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# Sepoys, Convicts and the 'Bazaar' Contingent: The Emergence and Exclusion of 'Hindustani' Pioneers at the Singapore Frontier

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*Abstract: The article studies migrants from Uttar Pradesh in Singapore who have historically identified themselves as 'Hindustani' – a group that has largely been ignored in historical literature of the Indian diaspora in Singapore. Through an examination of British expansion in India in the early nineteenth century, parallel developments in Southeast Asia, community publications and oral testimonies, the article attempts to '(re)discover' the history of Hindustani migration in Singapore.*

Within the Indian diaspora, which makes up approximately 7 per cent of Singapore's population, two subcategories emerge as particularly salient bases for community: subdivisions based on religion and ethnic differences based on place of origin. At one level the latter subcategory has adopted a north–south divide which is particularly salient in Singapore and Malay(si)a. At another, the mid-categories 'south' and 'north' can themselves be subdivided along regional lines – Tamil, Malayalee, Telugu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Gujarati, Bengali, etc. It has often been the case, however, that the history of subordinate communities has been appropriated by larger groups that are seen to define the 'racial' category in and of themselves. A void exists in literature of the migration processes and development of various Indian communities in Singapore which are 'overshadowed by the more numerous and visually distinctive Tamilian and Sikh communities'.[1] The study of these subaltern communities, many of whom have played a significant role in Singapore's early development, is especially urgent given the changes in the country's population. Although the government has pledged to maintain the broader 'multiracial profile' of the population, such a promise does not extend to specific 'racial' sub-categories, many of whom risk losing their distinct status or identification.

The lacuna for subordinate Indian communities is especially extensive in the case of migrants from Uttar Pradesh in Singapore. Various labels exist for this community such as 'Bengali', 'Baboos', 'UPwallahs', 'Bhojpuris', 'Biharis' and recently even 'Hindis'. ('Bengali' is obviously a misnomer, used by non-Indians or South Indians, though the name may have been derived from their membership in the Bengal Native Infantry. Some were indeed Biharis, but this was only a subset of the larger community.) This

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1 Glenda Michelle Singh, 'Sociolinguistic influences on the maintenance of Hindi in Singapore' (M.A. thesis, Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, 1994), p. 1.

group is labelled here as 'Hindustani', the most common term used by members of this community – particularly elders – to identify themselves. Although 'Hindustani' is an ambiguous term (when literally translated as 'Hindu-land people'), with nationalist reverberations, historically the term 'Hindustan' has held special significance for the people of Uttar Pradesh. Long seen as the imagined 'heartland' of India, 'Hindustan' was the popular designation for this region (present-day Uttar Pradesh and north-western Bihar) in the early period of British expansion.[2] Moreover, there exists a strong linguistic association with the 'Hindustani' language – a combination of Hindi and Urdu which, despite the presence of various vernaculars, was the accepted *lingua franca* of Uttar Pradesh in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hindustani migrants have been crucial to the development of two trades in Singapore – washer-men (*dhobi*s) and dairy farmers (*doodhwallah*s) – in which they occupied an important, if not the dominant position for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, until the advent of washing machines, imported packed milk and state policy against the use of scarce land resources for farming activities made these 'vanishing' trades. Other economic functions included a strong presence amongst watch-men (*chowkidar*), prison warders, tea-shop owners (*chaiwallahs*), Indian sweet-meat traders (*mithaiwallah*) and betel-leaf sellers (*paanwallahs)*.

In addition, Hindustanis have contributed to the 'production and reproduction of social and cultural phenomena' in Singapore.[3] The only (official) north Indian Hindu temple, the Laxmi Narayan Temple, has since its formation been dominated by migrants from Uttar Pradesh. Two other predominantly 'north' Indian Hindu organisations in Singapore, the North Indian Hindu Association (founded in 1921) and the Arya Samaj (founded in 1927), were formed through the initiative of the Hindustani community.[4] In addition, these migrants have been central in spearheading Hindi education so that Hindi has since the early 1990s received official sanction in the national curriculum as a 'mother tongue'. This decision meant that ethnic Indian students could officially take Hindi as their mandatory second language in primary and secondary school; previously only Tamil among the Indian languages was in this category.

This article looks at the interplay of factors leading to the neglect of Hindustanis in Singapore's early historical documents. Through a study of British expansion in India

2 See Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'Constructing the "heartland": Uttar Pradesh in India's body-politic', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 25, 2 (2002): 157–8.

3 Steven Vertovec, *The Hindu diaspora, comparative patterns* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 153–5.

4 The question of whether the 'N' in 'north Indian' should be capitalised is a difficult one. It tends to be capitalised in articles in Singapore and Malaysia because of the salience of the boundary between north and south Indians in this region (particularly amongst descendants of the diaspora born out of the colonial period). As Nirmala Purushottam notes, '"Indian" is seen to relate to the South Asian region that is neatly divided into two parts, a "North India" and a "South India", in a manner suggestive of a nice neat line dividing the "Indian" subcontinent. The two camps are treated as if there are irreconcilable differences between them. From this neat division arise many painfully amusing notions pertinent to "Indian". To take just one example, one informant vividly described the North as comprising more educated, fairer persons. The Southerner on the other hand is perceived as dark, generally less educated and Tamil-speaking'; Nirmala Srirekam Purushottam, *Negotiating language, constructing race: Disciplining difference in Singapore* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), p. 82. In this article I have chosen not to capitalise the 'N' in 'north' precisely because I did not want to add to the existing binary division. Moreover, this division has come to be increasingly irrelevant due to the demographic changes that have taken place in the Indian population over the last decade or so. Amongst the 'new' Indian professional migrants in Singapore this division does not seem as significant, however.

in the nineteenth century and parallel developments in Southeast Asia, it attempts to '(re)discover' the history of Hindustani migration to Singapore. It explicates the pivotal role of this group in the growth of the north Indian community in Singapore in the early colonial period, along with the dominant factors that fostered their movement as 'forced' and 'free' immigrants.

As is the case in historical studies of subordinate migrant communities, sources on Hindustani migration and settlement in Singapore are fragmentary and widely dispersed. These include official and non-official records located in archives in Singapore, Malaysia, India and Britain; observer accounts of Singapore and Malaya in the nineteenth century; and recently published works on the early Bengal Native Infantry. Particularly useful information on sepoys (soldiers) in the infantry and the Hindustani presence in Bencoolen and Malaya in the early nineteenth century can be found in Munshi Abdullah's autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah*, as well as the recent work of Dirk Kolff and Seema Alavi.[5] As for the 'inner life' of the Hindustani community in Singapore, few works exist, with the exception of ethnographic studies of dairy farmers and fragments in local newspapers and books relating to Indians in Malaya. To fill the vacuum in published sources, I have relied primarily on souvenir magazines produced by community organisations and on oral testimonies of elders in the community. These have proven to be 'rich' sources, yet bearing in mind their tentative nature, wherever possible they have been verified through official and published works, or alternatively through repeat interviews with informants.

This article focuses on what I have called the 'Singapore frontier', a concept which reflects the influence of Ravindra K. Jain's work on South Indian labourers at the plantation frontier.[6] The term 'frontier' evokes images of 'an area of wilderness' or the 'edge of a newly settled area'. As the Hindustanis were the earliest sepoys in colonial Singapore, a sparsely populated area at the time, it must have seemed like a 'frontier' area to them. Moreover, the sepoy lines tended to be positioned at the boundary of the new settlement and the original wilderness, and they – and later convicts as well – were crucial in opening up new areas in that wilderness, such as Serangoon Road, Buffalo Village, etc.

## The neglect of Hindustanis in historical literature

A crucial reason why 'Hindustanis' have been overlooked in the research of the Indian diaspora in Singapore is the failure to correctly identify the community in early historical documents. In the nineteenth century, these migrants were appropriated into categories more familiar to local writers and enumerators. Even as historical accounts in the early twentieth century grew more sensitive to differences amongst migrant groups, the Hindustani diaspora continued to be excluded due to their failure to identify themselves in a category sufficiently intelligible for inclusion in official reports.

In Isabella Bird's letters describing Singapore in 1879, she relates that 'the washermen and grooms are nearly all Bengalees'.[7] The term 'Bengali' or 'Bengalees' used

5 Abdullah, Munshi. *The Hikayat Abdullah*, tr. A. H. Hill (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970); Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Seema Alavi, *The sepoys and the Company: Tradition and transition in Northern India, 1770–1830* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

6 See, for example, Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the plantation frontier in Malaya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

7 Isabella Bird, *The Golden Chersonese and the way thither* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1883), pp. 115–20.

by Isabella Bird and other early observers is misleading in the context of colonial Malaya, as these were generic terms that encompassed all migrants from northern India, whilst 'Kling' designated those from southern India.[8] Of the few 'Bengali' *dhobis* that remain in Singapore, most trace their origin to eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP), primarily the district of Azamgarh. In interracial discourse, the designation 'Bengali' continued for much of the twentieth century as the primary term used to describe north Indians in Singapore. As one informant recalled, 'other races, like the Malays, the Chinese . . . used to call our people "Bengali". They used to call us Bengali, because we were not Tamilians or Malayali, these they would call "Kling".'[9]

The incorrect labelling of Indians existed not just in observer accounts and public discourse but also in official reports. In the first 'official' enumeration of Singapore's population undertaken by the police in 1860, Indians were divided according to *Klings* (11,735) and *Bengalees* (1,236).[10] This practice continued through the second decade of the twentieth century, when the growing recognition that 'the Bengali proper is rare in Malaya' caused the appropriate classification of north Indian groups to become a cause of deep concern for census superintendents:

> The problem presented by the . . . 'Northern Indians' was one of the most difficult confronting the census authority for two reasons. In the first place, it is a matter of great difficulty to devise a satisfactory basis of classification, and, in the second, when such a theoretical basis has been decided upon, the problem of obtaining in practice, through the medium of Malayan enumerators, anything like accurate adherence to the authorized classification is almost insuperable.[11]

To better enumerate north Indians, the Superintendent of the 1921 census included separate columns for 'birthplace' and 'race' in the schedules. The attempt to classify Indians based on birthplace, however, did not work well for Hindustani migrants as respondents were simply called on to 'enter the province of birth' but those from UP were wholly unfamiliar with provincial labels.[12] As Gyanesh Kudaisya reflects, 'it is important to recognize . . . that UP, with its existing boundaries and structure, owes its existence to the British. They amalgamated various districts, areas, territories to carve out a single administrative entity.'[13] Consequently, although the 'birthplace' classification in the 1921 census contained the category 'United Provinces of Agra and Oudh', only 20 respondents in Singapore stated that they were born there. Assuming that the number of

8 A. M. Pountney, *The census of the Federated Malay States, 1911: Review of the census operations and results including tables exhibiting the population by sex, age, race, birthplace, religion, and occupation* (London: Darling, 1911); cited in J. E. Nathan, *The census of British Malaya, 1921* (London: Dunstable and Watford, 1922), p. 86.

9 Interview with Ram Awadh Tiwary, retired Education Officer, Singapore, 17 Nov. 2002.

10 J. F. A. McNair, *Miscellaneous numerical returns [and] Straits Settlements population 1871* (Singapore:[s.n.], 1871), p. 8.

11 C. A. Vlieland, *British Malaya (the colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay states under British protection, namely the federated states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the states of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Brunei: A report on the 1931 census and on certain problems of vital statistics)* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), p. 83; the 'Bengali proper' comment is on p. 84.

12 The new categories appear in Nathan, *Census of British Malaya, 1921,* p. 87 and Vlieland, *British Malaya,* p. 83.

13 Kudaisya, 'Constructing the "heartland"', p. 155.

UP immigrants far exceeded 20, it is evident that the vast majority of these immigrants had no clue what the administrative term meant. C. A. Vlieland, Superintendent of the 1931 census, commented:

> It is little use to instruct an English speaking enumerator to ask an Indian what 'Province' he comes from, or to instruct a Malay enumerator to enter 'Madras, Panjab *dan sebagai nya* [*et cetera*]' in the birthplace and '*bangsa*' in the race column. As to birthplace, the result of asking (say) an Indian from the United Provinces where he is born is highly unlikely to be the appearance in the schedule of a recognizable equivalent of 'United Provinces'. The entry may be a village name, a district name or an actual error, but is still more likely to be an unrecognizable jumble of Roman or Arabic letters.[14]

The problem of classification was accentuated by the fact that by the early 1900s north Indians had come to identify themselves as 'Bengali' to non-Indian enumerators simply because this term was commonly understood by outsiders. As Vlieland noted, 'even a native of the United Provinces, an Afghan or a Punjabi, if he has been any length of time in Malaya, is as like as not to describe himself as a "Bengali" in speaking to a Malay enumerator'. Some migrants may well have identified their birthplace more precisely, only for the name to be unintelligible to local enumerators as 'a half-caught and wholly unfamiliar sound'; in such cases, 'the enumerator will generally write down, in despair, something quite unintelligible, or fall back on the one term he knows – i.e., Bengali'.[15]

A more successful representation of Hindustanis in the 1921 census came from the attempt to classify Indians according to 'race' (Table 1). This 'racial' classification essentially divided northern Indians into ethno-linguistic groups. However, as noted earlier, 'Hindustani' – whilst specific in ethno-linguistic terms to the community – was

**TABLE 1:**

Indian Population in Singapore by 'Race' (1921)

| **Total Indians** | | | **Tamil** | | | **Telugu** | | | **Malayali** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 32,456 | 27,058 | 5,298 | 25,823 | 21,269 | 4,554 | 151 | 122 | 29 | 1,379 | 1,267 | 112 |
| **Punjabi** | | | **Hindustani** | | | **Bengali** | | | **Pathan** | | |
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 1,526 | 1,323 | 203 | **892** | **727** | **155** | 1,830 | 1,633 | 197 | 121 | 115 | 6 |

| **Gujerati** | | | **Maharatta** | | | **Burmese** | | | **Gurkha** | | | **Indians Unspecified** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 207 | 182 | 25 | 8 | 7 | 1 | 44 | 28 | 18 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 471 | 373 | 98 |

*Source:* J. E. Nathan, *The census of British Malaya, 1921* (London: Dunstable & Watford, 1922), p. 191.

14 Vlieland, *British Malaya*, p. 84.
15 Both quotations from ibid., p. 84.

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ambiguous in that by this time it had become a popular term with Indian nationalist connotations. It was therefore possible that the number identifying themselves as 'Hindustani' in the 'race' schedule would be inflated beyond the specific community that it sought to identify. The likelihood of this occurring, though, was lessened by the fact that most of the primary regions/provinces from which individuals migrated were represented as separate categories of Indian 'races', thus encouraging respondents to identify with their specific areas of origin. 'It seems probable', Vlieland noted, that the great majority of those vaguely described as "Hindustani" were, in reality, natives of the United Provinces.'[16]

It was only in 1931 that Hindustani migrants were most accurately appropriated into the colonial census for British Malaya (Table 2). In the place of the ambiguous category 'Hindustani', the Superintendent of the census instructed enumerators not to 'ask northern Indians the usual questions as to race (*bangsa*) and birthplace, but to ask "What is your *zillah* (district)? And what is your *suba* (province)?"'[17] The term *zillah* held a strong resonance for Hindustani migrants. When interviewed, my own respondents identified primarily with their *zillah* when questioned about their origin. Ram Janam Mishra, a third-generation Singaporean Indian, recounts:

> My father used to make me memorise what was the *zillah* we came from, this was must. If I didn't know then I would get helluva scolding because he would be ashamed. And this used to be a test case, the elders would ask us, which is your post office, which is your *zillah*. Because it showed to them that we had not forgotten our roots.[18]

**TABLE 2:**

Singapore 'Indians' by 'Race' (1931)
('Northern' Indians enumerated based on *zillah and suba*)

| **Total Indians** | | | **Tamils** | | | **Telugu** | | | **Malayalam** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 51,019 | 42,998 | 8,021 | 37,293 | 31,012 | 6,281 | 125 | 70 | 55 | 4,390 | 4,144 | 246 |
| **Punjabi etc.** | | | **United Provinces** | | | **Bengal, etc.** | | | **Bombay, etc.** | | |
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 5,283 | 4,373 | 910 | **1,103** | **1,074** | **29** | 898 | 869 | 29 | 623 | 494 | 129 |
| **Bihar and Orissa** | | | **Nepal** | | | **Burmese** | | | **Other and Unidentified** | | |
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 23 | 23 | 0 | 22 | 21 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1,257 | 918 | 339 |

*Source:* C.A. Vlieland, *British Malaya [the colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay states under British protection, namely the federated states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the states of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Brunei: A report on the 1931 census and on certain problems of vital statistics]* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), pp. 194–5.

16 Ibid., p. 84.
17 Ibid., p. 84.
18 Interview with Mr Ram Janam Mishra, retired army officer, Singapore, 18 July 2002.

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However, the 1931 classification based on *zillahs* and *subas* for north Indians was a one-off occurrence. The 1947 enumeration, a model for postwar census operations, dropped this classification on the grounds that it supposedly emphasised geographical over ethnographic criteria. In any case, the census Superintendent, M.V. del Tufo, confessed that even if he had desired to use the 1931 classification, 'the lists of Zillahs and Riasats were not available'.[19]

The 1947 enumeration of north Indians reverted to the model of the 1921 census based on 'race', which was renamed 'principal north Indian communities'. However, in an attempt to '[avoid] the more obvious errors' in the 1921 classification, a crucial omission was made: the category 'Hindustani' was removed from the list of principal north Indian communities altogether (Table 3). Consequently, Hindustanis – long included under the misnomer 'Bengali' and only once correctly enumerated as a community in the 1931 census – were now subsumed in the category of 'Other unspecified or indeterminate Indian peoples', numbering 3,460. Whilst del Tufo admitted that this was a 'relatively large residuary group', a reclassification, 'regarded in terms of money and effort or in terms of the jettisoning of some other enquiry, was too high [a price] to pay'.[20]

## The arrival of Hindustanis in Singapore

The Bhojpuri-speaking country is inhabited by a people curiously different from the others who speak Bihari dialects. They form one of the fighting nations of Hindostan. . . they have

**TABLE 3:**

North Indians in Singapore by 'Specific Community' (1947)

| **Sikh** | | | **Bengali** | | | **Gujerati** | | | **Maharatti** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 2,196 | 1,686 | 510 | 1,253 | 1,019 | 234 | 549 | 361 | 188 | 151 | 121 | 30 |
| **Marwari** | | | **Pathan** | | | **Punjabi** | | | **Rajput** | | |
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F |
| 313 | 286 | 27 | 548 | 402 | 146 | 3,558 | 2,838 | 720 | 133 | 118 | 15 |
| **Sindhi** | | | **Other Unspecified or indeterminate Indian peoples** | | | | | | | | |
| Persons | M | F | Persons | M | F | | | | | | |
| 369 | 290 | 79 | 3,460 | 2,557 | 903 | | | | | | |

*Source:* M.V. del Tufo, *Malaya, comprising the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore: a report on the 1947 census of population* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1949), pp. 296–9.

19 M. V. del Tufo, *Malaya, comprising the Federation of Malaya and the colony of Singapore: A report on the 1947 census of population* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1949), p. 77.
20 Ibid., p. 78; the comment on 'more obvious errors' is on p. 77.

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> spread over Aryan India, each man ready to carve his fortune out of any opportunity that may present itself. They have in former times furnished a rich mine of recruitment to the Hindostani army, and, on the other hand, they took a prominent part in the mutiny of 1857. As fond as the Irishman of a stick, the long-boned, stalwart Bhojpuri, with his staff in hand, is a familiar object striding over the fields far from home. Thousands of them have emigrated to British Colonies and have returned rich men; every year still larger numbers wander over Northern Bengal, and seek employment, either honestly as palki-bearers, or, otherwise, as dacoits. The larger Bengal landholders each keep a posse of these men euphemistically termed 'darwans', to hold his [sic] tenants in order.[21]

A crucial issue overlooked in the study of Indian migration to Singapore is the fact that the emergence of Hindustanis in the region was connected to the early military garrison. Literature on the Indian colonial militia in Singapore has concentrated largely on the contributions of the so-called 'martial' races, i.e. the Sikh and Pathan forces. Kernial Sandhu wrote that 'the Indian elements in the military garrison appear to have come more from the ranks of such Northerners as Punjabis and Pathans'.[22] Whilst this view is not incorrect, particularly for the period after 1857, it does not take into account the earliest Indian militia in the region. What has been neglected, at least in the literature of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and Malaya, is the failure to recognise the composition of the Bengal Army in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that formed the mainstay of East India Company (EIC) forces in the 'Malay world', stationed at Fort Marlborough (Bencoolen), Penang and Malacca. Contrary to its name, until 1857 the Bengal Native Infantry drew its recruits primarily from Oudh, Buxar, Bhojpur and Arrah in Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar.[23] Hindustanis, as the first 'native' troops of the Company, marked the emergence of north Indians in Singapore.

Peculiar aspects of the peasant population in Uttar Pradesh made possible a reservoir of recruits for the EIC in the late 1700s and early 1800s. They were adept for military service since the agrarian economy of the densely populated Bhojpuri and Awadhi regions from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries depended on the 'long-standing involvement [of the peasantry] in military entrepreneurship'. The correlation between village sports such as *kusti* (wrestling) and *gatka* (wrestling with clubs) and the regional tradition of soldiering is apparent as well in the memoirs of Subedar Sita Ram.[24] The ability of the upper castes – particularly the 'Bhumihars' of the Bhojpur region – to manipulate and even ignore traditional identities to suit their circumstance enabled the Company to recruit beyond the confines of the traditional 'martial' groups. Dirk Kolff finds that:

21 G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic survey of India*, vol. 5, part 2 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing, 1927), p. 5.

22 Kernial S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of their immigration and settlement (1786–1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 130.

23 Amiya Barat, *The Bengal Native Infantry: Its organisation and discipline, 1796–1852* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), p. 120; see also Alan Harfield, *British and Indian armies in the East Indies 1685–1935* (Chippenham, Wilts.: Picton Publishing, 1984).

24 Sita Ram Pandey, *From sepoy to subedar; Being the life and adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, a native officer of the Bengal Army written and related by himself*, ed. James Lunt, tr. Lieutenant-Colonel Norgate (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1970 reprint). The comment on 'military enterpreneurship' is from Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and sepoy*, p. 190.

> The Bhumihars i.e. 'military Brahmans', of the Ghazipur district in the nineteenth century, though commonly called Rai, took the affix Singh to their name when enlisting in the army or leaving the district, no doubt taking up old nomenclature when that made more sense in changing circumstances.[25]

Marquis Cornwallis commented in 1788 that 'the Army could raise an almost unlimited number of men of the best quality for native soldiers in a very short period from the populous provinces in that quarter of the Company's dominions'.[26]

In the early nineteenth century, the Bhojpuri segment increasingly came to hold a dominant position in the EIC militia; the northern half of the district of Shahabad alone accounted for over 12,000 sepoys by 1810. The high population density and widespread poverty due to diminishing landholdings amongst the numerous gentry made it attractive for high-caste Bhojpuris to enlist with the 'most important redistributive institution of the new British empire in India . . . the Bengal army'.[27] Military service with the Company, in addition to providing an alternative source of income to agriculture, was also seen to improve the social position of enlistees.

The Company's policy at the time favoured high-caste recruitment for fear that enlistment of lower castes would prove a threat to its ascendancy in India. As Warren Hastings forthrightly expressed it:

> Any measures . . . pursued to shake the religious faith of the Hindoos and break up these political distinctions and gradations in society we call caste and the whole male population of India [will] be left free to follow any occupation they like, even that of a soldier which in the present state of things can be exercised but by a very small proportion of the whole; there is danger, that they will soon be united and embodied as an armed nation after the example of the Sikhs and become too formidable for their rulers.[28]

Consequently, the typical social composition of sepoys in the Bengal Army at the time was three-fourths Hindustani Hindus of high caste, i.e. Bhumihars, Brahmins and Rajputs, and one-quarter Muslims from the region between Hissar (in present-day Haryana) and Benares.[29]

Despite caste restrictions and taboos against crossing the ocean, Hindustani sepoys were agreeable to overseas postings as the Company took measures to safeguard their high-caste status. Marquis Cornwallis wrote to Robert Hamilton, the commanding officer at Fort Marlborough, of the need to placate their religious feelings:

> The Government of Bengal has studied every means to render this situation on board ship comfortable with a view to lessen and if possible to remove those prejudices which Hindus

25 Ibid., p. 185.

26 'Marquis Cornwallis to Henry Dundas on the best mode of modelling the army in India, 1788', London, Public Records Office (PRO), Cornwallis Papers, PRO/30/11/211; quoted in Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, p. 49.

27 Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, p. 186; the 12,000 figure is on p. 181.

28 Add. 29234, Warren Hastings, 'Copies of essays etc.', Warren Hastings Papers, British Museum, cited in ibid., pp. 44–5.

29 A. H. Amin, 'The forgotten regiments', *The Defence Journal*, 4, 10 (2001); downloaded from http://www.defencejournal.com/2001/may/forgotten.htm

> of every description entertain against going to sea. Due attention to these prejudices will be no less necessary on shore.[30]

Seema Alavi further notes that during the 1789 expedition to Fort Marlborough at Bencoolen the sepoys oversaw the filling of their own water casks and were asked to provide specific information about their dietary needs.[31]

Unfortunately, Company records of the colonial militia in Southeast Asia largely concerned themselves with the workings of British and European officers. Even so, information on the Hindustani sepoys can be found in the accounts of local historians such as Munshi Abdullah. During the Java War of 1811, Munshi Abdullah in *Hikayat Abdullah* spoke of the Hindustani Hindu sepoys who had collected in Malacca: 'I noticed that some of the Hindoos . . . tied three strands of thread round their bellies and went on eating until the thread broke . . . There were those who could not eat fish or meat or anything containing blood but only vegetables.'[32] As far as language was concerned, Hindustani and a wide variety of local vernaculars such as Awadhi and Bhojpuri prevailed in the Bengal sepoy regiment. Munshi Abdullah noted that:

> At the time the English forces in Malacca were all sepoys . . . A difficulty arose for me because I did not understand Hindustani and when I wished to converse with the soldiers we could only gesticulate like dumb people . . . I told one of the officers how anxious I was to learn Hindustani. He replied 'Come to my house in the Fort and I can provide you with food and tell my teacher to give you lessons' . . . Every day I used to converse with soldiers in Hindustani. It was then that people first called me 'Munshi', which means a teacher or tutor of languages.[33]

Since the Bengal Native Infantry formed the mainstay of native forces in the region, it is highly likely that the sepoy with Sir Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar at the founding of Singapore on 29 January 1819 was Hindustani. Wa Hakim, an eye-witness to the British landing, recounted that 'I remember the boat landing in the morning. There were two white men and a Sepoy in it . . . The Sepoy carried a musket.'[34] From 1819, Hindustani sepoys of the Bengal Native Infantry formed the Indian military garrison in Singapore. The first batch of 150 sepoys due for return were soon replaced by a detachment of 485 soldiers from Bencoolen on 1 April 1819.[35] A study of the *Singapore garrison orders* in 1826 reveals that the 25th Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry was stationed in Singapore; Lieutenants Samuel Long and John Tierney took turns as commander. Whilst names of Hindustani soldiers tended to be excluded in accounts, occasional mention of sepoys were made in special circumstances. For example, on 31 January 1827, a court martial was convened in Singapore to try a native soldier named Gazie, identified as a 'Lascar of the Ordnance Commissariate Department'.[36]

30 Marquis Cornwallis to Deputy Governor and Council at Fort Marlboro, 1789, Cornwallis Papers, PRO/30/11/184, cited in Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, p. 46.
31 Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, p. 45.
32 Munshi Abdullah, *Hikayat Abdullah*, p. 85; the Java expedition consisted of as many as 4,000 European infantrymen and 4,000 native Bengal infantrymen with 300 cavalry (p. 88).
33 Ibid., p. 49; on language, see also Barat, *Bengal Native Infantry*, p. 125.
34 Charles E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles of the Eastern Isles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 484.
35 Malcolm H. Murfett *et al.*, *Between two oceans: A military history of Singapore from first settlement to final British withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 48.
36 Harfield, *British and Indian armies,* p. 136; the 25th Regiment is mentioned on p. 133.

The year 1827 marked the end of the Bengal Native Infantry's tour of duty in Singapore. The *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Advertiser* reported that in early May the 35th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry had arrived to take the place of its Bengal counterpart.[37] Not all of these forces necessarily returned to India, and Hindustanis may have assumed the role of civilian immigrants. This was certainly the case in Penang, where there is no record of the return of the disbanded 'Bengali' militia raised in 1820. Even if they did return to India, some soldiers were known to have come back; they had profited in the settlement, since prior to the mid-nineteenth century garrison members were allowed to engage in farming and other commercial enterprises to supplement the Company's wages. Kernial Sandhu found that:

> Indian sepoys . . . were among the first to take up plots of land for commercial farming. They appear also to have engaged in money lending, with funds saved from their wages . . . there were . . . cases of some soldiers, who had previously been members of the garrison forces, returning to Malaya once they had obtained their discharge in India.[38]

In addition, the military garrison included followers known as the 'bazaar contingent' – prostitutes, *dhobi*s, tea-makers, servants, etc. – who often detached themselves from the entourage and settled in Singapore. Evidence of the garrison's 'bazaar contingent' can be found as early as 1823 with the mention of a *dhobi* encampment near the sepoy lines. L. N. Hull, the acting secretary on modification to the town plan, demanded the encampment's removal 'in order that the ground may be appropriated for the purposes which it is intended'. In addition to *dhobis*, the 'bazaar contingent' included grooms, *doodhwallahs* and *chaiwallahs* (tea-makers) who, particularly in the early period, 'matched the regular soldiers in numbers'.[39]

In addition to the sepoys and the 'bazaar contingent', a second wave of Hindustanis arrived in Singapore as a consequence of the British policy of using Singapore as a penal colony for Indian 'convict' labour from 1825 to 1873.[40] It is difficult to ascertain the cumulative number of convicts that came to reside in Singapore from 1825 onwards since no continuous record was maintained. Nevertheless, figures for particular years are available and in 1860 the number of convicts in Singapore was 2275, of which 'very few . . . returned home at the end of their sentence'.[41] From the outset the military garrison was closely connected to the convict colony and the immediate charge of the prison fell on Lieutenant Chester of the Bengal Native Infantry, who became the first superintendent of the establishment. However, unlike the predominantly Hindustani composition of the early militia and their followers, the convicts came from all parts of India: 'Almost

37 Ibid., pp. 137–9.

38 Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, p. 130, citing an interview with Mufti Nisar Ahmad Khan Sahib, former Indian supernumerary officer, Malayan police force.

39 Ibid., pp. 130–1. L. N. Hull, letter to G. Bonham, Esq. Lieutenant Jackson and Esq. F. Bernard, 28 Feb. 1823, quoted in Charles Burton Buckley, *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore: From the foundation of the Settlement under the honourable the East India Company on February 6th, 1819 to the transfer of the Colonial Office as part of the colonial possessions of the Crown on April 1st, 1867* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969), p. 86; see also J. F. A. McNair, *Prisoners their own warders* (Westminster: A. Constable, 1899), p. 38b.

40 Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Puru Shotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, present and future* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), p. 9.

41 Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, pp. 134–5.

every strata [*sic*] of Indian society were represented amongst the convicts, including Benares *brahmanas*, Sikh and Dogra *kshatriyas*, Chettiar, Bengali and Parsi financiers and *ryots* and untouchables from the various parts of the subcontinent.' In Superintendent J.F.A. McNair's work on the prisoners, however, it is evident that 'the Hindustani language . . . was spoken by the bulk of the convicts in the jail.'[42]

The settlement of the early Hindustanis followed to some extent the general pattern of settlement of Indian migrants in Singapore. At the first stage this was closely connected to their link with the early Indian military garrison and the convict colony. The Company garrison first set up encampment at the foot of Fort Canning Hill, where 'a bazaar and quarters for the camp followers also appeared'. This was followed by the construction of a military cantonment in the 1820s at what is now Short Street, with a 'large exercising ground . . . roughly bounded by Prinsep St., Albert St., Queen St., and Bras Basah'.[43] With the arrival of Madras troops in 1827, the cantonment shifted to the Outram Road area. However, the area around Bras Basah, particularly at the junction of Bencoolen Street, remained central in the early settlement of Hindustanis as it came to house the early convict gaol.

Archival records in the early nineteenth century point to the earliest location of *dhobi*s in the 'bazaar contingent' situated in an area co-terminous with the Indian garrison at the 'foot' of Fort Canning Hill, presumably near Stamford Canal. Writing in 1865, John Cameron mentioned their later location further upstream on the road leading to Orchard Road at the junction of Bras Basah;

> Shortly after leaving town it follows the windings of a small stream of anything but pellucid water, in which the *dhobis*, or washermen, are busy from morning till night, on Sabbaths and on week-days, in shower and in sunshine, beating away at the soiled linen of the clothed section of the population . . . The men, generally strong, stalwart Klings or Bengalese, naked to a strip of cloth round the loins, stand up to their knees in the bed of the stream with a flat slab of stone in front of them.[44]

The *dhobis*, a near-extinct group in Singapore, have long since vacated the tract at the junction of Bras Basah and Orchard Road, but a Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station in the vicinity continues to bear the name *Dhoby Ghaut*.

The early 'migration' of Hindustanis to Singapore, the outcome of a labour movement tied to the colonial militia and a forced movement of Indian 'convicts' to the penal colony, marked the beginning of a full-fledged migration network. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the early Hindustani presence facilitated the development of a circular migration system of 'free migrants' through movements to and from their villages of origin. Members of this community sponsored new immigrants from their locale and helped with their settlement by connecting them to occupations in which the Hindustanis had carved a niche in Singapore.

42 McNair, *Prisoners their own warders*, p. 73; Lt. Chester is mentioned on p. 9. The quotation is from Kernial S. Sandhu, 'Tamil and other convicts in the Straits Settlements A.D. 1790–1873', in *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Tamil Studies* (Kuala Lumpur: International Association of Tamil Research, 1966), p. 200.

43 Murfett *et al.*, *Between two oceans*, pp. 48 (Fort Canning Hill), 57 (Short St.).

44 John Cameron, *Our tropical possessions in Malayan India* (London: Smith, Elder, 1865), pp. 78–9.

**TABLE 4:**

Mean Density of Population per sq. mile in selected Eastern and Western UP Districts, 1872–1921

| Name of District | 1872 | 1881 | 1891 | 1901 | 1911 | 1921 | % of Net Variation 1872–1921 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Eastern UP:* | | | | | | | |
| Gorakhpur | 443 | 574 | 675 | 649 | 707 | 722 | 62.9 |
| Basti | 525 | 582 | 637 | 659 | 653 | 687 | 30.8 |
| Gonda | 416 | 452 | 519 | 500 | 503 | 524 | 25.9 |
| Jaunpur | 662 | 780 | 816 | 776 | 746 | 745 | 12.5 |
| Azamgarh | 602 | 733 | 790 | 700 | 675 | 691 | 14.8 |
| Fyzabad | 591 | 624 | 702 | 707 | 666 | 677 | 14.6 |
| *Western UP:* | | | | | | | |
| Sharanpur | 414 | 458 | 469 | 490 | 462 | 440 | 6.3 |
| Kanpur | 483 | 498 | 510 | 531 | 482 | 485 | 0.4 |
| Aligarh | 551 | 525 | 536 | 617 | 599 | 546 | –0.9 |
| Mathura | 540 | 463 | 492 | 526 | 452 | 427 | –2.4 |
| Agra | 580 | 525 | 541 | 572 | 551 | 498 | –14.1 |
| Etah | 480 | 438 | 406 | 500 | 504 | 483 | 0.6 |

*Source:* Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983), p. 61.

'Free' migration of Hindustanis in the late 1800s was spurred by the economic problems that beset the eastern parts of Uttar Pradesh. The long period of British rule and the concomitant peace and stability had resulted in a large increase in population, making this one of the most densely populated regions in India by this time. The economy of the eastern districts, plagued by intermittent famine, could not sustain the growth as landholdings there were smaller than in western UP (Table 4) and 'the bulk of the productive land was already under cultivation, with the result that the peasants had to resort to double cropping . . . making any further increase in productivity difficult'.[45]

Opportunities for employment outside of agriculture were limited. The few industries in the region experienced a decline in the second half of the nineteenth century with the extension of railways that essentially 'destroyed the riverine trade of the eastern region by shifting a large part of the provincial commerce to the large western cities'.[46] This, coupled with the disassociation of the British military from recruiting in eastern UP for their involvement in the 1857 Mutiny, resulted in a growing dependence on migration networks to sustain the agrarian economy in the region. Consequently, various migration streams from the region came to exist, extending throughout northern

45 Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983), pp. 61–2 (quotation from p. 62).
46 Ibid., p.62.

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India, particularly Bengal and the tea estates in Assam, as well as to British territories in Southeast Asia and Fiji.

Whilst the economic 'push' factor accounts for migration from this region in the late 1800s, the question arises whether the presence of the early Indian military garrison and the convict colony had any bearing on subsequent Hindustani migration to Singapore. Numerous characteristics of the Hindustani community evident in local records and publications seem to point to connections with the early Indian garrison, 'bazaar contingent', and 'convicts' and the subsequent migration stream from Uttar Pradesh to Singapore. Particularly useful is a random sample of 397 male respondents compiled in 1977.[47] In the sample, respondents were asked to fill in their names, date of birth, district of origin, occupation, size of their family and date of arrival in Singapore. The vast majority of Hindustanis in Singapore trace their origin to the most densely populated Bhojpuri districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh (Figure 1).

What is notable is the fact that two primary districts – Azamgarh and Gorakhpur – accounted for 75 per cent of the sample of Hindustanis in Singapore. Whilst other districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh were also beset with similar economic tribulations at the end of the nineteenth century, the unusually high number from Azamgarh and Gorakhpur points to the easy access to transport from these districts to the port of Calcutta at the time, as well as to the possibility of an established pattern of migration from this region which had a multiplier effect: 'The steady diminution of the feeling against emigration is caused by the return of old emigrants to their houses. People are at length beginning to find out that a Hindu . . . is not forced to become a Christian . . . [and] come[s] back too, with money.'[48]

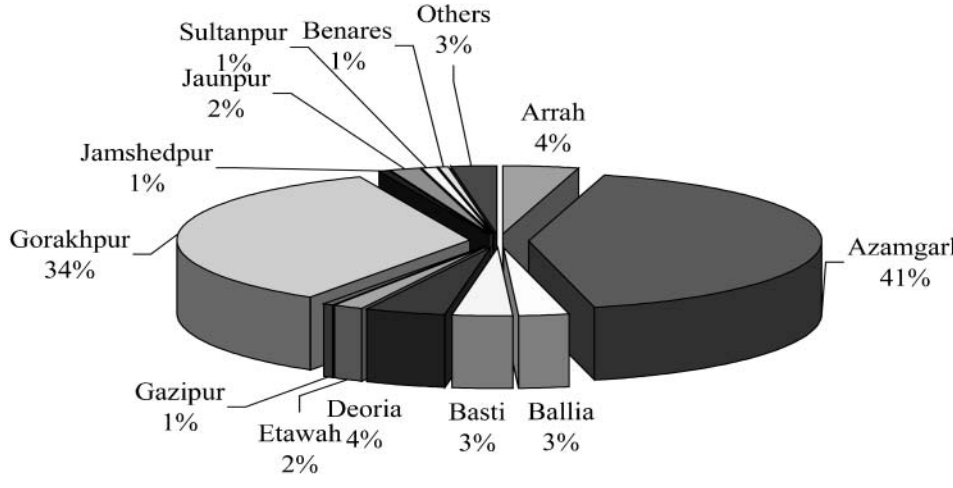


**Figure 1 Zillah (District)**

*Source*: Bharatiya Bhawan and Arya Samaj Singapore (sponsors), *Bhojpuri Music Festival Souvenir Magazine* (Singapore, 1977).

47 Bharatiya Bhawan and Arya Samaj Singapore (sponsors), *Bhojpuri Music Festival souvenir magazine* (Singapore, 1977).
48 Lal, *Girmitiyas*, p. 52.

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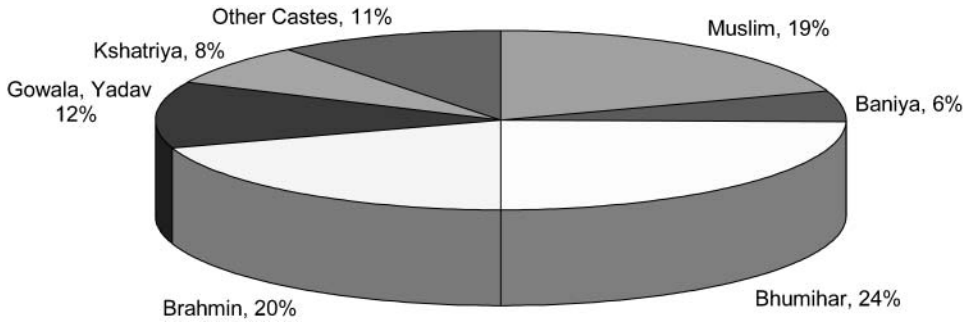


**Figure 2 Caste/Religious Breakdown**

*Source*: Bharatiya Bhawan & Arya Samaj Singapore (sponsors), *Bhojpuri Music Festival Souvenir Magazine* (Singapore, 1977).

A crucial factor in pointing towards a link with the early Indian military garrison is the peculiar caste composition of the community (Figure 2). The sample of Hindustani migrants in Singapore clearly shows the preponderance (more than 50 per cent) of high-caste Hindus – Bhumihars, Brahmins and *Kshatriya* – in the community, a proportion akin to that of the early military garrison. More fascinating are linkages in the occupational breakdown of the community, pointing to a connection with the Indian military garrison, the 'bazaar contingent' and convicts (Figure 3). As late as 1977, approximately one quarter of respondents continued to be employed as *dhobis* and dairy farmers, two occupations closely connected to the 'bazaar contingent' and the convict colony.[49]

Similar occupation patterns linked to the convict colony can be made with Hindustani government servants who continued to be tied to the prison service. It must be noted that it was the practice in the penal colony for senior convicts to act as prison warders. With the end of the Indian convict colony in 1873, Hindustani ties with the

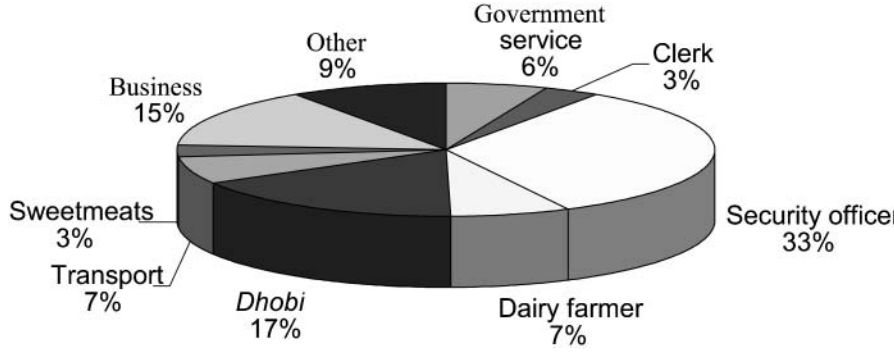


**Figure 3 Occupational Chart**

*Source*: Bharatiya Bhawan and Arya Samaj Singapore (sponsors), *Bhojpuri Music Festival Souvenir Magazine* (Singapore, 1977).

49 A newspaper report in 1857 stated that 'there has lately been considerable sickness amongst cattle in Singapore. The convict and municipal departments, as well as private individuals, have lost a number of animals' (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1857).

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prison continued as many came to be employed as warders at the prison in Outram and later at Changi. Even as late as 1955, in a list of recipients for the Colonial Prisons Service Medal, 10 of 19 medal recipients were Hindustanis, most of them from the Bhumihar caste.[50]

Whilst the settlement of the Indian militia, convicts and the *dhobis* of the 'bazaar' contingent is unambiguous given the existence of archival material, settlement independent of official institutions is more problematic. This is especially the case given that all north Indian migrants were labelled 'Bengalee', thus making it difficult to separate particular regional groups. Important clues can be found, however, if one continues to focus on the peculiar occupational patterns of Hindustanis.

Based on work by Yeo Chor Siang and Karpal Singh, it is apparent that Hindustani dairymen played a crucial role in the development of cattle farming in Singapore. Singh's study of the Potong Pasir dairymen in Singapore found that:

> The stock owners . . . were herdsmen who came to Singapore at the dawn of the twentieth century from the border areas of the Uttar Pradesh and Bihar provinces of India. Their original site of settlement was at a big stock shed situated behind the Tikha market on the left bank of the Rochor canal in the present-day Kandang Kerbau area. The name 'Kandang Kerbau' (a Malay term for buffalo corral) itself indicated the affiliation of the area to buffalo rearing.[51]

Whilst Singh dated the arrival of Hindustani dairy farmers to Kandang Kerbau only to the 'dawn of the twentieth century', it is probable that Hindustanis settled there much earlier, forming a component of some of the earliest Indian cattle herders, a crucial factor in the development of Serangoon Road as an Indian enclave. The *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register* reported in 1835 that

> In October a gang of fifty or sixty armed Chinese attacked the house of a Bengalee named Sarawan, at the new kampong, called Buffalo Village, now called *Kandang Kerbau*. The inmates were awakened by the barking of their dogs, and were prepared with loaded fire-arms . . . The robbers attempted to break in, when one of the Bengalis fired a musket from an upper window and killed one of the gang, who was carried off by his companions.[52]

Sharon Siddique and Nirmal Puru Shottam's work on Little India, also tells of cattle sheds close to the convict prison, along Waterloo Street on the right bank of the Rochor Canal. Close to the location, Hanuman Beem Singh, said to be of Hindustani origin, constructed the Krishnan Temple in the 1870s, by 'clear(ing) the ground around the Banyan tree and plac(ing) the deities . . . at the foot of the tree'.[53] Krishnan Temple, whilst it came to be shared with other regional Hindu communities, continued to be an important religious centre for Hindustani Hindu migrants. By the early 1900s the growing population density, increasing demand for residential-commercial space in Serangoon Road and the expansion of the city resulted in shift of cattle farming from the Kandang

50 'Colonial Service Prisons Medal', *Majalah Penjara*, 1, 1 (1958): 3.
51 Karpal Singh, 'An Indian dairy in Singapore' (Academic exercise, Dept. of Geography, University of Singapore, 1968), p. 5.
52 Cited in Buckley, *Anecdotal history*, p. 274.
53 Sri Krishnan Temple, *A journey through Sri Krishnan Temple (souvenir)* (Singapore, 2002), p. 6. Many elder Bhojpuri immigrants speak of the Krishnan Temple as having been their temple until it was 'taken over' by the Tamil community; see also Siddique and Puru Shotam, *Singapore's Little India*, p. 27.

Kerbau vicinity to areas further inland. In 1916, cattle farmers were forced to relocate and by 1924 Hindustani dairymen moved up Serangoon Road, setting up a dairy shed in the marshy land close to the Kallang River in Potong Pasir.[54]

Community publications provide evidence of a Hindustani presence in Singapore from the mid-nineteenth century. A Bhojpuri souvenir magazine states that Thakhur Mangal Singh Gaur arrived in the 1860s from the district of Kanpur (Cawnpore) in UP. He first settled in Dunlop Street, an arterial road off Serangoon Road, directly opposite Buffalo Road and Kandang Kerbau, which by the late 1800s had developed into a hub for the Hindustani community.[55] Another study's informant states that:

> My great-grandfather was in the cattle trade. He was doing milk business . . . He came in here around the 1860s . . . my family was staying in Kerbau Road. Before Kerbau Road they were staying in Dunlop Street. Dunlop Street was the nucleus of the UP wallahs of that time.[56]

The Hindustani hub at Dunlop Street became a focal point for new migrants who upon arrival made their way there to look for other kinsmen, accommodation and job opportunities:

> There were 3 boarding houses in Dunlop Street where the people who were from Azamgarh area . . . used to come . . . And they all had a *charpoy* [bedstead] and they used to stay there. If they were related, they would have a communal kind of kitchen. If they were working in shift, one would cook for the other. So they were all living there and it was all men, no women.[57]

Members of another popular vocation in the community – watchmen – were more dispersed than dairy farmers or *dhobi*s since their work was dependent on the location of godowns and factories. However, there were areas of Hindustani concentration such as Pulau Saigon, at the bend of the Singapore River close to Robertson Quay. This was a particularly popular area of settlement for migrants from the district of Gorakhpur; the more educated among them often took a second job as peons or clerks in firms located downstream at High Street.

A notable feature of Hindustani settlement in Singapore, reminiscent of soldiering traditions, was the tendency to mark out vacant fields as *akharas* or gym arenas for *kusti* (wrestling), a popular martial sport amongst Hindustani migrants. *Akharas* could be found in the vicinity of Hindustani settlement in Serangoon Road and Potong Pasir:

> I remember, this place at St Michaels Road, there used to be an *Akhara*. There was a wrestling match between the champions of two districts. I don't know which two districts, whether it was Azamgarh and Ballia or Gorakhpur . . . All the people from the *char* (dairy shed), and Dunlop Street gathered to watch this wrestling match. But what happened was something wrong in the refereeing and the two opposing [groups of] spectators started fighting with *Lathis* (sticks) and all.[58]

54 Singh, 'Indian dairy', p. 6.
55 *Bhojpuri Music Festival*, p. 5; interview with Brij Mohan Singh, great-grandson of Thankur Mangal Singh Gaur, 28 Jan. 2003.
56 Siddique and Puru Shotam, *Singapore's Little India*, p. 68.
57 Interview with Ram Janam Mishra.
58 Ibid.

By the turn of the century, a growing number of Hindustani musicians and dancers had begun to arrive. Dr Mangal Chotta Singh, born in 1889 and founder of the Ramakrishna Sangeeta Sabha (orchestra) in Singapore, had opportunities at a young age 'of meeting Hindustani musicians who came to Singapore from time to time'.[59] These musicians and dancers often performed in the homes of patrons, or in the *akharas*, which could easily be transformed to suit the purpose.

To meet the growing needs of the increasing number of Hindustani migrants, the North Indian Hindu Funeral Association (later renamed the North Indian Hindu Association) was formed in 1921 at the Krishnan Temple in Waterloo Street but was later moved to Dunlop Street and in the 1930s to Cuff Road, its current location. In addition to providing funeral services for the community, the North Indian Hindu Association also sponsored sojourning migrants and helped with their 'return' to India.[60] The latter service was important since the proximity of Singapore to the port of Calcutta, the British presence in Rangoon and Penang and the development of naval communications in the region made possible a system of 'free' migration sustained by circular and return movements that did not sever ties with their rural origin. The Hindustani migrant, then, throughout the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth could and often did remain a sojourner, and the displacement was not permanent.

As in the case of the Hindustani soldier of the Bengal Native Infantry who 'looked forward to furlough and to visit[ing] his family in the Bhojpur and Awadh countryside', the village occupied a central place in the life of Hindustani migrants.[61] This was *mulk* (home), where their wife and family remained whilst they sojourned abroad and remitted as much as possible for their material comfort:

> Working two jobs, a day job, and at night as watchmen . . . They saved, for their return . . . In their private life, they spoke about home. The crops and harvest, or about somebody's marriage taking place . . . whether the rains came in time or not. They talked about wanting to buy cows, a little more land or building a *pukka makaan* [house made from solid material such as brick] in their village.[62]

Similarly, Palany Sabapathy finds in his study of itinerant milk vendors in Singapore that

> What mattered was . . . [that the milk-men] should earn enough money to build their own brick house in . . . [their natal] village and buy a piece of land [there] since it . . . was these things that raised their prestige among their kinsmen.[63]

The centrality of the village of origin and the desire for return amongst Hindustani migrants had a telling impact on the extent of remittances to the 'homeland'. Indivar Kamtekar observes that prior to the Second World War,

59 *Bhojpuri Music Festival*, p. 5.
60 Singapore North Indian Hindu Association, *Shree Geeta Jayanti and 70th Anniversary of Association (souvenir)* (Singapore: Khalsa Printers, 1992), pp. 167–73.
61 Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and sepoy*, p. 27.
62 Interview with Ram Janam Mishra.
63 Palany Sabapathy, 'A study of itinerant milk vendors' (Academic exercise, Dept. of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Singapore, 1968), p. 23.

> Some regions in India were more closely tied to the East than others. In Azamgarh, a district in the United Provinces, no less than thirty *lakh*s [1 *lakh* = 100,000] of rupees were received annually through money orders dispatched from abroad . . . the economic balance was seriously disturbed by the Japanese war, especially in Gorakhpur where much of the population depended on remittances from relations working in Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore and Rangoon. It is estimated that in a normal year, the amount received in money orders in one *tahsil* [sub-district] alone was equal to the land revenue of that *tahsil*.[64]

## Conclusion

The Hindustani diaspora in Singapore, one of the oldest migrant communities there, has largely been ignored in historical literature. It stands out as a case in point emphasising that research on the Indian diaspora in the city-state can be inadequate if based solely on existing official literature in the region and early observer accounts. Such research cannot disregard the historical literature on British expansion in India which can, as in the case of the Hindustanis, be revealing in the information it provides on particular historical trajectories of migration from the subcontinent.

In addition, the researcher cannot ignore 'micro' analysis of community publications and oral testimonies, which, whilst providing a 'richer' embodiment of migration, can also challenge existing 'fallacies' in the historical literature of the Indian diaspora in the region. Certainly, oral testimonies are crucial in informing us about the lived experience of Hindustani migrants. Hindustanis have traditionally seen themselves as sojourners, living frugally and saving to meet some specific goal back home, and preparing for their eventual 'return', which became a reality for so many. So long as restrictions on migration were lax, the Hindustanis were able to sustain a system of circular migration based on kinship and familial ties, a system that has suffered with the restrictions on 'free' migration imposed by the nation-state.

The importance of 'micro' research in the study of diasporas underlines the urgency of the task of examining 'subordinate' traditional communities in Singapore. Significant out- and in-migration in the last decade or so has resulted in substantial changes in the disposition of the population. The continuation of this process, coupled with a more general transformation in an urban environment of communities tied by a complex web of social relations and emotional bonds into functional groups, has resulted in many 'traditional' communities (such as the Hindustanis) being pushed to the brink of becoming 'vanishing' communities, taking with them fragments of Singapore's early history.

64 Indivar Kamtekar, 'The Shiver of 1942', *Studies in History*, 18, 1 (2002): 82–4.