

ENGLISH

# chetti Melaka

## of the straits

Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities

7 SEPTEMBER 2018 –  
5 MAY 2019

SPECIAL EXHIBITION  
GALLERY, LEVEL 2



INDIAN  
HERITAGE  
CENTRE

இந்திய  
மரபுடைமை  
நிலையம்

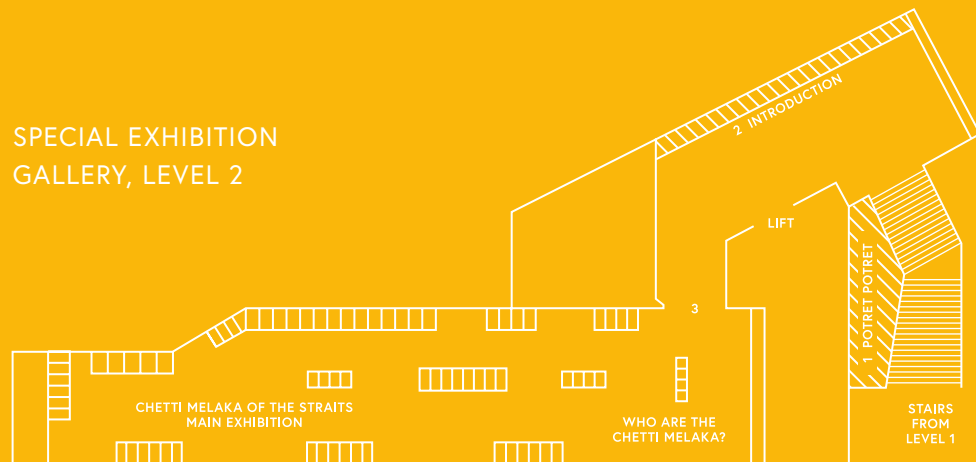
## INTRODUCING THE CHETTI MELAKA OF THE STRAITS

*“There is in our midst a fascinating and unique minority community whose numbers have diminished with each passing year. They are the Peranakan Indians...who have hitherto been known...as the Chetti Melaka.”*

The Chetti Melaka (or Chitty Melaka) are descendants of Tamil traders who settled in Melaka during the reign of the Melaka Sultanate (15th–16th centuries) and married local women of Malay and Chinese descent. Predominantly Hindu of the Saivite denomination, the community speaks a unique combination of Malay, Tamil and Chinese, which has been called Chetti Creole by scholars. They trace their roots to Kampung Chetti in Gajah Berang, Melaka, and it is estimated that there are 5000 Chetti Melaka in Singapore.

The Indian Heritage Centre, in collaboration with the Peranakan Indian (Chitty Melaka) Association Singapore, proudly presents *Chetti Melaka of the Straits—Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities*, the first of the Indian Heritage Centre's community co-created exhibitions.

### SPECIAL EXHIBITION GALLERY, LEVEL 2



## POTRET POTRET

*Potret Potret* is a commission for *Chetti Melaka of the Straits*. It serves to introduce past and present images of this unique community, pursuing the themes of hybridity and identity. Hand painted by Nadia Alsagoff, *Potret Potret* is a moving effort juxtaposing members of Singapore's Chetti Melaka community with their ancestors, seen side-by-side for the first time. *Potret Potret* also echoes the influence of Straits fashion among the Chetti Melaka, as seen in the use of batik fabrics. The subjects are uniquely Chetti Melaka, not falling into any one physical template. Nadia subtly reveals the diverse influences in their making—Indian, Malay, and Chinese.



A detail of a portrait of  
Ponnosamy Kalastree  
Hand painted on batik, 2018



Still from the film  
"Who are the  
Chetti Melaka"

## WHO ARE THE CHETTI MELAKA? —A DOCUMENTARY FILM

DIRECTED BY K RAJAGOPAL

COMMISSIONED BY  
INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

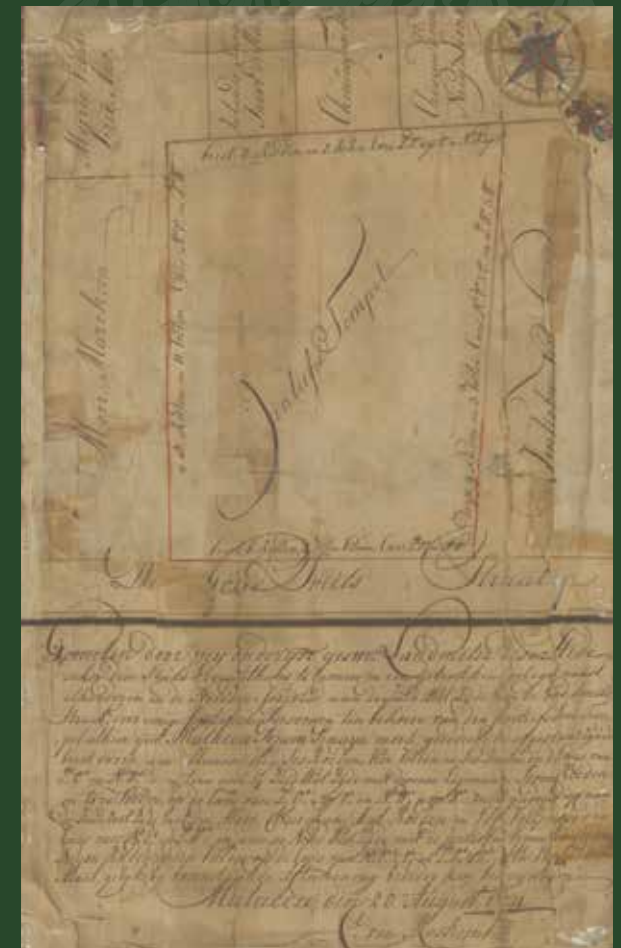
The Chetti Melaka community is fast becoming scattered and diluted. Their story is elusive and underexplored. It is waiting to be discovered, documented, and committed to memory.

Where are the Chetti Melaka? Who are they? What is their story? Discover the answer to these questions through this introductory film.

Shot in Singapore and Melaka in documentary style, this film presents the journey of Chetti Melaka youth in search of their roots, and unearths lesser known facets of the Chetti Melaka in Singapore.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

During the 15th century, Malacca (now Melaka) was a bustling entrepôt and attracted traders from across the world. South Indian traders arriving from the Coromandel Coast intermarried with local Malay and Chinese women, and established a Chetti Melaka community that survived the Malacca Sultanate and centuries of Portuguese, Dutch and British rule.



**A Grant of Land for Sri Poyatha  
Venayagar Moorthi Temple**  
20 August 1781, Dutch Period,  
Melaka, Malaysia  
On loan from Sri Poyatha  
Venayagar Moorthi Temple Trust

This is the title deed for the land given by the Dutch to *Jentiefs Tempel* (Dutch: Hindu Temple) upon which Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple was built.

## KAMPUNG CHETTI

For the Chetti Melaka, Kampung Chetti is the only known home town since most Chetti Melaka are unaware of the places of origin of their forefathers in India.

The majority of the Chetti Melaka families live in clusters around Gajah Berang, Bachang and Tranquerah, and Kampung Tujoh (now Kampung Chetti). This clustering of the community has resulted in the preservation of the community's distinct lifestyle and cultural heritage as seen at Kampung Chetti.



A photograph of the residence of N Somasundaram located at 174 Jalan Gajah Berang 1947, Melaka, Malaysia  
*Courtesy of S Namasevayam*



A photograph of MT Pillay 1950s, Melaka  
*Courtesy of Nathan Pillay*



A photograph of BS Naiker and Avarami outside their residence located at No 5 Kampong Tujoh, Gajah Berang 1940s, Melaka, Malaysia  
*Courtesy of Vengadesan Naiker*



A photograph of Arumugam Supramaniam Chitty and Sivagamee Mid-20th century, Singapore  
*Courtesy of the family of Letchemee Chitty*

## OUR CHETTI MELAKA PIONEERS

From the late 19th century, a number of the English-educated Chetti Melaka left Melaka for Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Many of the early Chetti Melaka in Singapore took up employment in the private sector or in the colonial government service.

They included Arumugam Supramaniam Chitty, a government clerk, Sandy Gurunathan Pillay, a successful lawyer and advocate, Apoo Pillay who was employed in a legal firm, Ramasamy Suppiah Naidu who joined the police force, Francis J Pillay who fought in defence of Singapore during World War II, and most prominently, MT Pillay, who was an executive in the Accountant General's Office and responsible for recommending many Chetti Melaka for government jobs in Singapore.

## FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE

The Chetti Melaka community's lifecycle rituals and ceremonies closely follow traditional Tamil Hindu practices. They include coming-of-age ceremonies such as *kaadhu kuthal* (ear piercing) for both girls and boys, and the fertility ceremony *sadangu* for girls. The traditional wedding rituals for the Chetti community are elaborate, and include various rituals and ceremonies with elements borrowed from Malay and Chinese customs, including costume, music and terminology.



Wedding photograph of  
N Somasundram and Meenatchi  
1940s, Melaka, Malaysia  
Courtesy of S Kunasehkan



Photograph of the Mariamman Temple  
ratham procession with Hantu Tetek  
figures at the front  
1970s, Melaka, Malaysia  
Courtesy of Meenachi Pillay

## CELEBRATING THE CHETTI WAY

Traditionally, the Chetti Melaka community were staunch followers of Saivite Hinduism and key Chetti Melaka festivals coincide with major religious events in the Tamil Hindu calendar. The most important annual festival, *Sembahyang Dato Chachar*, is held at the Muthu Mariamman Temple in Gajah Berang and attended by thousands, including much of the Chetti Melaka community in Singapore. At home, the Chetti celebrate most Hindu festivals, including some unique practices, called *parachu*, which are observed twice a year.



*Bhogi Parachu* held at Kim Keat Road SIT  
flats by the family of Mariappan Pillay  
Late 1970s, Singapore  
Courtesy of the family of  
Mariappan Kannusamy Pillay

## MAKAN CHETTI

Chetti Melaka cuisine is a fascinating blend of Indian and Malay culinary styles and offers a wide variety of delicacies for every occasion. In Chetti Melaka cuisine, traditional Indian spices are typically combined with Malay ingredients such as *belacan* (shrimp paste), *serai* (lemongrass), *lengkuas* (wild ginger), pandan leaf and coconut milk to create uniquely Chetti Melaka dishes.

## THE CHETTI KITCHEN

Find your inner gourmand and explore your way around a Chetti Melaka *nenek's* kitchen—with pots, pans and mysterious utensils galore, uncover what's cooking! The exhibition recreates a traditional Chetti Melaka kitchen to relive the meticulous and painstaking production of a variety of traditional Chetti Melaka dishes.

Need a break from the mouth-watering prospects? You can test your gaming skills with a fun session of *cherki*, or listen to some community experts speak about their food heritage!



An artist's impression of the Chetti kitchen

## ABOUT INDIAN HERITAGE CENTRE

All information is correct at time of print. The Indian Heritage Centre reserves the right to make changes and modifications to the programmes without prior notice. The views and opinions expressed by speakers, facilitators or artists in the talks and workshops do not necessarily represent the position of the Indian Heritage Centre. All rights reserved. Materials in this publication may not be produced in part or in whole without written consent of the Museum, the publisher. © Copyright 2018.

### VISITOR INFORMATION

#### ADDRESS

5 Campbell Lane  
Singapore 209924

#### OPENING HOURS\*

Tuesdays to Thursdays:

10am to 7pm

Fridays to Saturdays:

10am to 8pm

Sundays & Public Holidays:

10am to 4pm

Closed on Mondays

\*Last admission to the galleries is half an hour before closing

The Indian Heritage Centre, under the management of the National Heritage Board and with support from the Indian community, traces the history of the Indian and South Asian communities in the Southeast Asian region. The four-storey Indian Heritage Centre is an iconic, unique and sustainable building that blends both traditional Indian as well as modern architectural elements. The architectural design for the façade is inspired by the *baoli* (or Indian stepwell), and seeks to create an urban forum for the celebration and appreciation of Indian culture. It houses five permanent galleries, small scale museum facilities, a museum shop as well as programming and activity spaces.

#### GUIDED TOURS

Join our docents and enjoy guided tours of *Chetti Melaka of the Straits—Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities*

#### ENGLISH TOURS:

2pm, Wednesday and Friday\*

3.30pm, 1st and 3rd Saturday of every month\*\*

#### TAMIL TOURS:

11.30am, 1st Friday of every month\*

4pm, 1st Saturday of every month\*\*

\*From 12 September 2018 onwards

\*\*From October 2018 onwards

#### SELF GUIDED TOURS WITH SMARTIFY

Download Smartify from App Store and Google Play Store free of charge.



#### CONTACT US

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[www.indianheritage.org.sg](http://www.indianheritage.org.sg)

@ihcsg

facebook.com/indianheritagecentre

## ANECDOTAL TOURS

Join our community volunteers, on a series of special guided tours. Based on personal experience and memory, these Chetti Melaka guides will present their unique culture through these one-hour long tours of the Exhibition.

**Tours will require a minimum of 4 participants or will be subject to cancellation.**

## MAKAN CHETTI— DEMONSTRATION SERIES

Experience the uniqueness of Chetti cuisine through this monthly series. Expert Chetti Melaka home cooks will share the secrets of their favourite traditional foods. For more information, go to our website or contact us at [nhb\\_ihc\\_exhibitions@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_ihc_exhibitions@nhb.gov.sg) or 62912536.

**Second Saturday and Sunday of every month from October 2018 to May 2019.**

## SYMPOSIUM WHO ARE THE CHETTI MELAKA?

In spite of being one of the region's oldest communities, little is known about the Chetti Melaka of Singapore. They are a very small community, whose numbers are steadily declining, and their uniquely Straits heritage largely rests in the collective memory of older members of the community. This symposium will introduce participants to the complex and multi-faceted history and culture of the Chetti Melaka community. Bringing together scholars and academics from the region, the symposium will address the questions of the early beginnings of the Chetti Melaka, their unique hybrid identity, their culture, and the way forward.

**23 February 2019.**

**Free admission for all above events, register at [indianheritagecentre.peatix.com](http://indianheritagecentre.peatix.com)**

