

# Lived Spaces and Memories

## The Indian Business Communities in Colonial Singapore



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*Ethnic Indian communities have had considerable influence on the socio-cultural fabric and connectivity in the Southeast Asian region for many generations. However, scholarship on these communities has been far too little in relation to the continued significance of the Indic influence and diasporic interactions since very early times. The colonial discourse on the Indian community in Southeast Asia has traditionally revolved around the overwhelmingly visible labour diasporas and much less on the other sections of the Indian migrant population. In this respect, the study of the business communities is a diversion from the conventional paradigms, and is also closely associated with the peoples' movements within the complexities of economic networks.*

This article is based on the larger research by the author that has been recently published as *Beyond the Myth: Indian Business Communities in Singapore*, Singapore, ISEAS, 2011

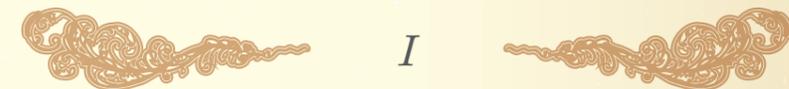


Most voluntary transnational mobilities have been essentially associated with better economic opportunities articulated through the flows of people, capital and knowledge. The model of exchanges in labour and capital has been shifted to the present-day transnational global networks and interactions like remittances, commercial networks, investments or philanthropic sponsorships, apart from socio-cultural bonding with the home country. In the changing trajectories of circulation of population, money, goods and information, the dynamics of the players and that of capital may have altered, but their interactions have assumed a significant place in the socio-economic and political exchanges in the global context. This article will offer a glimpse of these socio-economic networks and exchanges during the colonial era which have formed a strong foundation of the present bi-lateral and multi-lateral interactions in Singapore and

Southeast Asia and will continue to do so in the future.

The Indian sub-continent enjoyed global economic, political, and cultural connectivities through well-established land and sea routes. It also enjoyed political patronage and expansion by different rulers from different regions and time periods. However, Indic influence in Southeast Asian society and culture was much more significant than Indian settlements in the region. Western colonial expansions and technological innovations largely modified the prevailing dynamics channelising greater mobilities and consequent settlements within the purview of similar administrative domain. The establishment and development of a trading port in Singapore by the British, an example of the extension of the British colonial arm from the Indian sub-continent, undoubtedly facilitated the activities of the Indian merchants and traders, but this

was only a part and process of continuity established long before in this part of the world. Referring to the involvement of the Indian and the Chinese in trade and finance in the Indian Ocean, Rajat Kanta Ray, in one of his essays, argues that it formed "a distinct international system that never lost its identity in the larger dominant world system of the West."<sup>1</sup> The existence of this indigenous system of networks and business operations is further exemplified in Claude Markovits' work on the Sindi merchant community.<sup>2</sup> Takeshi Hamashita, another prominent scholar in this field has argued that the formation and functioning of the Asian trade networks had been propelled by forces emerging from within Asia and not essentially "formed" by the impact of Western hegemony, but rather "organised" and developed by them to an extent.<sup>3</sup> The onset of British imperialism consolidated and facilitated greater movements of goods and people to cater to their administrative, military and commercial interests.

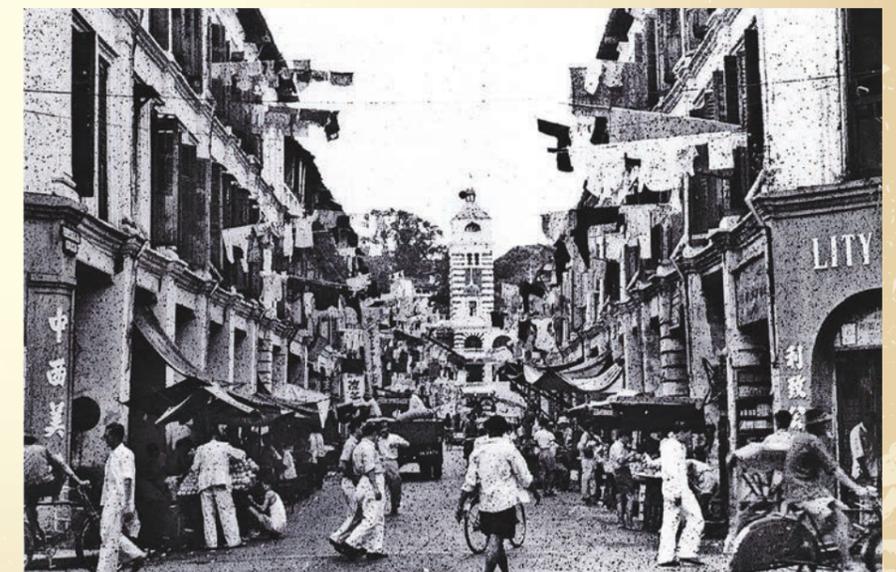


The story of Naryana Pillai stands in symbolic association with ethnic Indian businessmen arriving in Singapore with the coming of colonial expansion. When Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore in 1819, he brought in his entourage 120 *sepoys* of the Bengal Native Infantry and a Bazaar Contingent of washermen, milkmen, tea-makers and domestic servants.<sup>4</sup> He also brought, Pillai, an associate in Penang since 1804<sup>5</sup> to Singapore to start brick kilns which were necessary for the construction work of the new settlement. Pillai is also believed to have worked in the Government treasury as a Chief Clerk and Tamil translator.<sup>6</sup> He became the first building contractor in Singapore and also started a cotton goods shop in the Commercial Square area, thus becoming a wealthy merchant. He also initiated the building of the first Hindu temple at South Bridge Road, the Sri Mariamman Temple.<sup>7</sup>

The *sepoys* and soldiers of the East India Company, who came along with Raffles, stayed behind to guard British interests. They were accompanied by a contingent of civilians to help with the daily chores,

who gradually developed themselves into an organised occupational force. Other businessmen like the milkmen, both from North and South India, made good money for themselves. So did the *jagas*, or the

turbaned Sikh security guards, many of whom became part-time money-lenders and later invested their accumulated wealth in businesses. The majority of the Indians were the labourers who came



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### Overleaf

A Kittangi at 49 Market Street in 1977, before it was demolished. Kittangis were Chettiar quarters, which performed the dual functions of both places of residence and of business. Courtesy of Nachiappa Chettiar.

B

Market Street in 1930, where many Kittangis, as well as spice traders from Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, were located. Courtesy of Nachiappa Chettiar.

into the Malayan Peninsula under the indentured and the *kangany* system. There were also the convicts who were sent to the island and largely used as labour for the initial years of construction of infrastructure facilities in the settlement. Most of them later assumed 'self-supporter' status and settled down on the island by marrying local women.<sup>8</sup>

A familiar base of administrative and political entity, facilitated by a common British colonial master for both the Indian sub-continent and Singapore also mobilised Indian migration to the island colony. Between 1826 and 1867, the island was under the East India Company's rule and later, under the jurisdiction of the British Raj, both of whom administered the island from Calcutta. Tan and Major point out that to a great extent, "Singapore's administrative and legal systems — a centralised administration in which civil power was supreme — were based on British-India lineage".<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the Indian Penal Code (1860) adopted by Singapore in 1871 "still leaves its imprint on the country's legal system".<sup>10</sup> The English-educated Indian migrants from the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bengal and others, catered appropriately to the clerical efficiency that the British were looking for in its colonial subjects, which made them good candidates for administrative services. They were also in the professions of lawyers, doctors and civil servants, being familiar with the British colonial system for a much longer period of time, thus helping the Indians develop good relations with the

British and share a convenient working relationship with them over the other migrant settlers in Singapore.

The presence of the early Indians in Melaka (Malacca) (Singapore then formed a part of the Malayan Peninsula) dates as far back as 1413, and according to Samuel S. Dhoraisingam, numbered around 4000 by 1510 comprising of Gujarati, Tamil and other Indian merchants.<sup>11</sup> Those Indian merchants who were domiciled in the area soon married into the "indigenous community which included Malays, Javanese, and Bataks and some later with the wealthy Peranakan Chinese"<sup>12</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, many of the educated Peranakan Indians came to settle in Singapore, and like other races of their times, began to reside in enclaves across the island. They had settlements on Waterloo Street, Dalhousie Lane, Kampong Kapor, Kinta Road, Chitty Road, Rowell Road, Serangoon Road, Bencoolen Street and Selegie Road.<sup>13</sup>

In promoting entrepot trade in Singapore, Raffles initially made an effort to confront and contain the Dutch expansionist ambitions and also provide a safe and free passage for British ships through the Straits for their trade with China. In his own words, the purpose of establishing a colony in Singapore was "... not territory but trade; a great commercial emporium and fulcrum ..."<sup>14</sup> Two-way traffic continued throughout the year between Singapore and Calcutta through the Strait of Malacca with the East India Company as well as privately owned 'country ships' bringing in Indian jute, cotton, wheat, and opium to

Singapore and sailing back with "pepper and spices, sago, tin and silver dollars".<sup>15</sup> The report of the Straits Settlements Trade Commission, 1933–34, also gives us a glimpse of the extent of trading activities that was being carried out through this region in the twentieth century:

"... this trade consists in the importation of cottons, cigarettes, machinery, milk, provisions, hardware and other manufactured goods from Europe, America, India and the Far East and their distribution to the Malay States, Siam, Borneo, Sumatra and other neighbouring parts of the Malayan archipelago and, on the other, in collecting general tropical produce from these countries and (after sorting, grading, conditioning and treatment) re-shiping it to the consuming markets of the world.<sup>16</sup> "

Traders and merchants came in different categories and with various commercial interests. The North Indian business communities like the Sindhis, Gujaratis, Parsis and the Punjabis got involved with both the wholesale and the retail trade to provide different utilities and provisions to the migrant settlers. The Tamils (both Hindu and Muslims), the Moplahs and the Malabar Muslims formed an important part of the business population from South India, mostly trading in spices. However, the commercial class of the Indian immigrants was best represented by the Chettiar community from Tamil Nadu, in South India, who were mainly money-lenders. They spread their wings to different places in Southeast Asia like Myanmar, the Malayan peninsula and Thailand.

## II

A significant characteristic of Raffles' town planning was to create enclave structures by dividing and demarcating lived spaces on basis of ethnicities. In 1822, a Committee was appointed which marked "out the quarters or departments of the several classes of population".<sup>17</sup> The *Chulias* were assigned land up the Singapore River. There were also the *Mudaliars* and *Thirupathur Vellalars* who came to Singapore from South India for various business activities. Indians also spread out to the High Street, Market

Street, Arab Street, and to the naval base in Sembawang, the Tanjong Pagar area, and of course, to Serangoon Road. The perimeters of the different enclaves changed with time but "each group retained an unchallenged claim to defining the identity of various areas allotted to them".<sup>18</sup> The areas of High Street, Market Street and Arab Street along with Collyer Quay, Cecil Street, Robinson Road and the adjacent areas formed parts of the larger business district areas of Singapore.

The heterogeneity and diversity within the Indian community has brought serious challenges in the attempt to categorise them by region, caste, culture, language, or profession. A. Mani<sup>19</sup> has rightly pointed out the tendency of linguistic groupings and identification among the Indians. However, there are also other complexities involved in structuring ethnic Indians under various groups or lived spaces. Following the legacy of Raffles' system of enclaves, we may attempt to divide them in the landscapes of the High Street, Market



C

Street, Arab Street and the Serangoon Road areas. A broader category of economic activities may also be drawn between High Street, the main centre of activities of the North Indian merchants, and Serangoon Road dominated by the South Indian merchants, mainly Tamils. Interestingly, there have been many overlaps. Both Sindhis and the Tamils engaged in the textile business though the Tamils traditionally dealt in retail trade, but in different spatial contexts. Tamils were also engaged in the dairy business in a big way, and so were the men from Bihar. Similarly, the spice traders were both from the Gujarati as well as the Tamil community, and were situated in Malacca Street, Market Street and Chulia Street. To consider religious complexities, there could be a similarity between the Bohra Muslims from Gujarat,<sup>20</sup> based in Arab Street and mostly dealing with textiles and spices, and the Moplahs from Kerala — otherwise also known as the Malabari Muslims — also situated in the Arab Street, but mainly dealing with the food and the restaurant business. One of the earliest groups of traders on this island were the *Chulias* or the Tamil Muslims from the Coromandel Coast, who had established the Al-Abbar Mosque at South Bridge Road as early as around 1827.<sup>21</sup> Different business interests and regional affiliations soon found manifestations in the formations of associations like the Sindhi Association, the Gujarati Association, the Sikh Association and several other linguistic and regional organisations. The Sindhi Merchants Association was formed in 1921 followed

by the Indian Merchants Association in 1924. The latter subsequently developed into the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry as it is known today.

The two main areas of trading for the Indian merchants during colonial times were spices and textiles. Malacca and Indonesia were the main sources for the spices and exports from Singapore included, according to oral history recordings of one of the early traders, the sago flour, betel nuts, gum-benzoin, copra, long pepper, nutmegs, maize, sago seeds, tapioca seeds and rattan, which were all sent mainly to India.<sup>22</sup> Chillies and turmeric powder were sent to Ceylon. These were the two main markets for Indian traders. The raw spices were brought to Singapore and graded before they were re-exported to

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A bustling Serangoon Road on Deepavali Eve in 1957. Source: Singapore Press Holdings.

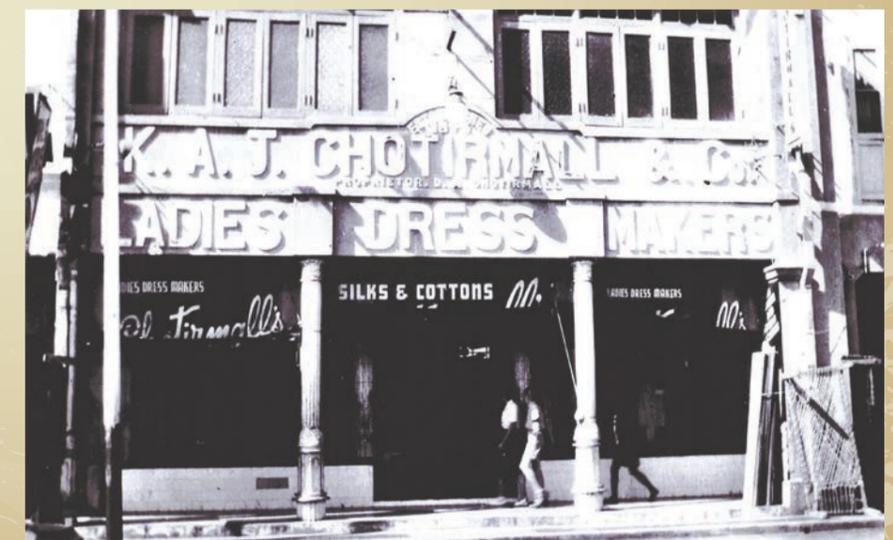
D  
A dressmakers' shop front on High Street, c.1945. Courtesy of David Turner.

other countries.<sup>23</sup> One big name among the textile companies in the 1930s was that of M/s Chandulal Co., who had offices in Chulia Street in Singapore, and in Jakarta and Makasar as well.<sup>24</sup> There were also firms who combined the business of the textiles and spices like that of Ranchoddas Purushottamdas Limited,<sup>25</sup> which started out around 1905 and has continued for three generations. It is also considered the oldest of the Gujarati firms in Singapore.<sup>26</sup>

The textile trade was another stronghold of the Indian trading community. One of the earliest pioneers of the Indian business communities, Rajabali Jumabhoy describes these merchants as he found them in Singapore:

"The textile merchants and the sarong merchants were mostly in Arab Street, Beach Road, Kandahar Street and Bussorah and the surrounding areas; whilst North Bridge Road from Arab Street, right up to High Street, say about 30 per cent were Indians, dealing in consumer goods and textiles, shirts and so on ..."<sup>27</sup> "

Most of the Gujarati and Sindhi communities participated in the lucrative textile business. The first known Sindhi firm in Singapore was Wassiamall



D



Serangoon Road, Singapore

E

Assomull, which opened its branches in 1873 along with one in Surabaya about the same time.<sup>28</sup> Jhamatmal Gurbamall, was established in the 1880s by Jhamatmal Gurbamal Melwani who went to Medan from Singapore and made a large fortune in the textile business.<sup>29</sup> The Chotirmals, Melwanis, Chanrais, Chellarams, and Jashanmals were other prominent names who made their fortunes in Singapore, Hong Kong, Dubai and different other parts of the globe. Markovits pointed out: "The Sindhi merchants' privileged connections with the big Japanese firms allowed them to steal a march on their competitors in the 1930s and to start emerging as a community of particular importance."<sup>30</sup> Among the Punjabis, Gian Singh Co. was a popular departmental store. The Bajaj brothers and Hardial Singh were some of the other well-known Punjabi names in business. The Parsis also had a considerable presence in

Singapore. Some names like Mistri Road and Parsi Road are named after them.<sup>31</sup>

The Serangoon Road area was more or less dominated by the South Indian textile merchants, provision store owners, spice merchants, goldsmiths, florists and garland makers, petty traders, hawkers, small shop-owners, money-changers and various other businessmen both big and small. Businesses in this area thrived mostly on the regular necessities of everyday Indian lifestyle. Prominent names like those of P. Govindasamy Pillai, Ramasamy Nadar, and H. Somappa, who made their marks in business as well as in philanthropy, were based in the Serangoon Road area.

The most important of the South Indian men of commerce were the Chettians. With their *kittingis*, which were simple infrastructures situated mostly around

**E**  
Serangoon Road, traditionally a locus of South Indian economic activity, c.1911. A single tram line (running from MacKenzie Road depot to Paya Lebar) was sufficient to service the area at that time. Courtesy of Arshak C. Galstaun.

**F**  
A portrait of Chettians in traditional Vesthi and Thundu in the 1920s. Such garments were common as daily wear, but were also produced with more high quality materials. These fancier versions were reserved for more formal occasions, such as this photo-taking session. Courtesy of Nachiappa Chettiar.

the Market Street area, they played a significant role in providing efficient money-lending facilities to men of all races way before the popularity of formal banking amenities appeared in the economy. They also invested a lot of their money into properties, plantations and tin investments. They mostly led a single, simple and frugal life, leaving their families back in India. They also associated their business closely with their religion. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Japanese aggression during the Second World War dealt a severe blow to their prosperity. Many of them lost money and went back to India. The ones who returned could not bring back the past glory. Gradually, after Singapore emerged as an independent nation-state, change of money-lending laws as well as urban restructuring altered their characteristic spatial identities as well as their market operations.



The 1940s created new dynamics in migration from the Indian sub-continent. While Japanese Occupation forced many of the Indian migrants to retreat back to their homeland, the Partition of the Indian sub-continent into West and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), along with the Indian independence from British domination in 1947 brought in a new wave of population into Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia. Most of the Punjabis and many Sindhi businessmen tried to re-establish themselves in Southeast Asia after losing their land and wealth in the blood-bath that followed the Partition. The Sindhis and Punjabis started arriving in large numbers, increasing the communities' population substantially, with many trying to eke out a living at different levels of trade and business. Many of them prospered well enough to become big names, mostly in the High Street area.

The changing geo-political dynamism with the decline of colonialism in most of Asia and the subsequent emerging new nation-states with different political ideologies in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought in economic complexities that ushered in a transition in the composition and the

components of trade among the ethnic Indian business communities. Singapore post-1965 brought forth a new trajectory of economic development in Singapore and renewed multi-cultural interactions. New domestic and foreign policies, rapid industrialisation, and urban restructuring brought about changes in architecture of lived-spaces and different dynamics in socio-economic interactions. The visual images in both High Street and Market Street changed with the replacement of the shop-house structures by modern buildings. However, the Serangoon Road area still maintains

most of its old world charm, though it had come a long way from being identified with a cattle rearing area.

The spatial Indian identity and influence in colonial Singapore's landscape remained as a part of colonial Singapore's heritage in its multi-ethnic fabric. Although a minority, the Indians remain an important section of the population and continue to play a significant part in the city-state's socio-economic expansion in its subsequent years of development to come.



## ENDNOTES

1 Rajat Kanta Ray, 'Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800–1914,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 29, no. 3, 1995, pp. 553–554.

2 Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*, Cambridge: CUP, 2000.

3 Takeshi Hamashita, 'Rethinking Historical Network in Asia' in the Workshop on *Asian Business Networks*, 31-3-1998 to 2-4-1998, organized by FASS, NUS, Singapore and Institute of Oriental Culture, Tokyo University.

4 They were locally known as *Bengalees* possibly for their association with the Bengal Native Infantry. Some later left the garrison to become civilian migrants in the new land. Brij V. Lal et al., ed. *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet in association with NUS, 2006, p.176.

5 Robert Godfrey and Samuel Dhoraisingam ed. *Passage of Indians, 1923–2003*, Singapore: Singapore Indian Association, 2003, p. 8.

6 M. Sangaralingam, 'The Role of Tamils in the Development of Singapore' in A. Veeramani ed., *Our History in Singapore (Tamil)*, Tenth Singapore Tamil Youth Conference Proceedings, Singapore, The Tamil Youth's Club, 1999.

7 Godfrey and Dhoraisingam, op.cit. pp. 8–9.

8 *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, op.cit., pp. 45–46.

9 Tan Tai Wong and Andrew Major, 'India and Indians in the Making of Singapore' in Yong Mun Cheong and V.V. Bhanaji Rao ed. *Singapore-India Relations: A Primer*, Singapore Centre for Advanced Studies/Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1995, p. 5.

10 Ibid.

11 Samuel S. Dhoraisingam, *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka, Indian Babas and Nonyas—Chitty Melaka*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2006, p. 4

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., pp 17–18.

14 Colin Anderson, et al. ed., *Singapore 30, A Portfolio of Singapore's Leading Companies*, Singapore: Springham Anderson Design Pte. Ltd., 1995, p.7

15 Roderick Maclean, *A Pattern of Change: The Singapore International Chamber of Commerce from 1837*, Singapore: SICC, 2000, p. 14.

16 *Straits Settlements, Trade Commission, Report of the Commission...Trade of the Colony, 1933-1934*, Part-II, Chapter 6, p. 41.

17 Walter Makepeace, et.al., *ibid.*, p. 345. See *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, V (1851), VIII (1854) for details.

18 Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Puru Shotam, *Singapore's Little India, Past, Present and Future*, Singapore: ISEAS, 1982, p.7.

19 A.Mani, 'Indians in Singapore Society' in K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani ed., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, Second edition, Singapore, ISEAS, 2006.

20 The three most common sects of the Gujarati Muslim migrants were the 'Bohras', 'Khojas' and the 'Memons'. 'Bohras' were, perhaps, the largest in number.

21 'Al-Abra' or 'Koochoo Pally', means a small mosque in Tamil. The mosque has been gazetted as a national monument in 1974. For

further reference, see, Norman Edwards & Peter Keys, *Singapore: A Guide to Buildings, Streets, Places*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1988.

22 Kantilal Jamnadas Shah, Oral History Recordings, Accession no.000094, Reel no.2, NAS, Singapore.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., Reel nos. 2 & 3.

25 D. G. Shah, Oral History recordings, op.cit., Reel no.1.

26 <http://sgs.org.sg/history.aspx> accessed on 14 August, 2011.

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28 A.Mani, 'Indians in Jakarta', in K.S. Sandhu, A. Mani eds., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 1993, pp. 98–130.

29 P. Bharadwaj, *Sindhis Through the Ages*, Hong Kong: World Wide Publishing Company, 1988, p. 367.

30 Claude Markovits, p. 149.

31 For further details on these businessmen, refer to Jayati Bhattacharya, *Beyond the Myth: Indian Business Communities in Singapore*, Singapore, 2011.