

For Review Only



"The book is the result of a herculean effort by two young authors to tell the story of Malayalees in Singapore through interviews with a cross-section of that community. For those interested in the ethnography of the various Indian ethnic groups in Singapore, this book is a boon."

Ambassador Gopinath Pillai  
Chairman, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

"This 'labor of love' will stand out as a gem in the literature of diasporic studies. Based on original and assiduous research, and with the inclusion of photographs and documents, many hitherto unseen, the book is a treasure trove of information on the Malayalee community in Singapore. As the distinguished academic Professor Antony Palackal points out in the Foreword, it is 'the transformation from a Keralite to a Singapore Malayalee'. That transformation also takes into account the larger story of the national diaspora, which has made Singapore what it is today."

Ambassador K Kesavapany  
Adjunct Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

"It is a brilliant work in auto-ethnography and a skilfully crafted work of 'sociological imagination' that beautifully combines experience, observation and reflection, which makes it quite a reader-friendly book to all, academic and non-academic readers alike."

Dr Antony Palackal  
Sociologist, Loyola College of Social Sciences, University of Kerala

"This is a superb collection of stories about migration. Here are tales of partings and loss but embedded in them are stories of new beginnings. Via descriptions of sea voyages, letters home to anxious mothers about failed culinary experiments and hints of assimilation such as the growth of Malayalee associations, these are narratives which display the manner in which the human spirit endures and develops and prospers in the face of change."

Jaishree Misra  
Author

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ANITHA DEVI PILLAI  
PUVA ARUMUGAM

FROM KERALA TO SINGAPORE

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# FROM KERALA TO SINGAPORE

## VOICES FROM THE SINGAPORE MALAYALEE COMMUNITY



ANITHA DEVI PILLAI & PUVA ARUMUGAM

# FROM KERALA TO SINGAPORE

VOICES FROM THE  
SINGAPORE MALAYALEE COMMUNITY

ANITHA DEVI PILLAI &  
PUVA ARUMUGAM



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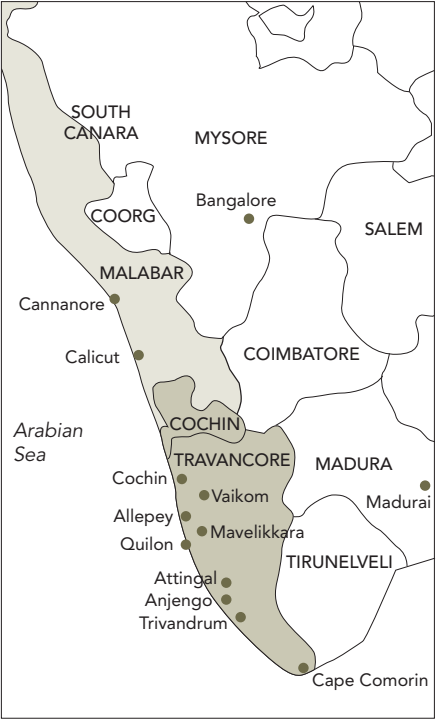
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# Malayalees in Singapore

Anitha Devi Pillai



Top: The Malabar, Cochin and Travancore kingdoms (1900s).

Above: The SS Rajula (20 Jan 1968).

This chapter provides an overview of the arrival of early Malayalee immigrants in British Malaya and to Singapore from 1900 to 2016. It traces the evolution of the Singapore Malayalee identity by examining community and literacy practices.

Events provide only one dimension to a story. It is the people and how events shape their lives and identities that make historical events valuable. As such, the chapter also includes narratives of individuals. These narratives provide an additional dimension to understanding the community's journey.

The purpose of this chapter is to air the voices of the Malayalee community who moved from Kerala to Singapore based on the interviews conducted for this project. This chapter also describes the important trends and issues that emerged from these voices. To analyze historical context, I referred to academic studies and press articles to provide a broad sweep of the issues relating to the Malayalee community in Singapore.

Malayalees are natives of Kerala which is a southwestern coastal state in South India. Kerala means "land of coconuts" in Malayalam. In the 12th century, the seaports of Kerala bustled with trade activities in spices, particularly pepper, cardamom and coconut, among merchants from Europe, the Arabs and the Chinese. A route from Europe to Asia was established in the 14th century when Vasco da Gama arrived at Calicut, one of the ports in Kerala<sup>1</sup>.

According to Vasisht (2012), a historian and expert on Kerala, before the 9th century AD, Kerala was part of Tamizhakam (Tamil Naadu) and shared the same language and similar cultural practices. After that, Kerala became a separate geographical unit comprising three kingdoms where Malayalam was spoken. The three kingdoms that formed Kerala were Travancore, Cochin (Travancore–Cochin kingdoms were already merged from 1949) and Malabar (which was part of the Madras Presidency). All three kingdoms were described as "three royal traditions of equal and legendary standings" by another historian, Stein (2010). Malabar was known for its trade in ivory, spices, sandalwood, and peacocks and Cochin was the place where the first European fort was built by the Portuguese and Travancore to an abode for prosperity<sup>2</sup>.

In 1956, Kerala was formed. It comprised the three Malayalam-speaking kingdoms. For the purpose of this book, I have used the term "Kerala" throughout my discussion to maintain consistency.

## I. ARRIVAL OF MALAYALEES IN BRITISH MALAYA

Rai (2006) posits that "Indian migration [to Singapore] began in January 1819 with the arrival of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. Raffles' entourage included some 120 sepoy of the Bengal Native Infantry and a Bazaar Contingent, comprising *dhobis* (washer men), *doodh-wallahs* (milkmen), *chai-wallahs* (tea-makers) and domestic servants. They were known as 'Bengalis' as the initial group of colonial militia and their camp followers came from what is now eastern Uttar Pradesh and northwest Bihar".

There was no mention of Malayalees being part of Raffles' entourage. But the evidence from the oldest Malabar Muslim cemetery in Singapore indicates that it has been in existence since 1819. It is likely that traders from Malabar were already in Singapore when she was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles or that they arrived shortly after<sup>3</sup>.

The first available records of Malayalees in British Malaya is in Sandhu's (2010) book titled *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786–1957)* where he places Malayalees as being 6.4% of 2,725,917 Indians who migrated to Malaya (including Singapore) between 1844 and 1941 (p. 159). By 2000, the vast majority had left as there were only 35,000 Malayalees in the neighboring country, Malaysia,<sup>4</sup> and 21,745 in Singapore.

The earliest record of Malayalees in Singapore indicates that there were 1,208 of them amongst 27,990 Indians in 1911. By 2010, there were 26,348 Malayalees in Singapore amongst 348,119 Indians. In Singapore, they are the second largest sub-group in the Indian community after the Tamils.

One researcher, Gomez (1997), speculates that many Malayalees could have moved from Malaya to Singapore in search of job opportunities in the 1840s. This trend continued in the 19th century where many of them were reportedly drawn to jobs in Singapore as the wages were substantially higher.<sup>5</sup> They were employed in clerical and civil service occupations in British Malaya and Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

Sandhu, an established historian of Malayan history, states that there were no reliable records of those arriving and departing from Malaya prior to 1870 because they were subjects of the British colony. Indians did not need passports or visas to travel to British Malaya. They just needed money to pay for their travel. Many working-class migrants arrived with just a luggage, a mat and a pillow.<sup>7</sup> Passengers who got off in Singapore were quarantined in St John's Island for several days. The men used to refer to St John's Island as Chikku Mala (Sick Hill). To avoid being quarantined, many of them chose to get off in Malaya and travel by road to Singapore.

In the early years, the main mode of transportation to India was by sea and usually on the SS *Rajula*, as noted by many of the interviewees such as Dr G Raman, Dr Liza and Reeta Raman. Departure details of the SS *Rajula* were advertised in the *Straits Times* periodically from early as 6 May 1927. It ceased operations in 1974.<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone traveled on the SS *Rajula*; there were several accounts of those who traveled by foot during the inter-war period such as Poovathikal Konnu Appu (P K Appu) (1909–1992). In the 1940s, P K Appu and his friends traveled by land to Singapore through Burma. They wanted to join the growing forces of the Indian National Army (INA) led by Subhas Chandra Bose<sup>9</sup> in Singapore. P K Appu was originally from Ottapalam. He had been part of the communications unit of INA in India. The man who made the arduous journey on foot from Malabar<sup>10</sup> to Singapore to support a cause he believed in passionately must have believed in the future of Singapore as well. He stayed and raised his family here, never leaving the shores again except for a brief visit to Kerala.



Top: Santha Sreedharan's family about to board the SS Rajula to India at the harbor (1971).

Above: P K Appu in his Indian National Army (INA) uniform with fellow soldiers (1940s).

*Section  
Three*

OUR STORIES



## FAMILIES WHO ARRIVED BETWEEN 1900S AND 1920S



Narayanan Narayanan's father, K N Narayanan Iyer (1913).





# Vilasini Menon

✧ With roots in Singapore since 1906

## Fathers were “shadowy figures or transient members” of the family

My late father, Dr Vadakath Padmanaban Menon (Dr V P Menon) arrived in Singapore in 1906 to his maternal uncle’s home. He studied at Raffles Institution and later completed his education at Edinburgh, Glasgow where he trained as a medical doctor. Upon returning to Singapore, he set up Lily Dispensary and Maternity Clinic. It was a two-storey building where the dispensary was on the first floor and the maternity clinic on the second.

Amongst the followers of the *marumak-kattayam* (matrilineal inheritance) system, maternal uncles educated their nephews. The system also meant that it was important for us to have girls in our family so that our family lineage is preserved and that fathers traditionally played a less important role in their children’s lives.

My father, for one, never spoke of his father and he only had a vague memory of him. Men were responsible for their sisters’ children who lived in their household or *tharavad*. These traditional *tharavads* had many people of three or four generations living in them. It must have been a challenge to attend to all the demands of various family members.

But my mother, who was born in 1901, was lucky that she grew up with both parents. It must have been an unusual situation for her father to continue to live with his wife’s family *tharavad* (ancestral home). In those days, in most Nair families that we knew, the fathers did not live with their wives or children.

Fathers in those days were “shadowy figures or transient” members of the family. That changed when families moved out of Kerala and that was when they formed nuclear families.

My father, Dr V P Menon, was passion-

ate about education and ensured that all my siblings and I were well educated. Many of my siblings went to Buxton’s Kindergarten (off Newton Road), which was run by a strict Eurasian, Ms Buxton. Her sister, Mrs Gomez, was at Raffles Girls’ School and, through that connection, all the female students from Buxton were admitted into Raffles Girls’.

My father was not conventional in many ways. For one, he was broad-minded and never forced us to get married. My older sister, Madhavi Kutty, for instance, neither fell in love nor wanted an arranged marriage and he let her be. In fact, she once locked herself in her room when she realized that a young man had come to ask for her hand. I do not know what my father said to that man but he got rid of him quickly.

He may not have been a traditional Malayalee father, but he was passionate about keeping in touch with the Malayalee culture, language and the community. He hired our tenant, Damodaran Menon, at our Mackenzie Road house to teach my siblings and me Malayalam. My mother used to read *Kerala Bandhu*, aloud to us every day. We spoke Malayalam at home and with friends.

We had several Malayalee friends like K M R Menon who was a well-respected mathematics teacher and K P Kesavan Menon (K P K Menon) was a very well-known barrister, founder of Mathrubhumi and prolific writer who won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for *Kazhija Kaalam* (*Bygone Days*).

In fact, my oldest sister, Leela, married K P K Menon’s only son, M S Varma\*. He was the king of Palakkad. This might have been no more than a title in Singapore, as he lived in Singapore for most of his life. Since we are a matrilineal society, he inherit-

ed his position from his maternal family. On the other hand, his children are not Varmas (caste title used by royalty) but Menons.

K P K Menon and my father remained close friends. K P K Menon got us to move out of the city to his house on Paya Lebar Road when the war broke out in Singapore. Unfortunately, his house was bombed. No one was injured and soon after a brief struggle, the British surrendered. After that, my family and I moved out of K P K Menon’s house to a huge house on Boundary Road near a *bagawathi* (a goddess) temple. But the war period was difficult and I remember that all the houses at Boundary Road depended on the “bucket system”. We did not have proper drainage in those days in certain parts of Singapore.

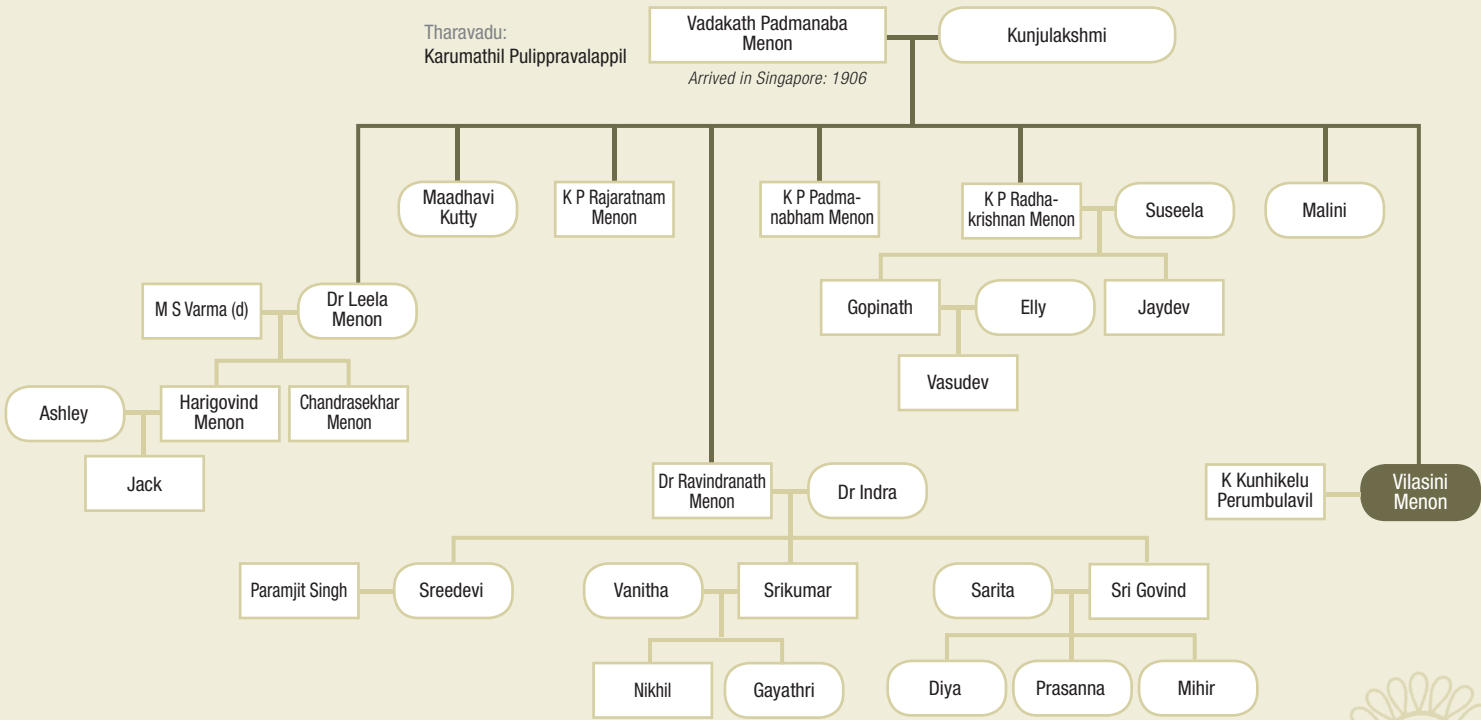
Another close family friend of ours was Captain Lakshmi, who was a medical doctor. During the war period, she led the Rani of Jhansi regiment of the Indian National Army (INA). She is from our family town Anakkarra. Once during the Japanese Occupation, my father and Captain Lakshmi attended a ball. A Japanese soldier stopped her, mistaking her for being British because she was unusually fair. She was also wearing pants, which was not something that other Malayalee woman generally did in those days. My father quickly intercepted by saying that she was his daughter and a medical doctor. Doctors had some privileges.

My father was also well-versed in Malayalam culture. He read voraciously on “the ways of Kerala” and the British. He would attend auctions to buy books from the expatriate British families who would sell ►►

\*M S Varma passed away in 2015 during the course of this research.



Standing, from left: Rajaratnam, Dr Ravindranath, Radhakrishnan, Jayadev, Gopinath, Sekhara Varma (M S Varma); Seated, from left: Malini, Suseela, Dr Leela, Madhavi, and Vilasini (2000).



them before leaving Singapore. Many of these books were first editions of classics. We had a huge collection of books in our home. I recall two books in particular that were given by Japanese soldiers to my sister and me when we met them for the first time.

But for all his knowledge and worldly ways, my father was a kind-hearted man. He gave loans to friends, which were never recovered. It did not help that we had male servants from Kerala who were quite wasteful in their ways. Later, my father built a huge house at 3 Goodman Road in Katong. That must have landed him in further debt. Eventually, my brother, Dr Ravindranath

took over the medical practice and they managed to turn things around. Sadly, none of my nieces or nephews became doctors to carry on the family tradition.

My mother was the street-savvy one between the two of them. It was she who helped my father with his finances. This is despite the fact that he had a roaring medical practice. My father was the gynecologist in attendance for the wife of our first president, Yusof Ishak.

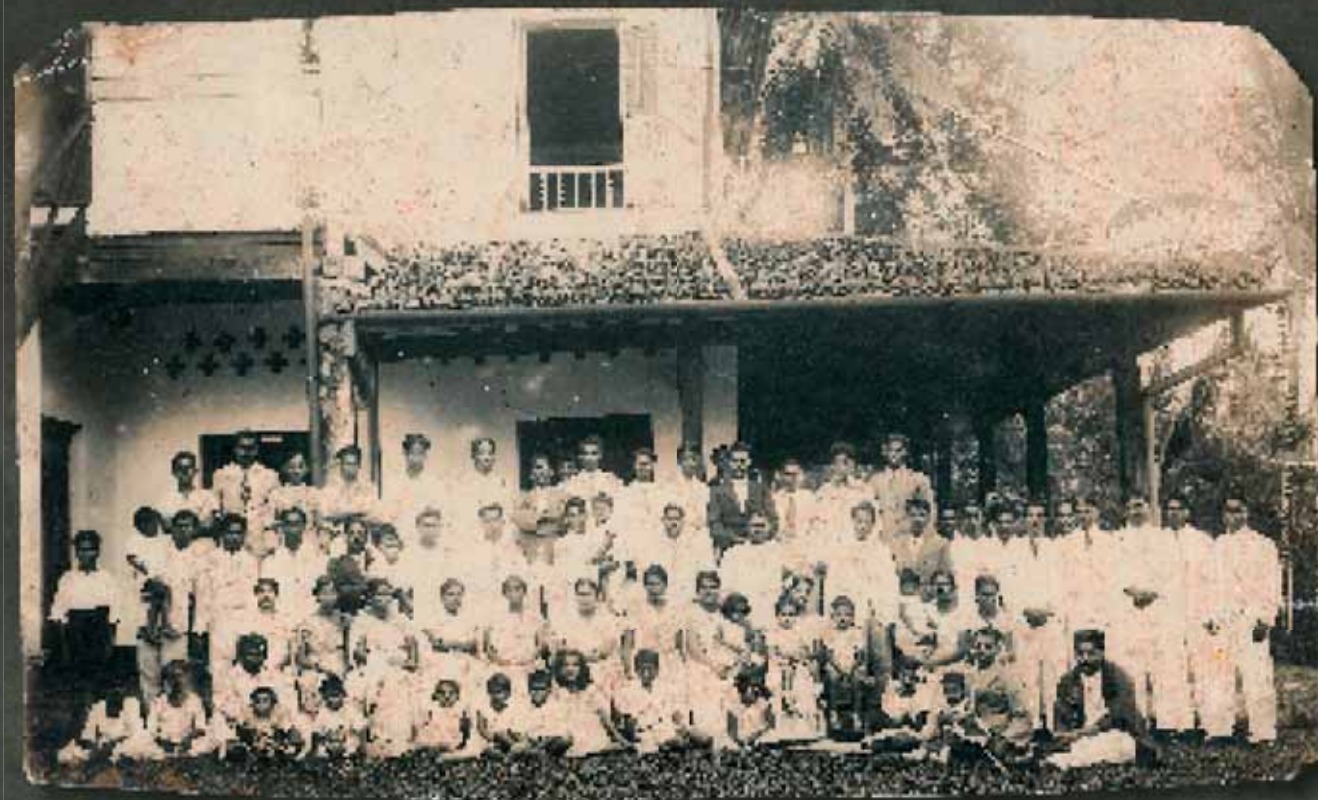
My mother's brothers worked as draftsmen in Singapore. In those days, there were a lot of Malayalees in Singapore. But they eventually retired and returned to Kerala. It

is a pity that so many of our pioneers did not leave much behind nor preserve their belongings.

My family too has no mementos here to share with you. My brother took all our family photos and my father's personal collection of books to our *tharavad* in Kerala. Now he too is bedridden. We are all growing old. My nephews themselves are already in their 60s. We have moved all of our father's precious belongings to Kerala to keep them safe. All I have is one photograph of most of my family members taken at my nephew Jaydev's graduation.

Written by Anitha Devi Pillai





Sudhir Thomas' family photo taken in Klang, Malaya, comprising his grandmother Mary Thomas, great-grandmother Mariamma Mathew, and his father's paternal and maternal family members (circa 1936).

## FAMILIES WHO ARRIVED IN 1930s





## Padmini Kesavapany

✿ With roots in Malaya since 1931

### My father’s daughter—the diplomat’s wife

Have you heard of the practice of men wearing a hair-lock on the side of their head? Men in my father’s community followed this tradition. It is referred to as a *kudumi* in Malayalam.

My father, K Palpoo s/o Krishnan wore it for as long as he could possibly bear to. But once he had graduated from medical school in Kerala, he chopped his hair-lock off. Perhaps it was his first sign of rebellion against ancient customs that divided the people of Kerala. My grandfather was livid and disowned my father.

They were both strong-willed men and neither relented. Finally in 1931, when he was barely 25 years old, my father packed his bags and sailed off to Malaya where he practiced as a doctor until he retired.

He did not return to Kerala in search of a bride or to visit his family as many others had done. He certainly was not a man who believed in following the crowd. He met my mother, Lucie Hamie, through his friends. She was just 16 years old when she married my 31-year-old father. My mother was fluent in Malayalam, Tamil, Malay and English.

But his hometown must have had a special place in his heart for he sent most of his earnings back to Kerala to buy land and build a house for him to retire to in his twilight years. Kollam is famous for its cashew trees and my father had bought a cashew plantation. His brothers who were entrusted to purchase the land and build a house for my dad had done so, but they had registered the property in their names not my father’s.

My father must have been heartbroken and he reluctantly gave up his claim to the land. By then he had retired. Needless to say, he did not return to Kerala for his retirement.

My husband, Pany (Kesavapany) tried his best to wrest the property back and return it to the rightful owner. But both my husband and I failed in the mission. Once we even traveled to Kollam in search of the house. The driver stopped the car in front of the first young man on the street close to the address and asked him for directions. The young man said that he didn’t know. We asked several other people and arrived at the home that my father had built, only to find the same young man in the house. Apparently, he was my cousin and he was determined that we would not find our way and stake a claim on the property. It was a long struggle and we gave up after lengthy legal proceedings in Kerala.

It was the only thing that my father had asked of Pany and me.

My father did not acknowledge Pany for years after our wedding. I met Pany in 1960 at Teachers’ Training College, Penang. He had just graduated from Teachers’ Training College, Liverpool, UK, and taken on the reins as the President of the Hindu Youth Organization. Needless to say, he was a charismatic leader and had no trouble with recruiting new members. I joined the organization of course and promptly fell in love with the President. But the next three years of our courtship was not a smooth ride. I was posted to Alor Star, Kedah as a Science and Mathematics teacher and he was teach-

ing in Penang. It was a good two-hour drive between the two cities.

Finally, when we broke the news to my parents, my father threatened to disown me. But I was his daughter after all. I was determined to marry the love of my life. My parents came as guests to the wedding and left the minute the *thaali* was tied. They neither stayed to bless us nor for a meal afterwards.

For the next five years, Pany would faithfully drop me off at my parents’ home every week. My father would walk away when Pany walked into the home. But, you know, Pany never took it to heart. He would always say “They are your parents. If they don’t acknowledge me it is okay. But we have to be there for them.”

We never figured out why my father was opposed to our marriage. Perhaps, it was because Pany was a Telugu. Sometimes I



Dr K K Palpoo.

wonder if it was because I had stood up to my father and chosen the man I wanted to marry.

Things changed with the birth of my first son Murali Pany in 1967. By then, Pany had completed his degree in History in Kuala Lumpur and was headhunted by the Public Service Commission, Singapore. It was a difficult period of time for me. Pany was in a new job and I was pregnant and alone.

We did not know many people here whom we could depend on. Murali was born one week after we arrived in Singapore.

It was then that my mother came for me. My father had sent her to bring me and the newborn home. It was the first time that my mother had entered our home. She had made the long journey from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore on her own, and that was in the 1960s when the roads were not as

developed as they are now.

That was the turning point in our lives. Finally in 1997, when Pany was posted to Kuala Lumpur as the High Commissioner, my father and Pany had time to connect. I spent the next 35 years of my life as a diplomat's wife.

Written by Anitha Devi Pillai



### Speaking and reading Malayalam

There have been no language barriers between Pany and me as we speak to one another in English at home. Over the years, we have both lost our fluency in Telugu and Malayalam. But it comes back to us when we hear it being spoken.

We did not necessarily seek out friends who spoke Malayalam. We met several Malayalees who were in the diplomatic service such as the late Ramachandran Nair, Verghese Mathews, Vanugopal Menon, Velayudan Sivaprasad and Gopinath Pillai, to name a few. But when we got together we generally spoke in English.

We did have other Malayalee friends

such as Mr K P Bhaskar and Mrs Shanta Bhaskar (Cultural Medallion recipient), Patrick Jonas (Editor of *Tabla*) and his wife Rani as well as Ravi Velloor (Editor at the *Straits Times*). When Pany was the Counsellor to Jakarta, we met Ananda Sivaram (son of journalist and author M Sivaram) and Shanti Sivaram through shared interests in the arts and the well-being of the Indian community.

But it was with the arrival of Asianet in Singapore that my Malayalam improved by leaps and bounds. In fact, having more access to Malayalam movies and television programs motivated me to pick up the

language on my own. I taught myself to read Malayalam from the Internet. It took me six months and now I read one chapter of Malayalam from the books that I had bought from Trivandrum every day. I also read a chapter from a book in Hindi, Singala and French as part of my bedtime routine.

I do love languages as they keep my mind active. I must admit though that I have not learnt to speak or read Telugu yet. Pany, on the other hand, understands my mother tongue, Malayalam, and enjoys watching Malayalam movies with me.



Padmini Kesavapany with her Teachers Training College classmates.



Mr & Mrs Kesavapany.



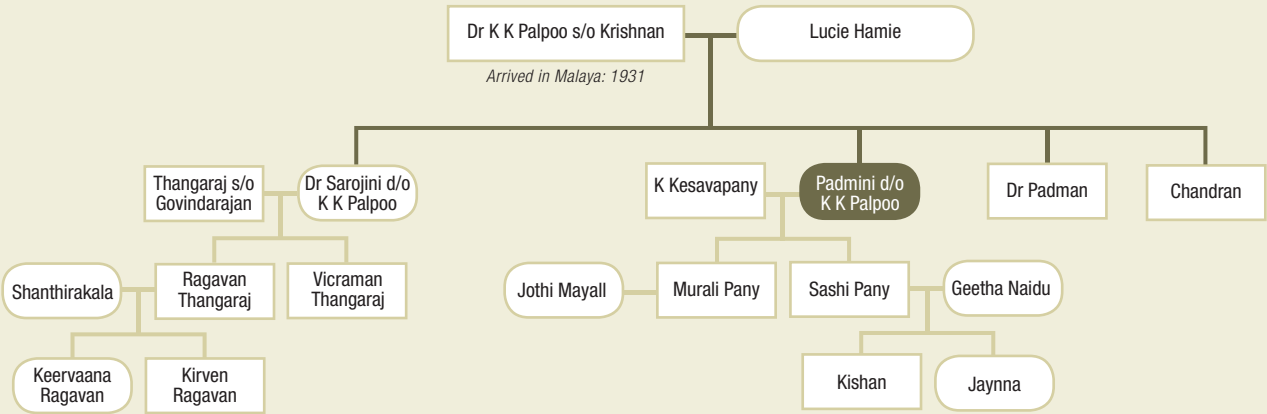
Mr & Mrs Kesavapany with fellow Hindu Youth Organization members.



Mr & Mrs Kesavapany (1963).



Padmini Kesavapany at K Kesavavapany's graduation (circa 1960s).







M Sivaram (*left*) with Subhas Chandra Bose (Netaji) in Singapore during World War II.

M Sivaram played a key role in the Indian National Army (INA). He moved to Singapore as part of the INA league in the early 1940s. He was the official spokesman of the Provisional Government of Independent India in Singapore, Director of INA's radio station and Chief Editor of *Azad Hind* (Free India) newspaper. He later started the Institute of Journalism in Trivandrum in 1968 and remained its Director till his death in 1972. Based on his sojourn in South East Asia, he also wrote *The Road to Delhi*, *Malaysia*, *The Vietnam War: Why?* and *The New Siam in the Making: A political Transition in Siam, 1932–1936*.

## FAMILIES WHO ARRIVED IN 1940s





## G Vasudavan Pillai

✧ With roots in Singapore since 1940

### My mother adopted my father’s Malayalee culture and never looked back

They got married in 1948 just after the war ended. My mother is a Singaporean Telugu and my father, Govinda Pillai is from the southern part of Kerala called Paravur. He was a teacher in Kerala and he left the place wanting something more challenging. He heard that there were job opportunities in Singapore and headed this way. In fact, he had left home without telling his parents.

He started working for the British when he came here. During the Japanese Occupation, my mother worked as a maid for my father. My mother was then very young and had been born and bred in Singapore. He fell in love with her and married her. Because they were from different races, she had to leave her family for him.

After the marriage, my father taught her to speak Malayalam and cook Malayalee dishes. He even brought her to India and there they accepted her, even though she was a Telegu. My mother is now 83 years old and she speaks Malayalam, Telegu and Tamil. Once she married my father, she adopted my father’s culture as her own and never looked back.

My mother was only 23 years old when she gave birth to me and I am the seventh out of 13 children. My father ensured that all of us studied Malayalam when we were

young and this posed a problem for us in learning Tamil in school. We had difficulties learning Tamil words as we got confused about the characters. But my father was fixed in his Malayalee ways. When teaching Malayalam, my father would ensure that he gave us homework and the lessons were held every weekend. He even gave us homework during the school holidays.

My father was also strict about discipline. We couldn’t talk at the dinner table and we couldn’t waste any food. We had to know how to place the banana leaf on the table and he would explain the reasons for all the practices we followed. Throughout his working days, he sent money back to my grandmother in India.

My father was a very nice man and taught us values through stories. He taught us how to be a good person and how we had to earn our money. He would talk to us like we were adults instead of children. He always believed that we had to respect the child and the child would respect us in return.

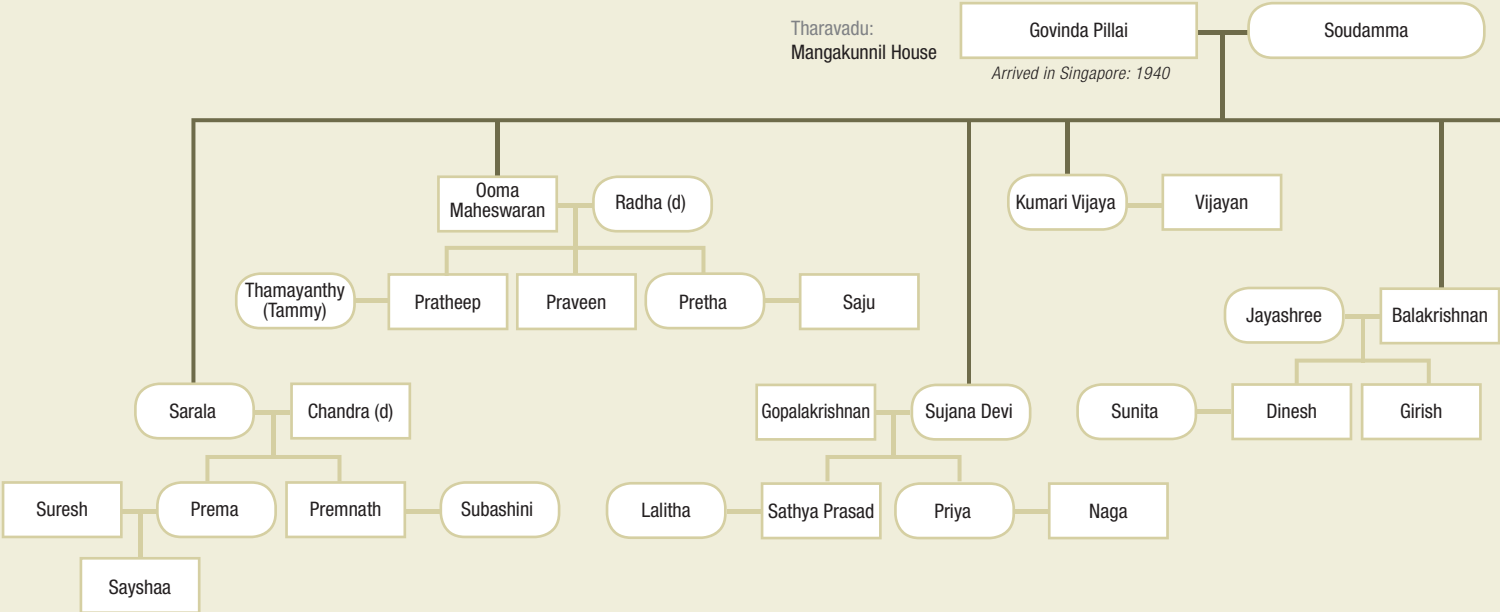
With such an upbringing, my family celebrated Onam and Vishu really authentically. My father insisted that the children married Malayalees where possible and that we keep our Malayalee roots intact. A few

of my siblings ended up marrying relatives within the family and for those who married non-Malayalees, the spouses had to learn Malayalam and our culture. That was a rule made by my father. All the grandchildren know how to speak Malayalam. We also hire Malayalee helpers to ensure that the children practice speaking Malayalam at home.

Our family is so big that we hire a bus when we go for functions. Even those who drive will come and park near the blocks and get into the bus. It is really fun when we go for these functions. Everyone speaks in Malayalam and jokes with each other. In this way, even the younger ones speak the language and join in the fun.

Till today, I find opportunities to speak Malayalam to everyone who can converse in Malayalam. My Tamil is good too. In fact, anyone who knows Malayalam will be able to pick up Tamil easily. I don’t think Malayalam will die off in the near future. There are certainly people like us. In fact, as a teacher I have observed that some children are absent from school during Vishu and Onam. This means they are celebrating these functions at home. I am really positive that the younger generation will carry the language and culture through.

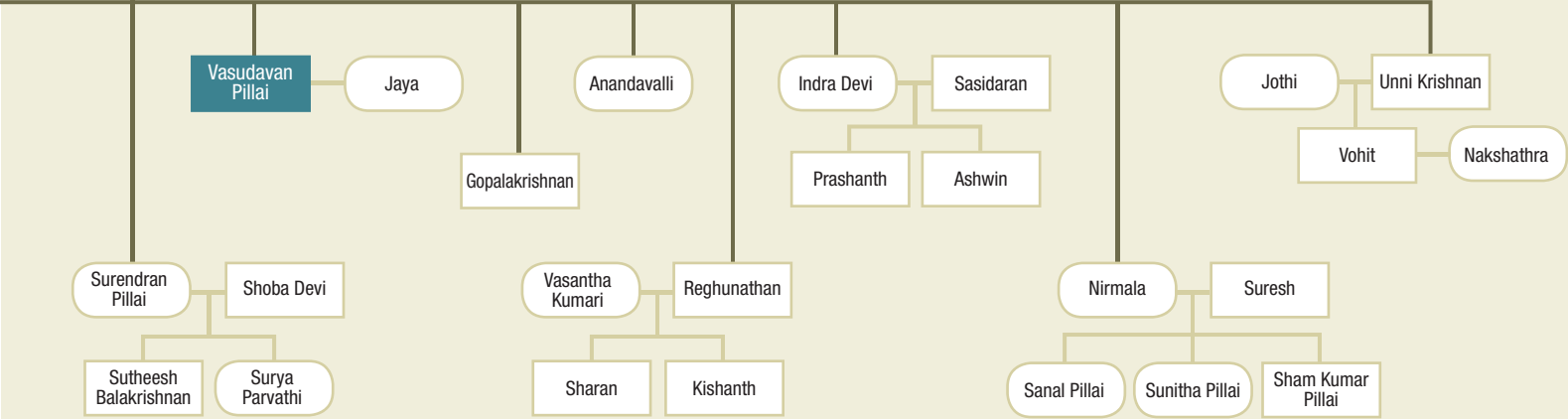
Written by Puva Arumugam



Govinda Pillai with his colleagues at Nee Soon Barracks (1948).



Govinda Pillai on the extreme left with his colleagues at Nee Soon Barracks (1950).



Govinda Pillai and Soudamma's wedding picture (1947).







Chief Minister of Kerala, Shri R. Sankar's visit to  
the British Naval Base in 1961.

The girl on his right is C. Lalythambika. On his left is Poravankara N. Nair.

## FAMILIES WHO ARRIVED BETWEEN 1950S AND 1960S





## K Sivaraman Nair & Mala Sivaraman Nair



### I am lucky to have witnessed a thousand full moons!

K Sivaraman Nair

*With roots in Singapore since 1950*

I arrived in 1950 to Singapore and became involved in the activities of the Singapore Kerala Association in 1955. At that time, the Association organized many events to cater to the young men who came to Singapore from Kerala to work.

I became more active in the activities after 1962. My interest in theater started way earlier while I was still in Kerala. I remember acting in my first play in 1946 or 1947 and it was known as *Prema Viplavam* (Love Revolution). It was a story about how a father's murder was plotted by his daughter's boyfriend. In those days, only men acted on stage. So I was the father and I was the one that my daughter's (a man played

that role) boyfriend plotted to kill. That play sparked my interest in acting.

When the associations in Singapore started staging plays and skits, I was invited to play character roles. I can play any role; the father, suitor, priest, romantic hero—you name it, I have done it.

The plays we staged in the early days were written by writers from Kerala. Then, in the late 1970s, we had more local writers like Mrs Kamala Devi Aravindan, Mrs Sarojini Chandran and Mr Radhakrishnan Menon. One of my favorite plays was the comedy written by Mrs Kamala Devi Aravindan titled *Vaarene Avishayam Undu* (Bridegroom Needed). It was about a mid-

dle-aged lady who advertises in the papers looking for a suitable bridegroom. I was the groom and my wife played the role of the fussy heroine who falls in love with me. It was a really funny play with clever lines. The audience loved it and so did the actors.

I am now over 84 years old and am still involved in the activities of the Association. In fact, we have a saying in Malayalam that if you live till 84, you would have actually witnessed a thousand full moons in your lifetime. I have done that.



### We still celebrate the “star birthdays” of all our children and grandchildren!

Mala Sivaram

*With roots in Singapore since 1964*

I arrived in Singapore in 1964, a year after getting married. I didn't have many friends when I first arrived. I was approached to teach Malayalam classes in 1973 at the Kerala Association and became friends with many parents. I was one of the few graduate women who came from Kerala and my aim was to ensure that the younger generation knew how to speak and understand the Malayalam language. So I dedicated myself to running regular Sunday classes to ensure that our children could learn the language. The size of the class varied from 10 to 30 students per session.

I also started to act in the skits and plays with my husband in the 1970s. By that time, women were beginning to act on stage.

Once the first couple acted on stage, many other wives joined their husbands on stage.

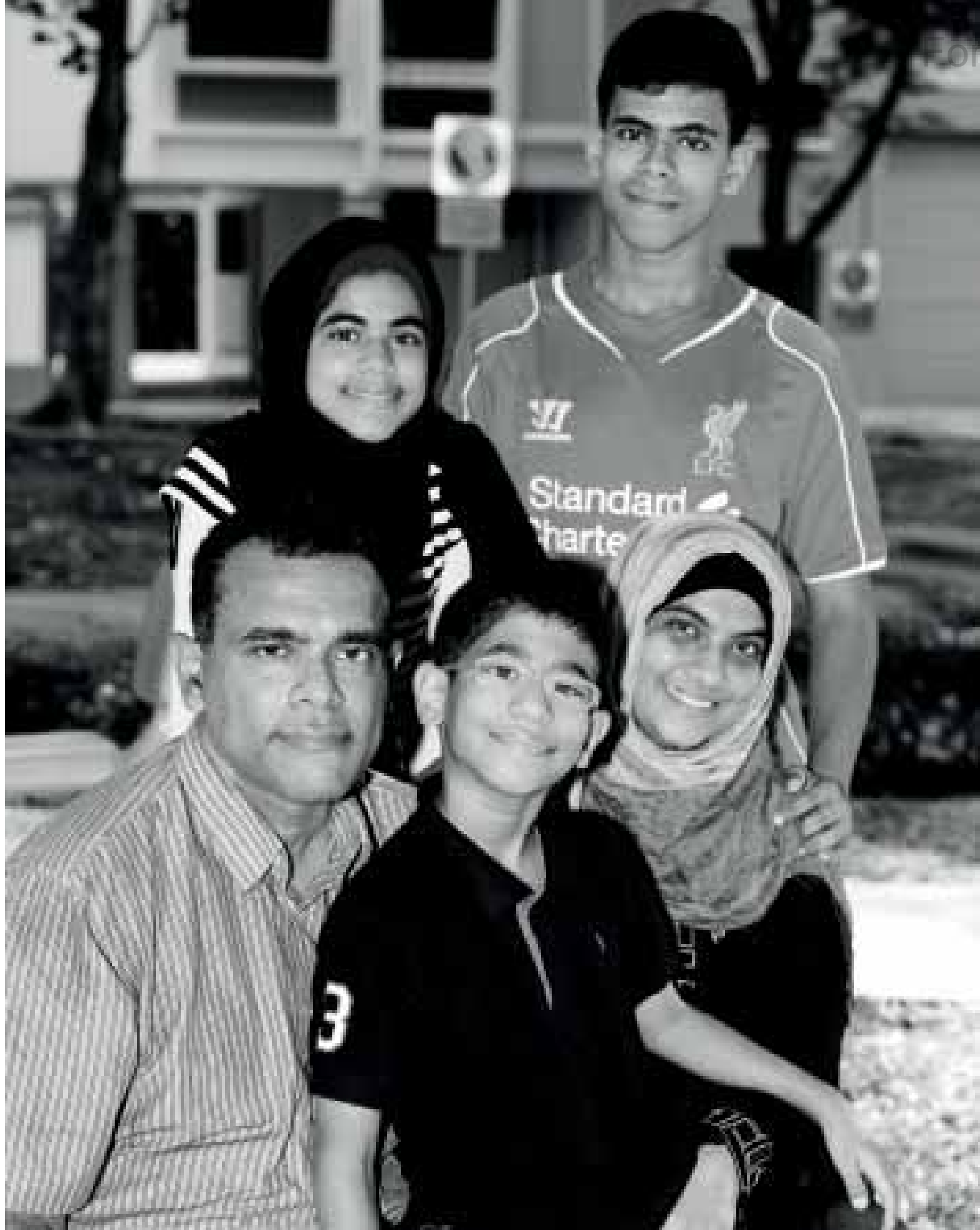
We were both very involved in the activities of the Kerala Association. I won the Most Outstanding Malayalee Award for my many contributions and that was a really memorable award. Then in 1990, we started the Ladies' Wing at Kerala Association. I rallied many Malayalee ladies together and got them involved in preparing authentic Malayalee food for all our events. That was one of our roles.

It was not easy to juggle the Malayalam classes, events and activities while also running the family. But I had the support of my husband. My children also were much older when I became more involved in the activi-

ties organized by the Kerala Association.

We want to preserve the Malayalee culture. You know till this day, we still celebrate the star birthday for all my children and grandchildren. It is something that we do in Kerala. We check the Indian calendar and note down the star birthdays of my family members. The date is different every year as it is based on the Hindu calendar. On that day, I will cook a nice traditional Malayalee vegetarian meal. I do this for all my children and they enjoy it very much. Then, on the actual date of birth as in the Gregorian calendar, we will go out for a nice family dinner and celebrate it like everyone else with a cake and non-vegetarian food.

*Written by Puva Arumugam*



# Noorunissa d/o P K Ibrahim Kutty

✧ With roots in Singapore since 1950

## Differences between Malayalees from North Kerala and South Kerala

I came to Singapore in 1971 when I was two and a half years old. I was born in India in 1969. I came from a place known as Pazhayangadi and it is in Kannur district, which is also known as Malabar. We flew down in those days. My mother brought me here with the rest of my siblings.

I remember learning Malayalam as a child as it was the language we spoke at home. I can also write the language. My mother used to borrow Malayalam books from the Kerala Association library. In my younger days, I remember attending functions and events organized by the Kerala association. They used to organize tele-

matches during my primary school days. It was great fun as all the kids would come together and play in these matches. I also remember attending Onam celebrations. But once I went to secondary school, my father left for Dubai to work and we just stopped going to these functions.

The Malayalee community in Singapore is quite diverse in itself. There are differences between the Malayalees who came from the south and north of Kerala. These differences can be seen in the way we speak and the types of food we eat. As you know, Malabari food is really famous. We have a dish called *pathiri*, which is a type of rice bread that

the people from northern Kerala call *orotti*. We Malabaris eat that bread with mutton curry. Then we have the *kaya varathathu*, which are chips made from green bananas. Those from the north call their banana chips *kariatudu*. These chips are not from bananas that are still green. Then we have the *nen-drangai* and they have the *ethakka* (both are snacks made from bananas).

Even in terms of social practices, South Kerala families that I know of practice matri-archal practices while those from the north have adopted patriarchal sets of values.

Written by Puva Arumugam

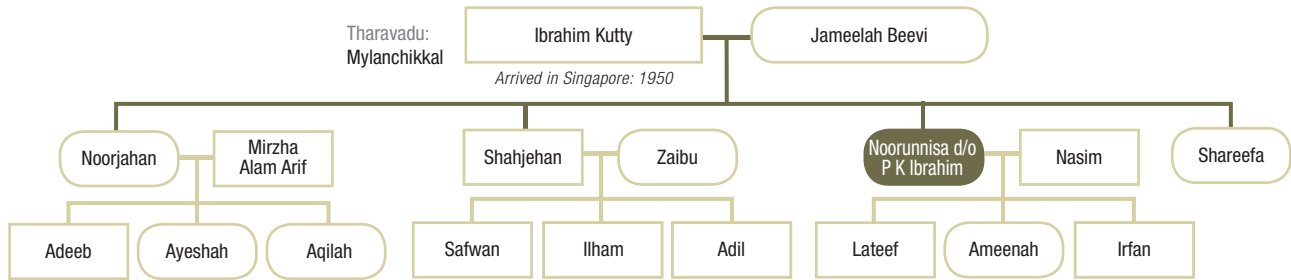


With immediate family far away, friends became family. The Kutty family with the Menons.

Back row, from left: Jalaja Menon, Shailaja Menon; Front row, from left: Varija Menon, Karunakaran Menon, Thankamani Menon, Jameelah Beevi, Noorjahan, P K Ibrahim Kutty, and Vanaja Menon (1965).



Koya and Kutty's family (1972).







The first few female drama artists in Singapore.

*From left:* Ganga Devi Menon, Philomena, Saradha Devi, and Vaasanthi Pillai (K Muralidharan Pillai's mother).  
Prior to the 1960s, female roles were generally played by male actors.

## FAMILIES WHO ARRIVED BETWEEN 1970S AND 2000S





# Bindu Nambiar

✿ With roots in Singapore since 1974

## Language is the link to learning a culture

When my father was posted to Singapore in the late 1970s, he was told that Singapore was going to be like Heaven. But once our family arrived here, it was nothing like Heaven. Life was, in fact, very hard. My dad was not a Permanent Resident (PR) and he couldn't buy a house here like everyone else. Instead, we had to stay in rental places in the kampongs. These houses were dirty and we hated them.

After a few years, my father was offered a chance to move to Bahrain and, for some reason, my mother wasn't keen on moving there. As such, we made Singapore our home. But one thing my parents did was to bring us to Kerala to visit our relatives once in three years. This helped me to always keep in touch with the Malayalee culture, the place and the language. I feel quite lucky to have had the chance to be in touch with my Malayalee culture and also be a Singaporean.

When I was growing up, my mother spoke Malayalam to me, and my dad spoke English at home. I picked up Malayalam, listening and speaking to my mother. The only regret I have now is that she didn't teach me

to read or write it. Having said that, knowing how to speak and understand the language has reinforced my identity as a Malayalee.

I know that I am not the same as a Malayalees from Kerala. There are differences and, for me, being Singaporean comes first. I am proud to be a Singapore Malayalee. We stand out from the expatriates who are from Kerala. The Malayalam we speak here in Singapore and Malaysia is certainly colloquial and it is not at all like the Malayalam you will hear in the different parts of Kerala. But knowing the language connects me to other Malayalees, be they from Singapore, Malaysia, the US or India.

Recently, I was in Zurich on a holiday and there, in the middle of the street, I heard a lady speaking Malayalam. I turned and smiled at her as I felt somehow connected to her when she spoke my language in a totally unexpected place. It's like when we are abroad and we hear someone speaking in Singlish.

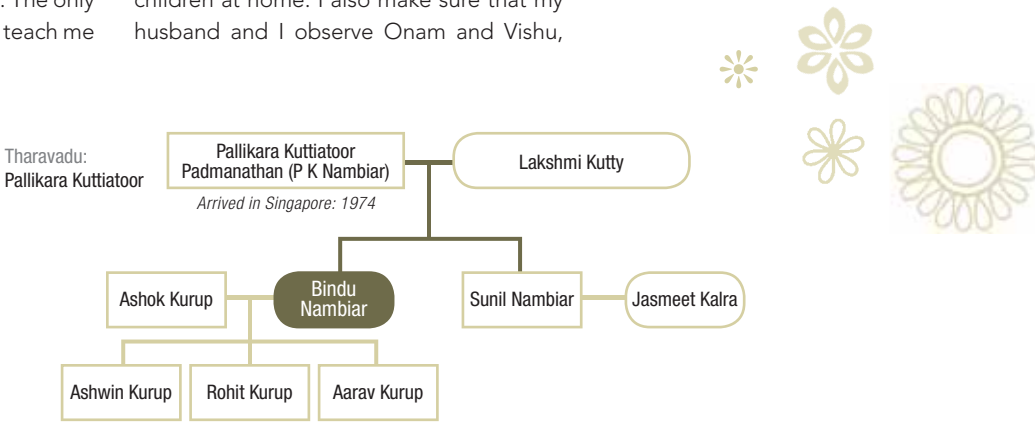
I see this connection as a good thing and that is why I speak Malayalam to my children at home. I also make sure that my husband and I observe Onam and Vishu,

which are important festivals for Malayalees. I cook the vegetarian meals, dress up in the traditional *mundu veshti* attire, make my husband dress up in the *veshti* and we do the prayers together! We do this annually as we want to show our children that this is part of our Malayalee tradition and our culture. This is who we are.

But my children do not understand what it means to be a Malayalee here in Singapore. We are all Singaporean Indians and that is all they know. Unlike the Tamils, the Malayalee identity is not reinforced here in Singapore in any way. The children don't need to study or even know how to read and write Malayalam in school as it is not a subject that they study. Neither the language nor the celebrations are recognized. Language links you to the culture and, if they are not learning the language in school, they wouldn't know the culture.

I just hope that one day when they grow up they will look back and know that they are Malayalees.

Written by Puva Arumugam





# Alphonsa Jose Paloccaran

✧ With roots in Singapore since 1977

## Well, this is home now

Dear Amma,  
I just posted a letter to you this morning and I am waiting to hear from you. I don't think the postal service is very efficient. I haven't received a letter from you in a week. Did you get my letters? I send two out last week as usual. This week I am sending you three letters.

Amma, Jose Ettan didn't like the curry I made last night. It reminded me of the first meal I had made on the ship as a newlywed captain's wife. I wanted to impress his friends on board. You know, between being shuttled to the convent school and all, I never really had an opportunity to cook back home. I think the chicken curry must have been a tad too spicy that night but everyone said it was nice with tears streaming down their faces. So I kept piling their plates with more food.

Jose Ettan didn't like the curry I cooked today and told me so. My children liked the curry.

In the afternoon, I took the children to the playground. I told them not to run around so much as they might fall. They didn't listen to me. I was worried about the dogs in the area. You must remember the occasion when Suman was bitten by the dog. So I told them not to run. Nobody listens to me. I miss home, Amma.

I am all alone most of the day with the children in a huge three-storey house in

a place called Pasir Panjang. I miss our friends and relatives who would drop in without an invitation. We have no Malayalee friends in Pasir Panjang.

Write to me soon, Amma. Please write a long letter. I feel like I have left my heart behind in Kerala.

Alphonsa Jose Paloccaran, 1977

I used to write letters home to my mother every day on an aerogramme in Malayalam. I would try to squeeze in as much as possible in the letters. Sometimes an aerogram was not enough and I wrote about 10 pages in a letter pad. I wrote every day. My mother used to say that, sometimes, three letters arrived at the same time. But the letters from my mother and sisters were never as detailed as mine and did not quench my thirst for news from home.

In the 1980s, my days came to be filled with kitty parties (a get-together of women), regular saree shopping trips at Serangoon Road, and shopping at C K Tangs in Orchard Road, which was a short walk from my new apartment. We moved several times. I soon found myself busy with get-togethers and celebrating Vishu and Onam with Malayalee friends. We also played host to friends and family from India for whom, I would write a menu in Malayalam. There were very few occasions to write in Malayalam.

I soon started watching Tamil movies and Chinese programs on the television. There were no Malayalam movies on television then. We also had limited channels available in Singapore. Initially, I would read the subtitles; then I became fluent in Tamil and even began to watch Tamil movies at Ciro's theater with my friends.

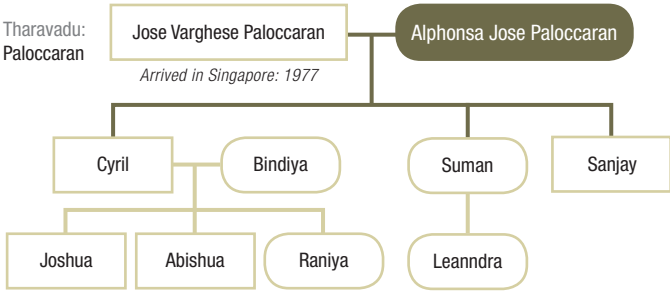
In the 1990s, phone calls became progressively cheaper. I was able to call home every day.

"I am boarding the plane now, Amma. We have been talking for the last two hours since I left our apartment. I am going to see you soon. Have I told you that I made Naadan fish curry today? Jose Ettan loved it. Yah... I will see you in a few hours then."

Funnily enough, when I got to Kerala, I had already told my mum all that had happened in Singapore and had nothing else to add.

Jose Ettan and I often talked about going home. At first, we thought we could go home after five years. But the five years became 10 years and the 10 years became 20 years. Now I have lived in Singapore far longer than I have lived in Kerala. These days, I am restless when I am in Kerala and start looking forward to getting back to Singapore. This is home now.

Written by Anitha Devi Pillai





❧ Families who arrived in 1970s–2000s ❧



From left: Dominic Puthuchery, Rajesh Gopalakrishnan, and Gopinath Pillai at Pravasi Express Nite 2013.



Bindu Nambiar with her parents (1975).



Alphonsa J Paloccaran (1969).



Baby Thomas (second from left) with St Thomas Syrian Orthodox Cathedral priest and altar assistants.



From left: C S Ullas Kumar, unidentified, Rev Jacob Johnson, Vikram Nair, Ong Ye Kung, M K Bhasi, unidentified, Stephen Samuel, Sreekanth A P V, and Mathai at the SG50 Malayalee Carnival (2015).



From left: Dr V P Nair, Gopinath Pillai, Rajesh Gopalakrishnan, and Sathian Pookkuttath. At the launch of Sathian's book *Oru Mazha Kkalathiloodu*.



Roshni Sudhir on her wedding day with Abhishek and her father Sudhir (2013).



Baby Thomas and Shyla Baby Thomas (2006).

❧ Forging connections ❧



From right: K O George and Annamma George with Goh Chok Tong, former Prime Minister of Singapore.



Dr V P Nair (right) with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



Mr & Mrs Lee Kuan Yew (left) with Mr & Mrs Kesavapany.



Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam (right) with Jayakumar Unnithan at the SG50 Malayalee Carnival (2015).



Malayalam Language Education Society (MLES) committee members, staff and students with K B Ganesh Kumar, an Indian politician (seated, second row, in green).



A scene in a Malayalam movie that Reviendran Gopal Pillay (third from left) acted in with Mammootty (far left).



The Singapore Malayalee Association raised half a million dollars for a bursary to fund tertiary education for needy students in Singapore.

From left: Gopinath Pillai, unidentified, Ong Ye Kung, Vikram Nair, and Jayakumar Unnithan (2016).



C G Narayanan (left) and Sajeev Narayanan (right) with former President of Singapore S R Nathan.



*Section  
Four*

# CONCLUSION

## Epilogue: My Journey

Anitha Devi Pillai

“*Veettu perru entha?* (What is your ‘house name’?)” asked a lady whom I had met at an Onam gathering.

I was a teenager then, and, although I knew enough Malayalam to understand that she was asking me for the name of my house, I was totally clueless about the cultural connotations in her question. She was one of the many new migrants who had arrived in the late 1980s. I assumed that it was a peculiar way of asking me where I lived. So I rattled off my address in Ang Mo Kio, probably much to her amusement.

It only dawned on me years later that she was asking me which *tharavad* I belonged to. At that point in time, I had only been to Kerala once—and that too for a brief holiday. The topic of ancestry did not feature high on a teenager’s priority of things that one needed to know. My parents were born in Singapore and Malaysia. They had never talked about their ancestral *tharavads* in Kerala.

The parents of my father, Aravindakshan Pillai, migrated to Singapore in 1920 and all but one of his siblings were born and raised in Singapore. But as fate would have it, most of his family members returned to Kerala and settled in their village in Paravur, Kollam. Others who worked for the British administration were granted British citizenship and moved to England in the 1970s, leaving my father and one of his sisters, Indra Pillay, in Singapore. It must have been an unsettling time for the family even as different members sought and found greener pastures.

My maternal grandmother, Kalyani Amma, arrived as a three-year-old in British Malaya with her father, Maadhavan Nair, and Ammini Amma from Ottapaalam,

Palakkad in 1923. Kalyani Amma never returned to Kerala. It was expensive in those days to travel, and many Malayalees rarely did so. She married her cousin, a Mathematics teacher, Kutti Krishan Nair, soon after he arrived in British Malaya in the 1930s. He had moved to the home of his maternal uncle, Maadhavan Nair (who was also my great-grandfather), in British Malaya, to look for a job. He too never returned to Kerala—not even for a short visit.

My mother, Kamala Devi Aravindan, was educated in a Tamil school in Malaysia. She was raised with a healthy dose of the Kerala essence in a Malaysian setting. She is a Tamil writer who frequently writes about Malayalee families and their cultural practices—interestingly, in Tamil.

My mother’s idea of the Onam *sadya* (banquet) that she had inherited from her mother comprises a few Malaysian-Singaporean dishes such as *tofu sambal*. At the risk of revealing a family secret, I need to let you know that it was not a practice my father completely agreed with as he was raised on more traditional fare by his parents, who were born and bred in Kerala. But, for both of his daughters’ sake, who were in more ways Singaporean than Keralite, it served as a compromise. He quietly let it go, just as he had to accept that Onam or Vishu are not likely to ever be public holidays in Singapore. The younger generation was oblivious to these “struggles”.

But growing up in the 1980s and 1990s also meant explaining to other members of the Indian community that Malayalee Hindus did not necessarily celebrate Deepavali. Despite being the second largest Indian community in Singapore, there was very little awareness about the Malayalee

culture. My parents watched as some Malayalees started embracing other traditions. It was the convenient thing to do. Many families slowly assimilated into the Tamil community and retained only some semblance of their ancestral roots.

Increasingly, many of the third- and fourth-generation members of the community were no longer literate in Malayalam. A few had a basic knowledge of Malayalam from attending weekend classes run by volunteers. Many families with weaker ties to Kerala also began to speak a local variety of Singapore Malayalam that borrowed features from the Tamil language as well as Singlish.

These days, with the recent influx of Malayalee professionals in Singapore, Onam celebrations take place at a much grander scale and there are several celebrations taking place every weekend for at least a month at community centers across the country. The media coverage of these activities and Facebook groups have brought about greater awareness of the community to the public. Interestingly, active participation by newly arrived migrants has also resulted in the activities and functions being catered to a specific audience who are familiar with Kerala politics, culture and Hindi songs. Publications that are predominantly or completely written in Malayalam are now locally produced to cater to the new migrants. The Internet and the arrival of Asianet in 2005 have also made Malayalam movies, serials and music more readily available.

Personally for me, things changed drastically, in 2002, with my arranged marriage to an Indian from my mother’s ancestral hometown. He was part of the new wave of migrants in Singapore who were primarily



My grandfather, Balakrishnan Pillai, captured during his usual route to the shops from his house in 13½ Mile, Sembawang. Interestingly, the photograph was captioned “Whose grandfather is this?” by the administrator of the Facebook group, Sofea Abdul Rahman. Well, now you know.

Photo credit: George Hardington (between late 1960s and early 1970s).

from the IT industry. His shock when I introduced *mee goreng* (fried noodles) as an Indian dish at our first meeting and his obvious amusement at my Malayalam left me baffled. I had always been told that my command of spoken Malayalam was pretty good and far above what is expected of a third/fourth-generation Singapore Malayalee. It was through him that I rediscovered my roots.

I started asking questions: *What’s my tharavad name? Why is Accha’s (father’s) tharavad in Trivella but we don’t seem to know anyone from our ancestral hometown nor have we seen it? What happened when my grandparents returned to their ancestral*

*home after living in Singapore for 50 years? Why do Malayalees ask me if my parents’ marriage was a love-match as soon as they hear that my paternal family is from Travancore and maternal family from Malabar?*

This book is in many ways a response to my journey. As an applied linguist, I had started off investigating literacy practices of Singapore Malayalees. But as I listened to the interviewees’ voices, it became clear that it was a story about the journey that they made from Kerala to Singapore both physically and metaphorically.

My story is also embedded within the many voices in this book. In the course of this research, I discovered the photo of my

paternal grandfather, Balakrishnan Pillai, on a private Facebook group for former residents of the Naval Base: Old Sembawang Naval Base Nostalgic Lane. It is the only color photo of my grandfather that exists. For all these years, it has been in the possession of a stranger in the UK. Now, I wonder how much of our history lies buried in the closets of those who returned to Kerala and the UK.

As Amy Tan puts it: “When all the missing pieces of your life are found, put together with glue of memory and reason, there are more pieces to be found.” My journey continues.



## The Research Team



**Dr Anitha Devi Pillai** (Principal Investigator) is a third/fourth-generation Singapore Malayalee, an applied linguist by training and a teacher-educator by profession. She enjoys working in interdisciplinary areas of research, particularly ones that focus on literacy practices. She's the author

of *Singaporean Malayalam: The Presence of a Hybrid Language* and has published research articles on the Singapore Malayalee community. She conceptualized the Singapore Malayalee Story project in 2002 and embarked on it in 2013 with a grant from the National Heritage Board, Singapore.



**Binod Therat** (Photographer) is a software architect by profession who shares his late father, Therat Kesavan Kutty Menon's love for photography. He is passionate about photography particularly of people and landscapes. Binod is a first-generation Singapore Malayalee with roots in Palakkad, Kerala. As a new migrant and a father of a fifth-generation Malayalee, he is interested in understanding the psyche of fellow Singapore Malayalees of all ages.



**Suvita Thanagopalasamy** (Research Assistant) embarked on this project as part of her honours year research on the home and school literacy practices of Singapore Malayalees. She will be pursuing a Post-graduate Diploma in Education in English Language and Social Studies. She plans to

research on the lives of Singapore Indians through a social history lens next.



**Aishwarya Nalamthamby** (Research Assistant) is a Tamil Teacher and part-time undergraduate studying Tamil language, Tamil literature and English language. She loves to examine South Asian culture, particularly the diaspora of Indians in Singapore and their unique identity.



**Dr Puva Arumugam** (Co-Principal Investigator) is a Singaporean Indian writer who currently resides in Australia. She graduated with a PhD in Theater and Cultural Studies. Puva is a playwright and has staged plays both in Singapore and in Australia in various theater festivals. Her writings serve

as a voice for minorities. Puva also takes a keen research and writing interest in diaspora and ethnic minority migrant communities. Her involvement in this project has been to write about the various trajectories of the Singapore Malayalee migrant community.



**Sumi Baby Thomas** (Research Assistant) is a second-generation Singapore Malayalee who moved to Singapore when she was five years old. She is a Mathematics teacher in Singapore. Sumi has a keen interest in the social history of the Singapore Syrian Christian Community and loves her

native language, Malayalam. She plans to research on the Singapore Christian community next.



**Faustina Asha** (Research Assistant) is a Mathematics and English language teacher who is passionate about studying cultures and societies. She loves to discover new areas of research and believes in going to great length in the pursuit of new information. Faustina likes meeting new people

and believes that a good researcher will help people to talk from the heart.



**Sreedharan Vijayamohan** (Research Assistant) is a Special Needs teacher with a keen interest in researching literacy practices of minorities and examining intervention strategies to facilitate language learning.