



experience
singapore

A newsletter of the
Singapore Cooperation Programme

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INDIAN HEARTBEAT

THE ETHNIC ENCLAVE OF
LITTLE INDIA IN SINGAPORE

AT THE HUB OF IT ALL

PLAYING A CENTRAL
ROLE IN THE SOUTH
ASIAN DISAPORA

A HAVEN FOR THE CHILDREN

SINGAPORE HELPS TO REMODEL
THE JAFFNA PUBLIC LIBRARY

Dear readers,

Thank you for your very positive reaction to the last issue of *Experience Singapore*, where our articles on environmentally-friendly urban living and volunteerism proved to be particularly popular.

This issue focuses on Singapore's well-established but still-expanding links with South Asia. Singapore is home to a globally significant number of people originating from India and the rest of South Asia. Find out in **At The Hub of It All** and **An Obvious Choice** how Singapore is becoming both a meeting point and a place to do business for the South Asian diaspora.

In **A Little Piece of India**, discover why the Little India enclave in Singapore is a favourite spot with locals and tourists alike. Also read about how migrant workers from Bangladesh keep **In Touch With Home** through Singapore's only Bengali-language newspaper *Banglar Kantha*.

This issue's **Joining Hands** segment highlights Singapore philanthropic organisation Temasek Foundation's programmes in India and Bhutan, focusing on earthquake mitigation technologies and emergency nursing training. In addition, we relate how the Singapore Cooperation Programme, with the help of other Singapore agencies, is bringing back the joy of **Reading It Right** to the children in Jaffna, Sri Lanka with the newly-remodelled children's section of the Jaffna Public Library.

We hope that you enjoy this issue. And do keep the letters and emails coming with your feedback and comments.

Sudesh Maniar

Director

Public Affairs Directorate

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore

KEEP IN TOUCH!

Share with us your memories, photos and views of your experience in Singapore under the Singapore Cooperation Programme. Email us at mfa@mfa.gov.sg.

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QUOTES FROM READERS' LETTERS

"In the last issue, I was humbled by the increasing spirit of volunteerism. Volunteerism sends a big message of brotherhood to the needy and eases Government's role of providing. This awareness should be stepped up to bring more people on board."

Edward Luande
Uganda

"Experience Singapore April-June 2011 gave me a chance to know more about how Singaporeans live 'The Green Life'... In my opinion, Singapore can be a role model to all developing countries, including Ethiopia, in every aspect."

Tefera Mekonnen
Ethiopia

"It was nice and interesting to read about new developments in Singapore particularly the stories 'Electric Car Pilot Begins' and 'The Green Life'. Singapore is one the most efficient nations in the world... (and) the people are friendly."

Luke Mua
Solomon Islands



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SINGAPORE

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Cover photo: Steve Zhu

INDIAN HERITAGE GETS A BOOST

The promotion of Indian arts and culture is set to get a boost when Singapore's Indian Heritage Centre opens its doors by December 2013. Located in the district of Little India, the S\$12 million centre will feature exhibitions that showcase the history of the Indian community in Singapore. It will also house galleries and educational spaces.

The winning design for the centre blends modern architecture and traditional Indian elements. It features an eye-catching translucent façade that will become iridescent when reflect-

ing daylight but transparent when backlit at night, revealing a colourful mural.

At a site dedication ceremony on 16 Aug, 2011, then-Singapore President S R Nathan said that he hoped the centre would attract both local and foreign visitors, and become a focal point for the Indian community.

"The Little India precinct still contains evidence of the various trades and industries of our Indian forefathers who had established roots and set up businesses in Singapore. It offers examples of both 'living' tangible



Photo: Architectural Design: Robert Greg Shand Architects in collaboration with URBANarc Pte Ltd © National Heritage Board, Singapore

and intangible Indian heritage," said Mr Nathan, who retired on 30 Aug 2011 after 12 years in office as President.

IMPROVED RANKINGS FOR S'PORE UNIVERSITIES

Two of Singapore's three publicly-funded universities — Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) — have improved on their positions in a global ranking of universities.

NTU shot up 16 places to take 58th position while NUS moved up three spots to be ranked 28th in the world, according to the *2011 World University Rankings*.

Released on 4 Sept 2011, the rankings examined education and research at almost 3,000 institutions. It looked at six key indicators — academic reputation, employer reputation, student-to-faculty ratio, number of citations, number of international faculty and number of international students.

Over 33,000 academics and 16,000 graduate employers were polled.

NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan said: "This year's placing reflects a strong recognition from global employers and academia of the world-class quality of NUS' education and research."

NTU president Professor Bertil Andersson said: "While rankings do move up and down, jumping 16 places is fantastic, as in the most established global ranking system, positions do not fluctuate greatly year-on-year."

The third university, Singapore Management University, was not included in the survey because it is a specialised university.

TALKING POINT

"In Singapore, if we run into trouble, who is going to be standing there helping us get out of the hole? So, I think the best thing is don't get into a hole and maintain a sense of self-reliance and personal responsibility because that is the best way for us to succeed."

— Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on why it is important to avoid being a welfare state, at the country's National Day rally on 16 Aug 2011



NEWS IN NUMBERS

5 million

The number of stories about Singapore the organisers of *Singapore Memory Project* hope to collect from Singaporeans by 2015, when the Republic turns 50. The project, launched in October 2010, is aimed at capturing, preserving and showcasing memories of Singapore. So far, about 33,000 stories have been collected.

S\$34.5 million

The amount raised in Singapore to date, in assistance to the victims of the earthquake and tsunami that hit northeastern Japan on 11 March 2011.

No.1

Singapore Airlines (SIA) has retained its pole position in a ranking of airlines worldwide this year, according to a survey conducted by online travel magazine *SmartTravelAsia.com*.



Photo: TPG

AT THE HUB OF IT ALL

SINGAPORE AIMS TO BE A HUB FOR THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA, AND A SPRINGBOARD FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN SOUTH ASIA AND THE REST OF THE WORLD. WORDS BY AGATHA KOH BRAZIL AND ARTI MULCHAND

At an estimated 50 million, the South Asian diaspora is one of the most ethnically diverse and geographically dispersed groups in the world, with immigrants and their descendants hailing from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Many members of this diaspora are success stories in various industries in their new adopted homes, and they could bring great success to both their

adoptive homes and the entire South Asian region if they came together.

What they need is a neutral ground, like Singapore, which is non-threatening and friendly to all, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, Chairman of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), told *Experience Singapore*.

Towards this end, the Institute organised the inaugural South Asian Diaspora Convention (SADC) with the theme 'Linking the South Asian Diaspora' on 21 and 22 July this year.

Officiated by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the convention presented a networking platform for about 1,000 academic, business, corporate, media, civil society and public policy experts.

These included participants such as Mr Shahid Javed Burki, the former Finance Minister of Pakistan, Mr Tarun Das, the former chief mentor to the Confederation of Indian Industry, Dr Parag Khanna, Senior Research Fellow at the New America Foundation and Professor T. N. Srinivasan, Yong Pung How Chair Professor at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Samuel C. Park, Jr. Professor of Economics at the Economic Growth Centre of Yale University. The convention also attracted prominent non-South Asian speakers like Mr Richard Armitage, former Deputy Secretary of State of the United States and Dr Han Seung Soo, former Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea.

"We felt Singapore would be a convenient venue for the diaspora to meet, exchange views and interact as well as explore the possibility of how Singapore can be a springboard for dialogue between South Asia and the rest of the world," Ambassador Pillai said.

Recounting a view expressed by the Confederation of Nepali Industries President Binod Chaudhary, Ambassador Pillai also said Singapore could be "the Davos to the diaspora," referring to the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Switzerland, a neutral platform for political leaders from all over the world to meet and discuss pressing global issues.

Singapore's signing of the landmark Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with India in 2005 highlighted the role Singapore can play as a springboard for South Asians to engage the region. This has led to a boom in bilateral trade which last year exceeded \$530 billion, with Singapore becoming the second biggest foreign investor in India. ASEAN, of which Singapore is a founding member, also has a Free Trade Agreement with India.

At the same time, Singapore is continuing to enrich its understanding of South Asia, leading to the estab-

lishment of ISAS in 2004 to focus on South Asian culture and heritage. The Institute is an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore. ISAS has established a South Asian Link website, which after its revamp, will showcase its various activities while highlighting happenings and developments in the various South Asian communities in the world. ISAS also launched a bi-annual newsletter, the *South Asian Link*, in November 2009 to track global activities in the South Asian diaspora.

CENTRE OF EVENTS

Professor Tan Tai Yong, Director of ISAS, said Singapore has been actively promoting activities related to the global South Asian diaspora for years. It has hosted international meetings, as well as cultural and artistic events linked to the diaspora. The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Diaspora* is one such example. Launched by then-Singapore President S R Nathan in 2006, it is probably the most comprehensive and authoritative account of the South Asian diaspora to date. It enjoys a worldwide circulation and has a French edition.

"The book is one of the things that has helped Singapore become the hub for the South Asian diaspora," said Dr Tan. Sequels are being prepared, and the first to be published would be *The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora*.

Several South Asian communities also organise and hold international meetings in Singapore. For instance, in 2007, the 14th International Sindhi Sammelan drew about 650 Sindhis from all over the world to their annual conference. A year later, Singapore was host to the Parvasi Bharatiya Divas, an annual gathering for overseas Indians. Various South Asian communities in Singapore also organise annual events to celebrate such occasions as Diwali, Vesakhi, Poila Baishakh, Durga Puja and many others.

Singapore is now gearing up for the launch of the Indian Heritage Centre. To be completed by end 2012, the centre will celebrate the journey and contribution of the Singaporean Indian community through permanent exhibitions and cultural programmes.

DRUMMING TO THE DIASPORA'S BEAT

English-language newspaper *Tabla!* links members of the Indian diaspora in Singapore

In the past three years, members of the South Asian diaspora who have come to Singapore for work reasons have been able to stay connected to their homeland through *Tabla!*, an English-language newspaper that turns three in October. While the weekly newspaper's primary focus is on the Indian diaspora, the largest group within the South Asian diaspora, it covers issues and interests that appeal to a much broader group, said editor Pradeep Paul. Topics range from community activities to Bollywood entertainment.

"We feed the diaspora's hunger for a taste of home while helping them understand their local compatriotes and exposing them to the range of



things to see and do here. At the same time, the paper also appeals to local Indians and long-staying expatriates, and helps them understand the newcomers better," said Mr Paul.

"The free paper also creates a sense of community among the various groups; the Indian diaspora alone is extremely diverse," he added. About 30,000 copies are given away each Friday.

Photo courtesy Tabla!



"AN OBVIOUS CHOICE"

Business brought him here, but Singapore is now home for Indian-born Anil Thadani

Private equity investor Anil Thadani is away from Singapore

sixty per cent of the time on business, but he calls the Republic home. Indeed, about five years ago, Mr Thadani bought a piece of land here and built a house for his wife and two children, now aged 27 and 23.

Originally from Delhi, he lived in Hong Kong for 20 years before business matters dictated a relocation more than 10 years ago.

"We had to be in this part of the world and Singapore was the obvious choice," said the 65-year-old.

As the private equity industry matured, and as Singapore's importance in world financial matters grew, many more private equity players from around the world began to set up shop around the region,

with many choosing Singapore.

Mr Thadani opened an office in Singapore in early 1998. Then operating as Schroder Capital Partners, the company was re-branded in 2004, and listed on the London Stock Exchange in 2007 as Symphony International Holdings.

A chemical engineer by training, he counts wildlife photography as one of his many interests. Now a Singapore Permanent Resident, Mr Thadani sits on many boards, including the Board of Trustees of the Singapore Management University.

"The lure of a harmonious multicultural society with an excellent education, healthcare, lifestyle infrastructure and a business-friendly environment, with a well-defined rule of law, is a powerful pull for any community," he said of Singapore.

Photo courtesy Anil Thadani

IN SINGAPORE

Little India is the place to go for everything Indian, especially flower garlands and incense, herbs and spices.



The sides of shophouses are very often lined with posters of the latest Bollywood blockbusters.



The Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple is one of the oldest Hindu temples in Singapore.

A LITTLE PIECE OF INDIA

“A magical showcase of sights, sounds and smells” is an apt description of the ethnic enclave of Little India — and indeed, few would dispute that after a visit.

WORDS BY SURESH NAIR AND GWEN LIN

Dickson, Clive, Dunlop and Campbell are British family names which incidentally, are the names of streets in an area Singaporeans call Little India. They remain as historical hints of the district’s distinctively Indian yet intrinsically cosmopolitan heritage.

Little India was originally an European enclave that evolved into an Indian cultural hub after Indian traders started raising and trading cattle in the area.

Today, its streets — which branch out from the main Serangoon Road — are lined with grocers selling herbs and spices for curries, goldsmiths offering ornate jewellery sets, boutiques displaying alluring *sari* styles, and sundry shops blaring soundtracks from Bollywood blockbusters.

The likes of Dickson Road, Clive Street, Desker Road, Dunlop Street, and Campbell Lane are named after distinguished administrators, or got their names from colonial settlers who built their homes there after Singapore was founded in 1819. Campbell Lane, for example, got its name from Sir Colin Campbell, 1st Baron Clyde (1792-1863), a Scottish field marshal who was responsible for ending the Indian Mutiny in 1857. This area was where cows were once slaughtered for beef.

Other street names also provide reminders of the cattle-trading era. Buffalo Road runs parallel to Kerbau Road (Kerbau means ‘buffalo’ in the Malay language). There is also Belilios Road, named after a prominent cattle trader from Kolkata, India. Then there is, of course, the formerly-named

Kandang Kerbau Hospital, commonly known as “KK” Hospital, the birthplace for over 1.2 million Singaporeans. It was in fact the largest maternity hospital in the world, from the 1950s to the early 1970s.

The Peranakans (Straits Chinese), Chinese and Malays also found themselves a niche in this district, and the colourful mix shaped the varied architectural landscape of Little India today. The architecture ranges from Chinese Peranakan houses, Malay-style shophouses to Art Deco gems.

The area’s multicultural nature is also displayed through its places of worship. One of the oldest Hindu temples in Singapore, the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, was built in 1881 by Bengali convict labourers. On the same stretch is Angullia Mosque built in 1898. Nearby are the

Photos: Singapore Tourism Board
Photo of Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple: Steve Zhu

Anglican Church of True Light built in 1952, and the 98 year-old Leong San Buddhist Temple.

"Some of the pre-war shophouses have been able to retain an old-world flavour," said photographer Darren Soh, who had a studio in the area. He shot the iconic Mustafa Centre — a 24-hour shopping mall and landmark in Little India — for *Canvas*, a compilation of 14 photographers' depictions of Singapore, which was presented to IMF and World Bank members at their annual meeting in Singapore in 2006.

A MELTING POT OF FLAVOURS

Little India also expresses its diversity through food. At one end of Serangoon Road is the Tekka market. "Tek-ka" means "the foot of bamboo shoots" in Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, and it was for the clumps that grew along the banks of the Rochor Canal intersecting Serangoon Road that the lively marketplace was named after. This is also the biggest, and some say, the cheapest "wet" market in Singapore.

There are myriad stalls selling foodstuff ranging from banana leaves, spices and herbs to *halal* mutton, free-range chicken and a large variety of crabs at almost wholesale prices. This is where homemakers and top chefs alike beat a path to daily to pick up the freshest produce.

Chris Millar, the Group Executive Chef for the 1-Rochester restaurant group, is assured of getting the freshest produce at the market because customers there "are ruthless and don't stand for stale food".

And what would Little India be

There is a variety of architectural styles in Little India.



"Fish head curry" is offered by many restaurants in the area.

without its eateries? The area, which measures about 700 by 500 sqm in size, boasts more than 200 Asian restaurants. While *biryani* stalls and *prata* shops can be found in every nook and cranny, Little India is also where you can find unexpected gems such as The French Stall — a no-frills bistro famed for its authentic French onion soup and chicken liver pâté. Or Ng Ah Sio Pork Rib Soup stall on Rangoon Road, which attracts locals, an international crowd of expatriates, and even visiting dignitaries.

But it is the iconic Indian fish-head curry that stands out for its fusion of Chinese, Indian and perhaps a hint of Malay cuisines. It appeals to Chinese diners who relish the gelatinous, bony bits of the fish head, and the Indians who appreciate the complex mix of spices in the gravy. Indeed, the dish did not originate in India but in Singapore, and numerous "fish head curry" restaurants in the district now claim the dish as their speciality.

Some say the Little India label is an inaccurate guidebook generalisation as the area also represents the

food and culture — to an extent — of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. What is unarguable is that the area is also the nerve center of the sizeable migrant labour force from India. They throng the area on Sundays, adding to the rich tapestry of visitors.

"Little India is the focal point for shopping, food, prayers and even banking. My family and I get everything 'Indian' there," said Dr V P Nair, a heart surgeon who is the Singapore president of the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin. "Little India retains its distinct identity without degenerating into a mere tourist attraction."

A weekday morning is the best time to take a tour of the area. If you're planning a walking trail, follow the Heritage Trail designed by the National Heritage Board (find it at <http://heritagetrails.sg>) which starts at the Tekka Centre. Or if you want to engage the explorer in you, just head down to the area. You will know you are in Little India by its magical showcase of sights, sounds and smells.



TO VISIT:

- Tekka Market, Tekka Centre, 665 Buffalo Road
- ◀ Mustafa Centre, 145 Syed Alwi Road
- Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, 141 Serangoon Road
- Angullia Mosque, 265 Serangoon Road
- Leong San Buddhist Temple, 371 Race Course Road
- Anglican Church of True Light, 25G Perak Road



Engineers in India during a site visit to a school.

FROM THE GROUND UP

In areas such as engineering and nursing, Singapore is upgrading the skills of trainers in India and Bhutan who can then share their expertise with their own communities. WORDS BY RONALD RAJAN

In the past two decades alone, a series of earthquakes have brought death, devastation and suffering to several parts of India. These include the quake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale that struck the state of Gujarat in 2001, killing at least 20,085 people and injuring 166,836 with about 339,000 buildings, bridges, roads and other structures destroyed or damaged. The latest major earthquake, measuring 6.9, occurred on 18 Sep 2011 in Sikkim, resulting in death and damage not only in India but in several neighbouring countries.

The odds are that India will continue to be beset by such calamities, and on a bigger scale too. The entire Himalayan belt — which lies in proximity to the northern states of Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Assam and Bihar — is prone to great earthquakes of magnitudes exceeding 8.0, four of which have occurred in India in the last century. With over 59 per cent of its land area under seismic threat, more lives are at risk, and scientific studies have warned that worse may yet follow.

In an effort to mitigate disaster risks in India's seismic zones, Temasek Foundation — the philanthropic arm of Temasek Holdings — has been working with partners such as the Nanyang Technological University's School of Civil and Environmental Engineering to train Indian engineers in technologies that can reduce the risk of buildings collapsing during earthquakes.

Temasek Foundation's grant of S\$1.4 million will help fund the efforts of 250 state government engineers, state university earthquake faculty members and graduate students, and local builders.

In particular, these engineers are seeking to deploy earthquake-resistant confined masonry construction and seismic strengthening techniques on 10 public school buildings in five earthquake-prone regions i.e. Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttarakhand.

"This is an important initiative in starting the chain reaction of getting trained and training others. The availability of skilled masons who are ready to adapt to the new technology and needs of society is the biggest challenge," said participant Sachin Balasaheb Kadam, a master trainer from the Department of Earthquake Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology.

Temasek Foundation CEO Benedict Cheong points to how its support of these programmes can have a catalytic effect. Following the training and strengthening of two public schools in Patan, Gujarat in 2010, the local education authorities have approached one of the programme's local partners — Sustainable Environment and Ecological Society (SEEDS) India — to strengthen another 80 public schools in the state using the techniques taught.

Over the past four years, Temasek Foundation has committed grants to

over 100 programmes in Asia, of which 11 are in South Asia.

In India, the Foundation has supported programmes worth a total of S\$5.2 million to date. These include the detection and treatment of preventable blindness through Standard Chartered Bank's "Seeing is Believing" project. In New Delhi, Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh, 40 "vision technicians" have been trained to detect symptoms of blindness early.

In Bhutan, \$1.8 million has gone into three programmes, including partnering the country's Ministry of Health to upgrade nursing care. Currently, Singapore's Nanyang Polytechnic's School of Health Sciences (Nursing) is training 94 Bhutanese senior nurses and nursing managers in critical care and emergency nursing through a "training of trainers" programme. They will eventually transfer their expertise to the Bhutanese nursing community.

The other two programmes are aimed at helping Bhutan's education sector. One seeks to aid school principals and heads of department in developing a blueprint for reform, by setting up "Beacon" Schools to serve as models for all publicly-funded schools. The other — carried out in conjunction with the Singapore International Foundation and Royal University of Bhutan — involves helping to integrate the use of information technology in Bhutan's education system.

IN TOUCH WITH HOME

Filled with personal stories and reflections, news and entertainment highlights, Singapore's only Bengali-language newspaper *Banglar Kantha* serves to link Bangladeshi workers here to their homeland even as it helps them settle into their host country.

When Mr AKM Mohsin left Bangladesh for Singapore in 1991 to take up computer and English language courses, little did he know that years later, he would feel called upon to set up a newspaper for thousands of his fellow countrymen in Singapore.

There are currently about 120,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore and many of them depend on *Banglar Kantha* or 'Voice of Bengal' to keep them informed of developments in Singapore and Bangladesh. Mr Mohsin, now a Singapore Permanent Resident, set up the Bengali-language publication in 2006 after observing that his fellow countrymen seemed to be isolated from Singapore society.

"When they seek help, the Bengali interpreters are mostly from India, not Bangladesh, so the accent and terminology is different, thus difficult to understand," said Mr Mohsin, 47. "Family is also a big part of Bangladeshi life, and so the workers feel cut off here. All these factors [make them] crave for something familiar."

These workers pen poems, stories and thoughts about their lives in Singapore and their families back home, some of which Mr Mohsin publishes in *Banglar Kantha*. In doing so, he hopes to not only help ease some of their homesickness, but also to create a better understanding between them and their host country.

Besides these personal contributions, entertainment and arts-related stories, each issue of the bi-monthly publication also carries a compilation of news about Bangladesh and



Mr AKM Moshin, now a Singaporean Permanent Resident, started the *Banglar Kantha* newspaper to serve his fellow countrymen in Singapore.

Photo: Trevor Tan

Singapore. *Banglar Kantha* also provides a useful channel for Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to disseminate information to the Bangladeshi workers here, by taking out advertisements or running sponsored features in the newspaper.

In April this year, Mr Mohsin was in the news himself. A port worker from Chittagong in southeastern Bangladesh had fallen asleep in a container which was then loaded onto a Singapore-bound ship. Mr Mohsin helped Singapore police and the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority in interviewing the man and tracking down his family.

Singaporean Alex Goh, 51, who runs a landscaping company, makes an effort to get a copy of *Banglar Kantha* regularly for his three Bangladeshi employees. "They are proud that they

have a newspaper of their own, and sometimes when they see something in it that they want me to know about, they will try and translate the article into English for me," he said.

The 24-page paper costs S\$1.50 and is distributed to Bangladeshi shops and foreign worker dormitories. It currently has a circulation of about 2,500, a sizeable increase from the 500 print run when it was first launched.

From a young age, Mr Mohsin was interested in journalism as a means of community service, so he takes the long hours he puts in now as chief editor and chief executive of the publication in his stride.

He said he started *Banglar Kantha* because Singapore doesn't have any Bangladeshi publications.

"I wanted to make a contribution," he said.



The Jaffna Public Library in northern Sri Lanka holds a special significance for Sri Lankans.

READING IT RIGHT IN JAFFNA

It has suffered a devastating fire and withstood the country's civil war, but the Jaffna Public Library building in northern Sri Lanka now stands as a symbol of hope — especially for the city's children.

WORDS BY ROSA ATAN

Not too long ago, the children's section in the Jaffna Public Library, with its tall bookshelves and heavy furniture, was not very user-friendly. There was also a lack of programmes that would have made a visit interesting. All that is now history, thanks to a makeover made possible by the collaborative efforts of the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP), the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), the National Library Board (NLB), members of the Singapore Sri Lankan Community and The Prima Group.

The library now boasts an attractive and pleasant environment for reading and learning. The walls of the

children's section have been given a fresh coat of paint. The furniture is now child-friendly, and there are book bins and computer terminals.

The remodelling of the children's area was initiated in 2009 by Singapore's then Foreign Minister George Yeo. The two-storey Jaffna Public Library, built in 1933, is one of the country's prominent historical buildings. In 1981, during the civil war, it was set on fire as a result of local political tensions. Before that, it had been one of the largest in Asia with more than 97,000 different books and manuscripts.

The nine-month project began in September 2010, and was expected

to benefit at least 1,500 children aged five to 14. Apart from the "hardware" — the physical remodelling — two NLB volunteers helped improve the library's "software". Sponsored by the SCP, the NLB volunteers made two trips to Jaffna to conduct workshops for their Jaffna counterparts. They are Ms Amarjeet Kaur Gill, Assistant Director of the Public Library Services, and Ms Chew Siew San, who was then a librarian from the Children's Services.

One workshop called "Raise a Reader" taught parents and caregivers how to select age-appropriate reading materials and use books with children. The Singapore librarians also shared with their Jaffna counterparts methods



Ms Amarjeet Kaur Gill (left), conducting a reading programme with Jaffna librarians.



Mr George Yeo lighting the *kuthu vilakku* (a holy lamp) to signify a new beginning for the library, at a special ceremony on 29 July 2011.

on cultivating love for reading in children, and using activities and games to create a supportive reading and learning environment.

The new services have taken off very well. One of these is storytelling. "When the programme first started, there were about five or six children, but within a few weeks the numbers increased to between 25 to 30," said Ms Gill. Now there is also a weekly reading programme on Saturdays which attracts close to 50 children each week.

The NLB librarians also helped to train four "champion librarians". "They are equipped with the know-how to train and motivate their own colleagues to ensure projects remain sustainable," said Mr Edwin Sam, SIF's Manager for International Volunteerism.

Several Jaffna librarians also came to Singapore in January 2011 for a training attachment sponsored by the SCP. What stood out for Ms Gill has

been the "drive and determination of the [library] staff to learn and try out new skills being taught to them," she said. "They saw this as a way to raise the level of reading among their community."

The children see the library as a way to better themselves. The children, despite having lived through difficult times, also showed "resilience and spirit", said Ms Gill. "The library provides them a chance to learn English and a hope for a better future."

Like many parts of Sri Lanka, Jaffna, the capital city of the Northern Province, is still struggling to rebuild itself after 26 years of a civil war which ended in May 2009. But while the war is over, political reconciliation will take time.

"The long years of conflict have poisoned the soil, and removing that toxicity will take time and effort as well as the cooperation of all parties involved," said Mr George Yeo. He was in Jaffna as the Guest-of-Honour

THEY WANT MORE

Not only are the children "anxious", their parents are too, said Mdm Mary Emelda, the chief librarian at Jaffna Public Library.

The cause of their anxiety? They want to be sure they get a spot at one of the library's storytelling sessions, she said.

Ever since the remodelling of the children's section, many children have been clamouring for their parents to let them visit the library daily. For August alone, more than 312 children have visited the library, she said.

for the handover of the library to the Jaffna Municipal Council in July 2011. "The past is not the way to the future," said Mr Yeo. Sri Lanka and members of its diaspora need ways to move on. The new Jaffna library could be the fresh beginning it has been seeking.

"The library provides them a chance to learn English and a hope for a better future."

National Library Board volunteer Ms Amarjeet Kaur Gill



The furniture in the children's section is now child-friendly.

INAUGURAL COLLABORATION BY SINGAPORE AND JAPAN TO TRAIN AFGHAN POLICYMAKERS IN PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

To help senior Afghan policymakers better understand good governance and corruption management, Singapore and Japan organised an anti-corruption seminar for 18 senior Afghan officials from 18 to 22 July 2011. The participants comprised senior personnel from the Afghan High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption and the Ministry of Finance, among other government agencies.

The seminar was jointly organised under the Japan-Singapore Partnership Programme for the 21st Century (JSPP21). JSPP21 is the framework for collaboration between the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) administered by the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Since its inception in 1994, Singapore and Japan have conducted over 270 training programmes for over 4,700 government officials.

MFA's Senior Deputy Director for Technical Cooperation, Mr Jimmy Chua, in his Welcome Address, noted that the seminar marked the first time that Singapore and Japan were partnering to assist Afghanistan fight corruption and uphold good public governance.

By teaming up with Singapore, Japan hopes to provide valuable knowledge on fighting corruption to Afghan personnel who will take leadership roles in rebuilding their country, said the Japanese Ambassador to Singapore, Mr Yoichi Suzuki. "Nation building is a daunting task. All of you have my deepest respect because you are the ones who are at the forefront of nation building in Afghanistan," said Mr Suzuki. "Each nation has its own history. Anti-corruption efforts must reflect the particularities and special experiences in your own countries, but I am sure that our experience will provide you with some valuable insights."

Participants were taught how to tackle financial crime and corruption with site visits to Singapore's Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau and the Supreme Court. Two Japanese professors also gave lectures on the Japanese's experience in managing corruption.

Singapore has been extending technical assistance to Afghanistan under the SCP since 2002, when it provided a S\$1.2 million aid package to the country. To date, about 410 Afghan government officials have been trained under the SCP in areas such as public administration, education, environment, urban transport planning and health care.



Prof Dairokuno was one of two Japanese professors from Meiji University who gave lectures to the delegates.

"Each nation has its own history. Anti-corruption efforts must reflect the particularities and special experiences in your own countries."

Japanese Ambassador to Singapore, Mr Yoichi Suzuki

SCP ROUNDUP

20 MARCH TO 1 APRIL 2011

Twenty members of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) were in Singapore to learn more about our experience in public administration and good governance. During their trip, the Vietnamese were offered insights into how Singapore handled issues such as e-Governance, urban development, human resource management, public finance and anti-corruption. They visited various agencies such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the Land Transport Authority, the Housing Development Board and the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. The Vietnamese delegates also had a chance to observe Meet-the-People Sessions hosted by Members of Parliament. The Vietnamese delegation comprised members from CPV's Central Inspectorate and the Provincial Party Committee Inspectorate. The study visit was conducted by the Singapore Civil Service College and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

4 TO 6 MAY 2011

Singapore hosted a workshop on international trade for 40 parliamentarians from the Asia-Pacific region. The workshop — the third since 2009 — was aimed at helping the lawmakers to understand better the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and issues involved in international trade negotiations. This, in turn, would assist them in making trade-related legislation. Led by WTO officials, the workshop focused on areas such as negotiations, dispute settlement, agreements, e-Government, climate change and trade. The workshop gave participants a hands-on visit to the Jurong Island Petrochemical Complex, and Parliament Building.

20 TO 24 JUNE 2011

Six senior officials from the Kyrgyz Republic visited Singapore to learn about public policy development, anti-corruption measures, racial and religious harmony, and municipal administration. Conducted by the Singapore Civil Service College, it was the first customised programme sponsored by the Singapore Cooperation Programme for the Kyrgyz Republic. The Kyrgyz officials, who were from the Office of the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs amongst others, visited various ministries and agencies in Singapore including the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, People's Association and Housing and Development Board.

For more information on the Singapore Cooperation Programme, please visit www.scp.gov.sg