

Shedding light on ‘minorities within a minority’

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The histories of Singapore’s Tamil Catholics, Hindustanis, Gujaratis, Telugus and Bengalis have been captured in a new series of five monographs and documentaries which shed light on these often overlooked communities.

The small sizes of these groups relative to the rest of Singapore’s Indian community – which com-

prises mostly Tamil-speaking Hindus – make them “minorities within a minority”, said Associate Professor Rajesh Rai, who headed the project along with senior lecturer Jayati Bhattacharya.

In the 2020 census, ethnic Indians made up about 9 per cent of Singapore’s population of about 5.6 million.

Prof Rai, who heads the South Asian Studies programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said these circumstances

have led to the variety of South Asian ethnic groups in Singapore being lumped together as one in both public discourse and official records.

Speaking at a launch event for the project held at the Indian Heritage Centre in Little India on May 28, he added: “A closer inspection (of Singapore’s Indian community) reveals a mosaic or a patchwork quilt, interconnected to a larger whole but each community marked by its own unique characteristics and experiences.”

The project, which was funded by the National Heritage Board, produced a series of five short monographs on each minority community which detail their migration to Singapore, customs, festivals and oral histories.

They also detail the areas and institutions important to each community, such as the Church of Our Lady

of Lourdes in Rochor, which has been the home of Singapore’s Tamil Catholics since the 19th century.

These books, collectively titled *Hidden Heritage: A Series Exploring Singapore’s Minority South Asian Communities*, will be available to the public through the National Library.

Each one is accompanied by a documentary featuring interviews with academics and members of the communities, running from 12 to 18 minutes. They will be used as teaching aids at NUS.

At a panel discussion held at the launch event, Prof Rai and members of his team discussed the motivations for and insights gleaned from the project.

Ms Vithya Subramaniam, who worked on the monograph titled *Telugus In Singapore: Re-making Diasporic Identities*, said one intention of the project was to give

each community its own “space” in both a literal and a figurative sense, something which they have not always been afforded.

Speaking to *The Straits Times* on the sidelines of the event, Prof Rai said he hopes the project will be a gateway for more scholarship and engagement with these communities and their histories.

Himself a Hindustani – people from the middle and upper Ganga plain – he said: “In Singapore, ‘Indian’ generally means two things – Tamil or Hindi. For these communities, this project is a voice and a chance to be represented.

“Growing up in the Hindustani community, my Indian-ness was always layered. At home, it was Hindustani and in school it was a different type of Indian-ness which I experienced and negotiated.”

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