

Singapore HeritageFest 2009
“Our Neighbours’ Heroes” Storytelling Competition
2nd Prize Winner (Lower Primary Category)



Participant's Details

Name: Ong Xin Hui Angelica
Gender: Female
Age: 8-year-old
NRIC: TXXXX843G
Nationality: Singaporean
School: Xinmin Primary School

Narayana Pillai

Hello there! Allow me to share the true story of Narayana Pillai, our Indian Hero of Singapore.

After Singapore was founded in 1819, many people flocked here in search of a living. Most of the early Indian settlers in Singapore were soldiers or camp followers of the British colonial authorities, but there were also other Indians who were involved in mercantile and other business activities. The most notable of all the Indians who came to Singapore soon after it was founded was a man by the name of Narayana Pillai.

When Penang came under the control of the British, Pillai travelled from South India to work there as a clerk. In 1819, he left Penang to try to make his fortune in Singapore. At that time, a great deal of construction had to be done. There was also a severe labour shortage.

Using his ties with both the Indians and the British, he was able to set up his business with few obstacles. Hiring convicts for labour, he soon became a well-known merchant. Besides clearing roads, the growing settlement needed large quantities of building materials to construct houses. Wood, bricks, steel, bamboo and cement had to be brought in.

Bricks were traditionally supplied from India, but they were heavy and inefficient to transport. So Pillai built Singapore's first brick kiln. He manufactured bricks in large quantities to fulfil the market demands. Thus, he made large profits and became rich.

Pillai also entered the textile industry, selling cotton cloth at a shop that he established. One night, the fire destroyed Pillai's shop and made him bankrupt. Pillai was unable to pay off his debts. However, he had built up such a reputation that his creditors trusted him to settle his debts once he was able to.

Pillai worked twice as hard, and was able to pay off his debts. Through hard work and perseverance, Pillai eventually became the richest Indian in Singapore in his time.

After Pillai built his fortune, he became concerned about the welfare of his people. The Indian population in Singapore was growing, but there was still nowhere Indians could gather to pray. He saw that many of them prayed by the roadside at a makeshift altar. Therefore, he decided to build a proper temple for his countrymen to worship in.

In 1827, he obtained a piece of land from the government to build a Hindu temple. This temple became known as the Sri Mariamman Temple. Today, the temple is visited by both tourists and the local population, and stands as a testament to the benevolence of Narayana Pillai, one of Singapore earliest heroes.

Goddess Mariamman is believed to possess powers in curing epidemics and diseases. She stands in the heart of Chinatown, even Chinese like me never fail to seek her blessings.

Community from which the hero came from: Indian