

Anitha Devi Pillai and Puva Arumugam, *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee Community*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2017. 339pp. ISBN-13:978-9814721837.

Reviewed by Shaila Koshy

Flipping quickly through *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee Community*, you might think you have a coffee table book in your hands. It is oversized and heavy. It looks good lying on a coffee table and is a potential conversation starter. And, it has impressive full-page Black & White portraits taken by photographer Binod Therat, except for four. But this 2017 book is anything but a superficial attempt to approach the topic of migration. And you will see social studies jargon like matrilineal, matrilocal and *tharavad* scattered through the pages and learn what they mean by the end of the book. *From Kerala to Singapore*, by Anitha Devi Pillai and Puva Arumugam, delves into the journey of Malayalees to British Malaya/Singapore, documenting their transformation from a diaspora of economic migrants to citizens. Migrants and their children who have questions about their roots, culture and identity will find the book a worthwhile read.

Much has been published on the amount of remittance by Malayalees working overseas. But this book explores the evolution of the Singapore Malayalee. Are you less a Malayalee if you are not literate in Malayalam but learn other languages to fit in, or marry a non-Malayalee Singaporean? Are you the same person when you've found a new home to raise your family and plant your roots? One of the interviewees who migrated in 1977 said she and her husband first thought they would return after five years, but that stretched to 10 years, then 20 years. The mother of two daughters, who has now lived in Singapore longer than she had in Kerala, says:

“These days I am restless when I am in Kerala and look forward to getting back to Singapore. This is home now.”

From Kerala to Singapore is probably one of the first books which includes the voice of the people. The authors conducted 130 interviews. The question of cultural identity is hotly debated in social theory, and *From Kerala to Singapore* makes a vital contribution to the discussion, says Antony Palackal, a sociologist from Loyola College of Social Sciences in Trivandrum, Kerala, in the Foreword.

Pillai, an academic at Nanyang Technological University, writes that this book was in many ways a response to her journey as a third or fourth generation Singapore Malayalee. Arumugam was happy to take up

Pillai's invitation to co-author because they would be using non-academic narratives to articulate the diasporic journey of the second largest Indian ethnic group in Singapore. A playwright and a poet, she writes that the research allowed her to observe how "Singapore Malayalees built their cultural identity through their language, Malayalam art forms, festivals." Growing up in Singapore, Arumugam, a Tamil, saw Indians as a "collective lot" unlike her Malayalee friends. She did not see the need to assert her identity as a Tamil Singaporean until she migrated to Australia.

From Kerala to Singapore is organised into four sections. The first two are historical accounts documenting the lives of Malayalees from 1870 to 2016. Section Three contains the stories of those who arrived in five different periods, personal memorabilia, and detailed family trees. The last section is an index of all the Hindus, Christians and Muslims interviewed, with their *tharavad* (ancestral home) names, the first family member to arrive in British Malaya/Singapore and when they came. I wish the font size in the book were bigger though. It was not older-eyes-friendly.

Their research showed that Indian migration to Singapore was said to have begun in 1819, with the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles. There was no mention of Malayalees among Raffles' entourage, but the Malabar Muslim Cemetery was in existence in 1819. This could mean that retail traders from Malabar were already in Singapore when it was being "founded" by Raffles. Official history does not always give you all the facts. For the Malaysian context of this, read your child's history book together with "What Your Teacher Didn't Tell you: The Annexe Lectures" by Farish A. Noor, who is also at Nanyang Technology. But this was not a case of wilful omission in Singapore. There are records documenting Malayalee contributions in the development of Singapore in several areas, for example, government, trade unions, culture and arts, and literature.

The earliest record of Malayalees in Singapore was 1911. But that was because there were no reliable records of those arriving and leaving Malaya before 1870 since they were subjects of the British colony and did not need visas or passports. And many migrants chose to get off the boat in Malaya and travel by road because if they landed in Singapore, they had to be quarantined on St John's Island for several days.

The authors' unearthed some interesting nuggets on the early Singapore Malayalees. For one, there was a disproportionate representation of Malayalees in politics and the media. In 1995, strike notices were printed in Malayalam along with other languages. And during the 1948 election, rallies in Malayalee strongholds were conducted in Malayalam. Popular Malayalee enclaves then were the British Naval Base in Sembawang, the RAF base in Seletar and Tanjung Pagar. They also found that Onam (spring/harvest festival) was considered a de facto holiday at the naval base because most of the Malayalee men would have taken the day off work.

My two favourite parts were the family trees and Index. I sipped from a huge mug of coffee as I went through the family trees of the people I heard of or knew. And since we are battling COVID-19 from the home front, armed with highlighters, I turned to the Index and began colour-coding areas of interest, for example, how many had ancestors who came before 1911, age of first-generation migrants, whether they went to Malaya first, and whether they identified with their maternal or paternal *tharavad*. A new wave of Malayalees has come to Singapore in the noughties, reviving interest in the Malayalam language and cultural arts. Will they too embark on a journey to become Singapore Malayalees or will they move on?

The wealth of information in *From Kerala to Singapore* makes it the ideal starting point for others wanting to continue the research here or look deeper into any of the issues raised. As Anitha says, “this is just the start of an ongoing conversation.”