Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal

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IN BOTH ACADEMIC WRITING AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE, the term "diaspora" has come to denote almost any migrant group of shared origin.[1] As Engseng Ho puts it, "today, almost every ethnic group, country, or separatist movement has its diaspora"; this marks a significant expansion from the original use of the term to refer to the Jewish and later the Armenian and the African experiences.[2] Histories of diaspora have proliferated where once there were histories of migration, or immigration. As a term of analysis in the humanities and the social sciences, "diaspora" has usefully drawn our attention to the importance of transnational connections and flows. Diasporic histories do not view migration as a linear journey from source to destination, but emphasize the enduring links—imaginative, familial, economic, or political—maintained by mobile people with their lands of origin.[3]

As several million Tamil-speaking people moved back and forth across the Bay of Bengal in the century after 1850—in particular between the southeastern coast of India, the Straits Settlements, and the Malay Peninsula—diasporic communities were made and unraveled alongside other kinds of local and transnational communities.[4] For most of the nineteenth century, until the 1870s, the connections between South India and Southeast Asia were characterized by constant circulation.[5] Con-

[1] For an admirably clear semantic history, see Stéphane Dufoix, *Diasporas*, trans. William Rodarmor (Berkeley, Calif., 2008). See also Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas* (London, 1997).

[2] Engseng Ho, "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: The View from the Other Boat," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 2 (2004): 210–246, 214.

[3] Pioneering efforts in the Asian context include T. N. Harper, "Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore," *Sojourn* 12, no. 2 (1997): 261–292, and Adam McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842–1949," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306–337. McKeown points out that at the heart of a diasporic perspective on human mobility is "attention to global connections, networks, activities and consciousness that bridge . . . more localized anchors of reference."

[4] Apart from the late-twentieth-century Tamil diaspora of refugees from the conflict in Sri Lanka, the Tamil diaspora has been very little studied. For one recent work that uses the term (although its focus is almost exclusively on questions of ritual), see Fred W. Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries: Continuity and Innovation in the Tamil Diaspora* (Columbia, S.C., 2007).

[5] On the Bay of Bengal in the early modern period, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected His-

tiguous, sometimes overlapping communities of Tamil Muslim and Hindu traders, boatmen, dockworkers, and laborers sojourned in the port cities of Singapore and Penang (known, together with Melaka, as the Straits Settlements) and returned frequently to South India. Cultural symbols and religious practices circulated with them, shaping the urban landscape of the port cities of the Straits. Tamil sojourners in Southeast Asia formed local communities while maintaining oceanic connections. From the 1870s, Tamil migration to Southeast Asia underwent a transformation, with the arrival in Malaya of tens of thousands of young men from rural South India—most of them of low-caste Hindu or "untouchable" (*dalit*) background, many of them under indenture—to labor on the sugar and then the rubber plantations of the Malay Peninsula. This marked both an expansion and a narrowing of mobility across the Bay of Bengal: the number of journeys increased in the age of the steamship, but most Tamils in Malaya now lived and worked a world away from the openness of the port cities, enclosed and isolated on plantations.

It was out of this process of immobilization that a narrower, more clearly recognizable sense of Tamil diasporic consciousness emerged (and one that more closely approximates the models of diaspora prevalent in the social sciences).[6] The colonial state identified plantation workers and urbanites alike as "Tamils"; the Tamil urban elite tried, as a consequence, to identify more directly with the masses on the rubber estates, and did so with reference to shared membership in a diasporic community. Confronted with a rising tide of Malay nationalism in the 1930s, Tamil intellectuals engaged in a profoundly self-conscious attempt to define the condition of living in diaspora. In the aftermath of the Second World War, increasingly exclusive definitions of sovereignty and citizenship on both sides of the Bay of Bengal closed down the space for diasporic modes of identification and assertion.

This is a new way of looking at a process that has been studied largely in terms of "the impact of Tamil immigration" on Malaysian history, with scholars sifting the "push" and "pull" factors underlying migration.[7] A shift in focus to the distinctive features of Tamil circulation around the Bay of Bengal can suggest new ways of thinking about diaspora and diasporic consciousness. Two arguments in particular may have broader comparative relevance in relation to other South Asian diaspo-

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tories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–762; Om Prakash and Denys Lombard, eds., *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1800* (New Delhi, 1999). A valuable perspective on "circulation" as a particular kind of mobility in South Asian history can be found in the essays in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (New Delhi, 2003).

[6] For a presentation of ideal-type "models" of diaspora, see Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, and Dufoix, *Diasporas*.

[7] K. S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786–1957)* (Cambridge, 1969); Sinappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Oxford, 1970); Amarjit Kaur, "Sojourners and Settlers: South Indians and Communal Identity in Malaysia," in Crispin Bates, ed., *Community, Empire and Migration: South Asians in Diaspora* (Basingstoke, 2000), 185–205. Emigration to Southeast Asia has also been illuminated from the perspective of its impact on South Indian agrarian history: Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labor in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1965); C. J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880–1955: The Tamilnad Countryside* (Oxford, 1984); on transnational Chettiar business networks, see the seminal study by David Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994).

ras—the Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Sikh, and Telugu diasporas, to name but a few—and to the study of diasporas more broadly.[8] The first is that Tamil diasporic consciousness was a product of the shifting balance between mobility and immobility across the seas: a sharper sense of diasporic consciousness emerged as a consequence of im- mobilization, rather than mobility. Diasporic connections, on this view, solidified when oceanic connections attenuated. Until the 1870s, the intensity of oceanic con- nections across the Bay of Bengal forestalled the sense of separation—between home and abroad—at the root of the diasporic experience.

The second broad argument here concerns the importance of "others" to the constitution of diasporic communities and diasporic consciousness. There is a ten- dency in the literature, particularly the literature on the Indian diaspora, to paint a very inward-looking picture of diasporic communities isolated from contact with others, and fixated upon reproducing social and cultural institutions from home.[9] Yet diasporic consciousness is forged not only in distinction to nationalist and indigenous claims—as James Clifford rightly suggests—but also from the interaction between multiple diasporas.[10] In the port cities of Southeast Asia, shaped to an unusual extent by mobility, being part of a diaspora was, by the 1930s, an essential part of what it was to be modern. However, emergent visions of diasporic modernity arose at the expense of other modes of identification across space and time, and of more local, improvised forms of community.

AT THE MOMENT OF EUROPEAN INCURSION into the Bay of Bengal, Tamil connections with Southeast Asia were intensive and widespread.[11] In early modern Melaka, Tamil residents not only were numerous, but had risen to positions of considerable power within the court. When Captain Francis Light founded the British settlement of Prince of Wales Island (Penang) in 1786, Tamil settlers, traders, and laborers were

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[8] Some of the earliest studies of the "Indian diaspora" were histories of indentured labor migration to the Indian Ocean and Caribbean colonies in the nineteenth century. See John D. Kelly, *A Politics of Virtue: Hinduism, Sexuality, and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji* (Chicago, 1991); Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–74* (Delhi, 1995); Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 1997). An- other approach to the South Asian diaspora has been to focus on mercantile networks: Claude Marko- vits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cam- bridge, 2000); more broadly, see Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi, 2000); Rajat Kanta Ray, "Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800–1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995): 449–554; and Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism*. On India's many regional diasporas, see, e.g., Tony Bal- lantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham, N.C., 2006); Mark-Anthony Falzon, *Cosmopolitan Connections: The Sindhi Diaspora, 1860–2000* (Lei- den, 2004). One work that expertly brings together these diverse threads of national, regional, and transnational history is Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in an Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

[9] Cf. Judith Brown, *Global South Asians: An Introduction to the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2006); Brij Lal, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore, 2006).

[10] James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–338.

[11] On the much longer history of Tamil connections with Southeast Asia, which may date to the second century A.D., see H. G. Quaritch Wales, "Archaeological Researches in Ancient Indian Colo- nization," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 1 (1940): 1–85; P. Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese* (Kuala Lumpur, 1961).

among the first to arrive.[12] Tamil Muslim traders of the Marakkayar community, many of them married to local Malay women, played a significant role in Penang's trade in the produce of the Malay hinterland, Sumatran pepper, Burmese rice, and Coromandel cloths.[13] Under their auspices, thousands of Tamil Muslim laborers arrived on Penang's shores each year, for a sojourn of months or years.[14] As early as 1794, the Straits Settlements Factory Records contain evidence of both the magnitude and the circularity of South Indian migration to the Straits, reporting that "the vessels of the [Coromandel] Coast bring over annually 1,300 or 2,000 men who by traffic and various kinds of labor obtain a few dollars with which they return to their homes."[15] By the 1820s, Tamil settlers constituted the largest single group in Georgetown, the urban settlement on Penang Island.[16] In Penang, as in Singapore, new arrivals from the Coromandel Coast encountered an already diverse South Asian population, which included East India Company soldiers and convict laborers from Madras and Bengal, as well as a large and growing number of Chinese migrants.[17]

The character of this mobile, transient Tamil society that emerged in Penang and Singapore is accessible to us only through fragments and traces for the period before the 1870s. In part this is due to the absence of sources: only from the later 1870s do we have Tamil-language publications from the Straits Settlements, and the character of Tamil society attracted only stray remarks from English commentators, owing to a lack of interest, understanding, or both. But there are many other archives that speak to the vitality of the Tamil cultural presence in the Straits: the archives of architecture are particularly revealing, and with them the documentary trail of petitions and counter-petitions that remain in the Straits Settlements Records, regarding the sanctity of particular plots of land, the sharing of public space, and the competitive nature of sacred appropriations of the city.

Tamil cultural forms, and particularly forms of religious culture, traveled—or circulated—with the migrants; they marked their presence in Singapore and Penang from the outset. A newcomer from South India would have found instantly familiar elements of the urban landscape, manifested through the architecture of sacred sites. The distinctive styles of South Indian Islam shaped the sacred landscapes of the Straits Settlements. Among many examples, there stand, to this day, the *darghas* (shrines) to the saint of the South Indian town of Nagore, Shahul Hamid, on Telok Ayer Street in Singapore, and on Chulia Street in Penang. The Penang shrine was built in 1801, and the structure in Singapore during the late 1820s; both were replicas of the original *dargha*, the saint's burial place, in Nagore.[18] Figures 2 and 3 show the presence of quintessentially "Tamil" styles of sacred architecture across the Bay of

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[12] T. J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, 2 vols. (London, 1839), vol. 1.

[13] Helen Fujimoto, *The South Indian Muslim Community and the Evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948* (Tokyo, 1989).

[14] John Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago: Containing an Account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions and Commerce of Its Inhabitants*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1820), vol. 1.

[15] British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collection, India Office Records [hereafter IOR], IOR/G/34/6, Straits Settlements Factory Records [hereafter SSFR], vol. 6 (1794), August 1, 1794.

[16] IOR, F/4/74020284, Prince of Wales Island, Census Department, 1823.

[17] J. F. A. McNair, assisted by W. D. Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Warders: A Record of the Convict Prison at Singapore . . . : Together with a Cursory History of the Convict Establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the Year 1797* (London, 1899); Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account*.

[18] For a petition from Tamil Muslim merchants regarding the land for the Nagore shrines, see the

FIGURE 1: The Bay of Bengal region ca. 1800, showing the ports of departure on the Coromandel Coast. Detail from "Asia," in R. Brookes, *The General Gazetteer; or, Compendious Geographical Dictionary*, 8th ed. (Dublin, 1808). Courtesy of the University of Texas Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, available at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/asia_1808.jpg.

Bengal. The *dargha* of Nagore also had a striking influence on the structure of the Masjid Jamae (or "Big Mosque"), the largest Tamil Muslim place of worship in Singapore.

Yet in moving, not only did the replicas absorb a wider range of architectural influences, both European (the Palladian features in the Singapore *dargha*) and from

National Archives of the United Kingdom [hereafter TNA], Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], CO 55/2, Proceedings of Committee of Investigation into the State of the Revenue, 1797–1798.

FIGURE 2: The Nagore Dargha, Telok Ayer Street, Singapore, built ca. 1828–1830. Photograph by Sunil Amrith.

the wider Islamic world, they also became active sites of devotion and healing, attracting local worshippers far beyond the Tamil Muslim community, just as the original shrine in Nagore had always attracted a majority of Hindu devotees.[19] The narrative of his life intimately connected with the sea, Shahul Hamid was an apt patron saint for mobile peoples.[20]

Tamil Hindu urban landscapes overlapped with Tamil Muslim ones. Numerous temples dedicated to South Indian deities emerged in Singapore and Penang in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Chettiar merchants established many of the early temples, plowing the profits from their already extensive Asian trading

[19] Personal interviews in Nagore, September 2008. On the saint Shahul Hamid, see S. A. Shaik Hassan Sahib Qadhiri, *The Divine Light of Nagore: The Whole History and Teachings of Nagore Great Saint* (Nagore, 1980). See also S. A. A. Saheb, "A 'Festival of Flags': Hindu-Muslim Devotion and the Sacralising of Localism at the Shrine of Nagore-e-Sharif in Tamil Nadu," in Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu, eds., *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (London, 1998), 55–76.

[20] At the heart of Shahul Hamid's story is the sea. Central to his legend is the story of his journey from the plains of North India to Mecca, back via the Maldives and Adam's Peak in Ceylon, to his final settlement and death in Nagore. The narrative of his voyage is narrated again and again, as it was in my many conversations with his devotees, and is even translated into the terms of modern cartography in one of the most widely circulated Tamil texts about him, on sale in cheap editions in Tamil Nadu, Singapore, and Penang. See Janāp Kulām Kātiru Navalar, *Karuṇaik-kaṭal Nākūr Āṇṭavaravarkaḷiṉ Punīta Vaḻkkai Varalāṟu* (Chennai, 1963). A note on language: I have used the usual diacritical marks in transliterating Tamil sources. However, for names (of people, places, and rituals) that are widely known and frequently transcribed into English, I have used their more familiar forms (e.g., Nagapattinam rather than Nākapaṭṭiṉam; Ramasamy rather than Rāmacāmi; *thaipusam* rather than *taipūcam*).

FIGURE 3: The Masjid Jamae (Chulia), South Bridge Road, Singapore, built in 1826. Photograph by Sunil Amrith.

networks into structures commemorating their favored deities.[21] Some were little more than makeshift shrines, dedicated to local deities, but more permanent structures soon emerged. In 1827, Narayana Pillai, a Tamil building contractor who had

[21] Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries*; on the culture of Chettiar capitalism, see Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism*.

FIGURE 4: The Sri Mariyamman Temple, Queen Street, Penang, built ca. 1833. Photograph by Sunil Amrith.

arrived in Singapore with the colony's founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, erected the Sri Mariyamman Temple in Singapore, on land granted by the colonial authorities.[22] A similar structure was erected on Queen Street, in Georgetown, by the 1830s.[23]

The temples were erected at the heart of early clusters of Tamil settlement. In the words of one petition regarding the Mariyamman Temple in Singapore, the East India Company had given early Tamil Hindu settlers "sufficient ground for our occupation, and also for the Church, near the banks of the Fresh Water River, and [we] accordingly observed that place, and builded the houses and Church." But in a context marked by multiple migrant communities in flux, the Hindu "Church" was built in immediate proximity to another place of worship; the temple's sacralization of the land in terms of Hindu cosmology bordered upon the largest Tamil Muslim mosque, the Masjid Jamae, which indicated a parallel but distinct spiritual connection—an Islamic one—between South India and the Straits Settlements. As early as 1827, a dispute arose between the trustees of the mosque and the temple as to the use of the public road between the two structures, generating much correspondence within the colonial archive.[24]

[22] National Archives of Singapore [hereafter NAS], Straits Settlements Records [hereafter SSR], Singapore Consultations (A), A 34, May 1827, "Petition from Hindoo Inhabitants of Singapore."

[23] Personal interviews in Penang, March–September 2007.

[24] NAS, SSR, A 34, May 1827, "Petition from Hindoo Inhabitants of Singapore"; "Petition from Mohammedan Inhabitants of Singapore Respecting the Hindu Temple Adjoining the Mosque."

On one level, a dispute of this kind suggests that the area of Tamil settlement in Singapore had become a microcosm of South Indian society, reflecting the physical juxtaposition, even sharing, of Hindu and Muslim places of worship, and the occasional conflicts between them over public space, both of which had characterized community relations in the Tamil country for centuries.[25] In some models of diasporic culture, this would represent a straightforward transfer of cultural practices and forms through the process of migration. But what is most striking about the circulation of Tamil cultural symbols—whether Hindu or Muslim—in Singapore and Penang is that they circulated amid many other sites, symbols, and practices. Religious performances were enacted before an audience of others: British soldiers and administrators, Chinese and Malay residents. In this context, circulating religious practices had to change in order to accommodate themselves to new ways of sharing public space.

From the 1830s, the colonial authorities began to formulate an improvised, still inchoate, public doctrine of toleration, which held that "traveling cultures" had to conform to certain norms of public behavior. Observing in 1834 a performance in Penang of the rite of *thaipusam*, James Low, chief military officer of Province Wellesley, wrote that "when people forsake their own country and voluntarily settle in another, they should be satisfied with the permission to celebrate their religious rites only which do not outrage the proper feelings of the other portions of the community, and which are not injurious to public morals, the decencies of life, and order."[26] Decades later, in 1860, the trustees of the Mariyamman Temple in Singapore were denied permission to perform the rites of *thimithi* in public, the Governor's Council declaring it their responsibility to "prevent the Peace of the Town being in any way disturbed."[27] There was, however, a great deal more cultural mixing—or transculturation—than this public doctrine would recognize. At times, "Indian," "Malay," and "Chinese" modes of performance came together to the point where they were indistinguishable to the state. In Penang, a hybrid, localized variant of the Shi'a Muharram procession attracted followers from all communities—including Tamil Hindus, Tamil and Malay Muslims (overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims), and Chinese—and in 1867 became the occasion for the "Penang Riots," involving rival alliances and brotherhoods that cut across the lines of community and religion.[28]

The years around the mid-nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of journeys between the Straits Settlements and the Madras coast. To English observers, the Tamil connection with the arc of coasts around the Bay of Bengal appeared entirely natural, and governed by networks indigenous to Tamil society.[29] Never-

[25] The seminal work on Tamil Muslim communities remains Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge, 1989). For a North Indian comparison, see Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989).

[26] James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang* (Singapore, 1836). *Thaipusam* is an annual celebration in honor of Murugan, son of Siva and Parvati, commemorating his defeat of Iṭumpan on Paḻani Hill.

[27] NAS, SSR, Miscellaneous Letters Out, 1800–1867, V 30 (1860), to Trustees, Hindoo Temple at Singapore. *Thimithi* is a Tamil fire-walking ceremony in honor of Draupadi, wife of the Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata*.

[28] On Boria, see Fujimoto, *The South Indian Muslim Community*. On the "Penang Riots" of 1867, see *Report of the Penang Riots Commission* (Penang, 1867).

[29] Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai [hereafter TNSA], Madras Public Proceedings [hereafter

theless, the sheer number of boats making the voyage across the Bay of Bengal began to elicit official concern, and it is from the late 1840s that Tamil emigration begins to feature prominently in the Madras archives. A number of cases came to light in which seriously overcrowded "native vessels" were arriving on both coasts of the Bay of Bengal. As one observer wrote in 1848, "it is notorious the crowded manner in which the vessels arrive at Penang," and "the consequences this year have been very fatal, many of the passengers having died on the way."[30] Regulation, however, appeared an impossibility: so dispersed was the traffic, from small as well as larger ports, that if regulations were tightened in Penang, "Asiatics wishing a passage can readily embark from the adjacent Malay coast."[31] Hindu and Muslim shipping merchants constituted the essential link between the port cities of the Straits and South India: they advanced to thousands of laborers the cost of their passage overseas, and linked them up with employers in Penang and Singapore.[32]

By the end of the 1860s, the Chief Secretary of the Straits Settlements observed that there was

a regular cooly emigration from [the Madras] coast to Penang. Many ships belonging to Hindus and Mussulmen are employed in it, and the number of persons who are thus brought over is believed to average 4,000 per annum. Almost all the boatmen, caulkers, and laborers on boardships and in the town,—syces, watermen, and a large number of hawkers, traders and domestic servants, are men from the Madras Coast.[33]

A number of these men must have participated directly in cultural performances that commemorated their sense of connection with the other coast of the Bay of Bengal—a connection that was perpetually reinforced by trips back home, and a constant stream of new arrivals. To take one example of many, groups of Penang boatmen, according to oral tradition, contributed a portion of their income to support annual celebrations of the saint of Nagore.[34] A central feature of Tamil cultural circulation around the Bay of Bengal is the sense of continuity it evokes between the two coasts of the Bay of Bengal. The streets of the Straits Settlements formed part of a continuous realm with the Tamil country. The sea was a means of connection as much as separation.

The 1870s saw a refinement and an elaboration of Tamil cultural expression in the Straits Settlements, through the medium of print. The introduction of the movable-type lithograph led to a proliferation of small-scale Tamil publishing in Singapore and Penang, beginning in around 1873, with the production of newspapers—

MPP], vol. 836, May 15, 1849, no. 7, from Governor, Prince of Wales Island, to Officiating Chief Secretary, Fort Saint George.

[30] Ibid., vol. 832, December 12, 1848, nos. 7–8, from Official Resident Councilor, Prince of Wales Island, to Fort Saint George.

[31] Ibid., vol. 836, May 15, 1849, no. 7, Governor, Prince of Wales Island, to Officiating Chief Secretary, Fort Saint George.

[32] Ibid., vol. 832, December 12, 1848, nos. 7–8, from Official Resident Councilor, Prince of Wales Island, to Fort Saint George.

[33] National Archives of India, New Delhi [hereafter NAI], Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce: Emigration Branch [hereafter RAC: Emigration], Proceedings 1–9, September 1871, J. W. Birch (Col Secy, SS) to the Chief Secy, Fort Saint George, July 1, 1870.

[34] Information from personal interviews in Penang (March–September 2007) and Nagore (September 2008).

most of them short-lived—and books, ranging from manuals of Islamic instruction to genealogies of saints, which connected the sacred landscapes of South India directly with the Straits Settlements, as well as backward and westward, to the Arabian peninsula.[35] The first Tamil-language newspaper in the Straits, *Taṅkaiṉēcaṉ*, was edited by Muhammad Sa'id, and first published by the Jawi Peranakan Company in 1876; the same publishers started the first-ever Malay newspaper, *Jawi Peranakan*, with its deep commitment to popularizing the Malay language.[36] This indicates the extent to which the hybrid Tamil-Malay community of the Straits (known as the *jawi peranakan*) stood quite naturally astride the Tamil and the Malay cultural worlds.[37] Conversely, many of the early Tamil Muslim publishing houses were backed by Tamil Hindu capital.[38] Penang's first Tamil newspaper, *Vittiya Vicāriṇi* (published in 1883), reflected this age of circulation quite literally, as it moved back across the Bay of Bengal, to Nagore, along with its editor, the Tamil poet Ghulam Kadir Navalar.[39]

If the division between Tamil Hindu and Tamil Muslim migrants to Southeast Asia stood among the many multiplicities of class, community, and language that characterized the mobile society of the Straits Settlements in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, it was not an impermeable nor always a clear boundary. In text, as in architecture, the impression—admittedly limited, given the scarcity of contemporary sources—is one of overlapping, continuous communities, each linked back and forth across the Bay of Bengal and nourished by the constant circulation of people and images, rather than any sense of a singular Tamil diaspora.

THE FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT in patterns of migration and capitalist development across the Bay of Bengal that began in the 1870s and gathered pace in the 1880s reshaped the boundaries of community and consciousness in the Straits Settlements. With the establishment of British control over most of the peninsula in the 1870s, the west coast of Malaya was opened to European capital, and to considerable investments in sugar and coffee plantations, followed late in the century by rubber. Unable to attract or coerce local Malay labor, and without access to the networks controlling Chinese labor, European planters looked across the Bay of Bengal for their supply of workers.[40]

[35] Mukammatu Aptulkātiṟuppulavar, *Muṉājāttuttiraṭṭu* (Singapore, 1872); Mukammatu Cultāṉ Maraikkāyar, *Patāṉanta Mālai* (Penang, 1890); Mukammatu Aptulkātiṟuppulavar, *Kīrttaṉattiraṭṭu* (Singapore, 1896).

[36] E. W. Birch, "The Vernacular Press in the Straits," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 4 (December 1879): 51–55.

[37] For an incisive analysis of one of the early Tamil Muslim newspapers in Singapore, *Ciṅkaiṉēcaṉ*, see Torsten Tschacher, "Kling, Tamil, Indian: Being a Tamil-Speaking Muslim in Singapore" (forthcoming). I thank Dr. Tschacher for sharing a draft of the paper with me. Tschacher shows that while we do not know much about the extent of the newspaper's circulation, its list of subscribers alone spanned Malaya, Sumatra, Java, Siam, Vietnam, and India.

[38] Fujimoto, *The South Indian Muslim Community*.

[39] S. M. A. K. Fakhri, "Print Culture amongst Tamils and Tamil Muslims in Southeast Asia, c. 1860–1960" (Madras Institute of Development Studies Working Paper no. 167, February 2002). To the best of my knowledge, no issues of *Vittiya Vicāriṇi* survive, although they may be extant in private collections in Tamil Nadu.

[40] NAI, RAC: Emigration, Proceedings 1–9, September 1871, Harry St George Ord to the Earl of Kimberley, May 15, 1871. The Governor of Penang explained the situation quite clearly to the Colonial Secretary, writing that "From the poorness of the soil of the Malay Peninsula, cultivation can only be

FIGURE 5:
Distribution of Indian Population in Malaya, 1891–1911 (percentage of total)

	1891	1901	1911
Singapore	21.0	14.9	10.6
Penang	47.3	31.7	17.1
Melaka	21.1	1.0	2.8
Perak	19.9	29.4	27.9
Selangor	4.7	14.1	27.6
Other Malay States	3.4	5.6	14.0

SOURCE: Drawn from M. V. del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population* (Kuala Lumpur, 1947), Appendix C; and Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 208.

From the 1870s, the magnitude of Tamil migration to Malaya increased manifold, and its distribution and composition changed; the position of the port cities with respect to the hinterland was transformed as a result. In 1848, at an estimate, 2,700 passengers had arrived in Penang from the ports of South India; for most of the 1860s, this number had risen to around 6,000.[41] Twenty years later, in 1888, more than 22,000 people arrived in the ports of the Straits Settlements from South India; in 1911, that number was over 100,000.[42] As more and more workers journeyed to the plantations of the hinterland, Singapore and Penang no longer provided homes to the majority of Tamil migrants to Malaya. In 1881, Singapore and Penang still accounted for 39,000 out of the 44,000 Indian migrants—the vast majority of them Tamil—who were estimated to live in Malaya; by 1901, the two cities' total population of 55,600 was matched by a plantation population of equal magnitude, mostly concentrated in Selangor and Perak. By 1931, only just over 100,000 of the 600,000 Indians in Malaya lived in the port cities.[43] Figure 5 illustrates quite starkly the changing distribution of Malaya's Tamil population between the cities and the plantations.

Tamil plantation workers' journey across the Bay of Bengal was one of confined mobility.[44] Tamil laborers began their journeys to Malaya at the emigration depot in Nagapattinam. After having their heads shaved and their clothes disinfected, the

carried on profitably when cheap labor can be obtained: the native Malay will not work as a field laborer, and the Chinese immigrants find other and more remunerative occupation."

[41] TNSA, MPP, vol. 832, December 12, 1848, nos. 7–8, Appendix: "Ships Arriving in Prince of Wales Island"; Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 304.

[42] Calculated from Straits Settlements, *Reports on Indian Immigration* (Singapore and Penang), 1880–1911.

[43] Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 183, 208.

[44] The next two paragraphs are based on the archival accounts in NAI, RAC: Emigration, Proceedings 12–15, March 1873, "Emigration from Madras Presidency to the Straits Settlements"; ibid., Proceedings 38–48, February 1874, Letter no. 282, Karikal, April 1, 1873, from Captain B. Fischer (British Consular Agent, Karikal) to Protector of Emigrants, Madras; NAI, Revenue and Agricultural Department: Emigration Branch [hereafter RA: Emigration], Proceedings 19–21, January 1882, from Major A. T. Rolland, Superintendant of Police, Tanjore, to the Assistant Inspector-General of Police, Madras, Tanjore, November 12, 1880; ibid., Proceeding 9, September 1886, from the Consular Agent, Pondicherry and Karikal, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, July 27, 1886; ibid., Proceedings 10–13, June 1874, from JDM Coghill, Acting Colonial Surgeon, Province Wellesley, to the Magistrate of Police and CEO, Province Wellesley, November 16, 1873. See also Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 89–103.

prospective emigrants would come before the local magistrate, and declare to him that they were migrating—and in some cases indenturing themselves—voluntarily.[45] After a voyage of six or seven days across the Bay of Bengal, packed on deck by the thousands, emigrants would arrive in Penang or Singapore, but often would not see the cities at all. From the quarantine stations at St. John's Island (Singapore) and Pulau Jerejak (Penang), they would be collected and taken directly to the plantations, where they would work for at least three years, or until their debts accumulated in the process of emigration had been paid off.

The plantations were enclosed cultural worlds, in which workers remained under the surveillance and supervision of the Tamil plantation foremen (*kaṅkaṇi*), who often originated from the same village or region as the workers. Through small estate temples dedicated to the local deities of the workers' South India homes, a sense of connection and continuity was established between rural South India and the plantations. Small estate Tamil schools prepared estate workers' children—of whom there were few, as the number of women who migrated was not large—for little more than a life on the plantations. Conditions on the plantations were notoriously harsh. Mortality rates were high, as a result of poor sanitary facilities and environmental conditions. Workers were often beaten, even tortured. Any purported violation of their terms of employment was punished harshly, as stipulated by the draconian labor code. Rupert Emerson, an American social scientist who visited Malaya in the 1930s, concluded that most Tamil laborers in Malaya "have lived out their brief Malayan lives within a radius of a few miles from the dingy 'coolie lines' in which they have slept."[46] The gulf between the plantations and the culturally and socially open world of the port cities could hardly have been greater.

Although a range of Tamil recruiting agents, transnational firms, and plantation foremen remained essential to the process of channeling migrants across the Bay of Bengal, the colonial state and European planters established an unbreakable monopoly over the labor supply.[47] Nagapattinam was declared the only official port of emigration for Southeast Asia; shipping across the Bay of Bengal was dominated by the British India Steam Navigation Company, and planters began to control their labor supply directly, by dispatching existing laborers to their home villages to recruit more men (under what was known as the *kangany* system) by advancing money to their families.[48] Lacking the institutional structures of the Chinese brotherhoods (*kongsis*)—which integrated laborers in the hinterland with urban merchants, financiers, and revenue farmers—the urban Tamil elite turned to print, and the public sphere, to stake their claim to speak for the mass of Tamil migrant workers on the plantations, and tried to forge a Tamil diaspora in their own image, under their moral and political leadership. This led to a struggle over power, authority, and image that

[45] I examine this process in greater depth in an as yet unpublished article titled "Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya, 1870–1941."

[46] Rupert Emerson quoted in K. A. Neelakandha Aiyar, *Indian Problems in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1938).

[47] NAI, RA: Emigration, Proceedings 19–21, January 1882, from Major A. T. Rolland, Superintendant of Police, Tanjore, to the Assistant Inspector-General of Police, Madras, Tanjore, November 12, 1880. For a detailed discussion of the colonial regulation of migration to Malaya, see Amrith, "Indians Overseas?"

[48] Archives of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, BIS/7/13, Correspondence re. Negapatam Straits Mail and Coolie Contract, British India Steam Navigation Company Ltd 1901–1904.

would reshape the boundaries of the Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia in the years to come.

From the early twentieth century, Indian professionals, civil servants, and merchants in Malaya had formed small associations, the first of which was the Taiping Indian Association, established in 1906, soon followed by the Selangor Indian Association in 1909.[49] By the 1920s, Indian associations had proliferated across the peninsula, the largest and most active being formed in Singapore in 1923. The overriding goal of the Indian Association—made up largely of English-speaking urban elites—was to increase the representation of Indians on the legislative councils of the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States. Alongside these umbrella organizations for the Indian community were social reform organizations directed specifically at the Tamil population, commercial associations, and associations based on the ties of locality.[50] More explicitly political associations emerged also, connected with the assertion of semiskilled labor on the railways, leading in 1924 to the first strike by Tamil labor in Malaya.[51]

Among the most significant outcomes of the flowering of associational life among Tamils and other South Asians in urban Malaya was the emergence of diaspora as the subject of debate, and as a political project. Out of the myriad of associations and societies—and particularly in the press—emerged a new awareness of being a Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia, and a new set of conflicts over its internal and external boundaries and its political implications. Much of what was at stake emerges from a letter written to the Reverend C. F. Andrews—a veteran campaigner for the rights of Indians overseas, and a close friend and confidant of both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore—by three Tamil railway workers from Sentul (on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur) in 1924. The railway workers wrote to Andrews, who had visited Malaya that year, "we live in a foreign country, hundreds of miles away from our motherland, among different races, with different culture and slowly but surely we lose our moral training." They echoed, directly, the language of Indian reformers who lamented the "demoralization" of Indian labor overseas. Turning to a critique of the motivations of Indians who, like themselves, voyaged overseas to work, Andrews's correspondents lamented that "we live for money, money and money alone." The writers asked their "countrymen" in India "not that they should help us materially, but morally." They asked for "the frequent visits to this country of some of our eminent countrymen of Congress fame."

Reinforcing the concern of Indian reformers and nationalists that the condition of Indian labor overseas reflected on the dignity of India in the world, the Tamil railway workers wrote that their greatest shame lay in the fact that "not only to Europeans but to the Chinese, Malays, Eurasians and to a certain section of Ceylon

[49] Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, 82.

[50] The Tamils Reform Association was established in 1932 by G. Sarangapany. Commercial associations included the Nattukottai Chettiar Chamber of Commerce, the Penang Indian Muslim Chamber of Commerce, and Singapore's Indian Chamber of Commerce. An example of a local association is the Kadayanallur Muslim Association, established for Tamil Muslim migrants from the Tirunelveli town of Kadayanallur; on the latter, see A. Nā. Meytīn (A. N. Maideen), *Neñcil Patinta Ninaivuc Cuvaṭukaḷ* (Singapore, 1989).

[51] NAI, Department of Education, Health and Lands: Overseas Branch [hereafter EHL: Overseas], Proceedings 95–98 (B), September 1925, from Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya to Deputy Secretary, Government of India, August 12, 1925.

Tamils, Indians (especially the Indian Tamils) are nothing but a nation of coolies."[52] The writers' concern illustrates, among other things, how powerfully the racial categories of the colonial census—"Tamil"—now grouped together urban elites and rural plantation workers, Muslims and Hindus, high caste and low caste, in a single representative category.[53] This heightened the competitive quest to speak for this now singular community of residents of Malaya.

By the end of the 1920s, the Tamil-language press in Singapore, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur was beginning to expand its reach; the press became an arena for intensive debate on the nature and the boundaries of the Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia, and for competing claims to leadership over the community. Two newspapers in particular emerged to dominate the Tamil public sphere by 1930: *Tamil Nēcan* was strongly influenced by the politics of Indian nationalism, and was edited by the Tamil Brahmin Narasimha Iyengar, who had arrived in Kuala Lumpur from Tiruchirapalli, after a sojourn in Rangoon.[54] *Munnērram* ("Progress"), its main rival, was edited by G. Sarangapany, and projected a more strongly "Dravidian" message, drawing deeply on the ideas of "Periyar" E. V. Ramasamy and his radical Self-Respect Movement in Madras, which focused on caste and social reform. Ramasamy's visit to Malay in 1929 was a catalyst for the development of a consciously reformist Tamil press under Sarangapany's leadership. Whereas in the nineteenth century, Tamil Muslims on the boundary between the Tamil diaspora and the local Malay world had dominated the press, by the 1920s, Brahmin and elite non-Brahmin Tamils contended for leadership.[55] A new consciousness of the Tamil diaspora, with sharper internal and external boundaries, emerged from the pages of the Tamil newspapers of the 1930s, but a strong sense of ambiguity prevailed, as diasporic consciousness appeared to be torn between the many worlds of its imagination.[56]

The first of the "worlds" evoked in the Tamil press of urban Malaya and Singapore was the world of Indian politics. Almost every issue of every Tamil newspaper printed in Singapore, Penang, or Kuala Lumpur in the 1930s published news and, later, photographs of Gandhi: his travels, his speeches, his actions, and his negotiations. The Penang-based Tamil Muslim newspaper *Dēca Nēcan* matched extensive coverage of Gandhi with news of the All-India Muslim League.[57] National politics combined with wide coverage of Tamil regional politics, in the pages of *Munnērram* in particular: the meetings of the Self-Respect Movement in Madras; the latest writ-

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[52] Ibid., Proceeding 1 (B), September 1924, from T. V. Thillainayagam, K. Mahalingam, and R. Aiyavoo to "C.F. Andrews of India," July 25, 1924.

[53] See Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 552–582.

[54] Rajeswary Ampalavanar, "Tamil Journalism and the Indian Community in Malaya, 1920–1941," *Journal of Tamil Studies* 2, no. 2 (1970): 41–58.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Benedict Anderson's analysis of the role of the daily newspaper in forging national consciousness—the sense of simultaneity and "mass ceremony" that it invoked within an imagined yet "inherently limited" community—remains a touchstone for any discussion of the colonial public sphere and its effects on the imagination of diasporic communities. Yet in the mobile waters of Southeast Asia, Anderson's assumption that the only (or even the most important) "imagined community" was the national one seems misplaced: the Tamil press in urban Southeast Asia in the 1930s spoke of, and spoke to, many worlds—many "imagined communities"—at once. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London, 1991).

[57] "Akila Intiya Muslim Līk," *Dēca Nēcan*, April 16, 1933.

ings and speeches of Ramasamy; even—much more locally—the proceedings of the Thanjavur municipal council.

At the same time, however, the newspapers distinctly evoked the world of "Indians overseas." In writing of the condition of Indians in South Africa, Fiji, Ceylon, and Burma, the editors created a sense that Tamils in the Straits Settlements and Malaya formed part of a broader dispersion of Indian peoples overseas, who shared similar problems and struggled together for equal status and recognition in their lands of residence. The condition of Indians in South Africa attracted regular comment.[58] More immediately, and closer to home, the "loot and murder" faced by Indians in Burma, in the aftermath of urban riots and rural rebellion, evoked a sense of fear and threat.[59] A feature on the Indian diaspora in Fiji painted a picture of the community with a flurry of statistics: the 76,722 Indians there owned 110,000 acres of land, 776 shops, 196 motorized lorries, 6 music halls, 1 temple, and 2 newspapers.[60] The features on Indians around the world indicated the extent to which the Indian nationalist category of "Indians overseas"—a product of the debates of the 1900s and 1910s—had taken root. But the language of the newspapers also conveyed a sense of the diversity of this diaspora; the terms "Indians overseas," "South Indian workers," "South Indian coolies," "Tamils," the "Tamil world," and "Indians in the empire" all appeared frequently, each evoking a community with subtly different boundaries.

Finally, the newspapers wrote of the local world: of Singapore and Penang, the towns and plantations of the Malay Peninsula. Implicitly and explicitly, the Tamil press coverage of local stories highlighted the vast gap between the city and the country, between urban Tamils and the plantation workers. In the context of a severe economic depression that left tens of thousands of Tamil rubber tappers out of work, many of whom were repatriated to India, the 1930s saw a renewed interest on the part of the urban elite in the conditions of Tamil labor on the plantations.[61] Regular and detailed features ran on estate workers' wages, on their "moral" condition—the "drink evil" loomed large—and on the future of Tamil migration to Malaya, which both the Indian and the Malayan governments sought to restrict and regulate after 1930.[62] This moralistic coverage of plantation life contrasted with the detailed, even parochial, stories on urban Tamil society: the conventions and meetings of clubs and societies; the proceedings of the municipal council and of local sanitary boards; court cases; shipping timetables; advertisements for potions and balms, clothing and ci-

[58] See, for example, "Teṉṉāppirikka Intiyar," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, August 13, 1932; "Teṉṉāppirikka Intiyarkaḷ," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, October 15, 1932; "Teṉṉāppirikka Intiyarkaḷiṉ Kavalaikkiṭamāṉa Nilaimai," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, November 23, 1932.

[59] "Parmā," *Muṉṉēṟṟam*, June 25, 1931; "Parmāvil Aṭāta Koḷḷaiyum, Kolaiyum," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, April 20, 1932.

[60] "Pīji Intiyarkaḷ Nilaimai," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, September 10, 1932.

[61] For a more detailed discussion of the political effects of the depression, see Amrith, "Indians Overseas?"

[62] "Intiya Kavarmeṉt Ējeṉtiṉ Varutāntara Yatastu," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, January 2, 1932; "1930-vil Maleya Nāṭṭil Intiya Kūlikaḷiṉ Nilaimai," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, January 2, 1932; "Kaṭaṉ Koṭuttu Vāṅkum Toḷilaik Kaṭṭupaṭutta Cipārcukaḷ," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, April 9, 1932; "Toṭṭai Kaḷḷu Kaṭaikaḷ," *Tamil Nēcaṉ*, May 3, 1932; "Rappar ūrpatti Kaṭṭuppāṭu," *Dēca Nēcaṉ*, October 1, 1933; "Malēyāvukku Toḷilāḷarkaḷ," *Dēca Nēcaṉ*, July 8, 1933.

gars, Parlophone records and the latest Tamil novels.[63] The progress of urban sanitation filled many column inches.[64]

In many ways, however, it was on its boundaries that this emerging sense of Tamil diasporic consciousness was sharpest—that is to say, at the point where the Tamil diaspora encountered others. The diaspora's self-appointed spokesmen confronted an increasingly strident strand of Malay nationalism that, by the 1930s, excoriated both Tamil and Chinese diasporas in the public sphere, arguing that they were no more than foreigners without rights in a Malay land. Early in 1932, the Malay newspaper *Majlis* mounted an attack on "foreigners" in an editorial with far-reaching implications. The government should inform Indian and Chinese migrants to Malaya, the paper declared, "that the 'protection' of the Malays isn't like the protection of the deer in the forest by the game warden, who sees to it that the deer isn't killed by hunters but allows it to be preyed upon by other enemies such as the tiger and other carnivorous animals living in the same forest."[65] The editors of *Tamiḻ Nēcan* responded immediately, and in the process they defined more sharply the boundaries of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya.[66]

The editors of *Tamiḻ Nēcan* berated *Majlis* for its "childish" editorial, which they characterized as a rallying cry for the notion of "Malaya for the Malays." The present bitterness they contrasted with a history of "friendship and brotherhood" between Malays and others in the land. It was "surprising," however, that "Indians and Chinese who were born in Malaya" were suddenly "considered as foreigners." *Tamiḻ Nēcan* reminded its readers that it was migrants from South India and China who had "struggled to clear the forest . . . attacked by tigers and bitten by mosquitoes"; they had worked the tin mines and the rubber estates; they were overwhelmingly responsible for Malaya's prosperity and development. Of particular concern to *Majlis* was the fact that Tamils and Chinese in Malaya maintained diasporic connections with their lands of origin or ancestry. The editors of *Tamiḻ Nēcan* expressed dismay that *Majlis* impugned such "great personages" as Gandhi and Sun Yatsen in condemning the destabilizing effects of foreign political ideas on Malaya. *Majlis* appeared to think that "people can be blind and deaf to the world around them," the Tamil editors argued; yet they asked whether one could really "sit idly and ignore" the world. It was precisely the many "worlds around them," of course, that the Tamil press in Malaya had woven together in print for its readership. Indians and Chinese could never develop "love for the country" (*dēca paktī/bhakti*), the article concluded, "if they have no life in the country of their birth." For those born in Malaya, there was "no law in God's court" to discriminate between Malays and others.[67] The con-

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[63] A more or less representative selection of articles: "Piṉaṅku Marutuvarkaḷ Potukkūṭṭam," *Tamiḻ Nēcan*, January 27, 1932; "Piṉaṅku Tamiḻ Ilaiñar Ārampa Makānaṭu," *Tamiḻ Nēcan*, February 3, 1932; "Cilaṅkūr Intiya Varttakar Caṅkam Kōlālumpūr," *Tamiḻ Nēcan*, March 23, 1932; "Māriyammaṉ Kōvil Kēs Mudivu," *Tamiḻ Nēcan*, November 12, 1932; "Kōla Kaṅkcār Tamiḻ Cīrtirutta Caṅkam," *Dēca Nēcan*, October 1, 1933.

[64] "Ciṅkappūril putiya nīcal kuḷam," *Munnērram*, January 15, 1931.

[65] Cited in William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), 171.

[66] The rapidity of *Tamiḻ Nēcan*'s response suggests, among other things, that vernacular newspapers in different languages shared certain terms of reference by the early 1930s. It is likely that many Tamil journalists in Singapore or Penang in the 1930s would have been fluent in Malay; at the same time, the English-language press played a bridging role in the public sphere, often summarizing articles from the Chinese, Malay, and Tamil newspapers.

[67] "Malay Nāṭṭil Rājiya Urimaikaḷ," *Tamiḻ Nēcan*, April 20, 1932.

flict over the entitlements to citizenship in Malaya—diasporic as opposed to indigenous claims—posed stark choices for those caught between the two. Thus Tamil Muslims, and particularly those (the *jawi peranakan*) who had intermarried with Malay families over generations, found themselves targeted by Malay nationalists—deemed not to be *betul Melayu*, or "truly Malay"—while sitting outside the bounds of the Tamil diaspora as it now emerged.[68]

The defense of the rights of Tamil residents in Malaya against the demands of indigenous nationalism soon transmuted into a broader, more assertive argument in favor of a specifically diasporic claim to citizenship. These arguments emanated primarily from Tamil commentators writing in English, often with an eye on parallel lines of argument coming from Anglophone Chinese leaders in Singapore and Penang.[69] At the heart of the argument was the proposition that Malaya's entire history had been shaped by migration, and that entitlements to citizenship had to be founded upon that basis; before the great migrations from India and China, there was no *civitas*, only jungle. "Let us try to understand," one Tamil journalist wrote in 1935, "that not long ago Malaya was nothing but a jungle land with only some scattered fishing villages, there was no civilization, culture or tradition."[70] In search of a historical narrative to support their claims, a number of Tamil writers in Malaya began to invoke the notion of "Greater India," the idea that Malaya and most of Southeast Asia was deeply shaped by Indian cultural influence (even Indian "colonization") in order to argue that "Indians are not foreigners in this part of the world, and . . . their traditions are not alien to this land."[71] Conversely, Tamil writers began to challenge the Malay claim to indigeneity, arguing that "the correct meaning of the term 'Malay'" is "an immigrant from Java or Sumatra belonging to the race called Malay."[72]

Central to the case that urban Tamils made for their entitlement to the rights of citizenship in Malaya was their argument by the early 1930s that fresh immigration from India to Malaya should be controlled, if not prevented altogether. In the aftermath of the economic depression that devastated the rubber industry after 1930, many Tamil leaders in Malaya argued that the number of fresh arrivals from India should be curtailed.[73] But the argument for such limits also shaped a growing distinction between the "local-born" (that is to say, Straits- or Malaya-born) and "foreign" (India-born) Tamils in Malaya. In the words of the Singapore-based Tamil Brahmin journalist R. B. Krishnan, there was a difference in "attitude and mental ability" between local-born Tamils and "their India-born brothers." "Their native country is Malaya," he wrote of the local-born, "and their interests, life and associations are entirely Malayan and local." The "Malayan Indian," he insisted, "has a

[68] Fujimoto, *The South Indian Muslim Community.*

[69] For an illuminating account of the Anglophone "domiciled" community in Singapore, see Chua Ai Lin, "Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life: Anglophone Asians in Colonial Singapore, 1920–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2008).

[70] "Indian Land Settlement in Malaya," *Indo-Malayan Review* 1, no. 2 (February 1934).

[71] R. B. Krishnan, *Indians in Malaya: A Pageant of Greater India* (Singapore, 1936), 1. For a broad discussion of the "Greater India" idea and its relationship to colonial orientalist and ethnographic scholarship, see Susan Bayly, "Imagining 'Greater India': French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 703–744.

[72] "Indian Land Settlement in Malaya."

[73] NAI, EHL: Overseas, 1932, File no. 206-2/32—L.&O., Confidential Letter from the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya, April 3, 1933; Confidential Letter from Agent, Malaya, KL, November 17, 1933.

better and more tolerant outlook than his compatriot born in India. For example, he is ignorant of, or if not ignorant he contemptuously disregards, the silly notions of caste and creed held across the Bay."[74]

In a letter to the editor of the *Straits Times*, the newspaper of Singapore's European elite, a Singapore-based Tamil writer made a strong case for Tamils in Malaya to rethink their connections with the other side of the Bay of Bengal.

So long as he considers himself to be a sojourner here, and allows only his carcass to move about here allowing his soul to cross the Indian waters and wait there anxiously for that blessed day when he can return, so long will he be looked upon with some suspicion and consequently never expect the status of a native or a domiciled citizen in this country.

Members of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya, he argued, "must boldly choose one of the two alternatives—and consequently stand for the chances a sojourner might get, or be a full-fledged citizen."[75] This was in practice an exceedingly difficult and painful choice for many to make.

THE BAY OF BENGAL CHANGED FUNDAMENTALLY as a regional arena during the 1930s. The global economic depression began to tear at the interconnected regional economy that had developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, involving flows of people, goods, and capital throughout the arc of coasts around the Bay of Bengal.[76] For the first time since the nineteenth century, an equal or greater number of people were returning to India from Malaya and Burma compared with the number of arrivals.[77] The Aliens Ordinance of 1930 introduced immigration controls in Malaya, aiming initially to restrict Chinese migration.[78] Some Indian government officials agreed with the Tamil writers in Singapore who were arguing that migration from India, too, ought to be controlled, if not stopped altogether.

In 1938, the government of India's Committee on Emigration, having failed to achieve its goal of improving the wages of Tamil migrant workers on Malaya's rubber estates, acted to ban state-assisted migration from India to Malaya altogether.[79] Without overstating the case, since migration between the two coasts of the Bay of Bengal resumed on a very large scale after 1933 and even continued after the ban in 1938, it is clear that freedom of movement across the sea had narrowed signif-

[74] Krishnan, *Indians in Malaya*, 27. John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan show that in the same period, prejudices also worked in the other direction: within India, nationalist discourse by the 1930s stigmatized "colonial-born" Indians, and deemed them to lie outside the bounds of the Indian nation in the making. Kelly and Kaplan, "Diaspora and Swaraj, Swaraj and Diaspora," in Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (New Delhi, 2007).

[75] "Indians in Malaya," *The Straits Times*, June 1, 1934. The correspondent signed off as "Forward," suggesting (as does the tone of the letter) that it may have been G. Sarangapany, editor of *Muṉṉēṟṟam* and *Tamiḻ Muracu*.

[76] Christopher Baker, "Economic Reorganization and the Slump in Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 3 (1981): 325–349.

[77] IOR, V/24/1196–1197, from Government of Madras, *Emigration and Immigration Reports*, 1930–1938.

[78] TNA, PRO, CO 273/566/2, Unemployment in Malaya: Restriction of Chinese Immigration (1930).

[79] NAI, EHL: Overseas, 1938, File no. 44/38—L.&O., Minutes of the Standing Emigration Committee, February 13, 1939.

icantly by the end of the decade.[80] During the 1930s, however, significant numbers of women began to migrate to the port cities of the Straits Settlements for the first time, leading to the establishment of settled families. This applied more to Chinese than to Tamil communities; the gender ratio within Singapore's Tamil communities, for instance, remained at fewer than 400 women for every 1,000 men at the end of the decade.[81] Nevertheless, the 1930s did see the arrival of more Tamil women in Singapore and Malaya, lending a more settled character to the population.[82]

As transnational connections between South India and Southeast Asia attenuated, with the establishment of permanent families in Singapore and Malaya and the increasing restriction on migration, the connections across the Bay of Bengal resided increasingly in the imagination. Forms of diasporic religious expression had now to be contained within a public doctrine of toleration, in a public arena in which diasporic elites competed for mutual respect and recognition. Diasporic elites built on the norms governing appropriate ways of sharing public space, of expressing emotions, and of governing intra-community relations that originated in the nineteenth century. Any religious practices, and any strong expressions of public emotion that violated these norms, threatened to bring shame upon the community.

Lamenting that "migration" had not brought about "religious toleration," a Malayan Indian journal wrote of the "ugly scene enacted by a section of Penang's caste Hindus last month on the occasion of the opening of a new temple there," protesting the opening of the temple to *dalits*. "Thanks to the prompt intervention of the police," the journal reported, "the situation was quickly brought under control," but it warned that these "unhealthy religious feuds," if they were to persist, would "only make us the laughing stock of our sister communities in this land."[83] Only if the elements of diasporic consciousness were brought in line with the public doctrine of secularism, it seemed, could diaspora become the basis for a new kind of citizenship. The more radical of the Tamil reformers wrote in favor not only of intercaste marriage—a common theme of the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu—but of interethnic marriage, as a way of breaking down the boundaries of race in Singapore.[84]

To the extent that plantation workers and working-class urban Tamils were unable to partake of this new form of public disposition and comportment, the elites suggested, they would stand outside the bounds of citizenship. Yet working-class Tamils continued to assert their "right to the city" in diverse ways, not least by con-

[80] The emigration ban did not apply to those who could show that they had worked in Malaya previously, and in practice the documentary proof needed was very limited; given the circular nature of migration throughout the 1920s and 1930s, many Tamil workers were able to return after 1938 for a second (or third, or fourth) sojourn in Malaya.

[81] C. A. Vlieland, *British Malaya: A Report on the 1931 Census* (London, 1931); M. V. del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population* (Kuala Lumpur, 1947).

[82] NAS, Oral History Department [hereafter OHD], A001211/20, A. Nagore MAIDEEN, interviewed by Rajendran Supramaniam, October 8, 1990. Maideen, a Tamil Muslim from Kadayanallur, went "home" to marry in the 1920s, and returned to Singapore with his wife; married women accompanying their husbands back to Singapore constituted perhaps the most common pattern of female migration to Singapore in the 1930s.

[83] "The Indian Agency," *Indo-Malayan Review: Journal of the Kinta Indian Association, Ipoh* 1, no. 4 (July 1933): 5–6.

[84] These arguments were expressed in assorted articles in Sarangapany's English-language periodical *Reform*, July–September 1936. Incidentally, Sarangapany practiced what he preached; he married Lim Boon Neo, a Straits Chinese woman.

FIGURE 6: Postcard featuring *thaipusam* festivities in Singapore, ca. 1927. Image reproduced courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

tinuing, even intensifying, their acts of public devotion.[85] *Thaipusam* and the fire-walking penance of *thimithi* continued to flourish despite the efforts of the reformists, who would "stand on the street corner and shout anti-religious slogans."[86] L. Elizabeth Lewis, an American writer for *National Geographic Magazine*, visited Singapore in the early 1930s to witness the performance of the *thimithi* and *thaipusam* rites, and found that they were performed with an immense power of belief and devotion. Observed by "thronged" crowds of "Hindus, Chinese, Malays and others," the *thimithi* ceremonies involved acts of willed pain and endurance. "The priests would sometimes strike the devotee several times," Lewis observed, "and then give the wrist a stinging blow before releasing him" to "dash, bare-footed, across the red-hot coals into the pool of milk." Observing *thaipusam* the same year, Lewis wrote that "faith in the efficacy of these ceremonies is absolute." She described a "martyr" being prepared for his three-mile "pilgrimage" to the Tank Road Temple by "thrusting pins into his flesh. His chest, his back, his forehead and his thighs were entirely covered with small, shining, V-shaped pins."[87] Similar processions took place in Penang and, perhaps most dramatically of all, in Kuala Lumpur, where they culminated in the Batu Caves (as they do to this day).[88]

[85] The "right to the city" is from Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1968).

[86] NAS, OHD, A000081/28, Kanusamy, interviewed by Yeo Geok Lee, October 25, 1983.

[87] L. Elizabeth Lewis, "The Fire-Walking Hindus of Singapore," *National Geographic Magazine* 59, no. 4 (April 1931): 513–522.

[88] "Piṇaṅku Taippūca Makortcavam," *Tamiḻ Nēcan*, January 30, 1932; personal interviews in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Singapore, March–September 2007, March–April 2008. On the performance of *thaipusam* in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia, see Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2006), and Elizabeth Collins, *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus* (DeKalb, Ill., 1997).

Lewis's horrified fascination with the rites was matched by that of the Tamil elite, who continued to rail against *thaipusam* with a mixture of exhortation and biting satire. Yet the act of claiming the public streets for the festival once each year established the power of a very different kind of diasporic consciousness from that projected in the newspaper columns by the literati; it linked the city with the plantation hinterland as hundreds or thousands of plantation workers spilled into the towns for the ceremonies; and it linked the South Indian landscape with the urban streets of Malaya in a way that the elites could not. Conservative Chettiar merchants, patrons of the Tank Road Temple in Singapore, stood against the reformists and intensified their sponsorship of these popular festivals in their own quest for leadership over the Tamil community of Singapore.[89] Interestingly, the flourishing of Tamil popular religiosity also created new kinds of connection between different diasporic imaginations. At some point in the 1930s—it is difficult to date precisely—a small but growing number of Chinese devotees began to participate in *thaipusam*, making their own meanings of the rite, and interpreting it in terms of their own cosmologies.[90]

At the same time, the very conditions of urban life challenged boundaries of ethnicity and diasporic community, while creating other kinds of connection.[91] The sources that speak to us of the conditions of everyday life in Singapore—oral histories; the records of the coroner's court, which reveal so much of the incidental detail of daily life—paint a picture of the ethnically and culturally mixed crowds that would engage in easy conversation, in many languages, in Singapore's coffee shops, where men ate among strangers and forged friendships.[92] Tamils spoke to Chinese in Malay or even in Hokkien.[93] Communities lived cheek by jowl; at a house on 27-1 Sambau Street, to take just one instance, a Tamil couple, two single Chinese women, and two "Malabari" men from Kerala occupied the five rooms.[94] On the docks of Singapore and Penang, Tamils worked alongside "Malays, Bengalis and Chinese."[95] The sad cases of violent deaths following disputes over debts also suggest that the webs of indebtedness that bound the urban poor almost invariably transcended particular communities.[96]

Even the boundaries of kinship were permeable; the economic distress occa-

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[89] NAS, OHD, A000081/28, Kanusamy, interviewed by Yeo Geok Lee, October 25, 1983; Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries.*

[90] Personal interviews in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, March–September 2007, March–April 2008, November 2008.

[91] Joel S. Kahn's brilliant work on cosmopolitanism in the Malay world makes this point convincingly. See Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore, 2006).

[92] James Warren pioneered the use of coroners' records to write Singapore's social history in *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore* (Oxford, 1988). NAS, OHD, A00193/12, Narayanasamy Ramasamy (Retired Mason), interviewed by Rajendran Supramaniam on May 28, 1990.

[93] Information on the languages of coffee shop conversation drawn from personal interviews in Singapore, Penang, and Kedah, March–September 2007, March–April 2008.

[94] NAS, Subordinate Courts, Coroner's Court: Coroner's Inquests and Enquiries, S/No. 20, January–March 1933. This was a murder case involving a Tamil couple; the National Archives of Singapore's rules on disclosure do not permit me to use the actual names of the individuals involved in cases dating from 1933 onward.

[95] Ibid., S/No. 13, April–June 1937, case of "male adult Malabari, aged 40" who "cut throat whilst of unsound mind."

[96] Ibid., S/No. 7, January–March 1927, case of Veeraiyah, "18-year old Tamil."

sioned by the depression of the 1930s led to many adoptions, including the adoption of Chinese children by Tamil and Javanese families.[97] It should not surprise us that love could prevail over the pull of both ethnicity and kinship. One particularly tragic case that emerged from the coroner's archive involved a Tamil man, a clerk in the Public Works Department, who committed suicide after his lover, an actress and dancer from Sumatra, ran off to join a touring dance troupe. He had hoped to abandon his family, who lived on a rubber plantation in Klang, to marry her. He instructed his closest friend, a Chinese man, to "write to her in Romanized Malay [about] what happened to me"; his own suicide note was written in English.[98] At the horse races, in public coffee shops—many of them, indeed, owned by Tamil Muslims, as they are to this day—and at Anson Road Football Stadium, subaltern migrants of many origins, members of many diasporas, asserted their right to the city.[99]

All of this is to suggest that particular diasporic visions were always limited and contingent. At their boundaries, diasporas constantly encountered other diasporas in the port cities of Southeast Asia. Life was lived in many languages. If language is at the heart of diasporic consciousness, then the polyglot experience of everyday life in the Straits Settlements indicates how malleable that consciousness may have been. There were probably few cities in the world where cinema houses screened films in as many languages, back to back, as Singapore.[100] One of the most evocative descriptions of this urban world of many diasporas in contact comes from the only great Tamil novel about the Southeast Asian experience of the first half of the twentieth century, P. Singaram's *Puyalilē Oru Tōṇi* (*A Boat in a Storm*). Although the setting for Singaram's novel was the Sumatran town of Medan, he could have been writing about any of Southeast Asia's port cities, especially Penang, where he lived during the Second World War. Singaram writes that in the crowd of Mosque Street in Medan, many melodies (*rākaṅkal*) and many tongues melded—above the dulcet tones of Malay were the sharp staccato sounds of Chinese, here filtered through the ears of a Tamil speaker.[101]

This seems a world away from J. S. Furnivall's memorable, and still influential, description of life in Southeast Asia's port cities.[102] "The first thing that strikes the visitor," he wrote, "is the medley of peoples—European, Chinese, Indian and native." But, Furnivall pointed out, "it is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace,

[97] Ibid., S/No. 20, January–March 1933, case of murdered "Hailam woman"; S/Nos. 21–22, July–September, October–December 1933, death of "Javanese woman murdered by person or persons unknown."

[98] Ibid., S/No. 12, January–March 1937, suicide of "male Tamil clerk, Public Works Department."

[99] NAS, OHD, A001211/20, A. Nagore MAIDEEN, interviewed by Rajendran Supramaniam, October 8, 1990.

[100] The first Tamil "talkie" to play in Singapore, *Kalidas*, had a soundtrack partly in Telugu; the earliest Malay films were made by producers and directors from Madras and Bombay. For a brilliant account of Singapore's urban modernity in the interwar years, see Chua, "Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life."

[101] P. Singaram, *Puyalilē Oru Tōṇi*, 2nd ed. (Chennai, 2005), 18–19.

[102] For example, Carl Trocki's recent history of Singapore follows Furnivall's account closely in its discussion of ethnicity and community relations: Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (London, 2006).

in buying and selling."[103] They "met," too, in the coffee shops and the football stadiums, and their transactions in the marketplace involved exchanges and translations not only of monetary value. There was space between each group's "religion," "culture," and "language" for the interaction of many diasporic imaginations. Yet if we apply Furnivall's description not to urban life but to the Bay of Bengal region as a whole, or even to other port cities such as Rangoon (the city Furnivall knew best), much more divided by race and scarred by the experience of interethnic violence, it retains force as a depiction of the segmentation and immobility that seemed more rigid by the 1930s.[104] The divide between the cities and the hinterlands grew sharper, and shaped the access that different groups had to different forms of moral and political community.

The Second World War and its aftermath completed the transformation of the world of the Bay of Bengal. Despite the resurgent, militarized connections between India and Malaya envisaged by the newly mobilized generation of Tamil workers in Malaya who took up arms with Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army to fight alongside the Japanese for India's freedom, the war interrupted and disrupted a whole series of connections between India and Southeast Asia, some of them permanently.[105] Tamil migration to Malaya ceased during the war, and never reached anything like the levels of the 1920s, and the intensity of circulation, too, lessened. The nature of the connections between India and Southeast Asia changed completely, as the era of national frontiers, passport controls, and immigration restriction established itself once and for all after 1945.

THERE WERE MANY, OVERLAPPING COMMUNITIES that circulated between South India and Southeast Asia during the century or so under consideration. Writing of "Tamils in Southeast Asia," we may be writing about Tamil Muslim merchants, boatmen, and food vendors; caste-Hindu moneylenders and traders; Brahmin administrators and writers; or lower-caste or *dalit* plantation workers. Over time, sections of these South Indian communities in the Straits Settlements came to share elements of a common diasporic consciousness, with shifting internal and external boundaries. Those boundaries were shaped by the constant interaction of Tamils and "others"—Malays, Chinese, and Europeans—across the Bay of Bengal.

The broader comparative relevance of this account of the Tamil diaspora may lie in its proposal of a more contingent, contextual model of diasporic formation—one that locates diasporic communities within a broader spectrum of transnational communities, each a product of the shifting currents of oceanic and urban history. Such a model may be used as a heuristic device, alongside others. It affords points of comparison as well as contrast with the "Chinese" model of diaspora, which em-

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[103] J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge, 1948), 304.

[104] On the anti-Indian violence in Rangoon (and also in rural Burma) during the 1930s, the most important work remains Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852–1941* (Madison, Wis., 1974). The experience of cultural pluralism in Rangoon as contrasted with Singapore or Penang would merit further examination.

[105] Many volumes have been written about the impact of the Second World War on Southeast Asia. For a masterful narrative history, see Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–45* (London, 2004). On the Indian National Army, see Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*.

phasizes the importance of institutions—clan associations, brotherhoods (*kongsis*), charitable societies—to the development of diasporic networks; or the "Hadrami" consciousness of living in diaspora that, in Engseng Ho's brilliant account, is centrally structured by genealogical representations of long-distance kinship.[106]

In comparison with the experience of other Indian (or South Asian) diasporas around the world, there were at least two features of the mobility of Tamils across the Bay of Bengal that are distinctive. The first is the intensity and scope of circulation: the circulation of goods, things, people, and texts from coast to coast. At least until the 1920s, velocity of circulation—so different from the experiences of Indian migrant communities in the plantation colonies of the Indian and North Atlantic oceans—lent fluid boundaries to the Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia, as new social groups and new ideas infused the diaspora and shifted its limits.[107] When, by the 1930s, circulation across the Bay of Bengal was limited, the boundaries of the Tamil diasporic community became firmer, and it came to resemble more closely other Indian diasporic communities, with a more fixed sense of its identity, a greater emphasis on cultural purity, and a more intense experience of nostalgia.

The second distinctive feature of the history of Tamil experience in the Malay Peninsula lies in the character of the port cities of Penang and Singapore. Both cities were more open, more cosmopolitan, with a greater mixture of peoples and languages, than almost any other land to which South Asians moved.[108] Crucially, South Indian migrants and sojourners had already shaped the public culture of both port cities long before the advent of mass migration to the plantations of the hinterland. It was because of the presence of multiple, interlocking diasporic public spheres, at the elite end of the spectrum, and a vibrant, multiethnic popular culture in the plebeian world, that the Tamil diaspora in the Straits Settlements was shaped—perhaps to an unusual extent—by interaction with "others." Yet this openness reached only so far. The ambivalent place of the mass of Tamil plantation labor within the political imagination of the Tamil diaspora in urban Southeast Asia proved a constant limitation on the reach of Tamil diasporic consciousness in the interwar years.

Viewed more broadly, some of the conditions that produced a sharper sense of Tamil diasporic consciousness in the 1930s were global ones, and they reshaped what it meant to belong to a diaspora right across the Indian Ocean world and beyond: the rise of controls over mobility, entry, and exit; a sharper differentiation between insiders and outsiders in governing residence and employment; the rise of nationalisms that emphasized indigeneity as the basis for political rights and representation; the entrenchment of global labor markets that functioned through ethnic dif-

[106] Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006); McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas"; Philip Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Singapore, 2008); Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); Maurice Freedman, "Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (1960): 25–48.

[107] There is a sharp contrast between the openness to cultural mixture of the Tamil reformers in Singapore and Penang and the Hindu revivalism that was found among the Indian diaspora in, for instance, Fiji, which tended to emphasize and consolidate the difference between the Hindu "self" and the foreign "other." See Kelly, *A Politics of Virtue*, and Peter van der Veer, ed., *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* (Philadelphia, 1995).

[108] Harper, "Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity." For a longer-term perspective on the cultural openness of Southeast Asian cities, see Eric Tagliacozzo, "An Urban Ocean: Notes on the Historical Evolution of Coastal Cities in Greater Southeast Asia," *Journal of Urban History* 33 (2007): 911–932.

ferentiation.[109] There is much potential, then, to write a connected as well as a comparative history of diasporas in this period, highlighting not only a convergence in the conditions and the painful choices faced by diasporas everywhere, but also the connections that emerged from the exchange of ideas about migration, citizenship, and diaspora. In the 1930s, Tamil diasporic elites in Southeast Asia deployed new frames of reference that reflected the development of a new sense of connection within and between diasporas: on the one hand, they saw themselves within the broader (nationalist) category of "Indians overseas"; on the other, they saw themselves—alongside their Chinese counterparts—as diasporic rather than "native" citizens of Malaya, but citizens all the same.

The transformations of sovereignty that swept Asia after the Second World War made both modes of identification more difficult. Ho makes the point succinctly when he writes that "the new, independent nation-states broke the diasporas straddling them into two: citizens and aliens."[110] This was precisely the situation confronting the Tamil diasporas of Southeast Asia. After 1947, the Tamil country had to find its place within the federal structure of India (eventually as the state of Tamil Nadu), which occasioned a sense of cultural loss as well as a short-lived movement for political autonomy.[111] Tamils in Malaya, at the same time, became a small minority within colonial and then independent Malaya/Malaysia; the majority of them remained poor, and outside the political negotiations that shaped the country's future.[112]

These transformations in sovereignty found reflection in the nation-based academic traditions of area studies, which have made it—to this day—difficult to imagine political and cultural regions that transcend the stark divide between, in this case, "South Asian" and "Southeast Asian" history.[113] Yet the Bay of Bengal represented an expansive space of interconnection, action, and imagination in its own right, until at least the 1930s. Restoring the Bay of Bengal as a region of analysis can remind us of why diasporic perspectives can be so illuminating in the first place—focusing on flows that cannot be contained by the borders of states, empires, or nations—even while showing us that such expansive and mobile regions produce many forms of community and consciousness that can transcend the limits of diaspora.

[109] For an important new perspective on the globalization of border controls, see Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York, 2008).

[110] Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, 305.

[111] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).

[112] Willford, *Cage of Freedom*.

[113] Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," in Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk Schulte Nordholt, eds., *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Singapore, 2005), 275–307.

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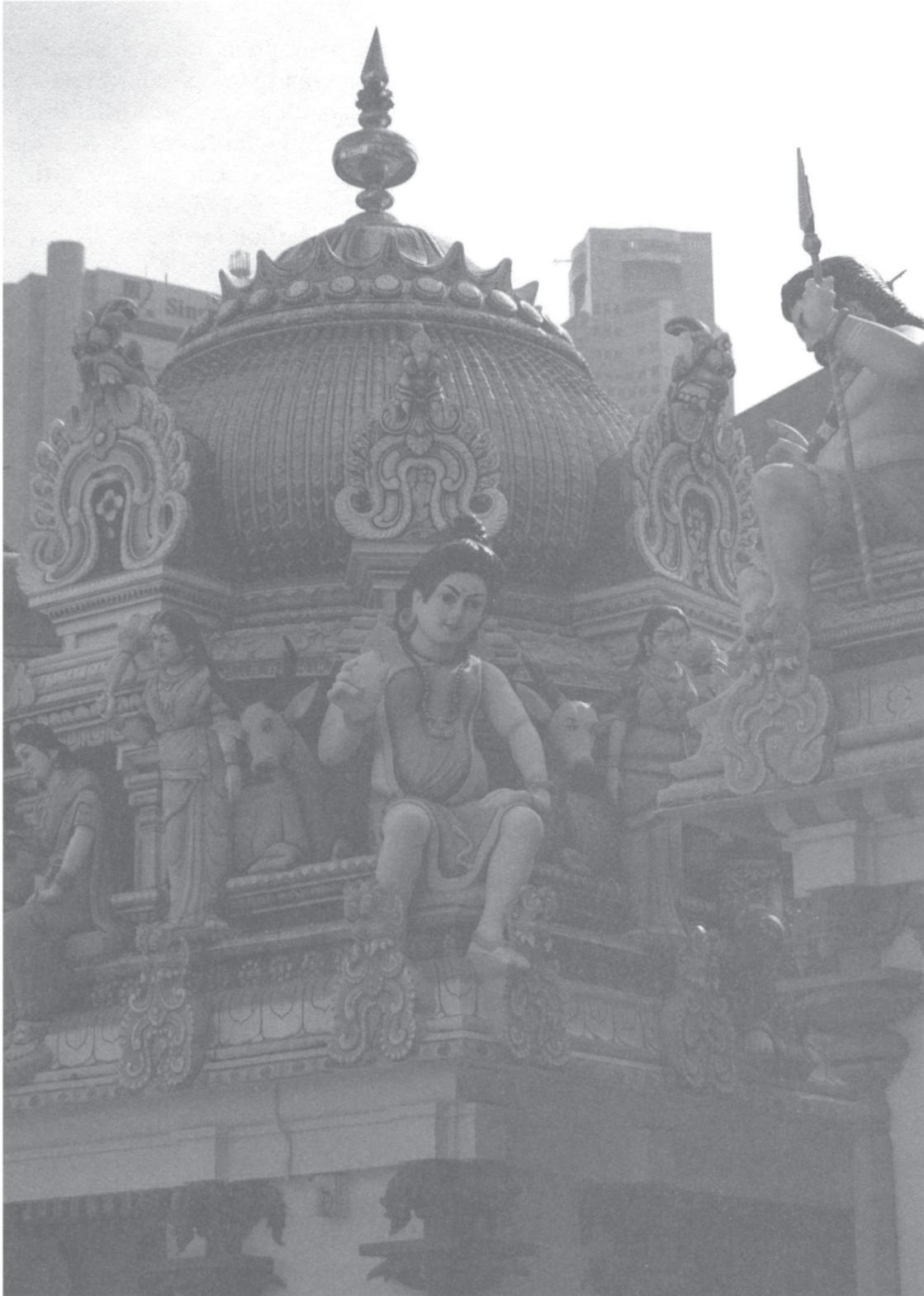
Tamil merchants in Singapore constructed the Sri Mariyamman Temple in 1827. The original structure was added to and renovated on several occasions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is pictured here with Singapore's contemporary skyline in the background. Even today, the temple's location reveals much about the culturally and religiously plural landscape of Singapore in the nineteenth century: it is adjacent to the largest Tamil Muslim mosque in Singapore—also built in the early nineteenth century—and in close proximity to several Chinese places of worship from the same era, in the area of Singapore now known, ironically, as "Chinatown." Photograph by Sunil Amrith.