

**Local Heritage, Community History, Personal Memory:
Case Studies in digitising Indian Festivals in Singapore**

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Introduction

Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) has been engaged in the documentation of tangible and intangible sources of personal memories of community pioneers and veterans for their own contribution, for their memory of key events in history as well as institutional history. IHC is actively engaged in sourcing and study of available documents including newspapers that relate to individuals or institutions of repute in Singapore. IHC has also focussed on cultural practices of the Indian communities in Singapore around festivals such as Thaipusam, Timithi and others, tapping on personal memories and experiences of the community members. The two are Tamil village practices which have found major resonance with many Indians and a growing number of Chinese devotees in Singapore.

Thaipuam is a thanksgiving festival in honour of Murugan or Skanda, the son of Shiva and Parvati that centres around the Thandayudhapani temple on Tank road in Singapore which was built in 1859. The practice has its roots in second half of the 19th century, but we don't know for certain when exactly the practice started. Documentation from both tangible and intangible sources is inadequate to say for certain when this practice began, however, its age cannot be doubted. Devotees carry milk pots or a kavadi, which is usually to fulfil a vow to overcome a difficult life situation or the fulfilment of a desire, mostly worldly and materialistic gains. Very few people carry it for spiritual upliftment. Devotees take honour in lifting the kavadi with unwavering faith and sometimes it is passed on in family and extended family circles or even a kampong circle. Many families get together for the fulfilment of their desires and co-fund a kavadi. Besides Murugan, many other Hindu deities are also seen being worshipped during this festival, including village gods of Tamil Nadu as well as Taoist deities – a testament to Multicultural ethos of Singapore.

Timithi is a festival dedicated to Draupadi Amman, a Mahabharata character and a village deity who is venerated in certain parts of Tamil Nadu, worship brought over to Singapore by the Caulkars, ship repairers from Tamil Nadu's Vadakku

Poigayoor Nagapattinam area. The temple dedicated to Sinna Mariamman started soon after the arrival of the East India Company and by 1827, the attap structure with a small gopuram in brick was erected at the South Bridge road supported by none other than the Indian pioneer Narain Pillai. Fire-walking started as part of the ritual, street theatre, worship performance of the Mahabharata war and its reading and re-enactment within the precinct of the Mariamman temple where shrines to Kodandasamy Ramar, Aravan and other village deities also started over time. This hybrid temple is still a focus of the Timithi ritual and fire-walking, however, the worship of all the deities has flourished since its establishment, another example of Singapore's multi-cultural identity and coexistence of the

A resource panel of qualified veterans has been organised that has shortlisted unanimously agreed list of veterans who form the core group to which more names will get added as information comes in about hitherto unknown pioneers and veterans. This paper discusses the challenges of incorporating archival digital resources, published primary and secondary sources, oral history from personal and communal memories and actual documentation of current form of practices. The challenges faced by a curator in a museological context of creating a heritage centre's content based on its community's available documents and oral narratives are enormous, and to get semblance of cohesiveness from this database, to package it for an interactive experience through digital media is a larger challenge. This multi-dimensional approach to creating a cohesive narrative begins with the 'personal', constructs the 'communal' and presents itself to the world as 'local/regional' heritage. This process engages many agencies involving varying views, but for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on just the first challenge – creation of the database and the merit of digitisation in recording personal memories and turning them into community history and local heritage.

Documentation of Indian Festivals:

Finding meaning through the coalescence of available sources and reconstructing the cultural practices of the Indian community since the beginning of the 20th century has engaged my curatorial sensibilities since early 1990s. Photo archives from national and private sources have yielded only limited material, private archives are dependable only to the extent to which they are known, the community

or semi-government organisations have been lacking in historical sensitivity to keep its records or preserve photos or even memories so as to institutionalise preservation of its own history, history of their origins and celebrate their common shared past. This usually leads the IHC curatorial team to a usual roadblock in accessing primary or secondary sources. Many institutional memories from the first half of the 20th century are lost or destroyed or are untraceable due to lack of available documents. From a number of official and private sources, Thaipusam photos of the post WW II period are generally available world-wide, the National Archives in Singapore is the main source of photographic record. The Hindu Endowments Board is the main statutory board that manages this event from the early 20th century, and yet, its own digital records do not precede the 1970s.

Challenges of Digitisation of Festivals:

A general sense of disconnect with history prevails within the Indian community in Singapore leading to further complication for a researcher of cultural anthropology, sociology or history. Due to war, change of premises or change of direction and leadership of institutions, many records of institutions are lost. There is also a general lack of awareness of recording institutional history as well as documenting milestones. Lack of space for storage of records in land scarce Singapore and change of premises due to escalating rentals leaves organisations and clubs with little options for record keeping. In such cases digitisation of records would have been a good solution, funding constraints notwithstanding.

Commercially accessible digital still and video cameras has led to an explosion of digital archival creation at the hands of devotees, bystanders, the media as well as the organisers in recent decades. The documentation of current practices and the creation of multiple archives of images and videos facilitated by the digital media therefore is only a step in the process of preservation, how it effectively preserves local heritage, needs to be further negotiated and investigated. In the process of digitisation, the use of a single camera and resource person poses limitation, the number of researchers engaged in the research is yet another limitation imposing barriers to how many perspectives and how extensive the research can be, proving a lack of comprehensibility of the entire effort.

Digitising a festival as it unfolds poses many issues, which perspective and whose perspective to document, how deep or extensive is the documentation, how often and how many times should one document a festival to notice a trend developing in order to analyse the data sociologically, statistically or even economically. In the study of Thaipusam and Timithi, the biggest challenge is how varied perspectives of different groups, such as the Chettiar, other Hindus, non Hindu Indians such as Sikhs and Christians, Chinese Buddhists and Taoists combine together to showcase the Multiculturalism of Singapore and how a myth is re-enacted in an urban context which began as a village festival transplanted from its original locale by the plantation and other workers who came to work and lived on in Singapore.

Currently, researchers are not able to assess what happens when the practice changes without allowing a pattern to form. Festivals such as Thaipusam and Timithi have undergone so many changes over the years, that it is not only difficult, it is almost impossible to study and analyse the emergence, growth and survival of this festival in Singapore. These festivals are often photographed but seldom studied in detail, that also poses further limitation to the 'understanding' of the motivation behind this hugely popular festival and the reason for the growing number of devotees participating in it. New paper coverage from the past has been found extremely helpful in surveying the community, traffic and racial matters that come to the fore and get reported via local dailies such as the Tamil Murasu.

Limit to the knowledge of a resource person, his/her own understanding of the problems at hand and how much of his data is historically accurate needs to be further validated. The nature of the festival, its extent stretching over several days as well as various communities' participation in different aspects of the same festival, leads to another significant limitation which most people at a glance will not be able to comprehend. Is digitisation an answer to the issues at hand? How similar issues also affect recording of other festivals? In the context of Singapore, even official and non official records pose a problem as to which of the two should a researcher take into consideration.

How a researcher negotiates his data from the memories collected from veterans of the community and the photographic data as well as the newspaper articles that document the festival is in itself a challenge. Currently, the festival of

Thaipusam has been documented by a dated photographic record to 1927 while newspaper reports are dated in the late 1930s and early 1940s. However from memories gathered from the senior devotees around the temple and those associated with the administration of the temple, it is believed that the practice is even older than 20th century.

Very often, after piecing together photographic and published records with oral accounts of veterans and younger devotees, the informant or the subject that was being documented may either pass on or discontinue the practice. This has also led to some difficulties in the continuation of the documentation process over a period of time. Most researchers also do not continue as they either have a limited time for their study or do not have sustained interest in the topic. The community is also quite close in guarding its knowledge and may only share with people they trust are respectful of the tradition.

Accessing Digitised Information on Festivals:

What IHC is proposing to do with this material is a challenge in itself. IHC will edit and script the researched and documented data so that it becomes a learning, experiencing hub for things that it believes the Indian community and the visitors need to know about the South Asian community in Singapore. In sifting through the digital records, interviewing veterans and younger practitioners of faith and drafting the script, has curatorial direction and community voice as its backbone. Focusing on shared experiences which are widely validated by the community are upper most concerns; whether or not will it be considered official and acceptable is a completely separate issue. Documenting the history of the community especially around the celebration of a certain festival such as Thaipusam is a special engagement that enables community a role in the manner in which they would like their community to be showcased and remembered for. IHC will package the research around some of these cultural practices as interactive media to disseminate their uniqueness. IHC hopes this will weave a common thread among the local visitors while educating the foreign visitors of their unique existence and survival. IHC's objective to educate, excite and entertain, the visitor using its digitised media content will fulfil its position as a resource centre for Diaspora practices and commonalities in the behaviour and

aspirations of different ethnic and racial groups and economic backgrounds which direct their behaviour and lifestyle choices they make.