

**SPEECH BY GUEST-OF-HONOUR PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH,  
CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD AT THE  
LAUNCH OF THE CATALOGUE  
“*THE DIVINE WITHIN: ART & LIVING CULTURE OF INDIA &  
SOUTH ASIA*”  
ON 25 MAY 2007 AT 7.00PM  
AT THE ISTANA**

President and Mrs Nathan,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. On behalf of the National Heritage Board, it gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to the Istana for the launch of “The Divine Within: Art & Living Culture of India & South Asia”.

**South Asia Collection in the ACM**

2. The launch of this publication is significant for several reasons. First, it records the remarkable achievement of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in building up its South Asian collection practically from nothing. The core of any museum is its collection. This is what attracts visitors and gives the museum its reputation. Usually, it takes

generations for museums to build up their collections. It is therefore remarkable that, in a very short period of time, the ACM's South Asia collection has grown to the extent that it fills the pages of this sizeable book. When the ACM was established, in 1993, as a new museum to showcase the ancestral civilisations of Singaporeans, there were only about 10 objects of South Asian origin in the collection. With the assistance of government grants and donations in cash and kind, the collection has grown in the space of 15 years to over 300 historic artefacts. The collection is now recognised as the finest and the most comprehensive collection in Southeast Asia. Such is its reputation that the ACM now receives requests from other museums in other countries to lend objects to their exhibitions – the latest example was the exhibition, “Goddess: The Divine Energy”, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney last year.

3. Second, this publication is also a record of how the ACM has chosen to represent the cultural heritage of Singaporeans of South Asian ancestry. Since we opened at Empress Place in 2003, visitors to the ACM have seen the most fascinating and comprehensive collection of beautiful Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sculptures, bronzes, paintings, jewellery and manuscripts, thematically laid out in the two

South Asian galleries. With one of its focuses on South India and its cultural practices, such as, Thaipusam and Fire-walking, and together with artefacts from other parts of the sub-continent, the ACM's South Asian galleries also serve as a rich resource for research. Visitors to these galleries will hopefully leave with a better understanding and appreciation of our South Asian heritage. Our South Asian galleries have received very positive comments from the museum fraternity as well as our visitors.

4. Third, this publication is a tribute to the dedication and vision of its author, Dr Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, the ACM's senior curator of the South Asia collection. Dr Krishnan has not only produced a comprehensive and beautifully researched work, but has been responsible for shaping the South Asia collection from its inception to what it is today. Her extensive research on South Asian material culture and history, and the documentation of South Asian traditions in Singapore and Malaysia that she has personally conducted, has given a unique dimension to this catalogue. Mrs Parimoo, you should feel very proud of your daughter, Gauri.

5. Fourth, the launch of this catalogue is doubly significant because it also marks the launch of the President's South Asia Acquisition Fund – an initiative to encourage donors to support the ACM's South Asian collection. Our target is to raise \$500,000 each year for the next three years. The money raised will be invested in high quality artefacts representing all the countries in the sub-continent. I am happy to announce that to date, we have already received cash donations and pledges amounting to \$260,000.

#### **Generosity of Donors, Lenders and Supporters**

6. I would like to record our grateful thanks to two special benefactors - Mr Hwang Soo Jin and Mr R Athappan. Mr Hwang and Mr Athappan have, in their personal capacities, as well as through their respective companies, Singapore Reinsurance Corporation Limited and First Capital Insurance Limited, sponsored the total cost of this publication. They have also supported us since the inception of the ACM with funds that have enabled us to acquire key objects that are now part of the core of our South Asia collection. Their belief in our mission has brought them back year after year with generous

donations to the South Asia collection. Their support has been vital to our growth and success.

7. I would like to extend special thanks to The Forum of Indian Banks in Singapore, for sponsoring tonight's event. The Chairman of the Forum, Mrs Anshula Kant of the State Bank of India, is with us this evening. I would like to thank the Government of India for making several long-term loans to ACM. I would also like to acknowledge our gratitude to several generous donors, including Ronald Ooi, the Shaw Foundation, Vikram Chand, Nitin Doshi and Maharukh Desai.

8. In conclusion, I wish to thank President and Mrs Nathan for lending us their strong support, for allowing us to hold this event at the Istana, and for gracing the occasion as our Guests-of-Honour.

9. Thank you all very much for joining us on this happy occasion. Since Singaporeans love bargains, I am happy to announce that the publication is available for sale, at a special launch price tonight. Please buy two copies, one for yourself and the other for a friend.

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