



**What's In An**

**Indian Road**

**Name In**

**Singapore?**

**Ever wondered about the origin of  
these roads in Singapore?**

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# What's in an Indian road name?

**D**HOBY Ghaut MRT Station is one of Singapore's busiest interchanges but did you know its name goes back to laundry activities in the area as far back as the 1830s?

Associate Professor Victor R. Savage, director of the Office of Alumni Relations and deputy director of the Master in Environmental Management Programme Committee, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore (NUS), remembers the area from his childhood: "Dhobis would wash clothes in Stamford Stream, a freshwater stream which used to go through the area. The stream is now known as Stamford Canal which is a covered canal."

Prof Savage is joint author of *Singapore Street Names – A Study of Toponymics* with NUS Department of Geography Provost's Chair Professor Brenda Yeoh. The book is an extensive compilation of road and place names in Singapore, now in its third edition.

"The old street names of Singapore carried with them political, economic, social, religious and cultural representations of personalities, peoples, communities, activities and nation builders," state the authors in the preface.

In an interview with *tabla!* Prof Savage elaborates: "The words 'dhoby' and 'ghaut' respectively translate to 'laundryman' and 'stepped bank of a river' in Hindi. One origin for the word 'ghaut' comes from the word 'ghat' from the famed Varanasi Ghats along the River Ganges. The area, originally known as Dhoby Green, covered approximately five acres. Queen Street was known in Tamil as vannam teruvu (street of the laundrymen) and in Malay, kampung dhobi (laundrymen village)."

*tabla!* takes a deeper look at Singapore road names which have their roots within Indian history, according to Prof Savage and Prof Yeoh's research.

## Historical significance

**Hindoo Road:** Originally named Hindu Lane, the road in Little India is associated with Tamil Hindu labourers, some of whom lived here, and worked for the municipality. Rents in the 1930s for a whole house was \$10 to \$15 a month.

**Madras Street:** This road, also in Little India, got its name as a result of the high concentration of Tamils living in the street.

**Neythal Road:** In 1968, the Advisory Committee on the Naming of Roads and Streets decided that place names within Jurong Industrial Estate should "reflect an international flavour and that Romanised names in all four official languages should be adopted. In addition, names should preferably be connected with industry".

Located in the vicinity of the Singapore Textile Industry, this road was initially suggested to be named "Nesavu Road" which means "weaving" in Tamil. But it was substituted to the English name Textile Road as it was felt "nesavu" was difficult to pronounce and translate to Chinese.

Finally, at the suggestion of the Postmaster-General, this was later changed to Neythal Road which means to "weave as clothes" in Tamil.

**Temple Street:** The street got its name in 1908 through the Municipal Council. It was named to reflect the presence of Sri Mariamman Temple, the oldest Hindu temple in Singapore. The temple was built as a gesture of piety and gratitude by one of Singapore's earliest Indian pioneers Naraina Pillai, who has a road named after him. (See Pillai Road.)

## Prominent Indians

**Anamalai Avenue:** This road in Sixth Avenue is named after Annamalai Chettiar from Ramachandrapuram in Tamil Nadu as he owned several properties in the vicinity. Known for his philanthropy within the Chettiar community in Singapore and Malaysia, he initiated the Nattukottai Chettiars' Trade Association in the 1920s.

**Chander Road:** This road in Little India was named after Indian Municipal Commissioner A.C. Chander.

**Meyappa Chettiar Road:** This road was named in 1932 after Meyappa Chettiar, an Indian landowner. It is located off Upper Serangoon Road in Potong Pasir.

**Mistri Road:** Navroji R. Mistri, a prominent Parsi entrepreneur, ran a successful business called the Phoe-



Named after prominent Indians... Chander Road (left) was named after Indian municipal commissioner A.C. Chander and Veerasamy Road (right) was named after Dr N. Veerasamy, who actively participated in public activities for 35 years, serving for 11 years on the Municipal Board. PHOTOS: SHONA LALL, NHB, NOSHIR MISTRI, THE STRAITS TIMES, SP JAIN

The origins... Temple Street was named to reflect the presence of Sri Mariamman Temple (below left), the oldest Hindu temple in Singapore. SP Jain Center of Management's Singapore campus (below right) is in Hyderabad Road which lies within Alexandra Park, the former residential area of the British military forces. Road names in this estate are named after place names in Britain and the Commonwealth.



nix Aerated Waters Factory. Known as the "godfather of the poor", his single largest donation of \$950,000 in June 1952, a tremendous fortune in the day, went towards the building of a third-class ward for non-paying patients. The Mistri Wing at the Singapore General Hospital is in remembrance of his generous contribution.

**Narayanan Chetty Road:** This road near Mohamed Sultan Road is named after an Indian businessman Narayanan Chettiar, who was known for his reform work in the Tamil community. He first came to Singapore in 1896.

**Pillai Road:** Off Paya Lebar Road, this road was named in 1957 after Naraina Pillai, one of Singapore's early pioneers. He accompanied Sir Stamford Raffles on the latter's second trip here, making him one of the first Indian merchants to relocate from Penang.

He was inspired by the ideals Raffles had for Singapore and stayed on. He began a bricks kiln, became Singapore's first building contractor and also ran a cotton goods shop. He donated land for the building of Sri Mariamman Temple.

**Saiboo Street:** Located in the River Valley vicinity, this street is thought to be named after S. Saiboo Ghany, one of the four appointed trustees of the Nagore Durgha Shrine in 1893.

**Veerasamy Road:** This road in Little India is named after Dr N. Veerasamy (born in 1864), who actively participated in public activities for 35 years, serving for 11 years on the Municipal Board. He was also president of the Hindu Advisory Board.

## Indian community link

**Chitty Road:** The Chitty community is a small Peranakan Indian community, which resided along Chitty, Selegie, Race Course and Serangoon roads. Chitties are of South Indian descent, and lived in Singapore and Malacca for many centuries. They adopted a Peranakan (Straits-born Chinese) way of life including speaking Baba Malay, eating Peranakan food and adopting some Malay traditions while remaining Hindu.

**Kadayanallur Street:** This street in Tanjong Pagar is named after a small community of Tamil Muslims from Kadayanallur, South India. They typically owned small shops and by 1936, the community had their own school in Tras Street with a class of 26 pupils.



Remembering generosity... Mistri Road (left) was named after philanthropist Navroji R. Mistri (above), who is also remembered by the Mistri Wing at the Singapore General Hospital. His contribution led to the building of a ward to house poor patients.

The school promoted cultural values and taught the Tamil language. By 1946 this became the Umar Pulavar Tamil School (named after the 17th century Tamil poet), and occupied a shophouse at 72 Tanjong Pagar Road.

**Parsi Road:** Named in 1952, Parsi Road off Shenton Way is named after the Parsi community. The first Parsis arrived in Singapore in 1829. Many became successful, well-known businessmen in the community including founding partner Cursetjee Frommurdze of John Little's and Navroji R. Mistri. (See Mistri Road.) In fact, there used to be a Cursetjee Hill before it was replaced by the name Mount Wallich.

## Nod to India

**Karikal Lane:** Karikal is a major port city, and one of four districts in the Union State of Puducherry. The lane off East Coast Road derived its name after tycoon Moona Kadir Sultan purchased land and built a mansion called Karikal Mahal (Karikal Palace) in the early 1900s.

**Hyderabad Road:** This road lies within Alexandra Park, the former residential area of the British military forces. Road names in this estate are named after place names in Britain and the Commonwealth.

**Ganges Avenue, Indus Road:** In 1952, several roads named after famous world rivers were commemorated within the Singapore Improvement Trust estate in Havelock Road.

These included names inspired by South Asian rivers such as Ganges Avenue, Indus Road, Brahmaputra Road (expunged) and Indus Lane (expunged).

## Indian literary figures

Teacher's Housing Estate, which was completed in 1968 has road names inspired by Asian literary figures. These include Iqbal Avenue, Kalidasa Avenue and Tagore Avenue. Poet and philosopher Sir Muhammad Iqbal originated from Sialkot, Punjab. Kalidasa was a fifth-century Sanskrit poet and classical writer, producing some of the greatest Indian epics. Tagore Avenue is named after Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Prof Savage highlights an interesting point when researching individuals from other communities in comparison to Indians. He explains: "One of the things that is missing with the Indian community is 'life after death'. For example the Chinese buried their dead so they left a very big mark in terms of burial grounds, unlike the Indians who cremated their dead. The only time you might find information is in Indian temples, etc."

In view of the fact that almost 10 years went into producing the first edition, Prof Savage and Prof Yeoh state: "Given the enormity of its scope, this project would continue to require painstaking, incremental research over several decades. This is an endeavour which cannot be single-handedly pursued but require the contributions of others to add more details and cross references to more street and place names."

When there are no official records of the histories of a place or road name, alternative views and histories are dependent on individuals to come forward. A project such as this relies on the community because it involves the sharing of histories of grandparents and great-grandparents.

The dynamics behind road names and places in Singapore are multifaceted. Naming or renaming reflects the Government's intention to build identification and belonging to place and nation; the fashion of public thought stemming from a particular era; and the mentality of life and culture of the communities that flourished around these streets over time in the wider history of Singapore.

Prof Yeoh summarises: "Singapore's fascinating tapestry of street toponyms – colonial names, Malay-anised names, multiracial names, names after famous personages, numerical names, as well as dialect and pinyinised names – reflects its development from a port-city of the British Empire to a multicultural post-colonial city-state well integrated into the global order."

In busy modern life, let us not forget in particular these silent markers which stand for exceptional individuals and resilient communities – the Indian facet in the Singapore story.

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