

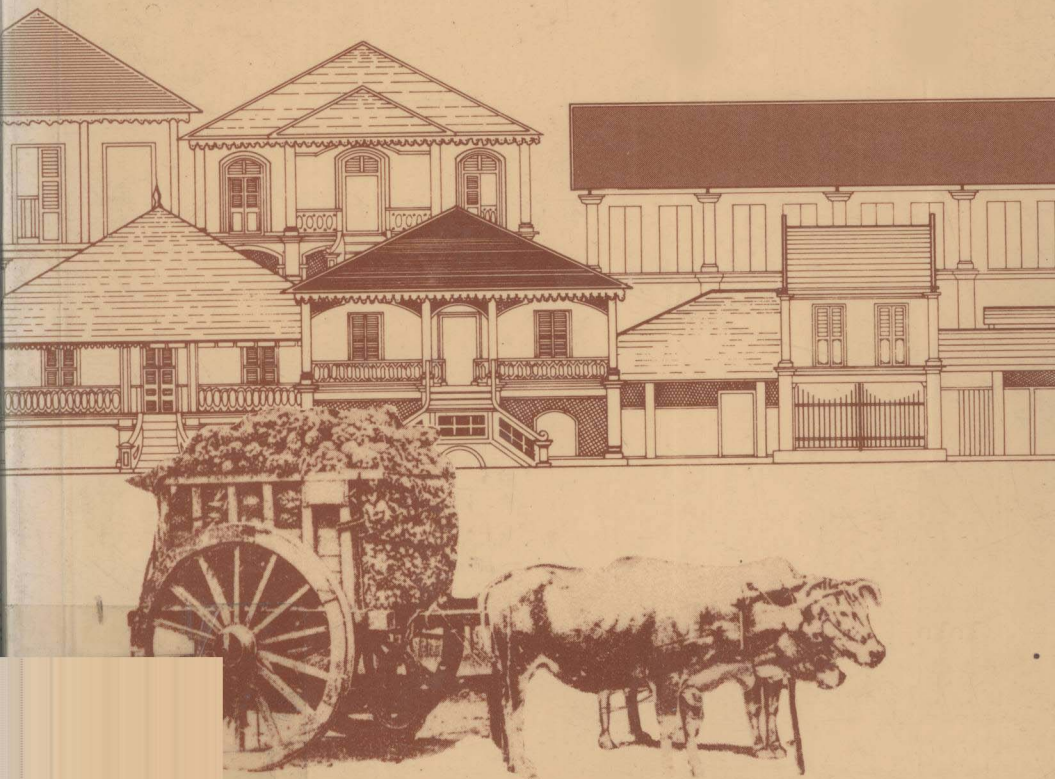
# *Singapore's Little India* *past, present, and future*

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*Sharon Siddique*  
*Hirmala Zuru Shotam*

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INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

# *Singapore's Little India* *past, present, and future*

*Sharon Siddique*  
*Nirmala Zuru Shetam*



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## *Abbreviations*

CBD	Central Business District
CCC	Citizens' Consultative Committee
CPF	Central Provident Fund
HDB	Housing and Development Board
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
POSB	Post Office Savings Bank
POSB GIRO	GIRO, a term borrowed from Western Europe and referring to a system of automatic transfer of funds, is used, in the local context, without knowledge of its abbreviated meaning. According to a POSB official, GIRO is probably a West European acronym.
RC	Residents' Committee
SBS	Singapore Bus Service
SILO	Singapore Industrial Labour Organization
URA	Urban Renewal Authority

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## *Preface*

This study is one of the first published pieces of a larger research project on “Religious Change and the Modernization Process: The Case of Singapore”, which was begun in February 1981. Funded by a grant from the Volkswagenwerk Foundation and housed at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, the project is headed by Professor Joachim Matthes of the Institute of Sociology, University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, West Germany, and Dr Sharon Siddique of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. The focus of the larger on-going research project is to assess the changes in religious orientation and conceptualization of life experiences and world-view through the collection and interpretation of self-narrated life stories. The project has been divided into two phases. Between February 1981 and December 1982, self-narrated life stories in the Indian and Eurasian communities are being collected, transcribed, and analysed. It is hoped that the project can eventually be extended to the Chinese and Malay communities.

During the course of our interviewing in the first phase we realized that we needed more information concerning the genesis and continuity of ethnic communities in Singapore. That Singapore is predicated on the principles of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious distinctions is obvious even to the casual visitor. A closer look reveals that the maintenance of this differentiation seems linked to the institutionalization of various aspects of Singapore's primary communities, that is, the Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others (CMIO). The (largely ignored) aspect

which we have chosen to focus on in this study is community space. CMIO community space can be defined as an environ wherein one of these constituent communities provides the definitive identity. This identity arises out of that community's actual physical domination of the territory which is a prerequisite for the development and maintenance of a particular, recognizable and unambiguous social-cultural and religious identity.

Anyone who cares to read the contemporary history of this city-state discovers that this particularized social fabric has a past, which is contiguous to the present national identity. Simultaneously, the rapid changes occurring in our environment are also apparent. So far this has caused much emphasis to be placed on disappearing buildings. But buildings — whatever their architectural merit — house people, and groups of buildings house not just people, but communities. The issues involved have implications for the larger Singaporean society of the future.

Why is it that the traditional areas of CMIO community identity do not, by themselves, crumble in the face of 20th century modernization and development? Alternatively, if lively and well-used traditional areas of CMIO community identity have to give way to urban renewal, what is it that we are renewing? What will be lost if the destruction of buildings dissolves traditional CMIO communities? What will be gained? Is preservation of life-styles which evolved in the 19th century appropriate or relevant for the 21st century? If the answer is yes, then to what degree might it be possible to carry forward some of its elements? We felt that focusing on one particular geographical area (Serangoon Road) would allow us to begin to assess and understand some of these larger issues. This book is a reconstruction of the past, a commentary on the present, and some speculation on the future of what has come to be known as Singapore's Little India.

How do sociologists reconcile themselves to becoming historians as well as futurologists? Our answer to this question lies in our understanding of men's perception of time itself, wherein images of the past, and of the future, can be conceived of as meaningful products of the present. Kevin Lynch, in his provocative book entitled *What Time Is This Place?*, explores the dimensions of this past-present-future time continuum:

We preserve present signals of the past or control the present to satisfy our images of the future. Our images of past and future are present images, continuously recreated. The heart of our sense of time is the sense of "Now". (Lynch 1972, p. 63)

It was this sense of “Now” that propelled us into the heart of Serangoon Road’s Little India, the territorial centre of Singapore’s Indian minority, and enticed us to follow the threads of time backward to the 19th century, and forward into the 21st century.

A historical reconstruction of Serangoon Road or, for the matter, any of the “native” areas of 19th century Singapore is very difficult. The first problem which one encounters is a lack of resource materials. Nineteenth century Singapore was conceived of as a European city, and thus there is no dearth of material describing colonial life-styles, administration, trading houses, and personalities. Popular historians such as Thomson, Buckley, Cameron, and McNair have recorded many detailed anecdotes of life in Singapore in the 19th century. But their mental maps and the characters about whom they chose to write, were for the most part those of the colonial élite. Buckley, for example, describes the subject of this study (Singapore’s Little India) as “a crowded filthy native locality”, and he mentions it only in order to illustrate his point that the European hospital and the lunatic asylum were built in a very unsavoury and unsanitary area. Thus one must turn to other sources, such as maps, building plans, memoirs, and such annual volumes as the *Singapore and Straits Settlements Directory* and the *Government Gazette*, and zero in on a Serangoon Road focus with which to reconstruct relevant 19th century developments.

For the early 20th century, it is possible to supplement such sources with the oral reminiscences of some of Little India’s senior residents and entrepreneurs. Armed with our tape-recorders, we collected about sixty oral history interviews for the present study, from October 1981 to March 1982. Excerpts from the resulting oral history transcripts have been woven into our text. The core of the book, that is, “Little India: Present”, (Chapter Four) is preceded by “Serangoon Road: Late 19th Century” and “Serangoon Road: Early 20th Century” (Chapters Two and Three respectively) and followed by “Little India: Future?” (Chapter Five). Chapter One is an introduction to the larger picture of the urbanization and community development processes in Singapore. We found it necessary to include this as our contribution to the difficult task of developing a sociological model of poly-ethnic Singaporean society. This detour into sociological theory may be heavy-going for some of our readers, and we hope that they will not be discouraged by it. We invite them, therefore, to pass through, or even over it, and on to the chapters which follow.

We would like to thank Professor Joachim Matthes, of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, who, as co-ordinator of our larger project on “Religious Change and the Modernization Process: The Case of Singapore” gave us his full support and more concretely, contributed many insightful comments which helped to shape and sharpen our research focus. We would also like to thank Professor K.S. Sandhu, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, who read a draft of the manuscript and provided us with many helpful suggestions.

We would particularly like to thank Mrs Lily Tan, Director of the Archives and Oral History Department, as well as her staff for allowing us to make full use of the building plans, maps, and photographs in the Archives collection. Thanks also go to Mrs Patricia Lim Pui Huen, ISEAS librarian, for her professional help and personal encouragement. We would also like to thank Professor Ann Wee for her initial encouragement, Mr Liu Thai-Ker for his perceptive comments on an early draft, and Ms Susila Ram Harakh, our co-worker on the Religious Change Project, who helped with some of the interviewing and archival work. We are grateful to Miss Eleanor Teo, who typed her way through the manuscript’s many drafts, Mrs Triena Ong, ISEAS editor, who not only corrected our spellings and improved our style, but who was a true friend for refusing to settle for sloppy arguments, and Miss Tan Kim Keow, who did the layout and handled the production of the book. We are also indebted to the Volkswagenwerk Foundation, which, through its larger grant, made this small study possible. Our final debt, one which we hope to repay in a small way with the publication of this book, is the most difficult to express. This debt is to the people of Serangoon Road’s Little India, who welcomed us into their shops and homes and who gave so generously of their time and thoughts. In so doing, they offered us the most important gift of all — their friendship.



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## *The Indian Community in Singapore*

### SINGAPOREAN SOCIETY

When urban sociologists seek to unravel aspects of the complex patterns of social order and structure to be found within modern metropolitan areas, they sometimes turn to one set of theoretical constructs: *Gesellschaft* (association) and *Gemeinschaft* (community). First crystallized in the works of the German sociologist, F. Tönnies, salient characteristics of these two ideal types of human interaction can be outlined as follows.

According to Tönnies, “all intimate, private and exclusive living together is understood as life in *Gemeinschaft*”.<sup>1</sup> By this he means that a community is based on emotional bonds among its members. Members of a community know each other personally, mutually participate in each other's lives, and value their sense of belonging to a social group. Their actions are directed by what Tönnies terms the *Wesenwille* (intrinsic will), based on the perceived worth and contribution of each individual. The key characteristic of a community is that it is possible for a person to live his life wholly within it.

The above becomes more clear if *Gemeinschaft* is contrasted with *Gesellschaft*. *Gesellschaften* (associations) are based on utilitarian interests. Although members of an association may know each other, their interaction patterns are impersonal. Tönnies characterizes *Gesellschaft* as public life — “it is the world itself”.<sup>2</sup> Members' actions, which generally have a contractual basis, are directed by what Tönnies terms *Kurwille* (selective will).

This distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* is well summed up by the Spanish sociologist, S. Giner.

When sentiments and emotions are of paramount importance for the group and it can be said to be organized around them, the group is a community. . . . When the functional division of work and impersonal, complex co-operation are decisive for the existence of a group, and the group exists within the framework of a system of goals that transcend or escape primary groups, we are dealing with an association.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that in a complex society, individuals may belong to many different communities and associations simultaneously. For example, one's immediate nuclear family may be a community, and this may be extended to larger kin-group and clan communities, and even to the nation. One may also belong to a variety of associations: those bound to the work-place, to leisure-time activities, or educational institutions. Such configurations are characteristic of everyday life in a modern metropolis. Many urban sociologists have hypothesized that the development of larger associational networks in urban societies has been at the expense of community networks. In the Singaporean context, however, we prefer to view this process as resulting in the *transformation* of various types of community life, rather than in their *abolition*.

Various aspects of the transformation of family-oriented communities in contemporary Singapore have been dealt with by others.<sup>4</sup> Our focus will be on the changes which have occurred, and are occurring, in *ethnic*-related communities, another key dimension of community life in Singapore.

Many books and articles on the concepts of ethnicity, ethnic groups, and ethnic identity have flooded the related fields of sociology, anthropology, and political science in recent years, and it is not within our present scope to enter into this debate in any detail. We intend simply to present what seems, from our perspective, to be the most relevant definition of ethnicity which, combined with our conceptualization of community, carries us furthest in focusing on the dynamics of the poly-ethnic nature of Singaporean society. Ethnicity, viewed from the perspective of the individual, consists of those identity-markers which are derived from what Joshua Fishman has termed "his descent-related being (paternity) and behaving (patrimony)".<sup>5</sup> These could include place of origin, language, kin-group formations, religion, customs, dress codes, socialization practices, and so on. Fishman further distinguishes "ethnicity phenomenology" as the study of "the meanings that [the individual] attaches to his descent-related being and behaving".<sup>6</sup> An exploration of these meanings should allow us access to a better

understanding of the role of ethnicity in the formation and perpetuation of certain types of communities.

Singaporean society is poly-ethnic and the composition of Singapore's population has remained relatively stable over the past century and a half. The major demographic change occurred early in the 19th century, when the Chinese gradually overtook the originally statistically dominant Malays. By 1891, the Chinese numbered 67.1% of the population, the Malays 19.7%, the Indians 8.8%, and the others (including Europeans) 4.3%.<sup>7</sup> In the 1980 census, the Chinese formed the majority with 76.9%, followed by 14.6% Malays, 6.4% Indians, and 2.1% others.<sup>8</sup> Thus a dominant characteristic of the population of Singapore has been a Chinese majority, with Malay and Indian minorities.

In contemporary Singapore these CMIO categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) are viewed as the building blocks of Singaporean "multiracialism", the word most often chosen to conceptualize Singaporean society's poly-ethnic nature. The CMIO, however, are also conceptual categories, and it is this aspect of CMIO which we will explore.

The first thing to note is that CMIO as ideal types in the Singaporean context are typified on the basis of "race" (ethnicity), culture, and language. Thus "Chinese" is typified by Chinese race, Chinese culture, and all Chinese dialects, but particularly Mandarin, which is currently being promoted as the lingua franca amongst Chinese dialect-speakers. "Malay" is typified by the Malay race, the Malay-Muslim culture, and the Malay language. "Indian" is typified by Indian race (stereotypically Dravidian South Indian "race"), Indian culture (again, stereotypically Dravidian South Indian Hindu culture), and the Tamil language. "Others" is typified by European or Eurasian race, Western culture, and the English language.

In the context of the present discussion, it is important to note that these ideal types are in fact *middle-range* conceptual categories — suspended, as it were, between the *higher* conceptualization of the emergent Singaporean national identity, to which it is assumed they will eventually be subsumed, and the *lower* particularistic ethnic categories which are recognized as breakdowns of the middle-range CMIO conceptual categories.

In Singapore, much attention is focused on these middle-range CMIO categories. Government spokesmen therefore speak of a Singaporean national identity which "has not yet emerged", and which will "take time to grow". At the same time attempts are made to consolidate the particularistic characteristics of the CMIO sub-categories so as to bring

reality more into conformity with the abstract “norm” (the most recent example being the Mandarin campaign).<sup>9</sup> Analytical studies of the Singapore population — whether historical, demographic, sociological, economic, or ethnological — have generally used the CMIO quadrotomy as the unquestioned basis for their scientific enquiries.

The implications of this sort of schema are of course enormous, and some work has been done on unravelling aspects of what Geoffrey Benjamin has aptly termed the “cultural logic of Singapore’s ‘multiracialism’ ”.<sup>10</sup> Certainly it is not possible to view the Indian category as an ethnic category. The Tamils, Telegus, Malayalees, Hindustanis, Punjabis, and so on, are members of the Indian category, but they clearly recognize very complex ethnic group distinctions. Similarly, the Chinese category breaks down into Teochews, Hokkiens, Cantonese, Hakkas, and other dialect groups, while the Malay category is composed of ethnic Malays, Javanese, Minangkabau, Baweanese, Bugis, and so on. Yet our study of the Indians in Singapore has led us to the conclusion that these middle-range categories, while they are not ethnic categories, are nevertheless much more than mere census categories. Here we will explore the possibility of speaking of an Indian *community* in the Singaporean context. Similarly, it may be possible to speak of a Chinese and a Malay *community*.

It is because of the poly-ethnic nature of Singapore that these middle-range categories take on the characteristics of community, in Tönnies’ sense. Inter-community interaction defines the boundaries for intra-community cohesion in a complex network of overlapping identification markers. A Javanese Muslim migrant identifies with the Malay community; a Hokkien Christian identifies with the Chinese community; a Punjabi Sikh identifies with the Indian community. Two perspectives come into play: relative to inter-community status, the position of all the above would be unambiguous; relative to intra-community status, all of the above would be marginal members of their ambiguous constituent communities. CMIO community labels, therefore, must not be taken as self-evident analytical categories, but rather as conceptual categories which must form the starting point for any serious study of community complexities.

If these communities cannot be reduced to ethnicity, and if they exist as more than simple census devices, then one might begin by posing the following questions: How did such communities evolve over time? How did such communities evolve in space? What factors have contributed to the maintenance or disruption of this community pluralism? The key to

answering the first and third questions is to be found in an attempt to answer the second. Singaporeans' concepts of space have evolved over the past century and a half, and have been until recently intimately related to the evolution and perpetuation of this CMIO community autonomy.

In order to conceptualize this relationship between ethnicity and these CMIO communities in the Singaporean context, we must thus introduce a new dimension to our terminology. One important characteristic of the concept of community in general is that it is always tied to a territorial dimension. Communities have spatial as well as affective reference points. We have stressed that one important base of community is sentiment. Locality is another. A village community epitomizes the relationship between social coherence and geographical area. A villager lives both physically and emotionally within his community. In a more complex society this need not be the case. Although a common territory remains a definitive characteristic of community, it is no longer necessary, within a modern metropolis with modern systems of communication and transportation, that each individual community member live within the physical environs of his community in order to participate in it. The urban sociologist Melvin Webber notes that "it is the accessibility rather than the propinquity of 'place' that is the necessary condition".<sup>11</sup>

CMIO community space can be defined as an area wherein one of the constituent communities provides the definitive identity. This identity arises out of that community's actual physical domination of the territory which is a prerequisite for the development of a particular, recognizable, and unambiguous social-cultural and religious identity. The mental map of the area, including its boundaries, further reinforces that community's dominance within these boundaries.

It should be noted that this concept is relevant for understanding CMIO inter-community interaction, as well as intra-community interaction. A member of the particular definitive community can significantly reduce inter-community interaction if he confines his activities to his particular geographical area. A Tamil goldsmith, for example, who lives and works in the Serangoon Road area, does not need to speak any Chinese dialect, or even Malay, need not ever vary his strict Indian vegetarian diet, or his dress styles, in order to sustain himself or his family in the larger Singapore environment. Similarly, a Chinese or Malay living in the Serangoon Road area, interacting mainly with the definitive Indian population, would have to adapt himself somewhat to his Indian environment, and his status as a member of a minority community within that geographical area.

But the implications of CMIO community space in Singapore are not only limited to those who live and/or work in a particular area. Such community space also affects those members of the community who live and/or work outside the area. The definitive Indian community space of Serangoon Road for the Indian minority in Singapore is relevant for those Indians living and working in other areas of the city as well.

CMIO community space as it has evolved in Singapore seems to have three fundamental characteristics. First, it serves as a focal point for migrants. When a migrant reaches Singapore, he gravitates to his/her community territory to look for kinsmen, job opportunities, accommodation, food, clothing, and other necessities of life. Second, community space serves as a focal point for community interaction, and therefore as a reinforcement of community identity which encompasses community members living outside this geographically defined community environ. This has several dimensions: in terms of everyday life necessities, such as special dietary requirements, clothing, and home decorations and utensils; in terms of the performance of certain religious, social, and cultural rituals, which reaffirm the boundaries of community interaction; and simply as a public meeting place. This is highlighted by the presence of many CMIO community-based cultural, religious, and reform societies and associations which have their headquarters in such an area. The weekly shopping trip to the area serves not only to acquire everyday life necessities; it provides the opportunity to exchange community gossip, and maintain and perpetuate community ties.

The third characteristic of CMIO community space is that it serves as a focal point for a larger clientele which transcends the definitive community. In the Indian case, this larger clientele has three dimensions — it attracts members of the Indian community from Malaysia and the Indian subcontinent, members of other Singaporean communities (for example, Chinese in search of fish-head curries), and finally foreign tourists, for example, from Europe, the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. Thus Indian community space also serves as a focal point for tourism — as a window into the world of Indian cultural, artistic, religious, and culinary achievements and activities, for outsiders as well as insiders.

CMIO-bounded community space has had a long history in Singapore. Singapore's first urban planner, Sir Stamford Raffles himself, allocated living areas to each of the major migrant groups who could then evolve quite independent of the larger whole.<sup>12</sup> Although the perimeter of these enclaves altered due to the pressures of a large and expanding population, each group retained an unchallenged claim to defining the identity of



various areas allocated to them. Thus Kampong Glam retained its image as an Arab-Malay, and later an Arab-Malay, Indian-Muslim enclave, whilst subsequent Malay settlements expanded up and down the coastline (Katong, Siglap, Bedok, Geylang Serai, and Changi in the east; Telok Blangah, Pasir Panjang, and Jurong in the west). The Indians were prominent first in the Market Street/Chulia Street area, and subsequently in areas around High Street, the naval base in Sembawang, the railway/port areas of Tanjong Pagar, and in Serangoon Road. The Chinese compacted themselves into Chinatown and the city centre, and also dispersed inland as farmers and animal husbanders. But the choicest and most central areas belonged to the Europeans. Initially this meant the area around Beach Road, Fort Canning, Orchard Road, and later the Tanglin and Holland Road areas. The British armed forces also built extensive residential/military complexes at Changi, Alexandra, Seletar, Ayer Rajah, and so on.

This traditional relationship between space and the preservation and perpetuation of CMIO communities has been radically altered in the past two decades. Over three-quarters of Singapore's population now lives in racially integrated high-rise apartment blocks in public housing estates.

One obvious effect of this new situation has been the alteration of CMIO community spatial reference points, rationalized in terms of the island's limited territory and its dense population. Along with the creation of the new comes the destruction of the old. The Malay settlement of Geylang Serai is no more. Chinatown, Kampong Glam, and Serangoon Road areas are now fringed by new high-rise housing estates, and their future is uncertain.

Another effect of this change in the concept of space is an alteration in the character of these CMIO communities themselves. Traditional inter- and also intra-community interaction networks have been transformed as surely as the geographical reference points out of which they originally evolved. Community Centres and Residents' Committees seek to provide new associational and communal neighbourhood interaction networks which are no longer oriented toward the maintenance of CMIO community pluralism. The time frame (less than twenty years) makes it possible to acknowledge their impact, but more difficult to assess their implications. Do they herald the establishment of a new dimension of old CMIO community complexities, or a reduction of traditional CMIO community complexities to some overarching emergence of new types of Singaporean communities and associations?

The evolution of CMIO community space has been an integral part of