

Her Singapore Indian Story

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LAST year marked the 50th year of Singapore's independence, and it was a fitting year to look back on the history of the city-state.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), along with Straits Times Press, launched the first 10 titles of Singapore Chronicles, a 50-volume series on the history of Singapore, in December. The remaining books are set to come out this year.

The first of this series includes a book on Indians that traces the history of the Indian presence in Singapore from the colonial period up till the present day.

Titled *Indians*, the volume is written by National University of Singapore's (NUS) head of sociology and the South Asian Studies programme Dr Vineeta Sinha, whose areas of research centre around Hinduism in the Indian diaspora.

Dr Sinha was approached by IPS to write the volume on Indians for the Singapore Chronicles project.

She makes it clear, though, that her work is "less on the Indian diaspora and more on the Hindu diaspora". "Coming to Singapore, I was exposed to a very different kind of Hinduism which I found quite fascinating over the years, which was very new to me and which I wanted to understand," she says.

Adding on to that is the fact that research on Hinduism in Singapore has been quite limited. "For academic and scholarly reasons, I thought it would be important to research on that topic so that I can try and fill the vacuum in the scholarly work here," she adds.

With her native language being Hindi, she explains that she had to learn Tamil in order to carry out her fieldwork. Dr Sinha's research has taken her from Singapore and Malaysia to Tamil Nadu, drawing comparisons between how Hinduism is practised in the various regions. Her first book, *A New God In The Diaspora*, tracks the identity and evolution of Muneeswaran, "a minor village deity who has become a very prominent deity in the Singaporean context".

She is also interested in festivals, especially Thaipusam. She explains: "Thaipusam was banned in India by the government during the colonial period, so you don't actually find Thaipusam celebrated in Chennai or in any large city in Tamil Nadu. But in Malaysia and in Singapore, these are huge festivals. These festivals have become very big in the diaspora, but not so much in India."

She also explores other aspects of religion, like the objects used in worship, ranging from statues and icons of deities to prayer altars and fresh flowers.

Next up for her is exploring the role that Indian women played in Singapore's nation-building days, something that she was interested in while researching for the Singapore Chronicles.

Coming across the Kamala Club, a longstanding club formed in 1950, she is fascinated by its story. "This story has not been told at all, and there's so much to say about women's roles in building institutions in the early years of the 20th century," she explains.

Comprehensive History

HER volume in the Singapore Chronicles series provides a more comprehensive history of the Indian presence in Singapore than has thus far been documented in a book.

Dr Sinha explains that the book is meant to be "a statement about the Indian community and how it has fared since independence in different fields like economy, culture and politics". However, she felt that such a discussion would have been incomplete without looking at pre-independence Singapore as "there are lots of continuities in the community from the colonial to the post-colonial period".

For the book, Dr Sinha draws heavily from existing research that has been done on the Indian community, digging through archives and historical material, including newspapers from 1850 till now that have been digitised by the National Library Board.

The topics in the book range from a profile of the earliest Indian settlers in Singapore to the socio-economic and educational profiles of the community to the new configurations in the community, with a section also looking at the relationship between "Singaporean Indians" and "Indian Indians".

The book was challenging not because of the content it covered, but because of the audience that the book is intended to reach.

Says the professor: "As an academic, you're used to writing academic pieces for a specialised audience. In the book, I was challenged to write for a broader audience in a language that would be accessible to a wider readership. I was quite interested in taking up this challenge and seeing how I could communicate the complexities of the Indian story in Singapore to a wider audience."

Dr Sinha's interest in this field stems from her personal history. She explains that her father was an academic and although she is originally from Bihar, "I didn't spend much time there because he was always on the move". He taught in Punjab and was later transferred to Hyderabad, and Dr Sinha spent her early years in those two states.

In 1974, her father took on a position as director of a mass communications centre in Singapore, and the family moved here when she was 11.

Coming from a north Indian Hindu household, the 53-year-old professor was fascinated by the differences between the kind of Hinduism she was used to at home and what she observed here. "Hinduism in Singapore was mostly south Indian, Tamil-based Hinduism," she explains.

"I found the idea of how people who have moved away from their homeland continue to sustain their religious and cultural practices in new environments really exciting."

The sociology professor got into the subject "really by accident".

"I was a pre-med student in college and I wanted to be a medical doctor, but I didn't get the grades to do that," Dr Sinha says. She applied to NUS' arts faculty, where sociology was a new subject to her.

She explains: "After the first few lectures, I found that I really enjoyed it because it provoked me to think about and question a lot of things that I had always taken for granted. It seemed like a new and exciting field to study."

Dr Sinha went into academia because she enjoyed "the whole experience of doing research" for her honours thesis at NUS, which marked her first piece of independent research. One particular method of research, which involves interviewing people, "getting your hands dirty and observing things up close and talking to people", caught her interest. "I got into academia because I was attracted to this method and I thought I could spend my time doing research for a long time," she says.

Another aspect of academia is teaching, which Dr Sinha had the chance to do while she was doing her master's degree in sociology at NUS. Although she was just a part-time tutor at the time, she found herself enjoying teaching.

"I thought that if I could get into a career that allowed me to do two things I really enjoy - research and teaching - then that's ideal," she says of her decision to be an academic.

Family Support

Such a decision could not be made without the support of her family.

As both her father and her grandfather were educators and her mother was among the earliest batches of students to graduate from a women's university in Bhagalpur with a bachelor's degree, education was very important in her family. "It's very much a part of our family DNA," she says, "and I knew that I would be expected to go to university."

She did her bachelor's degree in sociology from NUS, then went on to do her master's there. She then took a four-year break, working as a research associate at the now Yusof Ishak Institute. During that time, she got married and had a son as well.

When her son was about three years old, Dr Sinha decided to start her PhD studies at the John Hopkins University in the US. Her husband, Mr Ravinran Kumaran, a practising lawyer, stopped his law practice during the four years that she was doing her PhD.

"He was a full-time house-husband while I went to school full-time," she says. "He did everything: he looked after our son, did the laundry, did the cooking, and I was a full-time student."

She adds: "If not for that unconditional support, I don't think I would have been able to do this."

Though her father worked here, her parents never took either permanent residency or citizenship here, as her father had always wanted to return to India and retire there. Dr Sinha held permanent residency for many years before finally becoming a Singapore citizen 2002. Her older son Ashish Ravinran is a freelance film-maker, while her younger son Akash Ravinran has just enlisted in National Service. Her husband resumed his practice when they returned to Singapore.

Beyond Academia

DR VINEETA Sinha, who has been with NUS' department of sociology since 1996 and has headed the South Asian Studies programme for 31/2 years now, is also very interested in food.

She explains: "I was looking at ritual foods within Hinduism, trying to understand the logic of food offerings in temples, what kinds of offerings are made, and that's how I became interested in food."

In 2002, she started teaching a module on food, raising awareness about its production and distribution. The module continues to be offered today, though Dr Sinha has passed the teaching of it on to a colleague.

Her interest in food, she says, has taken her outside academia as well. Due to her research, she is approached by production companies as a consultant or an expert on documentaries, where she helps them with background research or conducts interviews.

Several years ago, she was involved in Gods Must Be Hungry, a documentary on the status of food in Taoism and Hinduism that was a collaboration between local production company Oak3 Films and Discovery Channel. She has also been involved in a six-episode project with the National Museum. Called Eat To Live: Wartime Recipes, the project looks at food conditions in Singapore during World War II and the Japanese Occupation. The six videos are played at the National Museum and can also be found on YouTube.

She was also invited by her colleague Lily Kong, currently provost of Singapore Management University, to help write Food, Foodways And Foodscapes, a book that Dr Kong was working on. (Photo at right shows Dr Sinha with Dr Kong). The book maps the culinary landscape in Singapore, and Dr Sinha has a chapter on cooking.

The professor also loves Bollywood movies. "A lot of people think they're too commercial to be enjoyed, but I enjoy Bollywood very much," she says. She adds that she started teaching a module on Bollywood a couple of years ago. She enjoys teaching it, but she adds that she also enjoys it as a consumer.

Dr Sinha also regularly volunteers with TOUCH Community Services' Meals-on-Wheels programme, delivering cooked meals from the centre's premises to the elderly.

As an academic, she also has service obligations to the sociological community.

Dr Sinha is active in the editorial boards of various journals, and is also vice-president of publications for the International Sociological Association.

Dr Vineeta Sinha is giving a talk on her book *Indians* on Jan 16 at the Indian Heritage Centre at 11am.