam. We might see an objectification of this same desire in the initial decisions to ban instruments and later to allow only 'traditional instruments'. We thus see in the 'right sound' and the right instruments, the 'concretion of identity', that is that 'a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity' (ibid. 128). While Thaipusam seems to be 'less rowdy' after permitting 'right sounds' on the procession since 2016, it has also grown smaller in the number of participants with *kavadi* bearers and their drumming supporters taking to *Panguni*—another festival dedicated to Murugan featuring a similar but shorter foot procession of *kavadis* in an industrial estate away from Singapore's city centre—or across the causeway to Thaipusam in Batu Caves or Penang in Malaysia. Even then, Thaipusam in Singapore has not become a homogenised performance of 'right sounds'. The polyphony continues reflecting the heterogenous identity of participants and their ways of walking a sounded Thaipusam.

Observing these differences in earlier iterations of Thaipusam, Lily Kong (2005) disputes the sense of 'communitas' Victor Turner (1974) popularised in the understanding of pilgrimage. I argue, rather, that these differences are demonstrative of a plurality of ways of 'retrieving from heritage' but ultimately demonstrative of a shared investment in regenerating Thaipusam to ensure its future. 'Heritage', as Heidegger frames it, is very much part of Dasein's active dwelling in the present and towards a future. As opposed to merely accepting something passively as an established tradition, 'heritage' is history or our past that is actively taken up again or 'retrieved' (Carman 2017: 559, sz 383). The 'retrieval of a heritage' does not simply let previous occurrent things recur, for it arises from a resolute futural projection, so rather it *responds (erwidert)* to the possibility of an existence that *has been* (ibid. 560, sz 384-5). In order to be historically resolute, 'we must somehow identify with our own contemporary world; its concerns must be relevant to the world we share with others' (ibid.). What we see as a plurality of sounding ways, should be recognised as a plurality of sound 'heritage' that comes to be because of the multiple possibilities offered from Thaipusams past. Further, each party is loyal to their sounding ways because they share a sense of resoluteness for the future of Thaipusam but differ on what that future should be and because they differ on what contemporary conditions are. Here, Heidegger's concept of 'authenticity' helps further. From his account, 'to inherit possibilities authentically is not to receive something ready-made from a tradition, but to choose to grant to oneself what one takes up, and moreover to transform it in the process' (ibid). In authentically taking over a heritage, 'Dasein hands itself down...in a possibility it has inherited, yet nonetheless chosen'. (ibid, sz 384). In this way, while Heidegger's conception of heritage sees that 'human temporality is fundamentally futural,' each party retrieves in response to what they perceive of

present conditions from the possibilities of heritage but does so differently, staying authentic to their sense of what is key from the past in order to ensure a future they each envision.

There have been occasions before where the community of participants and organisers shared a common sense on the relevance of practices to contemporary conditions, coming together in agreement over ceasing the use of bullock draw carts for the chariots and banning 'thankis' (long steel rods pierced through cheeks) (Sinha 2008: 162; *NN*, 4 February 1979, p2). Though the question of banning spike *kavadis* was raised over the 1930s to 1970s, the collective consensus was to allow the practice to continue with some restrictions in the form of higher registration fees and control over numbers (Sinha 2011). Across these examples, the community of participants and organisers have shown to be able to have both commonality and a plurality of positions on matters of 'tradition' or 'heritage'. The point in Heidegger's view of 'heritage' as part of dwelling and being over time, is that 'heritage' is an active and authentic retrieval for the present, where 'in the authentic moment, its commitment is neither to rigid tradition nor to arbitrary innovation' (Carmen 2017: 561, sz. 386). The community of organisers and participants, who as established are not homogenous in their ideas for how Thaipusam should sound, thereby retrieve from 'heritage' in a plurality of ways each authentic to a group, creating polyphonic ways of sounding Thaipusam, and bringing together polyphonic identities on the processional path.

The polyphonic nature of Thaipusam is evident in observations and recordings of the day but is especially artfully drawn out in *Vel Vel: A Sonic Walk* designed by sound designer Ramesh Krishnan and released in response to the cancellation of the 2021 Thaipusam procession in view of the Covid pandemic. *Vel Vel* sought to recreate 'the

experience of walking the pilgrimage route through a multidisciplinary audio-visual-text experience', and was accessible via a microsite and meant to be listened to while walking the same route the procession would have taken. I walked the path on 28 January 2021, the day of Thaipusam, with my earphones in, listening to its mix of field recordings of previous Thaipusam—collected by Ramesh between 2010 and 2016—and scripted monologues performed by members of Brown Voices, a local Indian playwrights collective. Despite being a 'multidisciplinary' piece, the visual elements on my mobile phone screen were largely lost on me as I was more preoccupied watching my step and the path ahead. From the production of this experience as 'sonic' to the way it was largely consumed, *Vel Vel* not only captured the primacy of sound in Thaipusam but also reflected its primacy in the conception, memory, and consumption of Thaipusam. Ramesh himself had also been a participant of Thaipusam in several capacities from learning to pierce from elders in his family, to piercing for others, to carrying several versions of *kavadi*. Even then, it was the sounds of Thaipusam that most interested him. His field recordings and the eventual mix on *Vel Vel* thus capture the full gamut of a participant's experience of Thaipusam from the beeping of a lorry's reverse signal as *kavadis* are unloaded at Perumal Temple; the seasoned renditions of temple musicians on the *tavil* and *nadaswaram*; the characteristic wail of the *urumi melam* and their singing projected through handheld loudhailers; the announcements over loudspeakers in the temple; collective chants of 'vel vel' and '*idumban kadamban vara / ettukudi velan vara*'; to then the noise of traffic on the roads as well as the beeping of traffic light signals as the procession is paused at a junction; the singing along the path including a mix of well-coordinated groups and those that are less so; the weariness in their voices and beats as the procession slows to a near stop in the last leg before entering Tank Road Temple; the social chatter amongst family and

acquaintances running into each other on the path; and the renewed strength in the voices of supporters and the strikes of accompanying drummers before the *tavil* and *nadaswaram* welcomes their arrival at Tank Road Temple; and finally the dismounting of the *kavadi* complete with instructions from all sides in a mix of Tamil and English. Produced in quick response to news that the procession would be called off, it is clear that for Ramesh it is through its sounds that Thaipusam can and does 'live' on. So while authorities and organisers may speak broadly of a 'tradition' or 'heritage' of walking Thaipusam, it is rather the sounded walk that is 'heritage' as seen in the ways people have persisted and insisted on making sounds of various modes over the decades before some sounds were permitted in 2016, and in the way sound was the primary mode of keeping Thaipusam going when the usual order was disrupted in 2021.

Other participants have also voiced the centrality of this sounded custom to the ritual and social proceedings. Arguing against the 'bar [on] music and drums' published in 2011, a writer to the newspaper characterised that 'it is common for the family and friends of the participants to cheer and shout during the procession, this is how Thaipusam is celebrated in Singapore' (*ST*, 13 January 2011, pA37). *Kavadi* bearers themselves find that 'the music will be useful in reducing the pain and enhancing their spiritual focus throughout their journey' (*ST*, 18 January 2016, p1), that 'drums are regarded as an aid to the devotees sustaining their concentration and trance, a state which helps to ameliorate pain' (*Sunday Nation*, 1 February 1981, p7) and 'the playing of the drums would motivate the devotees moving along the route' (*ST*, 10 February 2015, p20). This widely accepted purpose of music at Thaipusam is one that recognises the power of sound in the 'coming together' of *kavadi* bearer, his purpose, and his entourage of supporters. Having participated, Ramesh confirms the role of

these sounds and supportive relationships, adding that even in the quieter moments, when the group takes a break from chanting and singing, that it is 'quite joyous to hear everyone chatting and laughing'. A sounded Thaipusam thereby speaks to the communal, shared nature of the processional walk.

Whether singing or drumming as one follows a *kavadi* bearer, or watching along the path, the music of Thaipusam entangles walking and sound-making. *Vel Vel* reflects this entanglement not only in the design of the sonic experience as one to be had while walking the route, but also in their visual design. The differently sized words of 'Vel Vel'—the frequent refrain heard at Thaipusam—in both English and Tamil capture the double rhythm of the call as well as of footsteps. They were also mindful that the sounds of Thaipusam extend beyond drumming and singing. When asked about the choice to name this a 'sonic walk', as opposed to more commonly used terms such as 'audio tour', the team explained that the choice of 'sonic' relates to the importance they give 'to sound as a form of expression and as a phenomenon' adding that the sound of Thaipusam is 'a complex manifestation of different aspects mixed together, something that happens in the public space of Singapore'. Adding—in a contrast that aligns with Ingold's (2007d) assessment of 'sound'—that "“audio” refers more to hearing and listening, something that happens in our ears and in our mind'. True to this understanding, *Vel Vel*—mixed from field recordings—captures all manner of sound from the environment that participants would be familiar with. Playing off the environment is something frequent attendees would have noticed, and is captured in the scripted text of *Vel Vel*:

Some *urumi melam* drummers, a man with a snare drum and a boy with bongos are stationed under the bridge ripping away at their drums in sync. The acoustics ricocheting under the bridge is so intense it reverberates through my chest and flows through my veins.

Leveraging the amplification momentarily afforded in passing under the two-lane Oxley Flyover, drummers in particular take this opportunity to mete out their best beats. Given that this is the last stretch of the path and where the procession usually slows to a crawl, the musicians also have a ready and largely encouraging audience. It is not uncommon to hear two or more different drumming groups engage in a bit of a drum off, demonstrating the spirit of creative improvisation, and also then coming together on a popular beat pattern or refrain. At this spot, I have also witnessed the crowd drive the music when a *kavadi* bearer and his sole accompanying drummer were moved into playing and dancing by the rollicking hand-whistled beat provided by the group of migrant workers waiting in line to enter the Tamk Road Temple. In other ways, the sounds of Thaipusam work to draw participants on and along the path together. The retinue of songs at Thaipusam are popularly known to the Tamil Hindu participants—who would also hear these songs at other Hindu prayer sessions and on recordings—and most devotional songs are meant for group singing, encouraging those around to sing along, join in on refrains and chorus, or even clap along to the songs played by other groups.

Such ‘coming together’ extends to making music with non-human sound-makers too. In videos and as observed on the path, participants sing along to the music broadcast from speakers set up by organisers (‘ThaiPusam Singapore’, 11:11–11:57), drummers on bongos and tom-tom drums beat a faster peppier rhythm in double time with the Murugan song played over these loudspeakers (*ibid.*, 13:26–13:58), while another group whistles and claps along to the song on the loudspeakers, encouraging the *kavadi* bearer who responds by swinging and spinning in dance (*ibid.*, 7:33–7:55). In these instances, the use of unsanctioned, non-traditional instruments—whistles, tom-tom drums, and bongos—find step with the officially sanctioned sounds from the

loudspeaker, co-creating a sounded Thaipusam and blurring the lines that define the 'right sound' for the occasion.

A similar dialogue also happens at live music points along the route where hired temple musicians play traditional instruments like the *nadaswaram* and *tavil*. On at least one occasion captured on video ('Singapore Thaipusam Celebration | Thaipusam Kavadi Dance | Singapore Thaipusam 2024'), a group of drummers on tom-tom drums seek to play along with the official *nadaswaram* player at the 'music point' on Hastings Road. Their improvised rhythm is halting before both find their sync. The *nadaswaram* player, seeing that the *kavadis* are dedicated to various forms of the goddess, starts playing the song 'Om Sakthi', and the drummers drum along but they let the beat get away from them and the *nadaswaram* player struggles to keep up with their increasing speed before stopping. As the drummers reconvene amongst themselves, they appear to have been asked by officials to let the *nadaswaram* musician play alone, to which the group readily accedes and the *nadaswaram* restarts the song with a faster beat while the drummers clap along. As he ends the song, the group can be seen waving thanks and giving the thumbs up to the official player. In this exchange we see another instance of responsive sound-making, this time on the part of official musicians when he chooses to play a song reflective of the *kavadi* before him. Although Thaipusam is an event dedicated to the deity Murugan, such sectarian lines mean little in the practice of popular Hinduism in Singapore, and devotees adorn and dedicate their *kavadis* to deities of their own liking (including non-Hindu ones as detailed in section 7.3). I have noticed over the years that the temple musicians stationed at the entrance of Tank Road Temple similarly attune their song choice to the deity crowning the *kavadi* for the bearer's final dance. On occasion, I have also seen operators of water stations—who may also apply for permits to play music over loudspeakers—play songs in

accordance to the *kavadi* that has stopped in front of them. In these instances, even official sound is made in attunement to the moment, becoming co-created between official musicians or loudspeaker operators, the *kavadis*, and their accompanying drummers.

In paying attention to sound-making along the path, the sonic movement of Thaipusam also reveals how boundaries and thresholds can be a productive space for ‘coming together’. The drummers at Hastings Road had sought to transcend the boundary of sanctioned and unsanctioned sounds, though that boundary was ultimately enforced by officials on the ground. At the temple entrance of Tank Road where those with non-traditional instruments are no longer allowed to play, official temple musicians pick up the task of invigorating the *kavadi* bearer and honouring his deity. At the start of the procession, as seen in the video ‘Singapore Thaipusam 2024 - Kathir & Ganesh Kavadi’ (9:07–11:00), the sound making smoothly transitions from temple musicians on the *nadaswaram* and *tavil*—who wrap up their song at the signal that the *kavadis* are ready to step out—to the singing by family and friends, making the changeover just as the *kavadi* bearers steps out of the temple gates and onto the processional path.

Of course, the story of sound at Thaipusam is not only about toeing the line and making way. Improvisational sound making has also been the source of ire, such as with the use of ‘improvised instruments’ like tin cans and dustbin lids. But improvisation, by way of the introduction of non-traditional instruments must be credited with the creation of a distinct beat pattern now synonymous with the sound of Thaipusam in Singapore. Thiru, despite his desire to challenge this image of the Indian drummer, maps out their distinction and innovation:

I have to acknowledge the fact that these guys have created the Singapore Indian sound. When you hear 'dun dun dun tatata tata', this particular this particular [beat pattern] is Singapore Indian. You won't hear it in Malaysia, no. I can stand by the statement—the only people in Singapore in the Indian society who have really stayed and created a culture and follow through is our *anjadis*, the rowdies, they've done a damn good job and they are following through. Number two: the drums that they play. I've never seen anyone in any other country play this particular note of 'dun dun dun tatata tata', this is a 6/8 rhythm so in Tamil Nadu, you will never play this. It came from Bongos, now they've moved to tom[-tom drums] with a cowbell. These two are two-toned, but they use this [tom-tom drums and cowbell] because it's louder. And there's also the 'ae ah', that particular vocalisation, so 'dun dun dun tatata tata' 'ae ah ae ah', it's very Singapore Indian, who else does that.

Thiru also traces the coming of bongos to the Thaipusam path through a then-nascent Indian musical tradition evolving in Singapore. In the 1980s, a growing Indian band scene took shape performing primarily Tamil film music for Indian crowds. At the same time, renowned Tamil film music producer, Ilaiyaraaja, experimented with elements of Cuban music and included the bongos amongst the usual Indian instruments and *ragas*. It is through its popularisation in Ilaiyaraaja's film music, then played by the Indian bands on stages in Singapore, that the bongos step onto the Thaipusam path.

Creative improvisation, both in instrument and beat, gave rise to a distinct Singaporean Indian sound. Sounding Thaipusam emerges from a dwelling in this land that retrieves in a plurality of ways from Indian sound traditions, while introducing new elements from musical traditions evolving in Singapore, leveraging the urban environment, 'coming together' with structuring frameworks like sanctioned 'music points' as well as challenging them in the persistence with sounding banned instruments. In this sounded custom, what we see and hear, is not a frozen idea of 'heritage' or 'tradition' but a 'perdurance' with which Thaipusam is regenerated each year, albeit with some qualification, as the next section explains.

### 7.3 QUALIFIED REGENERATION

The coming together of a polyphony of sounded walks is one way the heterogeneous community of organisers and participants seeks to draw from 'heritage' in response to present contingencies in ensuring a future for the Thaipusam procession. In this brief section I examine other avenues through which the sounding and walking of Thaipusam is regenerated but also note that it is not entirely unrestricted in its perdurance, making this a 'qualified' regeneration.

While Heidegger qualifies 'heritage' as something authentically retrieved from the past for the future, Ingold rejects the term and idea of 'heritage' for an idea of 'perdurance'. For Ingold, the idea of heritage is akin to the idea of inheritance, 'a legacy that one generation passes on, fully formed and intact, to the next' (2024: 37). But 'to be inherited this legacy...must be broken off from the ebbs and flows of life, from the histories of place and people of which our own life-stories are the continuation' (ibid.). In this way, both Ingold and Heidegger share the idea that 'life is lived in the present' (Ingold 2024: 36). For the present (and the future) to be a continuation of the past, the past has to be entangled with the flows of present life. For something to be inherited, to turn the past into heritage, life must be drained from it. Instead, something that continues to live across generations is said to 'perdure' (ibid. 37). We do not 'inherit' our parents, tongues, homes, or place, 'because these things make up the very matrix from which [we] have grown, and are already part and parcel of who they are' (ibid.). Instead, these perdure through the generations, getting entangled in and changed through the lives and worlds of each.

With this view of 'heritage', Ingold argues that 'to walk a heritage trail, then, is not to carry on a living tradition but to re-enact a past that is already wrapped up' (ibid. 39).

He draws here the distinction from walking paths, tracks, and trails which are the form 'life generally leaves its mark on the ground' (ibid. 38). Such paths are worn by many feet passing the same way, not just the footprints of one, and they emerge over time 'along with the beings that walk it, the places they inhabit and the landscape in which it is inscribed, as the crystallization of a collective life process' (ibid.). A path like this 'never grows older, never recedes from its point of origin, precisely because it is originating all the time' for as long as generations walk it (Ingold 2023: xxv). In contrast, a 'heritage trail' has been turned into an '*object of memory*' and to then walk it is to only trace a line '*without ever making contact with it*' (Ingold 2024: 39). As I argue with Thaipusam, people don't seek to visit a 'heritage path' or perform a 'heritage walk', but learn to walk by following the lead of elders to then walk in their own ways. In doing so, the path is regenerated, renewed by each generation, not by adding layers but by 'removing' them in an ongoing inscription (ibid, 40). In this way, Thaipusam is not 'inherited' but 'perdures' as participants move with the times, as new participants learn the sounded customs and religious rites, and as the community makes space for new migrants on old routes.

From the discussion on sound making, it is clear that the conduct of Thaipusam each year is not a static re-performance removed from everyday lives and the times Singaporean Indians live in. From going unwalked over the two years of pandemic restrictions to decades of working with and around instrument bans, this walk has had to keep step with state policies. Creating sanctioned space for the *urumi melams* while continuing to challenge the presence of bongos, toms, and cowbells underscore that adaptation and adoptions do not simply go unfettered within the community of Hindu organisers and participants. The repertoire of songs sung on the path also demonstrates devotional and linguistic shifts in the community. With the popularity of

the deity Ayyappan growing since 2000, the devotional songs performed at *pujas* for Ayyappan have also found their way onto the Thaipusam processional path. This is not unexpected given that those who lead the singing are likely to do so in both contexts. The concept of *ishta devam* (favoured deity) in popular Hinduism also makes space for devotees to channel their devotion to deities other than Murugan at Thaipusam. Personalised devotion extends to include deities with non-Hindu origins in the devotional practices of Hindus in Singapore. A handful of *kavadis* may be seen each year devoted to the Taoist ‘monkey god’ known colloquially as ‘Tai Seng Ya’. Some Singaporean Indians have adopted the worship of this deity and demonstrate their devotion through their vernacular practice of crowning him atop their *kavadi*. Sonically, this visual is supported by the accompanying singing of Tamil songs dedicated to ‘Tai Seng Ya’. Songs sung at Thaipusam also adapt to linguistic shifts. There are now songs dedicated to Murugan that are primarily in English while incorporating common Tamil refrains and epithets for Murugan. An example recorded being sung at Thaipusam in 2020 includes lyrics such as:

Muruga, Muruga, *vetrive!* Muruga, you are my shining star  
*vetrive!* Muruga, *vadive!* Muruga, come to me Lord Muruga  
When I need you Muruga, you are there Muruga, take all my troubles away [x2]  
You’re my *saamy* Muruga, give me life Muruga, *vaa vaa vadivelava*  
Muruga... Muruga... [x4]      (‘2020 Murugan Shining Star Song 🌟🙏’, 0:30–1:38)

With more Singaporeans speaking English as their primary language and losing proficiency in their mother tongues, devotional songs in English help more Singaporean Indians join in on the communal singing. These adaptations evidenced in songs reflect Thaipusam’s entanglements and perduring forth in ways that meet the needs and desires of a devotional community emergent from dwelling in the Singapore context.

The use of technology to enhance existing practices has also been another avenue of regeneration. Evolving audio playback and amplification technology have quickly found their way to the path. Cassette recordings and cassette players used by some participants before were deemed inappropriate by organisers. As speakers were made battery-powered, they've been carted along in shopping trolleys while singers held on to attached microphones. In recent years, this has been replaced by portable speakers small and light enough to carry on a person. *Kavadis* too feature changing technologies in lighting, especially in the use of coloured LED lights. Though creativity here can also be 'low-tech' such as in the use of colourful plastic feather dusters in place of the usual peacock feathers in filling the tiers of a *kavadi* (Figure 36). What is of note is less that Thaipusam in a modern city like Singapore should become 'technologised' (ST, 10 February 1979, p17), but that it does because it is a walk not frozen in relegation to 'tradition'.



Figure 36: *Kavadi* decorated with colourful plastic feather dusters, in 1985. Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 19980006100 - 0041

When young children learn to walk Thaipusam, they do not inherit a pre-formed 'tradition' either. Instead they walk in the present, learning to follow the footsteps of elders whose own ways of walking are ever emergent. Children learn the rhythms of the walk by clapping along to songs and drumming or being bobbed to the beat while sat on their fathers' shoulders. Being on the path also offers an opportunity to practise greater involvement. Older children may be handed a simple percussive instrument to play along with the more experienced drummers in the family. Or, as I have seen, be handed the drumsticks to independently practise a few bars on drums held by an older family member. In these ways, children attune their 'haptic systems'—involving moving the whole body (kinaesthesia) and an awareness of the body in space (proprioception)—'though which bodies sense the world they are always already a part of' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, cited in Bennett 2017: 59). By attuning these 'background senses to our existence' (Bennett 2017: 60) through practical socialisation, the customs of a sounded Thaipusam are regenerated in the next generation of participants.

Partly because Thaipusam has significant social and familial involvement, and partly because of the assimilative nature of popular devotional Hinduism, Thaipusam sees the frequent involvement of non-Hindu, non-Indians in Singapore. Walking alongside family units, domestic helpers from the Philippines or Indonesia may also be seen socially participating in the day extending, for instance, their child- and elderly-caring duties to the path. Similarly, Singaporean Chinese may tag along in solidarity with their Hindu Indian friends. Non-Hindu, non-Indians are also often seen participating in the devotional practices, including bearing *kavadis*, and piercings (Figure 37). To do so, these Chinese participants learn to conduct their walk with the help of Indian peers who guide them on the proceedings (*Today*, 9 February 2009, p6). Chinese

participation also sees an expansion of the pantheon honoured in the processional walk. Previously, I discussed the incorporation of 'Tai Seng Ya' by a Hindu *kavadi* bearer. Chinese *kavadi* bearers, especially Taoist, are also frequently seen bearing their devotion with *kavadis* decked out with Taoist flags. Like the veneration of 'Tai Seng Ya', this bearing of Taoist flags has been adopted by some Indian devotees too (Figure 38). However, there have been limits to this exchange. 'Thankis' (long steel rod piercings through the cheeks; Figure 39) used in the practices of Taoist spirit mediums, were previously borne by some Indian as well as Chinese devotees at Thaipusam, but this practice was barred in the late 1970s (4 February 1979, p2). Even as the group of participants expand and Thaipusam is regenerated laterally with the inclusion of non-Hindu, non-Indian participants, there are limitations put on how this group and their ways may be welcomed in the walking of Thaipusam. I argue then, that as much as there is significant regeneration here, this is nonetheless a 'qualified' regeneration dependent on the recognition of new practices as admissible within structures of practice determined, in the first instance, by the Hindu organisers. In another example, HEB stepped in when 'a 10-year-old visitor from India was seen carrying a spiked *kavadi*' because regulations of the Singapore organising bodies allow only those above 16 years old to pierce their bodies (ST, 7 January 2011, pA12). Not all practices of newer participants are given space on the Singapore Thaipusam path. Nonetheless, Thaipusam offers an incredibly inclusive space for the participation of a wide spectrum of devotees, including marginalised figures such as transwomen, wheelchair-bound *kavadi* bearers (ST, 7 February 2024), as well as labour migrants whose numbers on and along the path greatly add to the procession and atmosphere.



Figure 37: Chinese participants on their preparations before bearing the *kavadi*, in the 1980s. *Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 19990002707 - 071*



Figure 38: Indian devotee bearing Taoist flags, in 2019. *Still from 'Thaipusam 2019 Singapore' 5:30.*

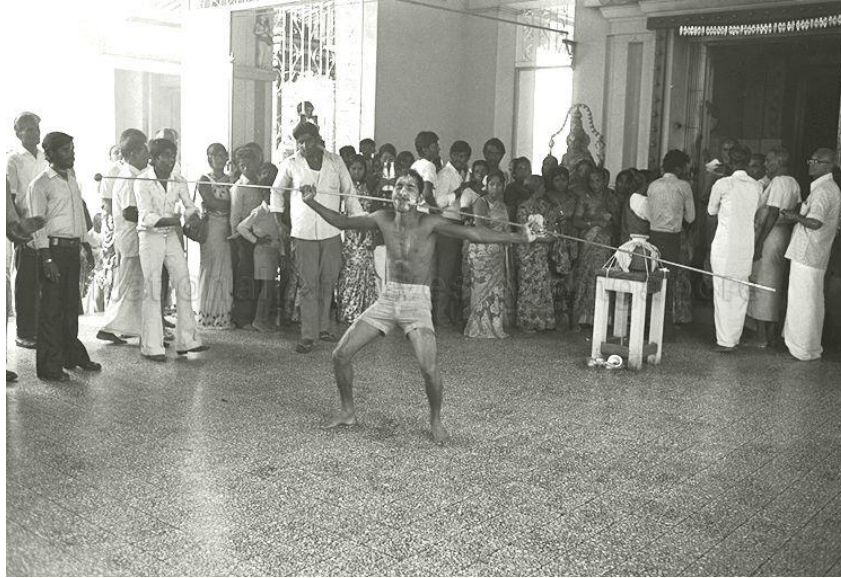


Figure 39: Indian devotee bearing a 'thank', in 1974. Photo credit: National Archives Singapore, Media-Image no. 1PCD0504 - 0027

Indian migrant professionals offer a curious study in the regeneration of this Singaporean Indian affair in the ways they recharge older routes laid by earlier generations of Singaporean Indians. The silver chariot procession that precedes the Thaipusam foot procession traces an intriguing path through Singapore's Central Business District. Although regulations hold that such vehicular processions should take the shortest route and not make stops en route, this procession contravenes those rules (Sinha 2008: 162). Instead, the silver chariot makes several stops on its return to Tank Road to collect offerings from assembled devotees. On leaving Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple on Keong Siak Road, the chariot first stops at Bank of India on Cecil Street, then Indian Overseas Bank up the same road, turns onto D'almedia Street and stops outside Bharat Building where Indian Bank and UCO Bank have their offices ('07.02.2020 Evening Thaipusam Silver Chariot Procession...', 28:30–48:00). These are all banks from India with local offices in the Central Business District and gathered devotees are primarily the banks' staff, most of whom are new migrant Indian professionals. Their participation here marks them out from the average Singaporean Indian participant who is more likely to participate in the foot procession.

Further, the gathering here of primarily migrant Indian bank staff socialises this as a gathering of ‘expats’ where dress, speech, and devotional practices reflect and distinctly mark out the group as being not Singaporean Indian. However, this path entangles the new Indian migrants with a key line of movement from earlier in Singapore’s history of Indian migration.

This practice of having the processional chariot make stops in the Singapore town may be dated back to the time when the chariot would stop over at the various Chettiar *kittangis* in town (Babb 1976: 7). These *kittangis* served as residence and office of the Chettiar moneylenders who maintained a close-knit network of kin and capital across Southeast Asia and their homeland in Chettinad, Tamil Nadu. Given that Thaipusam is dedicated to Murugan, favoured deity of the Chettiar community, and organised by the Chettiar-owned temple at Tank Road, Murugan’s chariot procession stopped over at these critical Chettiar institutions in enactment of the deity’s ‘divine sovereignty’. Just as the *kittangis* of before symbolised the social and financial ties between India and Singapore, so do Indian banks of today. This historical connection is in fact memorialised to this day when the chariot makes a brief stopover on at one end of Market Street (‘07.02.2020 Evening Thaipusam Silver Chariot Procession...’, 41:02–41:55). Though there is no discernible marker or building for which the chariot seems to stop, this brief visit remembers a major Chettiar *kittangi* that stood on Market Street until its demolition in 1977. Writing in 1976, Lawrence Babb notes that this separate path visited by Murugan on his chariot, ‘marks off the special domain of the god, and honours the Chettiars’ status as the god’s most important supporters and subjects’ and in this way, ‘the Chettiars are singled out as a community.’ Whereas those on the processional foot path take on great burdens to go to Murugan at Tank Road, those in town have the honour of being visited by him instead. Today, it is the migrant Indian

banking professionals who are 'singled out' and marked as 'important supporters and subjects'. This communal-economic connection of Thaipusam is regenerated as banks stand for *kittangis* and expats replace Chettiars. The 'India Indian' migrant professional is made part of the Thaipusam proceedings but still marked apart from the Singaporean Indian.

Each year as the Thaipusam procession is repeated, its practices are not merely rehearsed and reperformed but constantly regenerated in the expanded repertoire of songs, inclusion of favoured deities, and in the ways new participants learn to walk. As these adaptations that retrieve from Heideggerian 'heritage', they are not cut off from present-day flows and considerations to become the wrapped up 'heritage' of Ingold's conception. Such perdurance nonetheless is entangled in social and regulatory limits, making this a 'qualified' regeneration of Thaipusam.

#### **7.4 CONCLUSION: WALKING FOR A FUTURE**

In this chapter, I have emphasised a recognition of Thaipusam in Singapore, not as a diasporic import from the 'homeland', but as a uniquely Singaporean procession. Specifically, it is a Singaporean Indian thing gathering various flows into itself as it moves in the urban space, shifts with and pushes against state regulations, presents Singaporean Indian identity and moves belonging. To this end, I have underscored that the study of Thaipusam should recognise that it is as much what happens along the path as on it so as to recognise its social, spatial, and sonic gatherings. Where Thaipusam has been typically discussed in conflictual terms, I draw attention to how there is rather a 'coming together' in sound making that both heeds and challenges the structures put in place from regulation. As such, Thaipusam is a thing emerged and moved through dwelling, responsive to changing needs and attunement to the

political, social, and spatial environment of Singapore. It is polyphonic in the various ways Singaporean Indians make and sound their identities by retrieving authentically from the possibilities of the past. These 'retrievals' are thus productive of the perdurance of a sounded custom that continues to heft people to their land.

In all the ways it moves, Thaipusam is walked for a future. *Kavadi* bearers make vows for a better life for their family; older family members teach younger ones the various skills around mounting a *kavadi* or the rhythms around supporting a *kavadi* bearer; friends guide new participants in their vows, burdens, and drumming; new songs, styles, and technology are adopted; and new migrants enact old lines of connection, all ensuring a future of this walk and thereby a future for Singaporean Indian identity in this continued public pronouncement of presence and regeneration of belonging. As with the rocking back-and-forth bipedal motion of walking, Thaipusam does not offer a simple teleological projection towards the future, rather it ebbs and flows with the rhythms of life, community, and nation in its perdurance as it goes on walking into a future becoming.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

I began this thesis by recognising that the 'Singaporean Indian' is both a product of Singapore's multicultural administrative policy wherein being Singaporean is qualified by race, and a sense that this is more than just being an ethnically Indian person in Singapore. This thesis asks what then is the Singaporean Indian if not just a sum of race and nationality.

I hold several aims in asking this question. With this thesis I offer an alternative mode of conceptualising this idea of a 'Singaporean Indian' to move discourse away from the overly simplistic, deficient use of year of entry or place of birth to demarcate the 'Singaporean Indian' in opposition to those labelled 'India Indians'. Related to that, I also want to challenge the view that 'Indian' is a pre-formed and entirely imported way of being that is then supplemented or superficially cloaked with 'Singaporean-ness'. With the approach of recognising 'Singaporean Indian' as an identity in itself and not the sum of two parts, I seek also to take seriously the strong rejection of diasporic subjectivity by some. Seeking the answer to the question through the material world has also been a means of challenging the all-too-prevalent use of token objects in the representation of racial communities in Singapore. I instead aim to offer a way of seeing things for the real (and far more interesting) ways they are entangled in everyday lives, identity, and belonging.

Over the preceding chapters, I have laid out an argument for recognising that 'Singaporean Indian' is an identity and belonging that is in a process of becoming, ever emergent through 'dwelling' in Singapore's material world that is itself an entanglement of things and a plural society. I traced the becoming of local, 'Indian' and Singaporean

in colonial administration and migration and in post-colonial multiculturalism to establish a historical process and present-day context for the Singaporean Indian. I then examined the relations this group draws with identity documents and saw how they actively deployed home collections of familial documents to make legible their belonging as Singaporean Indian. The boundaries of identity were brought into question when my study of food practices revealed a great degree of skilled attunement in cooking and eating ‘across’ the race ascriptions of food in Singapore. It is in this deft ability to cross, yet maintain, those distinctions—in eating dishes from other race communities, cooking such foods at home with some adjustment for taste, or adapting cooking techniques from these other cuisines into the Singaporean Indian home kitchen—that the Singaporean Indian identity emerges as one responsive to the culinary world of Singapore. However, this world, shared and shaped by the other race communities of Singapore, does not always lend to seamless belonging. In my examination of smells and scent consumption, I drew attention to the leaky properties of smells and of homes. The social and olfactory flows of scent practices are thus not contained by private/public boundaries and instead entangle Singaporean Indians with neighbours and others. Accusations of Indian people and practices smelling foul weigh on a sense of non-belonging. Yet, as my study showed, common consumption also draws a space like Little India and the home together or gathers a community together in their shared scents of belonging. Discord similarly dominates much of the discussion around Thaipusam but, as I showed in paying attention to sound making on the processional path, there is a coming together of polyphonic ways. Singaporean Indians are heterogenous and have differing approaches to this sounded custom of Thaipusam, but ultimately each mode finds attunement with the others, with state regulations, and the changing urban landscape. Such responsive ways are how

Thaipusam perdures in Singapore and how Singaporean Indians have and continue to ensure a future. This thesis has demonstrated that the 'Singaporean Indian' is an identity and sense of belonging that is not fixed or predetermined, but a process of becoming emergent in responsive, skilled, and attuned 'dwelling' in a material world of Singapore that is itself an unfolding meshwork of people and things, marked by Singapore's plurality and multiculturalism. Becoming Singaporean Indian is not a simple transposition onto this land, but a continuous process of becoming *with* this material world.

While the Singaporean Indian has been the subject of this thesis. This anthropological case study has also allowed me to expand on the concepts of identity, belonging, and the material world. Extant understandings of identity recognise its relationality, premised on recognition of membership by others, and its fluidity when, constructed across a 'lack', it can never be identical to the subject processes (Hall 1996). Through this study of Singaporean Indians, I have discussed identity as in a process of becoming. While this captures the idea of relationality and fluidity from the literature, the concept of 'becoming' and ultimately the 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold 2000) accounts for the agency to make one's identity; the attention and skill necessary; as well as the limits on that from the world around. We see this for instance in the way Punjabis refer to themselves as 'Bengali' when speaking to local Malay census enumerators having learnt their ways of knowing the Indians but also limited by that understanding; in the choice and technical skills of cooking *nasi lemak* in the home but necessarily adapted for religious aversions or spice preferences; or in the innovation of a uniquely local beat from the persistent playing of bongos despite its prohibition. Through these mundane acts of dwelling, a Singaporean Indian identity unfolds in a

process of becoming. Where identity conceptualises a sense of who one is, belonging is concerned with a sense of acceptance and inclusion.

Belonging, as in the literature, is relational and contextual too (Antonsich 2010; Wood and Waite 2011; Gammeltoft 2018), and fundamentally spatial (Mee 2009; Mee and Wright 2009) and sensed (Racleş 2021). In framing belonging as also in a process of becoming, my study of Singaporean Indians offers an emphasis on becoming as actively engendered, having then to also attune to and negotiate challenges from the social and material world around. Thus, Singaporean Indians take agency in defining their own belonging through the redeployment of documents leveraging, though also limited by, the legibility of those documents in Singapore's social understandings. Or they find their agency challenged when their sensed belonging comes up against negative perceptions and the uncontainable quality of smells. The ethnography also points to how belonging emerges in future-oriented practices—such as setting up a community institution in the early years of settlement, or in teaching children to walk and sound Thaipusam, or even in making space for new labour and professional migrants to participate in the procession. These regenerative processes point to a recognition of belonging as necessarily continuously cultivated, requiring efforts in the now for a future becoming.

My approach to the material world was already premised on the process of becoming. I drew on Ingold's (2000) conceptualisation of 'things' as leaky bundles of flows drawing things and people into enmeshment. With this thesis, I offer a nascent idea of the enmeshment of lines of relations that entangle identity and belonging in Singapore as one I might term a 'plural material world'—expanding the conception of a material world of meshwork (Ingold 2008; 2011a) to account for entanglements with the raced

ways of seeing things and people in a plural society, especially one where race is part of the formal structures of state and society. This concept would call for a recognition that the relational flows of meshwork are not cut off from structuring frameworks, or that structuring ideas are already present in the meshwork. Approaching the material world in this way and taken together with a 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold 2000) that recognises the attuned, perceptive, responsive, and skilled ways people live in their everyday, I have drawn attention to the possibility of human and material agency in the unfolding processes of engendering identity and belonging.

Two implications follow from my reframing of 'Singaporean Indian', its identity, and belonging as unfolding in a process of becoming. In its continuous emergence and attunement, there is then no final point of arrival, to complete becoming Singaporean Indian. The question arises then of when identification and belonging as Singaporean Indian can be said to have happened. Here, I reiterate that there is not such a point of finality. Rather this reframing recognises that the task is an ongoing one, that even those who already identify themselves as 'Singaporean Indian' still find themselves having to articulate and defend this position in everyday interactions. To echo a participant: 'being Singaporean Indian is having to always define yourself to others'.

The other implication, following from this, is that this reframing affords a way to account for the instances where one's sense of identification with Singaporean Indian-ness is not matched by extant formal means of recognition through citizenship status. I return to two instances in my workshop recruitment process where I was contacted by people interested to sign up but who wanted to clarify if they were allowed to given their Permanent Resident status. Though I assured them they could and that my requirement was simply that they themselves identified as Singaporean Indian, both

these inquirers ultimately did not sign up. Recognising that identities and belongings are ever in a process of becoming and not a binary yes/no position would account for positions such as these. Likewise, my reframing could also begin to make sense of situations wherein individuals do have formal status but do not see themselves, or are not accepted by others as Singaporean Indians.

Most critically with this approach and its focus on continual attunement to an unfolding world, I seek to make an intervention in the prevailing discourse around migration and 'new citizens' in Singapore. To make up for falling birthrates, the Singapore government has pursued a liberal migration policy coupled with granting citizenship at greater rates. This move has particularly sought to attract 'Indian' and 'Chinese' migrants to make up for especially low fertility rates in these race communities. The discernible increase in population numbers and an ever-increasing sense of a difference between 'old' and 'new' populations has fomented sharp, and often, harsh distinctions between 'Singaporean Indians' and 'India Indians' with these terms also reflecting the underlying sentiments about belonging. With the view I put forward, of becoming 'Singaporean Indian' as a process, I hope to offer an avenue through which those who dwell in responsive attunement to the ways and world of Singapore may be recognised as 'becoming Singaporean Indian' even if their legal status does not formalise that identity or their biographical histories do not match popularly presumed markers of belonging. Singapore, uniquely amongst the South Asian diasporas, has had a continuous flow of migration from the subcontinent. That flow is the reality of this community's history and will be for its foreseeable future. This reframing, I propose, would offer a way of better accounting for identities and belonging that is grounded in everyday experience of dwelling in Singapore's social and material world.

On top of this conceptual intervention, I hope to make two anthropological contributions and two methodological ones. In extending the 'dwelling perspective' to the question of group identity and belonging, I hope to demonstrate further anthropological application of Ingold's (2000) ideas—including the concepts of 'thing' and his 'relational model' of inhabitation—to urban, cosmopolitan, postcolonial societies like Singapore. With that, I hope to also forefront the possibilities for even further anthropological study of Singapore, and particularly the Singapore Indian community. With my methodology, I wish to expand the use of the workshop method as well as object-based inquiry in anthropology, and in the questions of identity and belonging. And lastly, I have offered an expansion on the walking interview method by suggesting three modes of 'being with'. I draw from extant literature on 'walking interviews' that emphasise the importance of the walk as a process of 'being with' the participant in the co-creation of knowledge, or 'coming to know' (Springgay and Truman 2017; O' Neill and Roberts 2020). But not all walks and researcher-participant pairings are the same, so I have offered a trifold classification—the tour, the journey, and the wander—to highlight the productive differences offered with shifts in the dynamic or hierarchy between researcher and participant; in how both relate to the material environment of the walk; and in the collaboration on knowledge production.

Certainly, this thesis has not been without its limitations. For one, the premise of recruiting participants who already identified as Singaporean Indian, and the effect it had of returning only participants who were formally Singaporean citizens, meant my study could not account for those who felt inclined to this identity but who were held back by ideas of formal belonging. As a result, this thesis accounts for a becoming that is largely already recognised by dominant, conventional ways of identifying the

Singaporean Indian. Nonetheless, working with the established group offered a starting point from which to theorise identity and belonging as a process of becoming.

Second, I also have not been able to account for how class entangles becoming. This is on the first instance informed by the upper middle-class, English-speaking composition of my participants across the workshops and walking interviews. And on the second instance by my decision to maintain focus on this group for the sake of coherence. Given the current discursive climate around migration and especially given that ‘the “reason for the state” was from the outset defined in economic terms’ (Chua 1996), I am certain class has a significant hand in informing the experiences and ‘becoming’ of identify and belonging as ‘Singaporean Indian’, from both the lower and higher classes.

Third, this thesis does not account for the ethnic, religious, and linguistic complexities that are captured under the ‘Indian’ administrative category, or for gender. This has been largely informed by the contributions of my group of participants. Although they were predominantly Tamil, Hindu, and women, I did also have significant participation from my smaller number of Punjabi, Sikh, Christian, and male participants. Across the discussions, the patterns of relations they raised were similar, differing usually only in the particularity of an object—for instance, a statue of the Holy Family over a framed illustration of Jhulelal. They found far more, and far more enthusiastically voiced, commonalities especially on matters of food and smell. The only discernible difference informed by gender was of the experience of National Service, which only the male participants would have undergone. Even then the discussion was primarily around identity documents and demonstration of belonging, as reflected in chapter 4. Perhaps this may be a blind spot in a methodological focus on things and the material world.

However, drawing also from my interview participation, I am more inclined to think that the seeming lack of gender distinction in the becoming of Singaporean Indian is rather reflective of a largely gender-egalitarian society, but this perhaps needs further investigation. Likewise on the matter of ethno-religious and linguistic ways of becoming.

The present study has laid out an argument for the identity and belonging of Singaporean Indian as one in a process of 'becoming' grounded in the 'dwelling perspective'. I suggest two further expansions on this study—an approach to languages as 'things'; and a consideration of 'unbecoming'.

On top of the 'things' I have centred my chapters on, I would have most liked to take on a study of language as a 'thing'—itself an entanglement, and in entanglement with a world of other languages. This is a study, I anticipated, that would require separate dedication and its own methodological design. I, however, offer some preliminary thoughts on the possibilities of this inquiry with respect to the same question of becoming Singaporean Indian. The living nature of language lends naturally to the approach taken in this thesis of 'thing' and a world ever unfolding. In Singapore, the leaky lines of entanglement are highly noticeable in the ways South Asian languages adopt many nouns and verbs from the Malay language. This is the case most discernibly in the colloquial spoken forms of Tamil, Punjabi, and Hindi, to my ear at least. However, this way of speaking is largely limited by age and class, and to groups that have dwelled in an earlier Singapore where Malay was more ostensibly the *lingua franca* and the more accessible language option in schooling. The children of this group may have adopted much of the same vocabulary from this generation, but would have also had these 'incorrect' words disciplined out through formal language

education. Yet, the use of the occasional Malay word in speech still audible today, though decreasingly so, is a clear demonstration of attuned and skilled dwelling as Singaporean Indian. The linguistic entangling of Malay and South Asian Languages in Singapore is thus a fecund study.

Another entanglement involves education policy and present-day perceptions of language utility. Students in the public school system are required to take a 'Mother Tongue' subject. The choice of this subject is primarily tied to the ethno-linguistic identity of the child or either parent. However, the limited options of South Asian Languages and reforms to the enforcement of this policy in the last 3 decades have meant that many Indian parents may make the case that their 'mother tongue' language is not on offer and avail of any of the other Mother Tongue subject options. Anecdotally, Mandarin is chosen for the perception that it is of far greater utility in Singapore. This is an opinion shared by both 'old' and 'new' migrants. I would be interested in exploring how this choice, the eventual experience of studying Mandarin in school, the linguistic skill acquired, and the opportunities that it affords shape becoming Singaporean Indian.

Expanding the question of language availability and becoming, I am most interested in unpacking the entanglement of Tamil as an official language of the state and the process of becoming Singaporean Indian for both those with and without this Tamil linguistic (and related but separately, the Tamil ethnic) availability. This entanglement had been implied in undeveloped fragments in my research workshops and is certainly a hot-button issue today with allegations of a Hindi 'takeover' of Tamil in Singapore largely tagged to the influx of 'new migrants' who are assumed to be predominantly from the Hindi-speaking regions of India. But more than these entanglements, I would

be curious to study how official language status accorded to one language informs becoming Singaporean Indian for a linguistically diverse community, especially given the specific emphasis on language as prime determinant of South Asian ethnic identities.

The second expansion of this study pushes the conceptualisation of 'becoming' to consider the possibility of 'unbecoming' Singaporean Indian. Preliminarily, I suggest this may take several forms—foreclosure, reversal, refusal, reinvention, and unravelling. Premised on 'becoming' as a process of emergence through an entanglement in the relations and flows of a social and material world, 'unbecoming' would consider the possibility of severance from such flows, either incidentally or intentionally. For instance, having discussed the importance of phenotypical characteristics in the understanding of race in Singapore, 'not looking the part' might *foreclose* on parts of the process of becoming when, as I have established, identity is relational and partly dependent on being recognised by others as a member of the group. 'Unbecoming' as a *reversal* would account for experiences of rejection or marginalisation that pushes an individual to cease active 'becoming'. This is set apart from a *refusal* to 'become' where one actively rejects any associations and attribution as 'Singaporean Indian' and, perhaps, could include instances where one actively seeks association or identification with another race. An example of this may be an Indian Muslim person who cultivates a Malay identity leveraging in large part the synonymy of 'Malay' and 'Muslim' in Singapore. I set this slightly apart from *reinvention* which I, preliminarily, define as rejecting racial identification altogether in attempts to be seen as simply 'Singaporean'. Finally, with *unravelling*, I ask what might happen when the Singaporean Indian is removed from the meshwork of this material world, say, by migration. What happens to the process of becoming Singaporean

Indian, and its identity and belonging, when one no longer dwells in this located material world and is instead enmeshed into that of another nation and society; do the lines of relations unravel leading to a process of ‘unbecoming’ Singaporean Indian?

To conclude, the Singaporean Indian is not a fixed category but a becoming— unfolding in the rhythms of the everyday, in the documents, tastes, smells, and sounds that are the material world. This thesis has traced how identity and belonging are not merely inherited or bestowed, but crafted with care and intention, in attunement with a plural society and its ‘things’. What it means to be Singaporean Indian is not a destination reached, but an unfolding walk—in a world partly created by ancestors past, sometimes coming up against resistances of the present, and always regenerating for a future. It is in the skilled handling of everyday materials, in the attuning of one’s practices to the social and sensory world, that a sense of self and place emerges and perdures. In recognising this ongoing becoming, the ‘Singaporean Indian’ emerges not through accidents of birth or accordance of legal status, but as a process open to those who dwell *in* the land, and not just on it. I had set out to make sense of a way of being in the world that is my own. In the process, I have come to understand that, just like becoming Singaporean Indian, knowing it is also an ever-unfolding process. To echo Ingold (2013), ‘making’ this thesis has been a way of becoming knowledgeable —of coming to know through dwelling with the material.

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## Appendix A: Online Trial Workshop

Initial Planned Activity for Main Workshop	Modification to Activity for Online Trial Workshop	Feedback and Changes made for Main Workshop
<b>SESSION ONE</b>		
<b>Introductions</b> Introduce research project and the day's plans. Get consent forms signed. Have participants introduce themselves.	I introduced the intention of this trial session; explained how the planned workshop maps onto the trial; and flagged that I will ask for feedback at the end.	Have participants introduce themselves to the group by answering: 'How do you personally relate to the label of Singaporean Indian?'
<b>Wallet Museum</b> Participants unpack their wallets/purse to consider how their objects enact their everyday lives, then share observations.	As most were in their homes, I had them consider the objects on their desk or within reach.	Most participants simply listed things on their desk. Added probe questions for the main workshop to help them make further connections, e.g. 'what might this collection of things say about the person?' 'What identities are revealed?'
<b>Quick Listing</b> Participants list objects that come to mind when they think 'Singaporean Indian'	For the online trial session, participants listed on Jamboard (see Appendix B). After, everyone had a look at the collection of objects and unfamiliar terms or unexpected objects were flagged, the contributing participant explained their entry.	After an initial round of listing, I noticed that many of the listed objects were food items or things with strong smells, so I set up a second page for 'sounds' and asked participants to add to that.  In the main workshops, I will follow the first round of listing by asking what groups/types of objects are absent, then have them do another round of listing objects in a separate 'addendum'
<b>Rummage</b> From a pile of images, participants pick what that they think also enacts Singaporean Indian-ness	I did not translate this for the online workshop but only explained the idea.	Removed: I later thought that this pre-curated selection might give the impression that there was a 'correct' set of objects and thereby limit the discussion and pool of potential objects.
<b>Discussion</b> If 'Singaporean Indian-ness' is a varied experience, is there a core that we can identify	I suggested that we already touched on this in the above participants' introductions.	Move to and combined with participants' introductions.
<b>Treasure Hunt</b> Explain the homework assignment: Find and bring an object that says something about you/your family as 'Singaporean Indian'.	Since participants were at home, I had them walk around their home and identify such an object.	No change

Initial Planned Activity for Main Workshop	Modification to Activity for Online Trial Workshop	Feedback and Changes made for Main Workshop
<b>SESSION TWO</b>		
<p><b>The Walk</b> Participants start in a line. In turns, they complete the statement 'Being Singaporean Indian is...' or 'I feel Singaporean Indian when...', and take a step forward. Others also take a step forward if they resonate with the statement. At the end of the activity, participants are asked if they can pick out any aspect of the identity that they had not yet considered.</p>	<p>I explained that this is something that we would do in the main workshop. Instead of walk, trial participants simply volunteered some statements.</p>	<p>A participant feedbacked that the format could be exclusionary where someone who has not taken as many steps feels like they're not Singaporean Indian 'enough', or it might skew participants to make certain statements that they think others would resonate with.</p> <p>Instead, this will be converted into a listing exercise where participants submit their statements (on Mentimeter). The group will only see other submissions at the end of the submission window, and we will take the discussion from there.</p>
<p><b>Our Objects</b> Participants share their 'Treasure Hunt' object from home and explain their choice and criteria.</p>	<p>Participants shared the object they had identified, how it speaks to their 'Singaporean Indian-ness', and criteria for selection.</p>	<p>A participant couldn't physically bring her object to the computer, so she took a photo instead. This flagged an important consideration so I added the option of bringing the object or a photo of it instead.</p>
<p><b>Time Capsule</b> Working in small groups, participants list objects they would put in a Time Capsule.</p>	<p>Explained the planned format for the workshop. The trial participants worked together on a single Time Capsule of 3 things. I followed up with asking the participants who they imagined would eventually open their time capsule and how this shaped their object selections.</p>	<p>Participants feedbacked that this activity was a handy consolidation of the discussions and a nice conclusion to the workshop series.</p> <p>One participant feedbacked that the question of imagined audience was an interesting consideration, and suggested only asking at the end whether participants approached the task as a representation of themselves or of the community. Some observed that it being a group activity made them want to represent the group.</p> <p>Another suggested finding a way to help quieter participants contribute to the discussion and thus to the data. From this I made two modifications: 1. Starting with a round of making solo time capsules before a second round of group work; and 2. Having participants write/draw their time capsule collections on paper</p>



## Appendix C: Main Workshop

### Session One

Activity	Objective	Data Collection
<p><b>Introductions</b> Introduce myself, my research project, and the day's plans. Get consent forms signed. Participants introduce themselves by answering: 'How do you personally relate to the label of Singaporean-Indian?'</p>	<p>To ease participants into sharing with the group and focus the workshop's discussions.</p>	<p>Audio and video recording.</p>
<p><b>Wallet Museum</b> Participants unpack their wallet/ purse to consider how their objects move their everyday lives. Participants are asked to reflect on and share how their collection of things reflect them as a person and what identities are revealed.</p>	<p>To encourage participants to think about relationships with objects in the everyday. To help participants see how objects can and already relate to identity and being.</p>	<p>Audio and video recording.</p>
<p><b>Quick Listing</b> Working individually, participants list the objects that come to mind when they think 'Singaporean Indian'. Participants make their submissions via Mentimeter and can see other submissions in real time. After the first round of listing, the group identifies blind spots then starts a second round of listing in a separate 'Addendum'.</p>	<p>To get a sense of what objects are popularly associated with 'Singaporean Indian'. To allow participants to dive into the discussion and address their first impulses. To encourage participants to think beyond their first impulses.</p>	<p>Mentimeter files. Audio and video recording.</p>
<p><b>Explain 'Treasure Hunt'</b> Participants are asked to pay attention to their environment (not restricted to their home) and bring an object that says something about them/their family as 'Singaporean Indian'.</p>	<p>To give participants opportunity to apply ideas we've discussed. To encourage participants to pay attention to their everyday being in their environments. To generate objects and object-relations that might not be identified through recall in the classroom.</p>	<p>—</p>

## Session Two

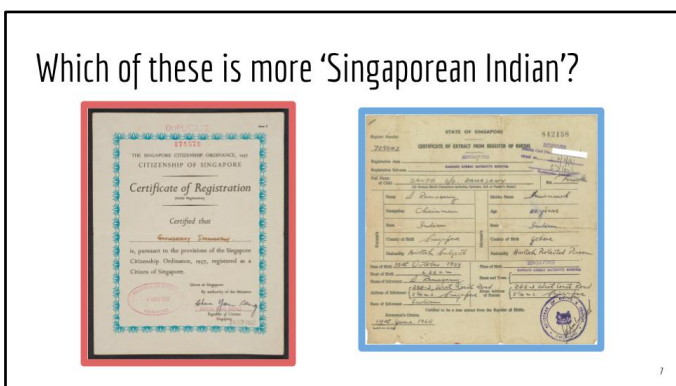
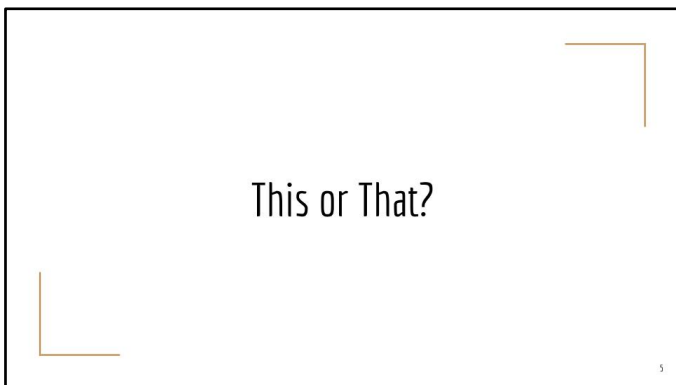
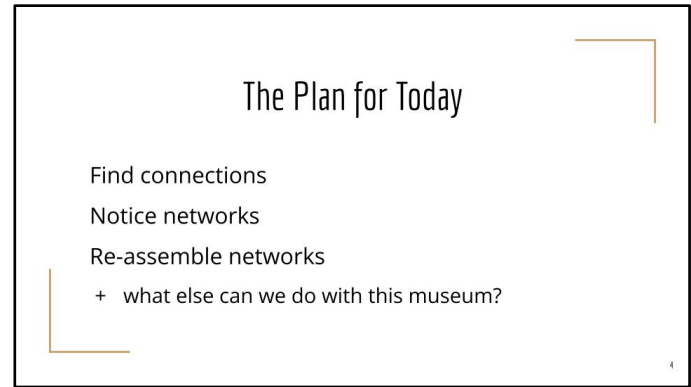
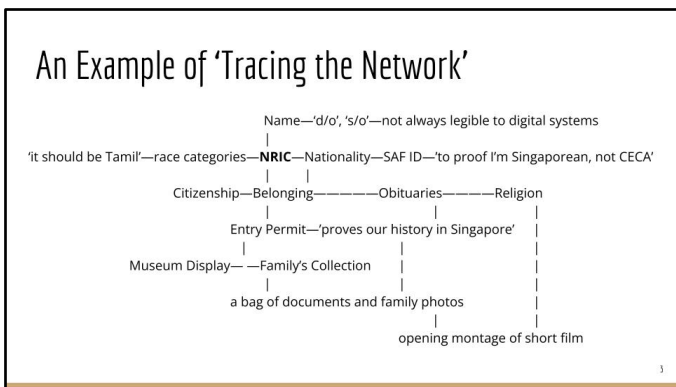
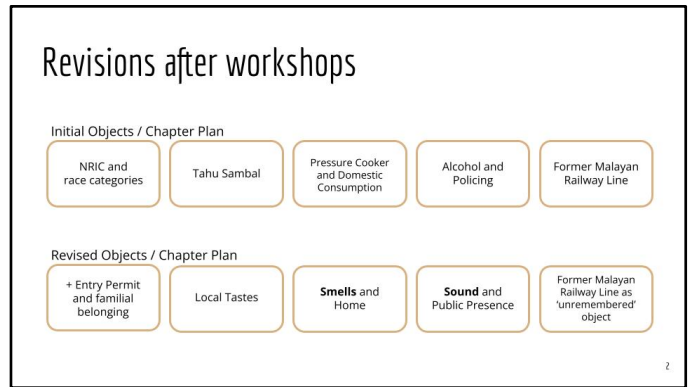
<p><b>Catch Up</b> Participants are asked for general thoughts/ reflection on last week's session</p>	<p>To recap the discussion and warm up into this session. To give participants space to air any preoccupying thoughts</p>	<p>Audio and video recording</p>
<p><b>Complete the Sentence</b> Participants complete the sentence 'Being Singaporean Indian is...' or 'I feel Singaporean Indian when...'. Their submissions are made via Mentimeter individually with other submissions hidden until the end of the submission window. All submission are then shown to the group for discussion.</p>	<p>To get a sense of when this identity flares up and/or where participants locate this identity. To collect responses synchronously so that they are not framed or limited by preceding contribution. To give quieter participants opportunity to contribute.</p>	<p>Mentimeter files. Audio and video recording.</p>
<p><b>Review of Last Week's List</b> Participants are showed their list of objects from last week and asked to clarify terms or reasons for inclusion</p>	<p>To give me an opportunity to better understand their submissions having had the time to read the full list carefully.</p>	<p>Audio and video recording</p>
<p><b>Our Objects</b> Participants share their 'Treasure Hunt' objects from home and explain their choice and criteria for selection.</p>	<p>To generate more personal narratives of engagement with objects. To understand how participants went about the process and what ideas inform their understanding of 'Singaporean Indian-ness' and thereby their criteria in object selection.</p>	<p>Audio and video recording</p>
<p><b>Time Capsule</b> Participants list 5 objects for their individual time capsule. They are then asked who they imagined their audience to be and why.  Participants then work in groups of 3 to make a time capsule of 10 objects. The groups then presents their criteria in selection, the list of objects and rationale for each inclusion.</p>	<p>To consolidate the workshop discussions. To get a sense of priorities when asked to shortlist/curate a representation. To get a sense of who else participants consider when thinking about their own being and identity. To get a sense of how participants see themselves or want themselves to be seen as Singaporean Indians.</p>	<p>Participants' worksheets. Audio and video recording</p>

## Appendix D: Closing Workshop

Activity	Objective	Data Collection
<p><b>Catch-up</b> (Activity Room) Participants are asked for general thoughts and reflections they've had since main workshops sessions.</p>	<p>To warm participants up to a new group. To give participants space to air any preoccupying thoughts. To recap and ease into the discussions.</p>	<p>Audio recording</p>
<p><b>Updates</b> (Activity Room) Participants are shown how I have so far taken on their ideas from the main workshops. (see Annex B)</p>	<p>To get participants' input on these directions. To demonstrate to participants how they have contributed to my work and encourage further input.</p>	<p>Audio recording</p>
<p><b>This or That</b> (Activity Room) Participants are shown a pair of images and asked to pick the one that is more 'Singaporean Indian'. Participants use coloured cards to indicate their choice and are asked to explain their thought process. (see Annex B)</p>	<p>To test some preliminary questions I had by forcing a choice. To get a sense of where participants locate (or would rather locate) Singaporean Indian-ness. To get a sense of how participants understand or position specific objects.</p>	<p>Audio recording</p>
<p><b>Object Dominos</b> (Activity Room) A deck of picture cards (featuring images of objects previously listed as well as some selected by me) are distributed to the participants. A random image is placed on the table to start with. Taking turns, participants put down an image that they find relates to another image on the table, thereby forming a web of connections (like in Dominos). Participants explain the connection when they put down a card.</p>	<p>To generate points of connections as seen by participants. To get a sense of how participants understand or position specific objects.</p>	<p>Audio recording</p>
<p><b>Gallery Discussion</b> (Permanent Gallery) Participants are led to the 'Journeys and Transnational Migration' display in IHC's permanent gallery. Participants are asked to respond to the display.</p>	<p>To elicit discussion through physical objects and a museum collection. To get participants' reaction to this collection of fairly mundane things displayed in connection to the major event of migration. To get a sense of how participants situate migration in their own lives and as Singaporean Indian.</p>	<p>Audio recording</p>

<p><b>Gallery Mapping</b> (Permanent Gallery)  Participants are given time to explore the permanent gallery on their own and asked to notice and to 'map themselves in the museum', i.e. draw the network of museum objects that enact them and their identity as Singaporean Indian.</p>	<p>To give participants opportunity to explore and engage with the gallery for themselves.  To have participants respond to actual objects and the museum's collections.  To get a sense of how participants locate themselves vis-a-vis the collection, and vice versa.</p> <p>Noticing a network w.r.t. Self, As you walk through the museum, take note of what objects speak to you and how they draw you to make connections with other objects. Sketch this network of objects/displays that enact YOU, that show your presence in the museum</p>	<p>Participants' sketches. Audio recording</p>
<p><b>Closing Discussion</b> (Activity Room)  Participants had also been asked to step out of the museum onto Campbell Lane (a popular stretch of shops) and repeat the mapping exercise there. Most participants did not get around to doing this after spending most of their time in the museum. Instead, back in the activity room, after sharing and explaining their maps, participants were asked to compare between the collection of things in the museum and the collection of things on Campbell Lane for how these enact them and their identity as Singaporean Indian.</p>	<p>To draw attention to how both museums and shops are a collection of things.  To have participants think about the work of official representations and collections in shaping how they see and relate to objects.  To encourage some engagement with the 'real world' of things and notice important mundane relationships there.</p>	<p>Audio recording</p>

# Appendix E: Slides Used in Closing Workshop



Which of these is more 'Singaporean Indian'?



9

Which of these is more 'Singaporean Indian'?



10

Which of these is more 'Singaporean Indian'?



11

Which of these is more 'Singaporean Indian'?



12

Which of these is more 'Singaporean Indian'?



13

## Object Dominos

14

## Gallery Discussions

1. How does this assemblage work?
2. How does IHC enact YOU?
  - notice the objects that speak to you
  - notice connections between objects
  - sketch this network of objects that enact YOU

15

## Campbell Lane Walk

How does this space enact 'Singaporean Indian'?

- Notice the smells, sounds, sights, actions
- Notice how one connects to another
- sketch this network of how this space enacts 'SG Indian'

16

## Appendix F: Indian Population in Census Reports (1871–2020)

There were population counts from 1824 to 1860, but these figures are largely deemed unreliable. This table collects figures from the first official national census in 1871.

Census Year	Population Total	Indian Total <sup>9</sup> (% of Pop. Total)	Dialect Groups <sup>10</sup> enumerated (% of Indian Total)					
			Tamils	Bengalis <sup>11</sup>	Indian Military	Parsees	Burmese	Singhalese
1871	97,111	10,761 11.1%	Tamils	Bengalis <sup>11</sup>	Indian Military	Parsees	Burmese	Singhalese
			9,334	944	415	35	26	7
			86.7%	8.8%	3.9%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%
1881	139,208	12,180 8.7%	Tamils	Bengalis	Burmese	Parsees		Singhalese
			10,507	1,551	52	28		42
			86.3%	12.7%	0.4%	0.2%		0.3%
1891	184,554	16,194 8.8%	Tamils	Bengalis	Parsees	Burmese		Singhalese
			12,503	3,452	54	26		159
			77.2%	21.3%	0.3%	0.2%		1.0%
1901	228,555	17,809 7.8%	Tamils	Bengalis	Indian Military	Parsees	Burmese	Singhalese
			13,791	3,242	750	26	14	244
			77.4%	18.2%	4.2%	0.1%	0.1%	1.4%
1911	303,321	27,939 9.2%	Indian-born Indians	Straits-born Indians	Indians born elsewhere	Burmese		Singhalese
			22,625	4,544	586	15		169
			81.0%	16.3%	2.1%	0.1%		0.6%
1921	425,912	32,831 7.7%	Tamils	Bengali	Punjabi	Malayali		Sinhalese
			25,823	1,830	1,526	1,379		375
			78.7%	5.6%	4.6%	4.2%		1.1%
			Hindustani	Gujerati	Telugu	Pathan		
			892	207	151	121		
			2.7%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%		
			Burmese	Maharatta	Gurkka	Indians Unspecified		
44	8	4	471					
0.1%	0.02%	0.01%	1.4%					

<sup>9</sup> From 1871 to 1957, the peoples from Ceylon were separately enumerated under the 'Other' population. This column reflects the total numbers enumerated under the 'Indian Races' as well as the peoples from Ceylon.

<sup>10</sup> These sub-categories was variously termed 'race', 'specified community' and 'dialect group'. This heading reflects the current application of 'dialect group' in effect since the 1970 Census Report. Spellings of group reflect that published in each report.

<sup>11</sup> From 1871 to 1901, the full title of this group is 'Bengalis and other Indians not particularised'.

### Sources:

1871–1911 Collated table of 'The Peoples of Singapore Census Returns', in Marriott, Hayes (1991) 'The peoples of Singapore: inhabitants and population.' in Brooke, G.E., Makepeace, W. & Braddell, R. St. John, Sir. (eds.). *One hundred years of Singapore*. Singapore: Oxford University Press. pp. 358–360

1921 'Table XV: Straits Settlements–The Indian Population by Race' and 'Table XVI: Straits Settlements–The 'Other' Population by Race' in J. F. Nathan. 1922. *The Census of British Malaya*.

Census Year	Population Total	Indian Total (% of Pop. Total)	Dialect Groups enumerated (% of Indian Total)					
1931	567,453	50,811 9.0%	Tamils	Punjabi, etc.	Malayalam	Other and Unidentified	Ceylon People	
			37,293	5,283	4,390	1,257	1,645	
			73.4%	10.4%	8.6%	2.5%	3.2%	
			United Provinces	Bengal etc.	Bombay etc.	Telugu		
			1,102	898	623	125		
			2.2%	1.8%	1.2%	0.2%		
1947	938,144	71,938 7.7%	Tamil	Malayali	Other South Indian people <sup>12</sup>	Punjabi	Sikh <sup>13</sup>	Ceylon Tamil
			42,240	9,712	4,150	3,558	2,196	1372
			58.7%	13.5%	5.8%	4.9%	3.1%	1.9%
			Bengali	Gujerati	Pathan	Sindhi	Telugu	Sinhalese
			1,253	549	548	369	346	820
			1.7%	0.8%	0.8%	0.5%	0.5%	1.1%
1957	1,445,929	129,510 9.0%	Marwari	Maharatti	Rajput	Other Indian peoples <sup>14</sup>	Other Ceylon peoples <sup>15</sup>	
			313	151	133	3,460	768	
			0.4%	0.2%	0.2%	4.8%	1.1%	
			Indian Tamil	Malayali	Punjabi	Sikh	Bengali	Ceylon Tamil
			78,228	21,783	7,757	3,405	2,405	3,454
			60.4%	16.8%	6.0%	2.6%	1.9%	2.7%
1957	1,445,929	129,510 9.0%	Gujerati	Telugu	Pathan	Other Indian and Pakistani	'Indians' & 'Pakistanis' <sup>16</sup>	Sinhalese
			911	581	316	5,624	3,074	1,379
			0.7%	0.4%	0.2%	4.3%	2.4%	1.1%
								Other Ceylonese
								279
								0.2%
					'Ceylonese' (so specified)			

<sup>12</sup> The full title of this group is 'Other, unspecified or indeterminate South Indian people'

<sup>13</sup> From 1947, 'Sikh' was enumerated separate from 'Punjabi' following petitions from various Sikh associations in Singapore (see 1947 Census Report, ch VII. Race, para 306, p 78).

<sup>14</sup> The full title of this group is 'Other, unspecified and indeterminate Indian peoples'

<sup>15</sup> The full title of this group is 'Other, unspecified or indeterminate Ceylon peoples'

<sup>16</sup> Census returns in 1957 reflect new national identities expressed following the independence of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon. In this year's report, the previously termed 'Indian' race category was renamed 'Indian & Pakistani'.

Sources:

1931 'Table 62: Straits Settlements—Indians by Race' and 'Table 69: Straits Settlements—Others by Race' in C. A. Vlieland. 1932. *A Report on the 1931 Census*.

1947 'Table 37: Indians by Specific Community' and 'Table 39: Other Communities' in M. V. Del Tufo. 1949. *Malaya, A Report on the 1947 Census of Population*.

1957 'Preliminary Release no. 3, Population by Race, Specific community and Sex within each administrative area' in Singapore Statistics Department. 1958. *1957 Census of Population, Singapore*.

Census Year	Population Total	Indian Total (% of Pop. Total)	Dialect Groups enumerated (% of Indian Total)					
						314	0.2%	
<b>1970<sup>17</sup></b>	2,074,507	145,169 7.0%	Indian Tamil	Malayali	Punjabi	Gujerati	Bengali	
			96,190 66.3%	17,371 12.0%	11,608 8.0%	1,453 1.0%	1,083 0.7%	
			Telugu	Ceylon Tamil	Sinhalese	Other Ceylonese	Other Indians	
			502 0.3%	3,426 2.4%	1,201 0.8%	779 0.5%	11,556 8.0%	
<b>1980</b>	2,413,945	154,632 6.3%	Tamil	Malayali	Punjabi	Gujerati	Others	
			98,772 63.9%	12,451 8.1%	12,025 7.8%	1,619 1.0%	29,765 19.2%	
<b>1990<sup>18</sup></b>	2,705,115	190,907 7.1%	Tamil	Malayalee	Sikh <sup>19</sup>	Hindustani	Sindhi	Punjabi
			122,038 63.9%	16,329 8.6%	12,771 6.7%	3,848 2.0%	2,842 1.5%	2,307 1.2%
			Urdu	Gujarati	Sinhalese	Hindi	Other Indians	
			2,190 1.1%	1,997 1.0%	1,994 1.0%	1,139 0.6%	23,452 12.3%	
<b>2000</b>	3,273,363	257,866 7.9%	Tamil	Malayalee	Sikh	Hindustani	Punjabi	Sindhi
			150,181 58.2%	21,745 8.4%	13,260 5.1%	5,062 2.0%	4,722 1.8%	4,005 1.6%
			Hindi	Gujarati	Urdu	Sinhalese	Other Indians	
			3,941 1.5%	3,254 1.3%	2,997 1.2%	2,422 0.9%	46,277 17.9%	
<b>2010</b>	3,771,721	348,119 9.2%	Tamil	Malayalee	Hindi	Sikh	Punjabi	Hindustani
			188,591 54.2%	26,348 7.6%	13,085 3.8%	12,952 3.7%	5,672 1.6%	4,818 1.4%
			Urdu	Gujarati	Sindhi	Sinhalese	Other Indians	
			4,773 1.4%	4,124 1.2%	3,971 1.1%	3,140 0.9%	80,645 23.2%	

<sup>17</sup> The 1970 exercise was the first post-independence census. From here on, groups from Ceylon are enumerated under 'Indian'.

<sup>18</sup> From 1990, this column enumerates only the resident population, before the count of a population total included non-residents.

<sup>19</sup> Though 'Sikh' was not counted separately in the prior post-independence census, the practice was reinstated on account of Sikh sentiments following the events of 1984.

Sources:

- 1970 'Table 22: Indians by Age-Group and Dialect Group' in Department of Statistics, Singapore. 1973. *Report on the Census of Population, Vol. II.*
- 1980 'Table 36: Indians by Age Group, Dialect Group and Sex' in Department of Statistics, Singapore. 1981. *Census of Population 1980 Singapore, Release No. 2 Demographic Characteristics.*
- 1990 'Table 15: Indian Resident Population by Age Group, Dialect Group and Sex' in Department of Statistics, Singapore. 1992. *Census of Population 1990 Singapore, Statistical Release No. 1 Demographic Characteristics.*
- 2000 'Table 6: Indian Resident Population by Age Group, Dialect Group and Sex' in SingStat. 2001. *Singapore Census of Population 2000, Statistical Release No. 1: Demographic Characteristics.*
- 2010 'Table 6: Indian Resident Population by Age Group, Dialect Group and Sex' in SingStat. 2011. *Singapore Census of Population 2010, Statistical Release No. 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion.*
- 2020 'Table 6: Indian Resident Population by Age Group, Dialect Group and Sex' in SingStat. 2021. *Singapore Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release No. 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion.*

<b>2020</b>	4,044,210	362,274	Tamil	Malayalee	Hindi	Sikh	Other Indians
		9.0%	198,449	26,693	18,618	12,589	105,925
			54.8%	7.4%	5.1%	3.5%	29.2%