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INDIAN DIASPORAS IN MALAYSIA, MYANMAR AND SINGAPORE: ORIGIN AND ROLES

Dr. Phung Thi Thao

Head, Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

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***Corresponding author:** Dr. Phung Thi Thao

Head, Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract

It is true that Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia are considered to be a significant source of strengths for India. They constitute considerable percentages in some members of the region while they demonstrate their own positions in terms of economy, politics and culture in both Southeast Asia and in India. This is going to be reflected in the paper called "Indian diasporas in Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore: Origin and roles". To achieve this researching purpose, this article is going to: (i). discover the origin of Indian diasporas in the region; (ii). explain the economic, political and cultural roles of Indian communities in some countries in Southeast Asia including Myanmar, Singapore and Malaysia; (iii). highlight their valuable contributions to India in terms of remittances and culture. Thanks to those mentioned researching tasks, this paper is expected to help us evaluate Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia as an integral part of Indian diasporas in the world.

Keywords: Indian diasporas, Southeast Asia, origin, roles

INTRODUCTION

Up to now, Indian diaspora is the term which is regularly used to refer to people who originated in the South Asian subcontinent including India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. In Southeast Asia, those Indians have resided mostly in some countries that were colonized by the British empire including Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore. Before the importance of

ORIGIN

Geographically, Southeast Asia is located in the south of China, the east of the Indian subcontinent. In particular, this region borders to the west by South Asia and the Bay of Bengal. In fact, Myanmar (once known as Burma) is the only Southeast Asian country which shares its land border with India. In addition, India shares its maritime borders with Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar in

Southeast Asia. In other words, India and Southeast Asian countries are close together in terms of geography.

In my own perspective, this geographical proximity is the decisive factor to explain the reason why the relations between India and Southeast Asian countries rooted in ancient times when Indian traders, monks, and priests came into this region and introduced many elements of Indian culture to Southeast Asian locals such as Indian religions (especially Buddhism and Hinduism), writing systems (Pali and Sanskrit), architecture, cuisine, arts... (Duong Van Huy & Ngo Hai Ninh, 2021, pp.77-78; Mai Ngoc Chu, 1999, pp.46-47). It is interesting that the Chola empire who was the Tamil speaking dynasty in South India and the ruler of a huge land encompassing the present day states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and parts of Andhra and Karnataka (Ammini Ramachandran, 2014), conducted many maritime expeditions to Southeast Asian countries. In particular, in 1025, the Chola empire with a powerful navy of warships and merchant ships managed to control over the Srivijaya empire in the Malayan archipelago under the Sailendras which are a number of parts of present-day Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia (Kangna Yadav, 2023).

However, the significant background for waves of Indian immigration into Southeast Asia originated from the British Indian empire. As a result of the Slavery Abolition Act passed by the British Parliament (1833), there was a serious lack of labor who served and worked for the system of the British colonies all over the world which were well known as “the Empire on which the sun never sets”. Historically, some countries in Southeast Asia were under the rule of the British empire. In other words, some Southeast Asian countries were once the British colonies. In particular, Burma was annexed as a province of British India after three Anglo- Burmese wars. Additionally, the Straits Settlements including Penang, Malacca, and Singapore was once an administrative unit of the British East India Company between 1826 and 1867 and later the British Colonial Office from 1867 to 1946 (National Library Board of Singapore, 2014). To deal with the above mentioned shortage of human resources, the British implemented its indentured system. Accordingly, a large scale number of Indians were exported as indentured workers into British colonies in the world in general and in Southeast Asia in particular to work in construction projects, municipal services, plantations, harbor ports... Before the period of British India, Indians who came to Southeast Asian countries and settled down in this regions as traders and merchants. With the implementation of the indentured system, Indians were directly recruited into British colonies in Southeast Asia as laborers. In addition, other different groups of Indians such as sepoys, lascars, domestic servants, lawyers, doctors, journalists, teachers, chettians... also immigrated into the region. It means that the British played a great role in bringing Indians into the region in large scaled movements.

Recently, India has the most powerful diaspora in the world in terms of its number and remittances. According to the UN’s migration Report issued in 2022, about 17.9 million of Indians retained their Indian nationality while they lived abroad. This figure has made India the largest diaspora in the world while Mexico and Russia came in second and third place, respectively (UN, 2022). Southeast Asia is home to a considerable number of Indian diaspora as highlighted in this following data table.

Top 10 countries with Indian diasporas in 2023

	Countries	Non-resident Indians (NRIs)	Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs)	Overseas Indians (OCIs)
1.	United States	1,280,000	3,180,000	4,460,000
2.	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	3,419,875	5,269	3,425,144
3.	Malaysia	227,950	2,760,000	2,987,950
4.	Saudi Arabia	2,592,166	2,781	2,594,947
5.	Myanmar	9,207	2,000,000	2,009,207
6.	Canada	178,410	1,510,645	1,689,055
7.	Australia	241,000	255,000	496,000
8.	United Kingdom	351,000	1,413,000	1,764,000
9.	South Africa	60,000	1,500,000	1,560,000
10.	Singapore	350,000	300,000	650,000

Source: Ministry of External Affairs (GOI). 2024. Population of Overseas Indians, https://mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf, accessed on 15/3/2024.

It is true that Indians in Southeast Asia have accounted for a significant part of the total Indian diasporas in the world. In particular, in 2023, PIOs in Southeast Asia made up nearly 29 percent of all NRIs in the globe while OCIs accounted for nearly 19 percent of all OCIs in the world (Ministry of External Affairs - GOI, 2024). In 2023, Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia numbered around 6 million. And among Southeast Asian countries, Indian diasporas have mainly concentrated in Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore. Accordingly, with nearly 3 million of Indians, the Indian diaspora in Malaysia is considered to be the biggest community in Southeast Asia, followed well behind by the Indian diaspora in Myanmar (about 2 million) and the Indian diaspora in Singapore (around 650,000).

Indians in Southeast Asian countries in 2023

Countries	Countries	Non-resident Indians (NRIs)	Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs)	Overseas Indians (OCIs)
1.	Brunei	11,500	269	11,769
2.	Cambodia	1,500	10	1,510
3.	East Timor	100	0	100
4.	Indonesia	8,500	111,500	120,000
5.	Laos	450	78	528
6.	Malaysia	227,950	2,760,000	2,987,950
7.	Myanmar	9,207	2,000,000	2,009,207
8.	Philippines	105,000	15,000	120,000
9.	Singapore	350,000	300,000	650,000
10.	Thailand	20,000	175,000	195,000

11.	Vietnam	5,000	500	5,500
Total		739,207	5,362,357	6,101,564

Source: Ministry of External Affairs (GOI). 2024. Population of Overseas Indians, https://mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf, accessed on 15/3/2024.

Because of their crowded number, Indian diasporas in three Southeast Asian countries have contributed to their hosting countries as well as India in terms of economy, politics, and culture. Such contributions of Indian diasporas are going to be further highlighted in the following contents of this article.

ROLES OF INDIAN DIASPORAS IN MYANMAR, SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA

It is true that Southeast Asia has been home to a large number of Indians who came into this region for doing business and settling down their life with their own families. They are increasing mingling with local residents and put their own imprints on the economy, politics and culture of their hosting nations which are going to be analyzed and highlighted in the following cases of the Indian diaspora in Burma (Myanmar), Singapore, and Malaysia, respectively.

Economic roles: The case of the Indian diaspora in Burma

When the British put their rule on Burma, this Southeast Asian country was not the rice exporter. To meet the demand of rice in Great Britain, the Irrawaddy river delta in Lower Burma was invested and exploited. In other words, the Irrawaddy delta was seen as the huge rice basket of the world. Before the Second World War came to an end, Myanmar had been the largest rice exporter in the world. For example, British Burma exported 3,123 million tons of rice in 1940 (David I. Steinberg, 2001, p.126-127). During the process of development in the Irrawaddy delta as the rice bowl, there was a high demand of financial resources for investment, technical methodologies for increasing rice productivity.

In this above mentioned background, a subgroup of the Tamil community in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, and Kerala called the Chettiars who were traders and moneylenders, actively involved in investing in the rice industry in the Irrawaddy Delta. Those Indian moneylenders were considered to be key agents in transforming Burma into the rice bowl of Asia in particular, in the world in general. In other words, the Chettiars played a special role in the agricultural economy of Burma. In fact, the group of financiers dominated and controlled the economy of Burma. For instance, the Chettiars occupied ¼ land used for rice production in Burma and possessed ½ rice productivity for export in this country (Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, 1955, p.84-87). In 1939, the Chettiars ran 6 banks in Burma which worked as the centers to operate and provide finance for business and trading activities. Thanks to the huge resources of capital and the lower interest rates, those banks dominated the financial market in Burma which domestic banks of Burmese locals could not compete with (Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, 1955, p.84). In 1939, the total foreign direct investment for Burma stood at 155, 25 million pounds. Accordingly, the source of direct investment of the Indian Chettiars into Burma was 56 million pounds, followed by European companies (47 million pounds), Burma government (45 million pounds), the Chinese (2.8 million pounds) and other sources (4.45 million pounds) (D.G.E.Hall, 1997, p.1123).

In addition to the crucial role of the Chettiars, Indian labor was competitive. Thanks to good skills of English and level of low prices, Indians became the source of labor for the British administrative system in Burma such as policemen, soldiers... In some aspects, Burmese residents suffered countless misery under the rule of the British while the Indian community made use of this situation and became more and more successful and prosperous in Burma in terms of economy. This inspired nationalism and hatred among Burmese people against Indians. That is the reason why after getting its independence from the British, Myanmar passed a number of acts which were considered to be discriminated against Indians in Myanmar such as the union citizenship act (1948), the Land Nationalization Act (1948)... It is obvious that these moves by Myanmar's governments demonstrated the Indian diaspora in Myanmar controlled the crucial pillars of the economy in this Southeast Asian country.

Political roles: the case of the Indian diaspora in Singapore

In fact, at the end of June 2023, the total population in Singapore was constituted of 74 percent of Chinese, 13.5 percent of Malays, 9 percent of Indians and 3.4 percent of others (Singapore Department of Statistic, 2023, p.4). It means that the Indian diaspora is the third biggest ancestry and ethnic group in this island nation. It is interesting that in Singapore, Indians were the most educated citizens over the period of 10 years, commencing from 2010. In particular, in 2010, 36.8 percent of Indian Singaporeans graduated and held university degrees compared to 23.2 percent of Chinese and 5.5 percent of Malays. One decade later, 41.3 percent of Indians completed their degrees, followed by Chinese (34.7 percent) and Malays (10.8 percent) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2021, p.19).

Resident Population Aged 25 years and over by highest qualification attained and ethnic group in Singapore in 2020 (percent)

Highest Qualification attained	Chinese		Malays		Indians	
	2010	2020	2010	2020	2010	2020
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Below Secondary	35.8	26.2	41.4	28.9	23.8	18.3
Secondary	18.5	15.5	27.5	23.5	16.9	14.3
Post-Secondary (Non-Tertiary)	8.7	8.4	15.8	19.8	9.6	11.0
Diploma & Professional Qualification	13.9	15.2	9.8	16.9	12.9	15.0
University	23.2	34.7	5.5	10.8	36.8	41.3

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics. 2021. Census of Population 2020: Demographic, Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/reference/cop2020/cop2020-sr1/census20_stat_release1, accessed on 24/3/2024.

Thanks to the high levels of education, Indians are confident and active in Singapore in terms of politics. In other words, they have

occupied a number of crucial posts in Singaporean politics. According to the following list of Singaporean Presidents, four out of nine Presidents of Singapore are Indians.

The list of Indians as Singaporean Presidents

	Name	Date of Birth	Origin	Term of office
1.	Chengara Veetil Devan Nair	1923 – 2005	Thalassery, Kerala, India	1981-1986 (third President)
2.	Sellapan Ramanathan	1924 – 2016	Tamil Indian descent	1999– 2011(sixth President)
3.	Halimah Yacob	1954 – present	Indian father and Malay mother	2017 – 2023 (eighth President)
4.	Tharman Shanmugaratnam	1957- present	Ceylonese Tamil origin	Since 2023 (ninth and current president)

Source: National Library Board of Singapore. 2023. Singapore's presidents, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=6303c01f-0b00-4244-8242-c94d5e8bea9b>, accessed on 23/3/2024.

A part from the above mentioned posts, Indians are well qualified to take care of other key roles in Singaporean politics including senior ministers, members of the Cabinet, members of Parliament... Up to now, three out of the entire Deputy Prime Ministers in Singapore are Indians.

The list of Indians as Singaporean Deputy Prime Ministers

	Name	Date of Birth	Origin	Term of office
1.	S. Rajaratnam	1915–2006	Jaffna Tamil descent	1980-1985 (third Deputy PM)
2.	S. Jayakumar	1939 - present	Tamil descent	2004-2009 (seventh Deputy PM)
3.	Tharman Shanmugaratnam	1957- present	Ceylonese Tamil origin	2011-2019

Source: National Library Board of Singapore. 2023. Singapore's presidents, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=6303c01f-0b00-4244-8242-c94d5e8bea9b>, accessed on 23/3/2024.

Cultural influences: the case of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia

In 2023, there were 2,760,000 persons of Indian origin (PIOs) in Malaysia who accounted for about 8 percent of Malaysia’s total population (Ministry of External Affairs – Government of India, 2019). Therefore, Indian represent the third biggest ethnic group in Malaysia, following Malays and the Chinese.

Most of Indians in Malaysia are Tamil speakers while the remainders speak Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali

and Urdu. In Malaysia, Tamil is one of the three primary Malaysian dialects, along with Malay, Mandarin. According to Article 152 of the Constitution, Malay is the national language in Malaysia while other languages of other ethnic groups are free to be used such as Mandarin by the Chinese and Tamil by the Indians (Department of Information – Government of Malaysia, 2016).

In fact, Malaysia is seen as a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multilingual society. And the Indian diaspora is regarded one of significant agents who have influenced and made numerous marks on Malaysian culture. In other words, Indians actively put their considerable imprints on a wide number of cultural components in Malaysia. I am going to take Indian food in Malaysia as an example.

With the migration of Indians from the southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala..., their types of spices and local cooking methods were also migrated into Malaysia. As years are passing by, Malaysian Indians have been an integral components of Malaysia. As a result, their distinguishing cuisine and its unique cooking ways have been one of integral elements in Malaysian food. For instance, a number of Malaysian Indian specialties including Mamak rojak, flaky roti canai, nasi kandar... are now well noted as the masterpieces of Malay Indian cuisine (Trysmartbite, 2019). The Malay Indian cuisine is seen as a unique mixture of banana leaves (originated from South India), Chettinad cuisine (based on heavily spiced meat cooking), and Mamak (Indian Muslims) culture (Trysmartbite, 2019).

In 2010, Malaysian government launched its campaign called the "Malaysia Kitchen for the World" to propagate Malaysian restaurants and cuisine in the New York City metropolitan area in particular and in the world in general. It is understood that Malaysia is the Kitchen for the entire world because this Southeast Asian country is home to a wide variety of ethnic groups. As a result, Malaysia is blessed with various cuisines of different racial communities. In other words, the cuisine of Malaysia has become richer and more unique with multi – cultural cuisines in the world including Indian cuisine.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIA

As above discussed, Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia have put their own imprints on their hosting countries such as taking part in building domestic economies, taking their political responsibilities and enriching local cultures. Moreover, Indian diasporas in the region have also significantly contributed to India in terms of economy and culture.

Sources of remittance

It is above noted that India has been blessed with the largest diaspora in the world recently. And India has been retaining its position as the largest receiving country of remittances in the world for the past 15 years. Specifically, in 2023, Indian diasporas offered their motherland \$125 billion which surpassed the source of remittances from any diaspora in the world. Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia annually send their remittances into India which help Indian economy in general and support economic conditions of their families in India in particular. The source of remittance by the Indian diaspora in Singapore is a typical example.

In fact, in many consecutive years, highly skilled people of Indian origin living in Singapore have provided remittances to their home country. Particularly, during the 2021-2022 fiscal year, India got foreign inward remittances of \$89,127 million while the remittance

flow to India from Singapore comprised of 5.7 percent in the total remittance flows. Because of this significant remittance of the Indian diaspora, Singapore was in the fourth, behind United States (23.4 percent), United Arab Emirates (18 percent), United Kingdom (6.8 percent) in the list of top 10 countries sending the largest remittances into India.

Remittances to India in 2021-2022, top 10 countries

Rank	Source country	Share in Total Remittances (Percent)
1.	United States	23.4
2.	United Arab Emirates	18.0
3.	United Kingdom	6.8
4.	Singapore	5.7
5.	Saudi Arabia	5.1
6.	Kuwait	2.4
7.	Oman	1.6
8.	Qatar	1.5
9.	Hong Kong	1.1
10.	Australia	0.7

Source: Indian Ministry of Finance. 2023. India received highest ever foreign inward remittances in a single year of \$89,127 million in FY 2021-22, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1897036>, accessed on 26/3/2024.

India's remittances from its diasporas all other the world in general and its remittances from Southeast Asia in particular are the testament to the crucial roles by people of Indian origin in supporting their families and contributing India's economic resilience. Moreover, the remittances depict the connectivity between Indians living in Southeast Asia and India.

Cultural ambassadors

In ancient times, Indian traders, merchants and missionaries introduced a number of cultural components into Southeast Asia. It cannot be denied that Indian culture has profoundly influenced on Southeast Asian cultures. And in my own perspective, Indian diasporas have played cultural ambassadors who have been keeping Indian cultural values and introducing them into local people in Southeast Asia. Specifically, people of Indian origin in Southeast Asia bridge between India and nation members of this region, transcend their borders. This can be reflected in the case of the Indian diaspora in our Vietnam.

Compared to people of Indian origin in other Southeast Asian countries, oversea Indians in Vietnam (OCIs) are 5,500 people including 5,000 non-resident Indians (NRIs) and persons of Indian origin (PIOs). The majority of people of Indian origin have settled down their life and done their business in the south of Vietnam, especially in Ho Chi Minh City. Many Indians have blended with and got married to Vietnamese people. Vikas Chaudhary is one of Indians who is living and doing business in Ho Chi Minh city. In the beginning of 2019, he got married to a Vietnamese well known singer and a talented music lecturer whose name is Vo Ha Tram. The couple has a lovely daughter. When they have free time, he

often teaches his wife how to prepare, cook Indian food and how to perform yoga (Thuy Ngoc, 2020). Especially, during their long holidays, he regularly takes her to visit his family in India. Thanks to those special occasions, Tram has taken these opportunities to explore about Indian culture.

It is amazing that Tram is extremely keen on Indian music as well as other cultural components of Indian culture. At first, she released a Vietnamese song which was conducted and filmed in many famous sceneries in Rajasthan such as Gangour Ghat in Udaipur, the ancient stepwell in Toorji Ka Jhalra, Blue city... In this video, the singer put on both Indian and Vietnamese traditional clothes and performed Indian dances. Thanks to this song, Vietnamese can discover more and more about Indian cultural landscapes. In some aspect, her song was considered to be an example for the fusion between Vietnamese and Indian culture. In April 2024, she continued introducing another new musical product called "Coming back to me" (Ve voi em in Vietnamese) which was also conducted in Indian backgrounds. In the video, the singer was showed doing Indian dances in traditional outfits. As an interesting part of the song, the singer tried singing in Hindi.

In my point of view, Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia in general and in Vietnam in particular have served as living bridges connecting India to the world. Their life, lifestyle, career, relations have meaningfully contributed to expanding more and more understanding about India. In other words, they are real ambassadors who help promote numerous components of Indian culture all over the world.

CONCLUSIONS

From all the above presented ideas, we can see that Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia are pretty crowded in terms of quantity. The large scaled presence of people of Indian origin can be explained by many important factors including geographical proximity between India and Southeast Asian countries, religious and cultural influences of Indian culture on this region since the ancient times and the roles of the British empire in boosting the Indian movements into Southeast Asia.

Indian communities mainly focus on some members of Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore who were once the colonies of the British. Up to now, they have mingled with local people and played significant roles in their hosting countries in terms of economy, politics and culture. This is reflected in the examples of Indian diasporas in Myanmar, Singapore and Malaysia, respectively. By contrast, Indians offer a lot of important benefits to India. On the one hand, they work hard and send a huge source of remittances to build their hometown in India. On the other hand, they are cultural ambassadors who have been contributing to propagating Indian cultural values to other friends all over the world. In this aspect, Indian diasporas in general and Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia have been India's precious strengths.

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Short biography

Dr. Phung Thi Thao was born in 1983 and she has been working for Faculty of Oriental Studies, Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Hanoi National University (Vietnam) as the Head (Department of Indian Studies). She was offered one scholarship by Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR-Government of India) for her MA program in School of International Relations (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, 2008-2010). And she completed her Ph.D program in Southeast Asian Studies (USSH, Hanoi National University) in 2018 with the focus on *India's foreign policies towards Southeast Asian countries in the period of 1947-1964*.

She has been giving lectures on *India's foreign policies, India's contemporary issues* in Department of Indian Studies, *influences of Indian culture in Southeast Asia* (Department of Southeast Asian Studies) for more than 10 years. Up to now, she has a large number of research papers published journals which have focused on Indian Foreign Policy, India's policies towards Southeast Asia, Governments and Politics in South Asia...