

VINEETA SINHA, *Temple Tracks. Labour, Piety, and Railway Construction in Asia*. (Asian Anthropologies 16). New York / Oxford: Berghahn, 2023. Xxii, 324 pages, 30 illustrations, tables, appendices, glossary, index, \$145.00. ISBN 978-1-8053-9016-9

In the last one or two decades, researchers have increasingly acknowledged that, in order to reach useful conclusions, the lives of “normal” people and everyday life merit at least as much attention as those of leaders or elites. The present study achieves this with a twist: it combines stories of Tamil railway labourers’ working and everyday lives in Malaya/Malaysia with their religious lives and endeavours, as well as with the history of railway construction – the sociology of infrastructure and the material world – and explores these narratives’ interdependence and “entanglement” (a mention of Latour might not have been out of place here). Indeed, to this day, shrines dedicated to the “moving god” Munisvaran and/or Muniyanti, or their ruins, dot the landscape along both functional and abandoned or destroyed rail tracks in Malaysia and Singapore – a sign of the intertwining of the sacred and the profane. Using what she terms an anthro-historical method to demonstrate the aforementioned entanglement of the material and the social, Vineeta Sinha argues that the creation of religion along the railways has been facilitated by global capitalism (pp. 161–162).

In the preface, the author describes her Indian family’s close connections to the Indian Railways and follows this with an introductory survey of railroad construction in colonial Malaya/Malaysia and the methods of labour recruitment in India. In the main chapters, she describes railway construction in predominantly British colonies worldwide, with a focus on the labour force recruited for this purpose. She then shifts her attention to the railways in Malaya, detailing the working and non-working lives of the Indian labourers, often highlighting poignant details such as poor working conditions and dismal housing, where the temple or shrine frequently served as the only source of relief and leisure. The railway itself was sacralised by the presence of the temple alongside the track.

The labourers, mostly poor villagers, brought their village gods with them. The author provides maps and descriptions of temples and shrines along the railways, both former and still existing ones, in present-day Malaysia and Singapore. In both countries, these structures are often under threat, either due to the construction of new rail tracks or other developments, and/or because of unclear or precarious legal and land ownership conditions. While devotees sometimes succeed in their efforts to maintain or relocate these often very small shrines, such struggles are more frequently unsuccessful.

This narrative is intertwined with the conflict-ridden history of the railways in Singapore and Malaysia and the often challenging negotiations that accompanied it. Following a chapter that delves deeper into the story of Munisvaran

– exploring the reasons for his becoming the deity of choice for Tamil labourers, the proliferation of his temples and the associated temple tales – she returns to the issue of the survival and maintenance of temples. These temples are increasingly under threat from postcolonial concerns of modernity, economic development and prosperity. The author observes that the pragmatic, profit-oriented attitude of the colonial authorities toward the religious practices and needs of their workers was often more conducive to fostering religious life than the ideologically driven development policies of the independent state, particularly in Malaysia: after labourers were recruited and housed, they were free to organise their personal and religious lives as they wished, provided their work remained satisfactory. Remarkably, until the early 20th century, plantation managers were required to know Tamil and Telugu to communicate directly with the labourers rather than relying on headmen and recruiters. In today's Malaysia, such a requirement would be unimaginable.

In the postcolonial modern world, technological priorities have relegated religion and religious concerns to a marginal position. Religious structures are no longer allowed to impede progress, however the term is understood. Still-existing temples are threatened by the racist and Islamic ideology of present-day Malaysia. Moreover, Indian labour was rendered redundant in Malaysia in favour of Malayisation. Socially and economically, Indians became neglected and impoverished, even as the railways prospered. The postcolonial disregard of religious rights leads directly into a story of neglect and discrimination against Indians by the powers that be in Malaysia. Against this, there are stories like that of the Amman temple in Kuala Lumpur's Megamall, which was destined to be destroyed but was preserved because, apparently, only after it was allowed to remain did accidents and losses for the construction companies cease. According to the author, this shows that any public space can acquire religious meaning and be infused with sacrality. The mention of HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force) should be emphasised: it strategically focused on endangered religious rights and sites in order to highlight and combat the general social and political discrimination against and deprivation of Indians in Malaysia.

The topic is intriguing and is presented in an interesting manner. The story of railway labour has, of course, been told in numerous studies, but the combination of railway and temple construction is of particular interest in Malaysia and Singapore. There are, however, some theoretical and methodological issues, as well as challenges in terms of narrative. The study is not very well structured and at times appears unsystematic. Narrative content and theoretical considerations are sometimes scattered haphazardly throughout the study without systematic discussion and analysis, and/or are repeated in several places. This creates explanatory gaps and makes it quite difficult to discern the main

argument, which seems to be that colonialism, somewhat unwittingly, enabled the creative development of religion and the empowerment of its poorest and most oppressed subjects – an empowerment now endangered precisely by post-colonial ideologies of national independence and self-determination.

The differentiation between anthropological and historical approaches is not convincing. The author states that history uses historical material as sources, whereas anthropologists view them as socially constructed texts (p. 34). What is meant by “sources”, and sources for what? Historians have long acknowledged that both written and oral sources are socially constructed texts that must be read in this light. The real difference is that historians identify unique or general processes, sometimes with the help of case studies, whereas anthropologists tell individual stories, occasionally as exemplary cases.

Some factual statements might be questioned, such as the claim that global labour flows originated in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Movements of people, whether forced or voluntary, have occurred since time immemorial. One example is Southeast Asia, where between about 800 and 1800 AD wars were fought not over territory but over people and labour. What seems to be meant here are labour flows for capitalist and colonial purposes. Besides, if the history of railways as part of global capitalism is to be treated comprehensively, its geopolitical and power dimensions should also have been discussed – for example, the plans for the Baghdad railway and the Kelantan-Pattani railway, as well as a more detailed discussion of the “Death Railway”, the Thailand-Burma railway built by the Japanese occupation forces using Allied and Indian forced labour, and epitomised in the movie “Bridge on the River Kwai”. The death rate of Tamil forced labourers was horrendous. All of these schemes and projects were clearly driven by colonial and power considerations that disregarded the human cost.

The strong focus on railway construction in general and plantation labour detracts from more detailed information on the actual relationship between labour, railway construction, temple building and what the author terms “creating religion”. Let me highlight some points here. For readers not familiar with Hindu deities, it is not entirely clear what kind of god Munisvaran actually is. Only late in the narrative, and in scattered instances, is he more closely described as a folk or village deity, one who guarantees the security and safety of the village and its inhabitants. He is thus not only a mobile god – with a horse as his mount (*vahanam*) – but also a fighting one. These characteristics could explain why he has become the railway god. Given the dangers of railway work, a security guard in the form of a god patrolling the railway tracks would be eminently useful. There is also no mention of what new characteristics he adopted as a railway god. Interestingly, Vinayakar, or Pillaiyar, the god of travel and remover of obstacles, who is highly venerated in Sri Lanka, has not become the railway god and has far fewer temples.

The author mentions some religious phenomena as having developed in Malaya or as unique to it, such as the rise of village deities into a Sanskrit pantheon, the choice of *kula devas* (family or clan gods) and *ista devas* (gods of individual or group choice) by clans or families, and the rise of “new” gods like Munisvaran in Malaya (p. 200). However, these phenomena are quite widespread in India as well and are not unique to railway labour or folk tradition. And in what way has Munisvaran become a “new” god? Instead, the remarkable fact that new religious establishments and traditions among Indian migrants often differed from those in India – or, to put it differently, traditions that became rare and obsolete in India survived in Malaysia and Singapore – could have been emphasised. This applies particularly to Timiti, the firewalking festival, and Kavati, a festival similar to flagellation celebrations in a Christian context (one only has to observe the celebration of Kavati in Singapore to appreciate this). Likewise, the coexistence of vegetarian and non-vegetarian worship in some temples is a feature that would likely be difficult to find in India.

In the conclusion, movable or mobile gods are termed a new category of sojourners. However, one learns too little about these deities. One question that is not even asked is how Munisvaran travelled and what induced him to move. Did he suddenly manifest in Malaya, or was a statue brought along? What does this make of the myth of not crossing the black water? And is his vahanam nowadays the horse, or rather the electric train, the iron horse? If the latter, has he also become the deity of machinery and infrastructure, i.e. an *ayutam* god (*ayutam* meaning tool, implement, weapon or, indeed, machinery, and any means of transport)? The interesting thesis that railways mirror the travels and travails of the Indian diaspora, thus creating a close relationship between religion and migration, is persuasive, but it is only articulated in the conclusion. It should have received more prominence, as it is, so to speak, the book’s *raison d’être*.

The study contains plenty of illuminating information and observations, but unfortunately, this is often difficult to piece together in a coherent understanding of what is being told. On the whole, there is too little interpretation and analysis, and too much agonising over the justification for undertaking this study at all. The question should rather be whether railway labour in Malaya/Malaysia has been given a voice and been retrieved from obscurity. This, the study has definitely achieved, despite some shortcomings.

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