

DEEPA TRIVEDI

FOURTEEN accomplished journalists from different Asian countries are adding to Singapore's multicultural mosaic these days.

The Asia Journalism Fellowship (AJF), a Temasek supported programme, has brought these professionals to the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University.

Remember Big Brother, the reality soap, and its motley group of housemates? That's exactly how the fellows initially felt as they struggled to settle down in cool, serviced apartments with their co-fellows whom they had never met before. An Indian spice aficionado found herself in the company of someone who was put off by curry.

A colourful pastiche of similar adventure stories abound.

But similarities between Big Brother and AJF begin and end here. Unlike Big Brother, the 14 fellows don't work towards evicting others but have, in fact, embraced each other.

Life is not all about learning but unlearning as well. Living together and sharing experiences have evaporated prejudices and misconceptions about countries and cultures. India-Pakistan unity is displayed at its best.

Ms Mildred Galarpe, a senior journalist from the Philippines who had never tasted Indian cuisine, has graduated to being a chapati fan. At Chinese journalist Ju Jing's birthday, a Vietnamese fellow swayed to Pappu Cant Dance Saala.

India, Philippines, Bhutan, Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, China, Malaysia and Hong Kong have forged relationships which are beyond the cosmetic achievements of international summits. Practical information gathered about other countries is a rich assortment which even the most trustworthy Lonely Planets do not offer.

Beyond field trips and classes at NTU, the fellows have bonded at bars in Clarke Quay, at mini international buffets and pot lucks at West

Like a mini UN



The two Indians at the Asia Journalism Fellowship recount their three months in Singapore

Coast and by learning basic course words in each others' language.

AJF director and veteran journalist P.N. Balji hopes the 14 journalists will be able to look back with joy at the intellectual stimulation and the networking that they experienced during their three-month Singapore sabbatical.

Unlike a country such as the United States, which had mechanically recorded my existence as an alien from Day One at the airport, Singapore has been a refreshing change. There is a sense of belonging. So when we go home, we will take back a small part of Singapore with us.

Can?

Deepal Trivedi is an Asia Journalism fellow from Ahmedabad

Building bridges... (front row, from left) Le Thi Than Huyen and Le Kim Thai (Vietnam), Doris Li Jianping (China), Deepal Trivedi (India) and Sonam Zangmo (Bhutan); (middle row, from left) Leong Siok Hui (Malaysia), Syed Murtaza Razvi (Pakistan), Mildred Galarpe (Philippines) and Ary Hermawan (Indonesia); (last row, from left) Karen Yap Lih Huey (Malaysia), Nge Tze Wei (Hong Kong). Missing from the picture are Eshwar Sundaresan (India), Munima Sultana (Bangladesh) and Ju Jing (China). PHOTO: ASIA JOURNALISM FOUNDATION

Shining through the rain

ESHWAR SUNDARESAN

THE afternoon sky is slate-gray. Underneath, Singapore waits patiently, as if anticipating the arrival of a comforting lover. And then it begins. A streak of silver rips through the clouds and drills a passage among the high-rises. The air ripples and roars like a Merlion.

Having sounded its doorbell, rain enters the city. It drenches the tall cranes in the harbour, making them look like forlorn giraffes. It licks the boundaries of hawker centres, pats down manicured greenery and gives the wipers a workout.

From 14 storeys above the ground, I peer down at this city that suddenly seems familiar. I experience the voyeuristic pleasure that the dry feel when they see the wet. That's how I've experienced Singapore in the past two months. Like an unaffected observer. Like a fascinated outsider.

Thanks to the Asia Journalism Fellowship, we fellows – all 14 from nine countries – have been offered an accelerated understanding of this city-nation. We've met local bureaucrats, economists, academicians, journalists and businessmen. We've even attended a prominent MP's meet-the-people session.

And I could summarise my findings by stating the obvious: That Singapore is a rare socio-political experiment that has not just survived but thrived. And it will be pretty hard to create a more unipolar society.

Of course, on occasions, I've felt that Singaporeans speak Martian gobbledegook. But then, I didn't come here to judge; I can't read this weather using my barometer. You see, where I come from, the rain invades our streets, homes and minds. Here, it just leaves the storm-water drains briefly swollen. It's too disciplined to meander. It must complete its short, circuitous journey to my tap. Because not all water is Newater, lah.

Eshwar Sundaresan is an Asia Journalism fellow from Bangalore