

Building Bridges and Celebrating Diversity in a Turbulent World

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Sustaining cultural traditions and heritage has long been a challenge for minority communities in Singapore, especially during the recent pandemic years. In this essay, R. Rajaram discusses the invaluable role various stakeholders and the government play in enabling cultural expressions through policies that respect and celebrate the nation's cultural diversity. He also points to the give-and-take required in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society and how minority culture contributes to Singaporeans' shared heritage.

In the small, crowded houses of South Main Street in Thanjavur, an ancient temple town and once the capital city of the illustrious Chola empire, there remain fewer than 10 families who can handcraft the melodious stringed instrument, the veena. Named after the Hindu Goddess of Wisdom, Saraswathi, the veena is thought to date back to about 1700 BCE and finds mention in one of the Vedas, the revered Hindu scriptures. It is a much-loved musical instrument still played today in concerts.

For the families trying to keep alive the craft of hand-making these instruments, the challenges are real. First, land where good-quality jackfruit trees are cultivated are rapidly giving way to residential plots. These trees provide the wood for the veena. Secondly, the children of these craftsmen are opting for better paying jobs in the new factories and software companies that dot the city. The laborious task of crafting a single veena can take up to 20 days. And finally, the invasion of western culture and the popularity of western instruments have reduced the demand for traditional instruments.

A rapidly changing and volatile world has obviously taken a toll on the craft and craftsmen. But the reality is that the golden age of the Thanjavur veena is gone forever. Even as traditions play a significant role in societies, providing a sense of identity and continuity, one needs to come to terms with changing times, and evolve and adapt if our touchstones of heritage are to continue to be meaningful in and relevant to our cultural and social life.



Figure 1. A lady playing the veena, a south Indian musical instrument in a religious ceremony.

The Perfect Long Storm

In recent times, it was the long-drawn pandemic that emerged an adversary of the preservation and growth of arts and heritage. Based on the Singapore Cultural Statistics 2021, attendance at non-ticketed arts and culture events and visitorship to museums during the pandemic plummeted to 32% of 2019 levels.

Post-pandemic, we now are confronted with a more complex world fraught with fault-lines, increasing geopolitical tension and domestic socio-economic challenges. As former Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam put it, the world has entered a “perfect long storm”.

Yet, there is no need to be overly pessimistic. This is not the first time we are encountering a challenge of such proportions. In the first half of the 20th century, the world was dealt an equally bad set of cards: two world wars, the Spanish flu and a prolonged economic slump during the Great Depression.

Our Shared Heritage— A Source of Strength

It is precisely in such times that our shared heritage may act as a source of strength to help us meet the challenges brought about by an uncertain and volatile world. Arts and culture are expressions of identity that have a definitive role to play. They can serve as a reminder of the resilience and strength the community has demonstrated in the past and instil hope and determination for the future. They

can bring together people from diverse backgrounds, help them express themselves, and even thoughtfully push boundaries, all within a safe space. The arts and culture reflect the collective experiences, struggles and triumphs of communities.

Singapore is endowed with a rich heritage that includes Malay, Chinese, Indian and other influences. Cultural practices such as our food, music, dance and festivals are important touchstones which should be preserved, cherished and passed down to future generations. Our material culture, such as historic buildings, artefacts and monuments, keeps the memories and stories of Singapore's past alive, while building a sense of community and promoting national identity.

As Singapore continues to evolve and grow, these touchstones will be increasingly important markers of its identity and heritage. This is particularly the case for minority groups such as the Indian community in Singapore which has a long and rich cultural history that spans thousands of years.

The ethnic Indians in Singapore form a diverse community with many different religions, languages and traditions. It is a community which has played a crucial role in shaping the country's landscape. While the average Singaporean would be familiar with Tamil, one of the four official languages in Singapore, the Indian community is not monolithic. It is a rich mosaic of various ethnic groups such as Malayalees, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Bengalis among others, and offers a rich tapestry of experiences that contribute to Singapore's cultural diversity. Inherent in the community's pluralistic nature is its respect for diversity and an appreciation for different perspectives which, in turn, can lead to a more inclusive society. By acknowledging and understanding this diversity, the larger Singaporean community can foster a deeper appreciation for the



Figure 2. The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC). Image courtesy of IHC.

Indian community's contributions to Singapore's multicultural fabric.

That said, it still can be a challenge for minority groups to maintain their cultural identity. In the face of dominant cultural influences, Indians in Singapore have had to work hard at preserving and promoting their practices and traditions.

The Role of Government

On its part, the Singaporean government is keenly aware of the importance of the heritage of minority communities, and has taken several steps to support the expression of the Indian community. As PM Lee observed at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in 2017, "...while cultures... evolve naturally... and cannot be planned... this does not mean the Government has no role." The government encourages "each race to preserve its

unique culture and traditions while fostering mutual appreciation and respect among all of them. Being Singaporean has never been a matter of subtraction, but of addition; not of becoming less, but more; not of limitation and contraction, but of openness and expansion."

One of the most significant efforts of the government to support the Indian community's cultural heritage was the establishment of the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) in 2015. The IHC is today an iconic museum that displays and promotes the diverse and rich heritage of the Indian community in Singapore, featuring a range artefacts, artworks and interactive displays. It provides visitors who hail from the Indian community as well as tourists and Singaporeans from other ethnic groups with a comprehensive understanding of the culture and history of Indians in Singapore.

Complementing the displays at the IHC are the workshops and open houses that IHC conducts every month which has attracted significant numbers of



Figure 3. A tour of the IHC premises attended by a multi-ethnic audience.
Image courtesy of IHC.

non-Indians to its premises. A deliberate focus has been on children's programmes which aim to develop in our young an early appreciation of other cultures. Today, nearly half of the visitors to the Centre are from other ethnic groups.

A Vibrant Cultural Calendar

Notably, the wider Singaporean community supports the variety of events and festivals that mark the Indian community's cultural practices and traditions. These include Deepavali, Thaipusam and Pongal. Thaipusam and Pongal, though not designated public holidays like Deepavali, have emerged as important signifiers of the cultural identity of the Singapore Indian community.

Though a general ban on religious foot processions has been in place in Singapore since 1964, an

exception has been made for Thaipusam as well as two other Hindu religious events, Panguni Uthiram and Thimithi, the fire-walking festival, which enjoy significant participation by the community. Additionally, in response to feedback from the community, the authorities have relaxed rules such as increasing the designated spots along the procession route where music can be played and allowing percussion instruments to be played by those accompanying the devotees. Even if all these translate to some inconveniences such as road closures, traffic jams and increased noise levels, the wider community is respectful and accepts them as part and parcel of living in a multi-racial community.

Pongal is the Tamil harvest festival accompanied by a colourful street light-up along Serangoon Road partly funded by the government. The IHC and the Little India Shop Owners and Heritage Association (LISHA) organise various events during this period, including bazaars and workshops as well as a mini farm where cows are honoured.



Figure 4. Multi-ethnic Pongal celebration at IHC.
Image courtesy of IHC.

Several other Indian festivals such as Onam, the harvest festival of the Malayalee community, and Holi, the Festival of Colours, celebrated in north and central India to mark the arrival of spring, are also marked by the different communities. These festivals, often held in the community centres run by the People's Association (PA), also attract multi-ethnic attendees and participants.

In the context of multi-racial Singapore, these public celebrations have become opportunities for non-Indian Singaporeans to appreciate and learn about the diversity of Singapore's cultural heritage. Today, it is no longer unusual to see non-Hindu Singaporeans bearing the kavadi during Thaipusam every year.

Looking Into the Future

When Singapore attained independence on 9th August 1965, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that “we will set the example.” That example

was set not by creating a monolithic society or requiring any community to give up its heritage or traditions, but by enjoining citizens to embrace their inherited cultures while respecting other cultures and beliefs.

Later that year, in his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam described Singapore as a “little United Nations in the making” where Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western cultures practised their beliefs without hindrance. In the Gallup World Poll in 2019, 54 years later, Singapore was placed first among 124 countries with 95% claiming Singapore “a good place to live” for the minorities. This was higher than the global average of about 70%. This statistic would have pleased our founding generation of leaders.

Today, Singapore remains a good place for immigrants who set out to make this island home. It is particularly so for South Asian immigrants who can tap into vibrant and ready networks, including cultural and community organisations and religious institutions, to find guidance and connections which

provide avenues for engagement and integration. The shared cultural backgrounds mean new South Asian immigrants can actively participate in the festivities and programmes alongside Singaporean Indians, making integration into mainstream society easier.

Singaporeans clearly appreciate the importance of their heritage. In the most recent Heritage Awareness Survey by the National Heritage Board (NHB), over 90% of respondents agreed that our history and heritage are important, and expressed an interest to learn and experience what it means to have our unique heritage.

This interest is undoubtedly an opportunity. Innovative initiatives that promote minority cultures can meet this demand while building a greater understanding and appreciation across different communities. It can facilitate dialogue and help Singaporeans explore and appreciate different perspectives. This can foster a more inclusive and harmonious society, better able to confront the headwinds we are now confronting.

One silver lining that has emerged from the gloom of the pandemic years is the accelerated adoption of digital technologies in the heritage sector. We should capitalise on this and continue to invest in technological infrastructure. Digital technologies make it easier than ever to connect with audiences across communities. The growing appetite for digital heritage content should translate to an expansion of digital offerings as well as experiments with different media to welcome people from all backgrounds and communities.

Conclusion

The pandemic years and the global events now unfolding are a reminder to the heritage sector to be prepared for highly disruptive events, or what author Nassim Taleb has termed “Black Swan” events. We need to recognise that such events are not as rare as we think they are. In a subsequent book, Taleb coined another term, “anti-fragile”, which refers to not just dealing with disruption, but developing the ability to find ways to constantly improve and emerge stronger. How does one develop this?

At a speech given at the Institute of Policy Studies-S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (IPS-RSIS) conference in 2021, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong referred to the late multilingual local playwright Kuo Pao Kun who had likened culture to trees “separate at the trunk but touching at the tips of their branches where cross pollination occurs, and at the tips of their roots where they draw sustenance from the same soil.”

For Singapore and its various communities, anti-fragility must mean not just going deeper to strengthen one’s own cultural roots, but also reaching higher to cross-pollinate with other cultures, to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of other cultures in our midst so that we may attain a stronger, shared Singaporean identity. What is most important is for everyone to approach these efforts with humility, empathy and a genuine desire to

learn. Building cultural understanding and fostering inclusivity requires an ongoing commitment to self-reflection, growth and actively challenging one's own biases and assumptions.

Together with continued government and stakeholder support, we have good reason to be optimistic that the heritage sector in Singapore will indeed emerge “anti-fragile”, and that minority cultures in Singapore will have a pivotal role to play in that journey. □

About The Author



R Rajaram JP is currently the Registrar at NUS and has been the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Indian Heritage Centre since 2022, and a member of the Hindu Advisory Board since 2023. He served as Chairman of the Tamil Language Council from 2013-19 and is currently its Advisor. Rajaram also worked with the Self Help Group, SINDA, in the late 90s, and later as a member of its Executive Committee from 2011-2017. These were stints, he believes, that helped shape his views expressed in this essay.

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