

# Telling the stories of convicts, ordinary folk who built early S'pore

This is the final article covering the Singapore History Series – Seven Centuries In Six Episodes, organised as part of the SkillsFuture Festival in collaboration with the Singapore Bicentennial Office

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The present-day narrative on Indian convict labourers of 19th-century Singapore generally focuses on their material contributions – their role in building monuments such as St Andrew's Cathedral and the Istana, and infrastructure such as North and South Bridge roads, Serangoon Road and Keppel Road.

The belief that the penal policy had been liberal, pragmatic and reformatory was common.

But historian John Solomon of the National University of Singapore (NUS) said their experiences were not necessarily easy.

During a panel presentation and discussion last Thursday, he noted that penal transportation to Singapore was often a harsh physical and psychological punishment.

"Their sentence was a one-way ticket from everything they knew – from friends, family and familiarity. It was a kind of social death. They often expected to never speak to their loved ones again."

The three-member panel discussion, which also involved NUS historian Nurfadzilah Yahaya and Malay Heritage Centre curatorial researcher Ho Chi Tim, largely discussed the lesser-known stories of migrant communities and how they fit into the history of 19th- and 20th-century Singapore.

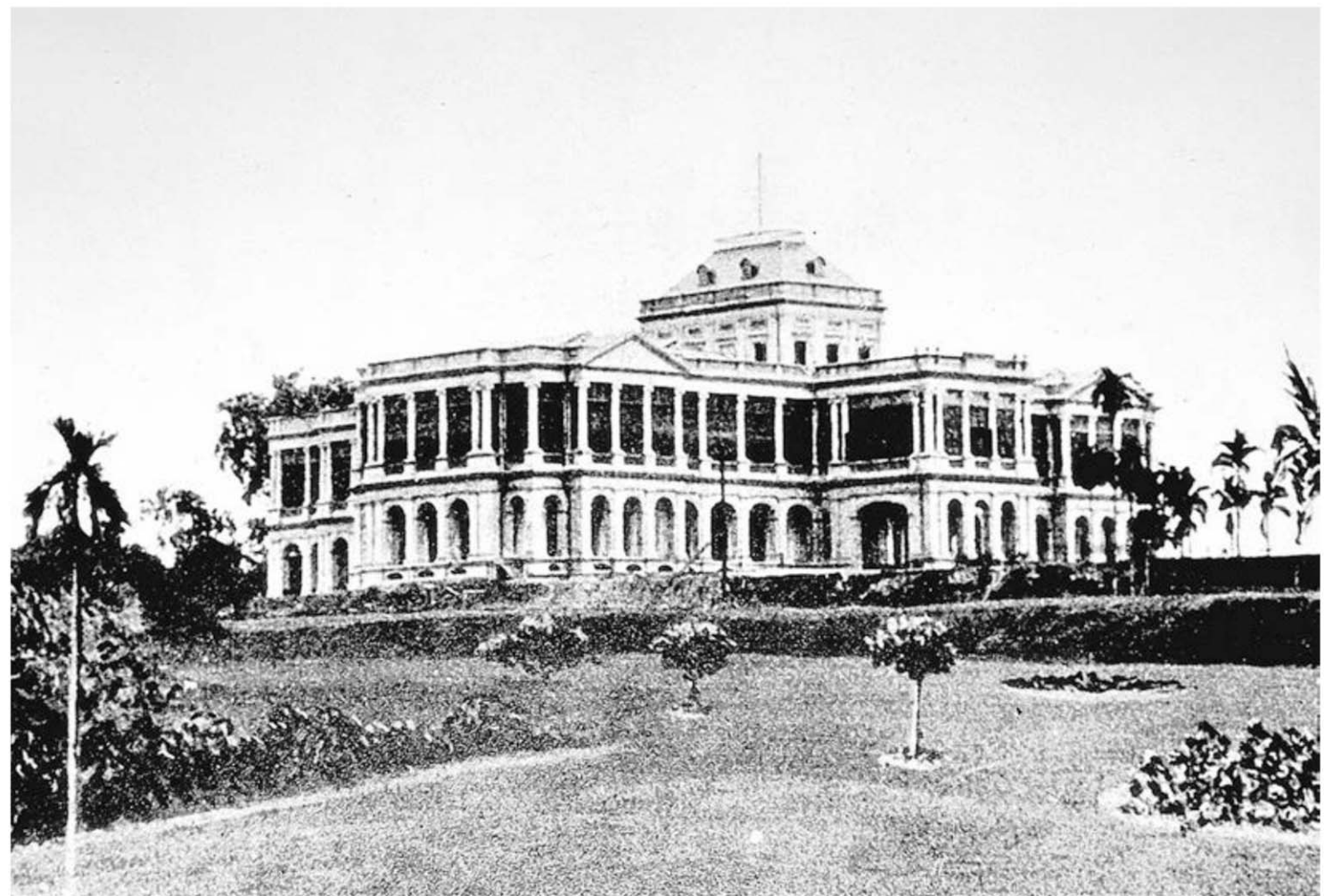
From 1825, Singapore began receiving Indian convicts to serve out their sentences.

They helped to plug the labour shortage amid the development of the cash-strapped colony.

Dr Solomon noted that Singapore, the main convict station in the Straits Settlements, was recorded as having the highest death rate in the mid-19th century.

In some years, Singapore's convict death rate exceeded those of Penang and Melaka.

As a result, their population remained fairly constant at just over 1,000 in Singapore for most years, despite 200 convicts arriving at the



The Istana was formerly known as Government House and was built in 1869 by convicts. They played a role in building other monuments such as St Andrew's Cathedral, and infrastructure including North and South Bridge roads, Serangoon Road and Keppel Road. PHOTO: ISTANA/NATIONAL PARKS

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Straits Settlements each year.

Depression and homesickness had been listed as causes of death by colonial administrators, although this could have been used to alleviate responsibility for the poor conditions, noted Dr Solomon.

"Singapore's early development as a port town was built upon cheap and unfree labour," he added.

The system was gradually dismantled following criticism from the settled European community here.

The relatively free movement of masses of convict labourers in public was seen as unsightly and a potential security threat in European

spaces in town, he said.

"They were afraid that Singapore's reputation as a penal settlement would affect their own status as residents of Singapore."

He noted that the way Singapore remembers convict labourers has been largely framed by accounts, such as those of Major John McNair who was superintendent of the convicts.

McNair was involved in the implementation of the labour scheme and defended the system in his book, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, after it officially ended in Singapore in 1873.

Moderator Chang Yueh Siang, the assistant director of content at the Singapore Bicentennial Office, said the country's image of labourers and pioneers here is linked to dockside workers, coolies and samsui women who happen to be Chinese.

While there were already Chinese settlers in early Singapore, the arrival of Chinese migrant labourers at a mass scale was a later, mid-century development.

"It is important to hear about the people who built the early infrastructure of Singapore," she said.

Dr Yahaya also spoke about her upcoming paper, which delves into the Sepoy Mutiny in Singapore in 1915. She studied the interviews and intercepted letters from the colonial commission of inquiry after the incident.

It had been sparked by a British commander-in-chief's speech that was poorly translated into Hindi.

It implied that the sepoys – Indian soldiers serving under British or other European orders – were headed to fight in Europe or the Middle East in 1915.

The sepoys were reluctant to fight their fellow Muslims – the Ottomans who were warring against the Allies in World War I.

In defiance of their orders, the se-

poys mutinied in Singapore.

Her study will show that Indian sepoys in the British imperial service perceived their roles as restrictive.

The discussion, which was attended by around 60 people, briefly covered how Singapore is changing the way it is looking at its history.

Dr Yahaya pointed out that historians tend to study people on the move and, as a consequence, they are over-represented while some groups get overlooked, such as those who were in Singapore before the British arrival in 1819.

Following the lecture, Dr Ho said Singapore's colonial history, and Singapore history in general, has a depth that remains unexplored because sources tend to be interpreted to address present-day concerns, instead of presenting them to understand, at least as a first step, what happened in the past.

Dr Solomon added: "We need to remember that historical change is not only driven by technology, the environment, commerce, politics and the actions of elites, but by the lives of ordinary people and people at the fringes of society too."

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