



Madras Embarking. Hand-coloured aquatint by JB East, Charles Hunt, and Rudolph Ackermann.
Collection of National Museum of Singapore

Telling the Tale of Tamils Across the Ocean

Arun Mahizhnan
Nalina Gopal

@Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai
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Sojourners to Settlers

TAMILS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND SINGAPORE

Edited by Arun Mahalingam and Nalini Gopal



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Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore



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"Bell of the Ship Mohideen Bakhsh [Bux]
17th–18th century. Made in Tamil Nadu,
discovered in New Zealand. Bronze.
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand
Te Papa Tongarewa, Bequest of William
Colenso, 1899.



Facsimile of the bell's inscription published
by John Turnbull Thomson in 1871
in *Ethnographical Considerations on the
Whence of the Maori*. Courtesy of National
Library of New Zealand.

Sojourners to Settlers

TAMILS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Edited by
Arun Mahalingam and Nalina Gopal

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Traces of the Cholas in Old Singapura



Map of Singapore dated to 1825, showing "Rocky Point", the promontory at the mouth of the Singapore River which was the original site of the Singapore Stone. Courtesy of British Library.

The naval campaign of Rajendra Chola I (reigned 1014–1044 CE) that defeated Srivijaya in 1025 had far-reaching effects, including new growth in Tamil trade and settlement throughout the Malay world. As the Chola fleet sailed through the Singapore Strait between the eastern and western coasts of the Malay Peninsula, did the Cholas leave traces in Singapore itself? This chapter examines four potential indications of a Chola presence: the unidentified place Valaippanduru; the Singapore Stone—the only specimen of writing surviving from the precolonial city, attributed to a 'Chulan' king in the *Sejarah Melayu* literature; the 'Headless horseman' artefact; and a Ganesha icon that washed up in Tanjong Katong in the 19th century.

Is Valaippanduru Singapore?

Among the 13 territories in the Malay Archipelago that are named as conquests of the Cholas, four remain unidentified. One of these four placenames, Valaippanduru, has been speculatively identified with Singapore. Valaippanduru could convey the hypothetical Malay name Balai Pancur, as proposed by Colless.¹ Pancur, 'spring,' is a common name. There is a place in Johor called Pancur, and Colless thought that the name Balai Pancur might recall a Chola attack on a fort in the Johor riverine system, as related in the *Sejarah Melayu*. However, Colless did not overlook the fact that present-day Fort Canning hill, the centre of old Singapura, was known as Pancur in the early 14th century CE. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, a *balai* (elevated hall) stood near the hill at this time.² Valaippanduru, in this interpretation, would refer to the area around the mouth of the Singapore River.

“

It is said, in verse 124 of the Sanskrit section of the Thiruvallangadu Plates, that Rajendra Chola set up a victory column (*jayastambha*) after defeating Kedah in his sixth regnal year, that is, 1019 CE. Although this monument's location has never been determined, it calls to mind the famous Singapore Stone.”



Madras Embarking. Hand-coloured aquatint by JB East, Charles Hunt, and Rudolph Ackermann.
Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

Obscure Odysseys: Chronicles of Coromandel Coast Natives

Connections between the Tamil coast and Southeast Asia have long been of scholarly interest on both sides of the Bay of Bengal.¹ However, many a detail still remains enigmatic. This is perhaps the result of a three-pronged challenge. First, epigraphic and literary corpora written in scripts and languages of both regions are seldom studied in juxtaposition with their original pre-translated forms.² Second, the regions' colonial pasts have resulted in a global dispersal of materials. Lastly, a predominance of interest in pre-modern narratives has led to a relative neglect of research on more recent diasporas. This chapter reconstructs the history of Tamils in Singapore beginning with a whistle-stop tour of pre-modern focal points and leads to the identification of lesser known 19th century Tamils in Singapore which forms the cynosure of this chapter. It surveys contemporary vestiges of 19th century Tamils by recording the family trees of three Singaporean Tamil families who trace seven to eight generations of their lineage. Through these glimpses of Tamil genealogy this chapter establishes an uninterrupted narrative of Tamils in Singapore from the 19th century to present times. This is but a drop in the ocean that is the odyssey of Singapore's Tamils, based on parallel evidence available in archival records, oral history, literary and epigraphic sources.

In the Beginning—Beyond 200 years

Tamil connections with Singapore can be traced to the 11th–13th centuries CE based on evidence presented in the form of the Singapore Stone.³ Located at the mouth of the Singapore River, the inscription on the Stone had attracted curious visitors before it was dynamited in 1843 by the British. Captain Begg of the Madras Artillery describes the interest the epigraph raised in the 19th century—

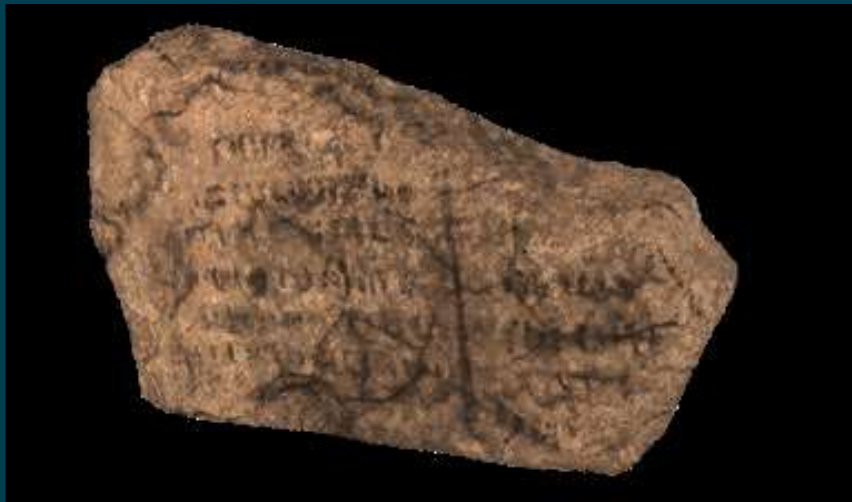
"the principal curiosity of Singapore is a large stone at the point of the river, the one face of which has been sloped and smoothed upon which several lines of engraved characters are still visible. The rock being, however, of a schistose and porous nature, the inscription is illegible. It is said that Sir Stamford Raffles endeavoured, by the application of powerful acids, to bring out the characters with the view of deciphering them, but the result was unsuccessful."⁴

“

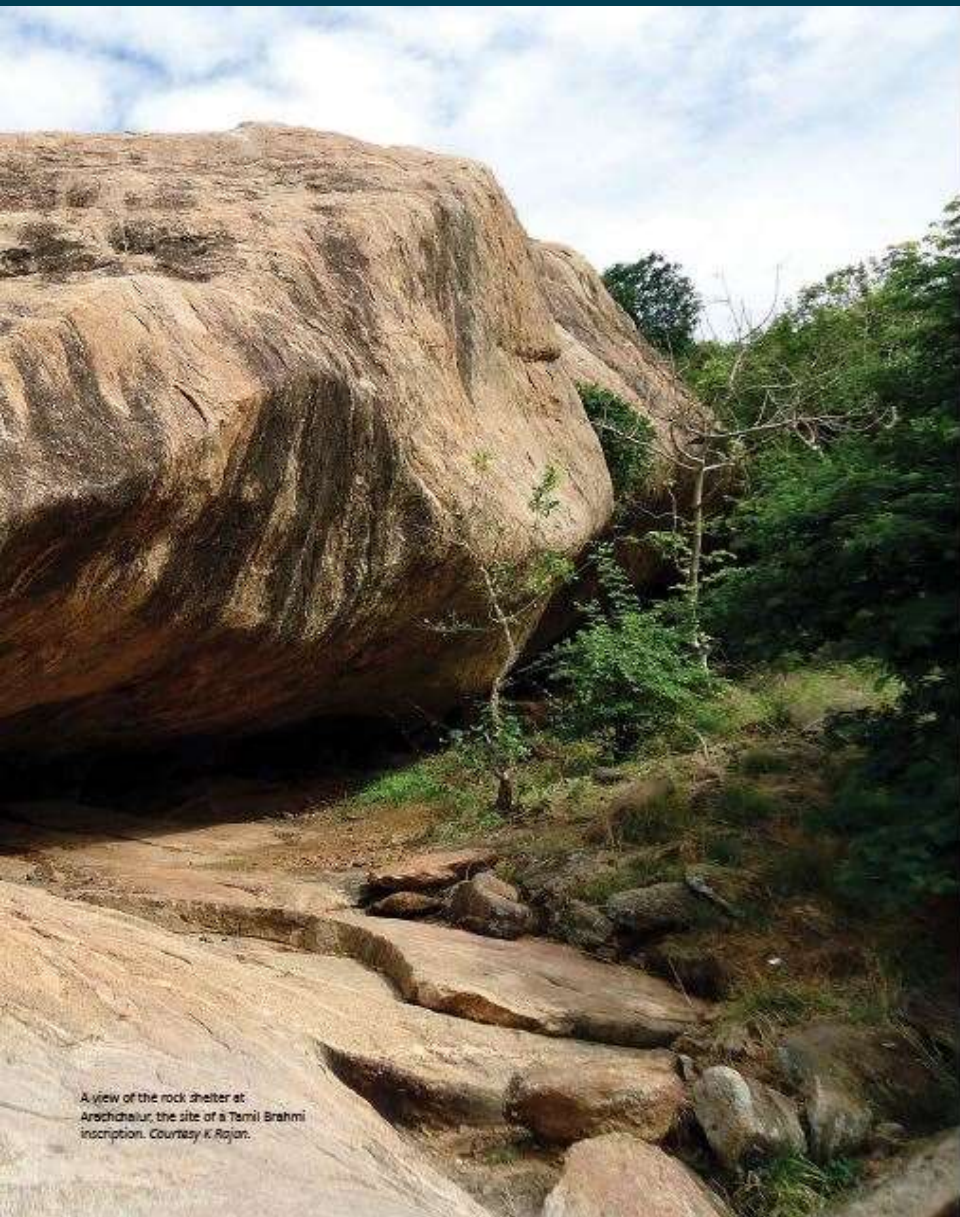
கற்றது கை மண்
அளவு. கல்லாதது
உலகளவு

Known is a drop,
Unknown an ocean.”

— Tamil Proverb



The extant fragment (right) and 3D models reproduced based on facsimilies of the inscription published by JW Laidlay in 1848 in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Courtesy of Asiatic Society of Bengal.



A view of the rock shelter at
Arachalur, the site of a Tamil Brahmi
inscription. Courtesy K. Rajan.

Evolution of the Tamil Script: An Essential Beginning

In the Indian context, south Indian history is largely written on the basis of epigraphical records. More than 100,000 inscriptions have been documented in south India, constituting nearly 60 per cent of the total number of inscriptions so far documented in India. These early south Indian inscriptions were engraved in Prakrit-Brahmi, Tamil-Brahmi, Grantha, Vatteluttu, Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada scripts carrying languages such as Tamil, Prakrit, Kannada, Telugu and Sanskrit. Among the scripts, Tamil-Brahmi dates back to the 5th century CE and Prakrit-Brahmi to the 3rd century BCE. The earliest epigraphical records in the Sanskrit language are from Ayodhya and Ghosundi but written in Brahmi, and they are datable to the 1st century BCE.¹ The Kannada and Telugu scripts are noticed from the 5th–6th century CE onwards, almost a millennium after the Tamil script. When the rest of India and Sri Lanka employed the Prakrit language in epigraphical records, Tamil Nadu did not use Prakrit. Rather, Tamil alone was used, but with a few admixtures of Tamilised-Prakrit words. Prakrit-Brahmi inscriptions have not been found in Tamil Nadu till now.

The Tamil script has evolved through several centuries to get to its present form. The Tamil-Brahmi script evolved as Vatteluttu and the Tamil script in the course of time, and the Tamil script in its present form was formed around the 8th–9th century CE. Since then, minor or negligible palaeographical changes do occur. There are some unsettled issues in relation to the origin of the Tamil-Brahmi script. Most scholars hold the view that it evolved from the Indus script and graffiti marks, a kind of writing system found in south India in the period between the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE and the early part of the 3rd century BCE. The occurrence of a large number of identical graffiti marks in different cultural contexts both in India and Sri Lanka suggests that these were used as one kind of writing system. However, lack of sufficient data to understand its stratigraphical and contextual position has prevented scholars from accepting it as a script. With the advent of the Tamil-Brahmi script, one can observe the continuous use of the Tamil script from the 6th century BCE till now.

“

The presence of both Prakrit-Brahmi and Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions in Thailand conveys the message that Southeast Asia experienced contact with the Indian Subcontinent as early as the 2nd century BCE.”



The Bhima Ratha at the Mamallapuram complex, dating to the 7th century CE.
Courtesy of Deep Goswami.

The Tamil Diaspora in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: A Longue Durée Narrative

The Jambudvipa Cultural Complex

Tamil-speaking peoples played a seminal role in a process of cultural convergence between South and Southeast Asia though their contributions in this regard have been scarcely examined in the form of a *longue durée* narrative. This chapter considers the long-standing interaction between Tamil-speaking peoples and Southeast Asian polities from antiquity down to the 1600s, a period which marks the decline of South Asian shipping and the ascendancy of European trade. The European records for the tail-end of the period in question have been detailed elsewhere and will not inform our discussion here.¹ But before this role is examined, the scholarly paradigms and premises underlying accounts of South-Southeast Asian transactions in antiquity require re-assessment.

A number of models, which are not mutually exclusive, have been outlined in modern scholarship to describe this acculturative process. Most historians of Southeast Asia now favour the localisation model which posits indigenous agency in selecting and (re)interpreting Indic models of political organisation and culture. This is invariably viewed as an organic development, largely taking place in the early centuries of the Common Era, following on the heels of centuries of maritime and terrestrial contact, circulation and exchange for which there is now ample archaeological data.² The sheer spatial extent of this transit trade in precious and pedestrian commodities alike is reflected, perhaps most spectacularly, by the use of Burmese rubies to flesh out the eyes of a Parthian (1st century BCE) statuette of a goddess from Babylon.³ The long-distance trade in Moluccan spices may also be far older than previously supposed. Myristate-related compounds, a derivative of nutmeg, found in flasks from early Iron Age sites (early 1st millennium BCE) in Israel and the upper Diyala valley of Iraq have tentatively suggested the presence of nutmeg.⁴ In the reverse direction, *intaglios* with classicising motifs of Mediterranean provenance (1st century BCE onwards) have found their way into Southeast Asia e.g. at Khao Sam Kaeo, Phu Kao Thong, Bang Klui Nok, Tha Cha Na and Khuan Lukpat.⁵

“

திரைகடல் ஓடியும்
திரவியம் தேடு

Seek fortune even
across the wave-
tossed sea”

- Tamil proverb

Hinduism in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia: Tamil Perspectives

The spread of Indian culture, Sanskrit language, and Hindu beliefs and rituals to Southeast Asia is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon involving the circulation of people, ideas, practices, texts, and icons across the Bay of Bengal from the early centuries of the Common Era (CE) through the "Early Medieval" period (the 6th to the 13th centuries CE) and beyond to the colonial and modern periods.¹ In analysing this phenomenon, and specifically the Tamil contribution to it, scholars have to face multiple problems, including the quantity and nature of available historical data, as well as their interpretation. Early scholars, like the Dutch Indologist Vogel and Indian historian Nilakanta Sastri,² privileged a Pallava-, Dravidian-, or Tamil-centric perspective, recognising both the geographical proximity of south India to Southeast Asia (especially Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula) and maritime trade (carried out by Tamil traders' communities) as the main catalysts for cultural transfer. While the important role played by the coastal areas of southern India and their inhabitants in trans-cultural dynamics across the Bay of Bengal is undeniable, these perspectives were—and still are—often tinged by modern nationalistic biases and regional (that is, "Dravidian") chauvinism. Indeed, cultural and religious elements that were appropriated by Southeast Asians seem to have come from various regions of the subcontinent over an extended period.³ Furthermore, it has increasingly become open to doubt whether trade and traders played a major role in the diffusion of the Indic religious paradigms that contributed to shaping the high cultures of much of Southeast Asia—the various classes of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical religious and ritual specialists sponsored by the political elites being perhaps better candidates.

“

South India and Southeast Asia have to be regarded as equal partners in shared civilisational processes.”

Agastya, 11th century CE, Indonesia.
Collection of Indian Heritage Centre.



A bronze image of Buddha found at Nagaopattinam, dating to the 11th–12th century CE. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Tamil Influence on Buddhism in Southeast Asia

Many important early Buddhist sites in India are located in the northeast region where the historic Shakyamuni spent his life. In northwest India, the caves of Ellora and Ajanta display important mural paintings dedicated to Buddhist themes. The island of Sri Lanka is recognised as an important centre for the development of Buddhist theology and philosophy and the transmission of Theravada belief and practice to Southeast Asia. The role of the Tamil region of southern India in developing Buddhist art and thought, and their dissemination across the Bay of Bengal, is relatively underappreciated.

Maritime links between south India and Southeast Asia were established in the late prehistoric period.¹ The oldest example of the Tamil language in Southeast Asia was written in the 2nd or 3rd century CE on a potsherd found at Phu Khao Thong, south Thailand; it consists of one word, possibly “ascetic” or “recluse.”² Similar inscriptions have been found as far west as Berenike, Egypt.³ At Khlong Thom (Khuan Luk Pat), south Thailand, a Tamil inscription on a touchstone for assaying gold was inscribed *penumpotankol*, “the [touch] stone of the great goldsmith” in the 3rd century CE.⁴ In all, 10 medieval Tamil inscriptions have been found in Southeast Asia.⁵

Ancient Indian literature contains numerous references to sea travel. These are difficult to date, and the geographical information in them is often imprecise or incomprehensible. For instance, the *Niddesa* (composed no later than the 1st century BCE)⁶ “deplores the bad consequences of desire, and among these the exceedingly dangerous voyages across the ocean in search of wealth. Long lists are given of the places which are the destinations of such voyages, a number of which are in Southeast Asia.”⁷

Several of the earliest Buddhist inscriptions in Southeast Asia, found in Kedah, Malaysia, are written in the Sanskrit language and the south Indian Grantha script.⁸ A related inscription written in Sanskrit using the 7th century CE Tamil Grantha script was found at Wat Mahayong, Nakhon Si Thammarat, south Thailand. It is Buddhist and advocates *dharma*.⁹ These indicate that Tamils were involved deeply in the early spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia.

“

The role of the Tamil region of southern India in developing Buddhist art and thought, and their dissemination across the Bay of Bengal, is relatively underappreciated.”



West Pra Mahastat inscription.
Courtesy of V Subramanyam.

Tamil Inscriptions in Southeast Asia: Cultural Implications

Written evidence on the commercial and cultural contacts between India and Southeast Asia start appearing from about the 1st century CE. Mostly they are, in the early stages, small label inscriptions in Prakrit and Sanskrit languages engraved on seals, like those met with at Oc Eo in south Vietnam, and Khlong Thom in Peninsular Thailand. They are followed by some Sanskrit inscriptions between the 5th and 8th centuries CE from Kutei (Borneo), Bogor in Java, among others referring to the Vedic sacrifices performed by the local kings with the help of Brahmin priests from India. Thereafter, there are a number of inscriptions written in local languages (Thai, Khmer, Malay and Javanese) mixed with some Sanskrit, which give some information about the foreign peoples in Java and other parts. There are also some Arab and Chinese travellers' accounts referring to the movements of people in the Indian ocean from Arabia to China. The Tamil inscriptions found in Southeast Asia, though not many, form an important source for tracing the contacts of the Tamils, particularly the merchants, with eastern countries including China. This chapter provides the full text of a number of Tamil inscriptions in Southeast Asia. These number nine precisely: three in Thailand, one in Burma, four in the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, including one which seems to be lost, and one in China. Two of these had been published long ago (see endnotes 4 and 14). All the available ones were checked again *in situ* and fresh copies were taken by an Indo-Japanese team headed by Noboru Karashima, who undertook some field visits in Southeast Asia during 1991-95 and 2000. A preliminary analysis of these inscriptions was reported by Karashima in the Eighth International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Research, Thanjavur, 1995.³ Basing on this report as well as on other published inscriptions, Jan Wisseman Christie discussed the importance of these inscriptions for understanding the complex trade relations that existed between south India, Southeast Asia and China from the 9th to the 13th centuries CE.⁴

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The Tamil inscriptions found in Southeast Asia, though not many, form an important source for tracing the contacts of the Tamils, particularly the merchants, with eastern countries including China.”



A view of the archaeological excavation at Keezhadi, a Sangam-era industrial-commercial centre discovered in Tamil Nadu. Courtesy of Paramatams, via Wikimedia Commons.

Trading Ports and Maritime Routes: Tamil Network with Southeast Asia

Cultural connectivity with distant lands through the exchange of ideas and goods, genetic transfer and migration of people have served as sources of development, progress and pluralism in history. Long-distance maritime and terrestrial relationships, migration and diaspora formation have contributed to the growth of civilisations, urbanisation and globalisation. The Afro-Eurasian and Indian Ocean worlds attained cultural diversity from the late pre-historic times; traders and individuals began to interact from the beginning of the Common Era.¹

In the trade activities of the Afro-Eurasian and Indian Ocean worlds, Tamilagam (the Tamil name to refer to the region that included Tamil Nadu and Kerala in India), and Sri Lanka have had a formative role. Interactions between south India and Southeast Asia have been studied by several scholars.² In this chapter, trade networks, ports and the agencies involved in commercial interactions between the Tamil region and Southeast Asia, primarily in the pre-colonial period, are discussed.

Maritime Interactions and Trade Networks of Tamilagam and Southeast Asia

Prehistoric connections between India and Southeast Asia are evidenced by limited archaeological finds. Surviving terminologies such as *prohu*, *bangka* and *prao* referring to watercrafts in the Southeast Asian languages are also similar to the Dravidian terms for boat such as *Padovu* and *Padogu*. *Malai* in Tamil, and *Mala* and *Male* of other Dravidian languages denoting hill have parallels in Malay. The megalithic burials of south India³ and the ceramic remains of pottery impressed by carved paddles from south India suggest the connections with Southeast Asia in the Iron Age and Early Historic periods. Paddles are wooden tools with a flat rectangular part and a handle used by potters to beat the roughly-shaped pottery in leather-hard condition to shape and strengthen them, and the paddles with carved designs produce such pottery with impressed decorations on the exterior.

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Tamilagam was in the central position of the transoceanic maritime networks of the Indian Ocean, and its pivotal position gave a lot of advantage to its culture and history, and has influenced the course of its history.”



Rouletted Ware, found at Phukhao Thong, Ranong Province. Courtesy of Wannasorn Noonsuk.

Early ports sprang up along the Coromandel Coast and the shorelines of Peninsular Thailand at around the same time, beginning in the late centuries BCE. Arikamedu and Alagankulam in Tamil Nadu, for example, were prosperous ports with connections reaching both Southeast Asia and the Roman World. Both sites' access to exotic eastern goods, such as pearls and silk, may have been the main attraction for the Roman merchants. Thus, this made the commercial partnership across the Bay of Bengal even more crucial.

The artefacts that can be the early evidence of contacts across the Bay of Bengal during the last centuries BCE to early centuries CE include—but are not limited to—semi-precious stone beads, Indo-Pacific glass beads, and Rouletted Wares, which were being produced in multiple sites, including Arikamedu, and became shared material culture in this maritime region. The Indo-Pacific beads were small, drawn, monochromatic glass beads, also produced in South India and Sri Lanka among other places. They were found in a large number of coastal sites in Southeast Asia.

Rouletted Ware is typically in the form of black shallow bowls, with a slipped and well-burnished surface. Its most distinctive feature is the indented concentric linear patterns on the interior, flat bottom of vessel, produced by the continuous rolling motion of the toothed roulette as it was held against the revolving vessel on a potter's wheel.

Rouletted Ware first emerged around the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE and may have lasted until the 3rd century CE.² It had multiple origins. In India, while Arikamedu was one of the major production sites of Rouletted Ware, this type of ware was found along the Coromandel Coast from Bengal to Sri Lanka. Among the 124 sites with Rouletted Ware in India, 45 of them are from Andhra Pradesh along the Krishna river, making it the largest group. In Peninsular Thailand, Rouletted Ware was found in several sites, especially Khao Sam Kaeo and Phukhao Thong.

Khao Sam Kaeo

The site of Khao Sam Kaeo, in Chumphon Province, is on the eastern coast of the Isthmus of Kra, which has the estuary of the Kra Buri River on the opposite coast of which Phukhao Thong is situated. It is the shortest point to cross the Peninsula, which is around 44 km from one coast to the next. I excavated at Khao Sam Kaeo in 2006. The site consisted of four main hills. The hills were most suitable for settlements, as the remote sensing analysis used by the expedition shows that the surrounding lowlands of the hills were subject to flooding in ancient times. While this site was never coastal, it had easy access to the sea via the Tha Tapao River.³

The large size of the settlement (54 hectares) and the complex activities in it indicate that Khao Sam Kaeo may have been an important urban centre comparable to those in South Asia, such as Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu, Nagarjunakonda in Andhradesa, Rajgir in Bihar, and Sisupalgarh in Orissa.⁴

Regarding the Rouletted Ware found at Khao Sam Kaeo, Bouvet⁵ suggests that they show homogeneity in paste, surface, and production technique, and thus indicate one centre of production. The technical and chronological similarities between Rouletted Ware from Khao Sam Kaeo and Arikamedu indicate that Rouletted Ware found at Khao Sam Kaeo were imported from Arikamedu. Manguin⁶ points out that the quantity of Rouletted Ware found in Southeast Asia is too small to regard them as a major trade item; he says "For some four centuries of exchange activities, enough

whole dishes (of Rouletted Ware) to set tables for only five dozen people [were found]". This ware may have been carried along by the Indian merchants to Southeast Asia and served specific purposes for them, perhaps in religious settings. It may have also been regarded as a kind of prestige goods for the elites. In any case, Rouletted Ware found at Khao Sam Kaeo may have been one of the earliest types of evidence that suggest the direct flow of goods and material culture from Tamil Nadu to Peninsular Thailand and even Southeast Asia in around the 4th to 2nd centuries BCE.

Phukhao Thong

Located on the western coast of the Isthmus of Kra, facing India, was the archaeological site of Phukhao Thong (or Golden Hill) in Ranong Province, which I excavated in 2006 with Captain Boonyarit Chaisuvann. The site sits on the southern bank of ancient Klui Bay and can be dated to 300 BCE–20 CE, although its chronology seems to overlap with that of Khao Sam Kaeo and it appears to have remained active throughout the early centuries CE.⁷ This ancient bay, which is now a mangrove forest, is protected by small islands (such as Klui Island) from the open water of the Andaman Sea and situated around 20 km south of the mouth of the Kraburi river.

Rouletted Ware and other Indian Fine Wares, such as stamped and unstamped bowls, knobbed wares, dishes with a rouletted or chattered rim, and a stamped leaf medallion at the center of the inner base, were found in Phukhao Thong as well. It has been noted that Phukhao Thong has the largest corpus of Indian Rouletted Ware (300–1 BCE) so far known in Southeast Asia,⁸ and that the Indian ceramic imports at Phukhao Thong are more numerous and diverse than the ceramic imports at Khao Sam Kaeo and may have come from various Indian workshops.⁹ The workshops in Arikamedu seem to have been among them.

The most tantalising find from Phukhao Thong which is related to the Tamil connection is the inscribed sherd I discovered in April 2006 during the ground survey in the



Rouletted Ware, found at Phukhao Thong, Ranong Province. Courtesy of Wannasorn Noonsuk.

northeastern side at the base of the Hill. There were a number of looting pits in this area and the sherd was found among other ceramic and rock fragments by a looting pit. It seems to have been dug up and discarded by looters.

The inscription on the sherd is most likely the earliest Tamil inscription in Southeast Asia, dated to around the 2nd century CE based on its palaeographic characters. This fragmentary inscription was read and commented on by Iravatham Mahadevan, an authority in Indian palaeography as follows:¹⁰

"The language is Tamil and the script is Tamil-Brahmi of ca. the 2nd century CE. These conclusions are based on the middle letter which is Tamil *Ra*, which does not occur in Brahmi script or Prakrit language.

As regards the reading, the first two letters from the left are clearly *tū Ra* . . .

I think I have now been able to decipher the whole text including the third letter as follows:

. . . *tū Ra o* . . .

According to the rules of Early Tamil inspirational orthography, the occurrence of an initial vowel in the middle of a word as in the present case signifies the addition of a pronominal suffix indicating number, gender and person. Accordingly, we can infer that the fourth letter which is lost presumably completes a pronominal suffix-like.



A bronze figure of Buddha, part of the bronze hoard discovered at Buluh Cina, Medan, dating to the late 1st millennium CE. Courtesy of E. Edwards McKinnon.

Merchant Guilds: Medieval Links with Aceh and Northern Sumatra

Prior to the advent of European adventurers in the 16th century CE, the medieval period was one of considerable regional interaction between communities living on the shores of the Indian Ocean and those in island and mainland South East Asia. These interactions appear to have commenced around the beginning of the Common Era, some 2000 years before the present. Around the 9th century CE, significant trading organisations, often referred to as 'guilds', were forming in southern India. By the 10th century CE, inscriptions in east Java record the presence of foreigners of various origins including 'Aryya, Campa, Coailka, Dravidia, Karmake, Keling, Kmir, Malaya, and Sinhala',¹ suggesting a complex multi-ethnic network of seafaring throughout the region in medieval times.

The various Indian trading organisations which developed in southern India by the 9th century CE expanded to include groups of itinerant traders who ventured as far afield as the Red Sea in the west, throughout mainland and maritime Southeast Asia to Guangzhou in southern China.² Their spread in southern India and Sri Lanka was linked to the expansion of Chola power. Among these groups, the most prominent were the Ayyavole, also known as *Tisaiyokottu Ainumuvor* or The Five Hundred of the Thousand Directions. They have left numerous inscriptions in southern India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Sumatra in Indonesia, and Quanzhou in Fujian, in southern China,³ which in medieval times was the greatest port in the world.⁴

The Role of Buddhism and Hinduism in Sumatra

Initially the spread of Buddhism and trade went hand-in-hand with much emphasis on the dispersal of religious artefacts—texts, bronze imagery, etc. Spices such as cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and sandalwood from eastern Indonesia were important elements in such trade.⁵

“

The various Indian trading organisations which developed in southern India by the 9th century CE expanded to include groups of itinerant traders who ventured as far afield as the Red Sea in the west, throughout mainland and maritime Southeast Asia to Guangzhou in southern China.”



1. Aceh
2. Lamuri
3. Pedir
4. Pasai
5. Kota Cina
6. Medan
7. Singhel
8. Barus
9. Pijar Koling
10. Si Pamutung
11. Portak Dolok
12. Natal

Map illustrating the place-names in North Sumatra mentioned in the text. Courtesy of Daniel Pernet.

Tamil Presence in North Sumatra

Travels and maritime migrations from the Tamil country to the present Indonesian Archipelago have been going on for at least the last two millennia. It is well known that the realisation of these oceanic journeys was dependent on monsoons. The Coromandel's ships, in particular, arrived in August and September and left in February. Several texts from the ancient religious literature of the Indian subcontinent preserve the memory of these contacts. But, according to the evidence to date, accounts originating from South Asia on these interactions will become increasingly rare over time.

As a counterpoint to this almost silent South Asia, it is then the Archipelago that will take over by revealing more or less irrefutable clues on this ancient Tamil presence. The accumulation of data with the arrival of Europeans since the 16th century led to the multiplication of historical studies.

In the Indonesian Archipelago, North Sumatra, due to its geographical position and its natural and agricultural resources, is at the forefront of these relations with the Tamil country and certainly represents the region of Southeast Asia that has delivered the greatest variety of evidence of this ancient presence. It is on this territory, which includes the present provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra, that this chapter focuses. Five places or regions are highlighted here: Barus, Padang Lawas, Kota Cina, Pasai, and Aceh.

Starting with irrefutable data, namely very rare individuals of Tamil origin known so far, the chapter then focuses on groups and indications left in economic, political, and religious activities, material culture, and social organisation, and ends with "footprints" in the landscape.

Chronologically, the period under study here begins with the Chola raid of 1025 CE and stops at the end of the 17th century, a moment characterised by a sharp decline in these interactions.

“

Impacts on local economy, politics, religion, and social organisation could have been effected only by a sizeable number of Tamil-speaking immigrants.”



Kibaya, 18th century, made in the Coromandel Coast, India. Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

Multiple Facets of Merchant Interactions with the Straits

There is ample historical evidence on the trade links between the Tamil country and Southeast Asia spread over centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the region. For instance, Sultan Mansur Shah of Melaka (1459–1477) sent an ambassadorial mission to the court of the Vijayanagara ruler and so the overseas commercial ties came to be strengthened and continued.¹ Going by the above evidence, it seems conceivable that maritime trade and diplomatic contacts had well developed between ports and the royal courts in Tamil country and Southeast Asia unimpaired for centuries together, before the advent of the Portuguese in the early modern age. This chapter focuses on some specific aspects of the interactions between merchants and rulers in the Tamil Country and Southeast Asia. In addition, this chapter utilises Portuguese and Dutch sources to tell the much lesser known story of Tamil trading communities and their connections with Southeast Asia.

Rise of Tamil Muslim Settlement in Melaka

The Marakkayars were Tamil speaking Muslims of the Coromandel Coast and they were descendants of Arab merchant settlers who had mixed with the Tamils both culturally and in bloodline. The ports of Kunimedu and Nagore on the Coromandel were their chief settlements. Tamil Muslim traders were attracted more particularly to trade with Melaka when King Parameswara (1403–1424) encouraged them—he had converted to Islam, which made the Tamil Muslims of the Coromandel Coast more inclined to trade there.² The diary of Vasco da Gama in 1498 mentions the ports of Nagore and Kunimedu and the trade conducted with Southeast Asia.³ Marakkayars played a major role in the coup d'état by killing an infant ruler of Malay blood and elevating his younger brother Muzaffar Shah (1455–1459) born to a Tamil mother to assume the title Sultan in Melaka.⁴ Thus, they became politically powerful and it is reported in the Portuguese records that as early as in 1509 the bendahara (prime minister and chancellor of the treasury) of Melaka was a Tamil Muslim (name unknown). He was the treasurer cum administrator with the responsibility to handle the civil and criminal disputes that arose in the case of any and all matters related to trade of the merchants.⁵



Maritime trade and diplomatic contacts had well developed between ports and the royal courts both in Tamil country and Southeast Asia unimpaired for centuries together, before the advent of the Portuguese in the early modern age.”



Page from the multilingual 'Izām al-fawā'id fi nizaam al-'agā'id'. Courtesy of Leiden University Library.

Linguistic Intersections between Malay and Tamil

In 2015, Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was mourned by Tamil communities worldwide. His popularity was certainly due to the close economic ties he had forged between Singapore and South India, along with his outspokenness on the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. Yet language played a significant role as well. Singapore is perhaps the only country in the world where Tamil can be seen and heard in every postal district, even though it is rarely used outside the Tamil community. As one of Singapore's official languages, Tamil is learned at schools and adorns the streetscapes of the island state. This chapter traces the origins of these linguistic practices and approaches them as the milestones of a connected history between Tamil Nadu, Singapore, and the broader Southeast Asian region. It provides a historical linguistic overview that is necessarily incomplete, yet suffices to demonstrate the vibrancy and durability of language contact across the Bay of Bengal from antiquity into the present.

The sections that make up this chapter are ordered chronologically, starting with the earliest attestations of linguistic contact between Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia. The available epigraphic material provides a useful timeframe to contextualize these interactions. Three strands of pre-modern evidence are particularly informative: Tamil inscriptions that mention Southeast Asia, Tamil inscriptions and inscribed objects found in Southeast Asia, and early Southeast Asian inscriptions (particularly in Old Khmer and Old Javanese) that exhibit Tamil loanwords. Many of these inscriptions contain a Shaka year, whereas others can be dated palaeographically. Doing so reveals that the epigraphic material is in line with archaeological findings. Both fields point towards long-standing contacts between Tamil Nadu, Sumatra, Java, and mainland Southeast Asia from the 9th to the 15th century. In certain parts of Thailand, contacts with South India go back even further in time.

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An Indian rubber tapper on a plantation, late 19th–early 20th century, Malaysia or Singapore. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

Presence as Palimpsest: Tamil Diasporas in Southeast Asia

The history of the Tamil presence in Southeast Asia resembles a palimpsest. With each generation of arrivals, traces of earlier settlements lived on as newcomers from the Coromandel Coast laid down roots and made Southeast Asia their home. Successive phases of movement across the Bay of Bengal have created a layered history that continues to shape the landscape, the culture, and the economic life of modern Southeast Asia.

Ancient Connections

The Bay of Bengal was for centuries the maritime thoroughfare between India and China, with the Straits of Melaka as a hinge connecting the Bay with the South China Sea. Mountain ranges on either side of the Straits sheltered ships from the winds. This shelter turned the Straits into a crossroads of trade, a transit point for ships travelling between China and India, the Middle East, and Europe. Lying at the “end” of both the southwest and the northeast monsoons, the Straits of Melaka became a favoured place of replenishment and commerce as ships waited for the winds’ reversal. Hence, the Straits of Melaka formed the pivotal point of cultural interactions across a very wide region. It was an aqueous world in which “rivers and seas formed unities”, while “land formed the link between bodies of water”. Long before the Common Era (CE), the bead trade between India and Southeast Asia flourished, as shown by archaeological evidence in Thailand and Vietnam. Buddhism formed a “common cultural bond” that linked the coastal regions of South, Southeast and East Asia through pilgrimage and through the trade in statues, relics and other sacred objects.²

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In answer to the simplest question—“Why did you migrate?”—we encounter a mix of conscious and unconscious motivations, a cocktail of intention and chance, freedom and constraint.”



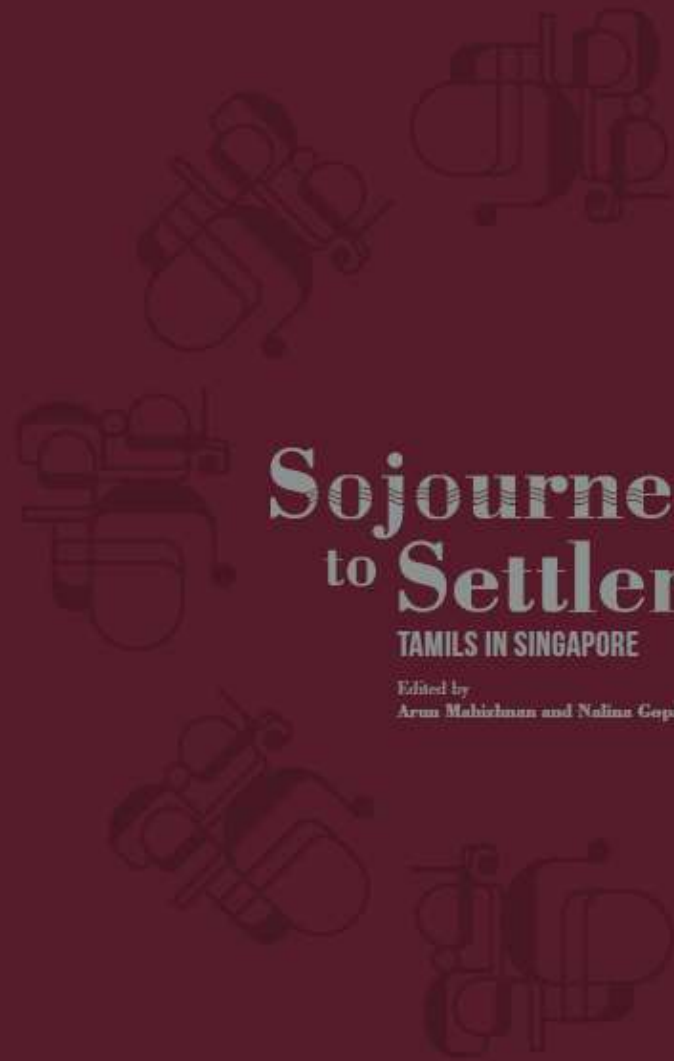
*Rumah Tambi Ismail dimakannya rata
apinya besar tidak boleh membuka mata
ditongkang dimuatkannya separoh harta
yang separoh hanguslah serta dengan pelita*

Tambi Ismail's house had been evenly razed
The fire's so huge can't open one's eyes
The *tongkang* was laden with half his assets
As half had burned, as well as lamps

- Munshi Abdullah describes the fire at Tambi
Ismail's
residence in *Shaer Kampong Gelam Terbakar*

A watercolour showing a Tamil Muslim (Chulia) Trader in
Singapore by E Schlüter, 1858.

Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Sojourners to Settlers

TAMILS IN SINGAPORE

Edited by
Arum Mahishman and Nalina Gopal



Studio photograph of a Tamil family, circa 1890, Singapore. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

Arrival and Settlement: Becoming a Community

The migration and settlement of Indians in Singapore has been well documented.¹ Migration has been complex, taking place over many waves. Hence, there are many approaches to understanding these migrants. Firstly, they can be seen as overseas Indians; i.e. people who are away from their motherland—India. This concept is relevant insofar as they are first generation migrants, who continue to cherish their natal areas in India as their homeland. At all stages in Singapore's history, those who typify this description could be found. Even as this chapter is being written, many new migrants from India are disembarking at Changi International Airport in Singapore, in search of the economic opportunities that have eluded them at home.

However, this category excludes those arriving from other parts of the Subcontinent such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. These people are not politically Indians as they carry distinct national identities. Culturally, however, they may share some similarities because of long historic interactions across communities. However, the term 'Indian' is both a cultural and a political label. It is cultural in the sense that it embraces all persons of South Asian origins and does not recognise their different political affiliations in the subcontinent. It is political because it allows the government in Singapore to categorise all citizens into a Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model, for easier management of race-related issues.

The concept of 'overseas Indians', however, is not easily applicable to second and subsequent generations of Indians who were born and bred in Singapore and who have lost their links to their natal areas, with little or no knowledge of their ancestral homes then or now. Being a fifth-generation Singaporean of Tamil origin, this author, like many thousands of others here, has very little knowledge of the towns and villages his forefathers came from. Such Tamil-Singaporeans' knowledge of Tamil Nadu is general and often based on Tamil movies from Tamil Nadu and occasionally on academic reading.

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Tamil arrivals and settlements in Singapore have occurred in many waves. It is still an ongoing process whereby Tamils are arriving and leaving, even while a substantial number have remained to create a population referred to as ethnic Tamil-Singaporeans.”



Rubber estate labourers, 1920s, Federated Malay States.
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

Voyage of Hope, Journey of Hardship

The establishment of British rule in Singapore ushered a period of rapid economic development in the colony. The strategic location of the outpost and the policy of free trade quickly drew large numbers of merchants and traders here. Colonial authorities and European entrepreneurs, however, faced difficulties in securing labour in the rapidly burgeoning colony especially for public works and for employment in European plantations. Although the option of turning to Chinese labour existed, these labourers had to be procured at a premium through Chinese intermediaries. Recruiting local Malay inhabitants was also difficult as few were interested in engaging as labourers for colonial authorities or European entrepreneurs. Consequently, as in the case of many other plantation colonies, colonial authorities and European businessmen in Singapore and Malaya in the 19th and early 20th centuries increasingly turned to the Indian subcontinent to address their labour needs. Various systems were introduced to procure these labourers. From 1825 to 1860 between 15,000 and 25,000 convicts from various parts of British India were transported to the Straits Settlements and utilized for clearing the land and for public works.¹ Concomitantly, large numbers of labourers were brought from the Madras Presidency either through assisted systems of labour migration such as indenture or *kangani*, or as 'free' labourers to work in a variety of sectors including plantations, public works, construction, and as port workers.

This chapter focuses on the voyage of these Tamil labourers from the Indian subcontinent to the Straits Settlements. While the movement of Indian labour to far-flung destinations around the globe during the colonial period has received considerable scholarly attention, these works have tended to focus on the journey of indentured labour across the 'dark waters' from Kolkata to the Caribbean, Mauritius and Fiji. Far less, however, is known of the experience of labourers emigrating from Tamil Nadu to distant locations around the globe. This chapter seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the experience of Tamil labourers journeying from the ports that dotted the Madras Presidency to Penang and Singapore in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

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By the late 19th century the pattern of recruiting from the Madras Presidency had been so firmly established that the Indian Government prohibited the Straits Settlements from procuring labourers from elsewhere in the subcontinent.”



Munajathu Thiruthu by Muhammed Abdul Kadir published by J Paton, Government Printer in 1872. Collection of National Library, Singapore.

Literature Liberated from Landscape

Tamil literature, culture, and lifestyle have always been strongly influenced by the geography of the homeland. It is only in Singapore that Tamils first found their literary inspiration became detached from the surrounding landscape. Called *Thinol* in Tamil, this literary concept of classical Tamil poetry maps specific types of physiographic landscape to specific kinds of psychographic emotional state of literary characters, as evident in Sangam literature. *Thinol* incorporates not just the physical aspects of the soil but also an all-embracing ecosystem including the flora and fauna of that landscape, and relates them to the moods and motives of the characters in a highly stylized and systemic manner. When Tamils moved to a small compact island that did not afford them the space to sink any roots and where they merely intended to be transient, the neural connections between land, language and emotions began to dissolve and a new kind of voice emerged—a voice liberated from the landscape. As such, Singapore Tamil literature differs in content and approach from Tamil literature originating from India, Sri Lanka and even neighbouring Malaysia. It can perhaps be considered the beginning of the post-land or post-*Thinol* literature of migrant Tamils. This chapter explores the contours of the literature that Singapore Tamils have produced since their migration in colonial times.

A separate Singapore Tamil identity beyond the confines of caste, class and religion started taking shape only approximately 100 years after Tamil migration to Singapore commenced in the early 1800s. Tamils here benefited from Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting and were better exposed to global historical, social, cultural and intellectual developments than their brethren back in India. They used these experiences and perspectives to anchor a strong linguistic and cultural identity, which was the basis, achievement and end-goal of Singapore Tamil literature.

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The neural connections between land, language and emotions began to dissolve and a new kind of voice emerged—a voice liberated from the landscape.”



Tamil Festival, mid-20th century, Singapore. Courtesy of Mrs Malai Arasi and M. V. Kalachelvan, Collection of Indian Heritage Centre Resource Library.

Dravidian-Tamil-Indian: Morphing of Multiple Identities

The relevance of Tamil identity and its place in multicultural and multiracial Singapore has been debated repeatedly in the past few decades. The use of the Tamil language at home, as a strong marker of Tamil identity, has been declining over recent decades. Yet, historically, Tamil identity and Tamil language did not enjoy the official status or institutional support they have been given since Independence in 1965. To be certain, the decline of an ethnic identity as well as its language marker is not unique to Tamils and Tamil in Singapore. The Chinese and Mandarin and the Malays and Malay, too, are going through somewhat similar trajectories. This chapter attempts to analyse the specific case of the evolving nature of Tamil identity and the attendant role of the Tamil language in the process. To understand the current state of Tamil identity, we are obliged to go back to its origins in Singapore and the evolutionary process that it has undergone over time.

Tamil Migration to Singapore

Though recent archaeological evidence suggests an Indian presence centuries ago,¹ the unbroken history of the Tamil community in Singapore is well established since the acquisition of the island by Stamford Raffles in 1819. Following the establishment of a British settlement, there was a steady influx of Indian labour, largely Tamil, into Singapore. The earliest British records show that in 1824, there were 756 Indians out of the total population of 10,683.² When British India made Singapore a penal settlement in 1825, a wave of Indian convicts joined the local population and by 1860 there were 2275 Indian convicts in Singapore.³ This is a significant aspect of the story of the Tamil community which we shall revisit. Together with the influx of labour and a more modest inflow of traders and merchants, by 1891, there were 16,035 Indians living in Singapore.⁴

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The legitimacy of the Tamil language as a symbol of communal identity is found in its ability to function as a means of facilitating reform and progress through a process of bottom-up mobilisation.”



Clockwise from the top left: A Tamil Muslim boatman, a Tamil Muslim trader, a Chetti merchant, and a Tamil coolie from Malaya. Courtesy of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Children's and Young People's Literature Department.

Between Mosque and Market: Tamil Muslims in Singapore

At the heart of what is today Singapore's Chinatown, two landmarks serve as reminders that this part of town was once the multi-ethnic heart of a thriving business district. Both were founded during the first decades of British Singapore. The Sri Mariamman Temple remains one of the oldest Hindu temples and is one of the most prominent symbols of Tamil presence in the city. Yet just across the road stands another building no less Tamil: the Jamae Mosque or Masjid Jamae (Chulia).¹ Originally constructed in the late 1820s, the Jamae Mosque is one of Singapore's oldest and largest mosques and bears witness to the important role played by Tamil Muslims in the history of Singapore and the development of local Tamil society.

Tamil Muslim history in Singapore has remained somewhat in the shadows. It is well known that prior to the 19th century, Muslim traders from south India, often known as "Chulias", played not only an important economic, but also political role in Southeast Asia. In many Malay kingdoms, Tamil Muslims acted as *saudagar raja* or "royal merchant" for the ruler, and thereby gained considerable influence.² Large numbers of Tamil Muslims had settled in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula before the 19th century, such as the family of the famous Malay writer Munshi Abdullah (1796–1854). His grandfather, who was of mixed Yemeni and Tamil descent, had migrated from Nagore in south India to Melaka, and Munshi Abdullah was described by one of his contemporaries, JT Thomson, as "a Tamilian of southern Hindustan" in appearance.³ Indeed, so numerous were Chulia settlers on the Malay Peninsula that, when the British established the port of Penang in 1786, the majority of the Chulias who flocked to the new port actually migrated from Kedah rather than from south India.⁴

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Many Tamil Muslims were able to build and expand business operations within Southeast Asia to a considerable degree in the colonial period. Largely, these businesses operated around what one could call “the three c’s”: cargo, cloth, and cattle.”

Thank You