# Temple Tracks

Labour, Piety and Railway Construction in Asia

Vineeta Sinha

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In memory of the forgotten labourers who built railways in Malaya

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From Apparent Endings to Unknown Beginnings

On 2 February 2022, I made two enthralling discoveries that enabled discursive and narrative possibilities for this book that I could not have imagined otherwise. The first acquainted me with an intriguing slice of unknown family history and the second brought uncanny closure to my protracted search for the source of an image that, for me, was the 'perfect' cover for this book.

Working on this book for the last decade, I have been on autopilot, so to speak, responding nimbly to inquiries about the book's content: it carries a tale of four entangled historical narratives in British Malaya – of railway construction, Indian labour migration, religion making and my own journey as an ethnographer of Diaspora Hinduism. Little did I know that an accidental finding I chanced upon in the closing moments of the book's writing would add a fifth strand to the book's storyline. Browsing through my late mother's notebook on this day, I learnt that my maternal grandfather had been a railway employee, a 'Permanent Way Inspector (P.W.I)', in the British North-Western Railways (according to the entry in my mother's notebook) for thirty-two long years. This was not just news to me, but also stunned and thrilled me. I confirmed further details of my grandfather's life in the railways via a phone call with my maternal uncle – the only one of my mother's surviving siblings and the last connection to the maternal side of the family. My grandfather, Dev Narayan Lal, had been a hazy presence in my life, having passed away when I was just two years old. The family history was that he was a successful and popular practising homoeopath, which indeed he was, and had passed this knowledge to my mother, who knew a great deal about homoeopathy. However, I had no knowledge of his life in the railways, or that he had travelled from his native state of Bihar to the far-off states of Maharashtra and Gujarat in multiple railway postings, probably from the

Endnote for this chapter begin on page xvi.

mid-1920s to the mid-1950s. Learning that my grandfather had been a sojourner, part of a group of Biharis, who travelled to other parts of India for work in the first half of the twentieth century, dramatically reconfigured my awareness of my family's history.

Armed with this information, I wondered casually, but only briefly, if this explained my passion for and connectedness I felt with trains and railway journeys. But, more seriously, it struck me that my grandfather's life as a railway employee was intriguingly intermeshed with my current academic project of theorizing colonial and contemporary railways in regions once marked as British Malaya. In particular, my research emphasis on the 'permanent way' and those who built and maintained them connected me deeply to my grandfather's professional identity for a large part of his working life. Knowing that he had been employed in the British colonial railways in Bihar, while his granddaughter moved to Singapore in the mid-1970s and embarked on the history of the colonial railways in Singapore and Malaysia some fifty years later, was indeed a sobering moment. My commitment to surfacing the everyday lives of railway labour in Malaya (largely migrants from South India), who had built and maintained the railways, came home to me in the new awareness that I had in fact been working on a project that spoke to my own family history. Remarkably, it was only at the end of the book's journey, when I was literally drafting its final chapter, that I made this chance discovery. It dawned on me that I had in effect indirectly been delving into my own family history, without being aware of it. And arriving at this point, while *being located in the diaspora myself, from a distance*, only added further intrigue to this tale.

Trains and railway journeys have long fascinated me. My academic father's career in agriculture and extension studies, and communication studies took him to teach and conduct research in universities in Ludhiana and Hyderabad. This saw the family travelling between our hometown, Arrah, and these far-flung Indian cities– several times a year – on the fastest long-distance trains of the time. Growing up in India from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, I remember vividly (with a generous, unapologetic dose of romanticization) the long rail journeys from my home state of Bihar, northwards to Ludhiana and southwards to Hyderabad. These journeys defined my childhood and I remember their minute details with nostalgia. There were also the annual travels to the city of Bhagalpur, my mother's maternal home and where my grandfather had settled after his retirement from the railways. In the 1960s and 1970s, middle-class Indian families like mine had an everyday familiarity with train journeys, this being the primary mode of moving across long distances. In fact, rickshaws and trains were the two dominant modes of transportation I recall, with the occasional car/taxi ride thrown in.

As a child, I remember the thrill and excitement of long-distance train journeys, spending days and nights on the train; arranging bedding on the sleeper berths; fighting and scrambling past my siblings to grab the upper berths; brushing my teeth and balancing precariously, in the so tiny bathrooms; devouring homemade *pooris*, *aloo bhunjiya* and *achar* or *aloo* and *gobi parathas* carefully wrapped in newspapers, not to mention snacks like *nimki*, *thekua* and *sakkarpara*; buying all manner of snacks from train vendors; freely eavesdropping on the conversations of fellow travellers; making friends in transit; watching adults play cards, listening to their discussions about whatever was in the newspapers, but especially heated discussions about politics; sharing food, playing games with other children; sitting for hours at the window watching the world outside rolling by; loving the sound of the train trundling out of stations and crossing bridges; my father alighting from the train to get water from the hand pumps on the platforms (yes, one could actually drink water straight from the platform taps then) and feeling anxious about whether he would get back on the train before it moved off; wondering about whether our family of five (and later seven) would miss the train or be able to get on and off the Punjab Mail with all our suitcases and bedding – in a one-to-two-minute stop at Arrah Junction – but miraculously always managing to do so; and waiting for hours at Itarsi railway junction for the connecting train to Mughal Sarai and then to Arrah.

These railway stations – big and small – exuded a charm and a familiarity; the train approaching the stations would bring into view the ubiquitous book stalls with novels, magazines and children's comics, the mouth-watering, sumptuous snack stalls, the *chaiwallahs* (the sound of 'chai, garam chai' reverberating) with their fragile clay cups (already ecofriendly back then) and *magazinewallahs* making the rounds in the carriages – expertly and deftly balancing a mountain of books and magazines in their hands, displaying their ware for sale. The romance and glamour of train journeys, and the visceral, sensorial and tactile memories these create have been emotively and evocatively expressed by generations of other lay train travellers as well as noted in scholarly accounts of the railways, sometimes in a critical mode. These continue to seduce rail travellers like me as I remember fondly the experience and memory of each train journey as unique and distinct. At a deeply personal level, train journeys have been a critical part of my childhood experiences and created unforgettable memories.

Coming to Singapore as a child in 1973 on my maiden flight from Calcutta's Dum Dum Airport – on a British Overseas Aircraft Carrier – opened up a new world to my family and I, in more ways than one. Buses, cars and taxis sufficed for movement across this compact island nation-state. The world of railway journeys seemed distant. At this time, I had no knowledge of there even being trains or railway tracks in Singapore. Family vacations to sites in Malaysia like Malacca and Kota Tinggi Waterfalls – were on coaches and taxis, – although I do

recall a 1982 train trip to the capital city Kuala Lumpur, which was probably the first time I became aware of trains in Singapore and Malaysia. However, I was not completely 'divorced' from Indian train journeys. The family made regular trips back to India, flying to New Delhi and then taking the overnight Rajdhani Express to Patna, relishing the precious twelve hours on the train.

Taking a big leap forward, the railways intersected again with my life in December 1987, the year I was married, and set up a family home in Wessex Estate, off Portsdown Road in Singapore. Wessex Estate is made up of twenty-six blocks/flats and twelve 'black-and-white' bungalows.[1] These were built in the 1940s by the Public Works Department and the British Administration for the Hampshire Regiment stationed at the Portsdown army camp nearby. In the late 1980s, the estate was rather run down and the apartments in desperate need of repair. The three-storey blocks were plain and angular, and were identified by their distinct black-and-white paint on the exterior façade. The Estate was then managed by the Urban Development Management Corporation, which has since been taken over in recent years by the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC). Demand for these flats was not great then and they could be rented at affordable prices. My husband Ravi and I had many options to consider from these blocks that were named after places relevant to British military history. We chose to rent a ground-floor apartment (with the luxury of large, spacious living interiors) in Block 6 (Chitral) Woking Road, perched on raised ground surrounded by dense greenery. This had a clear front view of a stretch of the Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) railway tracks, with the Housing and Development Board (HDB) neighbourhood of Tanglin Halt in Queenstown, Singapore's first satellite town, named in honour of Queen Elizabeth II, as the backdrop. We were told that this was an unpopular unit because of the facing and the noisy trains, but this was precisely the appeal for us. We lived here for four wonderful years.

Even as a young adult, I felt the anticipation and thrill of running out simply to watch the passenger and goods trains go by several times a day, waving at the passengers. Once upon a time, protective fencing had been constructed on both sides of the tracks, but human ingenuity had intervened to make convenient openings at regular intervals across the entire stretch of the KTM railway tracks grounded in Singapore. At the Tanglin Halt gap, my husband, young toddler Ashish and I participated in the daily ritual of crossing the tracks 'to get to the other side'. This served as a convenient 'shortcut' from Wessex Estate to the Tanglin Halt neighbourhood – with its wet market, hawker centre, provision shops, medical clinics and easy access to public transportation – that was crucial to our everyday lives. The view from our apartment included the Blessed Sacrament Church, which opened in Queenstown in May 1965. The older site of the Munīsvaraṉ Temple was not visible, and the temple had yet to be relocated to its new home in Commonwealth Drive. I had prior research familiarity with this

temple, having done fieldwork there between 1985 and 1987 for my MA thesis. This is where my biography had intersected yet again with this research on the railways.

The second momentous discovery I made on this fateful February date added another twist to the tale. This was tied to my quest for a fitting visual for the book's cover. In fact, I had encountered it several years ago, in the form of a black-and-white photograph, having come across it circulating on the internet, but it had then suddenly disappeared from cyberspace. While I had a soft copy of the image, despite my sustained effort over the years, I had not been able to confirm credible details of its ownership. This visual haunted me as I continued to establish its source. This photograph - showing a group of Malayan railway staff and four children (three boys and a girl), a shrine for the deity Muṉīsvaraṉ, a signboard in Tamil announcing the name of the temple – Sri Muneeswaran Kovil (not visible on the book cover) and the barely visible but present railway tracks, taken against the background of Wessex Estate in Singapore – was in my eyes ideal for the book. But I knew that without copyright permissions, I could not use it. Yet, I fantasized it as the book's cover as the image depicted key analytical pivots – temples, labour and railways – that anchored the book. Playfully, I had even taken to thinking and saying that it was almost as if the image had been taken for my book. In reality, of course, the photograph was much larger than the book and carried a far greater import in reflecting a precious piece of history. I reached out to archivists and visual experts in Singapore, Malaysia and the United Kingdom, but their collective searches unearthed absolutely no clues. The photograph, it would seem, had not been captured in the official archives to which I had turned. Ultimately, the mystery was solved in a manner befitting, on the one hand, the climax of a thriller and, on the other hand, in a most unspectacular mode.

On the same day that I learnt about my family's railway history, I had a meeting with a couple of gentlemen from the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, at Commonwealth Drive, Singapore. They had reached out to me in the context of their ongoing project on writing the history of the temple. In the course of a two-hour conversation, I also showed them the black and white image (which I had on my phone) and asked if they knew its origins. To my utter shock, one of the men said: 'Yes I was there when this picture was taken … We have a copy in our temple.' This was the second time on that day that I was left dumbfounded. It turned out that the gentleman had been associated with the Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple as a teenager and had witnessed the taking of the photograph as a sixteen-year-old. He surmised the following: that the photo was taken in 1967–68, that the site of the photograph was where the 'original' 1932 Muṉīyanti Temple near Queensway had been located, identified key figures in the photo, explained what was happening in the photograph, shared that he knew one of the young boys

in the photograph, who was now in his sixties and living in Singapore, and that I could use the photograph as a book cover. In that moment, I was enriched by meeting a witness who could vouch for the photograph and connect the dots I had been struggling to link. Plus, the copyright enigma that I had struggled with for a decade, was resolved in a flash, seemingly effortlessly.

Subsequently, I met and interviewed 62-year-old Mr. Sureshan, one of the young boys in the photograph. He confirmed that it was his father who was a Malaysian, Mr Dharmalingam, a *mandore* (chief foreman, supervisor) with Malayan Railways, who had founded the Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple at Queensway, in around 1935, and who was also in the photograph, together with his older sister. It was a fascinating conversation that clarified details of the photograph and the temple as Mr Sureshan shared his family's history and their experiences of living in the railway quarters, right next to the tracks. This meeting culmi-nated in a subsequent interaction with the temple's current President who handed me a magazine published on the occasion of the temple's 2011 Consecration Ceremony. This carried a write-up about the history of the temple, with the elu-sive black-and-white photograph – with the generous assurance that I was free to use the image as a book cover, bringing my pursuit to an end. He also helped me to secure a high resolution scan of the image. The meeting that led me to the origins of the photograph was momentous. Encountering the image in the temple's private archives, in the hands of lay individuals, highlighted to me the value of turning to non-official archives as an additional site where knowledge and information are located. More importantly, the magnanimous and straight-forward sharing of the photograph, without caveats, conditions or compensation, demonstrated the spirit of openness and generosity I have experienced with scores of interlocutors I have met through my research journeys. It was gratify-ing to witness and participate in this collaboration and cooperative effort, which I am convinced are key pathways for materializing the project of decolonizing research methodologies.

Ultimately, in these moments of knowing, it was impossible for me to ignore the fact that the contours of this railway project and my biography (and not just my professional identity as an ethnographer) crisscrossed in multiple and, as it turned out, completely unexpected ways. The apparent end of the project had transported me to an unknown beginning, about my family's past, and its links to the history of colonial railways in British India. Coming full circle, the fifth stream of this book, then, is the narrative of my own family's railway history, which speaks in the present from across the seas to this project on colonial railways in British Malaya, but which essentially remains untold at this point. In addition to narrating the lives of permanent way labourers in these regions, unwittingly I had in fact also been speaking indirectly to my own family's his-tory. For me, this connection had neither been the motivation nor the inspiration

for embarking on this book project. Yet, this belated discovery has marked this academic endeavour with an intimacy, sensitivity and poignancy that certainly transcend, but do not diminish the project as a scholarly undertaking.

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Vineeta Sinha

June 2023

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Note

1. Rodolphe de Koninck. 2003. 'Wessex Estate: Recollections of British Military and Imperial History in the Heart of Singapore', *Asian Journal of Social Science* 31(3): 435–51.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Nothing signals more powerfully the cooperative and collaborative nature of a research project than penning the acknowledgements section of the book that follows. First, I express my deep appreciation to my research interlocutors who have helped me over many years with my work on Hinduism in Singapore and Malaysia. Their generosity and willingness to share their lives, experiences and memories with me has made this book possible. Key individuals selflessly provided contacts and leads, connecting me with countless others I could speak to and learn from, all in the cause of an academic project that was neither central nor meaningful to their lives. These early leads opened doors and introduced me to members of railway and temple communities. Often, I arrived in a small Malaysian town with nothing more than a name and a mobile number, but would leave having made many friends, and with far more leads than I could have imagined. Individuals talked with me, answered my questions patiently, walked with me, drove me to temples and railway stations and quarters, and shared their knowledge, documents and photographs with unsurpassed generosity. In particular, I thank Illamaran, Indira, Hau, Mahen Bala, Nicholas MST and Palani, for their enthusiastic support and invaluable help. Special thanks is due to the many members of the current leadership team of the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth Drive in Singapore for sharing the image which has become the book's cover.

This has been a long but inspiring and inspired journey. Over the last decade, I have talked about this book so much that I worried it would suffer from overexposure. The book project was conceived in Singapore in January 2011, but the full draft of the book was completed in Bielefeld in May 2022. The book's progress was mediated by the demands of everyday living, when professional and personal commitments assumed priority. The writing itself was completed over two sabbaticals: the first at the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute, Harvard University (January–June 2018) and the second at the Faculty

of Sociology, Bielefeld University (January–June 2022). At Harvard, I record my appreciation to Sunil Amrith for organizing the sabbatical visit and facilitating my stay, and for his enthusiastic support of this book project over the years. While I was in the United States, Margaret Abraham (Hofstra University), Divya Chandramouli (Harvard University) and Lauren Leve (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) organized talks at their respective universities, enabling me to present my research on the railways. In Bielefeld, I am grateful to Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, who arranged my 2022 sabbatical visit and connected me with her colleagues. Here, I was honoured to be in the company of Minh Nguyen and her team of graduate students and postdocs, who welcomed me to their weekly lunches on campus and provided much-needed sociality through the long winter months. I thank the National University of Singapore for the grant of sabbatical leave that provided the mental space and the silence I needed to complete the book. My immense gratitude to Marion Berghahn, Anthony Mason, Tom Bonnington and Caroline Kuhtz at Berghahn Books for their patient and enduring interest in this book, and their commitment to seeing it published. Needless to say, I have been impressed by their professionalism, but perhaps more struck by their humane and gracious approach to academic publishing. I also register my appreciation to Chitralekha Manohar and her expert team of editors at 'The Clean Copy' for the painstaking and meticulous preproduction editorial work on the book, respecting its ethnographic spirit and retaining my voice.

Expressing gratitude to Ravinran Kumaran for his intellectual input in this project as a co-producer of knowledge reflects but a sliver of the deep imprint he has had on my research over the decades. I am privileged to have him as a partner on many of life's journeys and thank him for the respect he has shown towards my work, and for his unwavering moral support and unconditional love. The book's title was conceived over cups of *teh alia* (ginger tea) and *prata* (Indian bread) with fish curry with our son, Ashish Ravinran – at a coffee shop in Clementi, Singapore, long before I even began the research for this book. I thank Ashish for gifting me the inspiring title *Temple Tracks*, which has not only framed the book conceptually, but has also guided my ethnography – immeasurable contributions indeed. He has been a passionate intellectual ally in this project, and has patiently also guided me through the technicalities of reading digital images and preparing these for production. Our younger son, Akash Ravinran, has always championed my research and writing efforts. He especially pushed me to return to the book through many moments of despair and has been the perfect onsite problem solver for a technophobe like me, calming my nerves in moments of imagined and real digital disasters. Most importantly, he spent precious time with his *Nanima* and kept her company in 2017, while Ravi and I were away, doing fieldwork in Malaysia. I am thankful for the constant support

and love of my siblings – Rana, Niku, Bapi and Biju – and their families through good times and bad, and value the immeasurable encouragement from the newest member of the family, Shilpa Bisaria.

Expectedly, I have leaned on an army of assistants and supporters at the National University of Singapore (NUS) through the long decade in which this book has been in the making: A. Aarthi, Arnab Roy Chowdhury, Arunima Datta, Chand Somaiah, George Jose, Losheini Ravindran, Mamta Sachan Kumar, Pirratheep Moorthy, Ranjana Raghunathan, Seuty Sabur and Shivani Gupta – have helped with library and internet research, tracked missing citations, located sources, photocopied and scanned documents, transcribed ethnographic interviews, secured copyright permissions and prepared the glossary. I thank Aarthi and Losheini in particular not just for their transcription of Tamil interviews, but also for providing English translations of the same.

It has been a privilege for me to arrive at this point in my academic journey in the company of long-time friends and colleagues in Singapore – Chitra Sankaran, Chua Beng Huat, Daniel Goh, Feng Qiushi, Indira Arumugam, Kelvin Low, Lily Kong, Ganapathy Narayanan, Gyanesh Kudaisya, Medha Kudaisya, Noorman Abdullah, Rajesh Rai, Sidharthan Maunaguru, Suriani Suratman, Syed Farid Alatas, Teo You Yenn and Tim Bunnell. Hanging out and stealing 'vella time' with my NUS friends, debating over whether we should still consume 'yucky' tea, a speciality of the Arts canteen, has kept me sane and sustained me emotionally. But it is the solidarity and intellectual support for the work I do that have been heartening and gratifying. In particular, I have valued Kelvin Low's and Noorman Abdullah's friendship and camaraderie immensely, not to mention their excitement about and critical engagement with my research. Special credit is due to Sidharthan Maunaguru for his enthusiastic support of my work. His critical reading of the book's draft chapters has pushed me to enunciate with clarity its ethnography and analytical framing.

This book is dedicated to the memory of hundreds and thousands of men and women who built and sustained railways in Malaya, but whose work has remained invisible. In small measure, this book seeks to offer a redress: I have thought of the book as a site where their contributions can be recognized and valued. But this is also an offering to my late parents' memory. Amongst the many legacies they have bequeathed, my mother, Geeta Sinha taught me to prioritize relationships and to remember not with the brain but with the heart, and to my father, Panday Rewati Raman Sinha, I owe my commitment to scholarship and I have inherited his work ethic. Though it sounds a truism, working on this book has been nothing short of a labour of love. An equally compelling force has been my desire to honour the social relationships I have forged with hundreds of interlocutors, who have unselfishly committed their time and energy to my research,

which for them may ultimately be nothing more than an academic project. I remain indebted to them all.

BM	Bukit Mertajam
CCCC	China Communication Construction Company
CERC	China Railway Engineering Corporation
CRCC	China Railway Construction Company
ECRL	East Coast Rail Link
EIR	East India Railway
ESCR	Emergency (Clearance of Squatters) Regulations
ETS	Electric Train Service
FMS	Federated Malay States
FMSR	Federated Malay States Railways
FOM	Federation of Malaya
GIPR	Great India Peninsular Railway
HAB	Hindu Advisory Board
HEB	Hindu Endowments Board
HINDRAF	Hindu Rights Action Force
IIC	Indian Immigration Committee
JAMBRAS	*Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JIA	*Journal of the Indian Archipelago*
JKR	Jabatan Kerja Raya (Malaysian Public Works Department)

JO	Japanese occupation
JTC	Jurong Town Corporation
KTM	Keretapi Tanah Melayu
KTMB	Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad
MCCY	Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth
MoR	Ministry of Railways
MR	Malayan Railways
MU	Malayan Union
POA	Points of Agreement
POW	Prisoners of War
PWD	Public Works Department
PWI	Permanent Way Institution
RAC	Railway Assets Corporation
RM	Malaysian Ringgit/Dollar
SLA	Singapore Land Authority
SS	Straits Settlements
TBR	Thai–Burma Railway
TIM	Tamil Immigration Fund

Methodological Musings, Analytical Signposts

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Opening Frames

On 15 August 2003, during the Hari Raya Haji holiday season, I embarked on a trip to Genting Highlands in Malaysia with my extended family from Singapore. About sixty family members, occupying an entire railway carriage and more, boarded the overnight train from Tanjong Pagar Railway Station in Singapore bound for Kuala Lumpur. It was a memorable journey for many reasons: personal, familial and – it would seem in retrospect – intellectual. En route, the train stopped at the Paloh Railway Station (in the Malaysian state of Johore), where I witnessed a scene that became etched in my mind: a Hindu temple on the platform, a priest in a white *vēṣṭi* (Tamil, 'single piece of unstitched waist cloth/wrap') holding up a prayer *taṭṭu* (Hindi, *thaalee*; English, 'plate or tray') and waving a camphor flame towards our train as it pulled out of the station.

This memory was triggered powerfully as I planned the fieldwork for this book, for which train journeys have been vital. *Temple Tracks: Labour, Piety and Railway Construction in Asia* presents a historical and ethnographic account of railway construction, Indian labour migration and religion making in regions once known as 'Malaya'.[1] These three narratives are approached as entangled threads of the same historical project of colonial industrial-capitalism. Mapping these seemingly disparate strands onto each other and scrutinizing the specific nodes where they interface has confirmed the convoluted intersections and entanglements of domains marked as 'sacred/religious' and 'profane/secular'. This book presents a textured tale of the complex ties between the practices and processes embedded in notions of labour, mobility and piety – pivots on which my ethnography

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 40.

rests and with which it is analytically intertwined. A fourth hinge – that seemed firmly and inevitably enmeshed with this conceptual triad – was my journey as a researcher charting Hinduism in these territories for almost two decades. A final strand inserted itself into the book belatedly in its closing moments: that of my family's railway history, giving the narratives within a poignancy and intimacy. A series of intersecting ethnographic and historical journeys anchor this book, which straddles the colonial and postcolonial periods, bringing the discussion up to the present day in Singapore and Malaysia. As procedures for generating data and embodying tremendous analytical purchase, qualitative methodologies, ethnography and historical research have driven this project and produced narratives of railway-building, religion making and labour migration.

My long-term research interests in tracking the history and practice of devotional Hinduism amongst Hindu diasporas in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as in theorizing contemporary Hindu landscapes therein, are reflected in this book, but my efforts are now refreshed through novel theoretical and methodological lenses. Conceiving the book as an anthrohistorical project required me to turn to existing, known and official archives, perusing private collections of documents and images, temple records I stumbled into, and engaging in first-hand ethnographic fieldwork across the length and breadth of the railway networks and temple landscapes across Malaysia and the island of Singapore. Although a historical perspective has been pivotal in elucidating the named interconnected historical processes, the project had to begin in the present, and with ethnography.

On 1 February 1885, a seven-and-a-half-mile railway track between Taiping and Sapetang (in Perak) was opened to service tin mining needs, laying the foundations for a colonial railway network in Malaya. The contours of my research undertaking – to reconstruct the history of the railways in Malaysia and Singapore and reflect on their sociocultural impacts – began to take shape more than a century later. Although the project was conceived in July 2011, after railway operations had ceased at the Tanjong Pagar station in Singapore, I only began substantial and dedicated fieldwork and ethnographic research along and around the Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM or the 'National Malayan Railways') tracks in February 2017. A series of pivotal events and reflections converged to push this research forward, starting with the execution of the landmark agreement between Singapore and Malaysia to remove KTM railway tracks from Singapore and close Singapore's Tanjong Pagar Railway Station. In the months after this historical moment, I witnessed labourers – 'foreign workers' from India – working in Singapore with diggers, machines and, sometimes, bare hands to dismantle and remove tracks and other railway infrastructures from across the island. The latter was an ironic reversal and a historical reminder of railway tracks being laid by Indian labourers across the Malayan Peninsula from the closing decades of the nineteenth century, with Singapore being connected to the Federated Malay State

Railways (FMSR) by rail in 1932. But the KTM suspended its rail services to Singapore, when the last train was driven out from the Tanjong Pagar station on 30 June 2011 by Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar of Johore, and the project of removing tracks was initiated (Figure 0.1) soon after. Following these events, I felt a compulsion to move the research compass northwards from Singapore to Malaysia at the earliest, given that the KTM tracks and, indeed, the respective railway landscapes in Malaysia and Singapore, were on the cusp of dramatic infrastructural and technological changes that had been initiated in the 1980s. Over the ensuing decades, colonial railways have been modernized and upgraded across Malaysia. Thus through these transformative moments, the railways have been an integral part of everyday travel practices in both these countries.

In addition, in early 2011, my serendipitous discovery of a Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple along the railway tracks in Singapore, suggestively and alluring close to a Muṉīyanti Temple built by Malayan Railway workers dated to 1932 (and the claimed antecedent of the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth Drive), was another key motivation for moving forward with this research. The realization that this temple was located along the tracks (which were being dismantled), next to the still-standing Malayan Railway staff quarters – in their original construction – jogged memories of my earlier research on the deity Muṉīsvaraṉ in Singapore and Malaysia. I was also aware that some sections of the KTM tracks in Malaysia had already been electrified since the 1990s and others would be soon modernized – processes that would radically transform railway terrains, including the sacred landscapes within. In sum, specific historic moments, field encounters and intellectual musings provided the impetus for embarking on this work urgently. However, collectively these episodes also mapped onto, and imparted, a dramatically different value to my earlier ethnographic research on Muṉīsvaraṉ worship and folk/popular Hinduism in the two countries. In my mind, the 'Temple Tracks' project was conceived in these reflective moments.

The visibility of numerous Hindu temples along the railway tracks in Singapore and Malaysia has long been an intriguing puzzle for observers – residents and visitors alike. However, given my prior research on Hinduism in these regions, these phenomena were hardly surprising to me. Nor did the physical presence of temples along the permanent way (railway tracks) and railway premises, in and of itself, constitute this book's core problematic. Rather, the *physical proximity* of temples to the rail tracks and their *density* in railway premises constituted but an important starting point for the research. More importantly, this notice provided an analytical lens for making sense of the entangled historical processes of railway-building and religion-making by railway labour in Malaya. These emphases have further led me to attend to the everyday *labouring* and *nonlabouring* lives of railway workers as they built both railways and temples. When I conceived this book in 2011, Hindu temples

were still conspicuous along the vast railway network in Malaysia, although in many places, the old railway tracks and the temples beside them had been dismantled and demolished. By this time, all the temples along the Singapore section of the KTM tracks had also been demolished, save one, which had put up a determined fight, but succumbed ultimately. Yet, many of the temples built by railway staff in Malaya have persisted in their original sites or at alternative locales, even as numerous others have been destroyed. Nonetheless, even the latter have left both material traces and intangible imprints in individual and collective consciousness. Ironically, some of these older temples were given a new lease of life when they were relocated to other premises, while no such option was available for the original rail tracks, which in some parts of the railway network have been retired permanently in the face of railway and track modernization projects undertaken by the Malaysian government. And as mentioned previously, both the tracks and temples of the Singapore stretch have vanished.

In my research on Diaspora Hinduism, I have approached Singapore and Malaysia as a continuous ethnographic space given the knotted histories of these two nation-states. Focusing on colonial railway construction in these regions revealed yet again, the intensely entwined but awkward, shared past – and present – of these now separate geopolitical entities. Thus, a narrative about railway construction and Indian labour migration to Malaya, inevitably, has to embrace both these countries. Post-independence, the railway landscapes in Singapore and Malaysia have witnessed a series of dramatic transformations. A striking shift occurred in the 1970s with the nationalization of the railways, followed soon after by the double-tracking, electrification and modernization of the railways. These efforts to upgrade the railways have had an uneven impact on different parts of the railway network. At the time of my fieldwork between February 2017 and April 2019, on the West Coast line, the Gemas – Padang Besar, KL Sentral – Batu Caves and KL Sentral – Port Klang sections had been electrified, with trains running on new tracks at the speed of 140 km/h. The Johor Bahru – Gemas route was yet to be electrified, and the trains here were clocking no more than 90 km/h on old tracks. Indeed, it was a boon for my research that as I began my work, the latter stretch of the KTM had not been upgraded, even though negotiations about modernizing this segment had been ongoing since at least 2010. In addition, the Jungle Line Railway on the East Coast of Malaysia (Map 0.1 and Map 0.2) remained intact, virtually untouched by railway modernization efforts, although some stations had been demolished and new stations built. Including the East Coast Railways in this research enhanced the scope of the project. Historically, Indian communities have had a limited presence on the east coast of Malaysia, and the region has received less scholarly attention in sociocultural and religious research on the Indian community.

Map 0.1. Railway Network in Malaya. © Lee Li Kheng, used with permission.

It was also clear to me that without my earlier ethnographic work, I would not have been able to envisage the *Temple Tracks* project as I did in 2011. Researching Hinduism in Singapore and Malaysia over a long period has afforded me extended and deep familiarity with sociopolitical, religiocultural domains therein, and allowed me to discern contextual nuances and complexities that short-term research encounters would not have produced. However, precisely because of my longstanding prior research, I wondered if I could say anything new about the connections between the railways and Hindu temples in
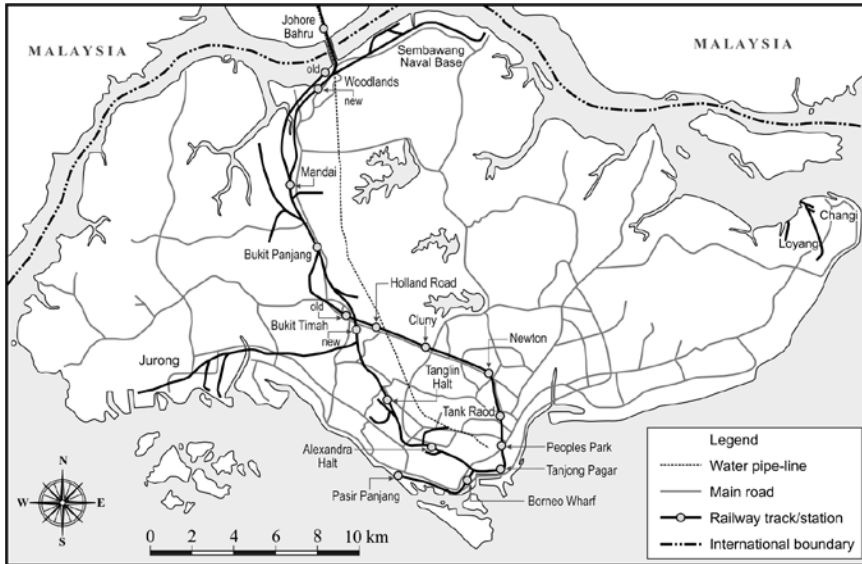
Map 0.2. Railway Networks in Singapore. © Lee Li Kheng, used with permission.

these two countries. Upon reflection, as I see it, the novelty of this project lies in the following arguments. This book approaches the history of railway construction and temple building by railway workers as intersecting threads of a common historical episode – the political economy of colonial industrial capitalism – which manifested in multifarious forms globally. Strikingly, a sacred landscape in Malaya was produced under the shadow of colonial-capitalist modernity by the same constituency – railway labour – that created and sustained both railway and Hindu/religious infrastructures in Malaya. Determining the contributions of railway personnel (especially its labouring constituencies) to producing sacred landscapes in Malaya has enabled me to foreground what seem to be counterintuitive and ancillary convergences between 'modernity/technology' on the one hand and 'piety/religiosity' on the other. Above all, my approach underscores and brings visibility to the key contributions of labour in materializing colonial railways globally.

Foregrounding Colonial Labour

The presence of Indian migrants in Malaya is aligned with the history of intensifying commercial and geopolitical British interests in the region, starting in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The contributions of the early Indian convict, coolie and indenture labour are inscribed in the region's spatiality and materiality, and are crucial to understanding its architectural history (Jain 1970; Jayathurai 2012; Lal et al. 2006; Rai 2010; Sandhu 1969; 2006). Indian labour

Figure 0.1. Removal of KTM tracks near Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Temple, Singapore, 2012. © Ashish Ravinran, used with permission

communities employed in ports, harbours, prisons, municipalities, the mining industry and rubber plantations were critical actors in colonial-capitalist projects (Latif 2008; Rai 2014; Sandhu 1969). Colonial architecture and infrastructure in Malaya – especially government offices, places of worship, hospitals, prisons, bridges, roads and living spaces erected across the region – carry the firm imprint of Indian labour, especially convict populations. This has been documented in historical materials on the subject. However, the scholarship on labour migration to Malaya, while recording the phenomenon of *labour building places of worship* in ports, harbours, prisons, municipalities and estates in Malaya, has not sufficiently analysed their impact on sociocultural, religious and political worlds therein – a gap this book addresses.

Writing in 2001, Ian Kerr, a stalwart railway studies scholar, urged the field of Indian railway studies to 'become more active, multi-disciplinary, extensive and multidimensional' (Kerr 2001: 22–23). This call can be extrapolated to railway studies in general and approaches to railway labour in particular. Much of the literature on railway workers and labour globally focuses on their involvement in labour unions, protests and strikes (Del Testa 2011; Kerr 1985; Sinha 2008). Far less is known about the everyday lives of railway labourers in British and other colonies, although some notable research is available (Karuka 2019; Kaur 1985; Kerr 2007; Wolmar 2017). Likewise, in the research on the railways in Malaya, the emphasis has been on the historical dimensions of railway construction and their political economy rather than on the sociocultural, religious and political ramifications introduced by the railways. The historical relationship between the builders of railway tracks and the founders of the earliest Hindu temples in Malaya has likewise been acknowledged, but not meaningfully theorized in the limited scholarship on the subject. Of course, temples on railway premises were founded not just by railway labour, but also by other categories of railway staff. My interlocutors used the expressions 'railwaymen temples', 'railway temples' and 'KTM temples' to emphasize the historical connectedness of these structures with the railways. Of these, 'railwaymen temples' was the most popular descriptor, which I approach here as an ethnographic category. This served as a crucial compass in helping me to locate and map sacred landscapes produced by railway labour and other categories of railway staff. These religious structures were often built under the oversight of railway authorities and with the support of senior personnel in the railway administration. The desire to establish the identities and motivations of those who founded temples along railway tracks, railway stations, yards, depots and railway quarters was a further inspiration for this research.

The economic, sociocultural and religious profiles of Indian populations that moved (and were moved) in the service of imperial projects have left an indelible mark on manifestations of Hinduism in diasporic locales. Significant amongst these were the regions from which these groups originated, their size

and their class and caste backgrounds. Historical records point to the dominance of the *Āti-Tirāviṭa* (Tamil, 'the original Dravidian') and other 'lower' caste members amongst the early Indian migrants to Malaya (Mani 1977; Sandhu 1969; Solomon 2016): over one-third of the migrants belonged to the 'untouchable' castes (such as Paṟaiyaṉ, Cakkiliyaṉ and Pallaṉ), as well as a cluster of depressed castes, and agriculturalists who were ranked medium to high in the prevailing caste hierarchy. Between 1786 and 1957, 65.3% of the total Indian migrants to Malaya belonged to the labouring sector (Sandhu 1969: 159). Additionally, up to 98% of the labour migrants were from South India (ibid.), and 80% of the migrants were of a Hindu background, with others being Sikhs, Muslims and Christians (ibid.: 161).

The strong Hindu presence in Malaya was evident in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Mialaret 1969; Rajah 1975; Sandhu 1969), with a conspicuous presence of gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals from popular Hinduism. In the South Indian context, when seen through Agamic frames, divinities from the folk, popular pantheon, denoted as 'secondary deities', were considered marginal 'small gods'. Their devotees were likewise placed outside Hindu frames altogether and were denied access to Agamic temples and participation in their ritual worlds. Unlike the Caribbean, where Brahmins constituted up to 15% of the indentured labour population, no Brahmins ever migrated to work on Malayan plantations or public work projects. This absence of the priestly caste in the migrating ensemble was important in enabling popular Hindu elements to be grounded, and indeed flourish, in Malaysia and Singapore.

In this study, I demonstrate that Indian railway labour transported to Malaya used familiar templates to enact devotional practices in new terrains to reproduce everyday religiosity and piety. They marked alien lands as sacred and reproduced a sense of *ūr* (Tamil, 'home town') in unfamiliar, treacherous territories. This resulted in building of homes for deities who devotees believed had accompanied them, with their efficacies intact, and even enhanced in new terrains. As pioneering religion makers, these labouring communities built temples near railway stations, locomotive sheds, railway workshops, railway quarters, labour lines and along the length of the rolling railway tracks as well as sustained a ritual complex therein[2] even as innovations were introduced. Going beyond the obvious, however, this study seeks to examine and make sense of the historical connections between the makers of railway tracks and builders of temples in the colonial period. I argue that the practice of individuals constructing temples is but one instance of *religion making*, admittedly a complex phenomenon that sustains religious consciousness and sensibilities. But this emphasis does not invoke the notion of 'religion from below' or glorify this effort as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985). Nor do my efforts attribute intentionality and aspiration to labourers to suggest that they explicitly sought to build sacred futures. Rather,

I acknowledge both the labouring and nonlabouring capacities of colonial labour constituencies as they built railways and erected temples. In so doing, albeit unintentionally, they also laid the foundations for the sacred landscapes and railway infrastructures of the future.

Unsurprisingly, what I denote as the *nonlabouring* lives of labour does not have a presence in the official railway archives. My positioning of colonial labour as pioneering religion makers is one mode of recovering one dimension of their nonlabouring lives. Information on how railway labour lived on a day-to-day basis, what kind of family lives they had, whether they engaged in leisure activities or whether they led religious lives (and how) is, as might be expected, missing in the official archives. Given such silencing of railway labour's contributions to building railways and their lives outside of their work, I argue that a turn to other sources is necessary to accord visibility to their efforts. A related objective in this project is to query how and, if so, where their labouring and nonlabouring capacities have left any imprints, and how these can be made visible, known about and accessed. In this context, driven by a commitment to decolonize research methodologies, I have turned productively to biography, temple archives and family collections of visuals and records, as well as individual and collective social memories.

The word *tracks* in this project carries multiple resonances. The first refers to the network of railway lines, where I literally started my fieldwork and that constituted a complex field site for me. Until very recently, the rail tracks across Malaysia and Singapore were conspicuously dotted with Hindu temples built by railway labour – something recalled vividly by scores of my interlocutors. Thus, a second reference to tracks speaks to the memories of these demolished temples emplaced in individual consciousness and collective remembrances. The notion of tracking has further shaped the methodological routes I have traversed in mapping and tracing railway and religion domains produced historically, as well as their contemporary manifestations. A final meaning of the word revisits my own ethnographic journeys as a researcher making sense of Hindu landscapes in Singapore and Malaysia.

This project reveals several key registers of mobility too. First, it references the railways as a mode of transportation – the Iron Horse – a symbol of modern, technological achievement. Next, it speaks to the flows of peoples, goods and ideas that the trains enabled and the consequences thereof. Subsequently, it focuses the gaze on labour movements from parts of India to Malayan shores to feed colonial infrastructural projects. The notion of movement also recognizes the phenomenon of sojourning Hindu deities that were moved across the Indian Ocean to Malayan landscapes. Specifically, it alludes to the narratives, discourses and imaginaries of Munīsvaraṉ as the *Railway God* that travel (or travelled) up and down the railway networks in Malaya. Finally, the emphasis on mobility

focuses the lens on religious structures on railway lands that were demolished and shifted to other locations due to railway upgrading projects, as well as speaks to my own journeys as an ethnographer.

The argument here is that colonial Indian labour constructed two types of infrastructure in Malaya – railways and religion – whose histories are entangled. In Malaya, as they lived out their lives in harsh, inhospitable and unfamiliar terrains, railway labourers built a transportation network, which was arguably more enduring, and constructed the edifice of a sacred landscape, which was seemingly more transient. Notably, the migrant Indian labour neither knew the technicalities of building railways nor possessed the knowledge to erect temples or sustain them ritually: in both instances, these constituencies learnt the appropriate skills and competencies on the job. This notice of colonial labour *making religion*, while also constructing railway infrastructures, may at first glance appear counterintuitive. However, it is precisely this seeming incongruence that has been an analytic force for this study. Furthermore, I argue that the building of temples near railway premises produced an intriguing interface of railway engineering technology and religiosity, which this book seeks to unravel and articulate.

Reading Railways and Religion through an Infrastructural Lens

Analyses of built environments, transportation networks, telegraphic, cable and telephonic communication systems, and the connectivities and border crossings they enable (or enabled) historically and contemporarily have a rich history (Bear 2007; Kaur 1985). Swanson (2020) makes a compelling case for studying the railways in the present as a window to theorizing modernity and as a site for interrogating corporate and state power. The counsel to 'think with the railways' (Ponsavady 2020: 2), given the limited scholarship on the subject, is indeed well-taken. Yet, Ponsavady has also observed that 'railroads are a relatively new object of attention for anthropologists' (ibid.). This is a fair assessment of the field. Yet, more than a handful of ethnographic texts or works with anthropological sensibilities on the railways do exist, some more visible and known to Euro-American anthropological communities than others. Here is a select sample of these works that my research has revealed. Laura Bear's well known pioneering anthropological work *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self* (2007) on the Indian national railways and the role of the Anglo-Indian community therein stands out as having acquired something of a classical status by now. Likewise, Ian Kerr's *Engines of Change: The Railroads That Made India* (2007) and Christian Wolmar's *Railways of the Raj: How the Age of Steam Transformed India* (2017), key works by two eminent railway historians, contain a wealth of sociocultural details about the railways, their builders

and their present standing in the Indian context. The longstanding field of 'railway studies' has been dominated by a focus on the railways in India, confirmed by the rich, voluminous and burgeoning scholarship on the subject. Nonetheless, browsing the extensive literature on railways across the globe led me to social, historical and anthropological railway research (in English) in Japan. Steven J. Ericson's *The Sound of the Whistle: Railroads and the State in Meiji Japan* (1996) presents a sociohistorical view of the Japanese rail industry and its entanglements with the Japanese state and private enterprise. Anthropologist Paul Noguchi's *Delayed Departures, Overdue Arrivals: Industrial Familialism and the Japanese National Railways* (1990) examines the role of family and familial connections in the emergence of this transport network. More recent examples include Freedman's *Tokyo in Transit: Japanese Culture on the Rail and Roads* (2010) and Fisch's *An Anthropology of the Machine: Tokyo's Commuter Train Network* (2018). The latter is an ethnographic study of Tokyo's commuter rail network, which documents its integration into the fabric of the everyday life of the city's residents. This text further highlights the limits and possibilities of infrastructural development and the risks of hyperinfrastructural development and an overburdened infrastructure, both for the system and for individuals.

Amarjit Kaur's sole and early work on railways in Malayan regions, *Bridge and Barrier: Transport and Communications in Colonial Malaya 1870–1957* (1985), is the work of a historian by definition, but contains rich sociological details and examines the impact of the railways on the colonial economy. By now, Kaur has produced a vast and rich body of scholarship on the construction of transportation networks in colonial Malaya and labour migration to these regions (Kaur 2004). In a critical piece, Kaur (1990) also locates Tamil railway labourers in the colonial economic structure sociologically by focusing on categories of race and gender and mapping their everyday lives to reveal the exploitation and deprivation they suffered. Most recently, I was impressed by Mahen Bala's *Postcards from the South: History and Memory of the Malaysian Railways* (2018). This text, based on the author's rail journeys, contains rare primary visual documentation of the southern part of the North–South KTM railway network from Gemas to Tanjong Pagar, Singapore. Bala accords priority to the diverse and multi-ethnic community that inhabited railway worlds in these parts and individual voices are heard volubly in the book. The volume reconstructs the history of railway building in Malaya and explores connections of the railways with the project of nation building in postcolonial Malaysia. The text is an immensely valuable and welcome contribution to Malaya's railway historiography and also contains significant ethnographic insights.

Notably, it is the social and economic historians rather than the anthropologists who have taken the lead in writing about railway building in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbean and North America, both within

and outside the framework of an industrial capitalist-imperialist global project. 'Railway imperialism' was a term popularized by Robinson (1991) in the early 1990s. A breathtaking volume of work has been produced on this subject since then (Bear 2007; Davis et al. 1991; Headrick 1988; Lewis 2007; Otte and Nielson 2007; Wolmar 2017). Colonial railways were constructed and developed to further imperial economic interests across Asia (Das 2015; Kakizaki 2005; Kaur 1980; Kerr 2007; Mukherjee 2010; Munasinghe 2002; Satya 2008), Africa (Miller 1971; Mills 2012; Monson 2006; Mutukwa 1977; Ruchman 2017; Sunseri 1998; Vail 1975), the Caribbean (Dyer and Hodge 1961; Hardgrove 2018; Palackdharrysingh 2018; Satchell and Sampson 2003; West 2011) and the Middle East (Earle 1923; Ericson 1996). The forces that produced an industrial, capitalist Europe were global rather than indigenous, and the core of the imperial project was executed in its colonies, where the construction of transportation and communication infrastructures were pivotal. The field of railway studies has also debated if colonial railways are/were a 'poisoned gift' in response to the question of whether the railways brought socioeconomic benefits – in the short term or the long term – to local communities (Bogart and Chaudhary 2012; Chandra 1981). I have found it useful to mine this diverse multidisciplinary body of literature – categorized primarily as railway historiography – for the sociocultural, religious and political ramifications of railway construction projects globally.

Additionally, I have been inspired by the interdisciplinary field of 'infrastructure studies', which has gained traction over the last two decades. This momentum has brought sociologists and anthropologists to the table – at which geographers have been seated much longer – to theorize oil, water, electricity, sanitation and sewage systems, dams, rivers, nuclear power and energy, roads and rails, the underground and the internet in urban cityscapes as well as rural landscapes, and the sociocultural and political worlds in which they are embedded. When I conceived this project a decade ago, the subdiscipline of 'anthropology of infrastructure' was not the 'hot topic' (Castro 2019: 103) it has now become. The emergence of this subdiscipline (Anand et al. 2018; Castro 2019; Joniak-Lüthi 2019; Kanoi et al. 2022) has been welcomed by practitioners. But it is worth noting that social scientists have long recognized the value of analysing economic and technological – i.e. the ontological dimensions of human-created worlds (Pinch and Swedberg 2008). Thus, anthropology and science and technology studies have a deep and well-recognized history (Venkatesan et al. 2018), possibly going back to the establishment of anthropology itself (Anand et al. 2018). Indeed, an impressive list of earlier works (Bear 2007; Collier and Ong 2003; Sahlins 2010; Star and Ruhleder 1996) can be cited as evidence of interest in studying infrastructures ethnographically (Star 1999). Further, the 'material' turn in anthropology, which has made sense of objects and materialities and their

agency, has been around for more than a few decades (Appadurai 1986; Barad 2003; Ingold 2007; Joyce and Bennett 2010; Mukherji 2015; Venkatesan 2009).

Yet, the recent explicit infrastructural turn in anthropology has been noticed and theorized productively by practitioners. Di Nunzio suggests that anthropologists had earlier neglected infrastructures because these were perceived to be 'unexciting, irrelevant … boring' (2018: 1, cited in Castro 2019: 103). This no longer holds true. Recent anthropological engagement with infrastructure as a category, site and method of inquiry has been serious and sustained. The body of ethnographic work produced in the last decade alone reflects that infrastructures do matter. While this conscious 'infrastructural turn' (Abel and Coleman 2020) in anthropology may be relatively recent, a refreshing body of critical work has already been produced under this banner. Today, anthropologists are more likely to read ethnographic accounts of repair works (Strebel et al. 2019), oil and gas pipelines (Rogers 2015), water (Ballestero 2019), electricity (Özden-Schilling 2021), dams and rivers (Scudder 2019), environments (Hetherington 2019a), roads (Croshere 2017; Dalakoglou 2009; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2016; Harvey and Knox 2012) and railways (Swanson 2020).

Furthermore, there have been creative efforts to transcend and rethink the taken-for-granted understanding of the concept of infrastructure itself. Anthropologists are moving past the notion that infrastructure should be approached as the invisible but present hardware in physical and organizational structures, logistics, services and facilities needed for the operational functioning of society. The concept of infrastructure has been innovatively transported to more abstract and intangible realms too. For example, Anderson speaks of 'research infrastructures', where 'infrastructure' is 'a material and experiential presence that is embedded in the practices and experience of research, which builds on and enhances that which already exists, that unites scholars with archivists, librarians, and museum curators, and that also finds a place for the amateur' (2013: 4), and Calkins (2019) speaks of 'infrastructures of citizenship' in the Indian context. Jensen approaches 'infrastructures as sites of (potential) meaningful interaction, pleasure, and cultural production' (2009: 139), while Amin emphasises the 'social life and sociality' of urban infrastructures, viewing these as 'deeply implicated in not only the making and unmaking of individual lives, but also in the experience of community, solidarity and struggle for recognition' (2014: 137). Yet another interpretation is the recent formulation of 'religious infrastructures', where participants at a 2020 workshop issued an invitation to 'think infrastructurally about religion':

> This workshop aims to consolidate a theoretical framework of 'religious infrastructures' which extends the concept's analytical potential. In thinking infrastructurally about religion, we explore how religiously-devised

infrastructures intersect with broader infrastructural landscapes, and how –
no less than mass transit systems and water supply networks – they sustain
shared ecologies and enable socio-material conditions of life support and
survival. (Frobenius-Institut 2020)

The papers at this conference called for conceptualizing religious infrastructures
and acknowledging their agency, challenging yet again the framing of religion as
a discrete and bounded domain and the idea that the sacred 'can be understood
in isolation from 'secular' dynamics' (ibid.). These ideas have been captured in
Ishii's (2017) invocation of a 'sacred infrastructure' in the Indian context, though
this is a rare example, and research that views religion through infrastructural
frames is on the whole limited and underdeveloped.

In this study, I take up the invitation to 'think infrastructurally' (Chu 2014)
and to think through and with infrastructures (Kornberger et al. 2019). However,
I approach 'infrastructuralism' (Peters 2015) as much more than a 'fascination
for the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind
the scenes' (Peters, as cited in Abel and Coleman 2020: xi). Moving beyond
empirical and substantive foci, Anand et al. (2018) rightly ask: 'What happens to
theory making and ethnographic practice when roads, water pipes, bridges, and
fibre-optic cables themselves are our objects of engagement?' (2018: 14). This
seems to me to be the key question, and resonates with my approach to analys-
ing railway building and religion making by labour in the Malayan context. My
insistence on the analytical value of the concept of 'infrastructure' also addresses
Hetherington's (2019b) concern that anthropological invocations of infrastruc-
ture may merely be fashionable.

In the context of this book, I extend the notion of 'infrastructure' to speak of
the idea of 'religious infrastructure' even as I problematize the simplistic binary
of material and nonmaterial dimensions of infrastructure. An infrastructural lens
has been compelling in framing this book analytically and enabling me to make
sense of the complicated interactions and encounters between the railway and
religious landscapes. I have found it valuable to approach *both* through the lens
of infrastructure. Using this logic, I am inspired to analyse the interface of Hindu
landscapes with the railways and with other infrastructural forms in colonial
and postcolonial moments. One key point to be made in this book is that reli-
gious and railway infrastructures emerged *together* in the *same* material sites in
the context of colonial modernity. However, my data also suggest that through
modernization and development moments, attitudes towards this infrastructural
co-presence have shifted over time, and new dynamics between the railway and
religious landscapes have emerged.

In a related vein, insights from recent scholarship on infrastructure and inti-
macy (Pasonnen 2018) have been provocative in problematizing and decentring

specific modes of interpreting conceptual binaries such as private/public, local/global (Wilson 2016) and material/nonmaterial, to mention but a few. The idea of intimacy is relevant in this book as my data reveal that practitioners are comfortable with approaching infrastructures, machinery and technologies as imbued with meanings and symbolism. For devotees, what is typically recognized as the 'hardware' (the technical, technological, logistical and mechanical) of infrastructures unproblematically becomes the site for expressions of devotion and piety. In this regard, the presence of deities, spirituality and temples on railway premises, and the perception of infrastructure hardware as connoting and embodying efficacies and divinity were not a surprise either to my interlocutors or to me. My ethnography of contemporary railway landscapes in Malaysia and Singapore resonates with the noted 'promise of infrastructure' (Anand et al. 2018, Joniak-Lüthi 2019) as well as its destructive and negative effects (Chu 2014). Infrastructures do connote material and technical relations, but they also enable the production and sustenance of religious and cultural worlds, even as these physical structures are dismantled, as the case of the railway and religious infrastructures in Malaya demonstrates.

Mapping Sacralized Railway Landscapes

My prior ethnographic efforts revealed the importance of the railways in narratives of Indian labour migration and its intersections with Hindu domains in Malaya. But in the current project, the railways assume centre stage, becoming the core unit of analysis and the object of my investigation. This allows me to use railway construction as a starting point – a window to analyse Indian labour migration and religion making in colonial Malaya. However, the belated realization of my own family's historical association with the colonial railways in India – through my maternal grandfather's professional life as aapermanent way inspector – enmeshed my biography with the current research in unexpected ways. Thus, here I allude to my own unknown family history as much as narrating the lives of others, although the former remains an incomplete project. Still, this was a key reminder about the value of biography as a site of knowledge production and life stories as knowledge-making and theorizing tools. Approaching biography as individual stories, voices and experiences seriously not only reflects my commitment to decolonizing research methodologies, but has also influenced my relationship with my interlocutors in this project. This research has demonstrably been enhanced by turning to life stories of individual interlocutors as well as temple tales, private temple archives and family albums and documents, in addition to relying on interviews, field journeys and official archives as sites from which knowledge can be generated and that hold crucial sense-making insights. For me, the obvious methodological choices for mapping

railway landscapes in search of sacred footprints were fieldwork and in depth interviews.

As an ethnographer, the human dimension of fieldwork and accountability to social relationships have been my priorities. Acknowledging that fieldwork is a collaborative effort involving a diverse pool of multiple interlocutors is a part of the same commitment. It has long been noted that ethnography not only entails collaboration but is also essentially social, even though it is mostly undertaken by individuals. These features merit an explicit acknowledgement, together with their political and ethical significance. Lassiter specifies what 'collaborative ethnography' means in practice and emphasizes that the entire ethnographic enterprise is infused with this cooperative sentiment:

> Ethnography is, by definition, collaborative … To be sure, we all practice collaboration in one form or another when we do ethnography. But collaborative ethnography moves collaboration from its taken-for-granted background and positions it on centre stage … We might sum up collaborative ethnography as an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process. (Lassiter 2005: 16)

In the interest of transparency, I begin by acknowledging that in the present research, the train journeys and fieldwork trips that commenced in February 2017 were not a solo effort. My husband, Ravinran Kumaran (Ravi), accompanied me on all legs of this fieldwork in Malaysia. Ravi's contributions to my research efforts are not new. His strong influence and input on my research go back to 1986, when I was doing ethnographic work for my master's thesis. At the time, in my thesis, I credited Ravi for his photography work and drawings of temple plans, which turned out to be crucial in the present project in ways neither of us could have imagined then. Over the years, colleagues have noted in jest that in Ravi, I was fortunate to have my own Edith Turner – a reference to the renowned anthropologist Victor Turner's spouse – who was an accomplished anthropologist in her own right, but who has remained somewhat invisible in disciplinary histories.

In a self-reflexive mode, I explicitly tease out and articulate Ravi's place in this phase of my research journey. This has not been straightforward by any means. My wish to honestly document Ravi's involvement in the fieldwork trips was necessarily mediated by his thoughts and perspectives. Undoubtedly, the emergent narratives would have to be respectful of how Ravi himself wanted his role in the research to be recorded, if at all – or, indeed, if he wanted to pen sections of the fieldwork journeys as part of the book. After lengthy discussions and

deliberations, Ravi was happy for me to enunciate his multiple contributions, but did not want to write anything separately in this book. We agreed that in narrating the fieldwork undertaken for the book, we would use the collective pronouns we/us/our meaningfully in this introductory chapter. But Ravi did not want to appear elsewhere in the book's narrative. Nor did he feel that he had contributed to the book's 'theoretical' and 'analytical' (his terms) discussions. Even as I hold that Ravi's influence was not confined to the field journeys, I have respected his wishes. The determination to write about these experiences meaningfully has raised the bigger issue of how to process, interpret and present the contributions of travelling spouses/partners and other key collaborators and interlocutors in ethnographic narratives. I believe that merely invoking the descriptors 'accompanying partners' or 'key interlocutors' is limiting and inadequate methodologically and analytically, and, even more so, ethically and politically. I hold that what is required is full and honest disclosure of their complex role(s) in research endeavours and a detailed account of their specific and direct inputs therein – a commitment that I attempt here.

During the 2017 journeys, Ravi was my research partner, spotting temples from the train and using his camera and camera phone to document sacred railway terrains. Apart from being a visual documentarian, he multitasked as a translator and interpreter, given his far superior command of Tamil; he drove us tirelessly across the west coast of Malaysia, negotiating difficult country roads and terrains, where we were both *temple and railway spotters*. Given the enormity of this input, Ravi was, in fact, a co-producer and generator of ethnographic knowledge in my research journeys. Ravi's identity as an Indian male was also critical during fieldwork in Indian/Hindu domains – it opened doors, helped with initial conversations and eased the way for securing appointments for interviews. He took the lead in some interview situations, given his linguistic facility, and was instrumental in drawing out particular strands of emergent conversations with our interlocutors and sought elaborations which were critical for the research. Despite this input, Ravi is gracious and generous in the insistence that his contributions were limited in being *nonacademic* and *nontheoretical*. We agreed to disagree on this fundamental issue.

Ethnography conventionally requires practitioners to identify a field, a space where research is carried out, rendering this a bounded, discrete and territorial entity, though this idea has by now been sufficiently problematized and unpacked (Amit 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Kalir 2007; Ringel 2016). Admittedly, over the last couple of decades, practitioners have conceived rather novel ways of thinking about field sites and innovative fieldwork practices have been engendered. Consequently, today for ethnographers, a field is not autonomously given, but always a construction. The researcher's role has been

Figure 0.2. Kuil Sri Subramaniyar Swami, Kajang, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

recognized to be crucial in curating this as a domain of enquiry, as its boundaries are literally brought into being at the time of fieldwork. Thus, I do not make the claim of novelty here, but demonstrate concretely in the context of this research how I have reconceptualized the entangled issues of field sites and anthropological data that have *reshaped* my approach to ethnography.

For us, fieldwork meant undertaking multiple train and road journeys across Malaysia, surveying sites around railway stations and railway tracks for signs of sacred Hindu structures, both big and small. This logic massively expanded the concepts of 'field' and 'field site(s)' in this project. In trawling these spaces, we found it useful to turn to the notion proposed by Marston et al. – that a site is 'a material location characterised by differential relations through which one site is connected to other sites, out of which emerges a social space that can be understood to extend, however unevenly and temporarily, across distant places' (2005: 416). In our follow-up visits to temples and during interviews, we identified links among the apparently randomly scattered sacred sites that we had sighted along our railway journeys. Recognizing these spatial links unsettled the priority typically assigned to field sites bounded in time and space, and the railway tracks themselves assumed centrality in the ethnographic work.

Fieldwork on the West and East Coast Lines of Malaysia's KTM network entailed spotting the temples still existing along the tracks from the window of a moving train first, and then travelling to these identified sites by road to determine if these were railwaymen temples/KTM temples – descriptions we encountered during our journey. The physical proximity of temples to railway premises alone did not signal their connection to the railways, whether historically or in the present. We needed to establish if these temples had been founded/built by railway personnel and to document their social histories. These field journeys took us across the entire KTM railway network in Malaysia and Singapore. This included the 26 km stretch of KTM tracks in Singapore that existed until 30 June 2011, the West Coast/North–South line from Johor Bahru to Padang Besar, the Jungle Railway on the East Coast Line, the branch lines from KL Sentral to Port Klang and from KL Sentral to Batu Caves – through the Malaysian states of Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Pahang, Penang, Perak and Kelantan. We travelled on trains, cars, aeroplanes and by foot to locate and then map Hindu landscapes in railway sites across Singapore and Malaysia. On the West Coast Line and the East Coast railways, we travelled on tracks at different stages of modernization – on electrified trains and those pulled by diesel engines. These upgrading projects have meant the evacuation of railway lands and removing railway squatters, including Hindu and Buddhist/Taoist temples, as well as some mosques and churches. The following excerpts from my field journal as I began the work reflected my mood:

> Feeling a sense of excitement and trepidation but mostly thrilled to be embarking on a journey that began, probably too long ago, and possibly without my knowing it had begun. (Field notes: 25 February 2017)

> Reminded of all the train journeys I have undertaken – the thrill, the anticipation, the sound of the engine, the rocking of carriages, watching the landscape roll by – still gives me goosebumps. (Field notes: 25 February 2017)

Plotting the existing sacred landscape from the window of a moving train was a core methodological choice, the logic being that we would record that which is visible from the train. What did we see while moving on the tracks? What was visible? What remained hidden? What spaces near tracks and stations were marked by signs of sacrality? We conceived of the length of the running tracks as sacralized spaces that expressed religiosity, piety and devotion. Initially, we used the permanent way and railway stations as physical coordinates to locate religious and cultural communal life. In time, we discovered other sites that functioned similarly – yards, workshops, labour lines and railway settlements – locales where the everyday religious lives of railway families and communities were enacted. But the related query that followed was as follows: how, if at all, could we access the sacred terrains that were invisible, hidden and unknown as well as those that had perished? This raised questions about what 'traces' there might be of the 'once-a-upon-a-time' sacred structures in railway sites in the absence of physical, material evidence. Answering these queries meant visiting the temples identified on train journeys by road and conversing with temple custodians whose lives in the present were intimately connected with these places of worship built by railway personnel and labour.

As we noted physical evidence of temples along the tracks, we wondered which were built first: the tracks or the temples? Was the presence of temples adjacent and alongside the tracks spurious or accidental? We also found numerous Buddhist temples, mosques and *gurdwara*s near stations and tracks, and many more had existed in the past. However, it was striking that, comparatively speaking, a disproportionately high number of Hindu temples were visible on railway sites even in February 2017, when we embarked on this research. Travelling on newly electrified tracks from KL Sentral to Butterworth, on trains moving at 140 km/h, was a different experience compared to the journeys on old tracks from Johore Bahru to Gemas, on trains running at speeds of 80–90 km/h. On 21 July 2017, our maiden journey on the 'Timuran Express' took us to the east coast of Malaysia, which we had not visited before. At the risk of exoticizing fieldwork and with full awareness of its limits, this trip was admittedly filled with intrigue and novelty:

Pulled off from JB Sentral on the dot – on a journey I have tracked so often in my mind's eye and plotted endlessly on paper maps and internet sites. The journey from JB to Gemas is a familiar one – it is one that we have travelled several times this year and many times in the last few decades. But the gaze recently has been a rather different one, bringing into sharp focus sights, sounds, places and peoples unnoticed in past journeys – seemingly inconsequential in earlier forays. The gaze is now fixed on sacred sightings and traces as the train chugs along on a track built by the foot soldiers of the British Empire about a hundred years ago, now at an astounding speed of 90 km/h – something unimaginable a century ago. (Field notes: 21 July 2017)

The appearance of railway stations at intervals lends order to an otherwise apparent movement of the 'iron horse' into nothingness and nowhere. The appearance of even the smallest station bestows confidence and reassurance that the beast is moving towards a charted destination. (Field notes: 21 July 2017).

Nothing substantial has been written about Indian, Hindu settlements on the east coast, as their numbers are much smaller compared to the west coast of Malaysia. Expectedly, we saw far fewer Hindu temples along the tracks on this stretch, but as we followed up by road between Tumpat and Gua Musang, we discovered numerous old and new railway-related temples.[3] From the train window, this part of the country appeared less developed, but we saw clear signs that development had arrived – new housing construction projects at different stages of completion and road upgrade projects, with the towering, heavy presence of Sumitomo Hitachi bulldozers, cranes and diggers.

The 'Timuran Express' sometimes crawled at 50 km/h on a single track, between thick vegetation on both sides, crossed rivers on railway bridges and disappeared into railway tunnels built almost a century ago. One can only imagine what perils and hazards workers would have encountered while clearing thick jungles, laying tracks and building tunnels and bridges with a little more than their bare hands. Strikingly, the road network on the eastern coast of Malaysia is recent, dating back only to the 1970s/1980s. Until then, the KTM train line was the primary mode of transportation. Even today, it remains central in connecting small towns and enabling mobility for school children and workers travelling to the bigger, east coast cities.

My desire to 'complete' my fieldwork for the railway temple mapping project was marked with urgency, given the inevitability of the railway modernization projects in Malaysia and Singapore and the impending changes. As we undertook these trips, I felt a deep sense of regret that I had not been able to do this work

earlier. Fortuitously but ironically, the numerous and prolonged 'delays' in the double-tracking and electrification of the Johor Bahru–Gemas line turned out to be a blessing for my research. Travelling on this old, originally single-track line allowed me to map the existing Hindu landscape built by railway labour and capture the ongoing demolitions of stations and once-upon-a-time 'railwaymen temples'. Given that the evacuation process around the railway premises had been initiated in the 1990s, I knew that our mapping would not capture the many railway temples that had already been demolished, although we did manage to track some that had been relocated. In fact, given the pace of work on the modernization of the Gemas–Johor Bahru stretch, we know that many of the temples we had surveyed would also be demolished and disappear by the time that this book is published. The unregistered temples would not be granted alternate sites and would perish, but the registered temples would survive in other locations. I experienced conflicting emotions in the knowledge that the railway and religious infrastructures I was documenting along this stretch would soon be history. Of course, history is being made all the time, but my ethnography was bearing witness to history making at work, even as history was being undone.

During different segments of my rail and road journeys, it felt as if we were crossing and glimpsing pasts and futures, which were enmeshed and coexisted in the same space, even if momentarily so, entangled in complex ways. This applied to religious and railway infrastructures, both in varied states of transformation, decay and regeneration. Gupta's observation that it is productive to view infrastructure as 'built in anticipation of a not-yet-achieved future' (2018: 63) speaks of the spatial and temporal entanglements of infrastructural complexities on the ground. The old railway tracks and temples built a hundred years ago contained the nuclei of what would become of the railways and the religious landscape in the region: the future was being produced in the past. Travelling from Johor Bahru to Gemas, we encountered a mix of 'old-new' in railway and sacred structures. It felt as if I were straddling different moments between the early 1900s and 2017. We found old stations in various states of existence – some physically intact and fully functional, while others were abandoned, run-down and lifeless. Elsewhere on this stretch, new stations were planned to replace older ones while retaining the names, whereas some old stations had already been replaced, such as at Gemas.

Likewise, we witnessed the demolition of older railwaymen temples, as my interlocutors lamented the passing of an era when we walked through the debris and ruins – the cyphers of a sacred past. The newly built stations and tracks made it challenging to track down the original railwaymen temples and to locate the coordinates of old stations and tracks that had been demolished. Finding what seemed to be old railwaymen temples, which were not near new stations and tracks, puzzled me initially. But when the coordinates of old stations, tracks and

labour lines were pointed out to me, their location made sense. Subsequently, using fragments of old stations and railway quarters as spatial clues for locating the railwaymen temples resulted in greater success. We also recorded newer histories being made in the sprouting of temples close to modernized railway premises as well as in old railway sites, which were built by descendants of railway labour but also by other Hindus.

The new, high-speed, electrified rails systems use alternating current at 25 kilovolts, and the track areas are cordoned off and rendered off-limits. We were fully aware that laypersons could not access spaces close to the tracks, let alone build temples therein. Some of the old infrastructures – tracks, stations, yards, quarters, stations and temples – were still standing at the time of fieldwork across the KTM track network in Malaysia and Singapore. Interestingly, across the West and East Coast Lines, some of the railway quarters and labour lines – which were also in a state of disrepair – were still occupied, but barely suitable for human habitation, attesting to the continuing housing problem for low-income groups in Malaysia. These were in a state of seeming abandonment, resembling ruins: the past now existing as wreckage. As we surveyed these landscapes, I could not but agree with Kimani that 'History has strange ways of announcing itself to the present' (Kimani 2017: 63).

The mapping project, facilitated by ethnographic and historical journeys, allowed the religion-making and railway-building processes in the distant past to be recognized through their enduring imprints in the present. At the same time, encounters between ethnographers and interlocutors in the present led to a methodological and analytical remaking of ethnography itself. A further methodological reference to mobility in this project speaks to the idea of 'ethnography on the move' and my treks as an ethnographer – both of which have grounded this research endeavour.

Ethnography on the Move

The book exemplifies what it means to practise 'ethnography on the move' in order to track religion-making and railway-building efforts. Given the primacy that anthropology accords to long-term, in-depth fieldwork in bounded spaces, the idea of generating data while moving is disruptive but also enabling precisely because it disturbs and unsettles longstanding, taken-for-granted epistemological, conceptual and ontological edicts of ethnographic research.

There has been considerable enthusiasm about the emergence of a 'new mobilities paradigm' that has engaged scholars across disciplines – human and cultural geography, urban studies, sociology, anthropology and transport/travel/tourism studies (Blok 2010; Brown and Laurier 2005; Brown and Durrheim 2009; Cresswell 2006; Fincham and Murray 2010; Molz 2006; Urry 2002; Watts

and Urry 2008). Scholars have devised 'mobile methods' (Büscher and Urry 2009) and 'walk along' research (Kusenbach 2003) as strategies that enable 'street ethnography' (ibid.). Concrete methods for tourism studies have been creatively produced under the banners of walking ethnography (Cheng 2013; Ingold 2004), backpacker ethnography (Sørenson 2003), mobile ethnography, Eurorailing, bus journeys (Jain 2016), train journeys (Watts 2008) and cycling (Spinney 2009), to mention some innovative examples. Sheller and Urry describe 'mobile ethnography' as 'participation in patterns of movement while conducting ethnographic research' (2006: 217). Drawing attention to 'the mobilities turn', Büscher and Urry propose that:

> The mobilities paradigm not only remedies the academic neglect of various movements, of people, objects, information, and ideas. It also gathers new empirical sensitivities, analytical orientations, methods and motivations to examine important social and material phenomena and fold social science insight into responses. (2009: 99)

My invocation of 'ethnography on the move' references the methodological paths I traversed given the nature of this research. In this context, this strategy entailed speaking to station guards, dining car attendants, ticket inspectors, passengers and station managers during train journeys and short stops on railway platforms. Travelling from Johor Bahru to Gemas on 27 February 2017, we struck up a conversation with a KTM dining car attendant, Ishwar, who had been working in the railways for 20 years. Speaking in Malay, he described the 'kuil kecil' (small temples) and 'kuil besar' (big temples) along the tracks, noting that 'dulu ada banyak-banyak' (before there were many of these), 'semua dekat stesen' (all near stations), but 'sekarang semua pecah' (now all have been broken/demolished). Travelling with a KTM ticket inspector named Rahim – who has been serving in the railways for almost thirty years – generated valuable insights. He was not only chatty but also extremely informative about Hindu temples along the tracks – those that had been demolished and those that still existed. As he walked down the railway carriages doing his work, he shared his 'temple map' of railwaymen temples. He alerted us to the temples that were coming up along the journey so we would be prepared. Based on hundreds of journeys on this stretch, he shared a wealth of precise details, naming stations where temples and mosques had existed and when they were demolished.

These encounters were crucial to the mapping project of this book and determined ensuing fieldwork steps. For example, it was Rahim who pointed out the remaining physical traces of a Hindu temple that used to be on the Paloh railway platform, and the Hindu temple and mosque that were near the Labis railway station.

Figure 0.3. Site of demolished Amman temple at Paloh Railway Platform, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

We followed up on these leads and they turned out to be crucial for future fieldwork trajectories and also shaped the analytical direction of this work. Also valuable was the opportunity to visit the station master's office at Kuala Kerai railway station along the East Coast Line and talk to Samad, a member of the station team, to learn about railway engineering and the technology of railway communication, such as the system of token exchanges and manual track switching machines from eighty years ago that is still in use. Unscheduled conversations, such as with the likes of Hajruddin, a former station master of the Kuala Kerai railway station who now operates a canteen on the same platform, produced ethnographic gems. Spending many hours on multiple train journeys observing and visually documenting the rolling terrains and making notes still left plenty of time for reflections about anthropology and ethnography, which fuelled subsequent methodological and theoretical paths and infused the writing of the book. Here are some illustrative selections from my field notes:

> As night falls and the light fades, only shadows and silhouettes are discernible through the large train windows. We are on the night service train on an 18-hour journey to the coastal town of Tumpat. I am filled with excitement and have hardly been able to contain the thrill and sheer pleasure of this hugely awaited train journey. This is supposed to be 'work' but hardly feels tedious. Moments of pleasure mingled with the anticipation of what lies ahead. I am very mindful that this is akin to the narrative of arrival and discovery of exotica – so typical of the anthropological trope. Despite all the warnings and self-reflexivity vis-à-vis the folly of this and knowing theoretically the limits of exoticizing the ethnographic enterprise – is it impossible to avoid these in practice after all? (Field notes: 21 July 2017)

> It's a sobering moment to now traverse this landscape and terrain made accessible by the blood, sweat and labour of hundreds and thousands of Tamil men who overcame harsh, inhospitable conditions, armed with rudimentary tools, braving the elements – to construct the marvel of modern science and technology – bequeathing to future generations a gift – a manner and method of mobility of speeds that they never imagined would be possible. Of course, one does not want to romanticize the railways, knowing the devastation, death and hardship its building and maintenance we know it [*sic*] has caused. Yet there is an incomparable thrill one feels – as the train with its engine pulls the carriages along the tracks and the rhythmic side-to-side motion that transports one to a world hardly contained in the walled, now air-conditioned carriages. (Field notes: 21 July 2017)

Following the train journeys, Ravi and I travelled by road to locate and visit the temples that we had mapped on the train. This entailed driving from Singapore to Gemas, Gemas to Ipoh, Ipoh to Padang Besar on the West Coast Line and then travelling down from Tumpat to Kuala Kerai on the East Coast Line. Not every temple we visited was a railwaymen temple. There were other temples we stumbled into – either accidentally or through contacts – that we had not plotted from the train, but that turned out to be railwaymen temples. These reiterated the value of serendipity and chance encounters on ethnographic journeys. Many of the railwaymen temples and KTM temples we encountered are still located on railway lands, within station premises, near living quarters or along the tracks, on their original sites. Some of these were built by railway labourers who also laid and maintained the tracks. Others were built by KTM staff who were part of the administrative and clerical sectors of the railway services. Yet others were constructed by the railway authorities for workers and staff.

Many of the railwaymen temples we visited were dilapidated, with limited funding and dwindling communities of devotees, but they were nonetheless enlivened sacred sites – functioning and 'living' temples. These were sustained by a small group of core devotees, largely older, retired, ageing men – some of whom grew up in the neighbourhood or were descendants of the temple founders, ex-KTM staff, or railway staff – who valued the historical connection of Indian labour with the railways and wanted to memorialize this connection. Notably, most of my interlocutors as temple caretakers and managers were retired men in their sixties, seventies and eighties; a majority of them were former railway employees. This is unsurprising given the dominant presence of men as railway employees in all categories of the service. Thus, in my search for railway-related temples, I encountered few women; in fact, I can only list seven women among my interlocutors. We also encountered clusters of younger men who enthusiastically mobilized resources to revive older railwaymen temples. They were not necessarily connected with the railways, but recognized the historical links of their ancestors to building temples and the railways. The latter seemed to be a matter of pride for both these groups and explained their commitment to this category of temples.

A unique methodological principle that emerged in the course of the ethnography itself is what I have denoted as *tracing*. Given the waves of temple demolitions in the face of railway modernization projects in Malaysia, it would hardly be surprising if no material evidence of these early places of worship remained. Not surprisingly, many of these early sacred sites have already perished. A related driver for this research, then, was to ask whether and what kinds of footprints these railway-related temples have left behind. Temples that have endured – both materially and otherwise – contain what I call *traces* of the labouring and 'nonlabouring' lives of labour. Thus, *tracing* – as a method and

concept – undergirds my plotting efforts across the East and West Coast tracks in Malaysia and Singapore. Being grounded in the present, this strategy has allowed me to speak to the histories and possible futures of both railway and religious landscapes in Malaysia and Singapore.

Tracing as Method and Concept: Surfacing Visible and Invisible Terrains

> It is only at the very end of the letter that the slave makes his entry … That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests – *the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time*. But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance, it was a mere accident that *those barely discernible traces* that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all. (Ghosh 1992: 16–17, emphases added)

Throughout this research, different forms of erasures, absences and silences were impossible to miss. Archival records typically document 'big' or 'macro' histories. 'Lay', 'micro' or 'everyday' histories find no place here. Typically, these reports and papers are sites of knowledge production that establish authorized accounts bolstered by colonial agendas, with no space for ordinary, lay voices and narratives of railway labour. Nor is there any mention of temple building on railway premises and the involvement of the railway administration in supporting its staff in these efforts. Railway labour is mentioned selectively in these reports, primarily as economic units and exclusively for their productive value. When railway labour welfare is discussed in these reports, it only refers to housing, health, wages and training. There is rarely any mention here of the recreational or nonlabouring lives of labourers. No details regarding their sociocultural or religious lives, which were deemed irrelevant to their primary identity as labourers, are included.

Thus, an important analytical move in this project was to recognize the value of the labouring as well as nonlabouring capacities of railway labourers. This also posed methodological challenges: where does one seek traces of nonlabouring, ordinary lives? Bringing these lives to light required a turn to different methodologies and a recognition of multiple sites and sources from which insights about

the latter could be generated. In addition to plotting the visible sacred structures in railway precincts, we also wondered if, and how, we could track down the traces of older, temple and railway landscapes that had been transformed or dismantled. It would have been a miracle to discover the material footprints of some of the early temples built by labourers, given that these were constructed of perishable materials. It is highly unlikely that these would have lasted a century or more without being remodelled and refurbished materially. Other temples that were founded by more prominent members of the railway services have indeed survived. Additionally, it turns out that these former groups of temples were vulnerable precisely due to their locations, given the modernization of the railways. Some of the registered temples that were 'in the way' have had to be demolished before being moved to other locations, while the unregistered ones have faced a less promising future and have disappeared.

Our conversations with interlocutors and research along the length of the railway tracks in Singapore and Malaysia revealed a long list of physical sacred sites, but also spaces where the temples 'used to be'. Religious actors remember these sites vividly, as these are imprinted in individual and collective memories. For instance, the persistent and creative efforts of devotees to mark and claim spaces as sacred, including along the (former) railway tracks – as seen in the *reappearance* of the Munīsvaraṇ temple on the site of the 1932 Munīyanti temple in 2009 – strongly suggest that the 'Hindu temple-KTM story' in Singapore still has some wind in its sails. Where possible, devotees revisit these sites for years after these have been radically transformed and temples have been demolished. The image of devotees returning regularly to conduct prayers at the site where the Munīsvaraṇ temple at the Tanjong Pagar station *once stood* is a haunting one (see Fig 0.4) For devotees, the sacred power of these locales does not seem to have been diminished, even in the absence of material sacred structures, or when these have been redeveloped as secular sites or left vacant and unattended.

Just as traces of ordinary lives are rarely found in the official archives – everyday religiosity and piety, constituted by implicit practices and processes, do not necessarily produce durable or discernible imprints and thus remain undocumentable, and therefore unnoticed by governments, urban planners and social scientists alike. I argue that through immersion in the field, a sustained fieldwork period and narrative interviews can reveal how individuals imagine sacred pasts, presents and futures, in landscapes that are continuously transformed by larger entities and powerful stakeholders.

An anthropological lens allows for the critical realization that elites and authorities only *appear* to have a monopoly on envisioning pasts or futures, and that ordinary actors, such as religion makers, are important players as well. Nonetheless, uncovering how these everyday attempts at making and remaking sacred spaces imagine and produce sacred futures remains a methodological

Figure: 0.4. Temple's gone but family prayers go on. Mr K.P. Luthesamy, 60, and his family praying outside the compound of the old Malaysian railway near Kampong Bahru Road, where the Muneeswaran Temple once stood, 2015. © SPH Media Ltd, used with permission

challenge. While I approach the past as a commentary on the present, through ethnographic research suggests that this also offers a set of resources for future making. Bringing historical materials and ethnography into conversation has been productive. In addition, turning to privately held temple records, personal and family documents and images as well as individual and collective remembrances has been equally meaningful. These latter sources assume tremendous importance in bureaucratic environments in Singapore and Malaysia, where 'evidence' of the rights of the temples to occupy state or KTM lands legally and legitimately has become consequential and a matter of survival.

When I first commenced this research, the questions I heard consistently from laypersons and academics alike were 'how many temples are there along the tracks?' and 'are there still any temples left?' When I returned from my field trips, I was asked: 'So did you find any temples?' Reporting to interested parties that I had identified ninety-four existing railwaymen temples in Malaysia and Singapore seemed to legitimate the project, in a nod to the strong ontological bias in anthropological and ethnographic work. My fieldwork journeys led to the accounting and documentation of the material traces as well as remembrances of these early sites, many of which have grown from rudimentary beginnings to 'proper' temples. Some of these temples remain in their original locales, while many have moved elsewhere but maintain firm and fond links with the railways. Given the waves of demolitions and the removal of temples from railway territories over time, surveying the scene between February 2017 and April 2019, I was prepared to find no or few railwaymen temples. Yet, even on stretches of the KTM tracks that had been double-tracked and electrified, I glimpsed religious futures in the form of railwaymen temples whose foundations were laid more than a century ago and that had surprisingly, survived, architecturally and ritually.

Recognizing the traces and footprints of religious and railway infrastructures, and the conceptual and methodological challenges they posed, have been the most engaging and thought-provoking facets of this journey. My research led me to conceive of traces and footprints in multiple registers. My approach to traces transcends physicality and materiality to include recollections, individual and collective memories, temporalities as well as digital signs. However, conceptually, I do not approach traces simply as social memories. Nor do I see them as residual, ephemeral fragments of a more complete, authentic totality that existed once upon a time. I think of these imprints as weighty, analytically dense and substantial, in and of themselves. Furthermore, these are layered and textured, embodying accumulated meanings and histories, and their manifestations mediated by multiple, intersecting temporalities. I propose *tracing* as a method for unearthing visible, invisible and marginal terrains, entities, narratives and practices. Viewing railway and religious landscapes as traces and footprints allowed me to also rethink the conceptualization of *infrastructures* themselves.

The enduring landscapes of railwaymen temples and the railway infrastructures that I have mapped are footprints of the late nineteenth-century colonial-capitalist project of modernity. Without a doubt, both sets of infrastructures have been radically transformed over time, although some have persisted in their original template, at least for now. Temples and railways alike have been subjected to the processes of development, urbanization and gentrification, and, in many cases, their earlier prototypes have been destroyed. Yet, railway and religious infrastructures continue to have an active presence and demonstrate regenerative capacities: trains have been electrified, tracks and stations have been modernized, but these are still functioning. Similarly, many temples have grown in scale and have acquired respectability and legitimacy in embracing new ethos and ritual practices.

Certainly, it is limiting and problematic to work with simplistic binaries, including that of 'enchanted' and 'unenchanted' domains. Nonetheless, I have found it productive to invoke the notion of enchanted landscapes, given the field data my research has generated. The book argues that Indian railway labourers in Malaya erected two sets of infrastructure: the material railway infrastructure of colonial-capitalist modernity and the foundations of religious infrastructure. Railway workers who were guards, gang line labourers, *mandores*, signalmen and locomotive drivers, also built temples for their gods on railway premises and led religious lives after office hours. My research suggests strongly that practitioners (as railway workers and devotees) approach railway and religious infrastructures *as if* they were enchanted. In this logic, enchantment is not determined by a set of external properties and features that are objectively given. My ethnography has revealed that for practitioners, railway tracks, engines and railway tracks – indeed, the lands on which these are sited – are *all* enchanted, animated and enlivened. It is also worth noting that notions of railways and religious infrastructures as being enchanted have emerged from the field and the narratives I encountered therein, rather than being imposed by me as the ethnographer. Based on these data, I recognize that the categories of 'enchanted', 'sacred' and 'spiritual', and the binaries they connote, are complicated in practice. Thus, even as I invoke these terms in my analysis throughout the book, I also self-reflexively problematize their usage. Further, I argue that this conceptual terminology merits unpacking through ethnographic and historical lenses – colossal tasks that I take up in this book.

An Anthrohistorical Endeavour

This book is an anthropological text that is attuned to the importance of historical perspectives and methodologies. As an ethnographer, I have been drawn to historical methods, especially archival research, and used them productively

in my earlier research (Sinha 2011). The idea that fieldwork, coupled with a historical imagination, allows the present to be understood in terms of a past finds strong resonance in anthrohistorical work. However, I continue to struggle with the question of how an anthropologist's approach to the archives differs from that of a historian, if at all. What difference does an anthropological (disciplinary) and ethnographic (methodological) lens make to the project of reading the archives? I agree with Libera (2011) that historical materials are deemed to be sources for historians, while anthropologists view these as socially constructed texts. Libera notes that 'an anthropologist and a historian will never find identical facts in the same materials. Different anthropologists discover different facts in the same historical materials' (p. 599). But this strict classification of 'facts' along disciplinary lines is problematic. Nor do I deem it productive to essentialize 'historical' versus 'anthropological' approaches to the archives in monolithic terms, given the tremendous diversity of views and practices about this within both disciplines. But in turning to the archives as an anthropologist, I have revisited a question asked by Bernard Cohn and Saloni Mathur: how does an anthropologist think about the production of archives, particularly in a colonial context? In response, Cohn has observed that 'Archives are cultural artefacts which encompass the past and present' (1980: 221), while Mathur has proposed that for anthropologists, the archives become 'increasingly understood as a valid ethnographic site' (2000: 100).

These ideas resonate with this project conceived in a postcolonial context. Invoking an anthropological lens, I am interested in abstracting ethnography from archival materials, as I prioritize human interventions in the careful curation of official archives, which are often dismissed as 'subjective' and thus irrelevant. Further, I do not see historical events and processes, documented in the archives and available in individual memory and consciousness, as offering only a commentary on *past* events, but as also containing a blueprint for charting futures. Thus, I turn to the relevant primary sources in this book *not* as repositories of facts and knowledge. Rather, as an anthropologist, I approach the official railway archives as socially constructed texts that need to be unpacked, reviewed and *interpreted* in light of the specific research objectives of the book. I consider official archives, which carry the imprint of colonial power inequalities, as spaces where knowledge claims are made and that therefore merit analysis and reinterpretation. I hold that the attendant explicit and implicit inequalities in the production of archival knowledge need to be recognized, and the presumed objectivity and authenticity of the ensuring historical facts/data warrant scrutiny.

With these caveats, I perused the following archives in the course of this project: Annual Reports of the Railway Department in the Federated Malay States, 1896–1948; Annual Reports of the Federated Malay States, 1896–1948; Annual Reports of the Malayan Railways, 1947–1954; Annual Reports of the Straits

Settlements, 1896–1948; Report on Indian Railways, 1914–1920; Report from the Select Committee Railway Servants (Hours of Labour) (1891); and Report of the Royal Commission for Labour in India (1931), along with railway legislation in India and Malaya and Malayan colonial newspapers in English. In addition, based on my survey of the relevant historical and anthropological scholarship on the subject, the English-language newspaper archives I present in Chapter 3 (from which I have abstracted the nature of railway work undertaken by railway labour) have not been presented elsewhere or used and analysed as I have. I argue that newspapers assume a centrality in this research as an important resource, as they contain ethnographic details, making it possible to consider these as an additional source of information. I consider these archival materials crucial in terms of mapping railway work and the everyday living conditions of railway labour, which is another key objective of the book.

As an anthropologist, I have surveyed the *same* primary archives about railways in Malaya that historians and social scientists have reviewed. I have indeed benefited from the analysis offered by the latter and have cited them where relevant. But, in this project, I have reviewed, interpreted and sometimes reinterpreted relevant historical materials – as an ethnographer - through the lens of the book's themes and problematics. The emphasis on discovering 'new' sources for narrating histories is interesting. It was fortuitous that I stumbled into 'private archives' held by individuals, families and temples, where I found fascinating historical materials – documents, temple plans, maps and visuals – all of which I was able to peruse and learn from, and that I did not find in the official railway archives. These allowed me to understand how railway labourers were able to build temples and negotiate the bureaucratic processes and practices that made this possible. While I share some of these materials in the book with permission, I am unable to share others as their custodians were guarded about publicizing these, given various sensitivities – something that I fully respect. Interestingly, rethinking the archives as ethnographic sites, populated with different knowledge claims articulated by historical actors with interests and agendas, has led me to further query and problematize anthropological notions of ethnography, field sites and anthropological data. This has been productive in imagining alternative ways of conceptualizing these data and translating them into practice.

Invoking feminist frames, *ethnography*, for me, connotes the lived, embodied experiences of the researcher in interaction with interlocutors and the field, and includes the following: undertaking immersive and episodic fieldwork; eliciting temple maps and temple stories through memories and remembrances; making audio and video recordings; taking notes by hand and sketching rough plans of railwaymen temples in my notebook; and generating narratives through numerous unstructured and free-flowing conversations with interlocutors. Collectively these convey complex fieldwork encounters. The ethnography presented in the

book includes insights and materials generated through *all* these aforementioned efforts. The materials generated certainly include oral, interview data, but also contain other forms of ethnographic data, including six maps of railwaymen temples I was able to construct on the basis of my field journeys. A total of seventy narratives from interlocutors were generated through in-depth conversations with railwaymen temple custodians, managers, caretakers and part-time priests and retired/ex-railway staff (station masters, *mandore*s (supervisor, foreman), locomotive drivers and permanent way labourers) – who were mostly retired men. Interactions and shorter exchanges with other interlocutors we encountered on field journeys were equally momentous, even if they were brief. In the course of my fieldwork, we met and conversed with at least one spokesperson for each of the ninety-four temples I located. In addition, we spoke to another forty individuals who were not associated with the railwaymen temples, but were key participants in the research as former railway staff, members of nonrailwaymen temples, current KTM staff, railway enthusiasts, Hindu activists in Malaysia, and Hindus who were concerned about the future of Hinduism in Singapore and Malaysia. Depending on the fieldwork circumstances, we met some individuals only once for interviews that lasted for an hour or two, while we interacted with others for longer periods and had multiple conversations with them. Some requested that no audio recordings be made, a wish that was respected, so we made handwritten notes instead. Interviews that were recorded with permission were subsequently transcribed. The interviews, verbal exchanges and interactions occurred in diverse locations: railway stations, and functioning and demolished sites of railwaymen temples, occupied as well as abandoned railway quarters being the most common.

Visual documentation of temple and railway sites complemented individual narratives as well as our primary observations of the *goings on* in these locales. We also interviewed interlocutors in their homes, railway canteens, cafes and restaurants and train carriages. Often, we found ourselves in fieldwork situations that approximated focused group discussions – at roadside eating places, railway canteens, railway neighbourhoods, on trains and especially in temples – where we engaged in unscheduled, unplanned collective conversations, which produced pastiche-like ethnographic vignettes that captured multiple and contradictory voices. A key fieldwork strategy was to elicit *temple maps* and *temple stories* – which I conceived as another variety of *traces* – from interlocutors, which entailed asking them to share their list of railwaymen temples and their locations as well as their social histories. As these maps and stories surfaced through ethnographic encounters, we noted that individual reconstructions overlapped and intersected to produce broader patterns and narratives. A small cluster of committed train spotters and railway zealots in Singapore and Malaysia were also part of the group we interacted with and learnt much from. We found the online

resources compiled by these individual railway enthusiasts to be meticulous, comprehensive and of tremendous historical and ethnographic value.[4]

The Book Takes Shape

Analytically, the project uses railway construction and religion making in colonial Malaya and the independent nation-states of Singapore and Malaysia to critically engage current literatures in railway studies and anthropology of infrastructure and transnational mobilities and religion. The global histories of labour migrations and colonial railway histories outlined in the two opening chapters provide the crucial comparative and historical context for presenting my ethnographic research. Surveying secondary historical materials in railway studies, I have abstracted themes within that are relevant for making sense of railway and religious landscapes in Malayan regions. Given the objective of framing the presence of the railways in Singapore and Malaysia through colonial and postcolonial moments, these historical discussions are thus invaluable.

Thus, the book moves forward with Chapter 1, 'Retelling Railway Histories: Centring Labour', which provides an overview of the construction of railway lines from the turn of the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, both globally and in the colonies. The lens is focused firmly on the role of colonial, immigrant labour in producing this new mode of transportation. This sets the stage for Chapter 2, 'Constructing a Colonial Railway Network in British Malaya', which articulates the complex patterns of colonial rule in Malaya and maps the labour flows therein especially for building colonial infrastructure. Through an engagement with selected archival materials, this chapter details the laying of railway tracks in Malaya by colonial labour as a variant of the global story labour migration and railway building – both of which were key drivers in the project of delivering colonial capitalism. In particular, the global demand for Indian labour in colonial infrastructural projects created scarcity and led to further regulation of labour through particular recruitment strategies. The early dominant presence of Indians as colonial labour and their efforts in erecting a railway infrastructure in Malaya's rather harsh terrains are detailed. These two chapters are linked through a detailed discussion on intensification of nineteenth-century global labour flows in the interests of colonial capitalism.

Turning specifically to railway labour in Malaya, Chapter 3, 'Work and Living Spaces of Malayan Railway Labour', surveys selected official archives, newspaper articles and primary ethnographic materials to describe what it meant for railway labour to work and live on the lines. The objective is to abstract from these a sense of the everyday labouring and nonlabouring lives of railway labour. The observation that sites where individuals laboured lived and worked overlapped as proximate spaces reveals the intriguing entanglements of technology

and piety on the one hand, and labour and religion making on the other. This project seeks to decentre the literatures on migration and religion through an explicit focus on railway labourers who built and maintained the railway tracks, and thus foregrounds their pioneering religion-making efforts in building some of the earliest Hindu sacred structures in Singapore and Malaysia.

Next, Chapter 4, 'Mapping "Railwaymen Temples" in Singapore and Malaysia', presents the outcome of ethnographic journeys undertaken over almost two years along the railways on the West Coast and East Coast railways of Malaysia and in Singapore. The method of 'tracing' has produced maps and stories of 'railwaymen temples' across these territories, which are presented as traces in this chapter. The mapping exercises reveal the contours of sacred landscapes produced, populated by temples built for Muṉīsvaraṉ and Am'maṉ, historically the two most popular deities in these regions. In addition to material traces of religion making, the chapter reveals memories and remembrances of the same, expressed as 'temple maps' and 'temple stories' – footprints of a different kind.

The notion of *religion making* acknowledges that railway labourers built temples for their gods and practised a ritual complex that allowed them to express their devotion and piety. Muṉīsvaraṉ's distinct affinities with the railways were articulated forcefully through my field journeys. Staying true to these data, Chapter 5, 'Sojourning with Muṉīsvaraṉ, the "Railway God"', presents new imaginaries about Muṉīsvaraṉ as railway *ayyā* (Tamil, 'father or grandfather'), mythologies that reverberate and travel up and down the permanent way. Muṉīsvaraṉ's distinct affinities with the railways present yet another rendering of his identity. In the very renaming of Muṉīsvaraṉ as a 'railway god', the deity is accorded by his devotees a new avatar. In being entwined with the history of the railways in Singapore and Malaysia, the inherited identity of Muṉīsvaraṉ as an *ellai kāval teyvam* (Tamil, 'guardian deity of boundaries/borders') and a *naṭumaṭam* (Tamil, 'walking, moving god') takes on novel resonances.

Focusing a comparative lens on the fate of religion and railways in colonial and postcolonial moments, Chapter 6, 'Railways and Religion: Negotiating Colonial and Postcolonial Modernities', brings the book into the contemporary moment. The chapter narrates the story of the KTM in Malaysia and Singapore, and reflects on the possibility of sustaining sacred landscapes through railway modernization projects. Scrutinizing sacred railway landscapes in postcolonial moments, it is apparent that neoliberal and technological modernity assert a hegemonic posture, marginalizing and subordinating cultural and religious imaginaries. This reduces possibilities for sustaining older sacred railway-related terrains, even though this stance has not been able to obliterate efforts to create new sacred sites on modernized railway sites. However, in the colonial period, railways and religions emerged almost simultaneously where a colonial

modernity did not appear to be hostile to sacred worldviews, even if for purely instrumental reasons. Unexpectedly, discussions about the history and future of railway-related temples generated a discourse on ethnic minority and communal nationalist politics and the marginalization of the Malaysian Indian community post-independence in Malaysia. This emphasis was *not* on the horizon when I first conceived the book, which began with a focus on 'railwaymen temples'. My analytic approach to the latter was itself transformed by the end of my research. These temples were described to me initially as sites where devotees expressed their piety and as centres of community life. However, by the end of my research, discussions about the existing 'railwaymen temples' and those who had built them became trigger points and produced unanticipated narratives, such as the impassioned conversations about the historical contributions of the minority Indian community in building Malaysia and the notice that these are neither acknowledged nor remembered appropriately.

The book's Conclusion, 'Sedimented, Intertwined Histories', begins with the premise that religion-making processes are forceful, dynamic, unpredictable and open-ended; they straddle temporalities. I argue that claims to closure are illusory and appearances of finality are but tentative. In a colonial context, religion-making practices, which produced the earliest Hindu temples, carried the seeds of future Hindu landscapes in Singapore and Malaysia. In Malaya, the evidence for the former is accessible in multiple modes and media as traces – materially and in the form of memories and recollections. Sites where the earliest 'railwaymen temples' were built have become saturated with religious meanings and efficacies, and accumulated reverberations, echoes and reminiscences over time. Driven by this logic, some of these sites, which contained railwaymen temples, are revisited by devotees who believe them to still be infused with sacrality, and some even attempt to build new religious structures therein. The book concludes that making and remaking religion are ongoing efforts, involving resources, energy, protracted struggles and complex negotiations among different stakeholders across timeframes. The notion of the sedimented and intertwined histories of the railway and religious landscapes is key to the arguments in this book. I argue that this captures the density and intensity of these sites, which are assigned fresh nuances and value in contemporary moments, even as religious infrastructures are erased and railway topographies are altered beyond recognition.

Based on my review of the scholarship, nowhere else in diasporic locales where colonial railways were built by Indian labour – in Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Burma, Mauritius, Fiji, Uganda and South Africa – has the phenomenon of building places of worship by railway personnel in railway premises been approached ethnographically or recorded comprehensively. Thus, I have often wondered if the story I narrate here – i.e. the interface and entanglements of the

railways, mobility, labour and religion and the sociopolitical, religious effects these engendered – is unique and distinct to Malaya and hence to Singapore and Malaysia. This is a complex question. This book offers an ethnographically and historically grounded response.

Notes

1. In this book, I use 'Malaya' as a shorthand description for 'British Malaya'. The latter denoted a diverse, complex regional and administrative entity between the late eighteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, encapsulating the Malay Peninsula and the island of Singapore. Over this extended period, this descriptor connoted three modes of administration: the Straits Settlements (SS) (1826–1946), which included Singapore, Penang and Malacca, were marked by the most direct form of administration by a legislative council, with their affairs being directed by Downing Street; the Federated Malay States (FMS) (1896–1946), which included the states of Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, where under the British Residential system, and autonomy was accorded to the Sultans as local rulers in dealing with nonpolitical, customary and religious matters, while the British had authority over political affairs; and the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS), constituted by the autonomous states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis and Johor, which were under British protection. All of Malaya was occupied by the Japanese from December 1941 to August 1945. After the return of the British on 1 April 1946, the SS, the FMS and the UFMS were brought together as a singular British colony – the Malayan Union – which did not include Singapore. On 21 January 1948, the Federation of Malaya was formed, again excluding Singapore, and lasted until 31 August 1957, when the region became independent of British colonial rule. In 1963, the Federation was reconstituted as Malaysia, this time with Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo. Under controversial circumstances, Singapore was ejected from Malaysia and became a sovereign state on 9 August 1965.
2. Historical data indicate that Sikh railway personnel built *gurdwara*s (Sikh temples) on railway premises across the Malayan Peninsula.
3. Some examples of newly built temples on new railway premises are the *Am'maṉ* temple at the Batu Caves (on the branch line off the West Coast Line), the *Am'maṉ* and *Muṉīsvaraṉ* temples at the Gua Musang Station (East Coast Line) and the *Muṉīsvaraṉ* temple at Queens Close, Singapore, which was founded in 2009–10.
4. An example of this is Projek Keretapi Kita (n.d.) (Our Railway), which was started in 2016. Its two core objectives are to 'create a Malaysian Railway Archive where artefacts, documents, photographs, and memories of the railways can be stored and made accessible. Nurture a regional network of similar initiatives around Southeast Asia, enhancing bilateral cooperation in the field of heritage preservation, research and documentation'. This project was conceived and curated by Mahen Bala and is rich in historical and ethnographic details. The results of this scholarly work, which has a focus on the southern section of the line between Gemas and Tanjong Pagar, were published in 2018 as *Postcards from the South: History and Memory of the Malaysian Railways*. Bala (2018) has extended his inquiries to exploring the relationship between 'people and railway heritage' in Java and Japan. Another useful source for my research was 'Mike's Railway History: A Look at Railways in 1935 and Before' (2012) which is a dedicated, virtual railway archive that has painstakingly documented the history of railways in different parts of the world, bringing together

archival and visual sources from academic and nonacademic sources. The section on 'The Development of Malaya' (http://mikes.railhistory.railfan.net/r178.html) provides a railway history of Singapore and the Malayan Peninsula. I found this to be an invaluable resource for reconstructing railway historiography in the region.

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RETELLING RAILWAY HISTORIES

Centring Labour

Foregrounding Labouring and Nonlabouring Lives

The birth of the railways transformed traditional patterns of movement and altered existing travel routes, enabling the rapid movement of freight, animals and people over large distances. Globally, the development of the railways was intertwined with the boom in demand that followed the Industrial Revolution as well as European colonial projects. Specific features of the first Industrial Revolution – such as the introduction of steam power and the exploitation of coal and iron mines – facilitated the birth of the earliest railways. Britain was a major player in pioneering the building and management railways in parts of Europe as well as in Africa, South America and Asia, including India, Malaya, Burma, China and Japan. At the same time, nineteenth-century European colonial incursions and the establishment of colonial economies in parts of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America fuelled industrialization in Europe by providing raw materials and other resources – not to mention access to a cheap and readily available labour force.

Any attempt to historicize the railways is inevitably a retelling and a selective one at that. Scholars have long asked how to recount transport and railway histories without resorting to top-down narratives (Gourvish 1993; Mom 2003; Pirie 2014; Strangleman 2002). Speaking in the context of the Indian railways, Kerr observed: 'Railway labour has received surprisingly little attention given the size and importance of the railway workforce' (2007: xxxix). In a similar vein, Samaddar noted:

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 70.

> People speak of the monumental engineering tunnelling feat amidst snow and rare air at the heights at Sierra Nevada (1867); there are now films, museums, and archives on the railway line construction … [they] involved companies, and the enterprise of the businessmen, yet not much on the details of the immigration of labour, labour forms, labour conditions, etc., except what we get from very few books on the Irish and Chinese labour in railway construction in the United States. (Samaddar 2015: 7)

Buier (2017) notes the same gaps in the case of the Spanish Railways, where, she argues, there has been limited recognition of railway labourers as social and political actors. However, there has been considerable research on railway labour in colonial contexts and its role in constructing and maintaining railways (Buier 2017; Kaur 1990; Kerr 1985, 1991, 2006a, 2007; Lockman 1993; Ruchman 2017; Sunseri 1998). There is also some rich historical material on the Chinese railway builders of the Canadian and American railway networks. This includes, for example, Cowen's (2019) work on the contribution of Chinese and Black labour to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the building of the transcontinental railways by Chinese labourers (Ambrose 2001; Chang 2019; Chang et al. 2019; Karuka 2019).

The colonial penchant for collecting detailed information about colonized subjects and analysing, reporting, archiving and, above all, acting upon data to control and regulate populations – all in the name of rational and efficient governance – is mentioned in the scholarship on colonial and imperial rule (Hawksley 2001). Here, I add my voice to those who have argued for centring railway labourers as historical actors with agency when narrating the history of railways (Bear 2007; Wolmar 2017). This emphasis on the neglected constituency of railway labouring communities neither denies nor diminishes the roles of railway builders, designers, engineers and surveyors, financiers and capitalists, railway companies and state and government departments. All of these have, in any case, been credited as pioneers for conceiving and constructing the railways. Yet, in much of conventional railway historiography, the work undertaken by labour is marginalized, if not obscured, and also remains unrecorded in official archives. When remembered, railway labour is spoken about in a very specific and selective mode in government records and official railway archives. Expectedly, such portrayals view labour primarily as economic units, and related issues of labour capacity, cost, and scarcity are raised in purely commercial terms. Here, questions of *labour welfare* are confined to the basic provision of health, wages, housing and sanitation, but all with the intention of extracting maximum labour productivity at minimum cost. Not surprisingly, labour discipline is a concern that often crops up in these records as officials express anxieties about worker involvement in unions and fear that this might lead to demands for higher wages and better living and working conditions.

Globally, the construction of railway lines is reported to be physically demanding, not to mention fraught with the dangers and risks associated with working in harsh, punishing conditions. A survey of the scholarship on railway labour in railway studies and labour histories reveals two related strands: a focus on unions, strikes and industrial action on the one hand, and an emphasis on labour welfare and labour rights on the other (Alderman 1971; Cooper 1996; Ingleson 1981; Kaur 1990; Kerr 1985; Pandian 2008; Sherlock 1989; Sinha 2008; Wyse 1981). Kerr observes: 'One finds discussions of railway unions and strike action within broader studies of the labour history … analytical writing about railway workers is limited' (2007: xxxix). Ironically, even narratives on railway construction, operation and maintenance side line the central role played by railway labour. To address these gaps, I take up the challenge of narrating a social history of the railways in Malaya by firmly placing railway labour at the core of my inquiries. As such, in an alternate rendition of Malaya's railway history, I foreground railway labour and accord visibility and priority to the foot soldiers of the railways and their labouring and nonlabouring lives. These were ordinary men and women who cleared the land, laid the lines and maintained them in treacherous terrains using basic tools and technologies, but they built and sustained cultural-religious worlds too.

In contrast to colonial railway labour constituencies, the lives of British railway navvies have not only been well documented, but they have also been memorialized in popular culture and fiction. The English word 'navvy', derived from the words 'navigator' or 'navigational engineer', refers primarily to manual labour associated with civil engineering projects in Europe and North America. In eighteenth-century Britain, the term appears to describe those who built and navigated canals, the forerunners of the railways. Railway navvies and colonial labour alike played a key role in building railways globally. I argue that positioning British railway navvies as capitalist labour alongside other forms of railway labour (contract labour, convict labour and prisoners of war) and in the *same* narrative is analytically productive. This makes it possible to see the convergences between these labour communities in the face of obvious differences and simultaneously recognizes both as key players who built railways. Interestingly, a comparative lens reveals uncanny parallels between the working lives and living conditions of British railway navvies and colonial railway labour.

Interestingly, substantial work has also been undertaken on the religious lives of navvies in Britain. In the case of the British navvies, the conscious and deliberate emplacement of religious organizations in secular locations (factories and railway premises) speaks of the intriguing connections between religion and railway infrastructures. Religion was used by British railway companies such that ministering and missionizing to navvy souls was developed into a system for disciplining industrial labour (Cohn 1979). Standards of Victorian morality

were used to produce habits and lifestyles conducive to industrial-capitalist activity amongst the navvies, one prominent example being the 'temperance movement' (Harrison 1967). Groups like the Navvy Mission Society (formed in 1877) and the Christian Excavator's Union (formed in 1875) were a big part of the temperance movement, with Elizabeth Garnett promoting 'tea as a wholesome alternative to the demon drink and hymn singing – especially hymns with uplifting choruses – as a counter to alehouse rowdyism' (cited in Richardson 2011: 204). Notably, through the involvement of the Church of England and missionary societies, institutionalized religion was involved in this effort. Likewise, Bleasdale (2018) has documented the presence of Protestant missions as moral regulators on railway lines in North America and Canada as advocates of temperance, given the stereotypes about navvies' propensity to work and play hard and drink copiously (ibid.: 156). These navvies were also seen to have no regard for law and order or authority and to undermine virtues, discipline and 'sober hard work necessary to moral, social and economic advancement' (ibid.: 286). In a different vein, Major (2015) notes that railway companies promoted their services to the industrial working classes by encouraging them to take leisure trips on weekends. The railway companies often found themselves embroiled in disputes and debates amongst churches, trades unions, town councils and secular societies, and faced considerable public criticism. Collectively, the available scholarship has registered the use of religion to regulate the labour force and working classes to produce morally acceptable social, cultural and economic behaviours.

However, similar works that deal with colonial railway labourers 'making religion' or labour building religious infrastructure in European colonies are practically non-existent. A survey of railway studies uncovers limited scholarly work on the railways and their interaction with religion. In the Indian context, Ahuja (2004) and Kerr (2001) have theorized the historical relationship between railways and pilgrimages,[1] while Prasad (2016) has noted that the British tried to introduce the notion of the Sabbath as a day of the Lord by trying to institute changes in railway timetabling and preventing the running of trains on Sunday for leisure purposes. However, this 'was a challenge to the tradition of the Christian Sabbath' as this was also 'a day of religious observance' (Valentine 2014).

In my account of Malaya's railway history, rather than begin with the oft-cited railway luminaries, I start instead with the seldom visible colonial railway labourers and the work they performed. I argue that their labour carried tremendous import and not only produced economic and religious structures in the colonial period, but, indeed, also shaped the course of history itself. In this context, I do not invoke the discourse of emancipatory politics, social justice and empowerment; instead, I find Wolf's (1982) notion of 'active participation' (Roseberry 1989: 130) to be relevant and meaningful. I approach railway

labourers in Malaya as history making agents through their routine, everyday acts and those with labouring and nonlabouring capacities. They not only materialized railway infrastructure in the region, but also laid the foundations for future transportation networks therein. Furthermore, by building places of worship near their work and living spaces, railway labour also shaped sociocultural and religious landscapes that have had enduring impacts on the lives of their descendants settled in these regions. This point is further aligned with scholarship that seeks to privilege 'history from below' (Bahl 2003; Hitchcock 2004; Thompson 1966; Wolf 1982) and 'everyday history' (Brewer 2010; Chakravarti 2012; Luedtke 1995; Steege et al. 2008; Zinn 1980) as opposed to what has been called 'macro history' (Wells 2002). The unprecedented, enforced mobility of labour across the world in the nineteenth century was a complex phenomenon that I will describe briefly in the next section. This discussion provides a crucial context for presenting historical and ethnographic details of railway building in Malaya in subsequent chapters.

Nineteenth-Century Global Labour Flows

Migration scholarship has demonstrated that human flows across the globe have been the norm rather than the exception over the course of history (Amrith 2011, 2013). Despite this, as McKeown comments, 'historians have been slow to acknowledge their global extent' (2004: 155). Since the sixteenth century, explorers, adventurers, traders and merchants have travelled from Europe to Asia and vice versa, as well as within Asia and from Asia to Africa and the New World. However, the historiography of global labour migration has been dominated by 'Atlantic-centrism' and 'North-Atlantic centrism' (Mohapatra 2007), and a focus on migration from Europe to the New World. Using historical data, McKeown (2004) for Northeast Asia, and Amrith (2011) for South Asia and Southeast Asia, have demonstrated the historicity of global labour flows across these interconnected and integrated regions, arguing against nationalist, segmented and regional histories of movements of populations. McKeown and Amrith argue persuasively that European migrations to the Americas and Australia were intricately entangled with movements to, and within, Asia and Africa, and that they were part of the same world economy: both were framed by European colonial hegemony, but in some moments also transcended it. These authors invoke the trope of interconnected, globalized, transnational and commercial economic networks and grids to make sense of moving populations, further highlighting that a vast majority of those being moved globally were migrants with labour potential.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, there were multiple, intersecting waves of the global movements of 'unfree/involuntary/forced' labour, even as there are also records of 'free/voluntary' migrations during

this time. Cohen observed that: 'Slavery and indenture-ship were two predominant forms of migration in the first 300 years of the world system' (1995: 2). African intercontinental slave migration was a universal method of securing labour from 1550 to the end of the eighteenth century, while indentured/contract labour emerged as a new mode of labour recruitment between 1834 and 1917. Drawing attention to convict labour as constitutive of the global system of forced migration, Yang (2003, 2021) makes the point that labour under contract, obligation and dependency, and indeed all labour – slave, wage and so-called 'free' labour (indenture, convict and *kangany* or 'overseer') – were directed and thus 'unfree'. He speaks of 'the punitive and economic objectives of transportation' (Yang 2003: 191) in light of its role in moving 'convict labour to penal colonies across the world. As such, Indian convicts 'were part of a larger traffic pattern in South and Southeast Asia that transported different peoples in different directions across these regions' (ibid.: 181). According to Anderson: 'For over three hundred years during the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, around 380,000 transportation convicts journeyed to and around locations across the British Empire' (2016: 381). He argues that penal transportation – an example of coerced labour migration – was a mode of 'labour extraction and governance within the larger British imperial world' (ibid.: 397). This logic recognizes the labour utility of convict workers – i.e. their labouring capacity – not to mention the fact that they were a cheap and readily available pool of productive and pliable workers. Countries sent convicts overseas to penal colonies in order to rid themselves of political opponents and criminals; meanwhile, receiving countries transformed convicts into workers. Yang (2003) documents that the convicts thought of themselves as 'Company *ke naukar*' (Hindi, 'servants of the Company') and focused on their labour service and utility rather than the fact that they had been punished in being exiled.

The slave trade was abolished in the United States in 1807 and in the British colonies in 1834. Yet official proclamations ended forced migrations only on paper, as the need for slave labour kept the system of slavery intact and alive for several more decades. Its eventual end led to the resurgence of contract labour, especially for plantation and mining work in the European colonies. Upon the formal abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, European-controlled territories needed cheap and docile contract labour to serve the burgeoning needs of industrial capitalism. The answer was a turn to Asia, from where Indian, Chinese and Japanese labour[2] were sourced, with 'a return to an earlier means of financing migration – indentured servitude or contract labour' (Chiswick and Hatton 2003: 71). The forced migration of convicts and later migrations of indentured labour (from the mid-nineteenth century to 1917) were replaced over time by the *kangani* (Tamil, 'overseer') system (Anderson 2009; Yang 2003).

Transatlantic and inter-Asian labour movements intensified in the nineteenth century, leading to the unparalleled movement of unfree labour under the system of indenture. Mohapatra (2007) highlights that non-European labour flows across Asia and Africa were comparable in magnitude, scale, timing and importance to movements across the Atlantic Ocean. He also credits McKeown with opening 'new areas of investigation of the under-researched aspects of global migration studies without the blinkers of Eurocentrism' (2007: 115). Together with Mohapatra and others, McKeown (2004) and Amrith (2011) highlight the limits of a Eurocentric perspective. Amrith (2011) and McKeown (2004) demonstrate that from the mid-twentieth century onwards, there was considerable mobility of labour from India and China to other parts of Asia as well as to other areas around the globe. Speaking of European empires as global systems, Frost observes: 'During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries empires and diasporas functioned as powerful "motors" of globalisation, generating traffic in goods, peoples and ideas that integrated vast portions of the planet' (2005: 29). He argues further that 'a rapid expansion in steam navigation, railways and telegraphic communication brought many of the territories bordering the Indian Ocean, the China Seas and the Pacific into closer contact with one another' (ibid.: 30). Exponential industrial growth and development in European countries under colonial capitalism saw a surge in demand for raw materials and cheap labour, resulting in mass movements of coerced and contracted colonial labour, with a small proportion who moved voluntarily. Investors, capitalists and entrepreneurs from Europe moved to parts of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and South America, while Indian, Chinese, Javanese, Filipinos, Japanese and Pacific Islander workers were moved to the British and other European colonies. Chiswick and Hatton identify the period from 1600 to 1790 as the era of 'contracts and coercion' and the years 1850–1913 as the time when forced labour movements were at their peak, as 'the age of mass migration'. Allen provides these startling figures that register the scale and extent of migration:

> The migration between the mid-1830s and early 1920s of more than 2.2 million Africans, Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Javanese, Melanesians, and other colonial subjects who worked under long-term written contracts had a profound impact on social, economic, cultural, and political life in many parts of the 19th- and early 20th-century colonial plantation world. (Allen 2017: 1)

Citing staggering statistics, McKeown also marks the predominance of the Chinese (19 million) and the Indians (29 million) moving 'to Southeast Asia and lands around the Indian Ocean and South Pacific' in the nineteenth century (2004: 156). The period between 1830 and 1920 saw the forced global

displacement of large numbers of Indians, largely to the British Empire, but sometimes also to other European colonial economies – for example, German, Portuguese and Dutch colonies. Indian indentured labour was exported to British Guiana (now Guyana), Trinidad, Dutch Guiana (now Surinam), South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, French-occupied La Reunion (in the Indian Ocean) and as *kangany* or *maistry* labour to Burma, Malaya and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Interestingly, Roy observes 'Indians' propensity to migrate' and flags the nineteenth century as a historical moment when 'India supplied several million migrant workers to plantation societies in the New World' (2018: 263). Aiyar surmises further:

> Between 1830 and 1930, approximately 29 million Indians dispersed across the empire on which the sun never set. Over a million of them arrived in British colonies, including Fiji, Mauritius, Natal, and settlements in the Caribbean, as indentured labourers to work on sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery. (2011: 988)

Behal corroborates the scale of this migration, noting that 'massive mobilization of Indian agrarian communities' was triggered by colonial capitalism:

> Modern industrial capitalism and the consequent colonisation by the British of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and other parts of the world triggered a massive mobilisation of Indian agrarian communities across these diverse geographical localities … Between 1834 and 1937, an estimated 30 million migrants from India went to the overseas colonies of the British Empire, such as Burma, Ceylon, British Malaya, Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean and East Africa. (Behal 2017: 1)

Other estimates suggest that between 1830 and 1916, over a million Indians were placed around the world as indentured labour (Thiara 1995), a system that Tinker calls 'a new system of slavery' (1974: 4). According to Chiswick and Hatton, large numbers of Indians were dispersed globally under the system of indentured labour:

> Over one-half million Indian indentured servants went to Mauritius, and another half million went to the Caribbean (primarily the South Caribbean, Trinidad, British Guiana, and Surinam), with smaller numbers going to Fiji in the Pacific Ocean, Natal in southern Africa, and East Africa. (Chiswick and Hatton 2003: 72)

In comparison to Indian labour, the Chinese did not typically migrate to work in the colonies *under* Europeans; rather, they were largely contractual labour in Chinese employment (Chiswick and Hatton 2003). Eleven million Chinese workers migrated from the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong in South China to the Straits Settlements (SS), the Dutch Indies, Borneo and Burma. Despite the fact the Chinese government officially opposed migration, McKeown documents the global movement of Chinese labour who ventured out, given the political instability, conflict and unemployment at home:

> Up to 11 million Chinese travelled from China to the Straits Settlements, although more than a third of these transhipped to the Dutch Indies, Borneo, Burma, and places farther west. Nearly 4 million travelled directly from China to Thailand, between 2 and 3 million to French Indochina, over 1 million to the Dutch Indies (for a total of over 4 million if transshipments from Singapore are included), less than 1 million to the Philippines, and over 500,000 to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and other islands in the Pacific and Indian Ocean. (McKeown 2004: 158)

In the age of high imperialism, a significant proportion of the global labour population on the move was in the service of colonial capitalism. The astounding scale of these human movements was driven by the desire to create colonial infrastructural projects to deliver imperial profits. Migrants from China, India, Java and parts of Africa, from agricultural and artisanal backgrounds, who were perceived as economic, productive units, were deployed in coal and tin mines and sugar, coffee, tea and rubber plantations as *labour*. These populations also built ports, bridges, roads, railways, prisons, hospitals, places of worship, government buildings and housing in the colonies. A key element in these projects entailed the making of migrants into *colonial labour*, resulting in a fundamental transformation of their very being. Colonial capitalism sought cheap labour and raw materials for its sustenance and thrived on the consumer market created – both in the colonies and at home – for the goods and commodities it produced. The construction of communication and transportation infrastructural projects in the colonies exposed the relationship between industrial capitalism, globalization and European colonialism. In this context, roads and railways were designed predominantly to transport cheap raw materials (extracted by colonial labour to supply industrial production in Europe) from the interiors of colonies to ports and then onto ships sailing to Europe. In arguing that European colonial infrastructural schemes and industrial development projects were not disparate but deeply entangled, I narrate the global emergence of the railways here as an intersecting thread of the *same* story.

Navvies and Colonial Labour Building Railways

The building of railway lines in the nineteenth century across different continents further intensified global labour flows. The opening decades of the nineteenth century saw the proliferation of railway lines across Europe and North America, followed rapidly by their expansion in European colonies starting in the middle of the century. In France, several short mineral railway lines operated from 1828 and in Germany from 1841; both imported railway knowledge and hardware from Britain (Harter 2005). In Canada, the railways operated from 1836 and in the United States from 1830, when a 13-mile (21-km) section of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad launched the first public railway with horse traction (Chang 2019). The Victorian 'Age of Steam' saw many firsts, including the advent of steam engine railways in Britain – the first steam locomotives operated in the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in September 1830 (Wolmar 2009). George Stephenson (1781–1848) was christened the 'Father of the Railways', given his pioneering role in railway construction in Victorian England (Rolt 2016). His Stockton and Darlington Railway, which built a 40-km track, was the first railway to be approved by the British Parliament and was opened in 1825 (Kirby 1993). On 27 September 1830, a steam locomotive hauled loaded wagons along a track of metal rail width of 4 ft 8½ in. This was famously termed the Stephenson gauge; it became the standard gauge in railways and was used in railway tracks in many countries around the world (Kirby 1993), including the colonies.

The development of the railways was fuelled by the scientific and technological discoveries of the Industrial Revolution. By the 1830s, Britain was in the middle of an industrial boom and the growth of the railways facilitated commercial and industrial activity. The 'railway age' saw the decline of canals and coaches as preferred modes of transportation (Bagwell 1974; Pollins 1971) and led to the substitution of animal power with mechanized power. Between the 1830s and 1840s, Britain's railways played an important role in energizing the Industrial Revolution. The introduction of steam power for vehicular transportation and the exploitation of coal and iron mines impacted the development of the railways in Britain. The reciprocal three-way relationship between coal, iron and steam heralded the age of the steam engine railroad, which revolutionized transportation globally (Harter 2005; Maggs 2018). The history of conventional railways, which is understood as 'guided movement of the wheel through a metal to metal contact' (Profillidis 2014: 1), emerged in the 1850s. Profillidis notes that between 1800 and 1850, the era of steam railways was impacted by changes in steel, coal and inorganic chemistry, whereas from 1900 onwards, oil and electricity produced dramatically altered transportation technologies in the form of diesel and electrified railways (ibid.: 1–5).

The expression 'railway mania' (Wolmar 2009) captures railway-related speculative frenzy in Britain in the 1840s. The enthusiasm of private enterprise for the railways culminated in extensive railway construction, inspired by the promise of profit. However, the railway boom was short-lived and as railway shares fell and investments in the railways declined sharply, only the largest of the railway companies survived the end of the boom (Odlyzko 2012). Despite this: 'By 1870 Britain had about 13,500 miles (21,700 km) of railroad. At the system's greatest extent, in 1914, there were about 20,000 miles (32,000 km) of track, run by 120 competing companies' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019). According to Harter: 'By 1886, the rail network in Britain had grown to a total of 19,169 route miles. Operated over this system were 15,196 locomotives, 33,656 passenger carriages and 464,139 goods wagons' (2005: 24). Remarkably, in 1890, British railways carried over 817 million passengers (ibid.: 25). The rail-way age had arrived and trains were transporting both freight and passengers, with over 1,000 million travellers buying tickets for trains in Britain by 1899 (Mitchell 1992: 682). By 1939, the total length of railway lines in Great Britain grew to well over 1,500 km compared to the less than 90 km in 1829 (ibid.: 656). In the 1850s, railways were developed by private companies, which not only provided the capital to build the railway infrastructure but also operated these by securing rolling stock and manpower (Gourvish 1980). However, from the 1930s onwards, there was far greater state involvement in managing and operating the railways, with the nationalization of several railway companies. In comparison, by the 1880s, railways in France had expanded considerably with a track length of 37,494 km, exceeding Britain's 29,828 km in 1899 (Mitchell 1992: 657). Meanwhile, in 1880, Germany had 20,891 miles (33,620 km) of railways and was the second-largest railway system in the world at the turn of the twentieth century (Harter 2005: 159).

Notably, railway construction in some British colonies overlapped tempo-rally with railway building efforts in Britain itself, while in others, it commenced within decades of British rail construction. For example, Wiseman (2020) notes that 'the railway system of Jamaica was built only twenty years after the British government started to build railway system in the United Kingdom itself'. In India, the British planned and built railways relatively early (Kerr 1995, 2007) as part of their imperial imperative. As Hurd and Kerr note, 'the railways of India were colonial railways conceived as a colonial project built primarily to serve the needs of the Anglo-Indian connection … The colonial connection colours the entire history of India's railways' (2012: 3–4). Governor General Lord Hardinge argued in 1843 that the railways of India would be beneficial 'to the commerce, government and military control of the country' (cited in Truscello 2020: 194). Between 1850 and 1947, the railways were crucial for the infrastructural development of India. Famously, Lord Dalhousie a great

advocate of railway building in India, drove this project predominantly to further Britain's colonial ambitions (Harter 2005: 219). He declared 'the important role that India could play as a market for British manufacturers and as a supplier of agricultural raw materials' (Harter 2005: 219) if the railway project was to materialize. In India, the first railway line was proposed to be built in Madras in 1832, but the first train operated there only in 1837. Under the auspices of the Red Hill Railway, a rotary steam engine locomotive manufactured by William Avery operated the stretch from Red Hills to Chintadripet Bridge in Madras in 1837 (Darvil 2011). Two railway companies that dominated the market here were the East India Railway (EIR), formed in 1845, and the Great India Peninsular Railway (GIPR), formed in 1849 (Debroy et al 2017). On 16 April 1853, the first passenger train (operated by GIPR) in India was dedicated to Lord Dalhousie; it covered a short distance of 34 km between Bori Bunder and Thane on a broad gauge of 5 ft and 6 in (ibid.).

Over the next few decades, the phenomenal growth of the railways across India completely altered – and destroyed – traditional transportation methods and mobility practices (Das 2016). In 1870, India's rail network stood at 5,000 route miles (about 8,047 km); by 1893, it had reached 18,042 route miles (29,036 km), making it the sixth-largest railway system in the world at the time (Harter 2005: 220–21). The years between 1832 and 1852 saw the rise of industrial railways, while the years between 1853 and 1924 saw the expansion of railways for the carriage of passengers. The electrification of passenger trains between Victoria Terminus and Kurla in India happened as early as 1925, even as steam and diesel engines remained dominant.[3] In another example from the Indian Subcontinent, in Ceylon, the British colonial government first introduced railways in 1861 – a 54 km stretch of tracks from Colombo to Ambepussa. The main function of this railway network was to transport tea and coffee from the plantations to the port in Colombo (Munasinghe 2002). The first railways in the British colony of Lower Burma appeared soon afterwards and were operational from 1877, running trains between Rangoon and Prome, on a 262 km track built on metre-gauge.

Railways were built in European colonies to serve specific colonial interests. Here, moving passengers by rail was not, in the beginning, a priority. Building roads and railways in the colonies was part of the global, colonial, capitalist enterprise. These new modes of transportation ensured crucial connectivity between sites where raw materials were located and produced and the ports through which they were exported (Kaur 1985). Strong links existed between plantation economies in the colonies and industrial capitalist development in various parts of Europe, including Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. For instance, railways were constructed on the islands of Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi primarily to connect the interiors with the coastal ports in order to serve the

economic and military needs of the Dutch colonial power (Gotz 1939). Indonesia was the second country in Asia to build a railway network (India being the first) and its first railway line was laid in 1864 and operations began in 1867. The closing decades of the nineteenth century also saw railway lines being laid in a range of regions from the Caribbean to the South Pacific to Africa, the Middle East and Asia, all in the service of colonial plantation economies.

A timeline of the sugarcane railways, typically built in narrow-gauge rails as part of the colonial project, is instructive and illustrative. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSRC) opened Fiji's first railways, built on a gauge of 2 ft 6 in in 1882. The company also built several lines across the islands in the South Pacific for the sole purpose of supporting the sugarcane industry – they moved sugarcane from plantations to mills ('The Railways of Fiji' n.d.). In British Guyana, the first railway line opened in 1848, spanning a short run of 8 km between Georgetown and Plaisance. This was the first section of the East Coast Demerara Railway, which provided an export route for the sugarcane industry (Williams n.d.a). In Mauritius, the first railway line opened in 1864, running a 50 km stretch between Port Louis and Grand River South East (de Kervern and Martial 2013), while in Martinique, the sugarcane railway, Les Rails de la Canne Sucre, was built in the 1870s ('The Railways of Martinique' n.d.). The Trinidad Railway Company was formed in 1846 but the first lines were only laid in 1873. The first railway lines in Trinidad and Tobago were opened in 1876, with a run of 16 miles (26 km) from the Port of Spain to Arima, which served the sugarcane industry in the Caribbean Islands (Brereton 2002: 14–15). In Jamaica, the first railways opened in 1845 and operated between Kingston and Spanish Town – it was a mere 21 km line, serving the sugarcane industry (Satchell and Sampson 2003) – while in the Philippines, numerous narrow-gauge railway lines were constructed from the 1890s to transport sugarcane from Luzon, Cebu, Negros and Panay (McCoy 2019).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the global sugarcane industry rested on the backs of indentured labour from India, China and Java as Asia had displaced Africa as the source of cheap labour (Galloway 2005: 126). Among this large pool of Asian labourers, 'Indians were to make a major contribution to solving the labour problem of the sugar plantations' (ibid.: 126). Indian labour was imported to the French-controlled island of La Reunion as early as the 1820s, followed by Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Martinique and Guadeloupe – a flow that was stopped by the Indian government only in 1917, with the end of indenture (ibid.). Notably, Cuba and Peru turned to Chinese labour for their sugar plantations (ibid.: 127), which was also used in Peru for 'building railways' (ibid.: 129). The cane sugar railways in the West Indies and the Caribbean were also built by predominantly Indian indentured labour and local labouring communities, as was the case with the laying of railway tracks

in Malaya. These narrow-gauge plantation railways, meant entirely for transporting sugarcane to factories, were designed as freight and not passenger trains. Not surprisingly, few of these sugarcane railways have survived: the railways in Trinidad and Tobago were unprofitable and closed in 1968; in Jamaica, the British-built railways ran from 1845, but finally closed in 2012. Today, there are no railway systems functioning in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, as most of them have fallen into disuse and disrepair, and those that remained, which were underdeveloped as both freight and passenger trains, ran financial losses (Wiseman 2020).

In contrast to the almost exclusive reliance on immigrant and colonial labour to build railways in the colonies, the railways in Britain were built by British navvies, as well as by Scottish and Irish workers. These navvies who built canals, roads, dams and railways were engaged for their physical strength. The emergent metaphor 'to work like a navvy' meant to work hard at manual labour. Additionally, they had a reputation for being rowdy, uncouth, lacking in good manners and morals, and for being heavy drinkers and womanizers, which raised concerns among Christian groups about the state of their spirituality, or lack thereof (Brooke 1975; Coleman 1965; Handley 1970; Treble 1972). However, some positive and celebratory accounts and their everyday experiences, anxieties, thoughts and sentiments can be found in British and American fiction and popular culture.[4] The navvies were employed in a range of public works in Britain through the nineteenth century, including in the railways (Coleman 1965; Cowley 2001).

Portrayals of British railway navvies typically reflect not only the harsh and hazardous nature of their work but also the attendant negative stereotypes about them. From the inception of the first railways in Britain, a sizeable navvy workforce was employed in construction works. Early railway construction was labour-intensive, involving physical strength and manual labour, with a primary reliance on hand tools, like shovels, picks and wheelbarrows. Brooke (1989) observes that navvies who worked in the railways were drawn largely from the English countryside; they returned to their farms when the railway work was done. He also highlights that in addition to these 'former farm labourers … from the earliest years of the railways there were groups of peripatetic workers who went about the country from one contract to another' (ibid.: 39). In nineteenth-century Britain, railway navvies lived in shanty towns built specifically for them. Typically, these rural neighbourhoods carried transient, makeshift structures, shared accommodation and overcrowded, squalid conditions that were far from comfortable or sanitary (Barrett 1883), quite like Victorian working-class living conditions. However, the situation did improve as poor accommodation gave way, by the end of the nineteenth century, to better housing for navvies:

Contractors were reluctant to accept the burden of housing their employees, and where navvies didn't sleep either in lodgings or the open air, they inhabited squalid communal dwellings, or shanties, fashioned from a variety of materials quite often only metres from the line. These shanties were damp, unsanitary, overcrowded hovels with little or no ventilation. They were clearly unhealthy places in which to live, and it was not uncommon for a navvy community to be overtaken by cholera, dysentery or typhus. Following a wave of concern, these appalling conditions began to improve. It was thought that better housing would not only improve the life of the navvies themselves, but would also serve as a civilising influence that would curb their notoriously immoral behaviour. ('Where the Navvies Lived' n.d.)

The navvies worked in hazardous terrains for long hours and without safety considerations, using their bodies without protection. Serious injuries, diseases, accidents and deaths were common as navvies worked on – and often lived in the proximity of – the lines. The Select Committee on Railway Labourers (1846) acknowledged the high rate of navvy mortality and recommended reforms to redress the situation:

> For the ten thousand navvies at work on the London Extension, contractors *erected temporary hutted camps* that consisted of a range of cabins made of wood and corrugated metal. The camps were built beside the contractor's depots and at strategic locations along the route, such as Quainton Road, Charwelton, Helmdon and East Leake. *Unmarried navvies lived in dormitories of perhaps fifteen men, whilst foremen and those with families were given a hut to themselves.* ('Where the Navvies Lived' n.d., emphasis added)

These observations are striking given the accommodation arrangements of colonial railway labour in Malaya, which I will elaborate in Chapter 3. Scholarly efforts to map the everyday lives of railway navvies focus on how they worked and how and where they lived; to their group subculture, family life and even spiritual life (Brooke 1975: 37) as well as their economic worth. The mode of payment to the navvies for railway work varied and was a combination of daily wages or payment for piece work. Although they are typecast as manual labourers, railway navvies were not necessarily a cheap source of labour. This was especially true when they travelled overseas for work. Richard Solomon, the Commissioner of Railways, in a 1903 letter to the Secretary to the Intercolonial Council in Johannesburg, discloses the results of 'the experiment made by importing English navvies for the work in this country upon the railways'

(Great Britain, Colonial Office 1905: 159). After working with the navvies on the railways for several months, the chief engineer declared that the experiment was 'financially a hopeless failure' and that 'it would be financially impossible to construct railways by imported English navvy labour' (ibid.). Based on these calculations, there were two proposed solutions: first, to end the navvies' twelve-month contract prematurely by giving them one month's notice, thereby saving £40,000; and, second, to import 'Indian labour for new construction', as this was perceived to be the 'most desirable measure' (ibid.).

The railway navvies in Britain were itinerant, mobile and experienced labour bands, who not only organized themselves, but were also 'free' to move from one contract job to another within the country, which they did. They also ventured overseas in pursuit of higher wages and work in the twentieth century. Coleman details the mobility of the navvies beyond British shores for contract work. He says: 'They spread all over the world' (1965: 273), travelling to build railway lines in Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Gibraltar, Sudan, Siberia, Buenos Aires and Australia, and were already present in France and Italy in the 1840s. Some British navvies travelled as far as New Zealand in the 1870s. The colonial government recruited the English contracting firm, John Brogden and Sons, to build railways across six contracts in New Zealand. The firm contracted 2,200 English immigrants for two years to complete this project. According to a New Zealand digital history website: 'They worked by hand using simple tools – picks and shovels, horses and carts, and dynamite – and endured primitive living conditions in isolated camps' ('Building Vogel's Railways' 2020). Burton writes of not just navvies from Britain, but also engineers and contractors who 'were in demand all over the world' (2012: 123). He argues that: 'The obvious locations for navvy involvement were those where British influence was strongest, and paramount among them was India' (Burton 2012: 133). Thus, unsurprisingly, British navvies travelled as far as India, where, Coleman says, 'they were well paid and greatly privileged' (1965: 275). Lieutenant Gibbon of the Royal Engineers, an officer of the Military Works Department at Harnai, observed that while the English navvies were paid INR 450 per month in 1888, local labourers were only paid INR 25 per month. He explained that this wage differential was due to the 'character' of the English navvies rather than their skills, which he admitted could also be found among the native labour (Burton 2012: 275).

Railway studies scholars have borrowed the term 'navvies' from the British case when speaking of Indian and Chinese navvies[5] who worked on railway projects at home and abroad. Chinese labour was used to construct large-scale railway projects, such as the railroads in the British Columbia mountain ranges in North America (Silverman 2006). Chinese immigrant labour was also used in the construction of the American Transcontinental Railway. This massive project relied on immigrant labour to lay down 1,800 miles (2,897 km) of tracks across

arid plains, deserts and rugged granite walls in Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains ('East and West' n.d.). In addition to building railways in Uganda (Kaur 2012), Sikh indentured labour contributed to the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Scholars have noted that 'Railway agents from India and Hong Kong recruited the workers in Punjab' (Mazumdar 1984: 332; Tatla 1995: 72). Irish workers were also used early in this project, but labour shortages were a recurrent problem. Subsequently, Chinese labourers were recruited directly from China:

> In February, 1865, the Central Pacific decided to try a new labour pool. Charles Crocker, chief of construction, persuaded his company to employ Chinese immigrants, arguing that the people who build the Great Wall of China and invented gunpowder could certainly build a railroad. ('Chinese Immigrants and the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad' n.d.)

The Chinese labourers employed in railway construction were especially vulnerable to exploitation by railway companies. Employers found them submissive and efficient, not to mention cheaper, more readily available and more willing to work in arduous and treacherous working conditions than the English workers. The pattern of dangerous, harsh working and living conditions, discrimination and low wages for railway workers recurred here. The Chinese workers were paid less and had to source their own food and accommodation, while local workers were provided with food and housing:

> Chinese workers often had to live in the underground tunnels they were constructing, and more than one thousand died in accidents and avalanches while labouring in the mountains. (Ibid.)

The railways in India were built by local Indian labour, which was neither readily available nor easy to negotiate with. Kerr records the presence of 'Indian navvies' in Madras, which merits some attention here:

> In 1770, a British official in Madras observed groups of men, women and children who formed 'a kind of travelling community of their own under a species of Government peculiar to themselves, with laws and customs which they follow and observe wherever they go'. These itinerant, coveted groups of earth and stone workers – 'even courted by Princes' – circulated from worksite to worksite where they dug tanks (small reservoirs), ditches, and built wells, and roads and fortifications. They lived close to their worksites in 'temporary hutts' [*sic*] which they throw up for the occasion, and always choose a spot distinct from any

village, wandering from one place to another as is most convenient. (Kerr 2006a: 85)

Given issues with labour availability and their accessibility to British officials, railway construction in India was inevitably seasonal and competed with other sources of manual work – mainly agricultural and government public works projects. Bubb reports:

Railwaymen favoured instead itinerant, specialist communities that would often be best understood not as 'migratory' but as 'circulating' groups: either returning from the ganger's to the farmer's life only at uncertain intervals, or indeed shifting continually between construction projects with no fixed village … Such groups had long served the needs of tank-digging and irrigation work in Southern India and the Deccan, and aligning their programme with this established labour economy during the early 1860s was a significant step by which engineers upped their efficiency through, as Kerr makes clear, 'adapt[ing] to Indian conditions'. (Bubb 2017: 1386–87)

One prominent example of such a labouring group known as the 'Wuddarees', 'Woddaries' or 'Woodaries', 'Vadar', 'Vadda' or 'Odde' (ibid.: 1387), who were portrayed as 'a close-knit, inscrutable, aboriginal community, "old as the hills", with set habits … They keep their own hours and will only take task work' (ibid.). They were renowned stoneworkers and commanded more respect than the earthworkers, and were known as the 'navvies of India' (ibid.). Kerr observes that it was challenging to induce these itinerant clusters of 'circulating labour' to take up part-time, labouring tasks, as for them, work was seasonal, structured around agricultural cycles:

Earthworkers in their cumulative millions had to be mobilized, among whom were certain hereditary earthworking groups the British described as the navvies of India. Where the demand for labour was especially great – as at the major inclines or great bridges – mobilization required consider- able effort and spatially far-flung recruitment. Advances often had to be provided to induce gangs of workers to go to a worksite. (Ibid.: 39).

While Indians built railways in their backyard, in the colonies too, there was a considerable global demand for labour from India in plantation economies and colonial infrastructural projects, including in the building of roads and railways. Indians were moved across the British Empire to build railways in the then col- onies of Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, Uganda, Kenya, Mauritius, British Guyana,

Malaya, Ceylon and Burma. Although the railways came to Fiji in 1882, sugar had been made there since 1862, and the island received its first cohort of Indian indentured labourers in 1879 to work on cotton, sugar, coffee and other plantations (Dyer and Hodge 1961). Birmingham confirms the preference for indentured Indian labour in Africa too:

> Indian labour had a much longer history of service in Africa than Chinese labour. Indian navvies, who were much cheaper than African workers, were used extensively to lay railway lines in Africa. Unlike Africans, Indians were unlikely to escape from building sites, since they could not expect to be welcomed as refugees in African villages. The contracting of indentured *servicais* from India prompted complaints both from the colonial government in British India and from the Indian middle class. (Birmingham 2006: 21)

Indeed, Indian elites back home expressed concerns about the exploitation of indentured Indian labourers employed in colonial projects, such as mining work and railway construction. This led to greater restrictions on the movement of Indian labour, even those deployed in the British Empire. For example, Burton writes that 'Indian railway workers were given the opportunity to emulate their British counterparts by going to overseas to work' (2012: 136) to help in the construction of the Kenya and Uganda Railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria (Hill 1977 [1949]; Mills and Yonge 2012; Miller 2017 [1971]). This was because:

> the company found the Africans had very little interest in the work; even those who did sign up were liable to wander away if they decided they needed to plant or harvest crops at home, so advertisements for workers were placed in Bombay. The Indian government only allowed recruitment if assurances were given that the men would receive a regular, decent wage and at the end of a three-year contract they had to be paid the expenses to get home. (Burton 2012: 131)

The first railway in Kenya was the Uganda Railway, beginning at the port of Mombasa and intended to connect Uganda to coastal areas. This 930 km stretch of railways from Mombasa to Port Florence opened between 1898 and 1901 (Miller 2017 [1971]; Mills and Yonge 2012). Peter Kimani's *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2017) documents the construction of the 'Lunatic Express' in British East Africa. This covered 600 miles (966 km) of tracks and was originally named the Mombasa-Nairobi-Lake Victoria Railway. A racially divided railway construction team was charged with building this railway across difficult terrains. Most of the railway workers were British Indian indentured labour, specifically

from Punjab – both Muslims and Sikhs – who worked with African workers and British engineers (Gupta 1998; Mills and Yonge 2012). As Kimani writes in his novel, 'the rail was the product of their collective efforts – of black and white and brown hands' (2017: 9). Relying on workers' narratives and drawing from oral histories as well as formal, official memos and letters from officials of the British Civil Service, Kimani weaves a fascinating tale of the everyday lives of those who built this railway.

In South Africa, the Natal Railways operated from June 1860. It was the first public railway between Durban and The Point (Natal), built on a 4 ft 8½ in gauge and extending to the mining areas of Witwatersrand (Cottrell 2010). However, there was an earlier railway quarry line on wooden rails at The Bluff, which had been operational since 1856 (Hutson 1997). In Sudan, the railways operated in the 1870s; the 54 km tracks running parallel to the River Nile were meant to be a trade route. However, Cecil Rhode's grand plan of running continuous rail lines from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo failed (Williams n.d.b). In Nigeria, the first railways opened in 1898, running a 96 km stretch between Lagos and Abeokuta on a 3 ft 6 in gauge, as in the other British colonies in Africa (Ayoola 2008).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the British recruited Sikhs to the police force, security operations and railway projects. This took them to Fiji, Hong Kong, Malaya and East Africa, where they constructed the Ugandan Railway (Purewal and Lallie 2013: 385). However, the role of Indian Punjabi labour in global railway construction projects has received limited scholarly attention. Railway building in Kenya and East Africa relied heavily on immigrant Indian labourers, who worked under harsh conditions and often died during construction. Zajontz elaborates: 'According to a parliamentary report on the railway, 31,983 labourers from India were involved in the construction; 6,454 of them were invalidated and 2,493 died' (Hill 1977 [1949]: 240; Zajontz 2022). Some lost their lives to a terrorizing pair of the notorious Tsavo man-eating lions in 1898 (Patterson 1908). These Indian workers were largely Punjabi peasants from Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities, recruited through the system of indenture (Whitehouse 1948). According to Aiyar, '40,000 Indians from Punjab provided labour for the construction of the Uganda railways' (2011: 991), of whom one-fifth 'remained in Kenya at the termination of their contracts, becoming masons, mechanics, and carpenters' (ibid.). Younger remarks that the construction of the railways in Kenya and Uganda saw the importation of '37,747 workers, mostly Punjabis from northwest India where a great deal of railroad building had already taken place' (2010: 201). Tatla states that in Uganda: 'Most of the Indian labour on the railways was comprised of Punjabis, a majority of them Muslims with the rest being Sikhs and Hindus' (Tatla 1995: 71). This was true for the construction of the railways in Kenya as well (Tatla 1995). In Malaya too, Indian workers were preferred as labour, including as railway labour, for several

reasons – not least because railways already had a presence in India, and it was presumed that Indians would have a familiarity with railway work (Kaur 2006; Raja 2021; Sandhu 1967). But in Malaya, labour was drawn largely from South India, not North India. This is not a historical puzzle given the earlier movements of migrants from the latter globally, including to parts of Africa (Datta 2021).

Carter (2006) lists other labour communities, such as prisoners of war (POWs), who built the Thai-Burma Death Railway, and political prisoners, who constructed the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) lines in Siberia, as non-capitalist labour. The British had already discussed the idea of a permanent rail link between Burma, Thailand and China in the 1880s. The building of the Japanese-led Thai-Burma Railway (TBR), known notoriously as the 'Death Railway' and built by forced Indian and Chinese labour and American and British prisoners of war, remains one of the grimmest accounts of railway construction (Hall 1981). About 240,000 railway labourers from Burma, Java and Malaya, known as the 'sweat army' (Kratoska 2002: 28), were also secured, many by force, to build this railway along with Allied prisoners of war after the fall of Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia to the Japanese in 1942. A large number of Tamil plantation and Sikh workers in Malaya were either abducted, tricked or 'volunteered' for railway work with the promise of 'a dollar and a pound of rice per day' ('A Brief History of the Thailand-Burma Railway' n.d.). The construction of this railway involved laying 415 km of railway tracks from Bang Pong in Thailand to Thanbuyuzayat in Burma in order to link the Thai and Burmese railway systems; work began at the same time on both ends. This project was conceived by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. The TBR, for which work started in 1939, was planned to move military troops, personnel and equipment to Burma's frontier regions in order to enable the Japanese to ultimately invade India. The actual construction of the railways only began in June 1942, and about 60,000 POWs were transported to the building sites in 1942–43. The Thai-Burmese lines were connected in October 1943. The 16-month project is remembered for the atrocities and cruelties of the Japanese towards the labourers and the harsh working conditions they suffered. Workers were housed in jungle camps as they maintained the tracks and performed exacting manual labour for prolonged periods without rest in dangerous and unforgiving terrains, while disease and death were rampant. Scholars and survivors alike note the horrific hardships endured by the workers as well as the ghastly diseases and deaths they experienced (Gill and Parkes 2017). These narratives are graphically and evocatively memorialized in the personal eyewitness accounts of British (English 1989; Evers 1993; Reminick 2002) and American POWs (Crager 2008; LaForte and Marcello 1993).

Writings about British railway navvies do not typically feature in accounts of railway construction in the colonies. In this project, bringing these two labour

constituencies into the singular narrative of global railway construction provides a critical comparative lens for examining the commonalities, as well as the differences, between them. While there are important overlaps in the lives of the British railway navvies and colonial railway labour, such as their living and working conditions, the contrasts are not insignificant. In contrast to British railway navvies, colonial railway labourers were contracted servants of the empire, at the mercy of labour recruiting agents, railway companies and governments. They were organized into working units, known as gangs, which were closely regulated and supervised, so the workers were neither free nor mobile. They were poorly paid, disempowered and had few options for negotiating better working conditions and higher wages. Interestingly, however, the formula for organizing British navvies to perform railway work, and the practice of housing them in rudimentary, makeshift accommodation close to railway tracks and railway premises in Britain, is a template that the British transposed and replicated in the colonies as well. The discussions in Chapters 2 and 3 confirm that the British continued to allow poor working and living conditions of colonial railway labourers in Malaya. Chapter 2 details the laying of railway tracks in Malaya by colonial labour as one strand of the global story of Indian labour migration and railway building – both of which were key drivers in the project of materializing colonial capitalism. The discussion further delivers on the commitment to prioritize labour, especially those who built and maintained the railways, in narrating a railway history of Malaya.

Notes

1. The historical relationship between pilgrimage and railways in different cultural contexts has been well theorized. See Eade (2015) and Bowman (2015) for the role that railways played in promoting a pilgrimage site at Glastonbury at the end of the nineteenth century. The Hejaz Railway (1980–1920) between Damascus and Medina was important in performing pilgrimages to Mecca (Blake and King 1972).
2. It is less well known that 'Japan too, was a source of emigrant labour' (Chiswick and Hatton 2003: 72) and 'Japanese workers went to Hawaii and the mainland United States, as well as to South America, primarily Peru and Brazil, as indentured servants or as recruited free immigrants' (ibid.).
3. https://indianrailways.gov.in/Indian%20Railways%20Whistling%20Ahead-%20%20Story%20of%20Growth%20and%20Modernisation-Booklet.pdf, 4 (retrieved 18 January 2023).
4. George Orwell writes a flattering account of navvies in his *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), and Phil Collins of the band Genesis wrote the lyrics of the song 'Driving the Last Pike', featured on the album *We Can't Dance* (1991), as a dedication to navvies.
5. Interestingly, Chinese immigrant labour was also used in the late 1920s by the colonial government of French Equatorial Africa for railroad work (Martinez 2017).

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2

CONSTRUCTING COLONIAL RAILWAY NETWORKS IN MALAYA

Contextual Grounding

The construction of transportation infrastructures in Malaya is a crucial part of the global story of industrial capitalism, which is intertwined with the unprecedented movement of labour in the nineteenth century. By 1932, an elaborate and inter-connected railway network had materialized in Malaya, including on the island of Singapore. This chapter historicizes the railway networks that were constructed in Malaya using Indian, Chinese and Malay labour. Picking up on the discussion in the previous chapter, here I elaborate on the overwhelming historical demand for immigrant Indian labour globally and in Malaya. Even though it was challenging to secure labour, recruitment strategies that sought to ensure labour welfare – supported by legal laws and labour codes – brought large numbers of Indians to Malaya. Over time, these labour clusters assumed centre stage in maintaining the railway infrastructures that they had helped build. This chapter also depicts the socioeconomic profile of Indian labour – their class, caste and gender back-grounds, and the positions they occupied in the railway services. This labour con-stituency is contextualized within a broader discussion on the Malayan railway's workforce and the terms of employment of the clusters within.

At the close of the nineteenth century, colonial capitalism required a large pool of cheap labour to extract raw materials and produce commodities, spur-ring industrial growth in Britain. A staggering range of complex contracts, leg-islations and policies were conceived to control and consolidate labour flows and ownership, sale and utilization of lands – particularly by indigenous com-munities – and, indeed, the very building of colonial infrastructure itself. These commercial commitments engendered exceptional demand for labour, which was sought primarily from India and China, but also from Java. The strategy

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adopted to ensure labour for working in tin mines, and rubber and coffee plantations, as well as on telecommunication and transportation infrastructures – laying telegraphic lines, building ports, harbours, prisons, hospitals, offices, residences, roads, bridges and railways – was importing cheap and plentiful workers from these territories.

The earlier disinterest in Malayan regions and the British policy of nonintervention (Dharmalingam 1996; Lo 1957; Looi 1995) therein was transformed dramatically at the turn of the nineteenth century, when these regions assumed strategic importance. Economic historians have highlighted that Malaya was rather peripheral to the bigger geopolitical and commercial concerns of the British Raj (Shennan 2001; Tarling 1969; Tregonning 1965). Britain was more concerned about trade with India and China during the eighteenth century and did not pay much attention to commercial opportunities in Malaya. When Malaya did make an appearance on the horizon of British interests at the end of the eighteenth century, it was to fortify the Empire and secure India–China trade, specifically the trade in tea (Tarling 1969: 1). Tregonning, an eminent historian of the Malay Peninsula, remarks that: 'For most of its history, the Malay Peninsula has been on the flank of greater empires, either in Southeast Asia itself (empires which have controlled it) or in India and China (empires which have influenced it). Denied the ample flat land a great civilization demands, the Malay Peninsula has been, almost invariably, a subsidiary of greater empires elsewhere in Asia' (1965: 5). Shennan agrees that: 'Malaya has never gripped the imagination of the British nation as vividly as the splendours of the Raj or the arcane riches of China' (2001: 14–15).

However, a key historical moment was the institution of the British residential system[1] in the west coast states in 1874, resulting in enhanced British control therein. Subsequently, the region experienced the clearing of large land areas for growing rubber and the escalation of mining activity, accompanied by large-scale immigration from India and China. Initially, this growing agricultural activity in Malaya was for fulfilling the food needs of the indigenous and immigrant communities. Gradually, the British experimented with growing coffee, gambier, sugar and rubber and established commercial estates. The burgeoning global importance of tin and rubber as profitable commodities spurred and fed industrial growth in Britain, which turned its attention towards augmenting and controlling the tin and rubber industries in Malaya. Sadka observes that driven by economic imperatives, British administrators were concerned about 'how to fill empty lands, develop mining and commercial agriculture and establish a modern system of communications' (1968: 381). Indeed, the establishment of roads and railways in Malaya was justified in light of the colonial-capitalist project. However, in order to execute these missions and other public works projects, the labour question would first have to be addressed.

Sustaining an Extractive Economy: The Labour Conundrum

The increase in rubber production and tin mining, as well as the urgent need to build infrastructure to sustain a capitalist export economy, necessitated the availability of large and cheap labour pools. From as early as the 1860s, rumblings of labour shortages, the challenges and high labour costs associated with overseas labour recruitment, and problems of labour retention reverberated through the reports and accounts of miners, planters, public workers and government officials in Malaya. These fears were not unfounded. Imported labourers, while screened in their home countries for 'quality' and fitness for labouring, could be – and were – rejected upon their arrival in Penang. They were judged as being unsuitable as labour due to illness or on suspicion that they had been recruited through illegal and illegitimate methods (Jackson 1961). The British relied overwhelmingly on imported labour, given that the local labour force – even if mobilized and fully engaged in agricultural and nonagricultural mineral economic activities – was not large enough and unsurprisingly not as willing as immigrant labour to be employed as wage labour. Chai observes of the Malays: 'When they worked it was for themselves, on their land, and very few could be persuaded to accept employment as agricultural labourers or on public works' (1967: 98–101). This has been noted by other scholars, including Drake:

> The need for immigrant workers was first felt in the middle of the nineteenth century when the Malays were unable, or unwilling, to provide (at prevailing wage rates) the labour necessary to achieve the much higher level of tin production promised by the new discoveries of ore … Moreover, such mining as was done by Malays was a part-time activity, carried out during the slack period of the rice-growing cycle. A large and full-time labour force was required to work the new-found tin deposits in Perak and Selangor. (Drake 1979: 278)

According to colonial logic, an imported, transient labour force was required for the 'capitalised export economy which operated alongside a labour intensive subsistence economy' (Kratoska 1982: 281), through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Malaya. Kratoska highlights that much of this production was confined to the western coast of the peninsula – in the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Johor – and dominated by the production of tin and rubber (ibid.: 282). For Malaya, the result was an 'unbalanced production' (King 1939: 136) in the agricultural sector where the economy was 'characterized by the extensive cultivation of crops for export markets, and the total inadequacy of the food-crops grown in the country to supply local demand' (ibid.: 136). It was a curious situation where Malaya produced less than half of the local demand for

rice – a staple crop (Kratoska 1982) – while rubber cultivation consumed 'nearly two-thirds of the cultivated area and accounts for 90 per cent of the value of the export trade in agricultural products' (King 1939: 136). This gave rise to concerns relating to adequate food supplies and, ironically, from 1918, Malaya had to import rice for local consumption, as noted by Kratoska (1982).

The tin mining industry was dominated by Chinese labour funded by European and Chinese capital investment, and saw the Chinese moving away from the Straits Settlements to tin-rich states in the Malay Peninsula (Leinbach 1975: 262). Deposits of tin had been discovered in the Larut district in 1848, which attracted Chinese labour as well as capitalists. The earliest labour inflows to the mineral-rich regions were thus from China, which 'came in response to the rapid growth of tin mining and government works, which … were related activities' (Drake 1979: 279). Subsequently, from 1910 to the mid-1930s, the imported labour force was diverse, attracting 'Indians, Chinese, and Indonesians' (ibid.: 279) to the global booming rubber industry, of which Malaya was a key player. This reliance and dependence on immigrant labour created challenges and vulnerabilities for owners of rubber plantations, tin mines and government departments. In 1896, the Resident-General of the Federated Malay States (FMS, comprising Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan) spoke approvingly of the government allocating money for recruiting Indian labour, which was deemed essential for building the railways as well as public works, hoping that immigrants would take up what seemed to him to be an attractive employment opportunity:

> The government also voted last year $30,000 for the introduction of Indian immigrants and, while some hundreds of these have already been imported for railway work, little if any advantage seems to have been taken by people of Southern India of the facilities offered by the Government by way of free passages etc. to the Malay States … But the government still requires labour for the Railway and Public Works Departments, and free passages and higher wages should induce the Indian labouring classes to emigrate. (FMS 1897: 1)

The Resident-General's *Annual Report of the Federated Malay States for 1899* foregrounds labour as 'the most important question of the year under review and of the present moment' (FMS 1900: 2). He adds:

> The scarcity of Chinese and Indian labour is now so great that not only is it necessary to pay double and sometimes treble the wages current a few years ago, but the scarcity has been so great that the most important works, railways, irrigation, roads etc. have been seriously delayed. (Ibid.: 3)

The same lament about labour scarcity and the urgent need to secure labour even at higher costs are expressed by government officials, year after year. Despite the early presence of immigrant workers from China and Java, the greatest demand in Malaya was for Indian labour, which was also sought-after globally. Mahajani (1960) dates the emigration of Indian labour to Malaya in the early 1830s, when Tamil and Telugu labourers from India were brought to work on the coffee and sugar plantations. Between 1881 and 1940, almost three million immigrants (Sandhu 1962) came to Malaya from India, although large numbers also returned to India.

In Malaya, much of this labour was drawn from the lowest rungs of the Indian class and caste hierarchy – that is, from the non-Brahmin and *Āti Tirāviṭa* communities (Arasaratnam 1979; Mani 1977; Sandhu 1969). Between 1786 and 1957, 65.3% of the total Indian migrants to Malaya belonged to the labouring sector (Sandhu 1969: 159); in addition, up to 98% of the labour migrants to Malaya were from southern India (ibid.). The population was differentiated along caste, linguistic, regional and religious lines, although an overwhelming majority came from a Hindu background (Sandhu 1969). The North Indian migrants arrived through different recruitment mechanisms and conditions, many of whom were employed in the security services and the police force (Sandhu 1969; Rai 2004).

The indenture system of recruitment was used to secure Indian labour for Malaya until 1910, when it was abolished. The years between 1844 and 1910 saw 250,000 indentured labourers flowing into Malaya (Sandhu 1969: 81). Thereafter, Indians were recruited through the *kangani* (overseer*)* system, which provided south Indian labour for Malaya, Burma and Ceylon (Mahajani 1960; Sandhu 1969). Kaur provides the following comparative figures for the indenture and *kangani* systems of labour recruitment in Malaya:

> The peak of *kangani*-assisted recruitment occurred in the 1910s, when about 50,000 to 80,000 Indian workers arrived per annum. During the period 1844–1938, *kangani*-assisted migration accounted for 62.2 per cent of the total Indian labour migration compared with 13.0 per cent of indentured labour migration. (Kaur 2004: 68)

Indian labour was employed in rubber plantations, the nonagricultural mineral economy and public works projects across the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. These arrivals were essentially unprepared to perform manual work under harsh conditions, lacking experience or expertise in the plantation and infrastructural tasks that were given to them. In Malaya, one witnesses the *making* of immigrants from diverse agricultural and artisanal backgrounds into *colonial labour*, which was no doubt traumatic, with devastating consequences for the immigrants'

physical and mental health. The Straits Settlements Labour Commission was set up in 1890 to investigate the state of the labour in the Straits Settlements and the Protected Malay States and to consider how immigration could be encouraged to meet the growing need for labour in these territories. The *S.S. Labour Commission Report of 1890* records that the arriving immigrants were often misled and tricked into boarding the ships bound for Penang:

> in most cases when weavers, *dhobies*, cooks and other men break down, it is because they have been deceived by their recruiters, who tell them they will only be required to practise their own trades. Then when they are required to use the *changkol* and do hard work they lose heart and strength, deteriorated into 'hospital birds' and swell the death rate. (Paragraph 4, cited in Jackson 1961: 99)

Government officials were not unaware that many Indian immigrants had not been previously employed in the kinds of jobs they were assigned upon their arrival on Malayan shores. Jackson cites early complaints from European planters in Malaya that emigrants were not suited to labouring tasks, which was recognized in government accounts too:

> There were many more newly arrived Immigrants on the Estate (Batu Kawan Estate) and *they are men who before arriving here have, in nine cases out of ten, never held a changkol in their hands before*. I have heard that an outside planter of experience well up in diagnosing these Indian Immigrants and who had seen them, confirms this statement and says they have been principally weavers before coming here – a very different occupation. (*S.S. Gazette*, 1879: 556, cited in Jackson (1961: 62–63), emphasis added)

> Some few of the emigrants bring their wives and children with them, but the greater number are single men. *Comparatively few seem to have been field labourers in their own country, as it is generally some time before they become accustomed to the work they are put to.* During the last few years, at least a third of the emigrants have been weavers, this branch of industry being apparently on the decline in their own country. (*J.I.A, (New Series)*, 1862, vol. IV, cited in Jackson (1961: 62–63), emphasis added)

Despite this awareness, Indian immigrants continued to be sought-after, as labour shortages were endemic due to intense internal competition for labour. Private industry – miners and planters alike – complained that the government was their principal competitor. Indeed, the colonial government 'was one of the largest

employers of *Kangani*-recruited labour for the public works department and the railways. It also recruited free labour directly under the aegis of the IIC and the Tamil Immigration Committee' (Kaur 2004: 137). There was heightened demand for Indian labour in Burma and Ceylon, which offered 'cheaper passages, higher wages and more attractive conditions' (Jackson 1961: 97) and in Uganda and South Africa. The Acting Resident-General of the FMS, R.G. Watson, wrote in 1909 that incoming immigrants had to be shared and alluded to ongoing tussles with other colonies for securing labour: 'of the 3013 statue immigrants brought over for the states, 518 were for government departments, the remainder for labour on estates; it is reported that the competition by recruiters for Fiji and Natal was somewhat tense' (FMS 1910). W.H. Treacher, the Resident-General of the FMS, complained in 1903 that the demand for labour far outweighed supply and was 'met in driblets' (FMS 1904: 14). Consequently, considerable efforts seem to have been made to procure Indian labour, including working the ground in India itself:

> The Protector of Labour is to reside for six months in each year in South India, travel and advertise the 'inducements' in likely districts, issue licenses to approved native and other recruiting agents and sanction advances to them by the Madura Company, who have been appointed the Government Financial Agents in this regard … The planters are fully prepared to pay good wages – seven *annas* a day for men and five for women – have been agreed upon – to take all reasonable care as to the comfort and health of the immigrants, and to pay their share of any necessary Government expenditure on recruiting. (Ibid.: 14)

These exertions were driven by the perception that Indian migrants made ideal labourers – suited for manual work, uncomplaining and pliant. K.S. Sandhu, a prominent historian of Indian migration to Malaya, expresses the following widely held view among employers of labour in Malaya:

> Altogether, the South Indian was perhaps the most satisfactory type of labourer, for in addition to being a British subject, accustomed to British rule, *he was a good worker, not too ambitious and easily manageable.* He had none of the self-reliance nor the capacity of the Chinese, but he was the most amenable to the comparatively lowly paid and rather regimented life of estates and government projects. He was well-balanced, docile, and had neither the education nor the enterprise to rise, as the Chinese often did, above the level of manual labour. *These characteristics of the South Indian labourer made him all the more indispensable as a worker.* Apart from economic reasons, Indian immigration was also desired by

British officials as a political move to counter balance the great number of Chinese in Malaya. (Cited in Chong-Yah (1967: 186), emphasis added)

A rather more unrestrained and negative portrayal of Tamils as the best estate coolies was published in the *Selangor Journal* (1894), where a European planter, adopting a self-serving stance, advised 'would be planters' as follows:

The labourers available in this country are, as everyone knows, Tamils or Klings, Malays, Javanese and Chinese. To take Tamils first: as general all-round estate coolies, I believe the people of this nationality, as imported direct from India, to be second to none in the world and I should advise the intending planter to secure as many of them as he can possibly find work for. *Quiet, amenable to discipline, very quick to pick up and adapt themselves to any kind of work, they are when they come in from their country, or their cost as they call it, the best servants to a just master, and they will often settle down on an estate and remain there, content with considerably lower wages than they might procure elsewhere, if they are treated with fairness and consideration.* A Tamil *likes* a hard master; they even have a saying that 'the master who doesn't get angry doesn't give good pay'; but he is worse than useless if treated unjustly. (*Selangor Journal* (3)3: 44–46, cited in Jackson (1961: 106), emphasis in original)

Thus the demand for Indian labour in Malaya was 'exceptionally high' (FMS 1904) in the early decades of the twentieth century too, aligned with global demand. Push factors included 'famine and widespread unemployment' (Drake 1979: 283) in India. Yet, government officials were puzzled by the lack of enthusiasm on the part of Indians to sign up for work in Malaya, despite what seemed to them to be attractive employment opportunities. The Resident-General of the FMS observed in 1899:

the government has gone into the market with other employers, and makes every effort to obtain recruits from Southern India on terms most favourable to the immigrant. We have met with very little success. We are now in the position of offering free passages, very high wages, quarters, medical attendance and perfectly reasonable work in a climate similar to that of their own homes, but we cannot induce the surplus labouring population of India to leave their over-populated land for an easy life and plenty in the Malay Peninsula … It is certainly rather curious that while the Chinese have come in hundreds and thousands, without any special protective legislation, the poor of British India seem to prefer starvation at home. (FMS 1900: 3)

While some Indians were indeed reluctant to venture overseas for work, the decision was not entirely in the hands of individuals. As early as 1837, the East India Company's regulations controlled the emigration of Indian labour, first from Calcutta and then from Madras. Shirras identifies three phases of Indian migration: the movement of indentured labour, first, between 1833 to 1908; second, between 1908 to 1922, with the formulation of a national migration policy; and, finally, in the post-1922 period, when this policy was executed (1931: 595).

In the first phase, the story of Indian indentured labour can best be described as one of stops and starts. Migrations to Ceylon, Mauritius and West Indies began after the end of slavery, but were suspended due to labour 'malpractices' and high levels of 'mortality' (ibid.: 596) during voyages. Shirras reports that: 'Emigration to Natal was stopped between 1866 and 1874 because of unsatisfactory conditions of labour' (ibid.). Probably the first ban on the movement of Indians was instituted in 1839, in response to reports of abuses of recruitment practices (Allen 2008). Under pressure from colonies as well as planters and miners, the ban was overturned to allow the export of Indian labour to Mauritius and then to other parts of the British Empire, such as the Caribbean. At the same time, a staggering number of new laws were conceived in the mid-nineteenth century (Shirras 1931) to address complaints of labour abuses and deaths during transportation due to the negligence of shipping agents. Striking amongst these was the Act XXIX of 1856, when the Government of India, 'for the first time took steps to protect its own nationals during their residence in the colony' (ibid.). This Act 'empowered the Government of India to suspend emigration to any colony which had not taken measures to protect emigrants on arrival or during the residence or to provide for return passage to India when the emigrant was entitled to it' (ibid.: 596). Despite attempts to regulate emigration and ensure that recruiters, employers and shipping agents were compliant, the system continued to be abused and labourers were mistreated and exploited by employers. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, these issues continued to surface repeatedly, and the plight of overseas Indian labourers was acknowledged to be less than ideal.

In the second phase, migration policies ended the indenture system in 1917, and the Emigration Act of 1922, which regulated the movement of 'unskilled labour' (Shirras 1931: 599), came into force. Malaya too felt the pinch of restrictions on Indian labour movement, as noted by E.L. Brockman, the Chief Secretary, in the *Annual Report of the Federated Malay States Railways for 1917*: 'The Indian government placed restrictions on emigration from India but gave permission for 82,000 assisted adults over 18 years of age to come to Malaya' (p. 10).

By the 1920s, Indian labour migration was highly regulated and labour was commoditized. As might be expected, the end of indenture was not well received by colonial officials globally. The South African statesman Sir Thomas Hyslop's

declaration that 'We want Indians as indentured labour not as free men' (Kondapi 1951: 7) has been quoted widely – a rather extreme expression of a 'slave-owner mentality' (Sandhu 1969: 46). With the end of indenture, labour shortages grew worse, with a greater, almost total, reliance on the *kangani* system, but there was also scope for voluntary – that is, 'free' – migration.

The Tamil Indian Immigration Fund[2] had already been established by the British in 1907 to control the flow of Indian labourers and to circumvent the problems of the *kangani* and indentured systems of labour recruitment (Rengasamey and Sundara Raj 2012). The Labour Code of 1912 also 'laid down certain requirements regarding working hours, pay, housing and accommodation' (Hagan and Wells 2005: 146), which were not always adhered to in practice. In Malaya, the end of indenture was not welcomed, although there was some confidence too amongst the authorities and employers alike that the *kanganis* would eventually deliver the much-needed labour: 'The abolition of indenture labour has caused a good deal of anxiety to the department, as the practice of obtaining coolies locally – by outbidding the employers who import them is not a practice to be commended' (FMS 1911: 7).

At the turn of the twentieth century, in response to political pressure, the Indian government raised the issue of the welfare of Indians employed overseas again (Hagan and Wells 2005) – including with the authorities in Malaya – and refused to allow further immigration unless these matters were addressed. This was in response to persistent reports of dismal living conditions and exploitative working environments for Indian labourers in Malaya. The Indian government invested considerable energy and resources in regulating Indian labour flows to the colonies, but not necessarily out of concern for labour; rather, this involved an element of national 'pride' and some degree of self-interest. In 1931, Shirras reflected on the weight of public opinion and the government's position on this matter:

> Coolieism has impaired India's national dignity in the eyes of the world. The unskilled labourer or coolie has been taken as representative of the entire population. For this reason, if for no other, the whole question of emigration requires careful control. (Shirras 1931: 604)

However, given the demand for labour, the movement of Indians continued, despite governmental reservations and the theoretical assurances granted by labour-related laws and codes. In addition to *kangani*, greater emphasis was accorded to free movement, which saw more Indians venturing to British colonies.

Another challenge for Malayan employers was retaining Indian immigrants. The labour woes of planters, mine owners and government departments

were amplified, given the significant number of desertions, as immigrant workers sought better employment opportunities (Datta 2021; Jackson 1961). Furthermore, South Indian migrants – more than 50% of the total migrants – preferred to return home at the end of their contracts, as noted by Kratoska:

> The immigrant workforce was transient, and employers continually had to replace labourers returning home or seeking new opportunities in expanding Malayan economy. Between 1911 and 1920, for example, though some 908,000 immigrants came to Malaya from South India, 562,000 returned. (1982: 282)

Despite these obstacles, the British invested significant energy and resources in procuring Indian labour, a large proportion of which was key in constructing colonial railways in Malaya. Critics have challenged – and some have resoundingly rejected – the portrayal of the railways as a gift to the native population, while acknowledging some positive outcomes, which in Max Weber's (2013 [1905]) terms, can only be denoted as the 'unintended consequences' of history. By and large, the railways did not spur economic growth in the colonies, where industrial development was limited at best. In '"But What about the Railways …?" The Myth of Britain's Gifts to India' (2017), Shashi Tharoor makes the point in graphic, colourful language, without political correctness:

> Apologists for empire like to claim that the British brought democracy, the rule of law and trains to India. Isn't it a bit rich to oppress, torture and imprison a people for 200 years, then take credit for benefits that were entirely accidental? … The railways were intended principally to transport extracted resources – coal, iron ore, cotton and so on – to ports for the British to ship home to use in their factories. (Ibid.)

Colonial railways – intended to move soldiers, labour, supplies, raw materials and commodities – served as an instrument of colonialism (Headrick 1988). Much has been written about why the railways did not herald economic growth and industrial modernity for India (Bogart and Chaudhary 2013; Roy 2018, 2019) while they positively impacted industrial development in Britain. Part of the answer for this lies in the fact that the business model adopted by the British government in the mid-nineteenth century did not encourage the growth of local industries (coal, iron or steel), train local manpower in managerial skills and capacities or transfer the technologies and expertise required to operate the railways. Satya argues that 'the Indian railway project was a good example of colonial capitalism whereby productivity was raised without mechanisation, and a capitalist labour market developed in a pre-capitalist economy, labour relations

of organisation involving Indian gangers, *sirdars, muccumdums, mistris*, etc'
(2008: 73). Thus, even as the expanding railways were integrated into the vast
Indian landscape, India remained predominantly agricultural, without realizing
the anticipated growth in local industries and the much-touted technological
transfer and expertise. For Malaya, Kaur makes a similar observation:

> The railways were essentially part of a system of colonial economic pen-
> etration; connected to Europe by way of the ports, they made possible the
> rapid carriage of goods. Thus, they had practically no 'multiplier' effect
> on the local economy; almost all the materials, skills, and labour (and to
> some extent the fuel) necessary for railway construction and operation
> were imported from abroad. (1980c: 696)

Kaur also observes that the advocates of railways found it 'more convenient to
import railway materials from countries where those industries were already
advanced than to develop an indigenous modern iron and steel industry' (ibid.).
In contrast to others who have argued for the positive and favourable effects of
colonialism on the Malayan economy (Chai 1967), Kaur delivers a more damn-
ing verdict:

> In effect, the railway system facilitated the 'reproductive' capacity of the
> country as the progressive exposure to, and domination by, capitalism
> resulted in the intensification of mining activity and the emergence of
> new economic activities such as rubber cultivation … Thereafter, Malaya
> began to play the classic role of a country at the periphery of the capital-
> ist system, exporting primary production and importing manufacturers
> [1980c: 710].

Kaur has demonstrated that in Malaya, 'railway construction failed to stimulate
industrialization' (ibid.: 699) and that 'Colonial policy was extractive rather than
developmental' (ibid.). Throughout the colonial period, railway hardware and
software – engineering, technologies, locomotives and carriages – continued
to be imported to Malaya from Britain. This did not provide 'a stimulus for the
establishment of domestic heavy industry' (Kaur 1980c: 696).

The economic development of Malaya in the closing decades of the nineteenth
century saw firm government interventions to protect the interests of European
and Chinese capital investments in the region. Establishing telegraphic, postal,
transport and communication networks as well as legal, administration and reg-
ulatory schemes was crucial, and privileged the interests of the colonial govern-
ment and private industry alike. Labour was needed to sustain both a large-scale
agricultural and a nonagricultural mineral economy in Malaya. Remarkable

interimperial collaborations globally enabled a continuous and uninterrupted supply of labour at reduced costs. The project of constructing railways in these regions was deeply entangled with trans-Asian labour flows. I now turn to the colonial project of building railways in Malaya and argue that this was inextricably connected to the global story of industrial capitalism, with labour as a vital, but often neglected, constituency.

From the Federated Malay States Railways to Malayan Railways

Building railways in nineteenth-century Malaya was irrefutably conceived as a colonial project, entwined with the demands and ambitions of industrial capitalism. Drake notes that the colonial imagination for unbounded economic growth in Malaya was exemplified in 1896 by Sir Frank Swettenham, Resident-General of the FMS, who 'enunciated his view of official duty – to open up the country by great works: roads, railways, telegraphs, wharves' (1979: 274).

In the first instance, the pattern of railway networks in Malaya was determined by the sites of the tin mining industry and its needs. Railways were built first in the three tin-producing west coast states of Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, where British Protectorate control was exercised. The story of rubber plantations in Malaya is complex and multifaceted, and saw the arrival of Indian and Javanese labour and 'European capital, enterprise and management' (ibid.: 279). The growth of the rubber plantation economy in British Malaya subsequently intensified the construction of a transportation network. As Chai remarks, 'originally built to serve the tin industry, the railways served not only strategic or administrative purposes but also the rubber industry which was to dominate the world's supply of this raw material and give Malaya wealth and prestige undreamed of' (1967: 195). The subsequent expansion of the railways in Malaya was not just driven by internal pressures, but was also 'associated with global economic shifts; as the Cornish tin industry became exhausted, deposits in Bolivia, Malaya and Nigeria were turned to' (Jackson 2013: 130). The rapidly expanding tin industry was a great impetus for more efficient modes of transportation, given that 'roads were very poor, bullock carts satisfactory. It was in this context that the railways made its first appearance in the 1880s' (ibid.: 130–1).

In a geographical landscape dominated by rivers and waterways as traditional modes of transporting goods, the building of a network of railways, and then roads, was undertaken primarily to link the mines with the coastal ports. Interestingly, railways came to Malaya before roads. Chai observes: 'At the time of the Pangkor Engagement, there were no roads in the Malay States, but between 1881 and 1910, 1728 miles of roads of various classes were constructed' (1967: 194). Scholars writing on the Malayan case have observed this

to be a period of intense competition between road and rail (Leinbach 1975; Kaur 1980b). The railways were integrated with river launches to function as a feeder to the railways before roads were built. The expansion of road and railway networks was driven by escalating commercial interests in these territories with rich offerings of minerals and resources integral for industrial-capitalist development.

Railway historians of British Malaya (Kaur 1985; Leinbach 1975; Shamsuddin 1985) have identified three main phases of railway building in the region. Kaur, a scholar who has pioneered research on the history of immigrant labour and transportation networks in Malaya and Southeast Asia, provides details of railway construction between 1880 and 1931:

> three phases of railway development may be distinguished which coincided approximately with the three stages of British political involvement in the country. In the first period (1880–96) short latitudinal lines were built in the western half of the peninsula to serve the tin-mining areas. These lines linked inland producing centres with coastal ports … The second period of railway development (1897–1909) was marked by the construction of a north-south trunk line which connected the original latitudinal lines … Railway development in the final stage (1910 – 31) served the needs of the plantation sector, which was not locationally specific to the western part of the peninsula. (Kaur 2004: 135)

Yet the story of the railways in Malaya does not begin with the appearance of the Federated Malay States Railways (FMSR) in 1901. There were several important forerunners, numerous state-level railways, which had a substantial and successful run prior to their consolidation as part of the FMSR. These included the following: Johore Wooden Railway – whose tracks and rails were made of wood – had a brief run starting in 1875 and lasted until the 1880s (Kaur 1980a; Selvaratnam 1985a); Perak Government Railway (1885–1901) – the earliest of the colonial railways in British Malaya – served the tin mines within the state, operating two lines: the Taiping line between Parit Buntar and Port Weld, and the other between Enggor and Teluk Anson; Selangor Government Railway (1886–1908) (Sidhu 1965), originally used to transport goods between Klang and Kuala Lumpur; Muar State Railway (1890–1929) (Kaur 1981), where the railway line in the district of Muar transported agricultural goods and passengers during its almost forty-year existence; Sungei Ujong Railway (1891–1901) in Negeri Sembilan, which operated a line between Seremban and Port Dickson; and the Prai-Bukit Mertajam line in Province Wellesley, which opened in 1899 and enabled the transportation of rubber and tin to the harbour while the Prai–Port Dickson line was being completed.

Swettenham's role in triggering railway construction in Malaya is well known. Writing in 1893, he had already proposed railways in the mineral-rich state of Perak (Babulal and Ariffin 2019: 145). But Swettenham was also instrumental in calling for the integration of the existing state railways into a larger network. This plan to link the vastly scattered lines received support from the colonial office on the rationale that a connected rail system would be beneficial in availing unused lands for agricultural activity and diversifying the region's sources of revenue. Various authorities argued that links between the FMS and the SS would lead to greater administrative governance and efficiency.

In the first phase of railway construction, Hugh Low, the British Resident of the state of Perak at the time, proposed the building of a short line between Taiping and Port Weld in 1880. The project was approved and allocated government funding, but it stalled due to an 'acute shortage of experienced labour' (Wijaesuriya 1985: 34). The construction of the 12 km line began in 1883 when:

> two divisions of the Ceylon Pioneers were made available by the Government of Ceylon. The pioneers were the Military Corps organised by Sir Edward Barnes in Ceylon [now Sri Lanka] for the construction of military roads. They had previously acquired valuable experience in railway work while constructing the Nawalapitiya to Nanu Oya line of the Ceylon Government Railway which traversed difficult mountainous terrain. (Ibid.)

From the outset, then, the task of laying tracks on Malayan soil was entrusted to external expertise. The Taiping–Port Weld railway line was completed in 1884 and opened the year after for transporting tin from the mines to the coastal ports, given that the growing volume of traffic in tin could not be sustained by river transportation and that a 'more efficient transport' system was needed and that 'the answer was the railways' (Drake 1979: 273). A number of mineral railway lines were laid over a decade:

> Between 1885 and 1895, four short lines were laid, each connecting a coastal port with a tin field in north-western or west-central Malaya. By 1903, a north-south trunk line joined the mining towns, and by 1910 the trunk, paid for entirely out of the revenue of the FMS, ran from Prai (opposite Penang) to Johore Bahru (opposite Singapore). (Ibid.)

In the second phase of railway construction, rubber plantations along the west coast were connected by rail to Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang (Kaur 1985; Shamsuddin 1985; Smith 2006). After the turn of the twentieth century, multiple mineral and plantation lines were built across Malaya, primarily driven

exclusively by a profit motive, with reduced costs of building and operating these railways.

After the establishment of the FMS in 1896, the FMSR officially came into existence in 1901, acquiring and consolidating several pre-existing state railways, which had operated autonomously up until then. The FMSR acquired and integrated the assets of the Perak and Selangor railways, which were the first to be connected, while the Malacca Government Railway was absorbed in 1905. The *Annual Report for the Federated Malay States for 1923* records the expansive sweep of the FMSR as follows:

> The FMS Government owns the railways both in the FMS, SS and the Unfederated states of Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan. It has leased the Johore State Railway (120 m[iles]) extending from Johore Bahru at the southern extremity of the Peninsula and opposite Singapore island, to Gemas on the boundary between Johore and FMS.

In the final phase of railway building in the first decade of the twentieth century, the following new lines were built: the Singapore Government Railway, also known as the Singapore-Kranji Railway (1903–12), the Malacca Government Railway (1905–6), the Johore State Railway (1909–12) and the Sarawak Government Railway (1915–47). In 1918, the FMSR network was connected by rail to Thailand as well, covering a distance of 1,188 miles between Singapore and Bangkok, linking with the Siamese State Railways in 1918 (FMSR 1924: 20). The British ambition to establish a rail connection between Malaya and Thailand was realized in this pan-Asian railway network. Several rail extensions on the West Coast and East Coast Lines were deemed necessary in order to make this possible:

> An extension has been made from Pasir Mas in Kelantan and runs in the westerly direction for 12 miles to the Golok River at the Siamese boundary, where it joins the Siamese line running to Haad Yai Junction, 145 miles distant, where a junction is made with the main Bangkok-Penang-Singapore line through working between the FMS and Kelantan via the Siamese State Railways commenced on November 1st 1921. (Ibid.)

In contrast to the financing of the railways in India, which was largely undertaken by private railway companies, the railways in Malaya were sponsored by funds from various state governments. For example: 'The Malacca Line was constructed by the FMS Railway Department for the Government of the Straits Settlements and then taken over by the Federated Malay States, the cost of construction being paid by the FMS to the colony' (FMS 1906). This was deemed

not to be an ideal arrangement – government officials expressed concerns about the drain on state revenues and about having to defer any profits that might accrue from the railways in due course. Writing in 1897, the Resident-General of the FMS noted that:

> Malayan railways are still in their infancy, and in spite of their healthy appearance, they grow but very slowly. The explanation is that, though they pay better than other railways, and are built at a comparatively low cost, they have to be constructed out current revenues. (FMS 1897: 1)

Railways in Malaya were, eventually, profitable, as the costs of construction and maintenance were consciously kept depressed in the interests of efficiency, which translated into lower wages for labour. The railways were used for moving goods and produce like rice, tin, kerosene oil, firewood and livestock, but also saw enhanced passenger mobility across the entire network as early as 1909, when 110 train stations had been opened and, 'the number of passengers was 7,262,830, an increase of 87,090' (FMS 1910a) over the previous year. In 1921, the railways in Malaya carried a staggering total of 13,401,532 passengers (FMSR 1923: 4) and gradually registered an increase in passenger and goods traffic over the years, which meant larger revenues for the railways. These figures indicate that the railways – though built for sustaining a capitalist colonial economy – had transitioned to carrying substantial passenger traffic too.

The history of the railways in Singapore is complex and is a substantial independent project in itself, beyond the remit of the current one undertaken in this book. Only a brief historical sketch is possible here. The precursors of railways on the island were steam and electric tramways, which made an appearance in the final decade of the nineteenth century. The Tramways Ordinance of 1882 laid down the routes for five tram lines to be built on the island. The Singapore Tramways Company Limited was founded on 8 December 1883 and construction work commenced in 1884, with the laying of the first rails on 7 April 1885. The Kranji Electric Tram Company ran between 1885 and 1894, and an electric tram system was opened in the city on 25 July 1905 and gradually expanded with the city (Tan, n.d.). By 1907, it was operating sixty trams on more than twenty-six miles of track. It closed in 1927 when buses took over (Wilton-Jones 2022). In addition to this elaborate tram network on the island, the one-mile-long Tanjong Pagar Dock Company steam railway on Tanjong Pagar wharf was built by Chinese labour. The Singapore Government Railway (SGR) tracks were constructed between 1900 and 1902 and the line was opened in 1903, functioning autonomously until 1913, when it was purchased by the FMSR. The railway network spanned the entire island during its run, with stations at Bukit Panjang, Bukit Timah, Holland, Cluny, Newton, Tank Road, Borneo Wharf, Pasir Panjang,

People's Park and Mandai, and with railway yards at Kranji, Bukit Timah and Kampung Bahru (ibid.).

Between 1929 and 1932, the line between Bukit Timah and Pasir Panjang was rerouted to create a new route with stations at Tanglin, Alexandra and Tanjong Pagar (ibid.). This expansive system facilitated passenger movement and reduced travel time, although the earliest trains ran at no more than 30 km/h (Teo 2019). In 1923, the Causeway – with two rail lines and a road across the Johor Straits – connected the island of Singapore with the Malayan Peninsula. In 1932, the Tanjong Pagar station opened in Singapore, pushing the railways into the interior of the island and providing direct rail connectivity from Singapore to Thailand. With the opening of the FMSR station at Keppel, several of the stations (Tank Road, Cluny, Newton and the old Bukit Timah stations) along the original SGR were closed permanently (Wilton-Jones 2022), while several new ones were constructed at Alexandra, Tanglin and Bukit Timah (ibid.). Until the appearance of the new station at Keppel, passenger trains bound for Kuala Lumpur used to start from the Tank Road station (McNicol 1985; Teo 2019).

In June 1932, Sir Cecil Clementi, the Governor of Singapore, opened the new terminal station – the Keppel Road Railway Station – at Tanjong Pagar. Speaking at a manufacturer's exhibition at the station, he expressed that he had 'not the slightest doubt that, for centuries, this Singapore terminal station will stand here as one of the most nodal points in the whole world's scheme of communications' (The Strait Times 1932). He spoke in rather lofty, grandiose terms about the historical significance of the new station:

> We stand here at the southernmost tip of the continent of Asia; and, since the Johore Strait is now spanned by a causeway which was opened for traffic on June 28, 1924, we may even say that we stand at the southernmost tip of the mainland of Asia. This point is, therefore, a real terminus as well as a natural junction between land-borne and sea-borne traffic; and it is very right that the terminal station of the Malayan railway system should be built at Singapore, the gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and immediately opposite the Tanjong Pagar docks, where every facility will be afforded for interchange between railway and ocean shipping. (Ibid.)

By 1932, 26 km of tracks had been laid across the island of Singapore as part of the north–south line, providing rail connectivity to the west coast of Malaysia and into Thailand. The older Bukit Timah Station in Singapore had been constructed much earlier in 1902 and opened in 1915 as part of the Singapore-Kranji Railway, which the FMS government bought in 1918 for a sum of $4.13 million (Tan 2018). Plans for a new railway line and station in Singapore were approved

by the Straits Settlements Legislative Council in 1929 (Koh et al 2006), which meant laying additional tracks between the Bukit Timah Station and Tanjong Pagar.

Several industrial and military railways also operated in Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s, an example being the Admiralty Railway, a side branch built in the 1930s to serve the naval shipyard at Sembawang (McNicol 1985; Teo 2019; York and Phillips 1996). The Changi Military Railway, a four-mile-long standard gauge line, was built by the FMSR for the War Department, which protected the new Sembawang naval base (Wilton-Jones 2022). By 1932, the main trunk line ran north from Singapore to Padang Besar (on the West Coast Line) and Tumpat (on the East Coast Line). This was connected by several branch lines to the railway ports of Malacca, Port Dickson, Port Swettenham, Teluk Anson and Port Weld. Steam ferry services ran between Prai (Province Wellesley) and Penang and Palekbang and Kota Bharu. The ports and harbours in Singapore and Penang were served strategically by the main trunk line. The railways owned and operated several steam and motorboats, which were used to ferry goods and passengers. Stations served the ports and industrial production centres and functioned as goods stations stocked with godowns and marshalling/goods yards to manage tin and rubber shipments.

The entire FMSR railway network was built to metre-gauge to ensure connectivity. In 1935, the FMSR boasted 1,321 miles of track, with 213 permanent stations and seventy-six halts. The railways in Malaya were essential for communication and for transporting goods as well as passengers. Mail was transported by train, and telephone wires ran parallel to railway lines, making it possible to relay voice communication and telegraphs between railway stations and post offices. In tandem with the spreading railway network, telegraphic and telephone lines were constructed, enabling connectivity and communication across vastly scattered regions. During its tenure, the FMSR was a major shipping channel that connected ports and harbours to the interior parts of Malaya.

The railway construction on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula stands in stark contrast to that on the west coast and the island of Singapore. The East Coast Line, from Gemas to Tumpat, took twenty-four years to build and was completed in 1931. The first stretch between Gemas and Bahau opened in 1910, and the last stretch between Gua Musang and Kuala Gris was made operational in the state of Kelantan in 1931. The 76 miles of the Gemas-Kuala Semantan Railway was the first section of the East Coast Line, which opened for traffic in 1910 and 1911, followed by the construction of the 43-mile-long Semantan-Kuala Tembeling Railway in October 1909.

Before 1910, rail and road networks were developed only in the west coast states – which had significant commercial activity and a greater population concentration – and facilitated the urbanization and modernization of these regions

(Lim 1978: 203). Kuala Lumpur rapidly became a 'railway nodal point' (Fisher 1948: 130) and, together with Ipoh, was a centre of heightened economic activities and a notable destination for labour migration and settlement. Lim highlights that: 'The east coast was relatively cut off from the effects of technological change, the pressure of direct European administration, large-scale Chinese immigration and capitalist enterprises' (1978: 150). It was only belatedly – with the completion of the East Coast Line in 1931 – that cities and towns on the east coast were 'connected with national nodes of urban development' (ibid.: 202–4). Speaking about the lack of connectivity on the east coast, King concurs: 'In contrast with Selangor and Negri Sembilan, there are large areas in Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, and Johore which lack communications and have not been alienated, though climatic conditions are suitable for plantation agriculture' (1939: 138). The East Coast Line was almost entirely a single-track line, which meant that trains in both directions used the same line, with passing loops near stations where there were double tracks (Figure 2.1).

The differential, divergent and uneven infrastructural developments of the eastern and western parts of the Malay Peninsula, between the 1870s and 1940s, have been noted by economic historians (Kaur 1978) and geographers (Lim 1978) alike. The delayed arrival of roads and railways to the east coast stimulated economic growth and modernization belatedly, and which 'broke the physical isolation and forged links between the subsystem and the main system' (Lim 1978: 152). However, Lim observes that: 'Both the east coast railway and the overland road link came too late to stimulate economic development or structural changes in urban development on the east coast' (ibid.: 203). The completion of the north–south railway line and the trunk road gave an impetus to development and modernization on the west coast of Malaysia, with the emergence of commercial nodes therein (Leinbach 1975: 270). Kaur also agrees that economic activity was predominantly on the west coast states, which was already the case before British rule, but 'colonial transportation policy strengthened and even intensified this earlier pattern' (1980c: 709–10). This relative underdevelopment of the east coast of the Peninsula is evident even today, as it tries to catch up with the rest of the country. In writing the railway geography of Malaya, Fisher notes:

> each major change in the political geography of Malaya since 1874 has had its counterpart in important modifications to the railway system. To this rule, the Japanese interlude is no exception, and indeed, it is probable that some of its effects may be permanent, for not all of the removed lines are likely to be restored. (1948: 134)

He further states that the Japanese occupation of Malaya left a deep imprint on its railways, reducing them to 'a state of chaos and disrepair' (ibid.: 133). During
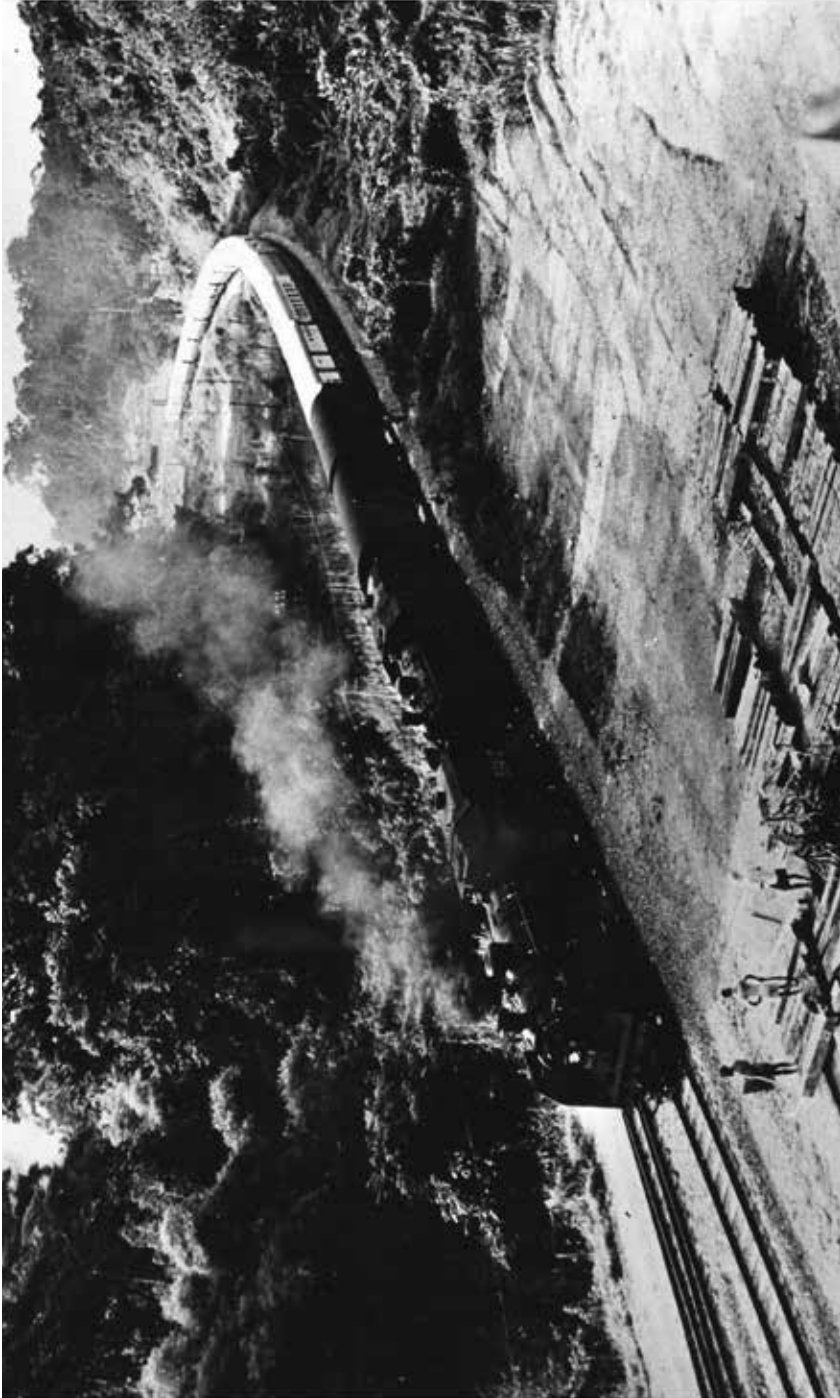
Figure 2.1. East Coast Railway Malaya, 1964. © Central Office of Information. Courtesy of the National Archives, UK, used with permission

this period between 1941 and 1945, the entire FMSR was under Japanese control and renamed Marai Tetsudo. Parts of the railway network suffered extensive damage, with many of the branch lines and depots being closed. According to Fisher:

> the Japanese embarked on a policy of railway construction in various parts of Southeast Asia in an attempt to provide overland alternatives to more vulnerable sea lines of communication, the most striking case being the Siam-Burma railway. (Ibid.: 133)

Railway quarters, accommodation and other buildings were destroyed, as reported by J.O. Sanders, General Manager of Malayan Railways: 'Out of a total of approximately 7,000 staff quarters which were in existence before the war, 260 were destroyed and 300,000 square feet of godown accommodation had been lost as a result of bombing' (ibid.: 1). About one-third of the locomotives were moved to Thailand, while others were destroyed. Passenger coaches were damaged either through neglect or conscious destruction and 'had been stripped of fittings, upholstery and windows' (ibid.). In addition to moving tracks and other railway hardware to build the Thai–Burma Railway, which was completed in 1943, the Japanese also forcibly moved railway employees: 'The Japanese, during their period of occupation, transferred approximately 750 railway employees to work on the construction of the Burma-Siam Railway, and of these nearly 200 had not returned at the end of the year' (ibid.: 63). These figures do not include the hundreds of thousands of Tamil labourers from Malaya, and many Malayan Sikhs, who were enlisted in the service of this railway construction project by deceit and coercion. A large number of these labourers lost their lives; those who did escape, and eventually returned to Malaya, were maimed, both physically and emotionally (Kratoska 2006; Narayanan 2018). R.G.D Houghton, the Commissioner for Labour at the Federation of Malaya, observes that the death rates among those working on the 'Burma-Siam Railway …was extremely high. Most of the labourers were Southern Indians though there were also numbers of Chinese and others' (Federation of Malaya 1949: 24). The modernization and restoration of the railways in the aftermath of the Japanese occupation required enormous funds, which were made available in the form of loan capital from the government. J.O. Sanders, the General Manager of Malayan Railways, wrote in the railways report for 1 April to 31 December 1946:

> Condition of Railway after Japanese Occupation – When the British Forces entered Malaya in September 1945, it was found that the permanent way between Singapore and the Siamese Frontier, and on the Port

Swettenham and Port Dickson branch lines was intact but its condition necessitated reduced maximum speeds. Rails had been removed from 200 miles of the East Coast Line between Mentakab and Krai and also from Tronoh, Teluk Anson and Malacca branches – 276 miles of running line and 57 miles of second line and sidings no longer existed. A large proportion of the rails and fittings had been taken out of Malaya and used in the construction of the Burma/Siam and Kra Isthmus lines. A total of 10,000 feet of linear bridging (approximately 2 miles) had been destroyed or removed. (MU 1947: 1)

Major reconstruction work was undertaken by the returning British civil admin-istration, given the extent of damage to tracks, stations, bridges, tunnels, goods yards, running sheds, fencing, wharves and the workshops of the railways, which had been neglected, destroyed, damaged or removed (Kaur 1982). As Sanders wrote in his 1946 report:

The maintenance of the permanent way was very seriously neglected during the 3½ years of Japanese occupation and the present maximum speed is 35 miles per hour compared with 45 miles per hour in 1941. It will be necessary to reballast certain lengths of the track and renew a very large number of sleepers before the pre-war speeds can be permitted. (MU 1947: 43)

After the war, the Thai section of the tracks was sold to the Government of Thailand, and the funds were used to compensate the Malaysian government for the materials stolen by Japan during the occupation of Malaya (*Western Star and Roma Advertiser* 1946). When the occupation ended, the railway infrastruc-ture in Malaya was in a state of disrepair, and major works were undertaken to utilize some sections as part of the railway network in Thailand. C.P. Rawson, the Chief Social Welfare Officer for the Federation of Malaya, announced the establishment of the Burma/Siam Relief Scheme, which was approved by the Government of the Federation of Malaya, being 'intended to grant relief to the dependents of labourers and others who were taken by the Japanese to work on the Burma/Siam Railway and died there' (Federation of Malaya. 1949: 13). The scheme seemed grossly inadequate in offering merely between 6–10 Straits dol-lars per month to the following categories of individuals: 'Aged and infirm peo-ple, widows, disabled persons, orphans whose both parents are dead and orphans with mother living' (ibid.).

Between September and December 1945, the railways in Malaya were placed under the control of the Transportation Directorate of the Allied Land Forces of Southeast Asia, before being administered briefly (between 1 January and 31

March 1946) as a branch of the British Malayan Administration, and then finally being placed under the charge of the British Military Administration. Following the founding of the Malayan Union on 1 April 1946, the FMSR was renamed Malayan Railways (MR) in 1948 and functioned as such until 1962. The period between the 1930s and the 1950s was critical for the development and modernization of transportation systems in Malaysia. The railways of Malaya were transitioning into passenger and commuter railway networks by the 1950s. By the mid-1950s, 'the revenue for passenger traffic was 33% and that of freight 67%' (Kandiah 1985: 92). However, over the next few decades, while freight traffic reduced, passenger traffic increased, generating more revenue, and Malayan Railways finally became a people's railway.

The railways were also impacted by the complex and controversial process of *Malayanization* in the country implemented in the late 1950s. At one level, Malayanization translated simply as 'the creation of jobs for Malaysians' (Selvaratnam 1985b: 99) and affected all sectors and industries. However, this assumed rather more complicated meanings and, in practice, reflected drastic shifts in employment policies along ethnic lines, including in the railway services. These new directions in recruitment altered the longstanding, historical dominance of Indians as railway employees in the FMSR and MR. These were received with disappointment and dismay by Indian railway staff, given their detrimental effects on careers and livelihoods, as will be elaborated upon in Chapter 6. The rebranding of the colonial railways as Keretapi Tanah Melayu in 1968 was driven by nationalist fervour (Stanistreet 1974). The remainder of this chapter maps the large and differentiated Malayan railway workforce, and focuses on the builders and operators of the colonial railways that had been imagined by the British and created largely, but not exclusively, by Indian immigrant labour.

Laying the Lines, Running the Railways: The Indian Factor

By 1932, the FMSR operated a total network of almost 1,700 km along the western and eastern coasts of the Malay Peninsula and in Singapore, of which 526 km was the East Coast Line, also known as the 'Jungle Railway'. Not surprisingly, the operation of this vast network needed a large pool of railway staff. As Kaur points out: 'In Malaya, the pattern of occupational differentiation evident elsewhere was also created and maintained by the Federated Malay States Railways (FMS Railways) … [and] the job categories also reflected the ethnic divisions in the country' (2004: 136) and 'reflected class stratification' (2004: 152). Railway work saw the employment of indigenous Malays, Chinese, Javanese and Indian immigrants as well as Eurasians and the British, who were placed in senior administrative and managerial positions:

> Malays were initially employed on a temporary basis to fell the trees and clear the jungle as the railhead advanced in the different states … Javanese were hired as construction workers under indenture contracts, while Chinese were recruited locally through contractors for the initial earthwork construction. Chinese were also employed in the clerical, mechanical and transportation sectors. The foundry workers in the main Sentul Railway workshops were Chinese who worked under their own contractors. (Ibid.: 137)

From the outset, the employment of Malays in railway services was an issue of public discussion and also a political one. In an early instance of their employment in the railways, in 1882, Malays were recruited as 'track labour':

> In Kedah, a trial was made with Malay labour on two gang lengths. Each gang consisted of a Tamil Tindal who speaks local Malay, a Tamil Keyman and six Malay labourers recruited by the local Headman. The Malays were informed that they were under training, and if their work was satisfactory, they would in due course be promoted to Senior Labourer, Keyman or Tindal. The District Manager took a personal interest in their training, but it is regretted that the experiment proved a failure. (Jegathesan 1954: 11)

Unfortunately, no follow-up on this initiative is provided in subsequent reports. Nor is it clear whether the failure was to be attributed to the trainees, the trainers or the training scheme itself. However, what is evident is that this *failure* justified the official narrative and the reliance on other labour sources, including cheap, immigrant Indian labour. Reportedly, early efforts were made by the railway services to attract more Malays to the workforce, but this apparently remained a challenging endeavour over the decades. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was political pressure to employ more Malays in the railways – an issue that subsequently manifested as an explicit labour policy. Thus, from the 1920s onwards, the railway department prioritized the hiring of Malays. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the annual reports of the FMSR highlight the efforts made to draw Malays into the railways, with meticulous reporting of the number of Malays trained in various railway skills and occupations. In the 1920s, the railways established a Scheme for Recruiting and Training Malays for various staff categories, including ticket collectors, signalmen, station masters, porters, gatemen, guards and pointsmen (FMSR 1925: 18). The same report provides detailed figures of Malays recruited under the new initiative, which are rare in official documents although this is understandable given the attendant political dynamics:

The scheme for Malay Station Masters came into operation in November, 1922, and so far as one can judge at present, it has been a success. During the year under review, it continued to attract more Malays to the Traffic Department, and at the end of the year there were 25 qualified Malay Station Masters in charge of stations and 15 under training. With the exception of Mentakab, Mengkarak and Triang, all stations on the Pahang line up to and including Padang Tungku and Kuala Pilah branch were in charge of Malay Station Masters. In addition, there were 19 Malay Ticket Collectors and 15 Signalmen compared with 14 and 11, respectively, at the end of 1923. (Ibid.)

The *FMS Annual Railway Report for 1929* contains a segment called 'Special Section on Employment of Malays' and notes that the 'Experiment of staffing, entirely with Malays, the Kuala Selangor branch commenced August 1927, and completed at the end of that year, has been found, so far as the clerical grades are concerned, to be generally successful' (FMS 1930: 30). In the 1931 *FMS Railway Report*, we learn that for the employment of Malays in the FMSR: 'The policy is to engage Malays whenever suitable men are available to fill vacancies and, in reducing staff, to dispense with other nationalities rather than Malays' (FMSR 1932: 28). The report includes a comparative statement about the number of Malays employed in the FMSR: 608 out of a total of 3,572 in 1930 and 557 out of a total of 3,009 in 1931 (ibid.). The *FMS Railways Report for 1932* explicitly states that: 'The policy is to give preference to Malays in both recruitment and retrenchment' (ibid.). However, despite these efforts, reflecting on the value of 'local Malay labour', in 1932, C.D. Ahearne, Controller of Labour, Malaya, expressed all the regnant problematic stereotypes and justifications for their so-called 'unwillingness' to become wage labour:

> This labour is of very little importance. No large estates depend to any great extent on Malays and the total number engaged in any one time on estates in the Federated Malay States is roughly 3,500 persons. The reason why more Malays are not employed as labourers is that they are unwilling to work regularly. They merely use the estate as a convenience to supplement whatever livelihood can be made out of their kampongs and cannot be relied on to remain on the estates when their services are most urgently required. They are, as a rule, not desirous of earning any more money than is sufficient to support them and to provide them with needs of the moment. As is the case with the locally engaged Javanese, and small numbers of Malays supplement regular forces of Indians or Chinese on many estates but the Malays work even less regularly than locally engaged Javanese. (FMS 1932: 19)

Even as late as 1952, the fact that a group of Malay workers had built a section of the railway tracks on the east coast was deemed atypical enough to be reported in a local newspaper, the *Straits Budget*: 'with their bare hands, 1,000 Kelantan Malays have laid a 100-mile railway straight through the heart of the Kelantan jungle into Pahang, a Federation Government spokesman said today'.[3] But despite these concerted efforts, over the decades, the proportion of Malays in railway services remained miniscule compared to the numerical dominance of Indian labourers. Ironically, the easy availability of Indian labour seemed to be a disincentive for recruiting local labour and was often used in subsequent decades to avoid the mechanization of labour processes in railway construction.

There was an overwhelming reliance on imported Indian labour from the outset of railway construction in Malaya, where this constituency was heavily in demand (Jegathesan 1954: 11). Here, the dependence on Indian labour for constructing the transport network was deemed critical, given that 'for want of this labour, road and rail construction was almost at a standstill in 1882' (ibid.: 16). Jegathesan further documented the specific preference for Indians in the railways:

> Indian coolies were preferred 'for all work' on the railways, while a State Engineer stated that they were the 'best metal breakers' for road work. They were specially adapted for road making. A perennial complaint of the planters was the enticing away of their Indian labourers by Government to carry out public works. (1954: 16)

However, by the early decades of the twentieth century, some labour for railway building was recruited locally from across the Malayan Peninsula. Until 1917, Indian labour was only allowed to move within the Indian Empire (Jackson 1961), which explains why Indian labourers did not end up building railways, like Chinese labour, in North America, Australia or New Zealand, but they did work as railway labour in the Caribbean and parts of Africa. Kaur iterates that: 'South Indian Tamils dominated the construction and maintenance sections of the FMS Railways' (2004: 137). Track laying and maintenance work was performed largely by male Tamil labourers who dominated the railway workforce, although the official railway archives do record the presence of women in the railway services. From the twentieth century onwards, the almost total reliance on Indian labour for constructing railways is palpable across British Malaya, including in Singapore, and in the building of the Thai–Burma Railway by the Japanese.

As in other colonies, the engineering expertise for building railways in Malaya was provided by the British. Given the long history of building railways in India, state governments and railway engineers in Malaya turned to India for

expertise and guidance. But from the outset, the materials used were local. Coal for locomotives was obtained from Batu Arang in Selangor in 'sufficient quantity to supply the whole system' (Fisher 1948: 123), while ballast was obtained from 'railway-owned workings, including a granite quarry at Segamat (Johore), and limestone quarries at Ipoh (Perak), Kodiang (Kedah) and Kuala Lipis (Pahang)' (ibid.). Sleepers and coaches were constructed from indigenous hardwoods like merbau and chengal.[4] Kaur documents that initially, railways in Malaya 'relied almost exclusively on firewood for fuel' (1980c: 696). Later, 'coal was imported from India to supply the coaling stations of Penang and Singapore' (ibid.: 696–97). However, 'coaches were also imported from Britain until the establishment of the Central Workshop at Sentul in Kuala Lumpur between 1904 and 1906; even after that time all the metal frames, the locomotives, and the rails were still imported from Great Britain' (ibid.).

And, of course, railway labour was imported from India as well, on the assumption that Indians would have a greater familiarity with the railways, which would be advantageous. Indeed, the British did teach Indians railway-building skills, even if the Indians who arrived in Malaya for labouring work did not necessarily have these skills. Kerr underscores the fact that the British:

> taught Indians those skills particular to railroad construction that were not part of the repertoire of construction practices in pre-railroad South Asia. One chief engineer (CE) reported in 1854 that Indians were learning to lay rails 'under the tuition of Europeans' and that with careful direction and adequate pay they would prove able 'to perform many of those duties for which they are generally considered unfit'. (2006: 37)

In India, Satya notes that 'Britons also held the best jobs as stationmasters of large stations, drivers of express trains and administrators' (2008: 73), reflecting racist and discriminatory colonial attitudes towards labour:

> The British in India distinguished between mental and manual work. Driven by the same racial prejudice, they reserved mental work for themselves and delegated manual labour to Indians. Railways did not become the training ground for skilled personnel for other sectors of the economy. Indians came to be hired as lower-level personnel in such jobs as engine drivers and guards. All management posts continued to be held totally by Britons. (Ibid.: 73)

The generic stereotypes associated with Indian immigrants noted earlier were believed to render them perfect labour material and made them popular with potential employers in British Malaya. This was certainly the case with the

FMSR, where Indians were employed in large numbers and dominated the work-force, even though the majority of them did not have any relevant experience or training. Within the large and diverse *Indian* category (which included the Ceylonese), subethnic groups performed specific tasks in the railways, which mapped onto their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. As Kaur stresses:

> The stationmasters were invariably Jaffna Tamils and North Indians; while drivers, signalmen, pointsmen and conductors were South Indians or Jaffna Tamils. Jaffna Tamils formed a large segment of the educated workforce that had migrated to Malaya, particularly in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Technical staff (surveyors, draughtsmen) and artisans comprised Chinese, South Indians and Jaffna Tamils. The clerical section was monopolised by Jaffna Tamils and Malayalis from Kerala in India. North Indians, especially Sikhs, dominated the railway police department or security services division. (2004: 136)

Typically, Indian immigrants dominated the workforce of the railways. Indian labour was recruited directly from India and Ceylon, while the Chinese came through the contractor system. Kaur observes that: 'By 1922, there was a decline in the number of workers because by that date the major lines had been completed and increasing road-rail competition resulted in staff reductions' (ibid.).

Despite this, the high proportion of Indians vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the railway services persisted well into the 1950s. Sandhu emphasized that:

> Indians have played a prominent, often dominant, role in almost every phase of development of Malaya's modern transport and communication system, particularly the rail, road and telecommunication networks. In these, not only have they been the principal labourers, but also, together with Ceylon Tamils, [they] have formed the bulk of the clerical, adminis-trative and technical staff. (1967: 120)

Table 2.1. FMS Railway workers by ethnic group, 1903 and 1922 (Kaur 2004: 136).
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Year	Indian	Chinese	Malay	Eurasian
1903	5,819	1,078	278	n/a
1922	2,058	288	107	50

Source: 1903 – *Hindu Organ*, 30 December 1903; 1922 – *Selangor State Secretariat* File No. 3103/1922

Table 2.2. FMS Railway staff by ethnic group, 1932, 1939 and 1946 (Kaur 2004: 139). © Amarjit Kaur, used with permission

Department	Europeans			Eurasians			Indians and Ceylonese			Chinese			Malays		
	1932	1939	1946	1932	1939	1946	1932	1939	1946	1932	1939	1946	1932	1939	1946
Management (including administration)	6	4	6	-	-	3	25	15	13	6	3	6	7	6	11
Engineering	39	20	21	12	10	14	4,719	4,444	4,286	186	80	270	365	385	578
Mechanical	22	17	17	29	35	1229	1,073	1215	455	501	450	450	195	295	473
Transportation	52	36	37	84	145	184	3,803	3,469	3,359	398	378	344	693	1,024	1,293
Accounts	12	9	6	3	8	10	91	85	91	33	31	37	42	47	52
Stores	6	4	4	2	2	-	133	94	131	1	2	6	71	47	41
Police	3	-	-	2	1	1	250	12	11	5	4	7	157	5	3
Health	1	-	-	-	-	-	92	100	147	2	2	1	2	3	10
Total	141	90	91	120	195	247	10,342	9,292	9,253	1,086	1,001	1,121	1,532	1,812	2,461

Source: Annual Reports, FMS Railways, 1932, 1939, 1946

In 1931, the total FMSR labour force was 15,611, of which 12,311 were Indian, 1,472 were Malay and 1,613 were Chinese, with 163 Eurasians and 178 Europeans (FMSR 1932: 35). Of these, 4,114 Indians and 668 Malays were in the traffic department, 4,814 Indians and 287 Malays were in the engineering department, 1,545 Indians and 154 Malays were in locomotive department, and 499 Indians and 46 Malays were in construction. In 1929, the FMSR employed 25,000 workers, but by 1932, the size of the workforce was reduced to 12,000, as the railway network was not further expanded. The Great Depression in the 1930s negatively affected railway revenues and led to staff retrenchments. There were different grades of employees in the FMSR, who worked in various departments of the railways – Construction, Permanent Way and Works, Traffic, Locomotive, Signalling etc. The vast majority of South Indians were employed as menial labour or railway servants and were at the bottom of the barrel, were most poorly paid, and received daily wages and limited benefits.

In the early days, railway staff were provided with basic, rudimentary guidance as they engaged in manual labour tasks in harsh and risk-laden contexts. However, railway operation and maintenance over time required more dedicated engineering knowledge. In some instances, even this was learnt on the job (confirmed in my interviews with former railway staff), but ultimately, structured instruction was provided through training courses to specific technical professions in the eventual professionalization of the railway services. Kaur's research on the railway landscape in colonial Malaya maps the logic and pattern of the railway workforce which:

> was characterised by a three-tier occupational structure based on task and job classification: the managerial elite; the subordinate technical and clerical staff; and the railway workers. The managerial elite, which comprised mainly European staff, was paid on a monthly basis. The subordinate technical and clerical staff, comprising mainly Jaffna Tamils, was also paid on a monthly basis. Together, these two groups ran the FMS Railways. The last stratum comprised skilled workers, semi-skilled workers and unskilled labourers. The skilled workers were predominantly Chinese who were employed as mechanics, fitters, sheet-metal workers, polishers, welders, blacksmiths and electricians. The semi-skilled workers, mainly Indians, were plate-layers, signalmen, lamp men and pointsmen. The labourers, who were predominantly South Indians, maintained the railway tracks. This third group of railway employees was paid on a daily basis, and housed in accommodation which ranged from labour lines alongside railway tracks and compound accommodation in the vicinity of the workshops. (Kaur 2004: 152)

Railway workshops and depots were built around major stations and junctions (Singh 1985), which were also absorbed into the FMSR when it consolidated the existing railway lines. As Kaur recounts: 'The consolidation of the different state railways necessitated the establishment of central workshops and the employment of a "permanent", large labour force' (2004: 135). The largest of the centralized workshops, which was in Sentul (see Figure 2.2), employed 5,000 workers (Sim 1959). Here, amongst other tasks, railroad cars were built, railway parts were manufactured and maintenance was performed on traction units.

While some educated Indians and large numbers of Ceylonese were employed in clerical, administrative and supervisory positions, a large number of South Indians were employed in the Permanent Way and Works Department of the railways. Given the strong numerical presence of Ceylon Tamils in the railway services, the railway system was popularly known as the Jaffna Railways. The railways were also referred to by railway staff as '*Sothi* Express' (Reeves 2013: 82) and '*Murungakkai*[5] Mail' (ibid.: 83), named after food items that were carried on the trains and were popular with Ceylon Tamils. As a measure of their prominence in the railways, it has been noted that: 'Before 1940, almost

Figure 2.2. Railway workshop, 1880s–1890s. © Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, Empire Marketing Board, and related bodies. Courtesy of the National Archives, United Kingdom, used with permission

every station-master was invariably a Jaffnese, and many more were stationed in remote parts of the country to man the substations' (ibid.: 82). They were also visible as postal clerks, signalmen, guards and ticket collectors (ibid.: 82–83).

In comparison to the ethnic profile in the FMSR, gender differentiation among railway labourers has received negligible attention in the scholarship. However, Sandhu does record the significant presence of Indian women as agricultural labour in Malaya, 'women have generally formed between 30–45 per cent of the total Indian labour force and more than 80 per cent of them have been employed in agriculture since the early years of the present century' (1967: 107). He clarifies that 'outside of the plantation sector of the Malayan economy the activity rate of Indian females is very low, on the whole, less than 20 per cent compared with the more than 30 per cent for the Chinese' (ibid.). This is certainly borne out by the data from the railway services, where women had a numerically small presence, although the percentage of women railway workers grew between 1921 and 1947, as seen in Table 2.3.

In an important piece, Kaur (2004: 138) cites the growing presence of Indian women workers in the railways and details the nature of the work they performed:

> Railway workers in the lower grades (especially maintenance) were invariably Indian males, but increasingly, women were employed in these categories from the second and third decades of the twentieth century. These women, often spouses of Indian male labourers, worked as railway servants. In 1921, there were 80 women workers (compared to 7,929 men). In 1931, the figure rose to 178 women workers (compared to 7,083 men) and 244 women in 1947 (compared to 5,111 men). These figures do not include women employed as administrative personnel and in other clerical/skilled categories. (Kaur 1990b: 106)

Kaur's acknowledgement of women workers in the FMSR workforce is rare, as women labourers have remained invisible as a critical labour constituency in the conventional male-dominated historiography of Malayan labour migration.

Table 2.3. Indian railway workers by gender, 1921–1947 (Kaur 1990: 106).
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	1921		1931		1947	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Males	7,929	99	7,083	97.5	5,111	95.5
Females	80	1	178	2.5	244	4.5

Source: Compiled from Great Britain (1922, 1932, 1949)

This is despite women being *present* as labour in archival records. For example, according to W.A. Taylor, Resident-General of the FMS, in 1905: 'The total number of coolies recruited by *kanganies* for employment on estates and introduced into these states in the year 1905 was 7,543, of whom about 19 per cent were females' (FMS 1906).

Through the earliest years of the twentieth century, the *FMS Railway Reports* too record women's presence in the railways as labour in specific departments and report that they were paid less than male workers – a broad pattern in Malaya. As Sandhu notes: 'About three-quarters of the Indian female workers have been on plantations where wages have been generally low' (1967: 107). In 1931, it was reported that women were employed in the Permanent Way and Works Department of the FMSR in the states of Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, and were paid 40 cents a day, compared to the 50 cents a day that their male counterparts were paid (FMS 1932: 36). Women were also employed in the Construction Department of the railways in Singapore, notably in Kelantan, where they were paid slightly more – 46 cents a day as compared to 58 cents for the male workers (ibid.). Indian women's presence as labour, either in the various railway services or as estate labour, has not been either adequately acknowledged or theorized. Even if their presence has been noted in the records, it appears only in passing.

During my fieldwork in Malaysia, my conversations with former railway labourers and *mandore*s led me to the idea of *railway families* as my interlocutors narrated their biographies and family histories. In case after case, I heard that entire families had worked in the railways, including the female members of the household and children – a pattern I encountered consistently in the field. My male interlocutors spoke of grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts and wives who had worked in the railways as cleaners of coaches, stations and tracks; as gardeners cutting grass, removing weeds, trimming bushes in railway precincts and, especially, keeping rail tracks and the surrounding areas free of vegetation; and in the railway canteen, cooking, cleaning, serving and washing dishes, and in rare instances in clerical services. In an early piece, Sandhu notes that 'it has been normal for almost all working age members, including females, of families to work' (1967: 107).

However, in my fieldwork, I encountered only seven female interlocutors who were active as custodians of 'railwaymen temples'. The first of my women interlocutors was Vani, who I had met during my 2017 trip to Paloh Station. She was in her seventies and had considerable knowledge about the hundred-year-old Am'ma<u>n</u> temple that used to be sited right on the platform. When we met, she pointed out the physical traces of the temple's past that were still visible on the station. She shared that she had been associated with the temple for twenty-two years. The temple was demolished in 2003 and moved to an alternate site in the

centre of the town, where a new temple was consecrated in December 2015. Vani told me that although the temple had been relocated, she still returned to the old site, as she felt the deity was 'still here'. She was extremely generous and took me to meet Menon, a leader of Paloh's Indian community. This introduction was instrumental in accessing further historical details of the famous goddess temple in Paloh.

Similarly, 55-year-old Kamala – the wife of the chairman of the Sri Mahamariamman Peycheeamman Temple in Serendah – was critical for my research as she generously shared the temple's history when I met her in 2017. She described her connectedness to the railways by saying that she came from a 'railway family', sharing that her grandfather was involved in maintaining the tracks, while her father was a jeep driver in the railways, her brother worked on track maintenance and an uncle on her mother's side was a station master. She was proud to note that her grandfather had looked after the eighty-year-old temple, which she recalled used to be located along the old railway tracks, near the old Serendah Station. It was moved to its present location near the new station in 2001, where it thrives with the support of a community of devotees.

In 2017, I also interviewed Vasanti – a teacher in her forties – one of the most charismatic and determined individuals I met during my fieldwork in Kampung India, Mengkibol, where her family had been involved in establishing several 'railwaymen temples'. She had considerable knowledge about the four 'railwaymen temples' in her neighbourhood and had also been embroiled in a long battle with the railway authorities to prevent her *kampong* (Malay, 'village') and temples therein from being demolished. I will share details of the difficult negotiations Vasanti had with the authorities in Chapter 6. Mala – a woman in her thirties – was equally committed to the railwaymen temple that her father Tharman, a *mandore*, had built next to their quarters at the Layang Layang Station. When I visited the temple in 2017, it was literally being demolished and the icons had been moved to a rented premises nearby. Mala, together with her husband, Chandran, negotiated with the KTM authorities and was involved in decision making about what would happen to the temple. Her father – who was in his seventies at the time – had retired recently and was working hard to convince the railway authorities to grant alternative living quarters for his family and his deities. Another of my interlocutors was Priya – a woman in her forties – who was a member of the temple's management committee at the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Behrang, and noted with pride that many women were involved in the temple's current leadership. Together with the chairman of the temple, Priya narrated this temple's story, which I will discuss in Chapter 6.

As daughters and granddaughters of male railway labourers and *mandore*s who had founded 'railwaymen temples', the women I spoke to had assumed responsibility for these temples, sustained them enthusiastically and expressed

that they wanted to honour the memories of their ancestors. The women viewed these sacred structures as *family temples* and as part of their inheritance and legacy. In all the cases I have presented, the women continued to live either in the original accommodation occupied by their fathers or grandfathers, or close to the original railway temples they had built. While I mostly met male temple caretakers, managers and time priests, women were very much present in railwaymen temples as visible participants in temple management committees and led key cultural, religious and educational initiatives programmes in the temples.

Despite the fact that women did have a presence in the historical and archival records, the mainstream historiographies of Indian labour migration to Malaya have been largely silent on gender and the scholarship is marked by androcentrism, producing 'female invisibility' (March 1982), rendering them 'missing persons' (McDonald 1994). However, over the last two decades or so, highlighting the role of women labourers and their contributions in the Malayan economy – who have been silenced and marginalized in social science and humanities research – has gained much-needed momentum and traction (Datta 2015, 2016; Jeyathurai 2012; Kaur 2014; Lee 1989; Oorjitham 1987; Pillai 2004), as women's exclusion and the neglect of gender as a unit of analysis in labour and migration studies have been critiqued and acted upon. Datta's book *Fleeting Agencies* (2021) is a pioneering text that documents the presence of 'Tamil coolie women' on Malayan colonial rubber plantations and presents them as socioeconomic and political actors with agency. This recognition has analytical importance for historians of labour migration to Malaya and redresses the erstwhile neglect and invisibility of women's labouring contributions to plantation economies. Datta's foregrounding of Indian women coolies as labourers and their labouring as constitutive of national and transnational histories is also productive.

This chapter has relied on select official archives and secondary historical materials to map a history of the colonial railways in Malaya and the movement of immigrant labour to these regions who, together with resident labour, constructed colonial projects, including the laying of railway networks. The historical data presented here have been interpreted and read through the lens of labour to reveal labouring efforts that typically remain hidden in official narratives. Against this backdrop, Chapter 3 recounts the day-to-day working conditions and labouring lives of railway labourers who were charged with the daily regimen of track maintenance – a key responsibility that kept the trains running smoothly. It details the living conditions of this cluster of railway labour, with an emphasis on their accommodation – the size, scale, type and location of sites they called home. Both these emphases enable me to document the nature and scope of *railway work* undertaken by those deemed underlings in the railways. Finally, these discussions bring into sharp focus comparative narratives about the working and living conditions of British railway navvies presented in Chapter 1.

Notes

1. The British instituted a residential system in Malaya where a British Resident was appointed for each of the Malay states. The authority of the native chief/ruler still held in all matters relating to Islam and Malay custom, but the Resident reigned supreme over matters of general administration, maintenance of law and order, and control over all revenues.
2. This was renamed the Indian Immigration Fund in 1912 and the South Indian Labour Fund in 1958. The recruitment of labour was also commodified with a different business model: the cost of passage was jointly borne by employers and the government, compared to an earlier arrangement in which the cost was covered by migrants themselves.
3. 'Pioneers Conquer Malayan Jungle', *Straits Budget*, 20 November 1952, 14.
4. The scientific name of merbau is *Intsia bijuga*, also known as kwila wood. It is a hard wood found primarily in Southeast Asia. Chengal is a durable timber from *Neobalanocarpus heimii*, a tropical hardwood tree that is native to Malaysia.
5. A vegetable from the horseradish or drumstick tree that is native to tropical Asia and popular as a food item across South Asia. Its scientific name is *Moringa oleifera* and it is known in Tamil as 'muruṅkai' and in Hindi as 'sahjan'. It is also recognized as having considerable nutritional value and healing properties.

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WORK AND LIVING SPACES OF MALAYAN RAILWAY LABOUR

Homes and Worksites as Contiguous Domains

Against the backdrop of global migration narratives and colonial railway histories outlined in the two previous chapters, the discussion here is focused specifically on the working and living conditions of railway labourers who built and maintained railways in Malaya. Selected archival materials and ethnographic data are used to unpack the *work* of this cluster of railway labourers and detail their worksites and living spaces. In a colonial context, manual labour was organized into *gangs* headed by a *mandore* (supervisor, foreman, inspector), akin to the organization of British navvies. Satya has observed that: 'The organisation of large bodies of workers into gangs was a central feature of the imperial railway construction project. The gang-labour system was recruited and controlled by Indian labour contractors in a classic colonial policy of divide and control' (2008: 73). As such, these gangs constituted productive units and were not unique to the railways.

The predominantly immigrant South Indian railway labour in Malaya, who had laid the tracks in these regions, were also tasked with the daily task of maintaining the permanent way and ensuring that the trains ran without disruption. Gangs organized by the logic of railway engineering and technology not only worked together, but were also often housed as a cluster, in functional accommodations close to their work sites. This proximity was necessitated by the very logic and nature of the work they performed; this was, above all, a deliberate and expedient decision of the railway authorities. The imperative of running the railways produced residential patterns that kept labour close to railway lines, stations, workshops, depots and yards – aligned with housing patterns of the British railway navvies.

In his review of the scholarship on India's railways, Kerr describes its 'socio-cultural dimensions' (2007: xli) as an under-researched field. In her

study on labourers who constructed the infrastructure of public works in North America and Canada, Bleasdale (2018) reiterates the same gaps. Speaking of the everyday lives of diverse local and migrant labouring communities, she poignantly remarks:

> As labourers came and went on public works, they created communities which were internally differentiated by age, marital status, the number of women and children present, degrees of poverty, types of attachments in the area of construction, and all the life experiences and circumstances individuals brought to the works … But much of the differentiation within any one cluster of labourers is lost in the historical record, and with it the day-to-day interactions within family, networks, neighbourhoods, communities of faith, and leisure affiliations from taverns to temperance associations. *These have been obscured by processes which marginalised in the past and into the present.* (Ibid.: 286, emphasis added)

This study is committed to highlighting these neglected aspects of labourers' lives. The driving argument in this chapter is that what constituted *homes* for railway labour in Malaya were located precisely in, or near, the places where they also worked. The workspaces and homes of permanent way labourers were thus contiguous sites. Notably, and unexpectedly, the proximate nature of these sites was consequential beyond serving the instrumental needs of the railways. I argue that these adjoined *work-living spaces* were, to some extent, sites of containment, and limited the workers' movements, though not in the same way that Malayan estates were places of discipline and confinement.

While the housing provided for railway labour was barely functional and often situated in harsh terrains, individuals could build sociocultural and religious lives therein, forge solidarities and build a sense of community. While building and maintaining the railways, Indian Hindu railway labour in Malaya also constructed temples for their gods and goddesses in their backyards, within railway landscapes. These sites were approached as efficacious and enchanted, where individuals expressed devotion and enacted their religious lives. I have designated these acts of building temples as an instance of the *religion-making* efforts of labourers, and as one register of their *nonlabouring* lives, which were manifested even as individuals laboured for the railways.

Unpacking the 'Work' of Railway Labour

Geographers have noted that the natural, physical environment of Malaya in the mid-nineteenth century was 'as difficult for men to control as any other equatorial landscape' (Dobby 1942: 211) and that 'the physique of Malaya has

been in no sense exceptionally favourable to human settlement' (Fisher 1966: 590). The commercial potential of Malaya for agricultural development and mining had to contend with the exacting and daunting natural features of the region. As Brookfield et al. note: 'As late as the middle of the nineteenth century, over 95 per cent of the land area of Borneo and the Peninsula was still under forest' (1995: 23), which is confirmed by Dobby's description of the Malayan topography:

> The chief variant within this cover of evergreen forest is marsh; often the jungles itself stands in marsh. Hundreds of square miles of marsh landscape are occupied by a bushy vegetation of which mangrove is the marine type; the fresh water-swamps carry tall grasses, *lalang*, as well as bushes. The combination of jungle and swamp dominates the natural landscape and has controlled rigidly the manner and patterns of man's settlement. (1942: 211)

Likewise, Lim highlights the natural barriers to the 'movement of people' in these territories (1978: 7), given that the 'alignment of the mountain ranges and by the tropical rain forest' (ibid.). As such, he argues that 'human activities were thus confined to the narrow coastal strips and the riverine lands. Even these areas could not be developed without difficulty' (ibid.), also adding that the onslaught of the 'north-east monsoon interrupted productive activities on the east coast' (ibid.), while 'a high proportion of the riverine lands elsewhere were rendered both unhealthy and agriculturally unproductive by the existence of marshes' (ibid.). Constructing transportation and communication networks in this inhospitable environment with rudimentary tools and technologies would not have been easy. As such, it is worth asking how a railway network was even built in these terrains *at all*. Yet, by 1932, the entire FMSR network of close to 1,700 km of tracks – across Malaya and the island of Singapore – had been completed. Comparing this railway network with others in Southeast Asia, Fisher declared that 'Malaya has a somewhat elaborate railway system. Indeed, no other nearby territory has so great a length of line relative to its population' (1948: 123).

Planning and laying railway lines and building bridges and tunnels in the dense, tropical Malayan jungles no doubt challenged railway engineers, surveyors and labourers alike. The terrain was neither ideal nor easy for railway construction. Shamsuddin observes that: 'These lines were constructed by manual methods following the land profile which offered a minimum of cut and fill, curves were quite sharp but gradients modest to accommodate the limited haulage capacity of early locomotives' (1985: 11). Fisher concurs that 'Malaya as a whole, is by no means an easy country for railway construction' (1948: 124) and that the topography of Malaya posed challenges to railway building as 'with few

exceptions, Malayan conditions are no more favourable to railway construction than those pertaining elsewhere in South-east Asia' (ibid.: 123), a view Stanistreet agreed with:

> Much of the permanent way lies along embankments and cuttings, though nowhere could any of these be classed as major engineering works. The very fact that the entire railway was hacked through thick tropical rain-forests and malarious swamps by largely unmechanized labour, would seem, in itself to qualify the whole of the system as a major engineering feat. (1974: 7)

In particular, the eastern coast of the peninsula was marked as a largely 'uninhabited and completely untamed jungle' (Fisher 1948: 123) and posed distinct obstacles to railway builders. Constructing this section of the railways entailed 'lengthy and expensive tunnelling and the construction of numerous large bridges' (ibid.: 125). Speaking at the official opening of the East Coast Railway, J. Strachan, General Manager of Federated Malay States Railways, outlined the difficulties of laying tracks in this part of the country, congratulating all involved in this onerous endeavour and even remembering 'the absent ones who have helped in the construction':

> The construction staff has had a hard task. The work has been exceedingly heavy and of a difficult nature: transport difficulties, sickness, frequent tropical rains and floods have had to be overcome. All ranks and races have shown a fine spirit; some have died at their posts, many rest in France, others are scattered over various parts of the world, and many are out of work and unable to find employment. We heartily congratulate Mr. W. J. Haskins, the Engineer for Construction, on the very satisfactory completion of the railway, but all of us who are now present should remember the absent ones who have helped in the construction. (*The Straits Times* 1931a)

Once constructed, the East Coast Line required considerable attention and maintenance due to climate and weather conditions, especially regular floods, which 'wreak great havoc to bridges, embankments and cuttings' (Fisher 1948: 123). Stanistreet also observed the difficulties in maintaining the FMSR, particularly its east coast network:

> Parts of the line, principally on the East Coast section, suffer from the softness of the ground and there is a tendency for slips to occur, especially during the monsoon seasons. In north-east Malaya, in the state of

Kelantan, further hazards are encountered, in the shape of serious floods. Permanent way staff have to be, and are, very vigilant. (1975: 7–8)

The blueprint for railway construction in colonial India, which was inspired by British railways, was exported to the other colonies. Kerr argues that railway-building efforts in India 'were colonial projects directed, initially, by railroad companies headquartered in London following a *template established by the colonial authorities*' (2007: 48, emphasis added). Comparative historical data confirm that the model used in India aligned with the Malayan case:

> The construction of a line was conceived, managed, and then directed on-site by the British … In India, the construction process ended at many individual worksites where *Indians physically built the railroads* under the direction of British engineers and British overseers with a leavening of skilled British workmen. (Ibid., emphasis added)

The laying of railway tracks was labour-intensive and translated into aggressive and unrelenting colonial policies and strategies for securing cheap and large pools of labour. Kerr observes that 'the British directed the entire construction process – overall and specifically' (2006: 37) and that 'Line formation required the most labour. This arduous, time-consuming task was the preserve of Indians. Their muscle power assisted by the simplest of tools formed the line' (ibid.: 38). This heavy reliance on human labour produced the earliest railways in Malaya – at the cost of tremendous injuries and death for labourers. However, this was analogous to railway-building elsewhere, including in India, where 'Indians built the railroads; they did most of the work and most of the dying' (Kerr 2006: 48).

Satya has noted that Indian railways were built literally on the backs of men, women and children, adding that the 'Majority of the workers remained unskilled as manual labourers, diggers and movers. Indian railways until the end of the Raj remained a heavily labour-intensive operation in which men, women, and children sold their labour power' (2008: 73). Given the precarious nature of railway work, labourers were vulnerable, just as in other places like India and Uganda:

> Often the railway work was extremely dangerous and accident-prone. Construction accidents were common and led to many deaths. Working on cliffs to drill and blast into rocks often sent workers down with suspension that dashed into rocks or snapped taking life. Blasting with powder resulted in considerable loss of life from flying rocks, slips, cave-ins, etc. (Ibid.)

Research on railway building in the colonies highlights the hazardous, harsh and backbreaking work undertaken by the labour laying tracks. Notably, Kerr

observes that: 'Manual methods requiring large numbers of labourers remained a distinguishing feature of earth-working in India well into the 20th century' (2006: 39). The longevity of traditional and manual methods of track construction and maintenance well into the postcolonial period is remarkable, not just in British India but also in the Empire's former colonies, like Kenya, Uganda and Malaysia. It would seem that the colonial proclivity to keep the railways tied to large labour pools was shared by the governments in these places even after independence, despite the availability of modern methods of track maintenance with enhanced technologies and scientific knowhow. However, the mechanization of track maintenance was a double-edged sword as, ironically, it rendered railway labour redundant. The railway workflow and labour processes that were implemented and executed in the Indian context also helped unpack the work deployed by railway labour in Malaya:

> Once the general route surveys and the detailed line surveys had been completed, railroad construction involved three basic tasks: formation of the line; ballasting and laying the permanent way (the tracks); building/ erecting workshops, stations, accommodations for workers, signals and signalling boxes and towers, water towers, installation of the electric telegraph, and many other devices. (Kerr 2006: 38)

Kaur highlights that in Malaya, 'The largest category of railway workers were labourers employed for construction and maintenance work' (1990: 106) from South India – mostly Tamils and some Telugus and Malayalis. These clusters were classified as *unskilled labour* and *railway servants*, charged with laying the tracks and, subsequently, maintaining them, for which little technical training was deemed necessary. The railway construction work included clearing land, forests and earthwork – that is, the renewal and clearance of soil, cutting dense vegetation, excavating cuttings and making embankments. These could be accomplished with little training and on-the-job guidance sufficed. On the other hand, erecting bridges and tunnelling work required training and explicit instruction. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of all railway work was performed by hand, using rudimentary equipment – shovels, picks and baskets – and was physically demanding. Beyond the arduous and gruelling task of laying the tracks, manual labour maintained the permanent way by surveying the tracks daily and performing meticulous technical and mechanical checks. The manpower in the Way and Works and Engineering Departments were the largest and most expensive sections of the railways and furnished labour for track maintenance.

From 1931, the 'Maflin formula' was used to calculate gang strength for manual track maintenance in the British railways and presumably in the colonies too. Essentially, this formula was 'a very simple one (number of gang men =

2.5 x "unit per mile" x length of track, where the "unit per mile" factor depends on the kind of traffic carried on the track). It assumes a standard requirement of manpower regardless of the track gauge' (Permanent Way n.d.). This blueprint evolved, becoming more complicated and incorporating more parameters in calculating the labour needed for track maintenance. Writing of railways in India, a 2017 report on the *Work Study to Review the Staff Strength at Sse/P.Way/Wst, Chennai Division* details the history of quantifying labour as a key element of rationalizing railway work itself:

> In the early days of company railways and State railways, the gang strength of permanent way was calculated in various ways. In 1931, the Maflin formula was first introduced. Then in 1959, the Lobo Committee appointed by Railway Board brought the 'Modified Maflin Formula'. But due to some inbuilt contradictions, this was not implemented. Again, two more committees appointed in 1971 and 1972 had not seen the light of the day at all. The special committee formula of 1976 was implemented in 1979. But this special committee covered only 12 activities and other activities were carried by contract/casual labourers. (Ministry of Railways 2018)

These technical formulae reveal a deep connection between railway engineering and the organization of labour for extracting maximum productivity – something that resonated with colonial logic. This method of calculating optimal gang strength for track maintenance continued to be improved and honed until 2014. According to Profillidis:

> In order to estimate the extent (and the expense) of track maintenance works, the maintenance coefficient k is used as a parameter. The entire railway network is divided into sections with approximately the same number of maintenance sessions of track teams along each section, maintenance sessions being used to understand all mean sessions, with either manual labour alone or including the use of mechanical equipment, between two complete renewals of the track … Use of maintenance coefficient k may contribute to a rational planning of track maintenance works. (2014: section 9.9.1)

Railway gangs were composed of eight to twelve workers who were charged with the maintenance of specific sections of the track length, at three to four-mile intervals, along the entire stretch of the railway network. For Indian railways, Satya notes that 'Indian labourers were organised into small gangs of 12–13 men under the immediate charge of an Indian *mistri* (ganger) who in turn were subjected to

close superintendence by British inspectors and sub-inspectors' (2008: 73). This pattern was replicated across the British colonies such as Kenya and Malaya. In the example of the Kenya Railways, Musuva documents two manual methods of track maintenance – 'the Orthodox and the Flying Gang Trolley methods' (1992: 119). He explains:

> The Orthodox method is a system whereby a *maintenance unit (gang) are accommodated alongside the railway line* and each gang covers a track length of about 7 km depending on the standard length of track and formation conditions. The basic method of calculating the strength of a unit depends on the number of curves, lines and turn-outs etc. As regards a maintenance gang, especially in the orthodox track maintenance method, *the number of labourers (gangmen) is determined by equivalent length of plain track.* (Ibid.: 121, emphasis added)

Notably, in the state of Selangor in 1889, the 'men per mile' logic was already being used by Selangor Railway. The government engineer for this state railway, A. Spence Moss, provides the breakdown of railway expenses and savings for 1889 and outlines the strategy of extracting maximum productivity from each labourer by reducing wages to a bare minimum, long before the appearance of Maflin's Formula:

> It is very satisfactory to note a gradual reduction of the working expenses per train mile, more especially in the item 'Maintenance of Ways and Works'. When I returned from leave in October 1888, this item stood at $1.70. I have now reduced it gradually to 46 cents. A brief description of the system of maintenance may be of interest. The line is divided into 10 sections of 2 miles each; to each section there is a Mandore, with 10 coolies, 9 ordinary and 1 spannerman, for tightening up rail joints. There is also a special gang, consisting of 1 Mandore and 12 coolies, somewhat more highly paid than the ordinary gangs, kept at Batu Tiga, in readiness to be sent to any portion of the line in case of emergency or breakdown. The cost is as follows, the month being taken at 26 days:

10 Ordinary Permanent Way gangs at $100.62	= $1,006.20
1 Special Permanent Way gang at $118.56	= $118.56
Per month	= $1,124.76
	× 12 months
Per annum	= $13,497.
Repairs to coach	= $ 13,800.00

It is notable that the *Annual FMS Railway Reports* and the *Malayan Railway Reports* offer meticulous account details of railway expenditures. Chief among these were financial details on track construction and maintenance, with reductions in these costs highlighted as accomplishments and triumphs. Kaur makes the crucial point that:

> Between 1884 and 1931 (by which time approximately 1700 km of railway track had been laid), cumulative expenditure on railway construction amounted to more than $233 million …. *This great expenditure was possible because of the exploitation of labour.* (1990: 101, emphasis added)

Interestingly, gangs persisted as the basic unit for organizing labour well into the postcolonial era in Malaysia, India and elsewhere. A 2019 article published by *Rail News Center* mentions permanent way gangs and outlines the manual work they undertake in the present as track maintenance crew, a role that has continued for over a century. The workflow of track maintenance outlined here overlaps with the work of permanent way gangs described in the *General Rules for Working Open Lines of Railway in British India* published by the Public Works Department (PWD), Government of India, in 1892 (see Appendix I). These rules were meant to 'extend to the whole of British India and, so far regards subjects of Her Majesty the Empress of India, to the dominions of Princes and States in India in alliance, within Her Said Majesty' (see Appendix I). Given its brief, this document contained meticulous details of the work to be undertaken by various categories of railway personnel. For example, 'Section IX of Chapter II' of this document is entitled 'Maintenance of Permanent Way' and specifies how the tracks are to be maintained:

> *Every portion of the permanent-way must be inspected daily on foot* by some authorized person responsible for its condition; and bridges and all other works (including signals and signal wires) must be regularly inspected in accordance with special instructions. (PWD, GoI 1892, Rule 112, emphasis added)

> Each ganger must report to the Inspector of Permanent way when any telegraph post on his length of line appears to be in an unsafe state, or any of the signal or telegraph wires are broken, slack, entangled, or touching each other or any building. He must also see that all grass, creepers, boughs of trees, and rubbish are removed from the wires. (Ibid.: Rule 113)

These elaborate specifications articulate the responsibilities of the ganger and the gang of workers he supervised. Other examples from the same document,

'Chapter VI: Rules for Regulating the Conduct of Railway Servants, and Generally for Regulating the Travelling upon, and the Use, Working, and Management of the Railway' and 'Section V' in particular, detail the duties and work scope of 'Inspectors, Platelayers, Gangers, and others employed on the Permanent way' (see Appendix II).

In Malaya, staff who were assigned technical tasks in the Way and Works, Signal and Telegraph and Locomotive Departments were trained at the Government Technical School (FMSR 1930: 28). This school, 'opened in October 1925, was under the direction of an Executive Engineer, Public Works Department' (ibid.). Here, apprentices took classes, sat for examinations in technical subjects and also received practical training. The Permanent Way Institution (PWI) for Malaya was set up in 1928 by R.W. Hiam, head of the Engineering Department at FMS. At a meeting held at the Railway Institute in Kuala Lumpur on 9 March 1929, Hiam 'explained that the main object of the Institution was to disseminate knowledge of permanent way work by means of informal discussions of the various little problems that creep into everyday permanent way maintenance' (*Malaya Tribune* 1929). J. Stratchan, the general manager of the FMSR who was present at the meeting, having visited other colonies, boasted 'that he had not yet seen one where the permanent way was as good as ours' and declared that 'this was largely due to the Head of Engineering Department, Mr R.W. Hiam, who was a very energetic officer' (ibid.), rendering invisible and inconsequential the contributions of the largely Indian labour force employed in the 'Way and Works' and 'Engineering Departments'.

Expectedly, in the official records of the FMSR, there is no mention of the manual labour engaged in earthworks, laying lines, tunnelling, building bridges and maintaining the railway network. Often the labouring work entailed in these railway construction and maintenance projects is referenced at best passively and indirectly, and reported in the third person. This obscured the individuals who laboured, their efforts were erased and they were rendered persona non grata. For example, the FMSR *Annual Report of the Railways for 1909* reflects the typical modes of reporting the tedious and extensive work of laying lines and sidings, digging tunnels, building bridges and platforms and reconfiguring goods yards, without any mention of who was doing all the reported railway work:

> Remodelling Goods Yard, KL, River Wall and Bridge on Klang River: All works in connection with this item have been completed, with the exception of the new road to goods shed which is in need and the cable siding which has to be ballasted. (FMSR 1910: 10)

> Gemas-Kuala Semantan Railway: The construction of this railway, which is the first section of the East States trunk line, was commenced in July

1907, the length from Gemas to Semantan river being 76 miles. 23 miles of the line from Gemas to Bahau were practically completed. The Progress made was as follows. Jungle felling and clearing has been completed for the whole length. Out of a total of 41,665, 275 cubic yards of earthwork, 3,679,193 were completed. The service road has been completed to the Semantan river. The total number of bridges and culverts is 338, of which 131 have been completed. The Permanent way was linked in for 55½ miles from Gemas. (Ibid. 16)

Despite the key role played by these labouring units, Kerr laments that the records 'do not penetrate to the level of the gangs and the gangers' (2006: 44). This is hardly surprising and such silencing of railway labour's contributions is rife in the archives. A turn to other sources is thus necessary to uncover their labouring contributions. My effort in this regard is driven by a commitment to decolonize research methodologies and to demonstrate the contributions of railway labour in building and maintaining the railways, given the limited discussions of this in official records and railway historiography. I invoke two alternate sources to achieve this: first, ethnographic materials generated through my fieldwork; and, second, content analysis of select English-language newspapers from Malaya. While colonial newspapers furnish insights on railway building projects and reflect public opinion about the economic, social and political issues of the time, these articulations were undoubtedly shaped by agendas that influenced the nature of the reportage. Nonetheless, I argue that newspapers constitute an important resource, as they contain substantive – sometimes even ethnographic – details unavailable in the official archives. Turning to the former materials enabled me to abstract the day-to-day railway work in which permanent way gangs were engaged as well as the episodic emergency work that they were called upon to perform.

I turn first to ethnographic insights from the interviews that I conducted with permanent way staff – *mandore*s, signalmen, linesmen and track maintenance labourers – as well as locomotive drivers, all of whom provided valuable first-hand accounts of the day-to-day railway work they witnessed or performed. Naresh, a former locomotive driver now in his early eighties who is associated with the Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman Temple in Bukit Tembok, noted:

Every 3 to 4 km there was a gang line – these were the railway line workers – always stationed nearby. Their job was to patrol and maintain the tracks. There were at least ten members in the gang plus one *mandore*. They all lived in railway quarters near or next to tracks and stations … People were living in jungles also. Their life was very hard. No water, no light, rooms so small … they worked for so long, so many hours, woke up

so early, could not rest also … how to sleep, staying so close to the tracks, just imagine the noise from the train – so close.

Hajruddin, a retired station master at the Kuala Krai Station and who runs a canteen there with his Thai wife, Titor, explained the nature of track maintenance work, highlighting the value of manual methods even after mechanization:

> Gang line people worked on the permanent way, on the maintenance of the track. So every 3 or 4 km, this gang, 10–12 people – they check everything. They are given … it seems they are given this part to check. Every morning you walk 4 km and turn back – checking and checking. It was very tough. Now it is not tough *lah*. We have the machinery. Last time, manually. Now also people check – they will just go on the bike and come back. But we don't trust 100% the machinery. The machine will just check and give the report but the gang line people still have to go and do the repairing and all.

Kaur's research is rare in documenting the impoverished working conditions of railway labourers:

> The most exploited groups of workers was [*sic*] the unskilled labourers who maintained the railway tracks and grounds. A small number were based at each station and the workshops. The majority were stationed along the railway tracks throughout the country at 3 mile (4.8 km) intervals. Their working hours were from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon with only a half-hour break for lunch. These labourers worked in groups of seven or eight – comprising the ganger (*mandore* or overseer), a keyman and five to six labourers. (1990: 110)

The idea of labourers being 'given kilometres to check and work on' appeared repeatedly in my conversations as I travelled across the western and eastern coasts of Malaysia, and soon became a predictable pattern. Lingam, who had worked in track maintenance in the railways and was in his mid-sixties when we spoke in 2017, was the caretaker of the Dewa Sri Muneeswarar Temple in Arau, a temple with a history of 117 years. He told me about the 'flying gang' – a gang of workers mobilized to handle emergencies and crises and who literally lived 'between the tracks … very close, right next to the tracks' because of their work. Lingam's grandfather was from Tamil Nadu, and had come to Malaya via South Africa and had worked with railways doing track maintenance. He recounted his grandfather's working experiences:

> Then our grandfather … according to our grandmother, she was from Nepal … our grandfather was with the railways. In those days, he was involved in clearing the forests for tracks to be laid. In those times, there was a system where the tracks will lock when the trains are crossing. Yes, he did track maintenance. The old system … they had to go very far ahead, walk a lot. As they were doing the maintenance, my grandfather's leg got stuck in one of those tracks … and he died in that accident.

Numerous other former railway labourers I spoke to about their working life in the railways confirmed the many instances of workplace injuries and accidents – some had experienced these themselves. Former locomotive driver, Tan, was in his seventies when I spoke to him in 2017. He had a wealth of information about railway history in Malaysia and continued to work for Indian and Chinese companies involved in railway modernization projects after he retired from KTM. He shared that he had witnessed a staggering number of accidents throughout his career, citing examples of rail crashes when two trains were travelling on the same track from opposite directions, and of derailments, worker injuries and deaths:

> I have seen major accidents – trains destroyed; passengers killed – but also when driving the train at night – workers living nearby tracks – crossing; getting knocked down. I don't know how many people have been knocked down … feel bad but what to do.

Mani, a Ceylon Tamil gentleman in his eighties who had retired as station master at the Port Klang station, shared similar stories:

> There was a famous accident at Layang Layang … because we put the wrong line … didn't switch properly. Two trains crashed on the same line, high speed … major … the whole entire thing is gone. The driver died, attendant and passengers also.

In another instance, 72-year-old Venu, a former linesman whose job was to shift a set of levers manually for trains to switch tracks based at Layang Layang station, noted:

> so many workers died – fingers, hand and leg stuck in the tracks – have to cut. Drivers got burnt … from hot coal and steam in the engine. Also attacked by wild animals – elephants – in jungles. KTM staff working on the tracks – see cobra everything [*sic*]. So many died also – knocked down by train – crossing tracks, working night time, cannot see properly [*sic*].

Likewise, Gopinath confirmed that railway work was dangerous. He was almost seventy when I spoke to him in 2018 and had worked in track maintenance in the early days of his long career with the railways at the Bukit Mertajam Station as a member of 'railway gangline no. 18'. He confirmed the presence of the famous 'flying gang' at Arau station and explained the different types of gangs as he described his own experience of performing demanding railway work:

> There was 'normal gang' and 'special gang'. In Arau, there was 'flying gang' and 'main gang'. Here they have special gang, crossing gang, normal gang. Special gang, they are responsible for the main repairs from Prai to Taiping. Normal gang, that one for three miles only – every day walking up and down. So, main and normal gang is the same. So, every three miles there was quarters for the gangs also [*sic*].

> I myself when I was working in the railways, our *mandore*, Sinnasamy Thevar. He – that time – the railway supply pocket watch you know [*sic*]. Those times where got wrist watch? And you [meaning labourer] cannot wear it, so he [*mandore*] keeps the pocket watch here (in his pocket). He will turn the time. If now it is 2 o'clock, the fellow will put 1.30. Why? To make you work extra *lah*. I worked about 8 hours a day when I was in the gang line [*sic*].

> No, you must finish the work by this time. But sometimes a lazy fellow will just be acting and working like that, so that's why they give *pangu* – a share *lah*. That means every three miles, every quarter mile they will be there. So one person will get 10 rails. That means 30 ft, 1 rail. So 300 ft one fellow. Less work you cannot do. You must finish work. If you don't finish today, tomorrow you have to continue. So tomorrow they will write down in the paper there. So, in weekly report, they will record that you haven't finished. Then the supervisor will come and ask why.

> I go to work at 7 o'clock so I wake up at 6 o'clock. Then by 7 o'clock when you leave, you have already done the cooking and carry my own lunch. And come back at 3 pm. So we were very tired after work.

My interviews further confirmed that the day-to-day maintenance of the tracks, undertaken by sectional gangs, entailed foot patrolling of tracks and visual inspections for damage and flaws, which needed to be repaired on the spot. My interlocutors shared that manual track maintenance was done using the methods of packing or beater packing – from the name of the tool for packing ballast (that

is, a beater) – and was physically demanding. Kaur's important work details the daily grind of the permanent way labourers:

> Every morning (except Sundays), the labourers would be 'rounded up' (in the process some men were beaten as well), and, carrying all their tools such as jacks and lifting bars in baskets, they would walk up the track one-and-half-miles (2.4 km) and then back to the other end, three miles (4.8 km) away … The poor Indian worker therefore trudged along with his basket containing his tools on his head. He also carried a tiffin carrier and some well water. The water was never sufficient and he had to depend on drain water from the drains adjoining the tracks. The workers had no shelter while they worked. (1990: 110–11)

Together, my interlocutors and I drew rough images in my field notebooks to visualize where these gangs were positioned in quarters and living camps near stations and depots and adjacent to the tracks. They described the daily routine of track maintenance thus: walking up and down the length of the tracks, checking for wear and tear, looking out for dislodged nuts and clips, carrying out the necessary repairs and reporting all the work they had done to the *mandore*. Damodaran, a former railway employee in his sixties when I met him in 2018 and the caretaker of the Sentul Yard Temple, explained the work done by gangline workers who lived in railway quarters near the Sentul and Batu Caves stations thus:

> Every morning they get up … check the track … whether the lines moved or not … check if the nails are loose or not … from Sentul to Batu Caves, they will check. You know *lah*, in those days, they will put their things in a trolley and push and go. On one railway block there were ten houses … one block on this side and one block on that side of the station. Each gang walked in opposite directions, checking, repairing tracks.
>
> They will start work early morning, 6 o'clock or 7 o'clock, carry tools on their head or in shoulder bags – then eat cold food they own-self make and carry – until … come back so tired – 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock – every day, only Sunday rest.

The railway tracks laid across the western and eastern coasts of the Malayan Peninsula and the island of Singapore constituted a sprawling railway network. This was spread across urban centres and the rural countryside, often cutting through thick jungles and isolated and inhospitable terrains. Many of my interlocutors shared that the gangs were also located in remote regions, as track work was required everywhere. In Malaya, the working and living conditions of

permanent way gangs operating in isolated parts of the country were harsh and perilous. Often, these railway clusters were without piped water and electricity, and did not have access to healthcare or proper nutrition. The health services section of the *Malayan Railway Report of 1949* acknowledged the presence of gangs in 'wayside stations' in reporting the work of the department, something that I rarely encountered in official records and documents:

> The Hospital Assistant visited *wayside stations and permanent way gang lines* twice each month attending to minor aliments: serious cases were sent to hospital. Sanitary inspections were made during these visits. (Malayan Union 1950: 40, emphasis added)

Turning to newspaper reports, I was also able to extract a great deal of information about gangs and the work they performed. In these articles, the different categories of gangs – marked as working units in FMS Railways and Malayan Railway – are *named* as such and their existence is acknowledged. In the newspaper articles I reviewed, these clusters of workers are described as 'gangs of coolies', 'patrol gangs', 'breakdown gangs', 'repair gangs', 'maintenance gangs', 'railway gangs' and 'gangs of workmen'. Notably, the breakdown and repair gangs of the FMS and Malayan Railways were kept busy, given the regular disruptions and damage to tracks and coaches due to human accidents and natural disasters. Rains and floods were a persistent challenge, as evidenced in the following newspaper reports. On these occasions, repair and maintenance gangs were rushed to the scene, where they worked around the clock to restore operations. I share a brief sample from my extensive perusal of the substantial number of newspaper articles through the decades that reported on the damage from floods and heavy rains to the railways:

> A serious landslip occurred yesterday in the Pass Section, near the 64th mile of the railway, owing to the heavy rains which fell throughout the evening. Ballast trains, with *gangs of coolies* were dispatched immediately upon the news becoming known, *the men working throughout the night*. Great credit is due to the District Railway Engineer and his staff for the expeditious manner in which the line has been put to right. (*Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser* 1907, emphasis added)

> Detailed reports from engineers exploring the line south of Manek Urai to the Pahang border are not yet available, although it is known that 50 serious slips have to be repaired along one stretch of the track in Ulu Kelantan … It is expected that the whole stretch of the East Coast

railway in Pahang will be put into commission early next week, thanks *to the intensive effort by the repair gang.* (*The Straits Times* 1931b, emphasis added)

Railway gangs cleared the main line at several points between Singapore and Penang today following slips of earth in the cuttings particularly in Johore and at Sungkat, Perak, after heavy rain. In two places the line had to slued (diverted) to get clear of obstructions with the result that services were slightly interfered with during the early hours of this morning. (*The Straits Times* 1939c, emphasis added)

Full railway services between Singapore and the federation were restored yesterday, twelve days after floods damaged the tracks. A railway spokesman said that *repair gangs, working around the clock*, had cleared up damage caused by 40 landslides between Gemas and Singapore. (*The Straits Times* 1954, emphasis added)

Given the history of disruptions caused by flooding, railway authorities anticipated landslides and slippages during the rainy season and made contingency plans. As can be seen from the following report, maintenance gangs were mobilized and preparations were made to circumvent the expected deleterious effects on embankments and tracks:

The Railway stations in the Federation have been alerted to be prepared for disruption of lines by landslides and floods. A Malayan Railway Administration official disclosed this today when referring to two landslides and a derailment in North Malaya yesterday. A round the clock watch is being carried out on tracks through the Federation – he said. He added, 'we are aware of the monsoon season and know what to expect'. *Groups of breakdown gangs and track labourers are being placed five miles from one another on all lines*. This is to ensure the least breakdown of lines and inconvenience to passengers. As soon as an incident is reported from a certain area, a work train carrying track engineers and labourers will be rushed to make the necessary repairs or clear the lines. (*The Straits Times* 1959, emphasis added)

As reported in the press, responding to train, engine and coach derailments due to accidents and acts of sabotage were common features of the work undertaken by maintenance gangs, who had to work under pressure, quickly and efficiently, to restore train services. These articles communicate that specific categories of railway workers were known as 'running staff' – this included the repair gangs

and flying gangs – who could be called upon at any time in response to crises that disrupted railway operations. It was not unusual for repair and breakdown gangs and labourers from the Engineering Department to work through the night to restore train travel (*Singapore Free Press* 1959). It is also apparent in the reportage that their working conditions were far from ideal – they were evidently on call twenty-four hours a day – and they had to often work irregular hours under stressful conditions:

> Working at high pressure, F.M.S Railway *gangs cleared the line of the derailed south-bound mail trail* by 9 o'clock last night and the Kuala Lumpur-Penang night mail train crawled through on the repaired track before midnight. Derailment took place at about 4 o'clock coaches strewn along the damaged track and the engine half way down the embankment. 220 yards of track damaged. (*The Straits Times* 1939a, emphasis added)

> The crane of an F.M.S Railway breakdown is seen at work on the wreck of the Penang-Kuala Lumpur night mail train which was derailed at Slim River, on the Perak-Selangor border early on Friday morning. *Working at high pressure*, gangs had the line clear by Friday night and services were normal by Saturday. (*The Straits Times* 1939b, emphasis added).

> Repair gangs and officers proceeded to the scene immediately and *after the feverish pace at which the work was done, managed to get the line clear* about 3 pm. (*Morning Tribune* 1941, emphasis added)

Maintenance gangs were also called upon to repair damage to railway bridges and lines due to sabotage – bandit activity and the work of terrorists. Between 1948 and 1957, a State of Emergency was declared in Malaya in response to what was denoted as acts of communist insurgency in the country. During this period, railways were targeted and trains, tracks and stations were destroyed (Selvaratnam 1985: 99). In one instance, terrorists removed fishplates from the track at Gemas Station, causing a derailment. In response, repair gangs arrived at the scene and worked at a rapid pace, which both surprised and impressed observers:

> The F.M.S Railways mail train time-table between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur has been restored – a deviation of the single track at Gemas, torn up by the wrecked night mail yesterday, being used … Reporters who drove to Gemas and walked through a rubber estate to the scene of the wreck *were impressed by the rapid progress made by repair gangs. Just after noon, a deviation of the single track had been completed*, and the

day mail for Singapore passed over it with only a short delay. The only interruption of traffic yesterday – in spite of many yards of tracks being torn up – was to a local train. (*The Straits Times* 1939d, emphasis added)

Working non-stop from last night, railway breakdown gangs this afternoon repaired the bridge between Labis and Bekok in Johore, which terrorists dynamited yesterday. (*The Straits Times* 1948, emphasis added)

The railway line between KL and Singapore was completely blocked as a result of bandit activity in Negri Sembilan last night, and *breakdown gangs worked all day to clear the line* (*The Straits Times* 1950, emphasis added).

Working around the clock for 36 hours, breakdown gangs of the Malayan Railway restored through traffic at noon today at Tapah Road, where terrorists blew up a section of the track on Wednesday night. (*The Straits Times* 1956, emphasis added)

Newspaper articles also detail the *nature* of the work performed by the gangs in these crisis moments. This work included, for example, 'jack(ing) up and lift(ing) the heavy engine by crane back on the rails' (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1937), clearing and repairing lines and bridges, rebuilding tracks, replacing sleepers and clearing spillages of goods from tunnels and tracks, and derailed wagons:

A truck in the middle of the 10.30 am goods train from Taiping to Ipoh ran off the rails while the train was passing through the third tunnel, near Bukit Berapit. The derailment was not very serious although all railways traffic was delayed some hours *while gangs of workmen placed the derailed truck* back on the rails. (*The Straits Times* 1937, emphasis added)

Gangs of railway workers toiled under armed guards today to clear the line near Taping where bandits yesterday derailed the mail train in which the Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan and his family were returning to Seremban. (*The Straits Times* 1951b, emphasis added)

After an eight-day break because of floods, the first through passenger mail train between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur ran again today … The line itself was cleared and deemed to be safe at 2.50 pm this afternoon. Since the floods finally subsided on Saturday, *gangs of workmen who were standing by have worked around the clock to restore the track.* (*The Straits Times* 1951a, emphasis added)

> Sixteen wagons of a south-bound goods train loaded with cement jumped the rails about 5 km south of here at about 11.22 pm yesterday causing extensive damage to about 200 metres of railway track. The most damage caused was in a pass where the pile up ripped off the tracks and sleepers from the stone beds. About 80 workers have been working from 2 am to *clear the wagons and rebuild the railway tracks*. Until late this afternoon, railways gangs were still trying to clear the pass of the seven wagons blocking it. Repair work on the rails is expected to be completed at about 4 pm tomorrow. (*The Straits Times* 1977, emphasis added)

In addition to these routine challenges, the permanent way staff sometimes had to manage exceptional incidents, including the menace from wild elephants, 'especially in isolated camps in the jungle', news that made it to the pages of the *Malaya Tribune*:

> Wild elephants, according to the annual report of Mr. D.H. Elias, the general manager, F.M.S. Railways, continue to do damage to the railway in Kelantan. Apparently, the elephants are very wild indeed, for besides playing havoc with the line, they have reduced the permanent way staff to a state of fear bordering on panic and which, if not allayed, may give the coolies every excuse for wishing to work elsewhere. As elephants are a definite menace to permanent way gangs, especially in isolated camps in the jungle, an effort should be made to curb their mischievous and dangerous proclivities. (*Malaya Tribune* 1936)

Railway workers faced these rather unique challenges globally, requiring them to go beyond the call of duty, as the following examples from Uganda Railways illustrate. In the aftermath of the First World War, the fallout from the continuing conflicts and skirmishes between the Germans and the British was borne by the personnel and labourers of the Uganda Railway. Trains were frequently attacked by Germans to 'damage the line and interrupt the traffic' (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1917). In 1916 alone, 'fifty-five attempts were made … the maintenance gangs were strengthened, the line was patrolled throughout the danger zone, and guards were placed by the military at all bridges and culverts throughout the entire length of the railway' (ibid.). Uganda Railways' 'running staff who worked over the danger zone during the year' were appreciated for their heroism for they worked without 'protest or complaint on the part of any of the men concerned' (ibid.). The threat from wild animals like lions was also reported to be more than a nuisance for the workers and led to the tragic loss of railway labourers, as reported in 1899 in the Malayan press:

> There seems to be something after all in the statements which appeared in Truth as to the dangers and difficulties amongst which the coolies of the Uganda Railway work … once the railway was started three years ago, 400 coolies have been killed by lions. It appears the districts in which the coolies live are infested with lions, and the unfortunate men are without any protection except that afforded by the shelter of their tents and a thick hedge of felled trees and brushwood with which they surround their camps … Day after day, it is said in broad daylight the lions charged into gangs of coolies when they were working, struck down their victims and proceeded to devour them on the spot in full view of the terrified coolies. (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1899)

Across the British Empire, labourers were denied both humanity and morality (Datta 2021), making the dismal circumstances of colonial labour invisible even when they were obvious. This echoes Headrick's comment that:

> The era of the new imperialism was also the age in which racism reached its zenith. Europeans … began to confuse levels of technology with levels of culture in general, and finally with biological capacity. Easy conquest had warped the judgment of even the scientific elites. (1981: 209)

Racist thinking manifested in the ways in which immigrants – as coolies, labourers and servants – were conceived of by the British across their colonies, justifying the kind of substandard working, housing and health provisions they were accorded and the rights they were denied. Despite sustained criticisms of poor living and working conditions of overseas Indian labourers, and the formulation of legislation and codes, there was no political will among colonial authorities to enforce these regulations or enact significant changes. As in other colonial contexts where railways were built, the residential arrangements of the gangs who maintained the permanent way embedded them within sites where they also worked. The discussion now turns to the controversial and complex question of housing railway labour in Malaya.

Accommodating Railway Labour

Concerns regarding the lack of provision of suitable housing for overseas Indian labour were expressed as early as the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Housing and health conditions of Indian labourers attracted the attention of Indian and Malayan authorities and Indian nationalists, albeit for very different reasons. In an early example, section 52 of the Indian Immigration Ordinance (1884) attempted to regulate housing for indentured labourers, requiring

employers to provide 'sufficient and proper house accommodation … such as shall be considered sufficient and proper by the Indian Immigration agent'. The *Straits Settlements Labour Commission Report of 1894* indicated the following specifications for housing labour: 'We think that a minimum floor space and a minimum cubic space per adult should be insisted on, and that a separate room should be available for every married couple' (cited in Jackson 1961: 103). Jackson also cites a European planter's views published in the *Selangor Journal* in 1894, reflecting the prevalent racial prejudices of the times, attitudes that denied both humanity and morality to labourers:

> Coolie lines, each room 12 by 12 with *jelutong* plant walls, door and sleeping platform 12 by 6 feet and *attap* roof, can be built for $25 to $30 a room … No more than six coolies should be put into each room, but the planter need have no apprehensions on the subject of mixing the sexes, as the Tamil cooly is most philosophical in this respect, a young unmarried woman not objecting in the least to reside with a family of even to sharing her quarters, if necessary, with quite a number of the opposite sex. (Cited in Jackson 1961: 104)

The Labour Code of 1912 specified that labour should be provided with sanitary housing, a pure water supply and a well-equipped hospital or dispensary. The Code mandated that employers had 'to set aside 1/16 of an acre of arable or grazing land for each laborer with dependents' (Thompson 1945: 16). Initially, 'some degree of compulsion was used to enforce the ruling' (ibid.), but subsequently employers 'were reluctant to see newly cleared land used for any purpose other than rubber growing and refused to allow laborers' livestock to feed off young rubber plants' (ibid.). Labourers were themselves not entirely enthusiastic about growing their own food crops and preferred to buy food items. The Code was completely revised in 1923 and underwent key modifications in the following years. In 1925, the Controller of Labour replaced the Indian Immigration Department (established in 1907) and enforced the Labour Code in the FMS and the SS. The housing question for labour had received specific attention in the 1912 version of the Code and 'encouraged replacement of the old coolie lines (barrack-like structures)', which were deemed 'no longer so suitable as in the days when few families accompanied immigrant Indians and when the danger of malaria made it imperative to concentrate the labor force while the estate was being opened up' (ibid.: 26):

> certain minimum requirements in regard to floor space so fixed standards were imposed and employers were encouraged to submit their own housing plans. The type of accommodation officially blessed consisted of a

room not smaller than 12 by 10 feet to accommodate a small family or 3 bachelors, with a front open verandah and with a back verandah, partially enclosed, where laborers could cook and dry their clothes … The housing situation in the Straits ports resembled that of Rangoon. (Ibid.)

Even though housing provisions were made for labourers, observers noted that the design and conditions of such accommodation were highly undesirable. The Indian Emigration Act (1922), which applied to the whole of British India, reiterated the need for regulating the emigration of Indians overseas, and imposed terms and obligations on employers for better living and working conditions. Ultimately, there were some changes in the barrack-type design of labour housing by the 1920s, when 'the standard accommodation consisted of raised accommodation (sometimes with a verandah), with a room provided underneath the main building for a kitchen and storage' (Kaur 2006: 458). Despite the changes effected in the architectural design of the coolie lines through the 1920s and 1930s, complaints and criticisms continued, and proposals for bigger housing with better designs were regularly called for:

> Better housing accommodation for estate coolies, cheap housing schemes and settlements have been worked out successfully in Malaya, and although the problem still leaves room for improvement, a great advance on the schemes has been seen during the last three years. (*Malaya Tribune* 1940)

In theory, the wooden, barrack-style labour lines were to be replaced with housing units for families – cottages for even the lowest-paid workers, given that, increasingly, labourers were accompanied by their dependents:

> On estates, detached or semi-detached cottages are taking the place of the long lines that were almost universal until a few years ago and many of the older lines have been converted into family quarters with two rooms and a kitchen. In the case of Government coolies, mostly employed in towns, there is usually not sufficient land available to permit building of detached cottages and separate allotments, but lines are usually constructed in small blocks of four or five houses of permanent type and provide excellent accommodation. (Ibid.)

In 1936, V.S. Sastri, a member of the Indian National Congress, visited Malaya to determine the living and working conditions of Indian labour there. His report (Sastri 1937) was largely commendatory and was thus criticized for being blind to the problems of Indian labour in Malaya. However, Sastri did

note the shocking state of housing provided for unmarried Tamil labourers in the Municipality of Penang:

> I was shocked beyond words by the condition of the quarters provided for the bachelors. They consist of a stone, barrack-like building which at the time of my visit was so overcrowded that it is doubtful if even the barest requirements of public health were fulfilled. Both the heat and the smell of the place were overpowering and appeared to find no easy exit. The washing accommodation was such that all used water found its way down the general entrance. No privacy of any sort was provided for, and no wonder that the place is the scene of frequent disputes and quarrels. (*Malaya Tribune* 1937)

In the 1940s, J. Orde Browne – who was the labour adviser to the Secretary of State for the Colonies – was still arguing that the existing rules were inadequate and recommended the provision of 'a standard of a 10 feet by 12 feet floor space for two adults, separate rooms for married couple, additional rooms for children above the age of infancy and the provision of cooking facilities' (Orde Browne 1943: 111). However, laws, codes and enquiry committee reports lacked the teeth or muscle to make any real difference in terms of improving housing for labour. Nor was there a political will to change the situation even after independence, as dismal living conditions for overseas Indian labourers persisted.

Limitations concerning land and funding continued to present challenges for the authorities in terms of providing housing for the large pool of immigrant labour employed across estates and government public works in Malaya. On the one hand, labour was needed to meet the needs of extractive colonial capitalism; on the other hand, this labour presence created a housing crunch as shortages were reported, especially by the railways. Acquisition of land for building housing for railway staff across the Malayan Peninsula concerned the authorities in the early decades of the twentieth century as much as sourcing funding for this purpose. The high commissioner of the FMS, Sir Arthur H. Young, sought substantial funding from the government for building railway housing in 1917: 'A considerable sum is necessary for quarters for officers and staff, and in this connection, I may say that, taking the whole of the estimates for public works, they provide about one million dollars next year for quarters for officers and staff, especially for the menial staff of the Railway Department' (FMS 1917: 23). Despite the FMS government's efforts to provide funds to establish a housing scheme for railway staff back in 1927, shortages continued to be reported in subsequent decades:

> A housing scheme for the Railway subordinate, artisan and menial staff estimated to cost $4,765,000 was commenced in 1926 and on 31st

December, 1927, 131 units had been completed and 634 units in hand. The main portion of the scheme is the railway settlement at Sentul, near Kuala Lumpur. The scheme provides 1,740 additional units. (FMS 1928: 1)

The shortage of government quarters has become so severe that the authorities responsible now in choosing sites, drawing plans and making other preliminary arrangements for the building of about twenty quarters of different classes in Ipoh … The Railway Department have their own quarters and the Police, Medical and the Posts and Telegraphs have a certain number of quarters of their own … Quarters are allocated according to salaries and a senior official interviewed by the Tribune said that there will always be a discrepancy between the number of houses available and the government staff requiring quarters. This is because there are 10 classes of quarters and the number of officers in each class is never consistent. (*Malaya Tribune* 1938)

In the FMSR, the various categories of railway workers were provided with different benefits in terms of housing, travel, wages and health policies, which mapped onto British and non-British personnel and were patently discriminatory. Hypocritically, British civil servants paid themselves more, ensured optimal hygienic and sanitary living conditions for themselves, and enjoyed good housing and medical care. Stanistreet reflected on the state of Malayan Railway housing in the old days: 'The Railway Administration provides its servants with their own quarters, which vary considerably, of course, both in size and comfort, for the different grades of staff' (1975: 48). Managerial and administrative elites who were mainly British and were paid substantial monthly salaries were housed in the best railway accommodation and enjoyed spacious dwellings with gardens. The subordinate technical and clerical staff, predominantly Jaffna Tamils, received monthly salaries and were provided with reasonable accommodation, being allocated 'Class 8 or 9' type quarters, which had two bedrooms, a hall, a kitchen, a bathroom and a toilet. Accommodation, with one bedroom, a hall, a kitchen and a toilet-cum-bathroom were classified as 'Class 9 or 10' type (Kaur 1990). The skilled workers, semi-skilled workers and unskilled labourers who maintained the railway tracks were paid a daily rate and housed in accommodations ranging from labour lines to barrack-style quarters.

The lowest category – the unskilled labourers – were housed in 'Class 11' accommodation. In urban locales, these translated to cement barracks, with a hall, a bedroom and a kitchen, and shared toilets and bathrooms, located outside and behind the lines (Kaur 1990). The labour lines consisted 'of a labour line of seven to eight units which was built next to the track' (ibid.: 110–11).

The wooden barracks located along the tracks and wayside stations were without piped water, drainage and electricity (ibid.: 118). Given the low priority accorded to this category of workers, they 'were the worst and they were paid the lowest wages' (ibid.), and worked in less than ideal conditions. Kaur emphasizes that: 'The smooth functioning of the railways necessitated accommodating workers in labour lines along tracks, near stations or workshops. These labour lines were occupied principally by Indians' (ibid.: 117). The manual labourers living in these conditions were vulnerable to the elements and natural disasters and suffered from diseases and death:

> Along the tracks, the barracks were located next to the tracks and dirt and dust prohibited the cultivation of flowers and vegetables. Under these unhygienic conditions, it is not surprising that the workers succumbed to diseases like malaria and dysentery. The passing trains also carried diseases and infections. Lack of privacy and unhygienic conditions typified labourers' dwellings. (Ibid.: 118)

Townships of Indian railway workers were established at the two main railway workshops at Sentul and Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur. Of course, this also made it possible for employers to have immediate and total access to workers at all times:

> There are a very considerable number of workmen now employed at the Central workshops who, owing to lack of local accommodation, are compelled to travel backwards and forwards from Kuala Lumpur every day to and from their works. It is proposed to erect a considerable number of workmen's quarters upon the Company's land and also to provide a sufficient number of shop houses, together with a proper theatre and all the other amusements and luxuries which native workmen wish for. (*Eastern Daily and Straits Morning Advertiser* 1907)

> There can be no doubt that at the present time, such quarters are badly needed in the neighbourhood and that as the Federated Malay States Railways System is extended more and more workmen must be employed at these workshops and the Batu Village will tend to rapidly increase in size and importance. (Ibid.)

In Malaya, the housing and living conditions of permanent way gangs who were based outside of urban centres and rural settlements, in wayside and isolated terrains, were the least regulated and most neglected, barring occasional visits from healthcare workers and sanitary inspectors:

All housing areas and all gang lines even at isolated places were visited once in every four months. In addition to this, a Local Health Committee under the chairmanship of the District Traffic Inspector visits the main stations and thickly populated railway centers periodically. The standard of hygiene and sanitation both in housing areas, and in isolated permanent way gang lines continued to show improvement during the year. (Malayan Union 1950: 50)

The design of early labour lines was common across Malaya consisted of barrack-style accommodation, such that 'a large building [was] divided into single-room units … each room housing three to four coolies' (Ferguson-Davie 1921) and where 'The building was rather rudimentary, often the single room [was] windowless and a veranda the chief sleeping place' (Dobby 1940: 103).

The labour lines through the early decades of the twentieth century were grim and dreary, lacked ventilation and did not meet sanitary standards. In 2018, I met 63-year-old Vijey, a former track maintenance labourer at Alor Star Station, who recounted his experiences of living in the railway quarters: 'Quarters a lot of Indians. All families, open bathroom, one kitchen – everyone can see everything, a lot of fighting also. Line maintenance, gang line workers … all Indians living there'. Kaur (1990) highlights that government dwellings, like the railway quarters provided by the Railway Department, were exempt from inspection by the Sanitary Board. Yet, the FMSR *Annual Report of the Railways for the Year 1938* acknowledges the unacceptable standards of sanitation in railway housing, especially on the labour lines:

The sanitary condition of Railway property varies considerably. Many of the gang lines are old and were built with little regard to the hygiene of occupants. The Health Department make recommendations from time to time to the Engineering Department for repairs or improvements in sanitation, and where possible these are carried out. (FMSR 1939: 71)

This pattern of substandard housing design and living conditions for manual labour was replicated in other British colonies. For example, accommodation for labourers in Burma was equally dismal: '[T]he great majority of the workers … were miserably housed, the housing problem being particularly acute in Rangoon with its considerable floating population and steady influx of immigrants' (Pillai, cited in Kaur 2006: 452). Kondapi too depicts the shocking accommodation of Indian labourers in Rangoon thus: 'in 1930, 42,000 workers lived in these dark and unventilated houses, and the gunny-cloth families, where married couples slept in hammock-style beds, slung above bedding used by single men, were most degrading for women' (1951: 183). Despite this, working in the railways

carried the appeal that *free* housing and healthcare were offered to employees. Together with the possibility of more stable employment, these were used as inducements to draw workers into the railways, even if the wages its staff received were not higher than that of estate labourers.

The Construction Department of the railways and the Public Works Department were responsible for building housing for railway staff as well as constructing railway stations and offices. The public works department was founded in the state of Perak in 1972, 'to manage the construction of works such as roads, railways, buildings and infrastructure facilities' (Babulal and Ariffin 2019: 142). Private contractors, many of them Chinese, secured these tenders to construct housing, but the building plans, size and design of the quarters and the materials to be used were determined by the FMSR authorities. Tenders were invited from private contractors and were advertised in the local press:

> Tenders are invited for the construction of the following buildings at Bukit Timah, Singapore, including labour and materials: One Unit Class VII Quarters; One Block of Two Units Class VIII Quarters; One Unit Station Building; One Block of Ten Units Cooly Lines; One Block of Two Units Cooly Lines. (*Malaya Tribune* 1930)

> Tenders invited by FMS for construction of buildings and housing scheme – 50 clerks' quarters Class VIII in blocks of 2, Artizans quarters Class IX in Blocks of 8, Menial Staff Quarters in blocks of 19 and 8. (*The Straits Times* 1927)

Labour lines for railway labour persisted in post-independent Malaysia and Singapore. Manual labour – the permanent way workers – continued to be housed here well into the 1960s and 1970s. During my fieldwork in Malaysia and Singapore in 2001–4 as well as during the 2017–18 leg of my research, I encountered these lodgings, some of which were occupied by squatters. In Singapore, I met Sureshan – the son of a foreman, Dharmalingam, who was charged with the care of the tracks between Tanjong Pagar and Johor Bahru stations – who stayed in the labour lines at Queens Close with his family of seven. This was an eight-unit barrack-style housing, two of which were allocated to the foreman and his family, while the other six units accommodated gangline labourers (three Indian and three Malay families) who worked under him. Sureshan – who was in his early sixties when we spoke in 2022 – and his four siblings were born in these quarters, which he called home for almost twenty years. The residents used a small generator for basic electric needs only at night, there was no piped water, and a latrine-style, outdoor bathroom was shared by all. Nonetheless, Sureshan shared that he missed living in the quarters, had very

fond memories of growing up close to nature, near the tracks and was hardly bothered by the noise of the trains. But other interlocutors were less complimentary and nostalgic, highlighting that life was not easy for the residents of these labour lines. Mohanan – a former railway employee in his late fifties and the caretaker of Kamunting Temple – noted that 'in the past, there were a lot of them in the quarters – two rows of quarters with eight to nine houses had about thirty families and more'. He pointed out that the congestion and lack of privacy were especially difficult for families. Others I spoke to refused the railway quarters and preferred to stay in nearby squatter settlements, such as Sentul Yard's caretaker, Damodaran's father, who was a railway employee and did 'not want to stay at the railway house. It was too small and crowded, so my father stayed in the squatter area nearby'.

Insights from my ethnography, selected archival materials and the current scholarship on railways in Malaya confirm that the working life of permanent way staff was hard and their living conditions often did not even meet basic standards. They laboured for long hours, were on call at short notice and had little control over their working conditions or living arrangements. Yet, regardless of these physical hardships, several interlocutors admitted that living in such proximity created a sense of community and solidarity among its multiethnic residents, something that has also been noted among the residents of Sentul Yard by Kaur (1990). Thiaga – a businessman in his early seventies and an active committee member of the Bukit Tembok Temple – recalled with fondness the spirit of collegiality in these neighbourhoods:

> That time it was very nice to see. Because all will come and help. When there is a *poojai [prayers]*, everybody will come and help – make *prasadam (blessed food offerings)*. That time, our people will do the *modagam (sweet delicacy)*. All the *maamis* (aunties), all will come. Like his mother-in-law, then my mother, then a few of my friends' mothers. All will come here to this temple, the main hall, will sit there and do all the *modagam*.

Interestingly, temples built by railway personnel surfaced in some of my conversations as centres of multiethnic community life. Hajruddin, an Indian Muslim who had served as a station master for thirty years, reminisced about the good times he had spent in the temples:

> I can still remember – we will go to the temple. We will eat there. So, when you say 'One Malaysia', now it is nothing *lah*. [The] 1960s to early 1970s – that was One Malaysia. Not now. I told you those days, we were all together – Malays and Indians and Chinese. Any festival in the temple, we go. We have nice food there. There is one prayer for studies

you know – we will take our books to the temple – we need to put our books there … *Saraswathi pooja [Prayers for Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning]*.

He lived in railway quarters for three decades and fondly recalled the close friendships he had formed with Indians – by which he meant Hindus – with whom he is still connected:

I had a lot of Indian friends, you know … When I was a station master there, I was getting my daily *thosai [savoury Indian pancakes]*, my daily *makan (meals)*, in their house. The family really takes care of me like hell, I tell you. They are so sweet.

But he mused despondently that the state of interethnic relations and the railway scene in Malaysia had changed following independence, and for the worse.

One key driver for this research is to shift the gaze to the nonlabouring lives of railway labour, which I argue constitutes another strand of railway historiography. This has meant asking if railway labourers had any free time and, if so, what they did by way of leisure activities. What else did and could they do, other than labour? As I discussed this query with my interlocutors, as I expected, I heard about the ubiquitous toddy shops in towns across Malaya, which I was told provided some respite for the workers after a hard day's work. Like numerous others, Thiru – a former office attendant who worked in the railway station in Kuala Lumpur – in making this observation emphasized that he was not 'making excuses' for this practice, but stated matter-of-factly that there were no other opportunities for workers 'to relax … that was the only thing that was there. Because they are not highly paid. They work hard, then go to the *toddy* shop, drink so they are happy but what to do, they will come out drunk … Get angry, fight'. Damodaran confirmed the lack of leisure options for labourers, adding that there was not much to do 'those days':

When I joined the service, the pay was only 74 Ringgit per month. I gave my father all the money and kept only 24 dollars. OK *lah*, it was enough, one can go for a film show, cinema. That time tickets were cheap, only 65 cents for Indian cinema. That time, we had cheap matinees … morning show, 45 cents. Yes, that time English movies – James Bond … Sean Connery, Roger Moore, *Dr No*, *Goldfinger*, *Thunderball*. Hindi movies … *Sangam* … the theatre was packed. I liked to watch MGR movies – *Nadodi Mannan*, *Enga Veethu Pillai* – very nice. So those days no video, nothing, you just go to the theatres. Those days everything was very cheap, 65 cents for cheap matinee and *chappati* (Indian bread made of

wheat) one can get for 10 cents. Three *chappati*s, 30 cents, one lunch can eat for 30 cents.

Interestingly, the *Report of the Malayan Railways* (1949) noted the presence of a Department of Public Relations mobile film unit and recorded that it:

> toured important centres on the Malayan Railway in April and October … Cinema shows of educational value were given and lectures in English and Tamil were delivered. The subjects covered Trade Unionism, Health and Hygiene, the Co-operative Movement and the Emergency regulations. The shows were highly appreciated by the staff. (Malayan Union 1950: 44)

These were the films screened for railway staff, which my interlocutors recalled as nationalist and propagandist. Prasad, who was in his late sixties and was a committee member from the Bukit Mertajam Temple, confirmed that in addition to watching movies in theatres, the railway authorities screened some films too: 'They only show film *negara* [Malay, nation/nationalist]. Only about the country, documentary *lah*. Politics. But in Alor Setar – we see Tamil and Hindi movies. Sangam and Shammi Kapoor film. Tamil – Shivaji and MGR films – that was in the 60s, 70s.'

In Malaya after the Second World War, railway staff welfare did receive some attention from the authorities, when a labour and welfare section was established in 1946 and the post of labour and welfare officer was created (Selvaratnam 1985: 99). However, prior to this, many 'railway institutes', effectively sports clubs, had already been set up across Malaya. For example, the Brickfields Club was established under the auspices of the Selangor Government Railway in 1896, and the 'Ipoh Road Club' was founded in 1915' (ibid.). These were renamed 'railway recreation clubs' and registered under the Societies Ordinance after the Second World War (ibid.). Sports clubs provided a platform for railway staff to compete in football, cricket, hockey and chess tournaments, among others (ibid.: 100). Sports, especially athletics, have a long history in railways in Britain and its colonies (Huggins and Tolson 2001; Mehta 2009; Sen 2015). The rationale for these sports and cultural initiatives was, in the first instance, a strategic decision, as noted by Selvaratnam:

> The Railway Administration had long recognized the importance of sports to their workers and the associated harmony and co-operation at the working place for better productivity and efficiency. (Ibid.: 99)

Remarkably, the authorities also established a railway staff arts society in 1959 to encourage staff to develop artistic talents and pursue crafts as a hobby. The

management logic was that affording staff and their families opportunities to develop hobbies like arts and crafts, music and dance 'kept [them] away from undesirable directions, would bring healthy results and happier relationships as long as heavy financial commitments were not involved' (ibid.: 105). However, many of these interclub competitions involved staff from the middle and higher grades of railway employees. It is unlikely that these were extended to railway labour, such as the permanent way staff. Certainly, none of my interlocutors from the Way and Works Department mentioned these sports or cultural activities, or reported being involved in events relating to these. However, I did come across a rare mention that at the Gua Musang Station, 'predominated by permanent way staff and other lower income groups … [staff] had organised an Arts & Crafts Exhibition and Sports Competition on 25 November 1961' (ibid.: 107).

The numerous former permanent way staff with whom I discussed this issue did not say anything positive about the experience of watching films screened by railway authorities – these were all dismissed as *negara* films, as propaganda. However, other sources contain personal, more favourable memories of sports events and film screenings organized by railway authorities. For instance, Bala notes that Madam Perima – whose father, Perisamay, son of Sola Thevar Alagan, was a clerk in the railway depot at Gemas and grew up in railway quarters – recalls the life of railway communities with nostalgia:

> We had railway sports at the field. A lot of activities. And then we watched movies sponsored by the railway. They had a big white screen. You bring your own mat and you just sit down [on the field] and they'll screen it from the railway club. Sometimes English movie, sometimes Tamil. Whole families would bring their mats, pillows, all of them excited. (Cited in Bala 2018: 25)

These contrasting experiences are no doubt mediated by the class of railway staff in question. Those who lived in railway communities in towns and cities, from the middle to the higher grades of the railway services, would report a good working life – good housing, medical benefits and time for leisure activities. The vast majority of my interlocutors who were daily-wage, permanent way labourers portrayed their working lives in dramatically different modes, with negligible leisure opportunities. My invocation of *leisure* here does not refer to organized free time for labourers, which was occasionally provided by railway authorities in the form of sports events and propagandist, educational films. The latter become more pronounced in Malayan Railways from the mid-1950s onwards following the establishment of 'Railway Institutes'. Nevertheless, this discussion of railway staff welfare and leisure has surfaced and given credence to the lives that railway labour led *outside their work as capitalist labour*. However, how

can the self-directed, meaningful activities that railway labour may have turned to of their own accord be known? In one response to this question, Kaur records that despite the dismal conditions in which railway labour in Malaya was housed and worked:

> These coolies were *provided with one facility deemed to be good for their souls – a small temple beside their labour lines*. Thus, all along the countryside were little temples providing salvation for the coolies. (Kaur 1990: 111, emphasis added)

Indeed, Hindu temples in diasporic locales have enabled immigrants from India to express piety and devotion. However, it is crucial to highlight that the temples that dotted the length of the permanent way in Malaya *were built by the labourers themselves*, as the colonial authorities permitted the use of railway premises to establish these sacred sites and, indeed, charged the workers a nominal sum for the right to occupy the land temporarily. The *same* group of individuals who built and maintained the railways also constructed the sacred Hindu landscape in and around railway precincts. My argument is that the religion-making practices of labour – through the building of temples – are one manifestation of the nonlabouring lives of labour. As such, I present labourers, who were the builders of railways – a symbol of technological modernity – *also* as pioneering religion makers in Malaya.

In highlighting their religion-making capacities, I argue that railway labourers did not lead one-dimensional lives, existing only to labour or function as labour. Ironically, it was precisely the strategic and utilitarian placement of these workers' homes within and around railway landscapes that – indirectly and unintentionally – led to them marking these territories with sacrality: a complex historical phenomenon in Malaya that I will turn to in the next chapter. The outcomes of my *mapping* and *tracing* of the railway and religious infrastructures across Malaysia and Singapore, enabled by the methodology of *ethnography on the move*, are also covered in Chapter 4. This approach has allowed me to construct visual maps of functioning 'railwaymen temples' across these territories. Additionally, my fieldwork has revealed stories about these temples, which entrench these sites firmly in my interlocutors' renderings of colonial railway history – remembered connections that reverberate in contemporary narratives of the railways and Hinduism that I encountered in these two countries.

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4

4

Mapping 'Railwaymen Temples' in Singapore and Malaysia

Sacralizing Diasporic Landscapes

This chapter presents the outcome of the mapping exercise I embarked upon during my ethnographic journeys along the western and eastern coasts of Malaysia and in Singapore from February 2017 to April 2019. Given that the project of modernizing the railways has been ongoing in these regions for several decades, it would not be surprising if there are no material traces of either the early temples built by railway labour or the railway infrastructures they fashioned. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that many of the former have persisted and even outlasted the solidity of railway infrastructures, which have been replaced by newer, more modern prototypes. My travels in Singapore and Malaysia by rail and road led me to a total of ninety-four active railwaymen temples, which I plotted spatially and share here in the form of maps.

In my field trips, I documented the 'railwaymen temples' visually; with the help of current caretakers of these temples, I also generated their social histories as *temple stories* and tried to determine their physical, spatial location as *temple maps*, Here, I approach the existing 'railwaymen temples' as *material traces* of the religion-making efforts of railway labour, and the *temple stories* and *temple maps* my fieldwork generated, as footprints of a different kind – as individual and collective remembrances. Through these mapping efforts, I exemplify the value of 'tracing' as a concept and a method. While plotting the materiality of the existing religious landscapes, I simultaneously captured the state of the railway infrastructures in which these are embedded – stations, workshops, yards, quarters and tracks – in the face of ongoing railway modernization and electrification projects. Ironically, the hardware of modern technology appeared more vulnerable

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 195.

and unstable in comparison to the edifice of religious infrastructures, which seem more durable, often manifesting itself in the form of new, renovated modes.

There is broad agreement in the social sciences and humanities that religion is never a given, existing 'out there'; rather, it is always 'created through cultural and communication processes' (Wijsen 2016: 3). Wijsen rightly notes that 'the task of the academic study of religion is to address processes that 'make religion' (ibid.). I consider the process of religion making to include sensibilities that produce spiritual worldviews, which are manifested through religious institutions, ideologies and practices. But this project adds a key question to the mix: who is in the driver's seat when it comes to making religion? While the role of the state, courts and political and religious institutions in constructing religion has been highlighted in the scholarship (Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Dressler and Mandair 2011; Elfenbein 2015; Nilsson and Enkvist 2016; Telle 2016), the role of non-elite, everyday actors as religion makers has received far less attention.

Thus, I shift the emphasis to capacities of Malayan railway labour as lay-persons who also fashioned Hinduism in a diasporic locale. For Malaya, I argue that the complex and multifacetted histories of railway construction and temple building by railway labourers, demonstrate that these are intersecting strands of the *same* phenomenon. The current project underscores my interest in the movement of migrants from India to Malaya in the nineteenth century, many of whom were transformed into *colonial labour* upon their arrival to these shores. Against this backdrop, I present railway labour in Malaya as core participants in the complex processes of historical religion making and argue that these efforts have further shaped future Hindu landscapes in Malaysia and Singapore. Given the demographic profile of labouring constituencies in Malaya, I explicitly acknowledge the predominant role of Indian immigrant labour in constructing railway and religious infrastructures and sustaining a modern mode of transportation, as well as every day and institutional Hindu religiosity therein.

Colonial Labour 'Making Religion'

Scholars of the Indian diaspora have documented that religious elements were transported to overseas locales with migrant populations, including immigrant colonial labour. The historiography of indentured labour to Mauritius, Fiji (Rambachan and Shukla 2015) and the Caribbean (Ramsarran 2008) is replete with instances of religious paraphernalia (including religious literature) and religious knowledge arriving with individuals who were transported to these shores. Speaking of Mauritius, Claus et al. note that: 'The indentured laborers in camps (only men at first) listened to recitations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics, sang sacred texts like the *Hanuman Chalisa*, and *even built temples*' (2003: 157, emphasis added). In 1879, the first indentured labourers

from Awadh, Bihar and the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of India arrived in Fiji with copies of the text *Ramcharitmanas*,[1] which were recited routinely. The historian Brij Lal notes that: 'The *girmitiyas*[2] never completely lost touch with their cultural roots. As early as the 1890s, only a decade after the beginning of indentured emigration, the basic texts of popular Hinduism and folk culture were circulating in the main areas of Indian settlement in the sugar belts of Fiji' (2011: 169).

The same practices are reported for Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad, where indentured labourers brought *gutkas*[3] (abridged and downsized versions of religious literature)*,* which were recited in the camps where they lived. Through the mobility of religious texts, Hinduism's *bhakti* (devotion) tradition – the enactment of oral and performative traditions and the building of temples – travelled with indentured labourers beyond Indian shores. The latter built temples in South Africa (Chetty 2013; Desai 2013; Kumar 2007) and the Caribbean (Ali 2016; Prorok 1991; Sahoo 2005; Younger 2010), temples and mosques on sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean (Bates and Carter 2017), and temples and churches in La Reunion (Ghasarian 1997; Lang 2021; Mooneegadoo 2018; Seth 2020). These were key institutions for building communities and sustaining cultural and religious lives. As in the Indian and Caribbean contexts, planters, mine owners and colonial authorities in Malaya also *tolerated* the religious lives of labour, and even offered land grants and financial support for erecting places of worship (Sinha 2011). Often, they attended cultural events and festivals observed in temples and mosques – expedient moves that contradicted the declared British 'hands-off', noninterventionist policy regarding the religious affairs of their subjects.

Colonial authorities were disinterested in the religious lives of colonial railway labour except as a matter of political expediency, driven by instrumental rationality and, sometimes, as a part of Britain's 'civilizing mission'. The British authorities in Malaya expressed a rather liberal stance towards the building of Chinese and Hindu temples, mosques, *gurdwara*(s) and other religious structures. Religiosity was supported through land grants given to migrant communities for constructing religious edifices. Certainly, one strong motivation for such encouragement was inspired by the desire to appease migrant workers and provide incentives for them to settle in the colony. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that the British and European capitalists in colonial Malaya encouraged labourers and workers to build places of worship out of concern for their spiritual lives: religion, custom and tradition were relevant to the Malayan authorities and private industry for purely strategic reasons. Likewise, the construction of temples was deemed to be advantageous to the colonial cause and labourers were encouraged to practise their ceremonies for the same reason.

Additionally, British authorities also acceded to attending and participating in the religious ceremonies and festivals observed in these places of worship

as a mark of support. As one of my interlocutors, Mani – from Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Batu Gajah – noted: 'Every year, the British/white man would give us a sack of rice. Every Tīpāvaḷi, they would also give us a goat.' In so doing, they momentarily suspended Britain's 'civilizing mission', which had gained momentum in the colonies from the end of the nineteenth century. Expectedly, sociocultural knowledge about Indian labourers was explicitly sought for self-interest and economic benefits as articulated by the community of planters in Malaya in 1920. Elaborate arguments were made for ensuring that the labourers could practise their customs and traditions in Malaya:

> The Committee believe that too little is known of the customs, religions, Castes and prejudices of Indians, and that our knowledge would be improved by the appointment of an Agent, to be styled 'the Indian Agent' or 'Indian Political Agent', a Class 11 (or higher class) Civil Servant, who would reside in India and whose sole duties would be to study India and Indians for the benefit of employers of Indian labour in Malaya … As an illustration of our lack of knowledge referred to in the preceding paragraph, it is pointed out that estate temples for Indians (which are usually not so elaborate or well-built as in India) are often erected by Chinese contractors and that in consequence such temples are not appreciated nor have the same value in the labourer's eyes that they would if they had been constructed after consultation with and upon lines agreed to by the labourers themselves. Discussions relating to such and similar matters might, with advantage, be referred to a Committee (*punjavat*) of *kanganies* and others appointed by labourers themselves … *The Committee recommend that every encouragement be given to labourers in the exercise of any of their customary ceremonial rites*…handbills, leaflets or small pamphlets in Tamil (or other Indian languages) with particulars about the estate (to be sent with letters written by labourers to family in India). *Such literature might, with advantage, be illustrated with pictures of estate building such as the lines, temple, shop etc,* and group photographs of labourers. (United Planters' Association of South India Scientific Department 1920, emphasis added)

In the early years of Malaya's settlement, the authorities were willing to do all that was necessary to 'fill the island with inhabitants' (Logan 1857). Colonial administrators also realized the strategic importance of knowing the native languages of Indian labourers. For instance, the Institute of Planters highlighted that estate managers needed to know Tamil and Telugu. In the Labour Report (1920), the controller of labour noted:

> The Malayan Civil Servants (Cadets) engaged in the department's work were required to have passed an examination in either the Tamil or Telugu languages, and to have spent a minimum of 8 months in India studying local dialects and customs. (Thompson 1945: 31)

Thus, in the colonial period, Hindu migrants were able to construct temples in their residential and employment sites across Malaya and Singapore. In general, colonial labour-built temples were located in ports, harbours, prisons and railways, where they enacted a ritual complex which was imported from across the seas. In the initial years, they served as focal points for the community and catered to its religious needs, providing comfort and solace in unfamiliar lands. In the Malayan context, different kinds of temples have been identified, such as 'labour line temples,' 'estate temples' and 'plantation temples' (Ramanathan 1995). To this list, my fieldwork allows me to add the category of *railwaymen temples*. It is striking that 'the British authorities did offer the Indian labourers some incentives such as toddy and *opportunity to build temples* on plantations' (ibid.: 76, emphasis added). These rudimentary structures were enhanced over time, and the 'plantation temples were maintained by a small sum of money deducted from the labourer's pay' (ibid.: 83). The plantation management even made provisions for a day to be set aside as the annual temple festival, which they sponsored, even as these places of worship 'were under the watchful eyes of the estate management' (ibid.)

The Hindu temple scene in Malaya was vibrant and dynamic by the mid-nineteenth century; Agamic[4] and non-Agamic temples could be found in abundance across these landscapes. A famous proverb in Tamil, 'kōvil illāta ūrilē kuṭi irukka vēṇṭāmām', implores devotees 'not to inhabit a place where there are no temples' – a dictum that was observed by Tamil Hindu migrants to Malaya and other diasporic locales (Trouillet 2012). The practice of building a *cāmi vīṭu* (Tamil, 'god's house') near residential spaces and work areas was widespread. The predominance of *Āti Tirāviṭa* (Tamil, 'first, original Dravidian')[5] migrants from South India meant that temples were mostly built for the gods and goddesses of rural Tamil Nadu from folk and popular varieties of Hinduism. The popularity of village deities – like Am'maṉ, manifested as a range of mother goddesses (Mohd Ali, N. 1985), and male *kāval teyvam* (Tamil, Guardian Deities) – like Muṉīyanti, Muṉīsvaraṉ and Karuppaṇacuvāmi – was evident in the many structures built for their veneration.

Unlike Malayan estate temples, some of which were built by plantation owners for the labourers, 'railwaymen temples' were invariably constructed by gangline railway labourers, *mandore*s or Ceylon Tamil station masters, something that my ethnography confirmed. Dayaparan, a 66-year-old retiree who worked with a power station in Port Dickson, has been associated with the unregistered

Munīsvaraṉ Temple in Bukit Tembok since his teens. He is currently the temple's primary custodian and commented pensively:

> Railway, railway – all temples built by workers. Laying the lines, maintaining, cutting grass. Labourers mainly *lah*. The guard, *mandore*, railway president, station master and all that. They were all here, all built temples. Ya but the workers … they call it gangline … they were all staying here *lah*. So those days, every railway station and quarters and all, there was an Indian temple. They have nowhere else to go.

Still sited on railway land, this temple was founded by Dayaparan's father, who was from Jaffna and worked in the railways as a track labourer. Dayaparan shared that his father had established the temple with help from other railway staff who lived in the quarters nearby. Likewise Mallika, who is in her seventies, told me the story of the Krishnar Temple, Tanjung Malim. I learnt from her that this was an old temple built by railway labourers, and though it was registered only recently, it still occupied the site where it was founded. Finally, 40 year old Kokila, from the Ambal Temple, Behrang, shared that her grandfather, who used to be a worker in the railways, had founded the temple, which was registered belatedly but was safe from demolition for the moment.

Other conversations during fieldwork pointed me to the many temples that had been built by the 'Jaffna people' – clerical, administrative and supervisory staff of the railway services – for the 'big gods' like Ganesh, Murugan and Civā. My interlocutors, who were former railway labourers, shared that, typically, station masters – Ceylon Tamils and others, whom they referred to as the 'big people' – were extremely supportive of temples erected by railway labourers. Velu, a track labourer at a Gua Musang Station, stated: 'Usually, all our bosses those days would be Indians [this included Ceylon Tamils]. They allowed them to build the temples. They used to come and support, even give some money. Those days were very good. There was no politics in these things, no "You are lower than me, I don't come to all these things".'

Based on these instances, it is reasonable to surmise that the stakeholders of colonial modernity at best tolerated customs and religions of colonial subjects as a matter of economic expedience rather than out of any concern for the salvation of the labourers.[6] Bates and Carter have observed this for Mauritius as well: 'The more enlightened planters naturally encouraged and supported the annual festivals and permitted the building of temples and mosques on their estates as a means of anchoring their workforce in the locality' (2017: 478). Albeit unintentional, such accommodation was consequential given that these concessions founded a religious architecture and a ritual-festival complex in the colonies –

including in Malaya – alongside the establishment of modern communication and transportation infrastructures.

In erecting temples within and around railway premises, railway labourers reproduced a sense of their homeland in unfamiliar territories. Here, they kept their preferred gods and goddesses close to them, literally in their backyard. The Indian Hindu immigrant labour used familiar templates to reproduce everyday religiosity in new terrains and enacted devotional practices to satisfy their immediate spiritual needs. These efforts also generated sacred futures for Hindus in Malaysia and Singapore, albeit unintentionally. Through their efforts, railway labour in Malaya curated religious imaginaries, marking their surroundings with sacrality and approaching them as enchanted and efficacious.

Eliciting 'Temple Maps'

My interlocutors had extensive historical knowledge of 'railwaymen temples' and their specific locations. The category of 'railwayman' was used positively and with pride by the former railway labourers, *mandore*s and locomotive drivers I spoke to. This was a term of self-description, but also referenced the solidarity they felt with their colleagues in the railways. My interlocutors made sketches of specific sites showing the location of the 'railwaymen temples' and where they were positioned vis-à-vis railway stations, quarters and tracks. I denote these as *temple maps* that were generated during my interactions with interlocutors at different phases of my ethnographic journeys. I was excited to see them as *traces* of labour's religion-making efforts, which could be recalled and articulated, with precise coordinates and topographical details. Drawing on their remembrances and experiences, my interlocutors outlined these maps, sometimes individually and at other times collectively. These articulations carried several registers for my research. First, they confirmed that railway labourers nostalgically remember the locations of temples in railway landscapes; even in the absence of material traces, these temples are etched in their consciousness. Second, they offered important clues in my temple tracking efforts as I travelled in search of 'railwaymen temples' that were named in these maps. Once I had embarked on my journey, I relied on the latter, drafted by those with first-hand links to the railways and others who were railway enthusiasts and chroniclers. Through these, I had accumulated a veritable database about temples and railway sites where they were located. I present here a select sample of these temple maps.

The most extensive of these temple maps by far came to me early in my fieldwork from Thomas, an engineer in his forties with a deep interest in the diverse cultural and religious worlds of Malaysia. Thomas' father was a locomotive driver with the Malayan Railways until his retirement in 2001. Thomas

told me that he had spent his childhood travelling on trains and confessed that he was most intrigued by the numerous Hindu temples that he saw along the railway tracks, especially on the western coast of Malaysia. He shared that he had encountered my 2005 book on Muṉīsvaraṉ worship when he was doing some internet research in 2015 about temples along railway tracks in Malaysia. He had contacted me by email in October 2015 and became a crucial interlocutor in my research efforts to map railway-related temples.

When I mentioned to Thomas that I was working on a book on the temples by the tracks, he immediately emailed me a detailed list of the temples that he remembered – his temple map. As a child in a railway family, he recalled seeing scores of small, unnamed temples as he cycled along the railway tracks between the Sentul and Batu Caves Stations when his father was posted. While these details helped me identify and locate the named temples, more critically, the information that Thomas shared helped me to chart research pathways that would have been impossible otherwise. I was impressed by the accuracy of his list and the tremendous knowledge he had, and marvelled at his memory as I used his list as a compass and guide. I accepted his generous contributions to my research efforts as a starting point with gratitude. Unsurprisingly, there were no pre-existing lists or maps of railwaymen temples that I could use at the start of my research. This gap was more than filled by the temple map Thomas shared, and it is only ethical that I fully acknowledge my debt to his generosity. His extended list not only contained precise geographical markings of the railwaymen temples but also provided ethnographic details about temple deities and their ritual-festival complex. Here I share his temple map with permission, with a brief biographical note he penned in his email (see Appendix III). I subsequently met Thomas in Kuala Lumpur, where he is based, and had intriguing discussions on a subject about which we were both passionate. He was also instrumental in connecting me with several former railway personnel (in Seremban and Prai) who opened other doors for my research.

The extensive list of temples produced by Thomas was in a class of its own, unmatched in its sweeping range and detail. I did not come across anything else in my fieldwork that surpassed it. Yet, every temple map I encountered was invaluable and provided critical leads and breakthroughs in my temple-mapping efforts. Next I present some other temple maps produced by my interlocutors. One was shared by Kanesan, originally from Malacca but who had worked for a good part of his career in the state of Terengganu, who managed the 'Mahalakshmi Temple in Slim River' and worked there as an estate manager. He was involved with the Am'maṉ temple for three decades, which was started by railway workers in the 1940s as a Muṉīsvaraṉ shrine. He shared his knowledge of railwaymen temples:

> There is one KTM temple in Tapah – on Tapah Road, and one in Tanjong Malim. It's a Murugan temple, oh and one more, you have the Krishnan temple. Tanjong Malim Krishnan temple it's also on railway land … I know there are about 40 temples along the tracks … they have small, small temples from here to Kedah, all temples along the tracks … even here in Slim River we have a small Muṇīsvaraṉ temple – very small one, near tracks.

In another example, Nadesan, a former locomotive driver who was in his eighties when I met him in 2017, has had a long association with the Mariamman temple at Bukit Tembok. He is from a *railway family* and has considerable knowledge of the temples along the tracks and at railway stations in Malaysia and Singapore. His list of railwaymen temples was based on his experiences of being a locomotive driver in KTM, driving trains and travelling up and down the East and West Coast Lines, including Singapore:

> Most of the Indians, they work in the gang line *lah*. Tracks. We got a railway temple next to Rawang station … then Tanjung Malim, Kulim River. The riverside all got temple. Slim River, Tapah Road, Ipoh – yes there is a Vinayagar temple there. In Falim also temple still there, Loco Shed there, big Indian community. Then Tanjung Rambutan, a bit further, after the curve ah then Sungei Siput. Kuala Kangsar – now no last time yes. Then Taiping yes, Bagan Serai yes, Perai yes, Butterworth so many temples. Bukit Mertajam also yes. Down side, Gemas got one Muneeswaran temple ya and Tampin got *lah.* Singapore also got. Temple near Tanjong Pagar, going up there was one in Queensway. Near where you know, Tanglin Halt. Also near Bukit Timah Road can see the white horses from the train. Now, all removed already what?

Likewise, Rahim, a Malay Muslim ticket inspector in his sixties when I met him in 2017 while travelling on the train from Johor Bahru to Gemas, shared his mental map of temples along the tracks. He had been a quality inspector on the East Coast Line for a large part of his 34-year career in the railways, which explained the wealth of information he had. He knew the exact location of temples, mosques and other landmarks near railway stations and tracks in the 'old days', and could also recall those that had been demolished and moved to other locations. My conversations with Rahim produced his temple map:

> Bekok there is a temple after the KTM station, can see from the train. Paloh, one temple on the left side of the station – now demolished. Chamek also – very small shrine on Jalan Stesen – now no more. Then

> Labis – temple just demolished, the mosque also gone. Niyor – also got
> temple, just before Kluang station. Kluang station got many temples –
> right hand side – four or five – still there. Mengkibol, Layang Layang – all
> temples demolished. East Coast line also many temples – Kuala Lipis,
> Gua Musang, Kuala Kerai, Tumpat – those still there la – because not yet
> double tracking.

Yet another example is the map furnished by sixty-year-old Hajruddin, a former
station master at the Kuala Kerai Station on the East Coast Line, who remem-
bered seeing temples along the stretch between Paloh and Mengkibol Stations,
as he travelled along the West Coast Line:

> Ya there were many temples. I can tell you; every station will have a tem-
> ple. From here to Gemas. Gemas to Johore Bahru. I can tell you where
> exactly. That was the 1950s, 60s and 70s – you can see a lot of quarters
> still in the jungle areas. You know every station, 4–5 km, you can see the
> quarters – there were a lot of people there. And then, one temple.

Mala, a 35-year-old woman who grew up with a temple in her backyard in the
railway quarters adjacent to the tracks at the Layang Layang Station, where her
father was a *mandore* (see Figure 4.1), could also easily name stations where
temples were located: 'Paloh, Mengkibol, Kluang, Gemas, JB, Layang Layang.'
    Following the leads carried in these maps, I used railway stations, yards,
depots and quarters as starting points for charting railwaymen temples. This
was challenging given that railway topographies across the West Coast Line
had changed dramatically through waves of uneven modernization over the last
twenty to thirty years. For instance, along the Gemas–Padang Besar stretch,
which has been double-tracked and electrified, many of the old stations, tracks
and railway quarters have now been demolished, making it impossible to locate
the old stations and quarters. Yet, I was gratified to find traces of older, original
temples built by railway labour amid new railway precincts – some had mirac-
ulously survived railway development projects. But on the Johor Bahru–Gemas
section, trains still ran on the old tracks at the time of my fieldwork in 2017 and
2018. Here some original stations and railway quarters remained as well, even
as the demolition of stations, quarters and temples and the removal of remaining
squatters were well underway.
    The railway topography of the East Coast Line, which had been completed
in 1931, was still intact in 2018, even though some old stations had been closed
and replaced by newly built stations. Travelling on the 'Timuran Express' (also
known as the Jungle Express) between Gua Musang and Tumpat in 2018, I
sighted and successfully located some of the older railwaymen temples that had

Figure 4.1. Durgai Amman Temple (Layang Layang), next to railway quarters for a *Mandore*, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

been pointed out to me by my interlocutors, as well as new temples that had been built close to the old tracks and stations. But, here too, there were signs that development would be escalated – especially in the states of Pahang and Kelantan – in relation to the long-planned East Coast Railway, which would ultimately alter the original KTM network, even if the short-term effects seemed to be minimal.

Using pointers in the temple maps shared with me, I first plotted temples while riding on the train, being true to the methodology of *ethnography on the move*. I then followed up by road, and located and visited many of the identified temples. While some were hard to find, I failed to locate others altogether. Still, at the end of my train and road journeys up to April 2019, I had identified a total of ninety-four functioning railwaymen temples: thirty-six for Muṉīsvaraṉ, thirty-seven for Am'maṉ and twenty-one for Sanskritic deities – mostly Vināyakar, Murukaṉ and a handful for Civā and Kiruṣṇā. When I shared these numbers with my interlocutors, their reaction was to say that this was a minute fraction of temples built by railway personnel – the total number was listed as several thousand across the entire KTM network. I have found it meaningful to use the notion of *presiding deity* to categorize these temples. However, as is well known to students of Hinduism, a presiding/primary deity is never housed in temples alone: a range of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic deities – as kin and as *kāval* (Tamil, guardians, security guards) – are typically present alongside the principal deity.

'Railwaymen temples' with Muṉīsvaraṉ and Am'maṉ as presiding deities occurred most numerously in my mapping exercises. This is aligned with the popularity of these two deities among Tamil migrants in Malaysia (Belle 2008; Jähnichen 2010; Manimaran 2014; Prorok 1998; Ramanathan 1995) and Singapore (Arumugam 2020; Krishnan 2015; Mohd Ali, N. 1985; Sinha 2005). In Singapore too, I documented traces of railwaymen temples, many of which were built primarily for Muṉīsvaraṉ, though only one of them has survived materially. The other category of temples were dedicated to gods and goddesses of the *Saivite* (relating to the deity Civā) tradition, built mostly by members of the Ceylon Tamil community who were employed in the managerial and administrative services of the railways.

I present the outcome of my temple plotting exercise in the form of maps that show the spatial spread of temples dedicated to Muṉīsvaraṉ, Am'maṉ and the Sanskritic deities (see Maps 4.1–4.4).[7] These maps include temples that were functioning when I visited them. Unfortunately, I was unable to revisit some of these temples due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have subsequently learnt through my networks and newspaper reports that several of the temples I had visited – particularly those on the stretch between Johor Bahru and Gemas – have been demolished since I completed my fieldwork in April 2019.

Map 4.1. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Malaysia, with Munīsvaraṉ as the presiding deity.
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Legend

○ Railway station

▦ Railway tracks

─·─·─ State boundary

━━━ International boundary

Temple:
1. Kuil Sri Mariamman
2. Kuil Dewa Ahree Maha Mariamman
3. Kui Sree Maha Mayana Kaliamman
4. Sri Maha Mariamman
5. Devi Sri Maha Bathra Kaliamman Alayam
6. Sri Mahapathiral Kaliamman Temple
7. Sri Marathdai Nagakanni Temple
8. Sri Parasakthi Amman Temple
9. Karu Mariamman Temple
10. Loco Hill Kaliamman Temple
11. Maha Mariamman Temple
12. Nagamma Shrine
13. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple
14. Durgai Amman Temple
15. Sri Vaitheeswara Thaiyalanayagi Amman Temple
16. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple
17. Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Railway
18. Sri Meenakshi Sundereeswarn Temple
19. Kuil Dewi Sri Veeran Pathra Kaliamman
20. Sri Bhagwathy Amman Alayam
21. Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman
22. Sri Maha Mariamman Pecheyiamman Temple
23. Maha Kaliamman Temple
24. Maha Mariamman Temple
25. Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman
26. Sri Kalumalai Mahakaliamman Temple
27. Dewa Maha Kaliamman Temple
28. Devi Sri Maha Kaliamman Temple
29. Sri Maha Mariamman Kuil
30. Ambal Kovil
31. Sri Mahaletchumy Temple
32. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple
33. Sri Mangalanayagi Amman Devasthanam
34. Kuil Sri Kamatchi
35. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple
36. Dewan Railway Sri Maha Mariamman
37. Kuil Muthu Mariamman

Map 4.2. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Malaysia, with Am'man as the presiding deity.
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Map 4.3. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Malaysia, with Sanskritic deities as the presiding deity.
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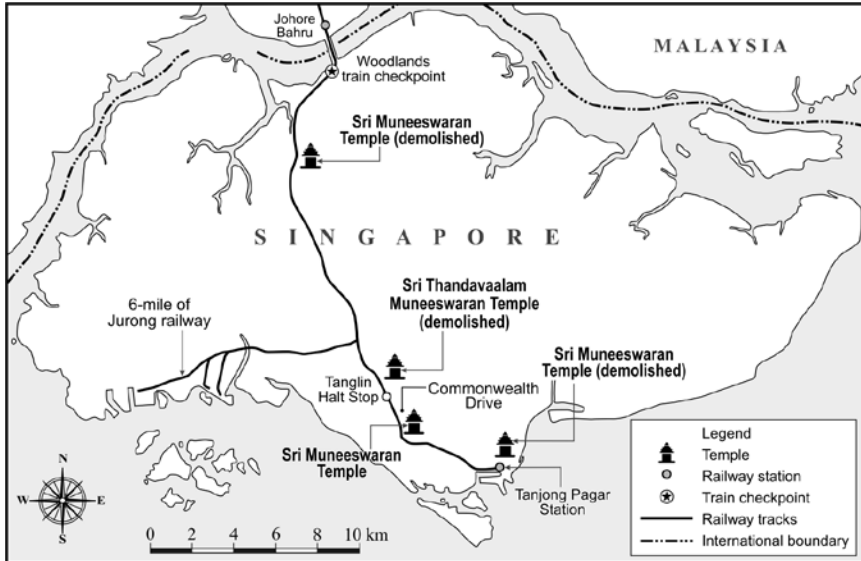
Map 4.4. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Singapore, with Munīsvaraṉ as the presiding deity.
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Grounding Munīsvaraṉ and Am'maṉ on Malayan Shores

During my field trips, I encountered some of the oldest 'railwaymen temples' for Munīsvaraṉ and Am'maṉ in the west coast states of Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Perak, along the West Coast Line. This reflects the concentration of Indians on the west coast historically and the significance of towns and cities there, where railway stations, depots and yards were constructed early on. For example, the railway line between Bukit Mertajam and the port of Perai, constructed in 1899, made Bukit Mertajam an important transportation hub. The roads and railways from this city to coastal areas allowed for the movement of tin and rubber to the harbour. The urban settlement of Perai was central to entrepôt trade in the closing decade of the nineteenth century and offered critical connectivity through railway lines constructed southwards and northwards. Perai was a railway hub in the 1900s and boasted a railway depot that serviced the coaches of the FMSR. The railway line between Perai and Bukit Mertajam was opened in 1899, and trains ran from Perai to Seremban by 1903 and to Johor Bahru by 1909. The line to Padang Besar was completed in 1918, allowing for international train travel to Bangkok's Thonburi Station. There was also a railway ferry, owned and operated by the railway authorities, which took train passengers across the Penang Channel, from Perai to Weld Quay, Penang Island and back.

It is not surprising that several early Hindu temples were built and founded in these regions not only by railway workers, but also by those employed in ports and harbours. During my field trips to Perai and Bukit Mertajam in 2017–18, I located four active Muṉīsvaraṉ railwaymen temples, dating back eighty to a hundred years. All four are registered temples, and I was amazed to learn that they were all still located on the same railway sites where they had been established. Notably, several of these temples can be dated back to the turn of the twentieth century. For instance, the Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple/Loco Shed Perai Temple in Bukit Mertajam claims to have a 100-year-old history, while a second temple, the Sri Muneeswarar Temple, dates back to 1909.

A similar story can be recounted for the state of Perak, the home of the first railways and the centre of tin mining on the western coast, which had one of the largest concentrations of Indian communities at the turn of the twentieth century. The first railway station in Ipoh, a major Indian settlement in Perak, was constructed in 1894, as railway tracks for the Perak State Railways were first laid in this town. This station served the railways for two decades before a second one was completed in 1917, following a long construction period of three years. Likewise, Taiping, in Perak, was another site of early railway and mining settlements, where the Taiping Railway Station, as the first operational train station in Malaya, opened in 1885. The station was constructed when the tracks for the Taiping–Port Weld line were being laid. This line was built to serve the tin mines in the Larut district and ferry those working in the tin mines to their homes.[8] A second station was built in Ipoh in Jalan Stesen between the 1890s and the early 1900s, but it was replaced by the third station in 2014, when the Ipoh–Padang Besar line was being double-tracked and electrified. Not surprisingly, my temple-mapping efforts revealed the firm imprint of several early railwaymen temples built for Muṉīsvaraṉ and Am'maṉ near railway stations and quarters in the towns of Ipoh and Taiping. These places of worship built by early railway communities were sustained by the large numbers of Indian Hindu railway personnel who settled in these areas. The concentration of Indian settlements in major towns like Ipoh and Taiping persists in the present.

Likewise, in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Gemas, Tampin and Bukit Tembok, which used to be the key nodes in the railway network, led to early settlements of railway communities therein. Notably, Gemas – placed at the intersection of the West Coast and East Coast Lines – has retained its strategic value as a railway junction. The original railway station at Gemas was constructed in 1922 and was the site of a goods yard for storing locomotives and rolling stock. It also housed a railway depot, which serviced train coaches on the southern section of the West Coast Line. During my fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, I located three railwaymen temples in Gemas that were built by railway labour – which were astonishingly still located in their original sites and were functional.

The concentration of railway employees in specific locales can be transposed onto the map of Hindu temples in the city of Kuala Lumpur too. For example, the neighbourhood of Brickfields housed the main depot for the Malayan Railways during the British administration. Ceylon Tamils – who were employed in the railways from the early decades of the twentieth century as clerical and managerial staff – were based at stations and depots, including the one at Brickfields and the Central Workshop at Sentul, and were housed in railway accommodation close to their workplaces. In addition to temples built for village deities, Agamic-style temples were also constructed by the Ceylon Tamil railway staff – station masters as well as those in the administrative services. A vast majority of these temples were built for Vināyakar and Murukaṉ. Two illustrative examples are the Bala Subramaniam Temple, Port Klang (near the railway station) and the Sri Kandaswamy Kovil, Brickfields, which opened in 1909. Community leaders, including Mr V. Sinnapah, acting traffic inspector in the railway services, helped to secure land for building the temple. Both were *Saivite* temples from the outset and have functioned in this mode since, occupying the same railway lands on which they were originally built. Both sit on substantial plots of land and have grown more elaborate over time. They have an active community of devotees as well as stable management and leadership. They were conceived and built in the archetypal Dravidian[9] style, complete with kōpuram (Tamil, 'gateway or temple entrance') and vimāṉam (Tamil, 'architectural structure covering the inner sanctum of a temple'), and have conducted several consecration ceremonies.

In a related vein, Sentul, which was a former railway hub of the Malayan Railways, housed the most prominent railway workshop, the Central Workshop, which was built in 1896 (Sim 1955). Most of the early residents in Sentul were Indians – including large numbers of Sikhs – who were employed at the workshop. These communities built Hindu temples and gurdwaras[10] at the close of the nineteenth century in this neighbourhood. Several Hindu temples were founded by railway communities based in Sentul, including at least two for Muṉīsvaraṉ and Muniyanti at the Central Workshop. These latter temples merged with several others from the area and moved to a new location in Sentul, which I visited in 2018 and was a site of my fieldwork. The current caretaker recalled the railway connections of the temple nostalgically and noted that it continued to attract former railway employees, given its popularity and historical association with the Sentul Central Workshop.

On my east coast travels, I encountered far fewer 'railwaymen temples.' In my survey, I only located one Muṉīsvaraṉ temple in Kuala Kerai, in the state of Kelantan, which has been renamed to reflect Murukaṉ as the presiding deity, although the original Muṉīsvaraṉ statue and the historical connection with the deity and the railways have been retained. In the town of Gua Musang, I visited two Muṉīsvaraṉ temples near the railway station and both were established

Figure 4.2. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple at the Mengkibol Station platform, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

Figure 4.3. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Jalan Hospital, Kluang, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

Figure 4.4. Signboard of Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman (Railways), Bukit Tembok, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

rather recently and do not appear to have a known link to the railways. I came across only one Munīsvaran railway temple in Kuala Lipis, Pahang. There is also a famous Am'man temple built by railway workers at the railway station in the town of Tumpat.

I also mapped railwaymen temples on the island of Singapore (Map 4.4). Some of my knowledge about the Singapore Hindu temple scene is drawn from earlier phases of my fieldwork. In these research endeavours, I had identified just five temples along the KTM tracks on the island, of which three were built by railway labourers (Sinha 1988). Over time, four of these temples – Vel Murugan Temple, Silat Road; Rama Bhakta Hanuman Temple, under a flyover at Bukit Timah Road; Muneeswaran Temple, Woodlands Road; and Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Kampung Bahru – have been demolished as part of Singapore's urban renewal programme and the KTM modernization drive (ibid.). Only one temple connected to the railways is still standing – the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth Drive, which traces its origins back to the 1930s. Today, it is an Agamic temple, with Munīsvaran still as its presiding deity, served by Brahmin priests and a vibrant temple community.

Apart from locating temples spatially and interrogating their connections to the railways, my interactions and conversations during fieldwork generated what I designate as *kōvil katai* (Tamil, 'temple stories'), which were crucial in piecing together social and historical narratives about the temples. The custodians of the 'railwaymen temples' I spoke to – even in the case of those temples that had moved out of railway hands and were being managed by other clusters of devotees – remembered the temple–railway connections. In my journeys, while I learnt about those railwaymen temples that had been demolished, without monetary or alternative sites as compensation, I was also told about those that had been demolished and had moved to alternative sites offered by the authorities. However, other 'railwaymen temples' had a rather different trajectory altogether – they remained small in scale, and lacked funds and devotees – but still managed to survive. The latter were also less likely to have their histories recorded and memorialized. My intention was thus to learn especially about this latter category of temples and *hear* from caretakers and devotees *what they knew* about temples built by railway labourers. I was not disappointed as my interlocutors shared with me a plethora of resonant and nuanced narratives about the temples with which they were associated or knew about through their community networks.

Generating *Kōvil Katai* (Temple Stories)

The *particularities* of my ethnographic journeys, and the unique encounters I had with specific individuals, shaped the narratives that were shared with me as *kōvil katai*. As a way of starting discussions, I asked for *temple stories* rather than the

histories of the temples, saying 'Kōyiliṉ kataiyaic colluṅkaḷ' (Tamil, 'please tell me the story of the temple') or 'Kōvil kataiyai terintu koḷḷa vēṇṭum' (Tamil, 'I want to know the story of the temple'). My interlocutors were comfortable with this approach and narrated temple stories with ease, although with caveats about their lack of knowledge about dates and other historical facts. Many were unsure about the exact dates when temples were built or the names and precise identities of those who built them. Yet they spoke easily of 'rayilvē toḻilāḷarkaḷ' (Tamil, 'railway workers') and 'eṅkaḷ makkaḷ' (Tamil, 'our people') building temples in 'paḻaiya nāṭkaḷ' (Tamil, 'old days') and 'anta nāṭkaḷ' (Tamil, 'those days') near railway tracks, quarters and stations. Most could not offer papers, records and documentation as evidence to substantiate their historical narratives. Their accounts typically included statements like 'kōvil rayil toḻilāḷarkaḷ pōṉṟōrai kaṭṭappaṭṭatu' (Tamil, 'the temple was built by railway labourers') and 'kōvil rayil taṭaṅkaḷ arukē kaṭṭappaṭṭatu' (Tamil, 'the temple was built near the railway tracks').

These exchanges elicited rich narratives from individuals who drew from their personal experiences and knowledge, which were received orally through family and community networks. Some accounts I heard were elaborate, while others were brief – a function of the contacts I made with temple founders and caretakers and their knowledge, itself mediated by their biography and association with the temple in question. In many cases, I was fortunate to access multiple members from a temple community and historical narratives were generated collectively, while with other temples, I gathered temple stories from just one person. In addition to the accounts of temple caretakers, management committee members and devotees, my interlocutors also shared their temple archives generously. These included temple registration documents, receipts of rent or fees paid to the KTM, *Kumabishegam* (temple consecration ceremony) magazines and temple publicity materials, such as posters announcing festivals and rituals celebrated in temples as well as private collections comprising papers and visual memorabilia. These were all valuable sources of information, which were key to elaborating and, in some instances, substantiating the temple stories that were produced by my interlocutors. Typically, these conversations occurred at temples or railway stations, where I often arrived without an appointment and approached a group of devotees and temple caretakers, finding myself in unplanned encounters. Still, these produced nuanced discussions about the historical details of the temples and the ensuing conversations were collective – and productively so.

The temple stories I encountered in my field journeys reveal that the narratives articulated by my interlocutors in the present, also spoke to the origins and futures of railwaymen temples. I now turn to a select set of stories of mother goddess temples in Malaysia that exemplify these emphases. The notion of *shakti* (Sanskrit, 'female energies, powers') emerged as a core framing principle as I listened to the stories of railwaymen goddess temples I visited across Malaysia and

also witnessed their popularity. This is not surprising. From the opening decades of the nineteenth century, mother goddesses from Tamil Nadu – Māriyam'maṉ, Periyācciyam'maṉ, Kāḷiyam'maṉ and Samayapuram Māriyam'maṉ – have been found in Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guayana, La Reunion, South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore. These have been conceived as *local* goddesses, but who also functioned as *kula teyvam* (Tamil, 'household, ancestral deities') or favoured or preferred deities. The worship of mother goddesses in Malaya has deep, historical roots, which is evident in the early temples that were built for them and the ritual-festival complex enacted in their honour. The latter includes *Kul*, that is, porridge offering, a communal practice rooted in Tamil Nadu villages; Timiṭṭi, the festival of fire-walking, which brings together the cult of Draupadi and the worship of Māriyam'maṉ, and *Navarāttiri*, the nine-day festival honouring mother goddesses.

The five temple stories I will now relate reflect a number of intersecting and overlapping themes: an awareness of the temple's historical links with the railways, challenges entailed in negotiating railway modernization agendas, concerns about the future of temples in light of limited human resources and funding, but a firm commitment to ensuring the sustenance of temples going forward. In the first example, at the Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Bukit Tembok in Negeri Sembilan, I was fortunate to speak to several individuals who have been associated with its care for decades, some of whom were former railwaymen currently serving in temple leadership. The temple was explicitly and proudly marked to me as a railway temple, its history dating back to 1910. Dayaparan, a 66-year-old who has known the temple since birth, stated that:

> the original people are all mostly from the railways. On the other side of the river was all the railway staff. They had quarters, all here, I think one, two, three or four rows. Single-storey quarters were there. That much I can remember.

While Dayaparan's family has no railway connections, the temple was in a railway neighbourhood where his family had settled after moving there from Kuala Lipis, Pahang. Other temple details were shared by Nadesan, originally from Port Klang, who worked in the railways and was proud of his railway family. He had started his railway career at the age of 'twenty plus in 1962', before which he was a tele-clerk for three years with the port services. He was promoted to the position of assistant driver and transferred to the Kuala Lipis Station, where he retired in 1997. His father had come to Malaya at the age of ten, from a village in the Ramnad district of Tamil Nadu and was employed as a carpenter in the railway services in Port Klang. Nadesan shared that three of his father's brothers who had accompanied him 'were all in the railways … all in carpentry'. When

I spoke to him in 2017, he told me that the temple was founded by a *mandore*, 'one of the gangers' in track maintenance and was around a 'hundred years old'.

The temple's signboard signals its strong historical association with the railways with the insertion of 'railway' next to its official name. I was told that the temple's records go back to 1910, but it was registered only much later. This was an Agamic temple with sanctums for Makāmāriyam'maṉ, Vināyakar and Murukaṉ, and had no non-Sanskritic deities other than Pairavar. The committee conducted the temple's first consecration ceremony in 1984, followed by a second one in 2000 and a third in 2012. Before it was consecrated, there were no Brahmin priests at the temple; only the local *paṇṭāram* (non-Brahmin priests) functioned as ritual specialists. Nadesan emphasized that even in the old days, there was 'no cutting and animal sacrifices at the temple'. Although the temple was started by railway labourers, members of the Ceylonese community working on the railways and living in the neighbourhood gradually became involved in temple management from the 1960s. This was explained by Nadesan as follows: 'Ya those days a lot of Indians, Ceylonese in KTM. So, they were the temple presidents and all but all supported the KTM workers' temples.'.

The current temple, which is behind the new Seremban Railway Station – visible and audible from the premises – is a short distance from its original location, which was close to a block of railway quarters that have since been demolished. The temple still sits on KTM land and its managers have some anxieties about the same, given that the temple does not own the land and they have not been successful in gazetting the site for religious use. The temple holds a Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL), that is, the right to run a temple on KTM land. In return, the temple pays a fee to the railway authorities, which in the 'old days' was a mere RM 1/year and increased to RM 10/year in 1975 and then to RM 100/year, before the current and rather exorbitant rate of RM 500/year. The temple managers generously shared the receipts they were issued for these payments. These documents are invaluable as they embody a history to which I would not have been privy otherwise. One receipt, in English, issued by the Malayan Railways in 1947 names a 'Mr. S. Kannusamy, Mandor Gardener's Gang, Railway, Seremban' as the 'Occupier' of 'an area of 49,500 square feet in Railway Reserve, Seremban, for erecting a Hindu temple' (see Figure 4.5). Another receipt, in Malay, issued by the KTM in 1975 shows the increased rate of RM 10/year (see Figure 4.6) for 'mendirikan sebuah kuil Hindu' (Malay, 'establish a Hindu temple'). The Am'maṉ at the temple is believed to be 'very powerful' by devotees. There has been talk of redevelopment, which might affect the temple, but Dayaparan was unfazed by these rumours, firmly convinced of Am'maṉ's power. 'People keep frightening me, "you know, they are going to come and take over" and all these. I just say … don't fool around with her. She has been here much before all these jokers who started developing this place.'

MALAYAN RAILWAY.

Permit No. 227

PERMIT FOR THE TEMPORARY OCCUPATION OF SITE IN THE RAILWAY RESERVE, SEREMBAN.

Mr. S. Kanupsamy, Mandor Gardeners Gang, Railway, Seremban (hereinafter referred to as the occupier) is hereby permitted to occupy from month to month, beginning on the 1st day of May, 1947, an area of 49,500 square feet in the Railway Reserve, Seremban for the purpose of erecting a Hindu Temple

at a rental of $ 1.00 cents (Dollar one and cents Nil only) per annum payable in advance to Station Master, Malayan Railway, Seremban on the first day of every May, each year, without demand, subject to the following conditions :—

Figure 4.5. Permit for temporary occupation of railway reserve land in Seremban for building a Hindu Temple, 1947, Temple Archives, courtesy of Bukit Tembok Temple, used with permission

Over time, the temple has grown in scale, with new deities added and older deities displaced, and a different ritual complex instituted – with the emergence of a new community of devotees. Nonetheless, this temple is currently supported by a large and committed community of devotees, and seems to be financially stable, although there were concerns about the lack of participation in temple affairs by younger Hindus and temple renewal.

Next, the Sri Maha Letchumi Temple, Slim River in Perak is also a relatively successful temple, with a stable community of devotees, and has managed to attract students, teachers and other professionals to the temple management team. However, here too there are lingering concerns about limited funds and human resources, a pattern that I observed with many other temples. During my 2017 visit to the temple, I met Kanesan, who was in his late sixties and was part of the temple's management committee. He shared that there are about twelve Hindu temples in Slim River, due to the large number of estates and mines in the area, all of which had 'at least a few temples.' Kanesan had been associated with the temple for almost thirty years and knew a great deal about its history. He stated that this was an 'old temple' that was started in the 1940s for Muṉīsvaraṉ, but Am'maṉ was 'already there … you see, earlier starting was, we had a small picture of Makālaṭcumi and Muṉīsvaraṉ … then, after some time, we changed the

thing to Makālaṭcumi, then we had a small place built up'. He observed that the temple already had Makālaṭcumi as its presiding deity when he took over its care. It subsequently transformed into an Agamic temple and has had two consecration ceremonies – the first in 1969 and the second in 1990. Kanesan pointed out to me that:

> According to the registry, from what I gathered, in 1940, Mr Bala started off the shrine and then built a bigger structure. When I came in, I took over the structure like this, that was in 1989 … the same place, no change in the altar. In olden times, in fact, they didn't even maintain a statue, they put a photograph of Ayyā and slowly they changed to Makālaṭcumi. They had a proper statue brought in from India and you see, we have got two now – the old one and the new one. The old one is in front – the statue – and in the back is the big one, the new one.

Kanesan could also share details of several key figures in the history of the temple: one was a Mr Bala (not a pseudonym), a local businessman and politician as well as two railway staff. One of the latter was appointed the temple chairman in the early years, and the second stepped into his shoes when the former was

Figure 4.6. Permit for temporary occupation of KTM lands for establishing a Hindu Temple, 1975, Temple Archives, courtesy of Bukit Tembok Temple, used with permission

transferred to Ipoh and managed the temple for about twenty-five years. The second gentleman lived in the railway quarters near the temple and had since passed away. Kanesan credited these three individuals with establishing and managing the temple before he arrived on the scene.

Under Kanesan's supervision, the structure of the temple was enhanced, with some older structures demolished and the addition of a *kōpuram* and *maṇṭapam* (Tamil, 'hall') in 2001. Further structural improvements were undertaken in 2012 when a sanctum for the deity Civā was added, thus rendering this an Agamic temple. Kanesan shared that the temple management faced 'a lot of problems with weddings, vege [vegetarian] means very few want to take', meaning that fewer people came forward to conduct marriages at the temple in the absence of facilities for serving nonvegetarian food. He also mused that 'financially we are not that sound, you see, we have to look at how to subsidise ourselves. Because it's not easy you see, youngsters nowadays, they don't want to come forward to spend their time in temples'. He recounted that the temple has had to move from its original site, but it is a registered, official temple with 'proper papers':

> Earlier it was near the old railway station, there was a small gate opposite the temple, the temple was very small when it started off … Land is railway land *lah* but we got a proper, I mean, approval from the authorities. Yes, registered in … I'm not sure when exactly … due to the new filing system, don't know the new number and all that but the old number is 222026. Yes, we have a proper acknowledgement with the respective body. Yes, we're paying rent RM 250 per month. And we're seeking by law to gazette the temple, land and all that.

In 2017, the temple still occupied KTM land, paying an annual rent of RM 250 under TOL terms and I was told that there were 'no problems' with the authorities. However, Kanesan admitted that the temple committee had experienced 'many problems' with the double-tracking project that started in 2005: 'Ya, we had a lot of problems. In fact, they relined the railway. The authorities … they say we have to remove the temple. No, they didn't mention any compensation, they just say you have to move out.' He stated that the temple leadership mobilized the community and enlisted political support to 'save' the temple:

> we resolved it with the support of the political side, the people around went all out to save the temple, so it was successful. So, Samy Velu [then a veteran Malaysian Indian politician] came over and looked at the temple and all that and asked the government to save the temple.

As in so many other cases I have encountered, on the ground assessments relating to infrastructural details of a temple's immediate surroundings by engineers and surveyors were critical in navigating the double-tracking project. Often these individuals were crucial in circumventing loss of temple space, adjusting the positionality of temple and in preventing the demolition a temple. In this case, Kanesan recalled with gratitude and relief that it was:

> lucky that they were going to build the overhead bridge. So, all the tracks have to go through that path over there, so this is off the track, so no tracks can go through here, I mean. On that basis, they allowed us to stay and no, no change in alignment.

Kanesan was convinced that the removal notices his temple had received were politically motivated: 'there was no actual reason to demolish it, it was not within the 100 feet, it is political. We are Indians, Hindus, so they see a temple, they just want to … just claim the land and so we went all out to fight … and it was successful'. Like most railway temple caretakers I met, Kanesan was well versed with the official rules for the demolition of structures along the railway tracks. He was aware that any built structures within 100 feet on either side from the middle of the tracks occupied railway lands and could be demolished.

In the next example, Ramesh and Nallan, two temple committee members of the Dewan Railway Sri Maha Mariamman, Alor Setar in Kedah who were in their sixties, recounted the railway history of the temple when I met them in 2018. Both men, who were involved in the temple's care, came from railway families that have been involved with the temple for several generations. According to Ramesh, the temple was built and sustained through the efforts of railway workers. He claimed that the temple, which still occupied KTM premises and sat on the land where it was founded, was 'given by British people to make the temple … more than 118 years ago'. The two men recalled the temple's connections with the railways with nostalgia. However, Nallan acknowledged that the temple has now been 'taken over' by other clusters of devotees: 'This temple, in those days, was run by the railway people, it was especially for the railways quarters' people. Now, the railway people are not here, so outsiders have come in.'

Ramesh shared that his grandfather was from Calicut/Kozhikode, Kerala and had been a railway worker in the locomotive department in Alor Setar when he started the temple in 1947, while his father was a station master at the Alor setar station. His family history was deeply entangled with the railway: his grandfather, parents and he had all worked in the railway services. He articulated this well: 'Yes, we are all from the railways … my wife also from railway people.' This family connection with the railways was a matter of immense pride for

Ramesh. His family too had been associated with the Am'maṉ temple, which had been surrounded by railway quarters in the old days. Speaking of his involvement with the temple he said that 'since birth I am here … in the old days the temple was in wood and all the while an Am'maṉ temple'. When Ramesh and Nallan pointed out where the railway staff quarters used to be, I realized that the temple had been flanked on one side by labour lines occupied by labourers – 'all track maintenance, line maintenance, gangline workers, all Indians' – and housing for the 'big masters', station masters, on the other.

Ramesh acknowledged the historical links of his family with the temple while highlighting the power of the deity Māriyam'maṉ and attributed the social mobility of the residents in the area to her blessings:

> So you see, before we were born, the temple has been here, those days temple was wooden … always an Am'maṉ temple – you can interview the *pūcāri* – he say when he came here he was nothing, he just had a bag. After serving Am'mā, he is doing very well. He even has bought his own garland shop. He tells me – all the power comes from her. For the people born here – I was born here in the village there – we also saw a lot of good changes. We are not very well educated but all the children study well … we believe all from Am'mā.

Ramesh too was proud of the fact that three generations of his family have been custodians of the temple. He has impressed upon his children to remain connected to the temple, even though they no longer lived in Alor Setar:

> My children – they will come but they are all in Kuala Lumpur. One studying, two working. They only come back during festive seasons. But this is what I always tell my children *lah* – there will be a time when we will not be around. So, I always tell them, when there is something in this temple, you all must come and get involved.

Ramesh observed that the temple sustained the ritual complex typical of Am'maṉ temples across Malaysia and Singapore, celebrating 'Poṅkal, *Navarāttiri*, *Kārttikai*, Timiṭṭi, Āti'. As elsewhere, *Timiṭṭi* was by far the most popular and prominent festival at the temple. Ramesh explained that: 'Firewalking is the main thing … those days, we had it in front of the temple, those days there was no tarred road, it was just sand, so it could be done. But now we have to move to the side.' He also highlighted that at the temple: 'Women also walking, very common in Malaysia. Nothing wrong with that.' However, Nallan added his concerns about women walking on the fire pit: 'I think – because ladies they wear sarees. Sometimes, they topple, then all lost the mood already *lah*. We can

be pious – can just go around – not necessary for all to walk on fire.' My ethnography has surfaced that Malaysian celebrations of *Timiṭṭi* historically included women, who walked on fire like their male counterparts. While this practice persists in many goddess temples across Malaysia, it has also been criticized and attempts have been made to ban women from walking on fire. I have also met Singaporean Hindu women, who are not allowed to walk on fire at the festival, and who travel to Malaysian temples to fulfil their desire to walk on the fire pit. Elsewhere in the Hindu diaspora, the issue of women walking on fire has been politicized in the face of rising reformist impulse, which seeks to bar women, who in the past had been able to fire walk without any problems (Diesel 1998; Lang 2021).

The Alor Setar temple was registered in 1971 and is currently being renovated, but is in dire need of building funds. The management committee estimated that RM 2 million are needed for the reconstruction of the temple and initiated fundraising efforts to source donors. Given the small size of the Indian community in Kedah and Alor Setar, which Ramesh notes is also 'not very well to do', it thus cannot provide the needed finances. Ramesh commended the openness of the Chinese community and their participation in Hindu temple festivals. He was also appreciative of their generosity: 'the Chinese, they give, they can give, they will join the prayers, they will give us donations during the prayers'. Both men were thankful that the temple has not been affected by the track modernization project and attributed this to the fact that they are 'legal and official … because we registered'. Nallan said emphatically: 'No, we were not affected. Once they wanted to do the project, they asked other temples to move – small, small temples near the tracks, not registered – taken care of by the railway people … but we pay rent regularly, also we are not so small, so we are safe.' Even so, the temple leadership remains alert to possible threats to the temple from urban renewal and railway modernization projects.

Another goddess temple in Malaysia that is renowned for its powers is the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Behrang in the state of Perak. When I visited the temple in 2017, Viknesh, the chairman of the temple, shared his knowledge of the temple's history with me. I learnt that the presiding deity of this temple is Makā Māriyam'maṉ, who was previously housed in a Vināyakar temple nearby and was originally represented by a small stone and *cūlam* (Tamil, 'trident'). Viknesh asserted that the Am'maṉ at the temple 'is very powerful', and that she has accumulated efficacies given that 'she is actually much older. Because she was there first, in the Vināyakar temple. Then from the Vināyakar temple, we brought her here. So, the statue has so much power'. The temple also has sanctums for the deities Muṉīsvaraṉ and Vināyakar, brought from other temples in the area that were being demolished. Viknesh did not deny Muṉīsvaraṉ's power, but expressed a firm preference for Am'mān – 'We call him Ayyā, the Malays

call him Datuk (Malay for grandfather). He is also very powerful but I only pray to Am'man' – something permissible in Hinduism in the notion of *ista devata* (Sanskrit, favoured/preferred deity). But he also admitted that the Ayyā at this temple was powerful: 'Ya, very famous, a lot of people will come because this Ayyā is *caivam* [vegetarian] – this means cannot cut *kambing* [Malay, goat] all.' He has also taken it upon himself to educate and reform devotees, drawing them away from performing 'cutting', that is, animal sacrifices:

> I am teaching everyone, my children, about it. You can't say, 'they used to cut, so we also want to cut', like that I don't want. I don't want to follow this here. Because the temple changed already. The Amma is *Caivam*. The *Datuk* is also *Caivam*.

Viknesh acknowledged that Munīsvaran was an extremely popular deity in Malaysia, especially amongst railway workers. He told me about several temples he knew of that were close to the Behrang Station, built for Munīsvaran and Munīyanti near the tracks by railway labourers who lived in the nearby railway quarters. He highlighted the link between the Indian presence in the estates, railways and public works, and the building of Hindu temples near their work sites and residences:

> Last time people from India came just to build these tracks/roads. There were so many of them. As long as this [*sic*] tracks/roads were there, Indians would be there and temples would be there. In Malaysia, 60–70% of the temples tend to be along the railway tracks/station … Yes, railway land. Later what they did was, they brought people to the estates, so then every estate had a temple. Then JKR,[11] so there also, there were quarters and temple. Then telecom, over there also, there would be a temple.

He observed that the Am'man temple 'is very old. So, at the time when the railway decided to start building quarters for labourers, they built the temples on the side'. He remarked that the Behrang Station was built before the Slim River Station and was 'the junction last time if you wanted to go to Tanjung Malim or Slim River'. The temple was asked to move from its original location in 2000 due to the track modernization project and was given some compensation by KTM to relocate to new premises nearby. The temple leaders negotiated the actual positioning of the temple with surveyors and 'when the KTM gave their permission, they placed the tracks a bit further away', thus saving the temple.

Two consecration ceremonies have been performed at this Agamic temple under Viknesh's leadership. He explained that he had used his personal funds to organize these prayers: 'OK, this temple is very special to me. I have spent

about RM 30,000 for the temple festival.' He admitted that he had reached out to the ethnic Chinese community who visited the temple and that he had been somewhat successful in securing funds from this constituency. Despite the generosity of the Chinese, he felt that the Indians could 'try harder' and donate what they can afford:

> So I am the chairman, I will say, if you are coming to Amma, don't come empty-handed. Amma is like a mother. Just like how we visit our mothers once a month, will you go empty-handed? OK fine, if you are poor, bring flowers and come. If not, buy some peanuts or sugar. Tea powder or bread. Don't come empty-handed. If you come empty-handed, you will also leave empty-handed.

He estimated that 'less than half' of the temple is still partially occupied about an acre of the KTM lands, paying RM 120 a year for the occupation. He reiterated the importance of registering Hindu temples in Malaysia:

> The thing is, you need to have them registered. You have to get them registered with the government. If you get registered, you will receive a certificate. Once or twice a year, they also give some money for us to conduct some activities. But a lot of people don't get it registered. But mine is.

Like many other temple caretakers I spoke to, Viknesh expressed that while official registration and 'proper papers' have protected his temple from the track modernization project and allowed it to remain close to its original location, he continues to be nervous about what will happen going forward.

In the final example, the Kuil Muthu Mariamman, Tumpat in the east coast state of Kelantan is a temple with a long railway history. This temple is located at the end of the East Coast Line, adjacent to the Tumpat railway station. When I visited the temple in 2018, I had the good fortune of meeting several current and past committee members. For example, I spoke to Subhas, who was in his late sixties and had been with the temple for several decades as treasurer, vice-president and president. Although he had resigned from the presidency some time ago, he has continued to be a committee member. Subhas described himself as 'half-Hindu, Thai-Hindu', as his mother is Thai and father is Indian Hindu, adding: 'But I accept that I am an Indian. I accept that I have duties to the Indian community. I am part of the Indian community as well as the Thai community. I have a leg in both.' He did not feel that the railway modernization project would impact the temple negatively: 'I don't think we will ever be affected by this double-tracking thing because whatever they do they will not extend up to Tumpat.' He observed that the temple, sitting on KTM land, was situated adjacent to the

Tumpat Station, which was built in 1931. It has strong historical connections with the railways:

> Yes, I will tell you, this is a railway-related temple, in several respects. One, of course, the history of the temple, was most probably … I would say 100% built by workers who have been employed by the Malayan Railway. Definitely. There were no other Indians (in Tumpat) at that time. Tumpat was one time a port village … but it was at one time the terminus of the railway, so there were large … fair number of Indian workers.

I spoke to several members of the temple's management team and the priest, all of whom told me that the temple was built by railway workers 'running the lines' and has always been on the same site, next to the Tumpat railway station. Subhas explained the coming of the railways to Tumpat thus:

> During British time – because I think iron ore was there – so, they had to transport the iron ore from there. Yes, that's the only reason they built the railways. That was only reason the port was there also. When the railways came, a lot of Indians those days. There were supposed to be more than a hundred families in Tumpat. That's what I heard *lah*. But you know there is only one, I think truly, only one Hindu family in Tumpat. But you see, the Tumpat temple has a certain resonance for the Hindu community. For some, it has its own pull.

Loga, another key member of the temple community and a resident of the nearby town of Kota Bharu, admitted: 'We don't know so much of the history. You want story and all, not easy. We don't remember so much.' To his knowledge, the temple lands were secured sometime in the 1950s, but the temple management dates the temple back to 1912. I was told that part of the land occupied was owned by the temple, but a small portion belonged to the KTM. For this, Loga said: 'We pay little rent, small government land what. We used to pay RM 10, now pay RM 150, monthly.' Speaking of the old days, he said:

> Earlier it was a small temple. It was like a shed *lah*. Like a shed, built by the railways, railway people. They found some small idol somewhere in the sea. Then they put it in the shed and used to pray there. And it was only an *Am'maṉ* temple first. The *Civaṉ* temple was added later. Now all temples got all gods. They don't care.

As with the general pattern elsewhere, the railway workers were housed near the station, as Loga confirmed: 'Ya ya, of course. There was [*sic*] quarters nearby.

People staying there built the temple.' He added that 'the temple is about a hundred years old. We had a 100-year celebration. And then you have to get the magazines. We don't have all the records. We must find out where it is. It must be in the temple cupboards *lah*. Some of the records will be there. But I don't think there is much'. But he pointed me to a source that might reveal details of the temple's past:

> *Kumbabhishegam* books, generally, they have the history. Some form of history at least. Not main history. Actually, there is quite a lot … founded hundred years … they were trying to trace, was there any temple? But you cannot tell without the facts. Anybody keeps that? Why should anybody remember all these facts? Unless you are doing research (laughter)!

I did turn to these 'books' Loga had directed me towards and learnt much about this temple's history. Indeed, here narratives about the temple's past claimed the longevity of the temple and its firm association with the railways. These accounts were mostly aligned with what I had earlier heard from various parties, but they contained more details, such as dates and names, and adopted a less tentative, more authoritative tone. For instance, Subramaniam Nachiappan,[12] the Deputy President and Chairman of the 'Kumabishegam Committee' of the temple, wrote:

> This famous temple was founded in 1912 and is located 14 km from Kota Bharu. It is believed that this shrine was under a small shed for many years. Over the years, it has undergone many changes with major renovation and restoration work being done. The temple has had four Consecration Ceremonies – in the years 1926, 1959, 1976 and 1993. Today on the 6th of May 2011, we are celebrating the fifth Maha Kumabishegam. (Muthu Mariamman Temple 2011:12)

Nachiappan's family has been associated with the temple since the 1920s as devotees and temple leaders. This same temple publication also includes an article 'History of the Sri Muthumariamman Temple, Tumpat', which carries the following information:

> The Sri Muthumariamman Temple, Tumpat is one of the oldest temples in Malaysia. It is situated close to the railway track at the entrance of the coastal town of Tumpat which is a district capital … It is believed that about 100 years ago, a person living in Tumpat had a premonition. He gathered the people and took them to the beach, where they found a beautiful Am'man statue embedded in the sand. They brought back the deity and began to worship it. The first temple was built in 1912 with a thatched

roof and mud walls … The deity found on the beach was worshipped in the temple till 1959. (Ibid.: 41)

The temple's connections with the railways are reiterated in this piece – an association I heard of consistently in my conversations with the temple's management committee members and the temple priest:

In 1931 when the Malayan Railway extended its services, people living in the other parts of the state began coming to the temple. During this period, many Tamils working for the period working for the Malayan Railway and their families settled in Tumpat. (Ibid.)

The temple community also celebrated a hundred years of the temple's existence in 2012 and produced a commemorative magazine on this occasion, in which its long affiliation with the railways was again highlighted. R. Chandra Sekaran (not a pseudonym), president of the temple, wrote about the early role of Tumpat's Hindu families in sustaining the temple in his message in this magazine:

The temple was built and maintained by Hindu, mostly, Tamil staff of the Malayan Railways [in Tumpat] However, in later years, road communications improved and larger numbers of Hindus from Kota Bharu could come to Tumpat to assist in maintaining the temple even as the Hindu population residing in Tumpat gradually decreased in numbers. (Muthu Mariamman Temple 2012: 9)

In another article in the magazine, Chandra Sekaran highlighted the goddess' enormous power and efficacy, which he said he had experienced himself, along with the 150 or so Indian Hindu families in Kota Bharu and Tumpat:

With all the powers at Am'ma<u>n</u>'s disposal, She is a force for good. And good is in dire need of allies these days. Traditionally She is worshipped as the Goddess who saves her worshippers from the viral diseases such as smallpox, measles and chickenpox. She is also the symbol of sacrifice and motherhood and grants wealth and good health to her faithful devotees. (Ibid.: 9)

Nachiappan's message in the same publication marked the current standing of the temple and its historical role in sustaining the Hindu community life in Kota Bharu and Tumpat:

> As a pioneer temple, the Tumpat Sri Muthumariamman Temple has been serving the small community in Kelantan, very well, for the last 100 years. It has always been our sacred place for worship, spiritual comfort and solace. It has played a vital role by providing a base for us, Hindus, to preserve our religion, festivals, culture, Tamil language and other social activities. (Ibid.)

Interestingly, in an emblematic gesture, the original Am'man̠ icon that had become worn out over the decades was buried within the temple premises. New icons for Am'man̠, Civa and the Navakkirakam were brought from India and enshrined during the temple's consecration ceremony in 1959. Given its early consecration, the temple has been Agamic from the outset, but was only registered in 1978. Subsequently, other deities, like Makālaṭcumi and Nākarkaḷ, were added to the temple's pantheon. After its fifth consecration ceremony held in 2011, considerable repairs and restoration works have been completed, including its artwork, painting and flooring. The temple is sustained almost entirely by the Kota Bharu Hindu community and has taken on a much larger social, cultural and educational remit than attending exclusively to the devotional and spiritual needs of the community. As my conversations with temple custodians temple confirmed, the tradition of mother goddess worship is sustained vigorously here, and in scores of Am'man railwaymen temples I visited across Malaysian urban and rural landscapes, a phenomenon that has been well documented in the scholarship (Collins 1997; Ramanathan 1995; Sinha 2013; Teo 2020; Yeoh 2006, 2016).

Reflecting on the epistemological status of temple stories I have shared, I suggest that these rich and layered accounts provide insights into the social historical details of 'railwaymen temples'. Wading through the details that I heard, my interlocutors and I strove to piece together a historical narrative about temples, especially their connectedness to the railways. However, this was challenging because many of the temples, even those that were known to have been built by gang line workers, *mandores*, gardeners, porters, locomotive and railway yard workers, etc., were subsequently being managed by other, nonrailway Hindu constituencies. Embedded within the stories of 'railwaymen temples', I identified issues that address ongoing transformations in the contemporary railway and religious landscapes in Singapore and Malaysia – themes that are explored further in Chapter 6.

Typically, the early temples built by railway labour were marked by no more than a *cūlam* (Tamil, trident), a stone slab or bricks, placed under a tree, either in the open or enclosed in a rough structure of perishable materials. As such, how could these original structures be memorialized, given that their builders did not have the resources to inscribe them permanently in material terms or in any historical record? Not surprisingly, the material traces of many of these early, original

temples have disappeared. However, several have been rebuilt many times over, reflecting renewed architectural forms. In addition to the evidence contained in material traces of the ninety-four existing temples that have endured, the temple stories I heard are further signs of railway labour building temples. Additionally, these older sites are also remembered nostalgically by descendants of railway labour who founded these temples, as well as members of railway communities and other devotees who frequented them. Thus, apart from accessing historical details of temple building by railway labourers, these accounts enabled a glimpse into the contemporary situation of specific temples, how they function on a day-to-day basis and the multiple challenges they face in sustaining the temple.

The generic pattern I observed is that railwaymen temples located in areas with large, settled Indian communities have flourished – and are even growing. But other temples struggle to survive. Some of these are in urgent need of physical renovation, full-time religious specialists and a stable community of devotees. Their caretakers highlight that funds and human resources are critical. Temple managers note further that the renewal of temple leadership rests on attracting younger members of the community, many of whom have left their home towns for better educational and professional opportunities in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Singapore and beyond. Yet, despite attendant uncertainties about the future of these temples, numerous 'railwaymen temples' I visited were being maintained on limited budgets and personnel, but with a huge measure of commitment and devotion on the part of temple custodians and devotees, who often even drew on their private savings to fund temple affairs.

The 'railwaymen temples' I located were dated by my interlocutors, and in some instances in temple records, to the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. However, I also encountered numerous temples that were built through the 1960s and 1970s or had been revived by those associated with the railways, in several cases by retired railway staff. Many of the older temples founded at the turn of the twentieth century were only registered decades later when the legality of temples became an issue.[13] Yet, other 'railwaymen temples' remain unregistered even today and are thus vulnerable when served with relocation or demolition notices. Lacking any official status, unregistered temples are unable to claim alternative relocation sites or financial compensation, and thus face the eventuality of demolition. However, temple caretakers, who have realized the value of registration, have found it challenging to register their temples in the last couple of decades, owing to the complex and controversial politics of Hindu temple demolitions in Malaysia. Temple custodians without legal status struggle to source new sites for temples, interestingly near railway premises, but only some have succeeded. Yet, I also learnt that temples that had been demolished had nonetheless been memorialized in being inscribed in individual and collective consciousness.

The notion of trans-Asian mobilities speaks powerfully to the analytical framing of this research. As a student of global migration and diaspora religion, movements of persons across national boundaries in colonial and postcolonial moments have been central to all my work. At the same time, in this project I reference a rather exceptional category of sojourners – Hindu deities – whose mobility I argue was intimately entangled with the historical flows of Indian migrants, who built homes for their gods in diasporic lands, including in Malaya. Moving forward, Chapter 5 recognizes the transnational mobility of deities and focuses the lens on Muṉīsvaraṉ, a deity from rural Tamil Nadu, who accompanied his devotees to Malaya in the nineteenth century. In the next chapter, I share a sample of *temple stories* from the thirty-six Muṉīsvaraṉ railwaymen temples I mapped in Singapore and Malaysia. In these renditions, his devotees rationalize the deity's relevance in new diasporic terrains. Specifically, his devotees assert affinities between the deity's desire for mobility and the speed and movement of trains – thereby articulating Muṉīsvaraṉ's connectivity with the railways. In doing so, they curate afresh the deity's identity as a *Railway God*, adding yet another facet to his complex, evolving persona.

Notes

1. This is a sixteenth-century text written by Saint Tulsidas, extolling the virtuous acts and character of the deity Rama.
2. Giramiṭiyā is a Hindi word referring to indentured labourers. The word is derived from the English word 'agreement' and refers to those who signed a contract of employment as workers typically to be deployed in the colonies.
3. *Gutka*s refer to miniature-sized versions of religious texts and are popularly used in Sikhism and Hinduism. According to one explanation: 'The etymology of the term *gutka* may be traced back to Sanskrit *gud* (to guard, preserve) or *gunth* (to enclose, envelop, surround, cover) through "Pali gutii" (keeping, guarding)'. Retrieved 25 January 2023 from https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Gutka).
4. Temples built according to Hindu texts (in Tamil and Sanskrit), known as Agamas, which describe amongst other issues, rules of temple construction and ritual worship of deities. These temples are also consecrated and the rituals therein conducted by Brahmin priests.
5. This descriptor has been in use since the late nineteenth century to refer to a cluster of depressed castes known as Paraiyars. It was adopted by the Tamil Nadu government in 1914 in lieu of that term. From the early decades of the twentieth century onwards, the Indian government used 'Adi Dravida' to refer to 'untouchable' communities in the Madras Presidency and were also known as 'scheduled castes' and as Dalit constituencies.
6. The form prepared by the Ceylon Labour Commission for recruiting Indian labourers for estates in Ceylon specifically mentions that 'Coolies can worship according to their religious beliefs. Festivals and celebrations can be according to their individual traditions' (see Appendix V).
7. See Appendix IV for further details about the locations of the railway temples I plotted during this research.

8. The line was only demolished by the Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) in the 1980s.
9. This refers to both a family of languages spoken in southern India and to the peoples who speak these languages.
10. For example, the Sikhs built the Gurdwara Sahib Central Workshops, Sentul, in 1912, which is also famous as the first 'nonpolice' gurdwara in the country (Gurudwara Sahib Central Workshops Sentul, Kuala Lumpur n.d.).
11. Jabatan Kerja Raya (JKR) is the Malaysian public works department under the Ministry of Works, which oversees the construction and maintenance of public infrastructure works in Malaysia.
12. This is not a pseudonym.
13. For example, the Kadarkerai Sri Muniswarar Temple, Perai, Penang was founded in 1909, but was only registered in 1962.

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5

SOJOURNING WITH MUṈĪSVARAN THE 'RAILWAY GOD'

Mobile Hindu Deities

Barring some exceptions, much of the scholarship on migration and religion has been anthropocentric, focusing predominantly on the movement of humans across territories. This emphasis has generated nuanced theoretical insights about how such flows have enabled the export of religious practices, institutions, sentiments, ideologies and solidarities (Ahmad 1994; Arumugam 2020; Engineer 1986; Khan 1997; Maunaguru 2020; Nye 1995; Rudolph 2005; Rukmani 2001; van der Veer 2002; Vertovec 1994). Here I focus on this rather exceptional category of travellers, whose mobility was deeply and intimately entangled with the historical movement of labour from India to Malayan territories to feed colonial infrastructural projects. This chapter shifts the focus to the phenomenon of globally sojourning Hindu deities[1] who arrived on Malayan shores across the Indian Ocean with their devotees.

Of course, Hindus are familiar with the idea of moving and mobile deities. Indeed, there are many *utsav* (Sanskrit, festival/processional) representations of Hindu divinities, who temporarily but regularly venture beyond temples, which are their earthly abodes (Sinha 2008). As such, the mobility of deities is neither new for Hindus nor surprising to them. However, I argue that the phenomenon of Hindu deities voyaging across transnational boundaries in tandem with a colonial-capitalist project had a rather different import for Hinduism in these regions, both historically and in the present.

Emerging from rural Tamil Nadu, Muṉīsvaraṉ's global forays have taken him beyond localized dominions, together with other male deities like Karuppaṇacāmi, Muṉīyanti and Maturai Vīraṉ, as well as mother goddesses like Kāḷiyam'maṉ, Māriyam'maṉ, Nākam'mā and Periyācciyam'maṉ. In my

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 233.

earlier work, I argued that multiple, layered and even contradictory imaginings of Muṉīsvaraṉ in Malaysia and Singapore have rendered him a 'new' god in the diaspora (Sinha 2005). In the current project, the overwhelming presence of Muṉīsvaraṉ in historical narratives of railway building in Malaya and his continued association with the railways, reveal yet other variants of the deity's multifaceted persona. In Malaya, enshrined in novel modes, Muṉīsvaraṉ has been christened as 'railway *ayyā*' due to his connectedness to the railways, as asserted by his devotees. For the latter, his inherited identity as a walking/moving deity has been mapped onto the mobility of the railways as a mode of transportation, expressing yet one more dimension of his personality.

By April 2019, I had ended my train, road and foot journeys in Singapore and Malaysia. This covered the railway tracks on the West Coast Line, starting from Tanjong Pagar Station in Singapore up to Padang Besar Station, and on the East Coast Line, between Gemas Station and Tumpat Station on the border of Thailand and Singapore. In the process, I located thirty-six functioning 'railwaymen temples' dedicated to the deity *Muṉīsvaraṉ*. I present here stories of the older 'railwaymen temples' dedicated to *Muṉīsvaraṉ* as well as tales of some new temples that have appeared in railway landscapes, given the close affinity his devotees claim he has with the railways.

Insights from my longstanding ethnographic work on Hinduism in Singapore and Malaysia, going back to 1985–87 and 2001–4, add a more recent historical dimension to this narrative. I argue that a remoulding of Muṉīsvaraṉ's identity, efficacy and relevance are witnessed as new mythologies about him are created by railway labourers and their descendants as well as other constituencies of devotees. While my mapping efforts revealed almost equal numbers of temples dedicated to Muṉīsvaraṉ and Am'maṉ, and far fewer dedicated to Sanskritic deities, no other deity was singled out as having the kinship and bonding with the railways that I witnessed with Muṉīsvaraṉ.

Articulating the Muṉīsvaraṉ–Railways Encounter

Throughout my academic career, my research journeys in Singapore and Malaysia consistently revealed the deity Muṉīsvaraṉ and his connection with the railways. My earliest academic encounter with the railways – and their significance for mapping Diaspora Hinduism – was between 1985 and 1987, when I did fieldwork for my master's thesis. As a student at the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, my research focused on devotional, theistic Hinduism on the island; one aspect of my research dealt with the organization of sacred spaces in homes and in public. In trawling the island's Hindu landscape, I had both identified registered, legal temples as well as unregistered, unauthorized structures, many of which were built for non-Sanskritic, village deities.

While exploring the history of Indian labour migration to Malaya and the preponderance of South Indians and Tamil Hindus in this category, I had noted that this group 'found employment in the railways and postal services, accounts and treasury and other departments of the government' (Sinha 1988: 38). These communities housed their deities in temples near their living quarters and work-spaces – in ports, harbours, prisons, army camps, gasworks and railway tracks. In my 1985 leg of the research, I had documented a total of twenty-four registered Hindu temples and another fourteen unregistered Hindu temples across Singapore. I had also identified five Hindu temples, which were located along the 26 km of KTM's North–South line, close to the railway tracks. These included: Sri Rama Bhakta Hanuman Temple (under the flyover at Bukit Timah Road, near Bukit Timah Circus), Muneeswaran Temple (Woodlands Road – see Figure 5.1), Murugan Hill Temple (Woodlands Road), Vel Murugan Temple and Sri Muneeswaran Temple (Queensway). Unsurprisingly, only the latter of these has survived urban and railway development projects in Singapore.

My next research encounter with the railways was in around 2001, when I turned specifically to folk/popular Hinduism and the continued veneration of Muṉīsvaraṉ in contemporary Singapore. Between 2001 and 2003, I travelled to Malaysia and mapped Muṉīsvaraṉ temples, including those along railway tracks, across the western coast of the Peninsula. However, at the time, I was interested in these temples because they were dedicated to Muṉīsvaraṉ as a guardian deity and not because of their historical links with the railways. My research also took me to Tamil Nadu and allowed me a comparative perspective, enabling me to present Muṉīsvaraṉ as 'a new god in the diaspora' (Sinha 2005). The Sri Muneeswaran Temple (Kampung Bahru) and the Sri Muneeswaran Temple (Commonwealth Drive), which have deep connections with the Malayan Railways, were key field sites for this research in Singapore. Alluding to the multiple locales where *ayyā* had found a home in urban Singapore and across urban and rural Malaysia, I wrote in *A New God in the Diaspora?*:

> The pattern I have noted is that in open spaces, some physical representation of the deity, such as a stone, picture statue or Cūlam, is placed under a tree or in a rudimentary structure, and revered as Muneeswaran. I discovered that, even today, the stretch of land along the Malayan Railway is an exceedingly popular space for establishing '*ayyā*'s house'. This is partly because it is tucked away from public view, but more importantly, because the land does not belong to Singapore, which gives some protection from local authorities. In fact, given the logistics of space and how it is policed on the island, shrines that are located on Malayan Railway land seem to be free of the 'hassles' related to land ownership and the protocol of establishing places and modes of worship that are authorised by the

> Singaporean state. The stretch of land seems to be ideal space 'to set up shop', as one of my informants told me. (Ibid.: 109–10)

Historically, of course, there is an intimate connection between Munīsvaran temples and railways in Malaya. Scholarly work on the subject, backed by experiential evidence and common wisdom, suggests that Indians who were brought to work on the construction of the Malayan Railways, set up shrines for Munīsvaran and other folk deities largely to seek protection in a new land (Mani 1977; Rajah 1975; Sandhu 1969; Siddique and Puru Shotam 1982). I asked one informant, an 'old-time Munīsvaran devotee', if he remembered how many Munīsvaran temples there were along these railway tracks. He remembered ten temples from the late 1980s; I could only recall having been to four of these. We could list only two that remain: one at the start of the railway track at Blair Road and the other in Queensway, the only still standing.

It was productive to revisit stories of the Munīsvaran 'railwaymen temples' in Singapore that I had heard earlier, given the tenor of my current research. Of the three *Munīsvaran* temples that I had documented in my 1987 research, two had been demolished. The Muneeswaran Temple at the 14th milestone, Woodlands Road, along the railway tracks, was an iconic landmark, which was visible from the KTM trains heading to Johor as well as to those travelling by road. Mialaret (1969) describes this as a 'Muniyandi Temple' that was built in 1960. The temple was founded and sustained by the employees of the Malayan Railways and was located near a block of railway quarters. The two larger-than-life statues of white horses at the entrance of this temple are remembered by devotees even now, long after the temple was demolished in the early 1990s. In 1987, this was not an agamic temple; chickens and goats were sacrificed for Munīsvaran as well as Am'man, even as the resident priest kept away from these 'cutting' sessions. A Munīyanti sanctum with a statue of Maturai Vīran astride a horse, together with a sacrificial altar and a platform for making offerings, was set apart from the main sanctum. Devotees had free access to these male guardian deities. The main temple building had sanctums for Munīsvaran (a life-size cement statue) and Am'man as well as icons of the deities Civā-Pārvati, Kirusṇā, Vināyakar, Murukan, Turkā and Kāḷi. An interesting and unusual feature of the temple was that it had wall paintings of Piram'mā (Brahma) and Viṣṇu. This was one of the three sites with railway quarters in Singapore, the other two being Kampung Bahru and Tanglin Halt/Queens Close. All three housed 'railwaymen temples' on the island – which is not a coincidence.

The second Munīsvaran temple with strong railway links in Singapore that was familiar to me was the Sri Muneeswaran Temple at Kampung Bahru, which has since been demolished. This temple was located within the compound of Singapore's Tanjong Pagar Station. Despite the lack of official recognition and
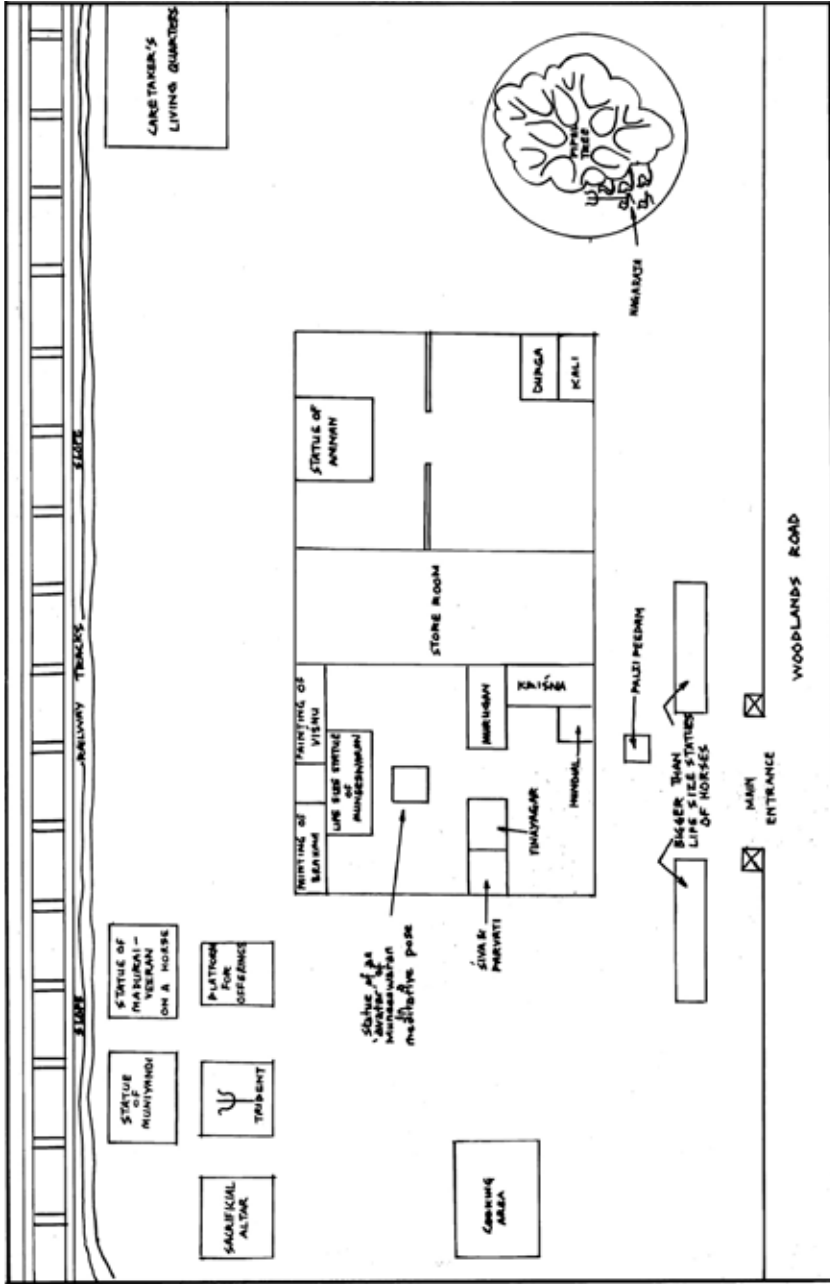
Figure 5.1. Plan of Munīsvaraṉ Temple, Woodlands Road, 1988. Source: Sinha 1988. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

registration, the temple enjoyed patronage and support from a community of local devotees. The sole Brahmin priest at the temple – the late Mr Sundaraj – was a Singaporean whom I first met and interviewed in 2002. The sixty-year-old temple was enclosed within the railway station, but was accessible separately to devotees via a staircase from Blair Road. Sections of land around Kampung Bahru Road, Keppel Road and Spooner Road were historically owned by Malayan Railways and subsequently by the KTM. From the mid-1930s onwards, the railways housed its staff in quarters in the area – near the famous Running Bungalow, Spooner Road, built in the 1930s – where the flats were named after the Malaysian states of Pahang, Johor, Kelantan, Kedah, Perak and Selangor. This temple carried a firm imprint of the railways and was founded by the railway staff working and living in the area.

Devotees recalled that the temple had been moved twice within the station premises before being placed in its present location in 1988. Mr Sundaraj shared that the temple began with nothing more than a small stone and a *cūlam* to represent Muṉīsvaraṉ. At the time of my research in the early 2000s, the temple's affairs were overseen by a management committee of Singaporeans and Malaysians. I learnt that the deity here was named *Sri Muneeswaran* and was seen as an incarnation of Civā. A five-foot-high cement and brick statue of the deity and a *civaliṅkam* (Sivalingam – an aniconic representation of the deity Civā), both placed in the *karppa kirakam* (Tamil, sanctum sanctorum; Sanskrit, 'garbhagrihya'), were added subsequently. The temple held its first *kumpāpiṣēkam* (Tamil, 'consecration ceremony') in 1998, placing it firmly within agamic frames.

Despite its early links with the railways, the temple had moved into other hands, as its clientele has expanded to include devotees from the Hindu-Punjabi, Marathi and Uttar Pradeshi communities, not to mention the visible institutional involvement of members from the Singapore Dakshina Brahmana Sabha.[2] The presence of English-speaking devotees from middle and upper middle-class backgrounds further complicated the structure of the temple community vis-à-vis vectors of class and caste (Sinha 2005). But the temple was still patronized and supported by KTM railway employees and other Hindus until train services were suspended at the Tanjong Pagar Station on 1 July 2011 with the removal of the KTM tracks across the island. This also ended temple operations on these premises. However, the temple, together with all its icons, was relocated to the third storey of a building in Upper Bukit Timah Road, before moving yet again in mid-2018 to the Sze Cheng Keng Chinese Temple, Kampong Ubi Road, where it still functions.

The temple had been sustained through the decades with the commitment of its custodian Mr Sundaraj, whom I had known for almost two decades and who passed away prematurely in 2021. He was a repository of knowledge about

Hindu deities, rituals and mythology, the local Hindu scene and the history of the Kampung Bahru temple. He was a popular local figure with a hundred or so disciples who had accepted him as a *guru*. Over the years, despite his health issues, he demonstrated a dogged determination and practically single-handedly sustained this railwaymen temple. His views on Muṉīsvaraṉ were complex, even as he supervised what I have called the 'Saivization' (Sinha 2005: 96) of the deity in the temple. Yet, he did not try to reform the 'traditional' village practices associated with the deity's worship or insist that his veneration must be aligned with Agamic practices. He was a rare Brahmin priest who easily integrated elements from Agamic and folk Hindu traditions: he would go into a trance during *Māṭṭu Poṅkal* celebrations at the temple, which had a *Caṅkali Karuppaṉ* statue, while he also officiated the *rutra apiṣēkam* prayers for Muṉīsvaraṉ, where members of the 'Singapore Dakshina Brahmana Sabha' recited Vedic mantras. I learnt historical details of this railwaymen temple and about Muṉīsvaraṉ from him. His view was that this powerful deity had been linked with the railways due to his love of mobility and speed.

The only surviving Muṉīsvaraṉ railwaymen temple in Singapore is the Sri Muneeswaran Temple in Commonwealth Drive. The historical narrative of the temple acknowledges its beginnings in 1932 and its founders as railway workers. The recorded origin story of the temple traces its start to a simple wooden enclosure with a 'small *sulam*' (Tamil, trident) and a stone in a triangular shape' (Sri Muneeswaran Temple, *Mahakumbhabhishekham Magazine*, 1998), which represented Muṉīsvaraṉ. The explicit connection of the temple with the Malayan Railways is documented on the temple's website:

> In 1932 Indian workers of the Malayan Railway built a shrine beside the railway tracks to honour the Hindu deity, Sri Muneeswaran. The shrine, called Muniandy Temple, started in a hut housing only a stone and a trident to symbolise the deity. (Sri Muneeswarar Temple n.d.)

The temple was located on a stretch of land that was spatially within Singapore, but under the purview of the Malayan railway authorities, maintained by its railway workers – both Singaporean and Malaysian. Ananda Rajah's work on Muṉiyāṇṭi-Muṉīsvaraṉ shrines in Singapore from 1975 contains important ecological, ethnographic and historical details of this temple. He noted that the temple:

> lies just off the main thoroughfare, Queensway, and abuts onto a railway cutting. Immediately next to the shine are some quarters which are occupied by the employees (principally South Indian Tamil) of the Malaysian Railways. (Rajah 1975: 60)

Rajah acknowledged the link between the emergence of the shrine and the occupants of the quarters (ibid.: 62). He observed that 'the land on which the shrine stood belonged to the-then Malayan Railways' (ibid.: 64) and that 'the Railway workers were mainly employed in manual labour and he shrine which they established was called a Muniandy Koyel (i.e. 'shrine')' (ibid.: 63). By 1965, efforts to scale up and develop the temple did not involve 'Railway workers, but were nevertheless associated with manual labour' (ibid.), highlighting the important early role of manual labour in building Hindu landscapes on the island. Evidently, by this time, the shrine was no longer serving the religious needs of just the railway workers, but had drawn a much wider community of devotees who 'had little or nothing to do with employment in the Malayan Railway' (ibid.: 64). The shifts in temple management and the constituency of the devotees did not entirely sever the historical link with railway labourers who had founded the original temple. Rajah's critical notice that manual labour was involved in building temples like these in Singapore pointed to the caste of these populations, that is, their *Āti Tirāviṭa* backgrounds.

The Sri Muneeswaran Temple Society was officially registered in 1967, through the efforts of devotees who were English-educated Tamils from non-*Āti Tirāviṭa* backgrounds. This was the beginning of a more managerial and formal administration of temple affairs, including a shift towards an agamic style of religiosity. The first *kumpāpiṣēkam* (Tamil, 'consecration') ceremony of the temple was held in 1970, which signalled an adherence to specific Agamic ritualistic procedures and the employment of religious specialists (Brahmin priests and *paṇṭāram* (non-Brahmin priest) from India) to officiate at the temple (Sinha 2005). By this time, Muṉīsvaraṉ assumed centre stage with Muṉīyanti marginalized and almost rendered invisible, although the latter process had already begun in 1967. In 1991, after considering many alternative sites, the location next to Damien Hall Church was deemed suitable and was accepted by the temple committee. The construction of a new temple began in 1994 and was completed in 1998 when the second consecration ceremony of the temple took place. The temple described itself as 'Lord Muneeswaran's new home' and claimed the distinction of having the largest shrine for Muṉīsvaraṉ in Southeast Asia (Sri Muneeswaran Temple, *Mahakumbhabhishekham Magazine*, 1998: 25). As I have noted previously, in this self-narrative the temple custodians write that the temple:

> has been modelled by the best artisans and craftsmen from India and displays the finest sculpture of Hinduism – a shrine with no central pillars to obscure the view of the devotees during prayers to the Lord bringing forth a great engineering feat rarely shown elsewhere in shrines. (1998: 25)

The Agamic temple houses these deities – Vināyakar, Turkkai Am'maṉ, Mariamman, Kiruṣṇā, Ayyappaṉ, Visvanātar, Vicālāṭci, Iṭumpaṉ, Āñcanēyar, Taṭciṉāmūrtti and Muṉīsvaraṉ. The temple employs Brahmin priests from India who are assisted by *paṇṭāram* to enact and reproduce a ritual complex guided by the agamas. The presiding deity, Muṉīsvaraṉ, is approached as an incarnation of *Civā* and venerated according to procedures outlined in the *Caiva ākamaṅkal* (Sanskrit, Saiva Agama). The folk origins of the deity were gradually de-emphasized with his absorption into a *Caivite* tradition. He was distanced from other male guardian deities like Muṉīyanti, Maturai Vīraṉ, Karuppaṉcāmi and Mutal Rājā. In the literature, this cluster of deities is marked as *ciṟiya kaṭavuḷkaḷ* (Tamil, 'small gods, secondary deities') and less complementarily as 'criminal gods' (Hiltebeitel 1989). In the latter rendering, the 'criminality' of gods is approached 'metaphorically' (ibid.: 1) as Hiltebeitel describes these deities as transgressive, as they 'violate sacred codes' (ibid.) of a given Hindu social order.

While Muṉīsvaraṉ's status has been enhanced by his co-option into an Agamic fold institutionally, Muṉīyanti's fate has not been the same. In Muṉīsvaraṉ's upward mobile trajectory, he has had to be detached from his former avatar – Muṉīyanti – and hence from his folk origins. Accompanying this rendition of 'Muṉīsvaraṉ as Civā' has changed the ritual complex through which he is now venerated by priests and devotees alike. My interlocutors admitted that while there were some protests by devotees in the early days about this ritual shift, that moment has passed and the temple is now 'fully' Agamic.

From my earlier research, I had been well aware of Muṉīsvaraṉ's association with the railways and was told by my interlocutors that railway labour had built temples for him near the tracks and had even mapped some of them. But while doing research for this book, I consistently heard Muṉīsvaraṉ being described as a railway god, which compelled me to interrogate anew the relationship between the railways and the deity. In earlier phases of fieldwork with Muṉīsvaraṉ temples near railway premises in Singapore and across Malaysia, I had not placed the railways at the centre of my research inquiries; rather, the analytical significance of the connections between railway labour and 'railwaymen temples' came into sharper focus in this project.

During my recent fieldwork, when I asked my interlocutors, who were *ayyā* devotees, about Muṉīsvaraṉ temples along the railway tracks, Singapore and Malaysia seemed to merge into one continuous space. Informants spoke of there being at least fifty of these temples along the permanent way, just between Singapore and Ipoh. Many of these were known amongst my interlocutors by name and exact location, and they reported having visited these to offer prayers and during festival celebrations. During this leg of my research, my interlocutors – many of whom were former railway labourers – and other railway employees with whom I conversed, expressed an affinity between what they denoted as the 'small

people' (citing manual labourers as one example) and *ayyā*, describing him as the 'simple man's god, ordinary worker's god'. My interlocutors observed that, historically, the labourers who built and maintained the railways could not go to the 'big temples' and pray to the 'big gods' because they were from low-caste backgrounds and thus had to build their own separate temples to house their gods.

This affinity of the deity with those from lower caste and class backgrounds was evidenced in the large number of temples that were built for *kāval teyvam* (Tamil, guardian/protector deity) by Tamil Hindu migrants who worked as manual labour in Malaya. Interestingly, Segar – from the Amman Temple, Kluang – noted this appeal of the deity as an explanation for why 'so many' temples were built for Munīsvaraṉ near tracks and stations. In his words: 'Actually, *ayyā* temples are built by KTM labourers. You know, the workers want to have Munīsvaraṉ, they are all South Indians so they are particular about this – if they have *ayyā*, they feel safe.'

The contours of this book project had begun to take firm shape after June 2011, following the removal of the railway tracks from the island of Singapore. Munīsvaraṉ entered my research agenda yet again, as I returned to the history of railways and Hinduism in the region amidst the removal of the railway tracks from Singapore. Like scores of Singaporeans who walked the railway tracks after the announcement about the latter was made, I embarked on multiple foot journeys along the tracks, fully aware that I was soaking in history but making memories as I savoured these bittersweet experiences.

The stretch of the tracks near Queensway and Tanglin Halt held special interest and intrigue for me, given that it intersected with my biography as well as my earlier research on Hinduism in Singapore. It was here that I encountered the Sri Thaandavaalam[3] Muneeswaran Aalayam at 415A Queensway when the nearby tracks were being dismantled before my eyes. Ironically, this coincided with renewed publicity and visibility of the temple, which devotees argued had already returned to its 'original site' well back in 2009. This narrative was shared with me by Rajan, the temple priest at the time, whom I interviewed in July 2012. After the removal of the tracks, the stretch of land occupied by the KTM tracks was designated as a part of Singapore's rail corridor and zoned for redevelopment. In the meantime, the temple community had been served notice to relocate, but they were neither keen to move the temple to another site nor to merge with other Hindu temples. Speaking to the local press in 2016, Adaikalam Annadhurai,[4] the-then shrine's treasurer, insisted:

> We feel a sense of belonging here. If possible, we don't wish to go. But if we need to, we would like to move somewhere nearby … We worship a *railway god*, so we would like to move to a place near the railway. (Yang 2016, emphasis added)

In another interview he said: 'We've been here for so long … We feel a sense of belonging, but we have no choice but to go' (Yang 2017). Annadhurai's account of the temple's beginnings was tied to his biography and he stated that he had been praying at this site for the past five decades. He recalled the presence of a Munīyanti temple near the railway quarters in the 1960s and observed that this was not 'taken' when the Munīsvaraṉ temple moved to Commonwealth Drive in the 1990s. In his version of the temple's history, he said: 'I remember back then, I would also visit this small shrine next to the temple. It was left out of the move you see, so I stayed and prayed' (Teo 2016).

His reference to Munīsvaraṉ as a 'railway god' and the desire to find an alternate temple site near the railway, not to mention the claim of having 'been here for so long', added twists and turns to this temple's story. My 2012 conversations with this temple's devotees and the priest about the history of this temple pinpointed an old small temple for Munīyanti that had been founded by the Malayan Railway workers 'on or around the same site', as noted by Rajan, the temple priest. When I visited the temple in 2012, it had already been marked as the Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam and claimed a temple community of a hundred devotees. Devotees highlighted the connection of the deity with the railways as well as the fact that *ayyā* had returned to this site because he liked being near the tracks. His devotees saw his 'return' as an achievement and attributed this to the deity's supreme power, desire and will to remain in this location, close to the railway tracks.[5] I heard from several old-time devotees that the temple sat on the same site where the original 1932 Munīyanti temple had been located, which later moved and transformed into the bigger Agamic Muneeswaran Temple in Commonwealth Drive. But the historical details narrated by this cluster of devotees have been disputed by the current temple leadership of the Queensway temple, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

After protracted and unsuccessful negotiations with the authorities (Somaiah 2018), the temple was given a final deadline to 'remove the shrine, structures and other items by 18 January 2017' (Yang 2016), which was extended to 16 February 2017 after another appeal. The temple's request for further extension to conduct a 48-day ritual to properly relocate the deity was turned down by the authorities. Despite the efforts of the temple custodians to resist numerous removal notices, the temple had to move without securing an alternative site anywhere, let alone near the former railway tracks. The temple deity was then moved to a rental space on the third storey of a building in Upper Bukit Timah Road.[6] I observed a couple of interesting coincidences when I heard about this move: first, that the deity from Queensway had moved into the same premises where the deities from the Kampung Bahru Munīsvaraṉ Temple had been relocated; and, second, that the new abode of both these deities happened to be in a building alongside the former KTM railway tracks in Upper Bukit Timah Road. My fieldwork suggests that

Munīsvaraṉ's devotees have shown obstinacy and commitment and have left no stone unturned to find him another home in urban Singapore. In this case, I learnt that securing a suitable abode for the deity has been challenging. As far as I know, the temple custodians are still exploring options for housing the deity in a more permanent, stable location.

Taking a conceptual leaf out of Maunaguru's (2021) inspiring work on 'homeless deities' and 'refugee devotees', I speak of Munīsvaraṉ as a 'refugee god' – constantly on the move, displaced by urban and railway development projects, and rendered *seemingly* powerless. However, as Maunaguru argues, it is precisely in the interstices of vulnerability that dislocated deities 'reassert their power' (2020: 686). His rich ethnography in, and from, the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu diasporas has led him to propose alternative modes of thinking about the potencies of Hindu deities, both in overseas locales and at 'home'. Critically, his work further complicates the marking of Hindu deities as 'local' and questions the premise that their efficacies are derived singularly from their grounding in specific ecological terrains – i.e. in sites from which they *originate*.

My interest in the histories of the Queensway and Kampung Bahru temples was rekindled due to my encounter with the 'old/new' Munīsvaraṉ temple at Queensway in 2012. Intriguingly, the kinship the latter has asserted with the 1932 Munīyanti temple in Queens Close is challenged by the current custodians of the Sri Muneeswaran Temple in Commonwealth Drive, which also draws a direct genealogy with the former. The claims of the Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam are rendered by the former as 'just a story', which further piqued my curiosity about the history of all these three temples.

In the meantime, after being demolished, the Queensway temple migrated to cyberspace, with a Facebook account entitled 'Railway Temple: Preserve the Shrine at Queen Close, Singapore' being set up (see Figure 5.4). In the hands of temple custodians, who are savvy with social media platforms and new technologies, the Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam and the Sri Muneswarar Peetam (Sze Cheng Keng Chinese Temple) – both with refugee gods – have found some longevity in moving to cyberspace, which I denote elsewhere as a 'realm of possibility' (Sinha 2005). This virtual presence has enabled visibility for the temples and afforded them some staying power, not to mention the fact that it serves as a platform for keeping temple histories and indeed the temples, alive. This digital route has also enabled connections with dispersed temple supporters, both old and new, as well as broadened the online communities of Munīsvaraṉ devotees.

Interestingly, in the Kampung Bahru Munīsvaraṉ temple's self-understanding of its past, its association with the railways was acknowledged by Mr Sundaraj when I spoke to him in 2003, but was not especially highlighted to me at the time. However, according to the Facebook page set up for this temple in 2012,

strikingly, the temple had a new name, whereas the earlier one had consciously and explicitly asserted its link with the railways, as it crafted a novel identity:

> Formerly known as *Railway Sri Muneswarar Temple* at [*sic*] Kampong Bahru has been shifted to the current location. And now, it is known as Sri Muneswarar Peetam, the one and only in the world for Lord Muneswarar with 100,008 *rudrakshas* and 1008 *Shivalingams* installed. (Emphasis added)

Yet the temple's link with the railways has been underlined in this online statement, precisely when the physical evidence of the temple's connectedness with Malayan Railways had been erased in the removal of the railway infrastructures from the Tanjong Pagar Station.

The Commonwealth Drive Sri Muneeswaran Temple too has recently embarked on a project to write a comprehensive history of the temple, going back to its beginnings and association with the railways. One of the current members of the temple's management committee is a descendant of its founder. Other temple members too have family connections with the railways. From the conversations I have had with those who are writing the temple's history, it appears that the temple's railway connection will have a prominent place in the narrative.

Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple Tales

As I travelled in search of Muṉīsvaraṉ 'railwaymen temples' across Malaysia, I heard temple stories that suggested the deity's unique connection with the railways. Here I share some of these, starting with the story of the Berhala Saiva Muneeswaran Keretapi[7] in Gemas, a temple that I only located on my second visit to the town. On my first trip to Gemas, I had failed to find the temple, as I had used the new station as a landmark. But this temple, which still sits alongside the old railway tracks on its original site, was invisible from the train and the new railway station. As I walked around town subsequently, I encountered several signs in Gemas, which were directing devotees and visitors to the temple and eventually found my way there.

In my conversations with Prakash, the secretary of the temple's management committee then, and Krishnan, another committee member, I learnt that 'old-timers' reported the temple to be about 130 years old, but it was 'officially' founded in only 1906. Prakash narrated the temple's story thus:

> It started in 1906 … in the 1900s. First, was built by a gang. Labourers improved it further. Then in 1965, a land inspector came to Gemas. He [*sic*], our man [Indian]. For five years. His name is Maniam. He made this

Figure 5.2. Sign to the Gemas Muneeswarar Temple, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

temple a permanent temple. The KTM guard helped and registered the temple secretly.

Each year the four sections of the railways will come. The track was here, isn't it? So there was something special about the place. Do you know why they wanted to build a place? For the protection of the workers … they do … if anyone gets injured – it is for protection. In every station, there would be a temple. My father was involved. He was working here only. First, there was just a *sulam*. You can ask any old railway people... this temple is alive. Ayyā here is very powerful, he has been here for 130 years. Those days, ayyā saw respect from the Indians, Chinese and Malay also. All drivers could come here to pay respects to ayyā – very powerful temple.

Krishnan came from a railway family – his father, uncle and grandfather worked in the railways – and confirmed this narrative, citing his own family's long association with the temple as proof. He shared with pride that he was a railwayman himself, starting as a labourer in 1976 and then joining the locomotive

Figure 5.3. Berhala Saiva Muneeswarar Keretapi, Gemas, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

department as a driver. He also worked at the Tanjong Pagar Station between 1983 and 1986, and remembered the Muṉīsvaraṉ temple near the station yard. He recalled the importance of the Gemas Station and depot when it was an exchange hub. He noted wistfully that 'in those days, all 4–5 sections of KTM people – 95 per cent Indian' supported this temple, including 'Ceylonese staff' who frequented the temple and 'sponsored prayers'. He recounted that the temple had adhered to the practice of animal sacrifices in the 'old days … we make offerings of twenty, twenty-five, forty goats for *ayyā* … then cook and eat … Indian, Chinese, Malay staying nearby – all came'. He could not resist quipping 'now not like that, now KTM no good – all Malays, no more Tamil'.

The original deities Muṉīsvaraṉ and Nākam'mā are the main draw at the temple even today. The temple, which was only registered in 2002, sits on its original site and escaped serious effects of the double-tracking project at Gemas, losing just a small portion of its storage area; only one of its sanctums had to be relocated slightly. I was told that the temple 'is non-vegetarian … always non-vegetarian. But now we have vegetarian. Last time we had *āṭu*[8] and all'. Krishnan added that the committee had decided to make the temple:

> vegetarian … because we have Nandi, we consider him Saiva [vegetarian]. The temple is now called Saiva Muneeswarar – he is Lord Siva. So, we decided to make *ayyā* into *Civā*. There are no sacrifices here now.

Having taken this Agamic route and rendering Muṉīsvaraṉ as a form of Civā, the temple celebrates the festival *Mahācivarāttiri* in his honour. As with the other old temples, finances and human resources are two persistent challenges. The temple only has about fifty-six regular members and given its limited revenues, it can only afford a part-time priest from India who conducts daily temple prayers between 7 pm and 9 pm and officiates at bigger rituals and temple festivals. Nonetheless, the temple committee aspires to construct a larger temple and eventually hold a consecration ceremony.

Krishnan and Prakash shared that there were 'not so many Indians' in Gemas and several temples competed for patronage by devotees. They stated that there is one other KTM temple in town, the Sri Balasubramaniam Gemas, which was built by 'KTM people, labour gangs', believed to be more than a 'hundred plus years old'. I visited this temple and learnt that it had only been registered recently. Although it began as a small temple, it has historically been popular with KTM employees. Its current committee still had several former and current KTM staff as members and numerous former staff returned to the temple during its annual festival. I also located a third temple in Gemas, the Loco Hill Kaliamman Temple, which is unregistered and boasted a history of a century. I learnt from the temple custodian, Bala – who had no association with the railways – that it was originally

built by 'track maintenance people' close to the now-demolished railway quarters, near the old tracks. All three temples assert firm links with the railways and continue to pay a small rent to KTM under the Temporary Licence Scheme (TOL) for occupying railway lands. The three temples face similar problems relating to scarce finances, a dwindling community of devotees, a lack of youthful temple leaders and volunteers, and the looming threat of demolition due to railway modernization projects.

In the colonial period, the neighbourhood of the Central Workshop, Sentul, Selangor, was the site of several Munīsvaran̠ temples erected by staff working there. During my second visit to the Batu Caves and Sentul areas, I found my way to the Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple, a registered temple that was located on KTM lands. Damodaran – the 66-year-old temple custodian – shared the temple's story and his biography with me. He had started his career in the railways as an office boy when he was just fifteen years old and stayed in the services for forty years. He came from a railway family: his grandfather and several uncles worked in the railways, as did his maternal family members, whom he noted were 'all in the railways'. He stated these railway connections in his family with pride: 'My father was a painter … my grandfather was working … sharpening the saw, you know, one uncle was working in the machine section, one more uncle was carriage repairer and one more uncle was working in the locomotive side … all passed away *lah*.' His father had secured his first job in the railways and was involved with the Indian National Army (INA) in Malaysia, and stayed at the squatter colony near the INA camp in Batu Caves.

Damodaran shared that the temple was originally started by gangline railway workers who lived in quarters very close to the tracks and their job was maintaining the tracks. Due to the absence of records, he said that he could only guess that the temple is 'probably [a] hundred years old'. I interviewed Damodaran in 2017 and he shared that he had become involved in the temple thirty years ago. He explained that this motivation came to him in a dream visitation by his late mother, who implored him 'to go to the site of the original temple' and 'put lights in the temple', which was run down and neglected, as all the railway staff had moved out from the quarters. When Damodaran assumed charge of the temple, he changed its name to Sivarajan Muneeswaran Temple, which was used for its registration in 2008. Ultimately, he decided to install *Civā* as the presiding deity in the *mūlastān̠am* (Tamil, 'sanctum sanctorum') – together with Munīsvaran̠ and Am'man̠ – and thus renamed the temple Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple. It was only registered after it moved to the new premises in 2008 after he retired from the KTM. He recalled that all the original temples near the tracks and the workshop were demolished around the same time. He added that it was moved about a kilometre away from its original site near the old tracks and Sentul Station due to the double-tracking and electrification project.

The new temple site is much bigger and sits on land allocated by the railway authorities. The new site is KTM property, but is not near the tracks or the station. It brings together two temples: one for Muṉīyanti from the Central Workshop, Sentul; and the other for Muṉīsvaraṉ from near the old railway tracks, just before the old Batu Caves Station. Damodaran merged these two temples, retaining the original representations of the deity – *cūlam* – from both temples. He used the money from his retirement and a compensation of 5,000 ringgit from the KTM to set up the new temple on the allocated site. The current Muṉīsvaraṉ statue was built by Indian workers from Batu Caves only after Damodaran took over care of the temple. The temple continues to conduct *ayyā* puja annually, although after installing the Muṉīsvaraṉ statue, the temple turned vegetarian and discontinued animal sacrifices, which were prevalent in the 'old days'. As yet, no consecration ceremony for the temple has been performed due to a lack of funds and a modest community of devotees. The temple used to pay a mere RM 10 per month to the KTM as rent for the use of KTM lands for operating a temple, but this has been increased to RM 250 per month, which Damodaran said he could not afford.

Figure 5.4. Screenshot of the Facebook page for the Sri Muneeswaran Peetam, also known as the Railway Sri Muneeswarar Temple, 2022. © Vineeta Sinha, used with permission

During my field trips, I also encountered temples that were not built by railway employees, but that occupied railway lands, an example being the Muneeswaran Temple in Parit Buntar, Perak. Vasu, the temple secretary in 2017, shared that the temple was started by Veerasingham, a hospital assistant who 'acquired this land. Acquired meaning, he did not buy this land for the temple but got it for rental on a contractual basis from the railway – KTM railway. So, they started to build this temple in 1960'.

Vasu highlighted two important railway connections to the temple 'in the old days': 'Last time, quarters were here. A few railway quarters were here, one was really close to the railway station and the other one is on the other side … The temple was frequented by railway workers in the past.' He mentioned that there were two other KTM temples in Parit Buntar, one for Muṉīsvaraṉ and one for Vināyakar, which had been more or less 'abandoned' but qualified that, 'not to say temple was abandoned fully – they will do just yearly prayers. Nothing much. Nothing daily'. Referring to the Vināyakar temple, he said: 'That was a railway temple but the temple is no more. We took Vināyakar and brought it over here in 2010. It was not exactly near the railway station but close to the railway track. I heard it was started by the railway workers. Over [a] hundred years.' This was but one of the many cases of temples that had 'taken over' deities from temples
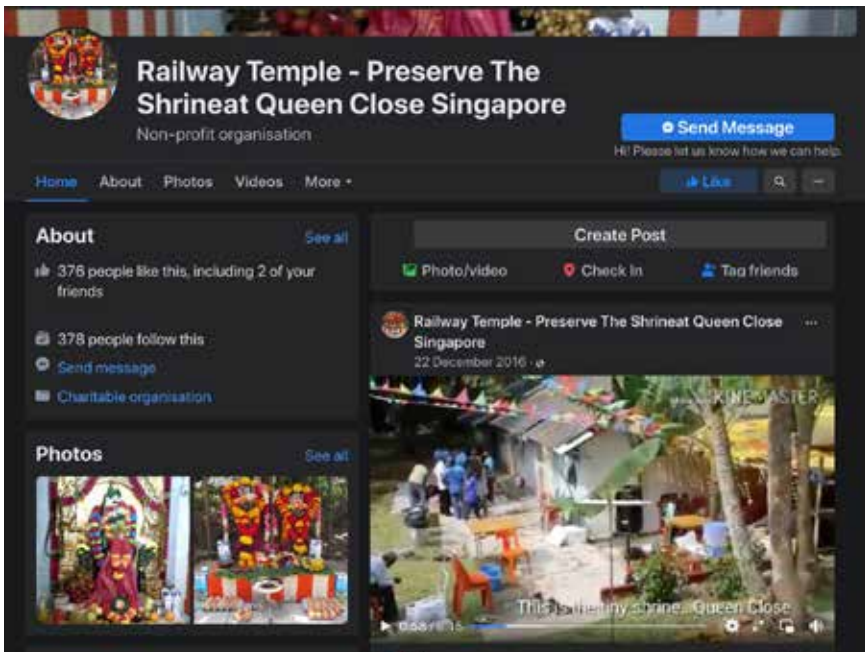
Figure 5.5. Screenshot of the Facebook page for the railway temple at Queens Close, 2022. © Vineeta Sinha, used with permission

that had been abandoned or demolished. In the case of deities from railwaymen temples of the latter category, their origins were not forgotten, but reproduced evocatively in temple stories, as with this Parit Buntar temple narrative.

Moving further north, I encountered the Sri Muneeswaran Temple in Bukit Mertajam, one of the oldest temples in Penang, which was already registered with the authorities in 1966. Pradeep, who has been associated with the temple from his 'childhood days', shared that the temple was about a hundred years old. Interestingly, Pradeep and his friends who assumed care of the temple do not have any connection with the railways. He had heard from the older devotees that the temple was started by railway labourers who maintained the tracks, the 'gangline workers, mainly labourers'. Over time, the temple was cared for by different clusters of railway workers, but had eventually been abandoned:

> They just left it … then we only started maintaining it … When they [the KTM authorities] start building the track then they do not know who to go and see … so we put in, we write to the registrar of society and say that we are the new management *lah*. We wrote an official letter saying that we had a meeting and that we were elected for this.

The authorities approved and accepted this claim, and recognized Pradeep and his team as the new temple custodians. According to Pradeep, the temple had moved from its original site, 'a little far from the original Bukit Mertajam Station'. He added that he could show me 'the place where it used to be but there is nothing there. This temple was always there but then demolished. Everything gone'. He affirmed that to his knowledge, 'this temple is a railway temple. I think this is the oldest temple around this area'. It still sits on KTM land and was originally a Munīsvaran̲ temple, which has retained the original *ayyā* statue, but a *civaliṅkam* was added in 2017. He was not sure who built the original Munīsvaran̲ statue:

> That we do not have the history *lah*. Maybe those days they brought these statues here. Maybe this one was from India. Railwaymen travelled up and down from India. Mostly from India, our grandfathers also from India. KTM people all from India last time.

The temple was built close to the railway station and the nearby railway quarters, which housed labourers and the station master, on either side of the tracks – a typical pattern across Malaya's railway network. I learnt that the temple used to pay RM 10 a month to the KTM for the lease of the land, but had been paying RM 250 a month after the rate was increased in recent years. Pradeep noted that this was a challenge:

> Yes, actually this is a no income temple. We wait for the letter to come, then we send in the money. We are personally financing this temple … We already paid [RM 250] for two years. One and a half years, we did not pay. We wanted to negotiate with them.

The temple is in financial need and only has a core of older devotees, with little interest from younger Hindus. Still, Pradeep and the new committee are working hard to raise funds: 'We are trying to get financial support, estimating about 250,000 ringgit to rebuild the temple. Because heavy rain, it will be leaking everywhere. The roofing and all, how many years can it last?' There is no part-time or full-time priest at the temple due to a lack of funds, and the small community of devotees from low and middle-class backgrounds is not able to sustain the temple financially. The temple opens at set times in the morning and evening, and devotees attend to the deities themselves. As in many temples like this across Malaysia, Pradeep said the devotees 'pray on their own and go'. He reminisced that earlier 'a lot of people used to come. Now very sad and very hurting to tell this *lah*. Little people coming'. Speaking of temple supporters, he lamented that: 'All elderly people. Young supporters not yet.' But he remains hopeful: 'can, can slowly. We are doing it. We are doing our best'.

The Railway Thirumurugan Temple in Kuala Kerai, Kelantan, was the only old Munīsvaran̲ railwaymen temple I located on my incomplete east coast journey. Although the temple started with Munīsvaran̲ as its founding deity, it was subsequently renamed Railway Thirumurugan Temple. The Murukan̲ element was introduced in the 1970s with the placement of a *vel* (spear) to denote the deity, largely to re-energize the temple. The deity Murukan̲ was perceived as one who had a more universal appeal compared to Munīsvaran̲, although the original deity has not been forgotten by any means. This temple was known to me long before I visited it, as it had been mentioned in the multiple narratives and accounts of 'railwaymen temples' I had come across in my west coast travels. The locomotive drivers in particular remembered this temple as remarkable because it was literally built adjacent to the tracks. I was excited to finally visit the temple in 2018 and had the benefit of speaking to many members of the temple community, including temple managers and some devotees. I can confirm that the temple indeed sits on railway tracks close to a railway bridge near the Kuala Kerai Station – landmarks for which the temple was famous. The temple traces its beginnings to 1955, when it was started by railway workers who lived in the railway quarters near the Kuala Kerai Station. It started with nothing more than a *cūlam* representing Munīsvaran̲, placed in a small hut that has grown in scale and stature over time. This is a registered temple and Vishalan, chairman of the temple's management committee, told me that the temple paid a 'token sum to the KTM' for the right to occupy the land and to run a temple there. I

learnt that the temple committee was not particularly concerned about the track modernization project and they had received no notice to move or vacate the site. Raghu, a committee member of the temple, said with confidence that 'the East Coast Line is not profitable for the KTM. It is just for normal transportation – main transport for ordinary people in small, small villages, children going to school … Main route to Gua Musang. Even go to KL and Singapore'. The east coast is famous for severe flooding, which had not spared the temple. According to Raghu, 'this temple in 2014, with floods, it submerged. Until the *mūlastānam* all completely gone. Whole temple was gone … So now something like rebirth for the temple'.

Temple renewal and continuity are, however, serious concerns, given the lack of youth engagement with the temple. I encountered the same narrative here that I had heard in the older, less established 'railwaymen temples' across Malaysia – limited support, a shrinking community of devotees and a lack of finances. Vishalan added that 'support there is but people are getting smaller' – a demographic problem that cannot be overcome easily. The Indian population in the state of Kelantan had always been amongst the smallest in the country. During the colonial period, Indians in the state were employed on rubber estates and as labourers in the mining towns of Gua Musang and Tanah Merah. According to the 2010 census, 95.2% of the population in the state is Muslim, 3.8% Buddhist and 0.3% Christian. The Hindu community is enumerated as a mere 0.2%.[9] Raghu estimated that there were only about 'one thousand people or maybe three hundred Indian families in Kuala Kerai. Kota Bahru also, same. Tumpat – only one Indian family now'. Vishalan continued: 'Those days, Indians working on estates, now running small businesses or working in factories. Railways also, no more Indians. Not even one Indian working in the railways now. Those days 70–80 per cent Indians.' But Raghu interjected with humour:

> I think there *is* one Indian *lah*. When they retire, the replacement is always a Malay. So, we lose out. You know. Old days, 95 per cent, Indians. They were running the railway systems in Malaysia. No Malaya, those days. Those days, the railways, the JKR … all Indians. I mean, they built the tracks, maintain and run stations. Even now, as it is, the maintenance, those labourers from India are taking care of it.

Nonetheless, the temple committee is hopeful that the history and fame of the temple can sustain it, going forward and they are making efforts to attract Indians from other towns and cities in Kelantan and on the east coast.

Most of the time, following railway coordinates led me to temples built by railway staff. Occasionally, though, the reverse was the case. My encounter with the Jada Muneeswaran Temple in Taiping, Perak, was one such instance. During

my 2017 visit, I spoke to Gopi, the temple caretaker, who has no connection with the railways. Gopi started our conversation by saying: 'My life has become intertwined with the temple. I have known this temple since I was very young. It has been forty years since I have come here.' He then told me that the temple is 'very old' and used to be near the railway tracks next to the railway quarters, and was built by the railway workers who lived there:

> this has been here for a long time. Someone who laid the tracks established this temple … In 1885, the railways started here for the first time. *Āmā mutal mutal* [Tamil, yes, in the beginning, early days] track used to be there but now removed … Yes, here, the first time. Can you see the jungle there? There was a big workshop there. They used to do metal work there. And make parts for the coal trains. There used to be a path there and the tracks – not there anymore. Now, everything is gone. They have demolished everything … The old address is Jalan Keretapi Lama, near tracks, quarters nearby but everything has been demolished during the double-tracking project.

Gopi was referring to the Port Weld-Taiping line, which signalled the start of the railways in Malaya in 1885. It was thrilling to actually stumble upon this historic site almost by accident in my search for 'railwaymen temples'. It was indeed surreal to stand on the spot where the first tracks in Malaya were laid. Gopi highlighted that the temple 'was first inside the quarters, then moved to a new site – land given by KTM and we pay rent'. Despite the challenges these temples face, I was impressed with the level of personal commitment his devotees expressed towards Muṉīsvaraṉ and the efforts they made to care for his temples in the face of adversity. The temple that I visited had been relocated about 500 m from its original site two decades or so ago, but was only registered in 2017. Gopi shared that he struggled to pay the Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) fees and often dipped into his savings to keep the temple going.

While the literature on the preponderance of *Ati Tirāviṭa* clusters amongst the nineteenth-century arrivals to Malaya is rich (Mani 1977; Rajah 1975; Solomon 2016), the indispensable role of South Indian manual labour in laying both the foundations of a railway network and the *Hindu* infrastructure in Malaya has neither been acknowledged nor analysed adequately. This includes the building of makeshift temples for village gods and goddesses in diasporic sites, and enacting domestic and public rituals and festivals, firm traces of which are evident in Singaporean and Malaysian Hinduism. Some of these early places of worship were subsequently demolished, while others were transformed into Agamic temples, having moved into nonlabour and elite hands. The role of religious specialists has been highlighted in the religion and migration literature, while the

contributions of commoners and laypersons largely remain invisible. It is remarkable, even as it is ironic, that colonial railway labour – who were members of marginalized and what were deemed to be *ritually impure* communities, marked as outcasts and not accepted as legitimate Hindus – were among the pioneering architects of the Hindu landscape in Malaya. In addition, they also served as religious functionaries in the temples they built and reproduced a ritual-festival complex that devotees have denoted nostalgically as the 'ways of the ancestors' (Sinha 2005). As I learnt on my journeys their efforts have firmly grounded their favoured deities in a diasporic setting and their descendants continue to generate new legends and imaginaries about them, including the deity Muṉīsvaraṉ.

Producing Muṉīsvaraṉ Mythologies

Travelling with his devotees to Malaya over a century and a half ago, Muṉīsvaraṉ's identity and relevance have been reconfigured in new terrains. For scores of my interlocutors, railway-related landscapes are perceived as one of the numerous sites favoured by the deity. Housed in labour lines along the railway tracks, Indian railway labour built his temples along the length of the permanent way, which have sustained the deity's folk identity as a protector deity. As I encountered his devotees who were former railway personnel, it was obvious that Muṉīsvaraṉ's character as a *kāval teyvam* and a *naṭumaṭam* was entangled with the railways in new registers. I was intrigued that one of my interlocutors, Damodaran from Sentul, noted somewhat lightheartedly: 'Ayyā is also like those gangline people, walking, checking the tracks every day.' In my recent fieldwork journeys, Muṉīsvaraṉ's devotees appeared as creators of novel, fresh mythologies about the deity, inventing and reinventing tradition in the process.

To start with, it was apparent that many Muṉīsvaraṉ 'railwaymen temples' asserted the railway connection by inserting specific railway-related descriptors – mostly in English, but sometimes in Malay and Tamil –such as 'railway', 'railway quarters', 'keretapi', 'thaandavaalam', 'loco shed,' 'loco hill' and 'KTM', in the *name* of the temple, Here are some illustrations: Arulmigu Sri Muniswaran Temple (Railway), Johor Bahru; Berhala Saiva Muneeswaran Keretapi, Gemas; Sri Muniyandi Temple (Railway), Bukit Tembok; Loco Shed Muneeswaran Temple, Bukit Tembok; Sri Maha Muneeswarar Temple, Railway Quarters, 12½ miles, Sungei Buloh; Railway Muneeswaran Temple, Shah Alam; Railway Sri Muneeswarar, Tanjung Rambutan; Om Sri Muniswarar Alayam (KTM), Kamunting; Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple (Railways), Sentul; and Railway Thirumurugan Temple, Kuala Kerai. The addition of Tamil, Malay and English terms connoting the railways to the names of Muṉīsvaraṉ temples was pervasive, striking and deliberate. Moreover, railway symbolism was invoked further in identifying the deity with names of famous railway stations, as

in Gemas Muneeswaran, Prai Muneeswaran and Sentul *Ayyā*. In other instances, Muṉīsvaraṉ was himself linked with the railways in being assigned a suffix like 'tāṇṭavāḷam' and with English words like 'rail' and 'railway', as in 'railway ayyā' and 'rail Muṉīsvaraṉ'. This labelling and renaming of the deity as 'railway ayyā', '*tāṇṭavāḷam* Muṉīsvaraṉ' and 'railway god' was a widespread practice, and consciously and directly conjoined the deity with trains, stations, railway towns and with the history of the railways in Malaya.

Notably, I did not encounter this phenomenon with any other deity for whom railway labourers had built temples and was peculiar to Muṉīsvaraṉ. In this context, I was reminded of naming conventions in Tamil Nadu, where it is customary for individuals to carry the place name – that is, the name of their village, town or region – together with the names of their father, grandfather and the caste name (Britto 1986: 359; Valentine 1984: 88) in their personal names – to signify connections to their ancestry and the locality from which they originate. Personal names have been interpreted as identity markers and the emergent links between names, bodies and identities have been well theorized (Goffman 1963; Pilcher 2016). Naming has further been approached as a 'social practice' (Rymes 1996) and names are interpreted as a 'key to memories and experiences' (Hulden 1994: 33, cited in Helleland 2012: 96). Thus, invoking railway-specific terms and place names – indeed, the explicit turn to the word 'railways' itself – is a mode of registering the historical link of temples and Indian labour with the railways. When tagged onto Muṉīsvaraṉ and the temples built for him, these naming signs function as nouns, but also possess an 'adjectival quality' (Das 2009) and serve additional descriptive and referential functions.

Geographers have analysed attachment to places (Lewicka 2011) and highlighted the importance of 'place names' not just as linguistic units, but as key 'links to the past' (Helleland 2012: 95). Helleland has noted that 'names, especially place names, are not only a source of linguistic knowledge, but also of geographical, historical, anthropological, ethnographic, social, psychological, and other knowledge' (ibid.: 99). He further highlights the affective dimension of 'place attachment', which he defines 'as an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe' (ibid.: 107). This thinking resonated with the fondness that my interlocutors express for sustaining temples near railway premises, as spaces where both they and Muṉīsvaraṉ 'felt at home'. I suggest that naming practices that invoke railway place names and imageries are codes, which act as metaphors that embody historical experiences and memories. Invoking names of railway stations and railway towns links the deity, his temples and devotees alike to railway landscapes and infrastructures.

A dominant strain in narratives about Muṉīsvaraṉ, popular with his devotees, is that the deity is free-spirited and has a fondness for 'roaming', and dislikes

being grounded and 'frozen' in Agamic temples, trapped in stillness. As I have noted previously, his devotees state that he prefers resting/residing under trees,[10] atop mountains, in jungles and in wide open, natural spaces (Sinha 2005). In my recent research, my interlocutors, speaking as devotees and temple care-takers, observed that the railway tracks and their surrounding areas were also sites favoured by the deity. They substantiated this by alluding to the rolling, unending feature of the tracks themselves, which enabled the movement of trains and emphasized that mobility of all kinds was appealing to the deity. Devotees explained this fondness by reiterating the deity's primary identity as a walking, moving god, astride a horse or on foot, patrolling territories and protecting his devotees from dangers. In these narratives, Munīsvaraṉ's proclivity for movement and his ambulatory nature were highlighted and led devotees to assert what they saw as the deity's 'natural' fit with the mobility and speed of the railways. The latter were further mapped onto the deity's enjoyment/pleasure of movement and desire for freedom. Devotees explained that the constant movement of the trains was in perfect synchronization with the deity's inclination to be on the move.

Munīsvaraṉ's given identity as a guardian deity was also invoked in a fresh mode in curating new legends about him and reconfiguring his capacities in, and through, the railways. Munīsvaraṉ has been approached as a powerful protector deity, both in the sacred landscapes created by railway labour and in the every-day religious lives of his devotees (Sinha 2005). The Tamil word *kāval* comes from the root word *kā* (to keep safe from harm or injury, protect, guard or offer refuge). But how does the idea of *kāval* travel to diasporic locales and what are the shifts, if any, in the way it is conceptualized?

My interviews with former railway labourers and *mandore*s revealed nar-ratives about railway work being physically arduous, demanding, hazardous and risk-laden. Activities such as clearing dense vegetation and trees in forests, doing earthwork, moving soil, stones and boulders, constructing bridges and cul-verts, laying tracks and maintaining them, and driving trains on tracks over long distances, were all pointed out as substantiating evidence of the attendant risks. Injuries and death due to train derailments, crashes and accidents, as well as the destruction of railway tracks and equipment by natural calamities like floods and storms, were all too commonplace and familiar to railway personnel I spoke to. My interlocutors argued that given the demands, pressures and dangers of work-ing on the railways, the need for 'protection' from a guardian deity assumed new resonances in Malaya, as indicated in the following Munīsvaraṉ narratives and temple stories they shared.

The first account is that of Palani, whose father was according to him an 'ordinary worker in KTM' and had started the Sri Sivalingeswarar Temple in Johor Bahru in 1974. Established as a small temple for Munīsvaraṉ, this had transformed into a *Civā* temple over time. In 2019, the temple still sat on KTM

land in the same location where it was founded. Palani offered this explanation for why there were 'so many Munīsvaraṉ temples' along the railway tracks, saying 'temples come up in places where people are killed and die – that happens a lot on the rail lines – that is where *Muṉivar* comes – that is where temples are built'. Likewise, Krishnan of the Gemas Muneeswaran Temple shared that 'all trains used to come to this interchange – it linked the West and East Coast Lines. All drivers used to come to the temple – everyone know [*sic*] this temple to be very powerful … All drivers used to pay respects to the temple … ask *ayyā* for protection and security. Railways – lots of accidents and deaths but *ayyā* gave protection and take [*sic*] care of the KTM workers'.

The harsh and inhospitable working conditions of railway labour were repeatedly highlighted as reasons why temples would be built for Munīsvaraṉ by railway workers near railway precincts and why devotees would turn to him for help, given his role as a 'security guard'. Naresh, an 86-year-old former locomotive driver, confirmed this:

> If you want to talk about Munīsvaraṉ, every station got *lah*. Because the workers, those from India, they want somebody to protect them. From train, I could see so many temples along the railway built by the railway people, now maybe other people looking after.

Dinesh from the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Bukit Mertajam, concurred: 'railway people built the temple for safety, protection … they say he is railway *ayyā*'. Damodaran observed likewise:

> wherever the gangline workers go, they build a temple … in the railway workshop also there was a temple … *Ayyā* temple. Mainly for the gangline … they all coming [*sic*] from India so they need a place to pray. For safety of the people, where our people go, they build *ayyā* temple, for those *kāval teyvam* … those days all jungle and all dangers … depend on Ayyā for safety and protection.

Yet, Rama from the Munīsvaraṉ railwaymen temple in Bukit Mertajam expressed the view that one needs to be cautious in dealing with this deity and that he has to be approached with care. This is a view I heard in my conversations with *ayyā* devotees across Singapore and Malaysia in my earlier research as well. Damodaran expressed this view well: 'Munīsvaraṉ and all, these are *kāval teyvam*. But guardian gods, you have to be very careful – they are waiting to help but you cannot make them angry and upset them.' Despite this risk, devotees were drawn to the deity, who had a looming presence in their lives, as they were convinced of his especially his protective capacities. During my field trips to

Kulai and Mengkibol, I met Vasanti, a teacher in her forties who was the grand-daughter of the Muneeswaran Temple founder in Kampung India.

Vasanti noted that the temple was founded in 1914 and she had gradually assumed its care as a family temple. She spoke of the visceral, sensuous, real presence of *ayyā* in the life of the family members. She added that she had heard her grandparents speak of *seeing* Munīsvaraṉ walking on/along the railway tracks at night, *hearing* him and *sensing* him. She recalled that as youngsters, they were warned to be cautious when walking along or near the tracks: 'The elders used to say do not walk straight on the track, he will hit [bang] you … walk on the side. The people have seen the god there, they can get the *curuṭṭu* [Tamil, 'cigar'] smell.' She added:

> My grandma told me this. So, the people who came to build temples, they used a stone because those days, the people from India, they did prayers to prevent mishaps. You can hear the tinkling of the anklets. Till today we see *ayyā*. No such thing as fear of Munīsvaraṉ. He is very powerful. We can feel his presence because he is our family deity.

Rather than push these deities to the boundaries of human habitation, as was the practice in Tamil Nadu, in Malaya homes and resting spaces for Munīsvaraṉ and other guardian deities were built in/near living quarters and workspaces; his devotees kept the deity close to them. Given the everyday realities of labourers'

Figure 5.6. Signboard of Sri Muniandy Temple, Railway, Bukit Tembok, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

Figure 5.7. Muneeswaran Temple, Kampung India, Mengkibol, 2017 . © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

lives, I repeatedly heard that those working with the railways sought refuge and protection in Muṉīsvaraṉ and other guardian deities for themselves as well as their work tools and working environments.

These accounts strongly suggest that Muṉīsvaraṉ's remit and functionality have been seamlessly expanded by his devotees in alien, foreign territories to include railway tracks and railway infrastructures as new sites over which the deity exercised his protective powers. Devotees explained this complex relationship of Muṉīsvaraṉ with the railways as follows: the deity shielded devotees against various railway-related dangers, but also protected railway tracks, trains, stations and quarters from natural disasters and ravages. My interlocutors shared that the possibility of accidents on the tracks – with the loss of life and damage to and destruction of tracks and trains – was seen as one of the biggest dangers in the railways. The need for safety was thus cited as a key attraction for turning to Muṉīsvaraṉ. Some former locomotive drivers I spoke to even stated that they felt safe driving trains in the dead of the night, in the knowledge that *ayyā* was travelling with them, showing them the way and averting catastrophes. Muṉīsvaraṉ was thus seen as protecting the railways as much as safeguarding his devotees against risks associated with the railways, which in the early days, were less than perfect as machines and embodied risks.

Hari, a committee member from the Commonwealth Muneeswaran Temple, shared that railway labourers prayed to Muṉīsvaraṉ and implored him to 'make sure no accidents happen' on the tracks and to keep 'passengers, drivers, everyone safe'. Subramaniam, another committee member, noted that railway labourers would pray to the deity that there should be no accidents in areas under their watch and supervision, adding that there were indeed 'no accidents' in areas where there were *ayyā* temples. From this perspective, devotees saw Muṉīsvaraṉ extending his influence as a divine guardian over new dominions, not just spatially but in fact expanding his jurisdiction over the protection of machinery, infrastructure and, indeed, technology itself.

Together with gods and goddesses, ritual practices for venerating them were also transported to Malaya. The longstanding presence of a folk Hindu ritual complex in these regions confirms devotees' preference for the 'nonvegetarian' character of these deities. In the literature, these have been denoted as 'extreme rituals', which include practices like enacting trances, animal sacrifices, offering cigars and alcohol, and 'self-mortification' rituals undertaken by devotees to appease these deities and to sustain their powers (McNeal 2009; Sinha 2005). In the contemporary period, Bhasi (2021) notes the rising trend of worshipping *kula teyvam*, such as Muṉīsvaraṉ, in Malaysia via enacting these rituals.

These practices certainly marked the many Muṉīsvaraṉ 'railwaymen temples' I visited during my recent fieldwork. Many of these temples had not been *saivized* or Agamized and adhered to a ritual complex for venerating Muṉīsvaraṉ

as a nonvegetarian deity. Thus, I met large numbers of devotees and temple custodians who were committed to this latter feature of the deity's identity, whose capacities were seen to be enhanced through the enactment of these rituals, which reform-minded Hindus in Singapore and Malaysia typically find objectionable and inappropriate (Sinha 2005). However, a handful of the temples have distanced themselves from this cluster of rituals and have made Muṉīsvaraṉ into a *Caivite*, vegetarian deity, to be approached through the agamic rituals conducted by Brahmin priests. These also happen to be the larger temples, which are supported by a stable, established community of devotees and have access to finances as well as social and cultural capital to aspire towards respectability. Prominent examples of these temples include the following: Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth Drive, Singapore; Arulmigu Sri Muniswaran Temple (Railway), Johor Bahru; *Ayyā*/Muneeswaran Temple, Gemas; Kuil Maha Sri Siva Vaal Muniswarar Alayam, Tampin; Sri Maha Muniswarar Temple, Batu Gajah; and Railway Thirumurugan Temple, Kuala Kerai.

The story of the Kuil Maha Sri Siva Vaal Muniswarar Alayam in Tampin, illustrates well the complex processes of Agamization, which have been approached through the concept of Sanskritization (Srinivas 1956). This temple occupies KTM land and Muthu, a member of the temple's management committee, estimated that it is 'probably around seventy to eighty years old'. As a registered temple, it has not faced demolition or relocation threats. I visited the temple in 2019 and found no Muṉīsvaraṉ sanctum there, the presiding deity being *Civā*. Muthu highlighted that 'this is a *Caivam* temple – no cutting now – probably done in the old days'. He added that these reformed ritual practices prioritize the principles of *ahimcai* (Tamil, 'nonviolence'; Sanskrit, 'ahimsa') and the temple committee discontinued animal sacrifices on ethical grounds. He shared that some elderly members of the temple community remember that it was originally built for Muṉīsvaraṉ through the initiative of railway workers. Muthu has been associated with the temple for more than two decades, but has no railway connection, although some of the committee members do. The temple has conducted several consecration ceremonies, with another one planned in a couple of years. It is still situated opposite the old Tampin railway station, close to the railway quarters. Two to three rows of these quarters were still standing, in a dilapidated condition, when I was there and some were occupied by the Malay staff of the KTM.

The Agamization[11] of temples like this has included the aspiration for performing consecration ceremonies, producing a 'vegetarian deity', lodging Muṉīsvaraṉ in the *Caivite* tradition and securing Brahmin priests as ritual experts, resulting in what devotees consider to be an explicit taming of the deity (Sinha 2005: 79). Yet, other temples, such as the Muniswarar Temple, Kamunting, have adopted a hybrid approach – they observe vegetarian rituals inside the

temple, but allow nonvegetarian rituals outside – appealing to the deity's as well as the devotees' sentiments. Several railwaymen temples that began specifically with Muṉīyanti and Muṉīsvaraṉ as primary deities now include Sanskritic deities in the temple's pantheon, while still remembering and retaining the historical link with Muṉīsvaraṉ and the railways. This is evident in the case of the Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple, Sentul and the Railway Thirumurugan Temple, Kuala Kerai, where the leadership made conscious decisions to not only register Am'maṉ and Murukaṉ as presiding deities, but also to rename the temples to reflect this change.

Bracketing essentialist, homogeneous and monolithic approaches to conceptualizing Muṉīsvaraṉ – or any other Hindu deity for that matter – has been productive in my research. Certainly, the hybrid, mutable and dynamic character of Muṉīsvaraṉ – where his status as a guardian deity is conjoined with his identity as an incarnation of *Civā* – render questions about his original and authentic self somewhat redundant and superfluous for devotees. Similarly, concerns about locales where the deity is 'at home' and sites where he is 'out of place' seem to be pointless for them. Guided by these perspectives, like his devotees, I avoid the presumption that Muṉīsvaraṉ's primary identity is confined within the frames of a localized deity, grounded in the ecology and rural, agricultural setting of Tamil Nadu, and his efficacy thus limited to this environment. Nor do his devotees accept that the latter is the deity's 'natural' homeland, even though his Indian origins are explicitly acknowledged. Notably, his devotees emphatically deny that his potency is diminished in diasporic locales or that his capacities can only be fully and genuinely realized in his 'authentic' home. He is certainly not viewed as an enfeebled deity, lacking efficacy in the lands his devotees have adopted as their new home.

My long-term ethnographic research on the mobilities of deities beyond their local territories and the narratives of his devotees lead me to reject – like his devotees – the notion that these deities are destabilized and their powers neutralized in these transnational shifts or that they are 'out of sync' and powerless in the new locales they inhabit. The complex processes that transport and emplace deities in diasporic settings have been well theorized by Maunaguru's (2020, 2021) research on Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus who have built temples and sustained Hindu religiosity in diasporic locales. My conversations with Muṉīsvaraṉ's diasporic devotees as they narrated their experiences and sentiments about the deity vouch for his visceral and primeval presence in their lives. For devotees, the deity has certainly found his feet in new terrains – he is now defined by new modalities and has acquired different and even enhanced capacities, needed by his devotees in altered contexts. In fact, Muṉīsvaraṉ has been envisioned and reimagined in the consciousness of the first generation of Tamil railway labour communities and in the memories of their descendants. These clusters have

collectively crafted new mythologies about him and reinterpreted his identity as a *kāval teyvam*. a tutelary deity who may have once been tied to specific ecology, lands, territories and lineages, but who has also acquired distinctive dispositions on Malaysian and Singaporean shores.

In the hands of his devotees, Muṉīsvaraṉ has escaped a one-dimensional, rigid identity: he continues to be marked as energetic, forceful and dynamic as his personality shifts and mutates, refusing to be contained in an inherited template. Devotees argue that the deity's potency and agency originate precisely from this refusal to be imprisoned either spatially or through a fixed set of attributes and functions. The data from my research on the place of Muṉīsvaraṉ in the history of railway building and religion making in Malaya reveal that devotees see the exponential reach of his capacities, given the multitude of unforeseen modes in which he can exist and exercise his efficacies. In my previous research, I had documented Singapore and Malaysia-specific stories about Muṉīsvaraṉ that circulated amongst his devotees, for example, Muṉīsvaraṉ as a SARS[12] warrior (Sinha 2005). The narrative of Muṉīsvaraṉ's entanglement with the railways offers yet another iteration of the deity's repute and eminence in the universe of his veneration – a construction that is vigorously sustained by the current generation of his devotees, some of whom are the descendants of railway labour.

This chapter has argued that Muṉīsvaraṉ's very name, character, sphere of influence and the mythologies about him have been marked in complex modes in being associated with the railways. I have demonstrated that new folklore about Muṉīsvaraṉ have been created in his association with the railways even as his persona as a guardian deity persists firmly. Remarkably, the deity has been accorded novel powers, some of them linked to the nature of railway work and others allied to features of railway infrastructure itself. Conversely, in closing this chapter, it is intriguing to reflect on what, if anything, of the railways has been imbibed by Muṉīsvaraṉ and what have the railways taken from the deity. For a start, his devotees have transcended the materiality of railway premises and the tracks themselves, transforming these into enchanted and animated sites. This held true for the first-generation railway labourers who built temples, but this inheritance has been cherished and retained by their descendants as much as by other Hindus who seek to resacralize modern and upgraded railway sites.

Devotees have shown an inspired appetite for establishing temples for Muṉīsvaraṉ in new railway vicinies and some have even succeeded in these efforts, despite facing tremendous challenges in this regard. New temples for other deities have also sprung up on railway premises, which are perceived by devotees as highly efficacious *because* of their proximity to the railway lands. Interestingly, I found this to be the case even on stretches of the railways that have been double-tracked and electrified. My interlocutors demonstrated considerable ingenuity and creativity in sourcing sites close to modernized railway

infrastructures and also in hunting down sites where the 'old' Muṉīsvaraṉ temples 'used to be' and making concerted efforts to populate these sites with new temples. Naresh from the Bukit Tembok temple explained this desire thus:

> When you build a temple and many people have prayed there, then the place has a lot of energy and vibrations. Even if the temple is gone, the place is still very powerful. You can feel it. God is still there. That's why our people like to go back. Temple gone, still, we go. That is also why people want to start new temples in the same place.

This is a sentiment I heard persistently during my interactions with Hindus in Singapore and Malaysia both in earlier phases of my research and more recently. My fieldwork at the Amman Temple, Paloh Railway Station, the Amman Temple, Layang Layang Station, the Muniyanti Temple, Queensway, Singapore and the Sri Muneeswaran Temple at Kampung Bahru, Singapore attest to this strong conviction amongst devotees that railway lands are spiritually charged and that deities wish to stay here. Interestingly, I also came across numerous new temples that had been built close to or on old 'railwaymen temple' sites, driven by religious sensibilities that interpret the very materiality of spaces marked with divine energy. Furthermore, conjoining the history of the railways with Muṉīsvaraṉ seemed to be a way for my interlocutors to remind themselves and others about the long and deep historical connections between Indian labourers and the railways in Malaya. This reminder was made poignant in the observations made by Muthu from the Tampin temple: 'Paḻaiya nāṭkaḷ rayilvē il 80–90 catavītamāṉatu namatu makkaḷ iruntaṉa' (Tamil, 'In the old days 80–90 per cent in the railways were our people') and reiterated by Damodaran from Sentul: 'Last time, railways were all our people. Now we are out, only Malays' – sentiments expressed by numerous others I encountered and spoke to on my journeys.

The marginalization and evacuation of Indians from the railway services, which began with the nationalization of the railways in Malaysia in the late 1950s and intensified in the 1960s and 1970s, were highlighted in practically every conversation I had about the history of the railways in the country. My interlocutors argued that it was crucial to ensure that temples near the railway tracks and the stations were protected from demolition and relocation so that the contributions of Tamil migrants in building railways are not forgotten. My interlocutors saw the evacuation of Indians from the railways as deliberate, politically motivated and unjust. The desire to ensure the presence of temples near the railways was thus justified due to the latter and seemed to be a way of addressing and registering the 'absence' of Indians from the railways.

The depressed socioeconomic position of the minority Indian community in Malaysia was another factor for claiming something of a golden railway past

when Indians were in charge and had the power to imprint their dominant presence on the railways. The drive to build new temples for Muṉīsvaraṉ and other deities in and around new railway precincts seemed to be a project of collectively, visibly and publicly memorializing the role of Indian labour in building railways in Malaya. This commitment appeared to me to centre on religion as much as it did on politics, complicated themes that are elaborated in the next chapter. These latter discussions also shift the lens to postcolonial moments and examine the fate of the railways in Singapore and Malaysia against the backdrop of not only the modernization drive of the railway infrastructures, but also the larger development, urbanization and nationalization projects in these nation-states.

Notes

1. See Maunaguru's (2020, 2021) important works on these themes in the context of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu diasporas.
2. This organization was founded in 1924 'to fulfil the religious, social and cultural needs of the Brahmins living in Singapore … It was later registered formally in 1949 under the "Societies Act" when the sabha activities were revived after a brief period of disruption during World War II' (retrieved 25 January 2023 from https://www.sdbbs.org/about-us).
3. *Tāṇṭavāḷam* means 'rail' in Tamil.
4. Not a pseudonym.
5. See Sinha (2014) for the story of the Jalan Bena Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple, Singapore. This unregistered but old temple was founded in 1956 by Hindu employees of the PWD in its then-residents' quarters in Jalan Bena on the east coast of the island. The temple was demolished in 2004 when a new industrial complex was built on the site. My long-term research with the temple and its community revealed that even after all material and architectural traces of the temple were erased following demolition, devotees continued to return to the site to make offerings of food and flowers and to simply be present in a space that they deemed sacred, as it was inhabited by their revered deity Muṉīsvaraṉ. Many devotees were convinced that their *ayyā* was still there. The temple did in fact return to this same site in 2007, after the owners of the industrial complex invited the temple custodians to re-establish the temple that had been demolished earlier. This further vindicated devotees' belief in the deity's power and that the deity could not be dislodged against his will.
6. The Queensway Muṉīsvaraṉ deity was located in this new site temporarily as the temple committee continued to seek a more suitable location. Despite my efforts, I have not been able to locate where the deity is now. I have heard rumours that the deity has either been moved to Malaysia or to another Chinese temple in Singapore, both of which I have been unable to verify.
7. *Keretapi* is the Malay word for 'railways'.
8. Tamil for 'male goat' and a shorthand reference for animal sacrifices as part of the ritual complex for venerating nonvegetarian deities.
9. https://www.mycensus.gov.my/index.php/census-product/publication/census-2010/691-characteristic-of-living-quarters-2010 (retrieved 25 January 2023).
10. Walter (2005) notes the centrality of sacred trees and groves in Tamil Nadu villages, which are also believed to be the abode of local deities.

11. Scholars of religion in Malaysia (Lee and Rajoo 1987; Subramaniam 2006) have used the concept of Sanskritization to denote what I have labelled 'agamization' in my research.

12. Singapore experienced an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), a viral infection of the respiratory system, in 2003. As I was doing fieldwork in 2003–4, I routinely heard devotees describe Muṉīsvaraṉ as a 'SARS warrior'. They argued that the deity's protective powers are mobilized to keep his devotees safe, regardless of the dangers they faced.

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RAILWAYS AND RELIGION

Negotiating Colonial and Postcolonial Modernities

Intersections of Railway and Religious Landscapes

A historical perspective, with a focus on the transformations in transport networks and religious infrastructures, has been productive for probing the religion-railways interface in Singapore and Malaysia. This chapter narrates the contemporary story of the colonial railways grounded on Malayan soil, more than a century ago. Here I argue that scrutinizing railway modernization projects in these regions highlights the encounters of religious and cultural elements with economic and technological developments. Expectedly, this interaction has taken multiple forms with diverse outcomes – some anticipated, others not so. As I have demonstrated earlier in the book, the construction of railways and the building of Hindu temples on railway sites emerged almost contemporaneously in the colonial period. I suggest that at this time, there was no palpable and inevitable dominance of one infrastructural form over the other, despite the obvious power inequalities between the colonial authorities and colonized populations.

Thus, in a moment of colonial modernity, railway-related locales were also spaces where religious practices were enacted in sacred structures produced therein by colonial railway labour, often with the blessing and even support of colonial authorities. In contrast, in moments of postcolonial and neoliberal modernity experienced in the two nation-states of Singapore and Malaysia – starting from the 1970s but firmly in place since the 1990s – the narrative of economic and technological superiority was dominant, displacing all other sensibilities, including those driven by sociocultural, ethical and religious considerations. I argue that the emergent reasoning and mode of operation of the former

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have marginalized all other societal narratives and often sought to eliminate pre-existing and longstanding cultural representations and modes of living, privileging modernity and development above all else, for claims of a larger societal good. Anything standing in the path of these modernization and development efforts has thus typically been viewed as obstacles and encroachments to be justifiably removed in the name of progress.

To begin with, the dramatic makeover of the railways in these two countries over the last five decades or so required extensive clearing of squatter communities from railway reserve lands. Embedded in the broader trope of economic development and urbanization, the reconfiguration of railway networks was assumed to be both inevitable and desirable. This logic was aligned with an emphasis on engendering a mode of transportation that was focused primarily on moving passengers rather than transporting raw materials, labour and commodities. This motivation translated into the acquisition of new lands and the re-appropriation of railway reserve lands for upgrading the railways. The attendant processes entailed ejecting squatters off railway properties and assets (tracks, stations, workshops, locomotive sheds, abandoned quarters, etc.) as well as demolishing living spaces (slums, squatters and quarters) and sites where cultural-religious lives were once sustained (religious structures). Admittedly, freight movements were still key in the reconfigured railway system in the new economic landscape. Yet, already by the 1980s, short commuter trains were introduced, and by mid-1995, the KTM Komuter network provided local rail services in the Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley areas. Over the next decade, the colonial railways had transitioned into a commuter railway network with the setting up of KTM Komuter with a network spanning more than 550 km along the west coast of Malaysia. Remarkably, this commuter network alone had moved close to 34 million passengers in 2017.[1] With a further extension, the KTM ETS (Electric Train Service) was established in 2010, and provided rail services between major Malaysian cities on the west coast. Together, the KTM rail, intercity and commuter networks facilitated long and short-distance passenger travel and were well integrated into the everyday lives of Malaysians and Singaporeans.

Through these moments, neoliberal and technological modernity stood tall and assumed a hegemonic position against which other discourses and practices, including cultural and religious imaginaries, were deemed subordinate and even irrelevant. The nationalization and modernization of colonial railways in Malaysia were related processes which impacted the future of the railways in Singapore as well. The project of 'Malayanizing' the railways in these regions, which is discussed next, sets the stage for detailing the convoluted interface of religions and railways in the postcolonial period in these two countries.

The Story of Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM)

The modernization of the railways in Malaya can be dated to the mid-1950s. This massive infrastructural project required substantial capital, land and expertise, not to mention the requisite technology. The first diesel locomotive was introduced into MR in 1957. These replaced the longstanding steam engines and revolutionized train travel across the country. This historic moment signalled the beginning of the railway upgrading project, with the eventual end of the steam locomotive in 1974. The KTM came into existence in 1962 with the push for nationalizing and localizing the railways. It had a long run of three decades and operated until 1992 when the fully government-owned and corporatized entity Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) was formed. Built-in the standard 1 m gauge (1,000 mm), the total track length of these railways in 2017 was roughly 1,658 km,[2] reduced from the earlier 1,700 km with the removal of about 42 km of tracks from Singapore after 30 June 2011.

In addition to the main West Coast and East Coast Lines, the KTM also run several branch lines, which currently offer freight services to and from ports, while others are dedicated to passenger services. However, these branch lines, which were tied specifically to the colonial extractive economy and were no longer functional, were closed in the 1970s: the Batu Arang line, which had been operational since 1915, was closed in 1971; the very first rail tracks, which were laid in 1885 from Taiping to Port Weld, were shut in 1972. By the mid-1980s, there was tremendous enthusiasm for modernizing the railways. Shamsuddin foretells the promise of a modern railway network for Malaysia and notes approvingly:

> Malayan Railway management is already exploring the possibilities of building a wide gauge high speed railway, investigating other ways to provide dependable transportation in the decades ahead … In recent years, as funding was available, steam has been replaced by diesel traction as motive power, track has been upgraded and heavy liner-on unit trains introduced. (1985: 1)

These anticipated changes were seen as progressive and extolled as enhancing passenger experience of railway travel. These were also expected to have great economic and commercial significance in bolstering convenient and easy transportation of freight, such as coal and palm oil. Shamsuddin makes the following observations about the passing of railway traditions and the changing of guard, all within modernist frames and without any seeming regret, lament or disappointment:

> Not only has steam locomotion gone to the scrap heap but traditions are changing and old-time railwaymen are going on pension, the craftsmen with an eye, ear, and feel for setting a steam loco vale timing is being replaced by the young expert with his calibrated instruments who tunes today's diesel engines and electrical controls to very fine limits to obtain peak performance from the entire class of locomotives. (Ibid.)

Ironically, these modern diesel engines that replaced steam locomotives would themselves be rendered obsolete in time to come. In the meantime, with corporatization in 1992, all KTM assets, including railway lands, were consolidated under the ownership and management of the Railway Assets Corporation (RAC), a federal statutory body established under the Railway Act of 1991. Ming et al. (2018) introduce this new entity briefly:

> RAC was established to manage the assets of the KTM railway, namely the track and the stations, to free KTM from costs such as track and station maintenance and enhancement. RAC also has a role to play in developing the railway infrastructure so that KTM can focus on its role as a railway operating company. Under this model, RAC would be the main asset manager of railway assets in Malaysia and KTM would be the main service provider by utilising assets owned and managed by RAC (p. 27).

Under this arrangement, KTMB existed as a company under the Ministry of Finance and was wholly owned and subsidized by the Malaysian government. Over time, there have been suggestions that KTMB should be privatized, but the idea of complete privatization (Lee 2001) has neither been accepted nor acted upon by the Malaysian state, which is presumably hesitant to 'free' the railways from state regulation. The ghost of KTM's privatization has continued to lurk in deliberations over time, but has yet to materialize. While the political authorities may see privatization as a way of addressing the dwindling finances of the railways, this was not welcomed by the railway unions for obvious reasons. Even in 2012, the Railwaymen's Union of Malaya objected to the possibility of privatization 'due to fears over the future of the railway's 5,500 staff' (Bigland 2012: 24).

Attesting to its good financial health, until 1995, KTMB was largely profitable. However, by 1996, it was facing several challenges – the high cost of leasing locomotives from the Indian Railways, lower revenues from property development and deteriorating infrastructure – and was reporting a loss of RM 25 million a year (Briginshaw 2001: 14). The day-to-day management of the railways was then turned over to Marak Unggul Consortium, Renong Group, Diversified Resources Berhad (DRB) and Bolton Properties. According to Ming et al. (2018), the intention was for this consortium:

to reduce the government's financial burden in enhancing and expanding the railway's infrastructure. However, in 2001, the government cancelled this arrangement and scuppered plans for a KTM privatization due to the high debt levels of Renong and the failure of this consortium to inject capital into KTM.

The Malaysian government argued that in proposing the privatization of KTMB, Marak Ungkul had 'failed to meet the terms of its original contract which required the group to reach agreement regarding privatization. However, the decision coincided with a major reorganization of the Renong Group after its financial collapse' (Anonymous 2001). Other changes in the railway modernization project included the computerization of passenger experience services, such as ticket sales and reservations, and the train operation management and accounting systems, which also reduced the need for station operation staff. These upgrading and modernizing efforts have reconfigured the methods of track maintenance, signalling and telecommunication, with a shift away from traditional manual systems that required large labour pools.

Briginshaw notes a direct link between the modernization of the KTM – especially the gradual replacement of manual track maintenance methods with automation – and the reduction of track maintenance staff. This severely affected continual employment options for the foot soldiers of the railways – the railway labourers – who had been maintaining the tracks manually up to this point:

> Track maintenance is being further mechanised with the purchase of sleeper changing machines, tampers, tack recording cars, and ultrasonic flow detection equipment. The new equipment has enabled the number of track maintenance staff to be reduced during the last five years. (Briginshaw 2001: 13)

Briginshaw also notes that since 1998, several initiatives had been enacted to improve the financial standing of the railways. One of these, he notes, was the 'acceleration of the policy to reduce the size of the workforce, which has been cut from 7595 in 1992 to 5077 last year (i.e. 2000)' (ibid.: 14), adding that this translated to 'a 17% increase in productivity last year in terms of the amount of revenue generated by each employee' (ibid.). In implementing mechanization systems, a sizeable labour pool of the permanent way staff was indeed made redundant. The transformative expansion of the railways, with more trains running at faster speeds, signalled the transitioning of colonial railways to a contemporary passenger rail network through the 1980s and 1990s. It is not surprising that these modernization schemes caused some consternation amongst railway workers and were resisted by railway unions for decades.

The project of nationalising colonial railways in Malaya was entangled with the aspiration for decolonization, and was also impacted by the Malayanization movement, which has deep historical roots. The beginning of the latter has been traced to the 1920s, with a primary objective of ensuring appointments of local personnel to the administrative service. Yeo has observed that the process gained momentum in 1956 (1973: 85) and had two key dimensions:

> Firstly, it involved the recruitment of local officers as the administration expanded and its expatriates left the country. Secondly, Malayanization sought to replace the expatriates in top senior posts by local men so that policy formulation and execution would come under local control. (Ibid.: 75)

Yeo emphasized that 'Malayanization was primarily a political issue' (ibid.) and not just an administrative matter. Following independence, the push for Malayanization was driven by the logic of laissez-faire capitalism. However, its method of implementation translated into preferential treatment for ethnic Malays outlined thus:

> Malaysia's 'New Economic Policy' espoused a philosophy of free-market capitalism but in practice modified this significantly in pursuit of national goals … In the process national corporations acting mainly on behalf of the Malay ethnic group bought controlling shares in many multinational enterprises over a period of years. Regulations provided for progress towards a pattern of capital ownership in which at least one-third would be Malay, for the most part held through organizations set up for this purpose, and strong preference was given to Malays in employment policy, the award of contracts, and opportunities for advancement. (Brookfield et al. 1995: 49)

The implementation of new economic policies favouring the employment of Malays in the railways coincided with the modernization of the railways. Malayanization processes heralded new economic policies, which impacted all industries, with the effect of increasing the recruitment of more Malays into the railways as well. Additionally, Indian staff in the railway services who had reached the-then retirement age of fifty-five were not offered extended contracts. My conversations with former railway staff who were Indians, consistently highlighted that these national level policies negatively impacted their livelihood and they confirmed that the employment of Indians in KTM and subsequently KTMB was not prioritized. My interviews revealed a sense of alienation and bitterness amongst those Indians who had worked with these two entities. For example, Prakash, from Gemas, declared that he had no interest in continuing to work

with KTM after retirement: 'No interest. Now majority, all Malays – not much incentive for us. If one Indian guy retires, two Malays come in. You cannot see a Tamil station master now.' Tharman, a retired *mandore* from Layang Layang, reiterated this sentiment: 'When we joined, all were our own people. Just one or two Malays. The rest were our men. From the supervisor to the coolies – all were our men.' He expressed his frustrations over what he saw as the unfairness of KTM's ethnically differentiated re-employment and recruitment policies. He too had refused an extension that he was offered on a matter of principle:

> Malays are more in this field now. Why are they not giving us an opportunity? When we were working, they never gave us an extension. The Malays continue working till they turn 65 years old … By right, they must retire once they reach 60 years but the Malays are working till 65. During our time that was not the case. Is there such a thing as a legal system? If you do not trust me you do not need to give me the work. So, why should I work for you? They do not give Indians the job even though we have the skills.

Selvam, whom I met in 2018 and who worked with the KTM in Kuala Kangsar as a part of the Workshop Gang, noted wistfully:

> Indian labourers built the railways, the roads. Now it is KTM – *Melayu* – only for Malays – and they do not work. Hardly any Indians or Tamils, in KTM after retirement – do not have Tamils. Indians know railway work; they built the railways with their hands.

As to why there were 'so few' Malays in the railways historically, Tharman reasoned that: 'They would leave their jobs – they found it hard. The Malays could not bear the heat and would leave.' He suggested that Indians and Malays displayed different work ethics:

> Not sure why but they [Malays] were afraid to do the jobs because they thought this would spoil their hands, so they would not come. The Malay worker will come today and leave the next day. Our people took the responsibility to do it. They had a conscience and a family, they used to bear that in mind and work hard. That is why our people could sustain it.

Like other former staff working in the Construction and Way and Works Departments of the KTM, Prakash, Tharman and Selvam expressed that working in the railways was a matter of pride for *them* – meaning Indians – who took ownership of the railways and were committed to their success.

The modernization of the railways saw international and local companies vying for upcoming profitable projects. In 2001, Lee noted that 'the Malayan Railway double-tracking project is the biggest infrastructure project to come on stream in the country and the construction giants are already lining up for a share of the pie'. The eventual turn to international expertise – that is, Indian and Chinese companies –with Malaysian government funding from 'barter trade' (Brookfield et al. 1995: 49) was paid to them through crude palm oil. Malaysia's turn, especially towards Indian railway expertise, was not surprising given the long history of railways in India. In May 2001, KTM 'awarded a US$1.8 billion contract' to Indian Railway Construction Limited (IRCON) India, a government of India undertaking with the Ministry of Railways. IRCON was charged with the responsibility 'to double track, re-signal and electrify the remaining 342 km of the northern line from Ipoh to Butterworth and Padang Besar on the Thai border' (Briginshaw 2001: 15). A 31 km-long rail line between the ports of Tanjung Pelepas and Kulai was opened in 2002, which was constructed under the auspices of IRCON at the cost of RM 500 million (US$131 million) 'under a trade barter arrangement which involved the exchange of palm oil' (Anonymous 2002). The company reported that GCU, a member of Aurecon Group, was appointed 'to work on temporary shoring designs to facilitate Stage 2 construction for Section 2 of the Gemas – Johor Bahru Electrified Double Track Project' (Aurecon n.d.). Running more trains at faster speeds on the refurbished tracks was intended to boost economic and industrial activity in towns and cities along the railway routes. The project also included the construction and upgrading of twelve existing stations and the creation of a new station in Senai near Johor's airport. Depots, land viaducts and bridges were also to be built along the route. On the website of the Aurecon Group, which is an international engineering and design company, the modernization of the Gemas-Johor Bahru track was explained as follows:

> The railway lines aim to improve connectivity for residents living in towns along the route, spur economic development in Central Johor and to facilitate large-scale cargo shipments by rail between Malaysia's two largest ports, Port Klang and Port Tanjung Pelapas. (Ibid.)

The Chinese government, which has a long history of funding infrastructural projects globally, has also had a presence in railways in Malaysia. In one example, the Chinese government had agreed to 'a MR 6 billion palm oil barter deal for electrification and track doubling' (Briginshaw 2001:15) of 297 km of track between Seremban and Johor Bahru. In 2004, the modernization work for the section between Rawang and Ipoh, a track length of 175 km, was 'awarded to a consortium led by Mitsui, Japan' (Anonymous 2000). The contract for the

signalling system was awarded to Siemens AG, for automatic ticket vending machines and the power transformers to Omron Corp, and for communication and electric systems and equipment to Adrantz, Germany (Lee 2001).

As further evidence of reliance on foreign multinationals for railway equipment, KTMB planned to secure twenty diesel-electric locomotives from General Electric, United States, in 2003. For this, the Malaysian government paid 200,000 tonnes of palm oil and palm oil products worth USD $60 million (Anonymous 2001). The modernization of the railways in Malaysia was materialized in a piecemeal, fragmented manner, leading to uneven railway development. However, the end goal was unambiguous for the Malaysian government and the plan was:

> to transform Malaysia's single-track colonial-era West Railway, which runs the length of the mainland from Johor Bahru to Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Padang Besar, into a modern, 160 km/h, high-capacity electrified route for both passengers and freight. (Bigland 2012: 25)

The electrification phase of the railway's modernization in Malaysia had begun relatively early, in the 1990s. The first tracks to be electrified were sections of the West Coast Line in the Klang Valley. The first electric trains were launched in 1995, running between Port Klang and Sentul, and between Rawang and Seremban, where the double-tracking and electrification projects had begun in 1989. But it was only after 2007 that the pace of electrification along the west coast tracks was accelerated. Consequently, the double tracking project between Rawang and Ipoh was completed in 2008 and the Port Klang and Batu Caves branch lines were electrified by 2010. In 2013, the stretch of rail between Seremban and Gemas was double-tracked and electrified, and fast Electric Train Service (ETS) services ran on these tracks in the same year. While the project was conceived as early as 2002, it was only in 2014 that the stretch of rail between Ipoh and Padang Besar was double-tracked and electrified, with ETS services beginning in 2015.

Under the banner of the KTM ETS, electrified trains have been running on these tracks at speeds of 140 km/h, connecting key Malaysian cities on the west coast in dramatically reduced travel times. Yet, the modernization of the railways in Malaysia has been far from seamless. While many projects have materialized, others have been delayed in the face of execution challenges, even though plans have long been in the pipeline. For instance, the electrification and double-tracking of the Sentul–Batu Caves route started in 2006 and was completed four years later in 2010 at a cost of RM 515 million (Weng 2006). In another example, the electrification and double-tracking of the 179 km Rawang–Ipoh route were earmarked for completion in 2003, but only materialized in 2008.[3] Other projects

that have suffered from delays include 'the RM 12.5 billion Ipoh-Padang Besar and RM 3.45 billion Seremban-Gemas projects … originally scheduled for completion in 2013 and 2012 respectively, but each of these projects experienced a year-long delay in completion' (Ming et al. 2018: 30). The various upgrading projects across the vast railway network required a huge investment of capital. Ming et al. (2018: 30) note that 'the entire double tracking and electrification project from Padang Besar to Johor Bahru is expected to incur a total cost of RM 36 to 40 billion to the federal government'.

The efforts to modernize the Gemas–Johor Bahru section of KTM tracks have been in the public limelight and mired in a series of controversies and delays. The first phase of the double-tracking and electrification project in Gemas–Padang Besar was completed in 2013 (Hutchinson and Zhang 2020) while the final phase was completed in November 2015. But the Gemas–Johore Bahru section was the last portion of the West Coast Line to be upgraded. This project, which is currently in progress, had been plagued by several delays 'due to land acquisition issues along the route' (Khoo 2018), although the plan was conceived in 2009. At the time, contracts were awarded to Global Rail Sdn Bhd and its Chinese partner, China Intraglobe, which proposed completing the work for RM 5 billion. This did not materialize as well and the contract was then offered to the China Railway, but which also failed. These failures related to the issue of what percentage stake local and international companies would have in the contract

Figure 6.1. Electric fencing on the boundary of Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple, Sentul, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

for a joint venture, even though earlier decisions on this had been reached in 2001. According to Lee:

> the apportioning of job responsibilities in the double-tracking project has been fixed. Local participation is to be confined to project management and civil works while foreign partners are to benefit from consultancy services and supplies contracts. (2001: 2)

Despite these lingering issues, with the YTL Corporation coming on board in 2018, the local arm of the joint venture, the Johor Bahru–Gemas project finally moved forward. The joint venture between the China Railway Construction Company (CRCC)[4] and SIPP-YTL secured the prized contract that had eluded several railway construction entities. Initially, the contract was awarded to the following Chinese companies in October 2016: China Railway Construction Company (CRCC, 40%), China Railway Engineering Corporation (CERC, 30%) and China Communication Construction Company (CCCC, 30%). However, in the absence of a local partner, the project was politicized and stalled. After multiple protracted delays, the electrification and double-tracking drive of this stretch began belatedly in 2018 and is ongoing. The project was expected to be completed by the end of 2022 at a staggering cost of RM 9.5 billion (Hutchinson and Zhang 2020)[5] but completion is now projected to mid-2023. On this stretch, the modernizing work has included: laying electrical cables; conversion from single to double track; replacement of diesel locomotives with high-speed electric trains; enhancement of freight volumes in providing connectivity to Port Klang and Tanjung Pelepas, and increasing passenger and commuter traffic and cutting travel time. Another key feature was the introduction of modern signalling systems and the removal of level crossings. Traditionally, wooden sleepers were used across the railway network. These were gradually replaced by concrete sleepers and the aim was for total replacement on all segments of the West Coast and East Coast Lines in due course.

In contrast, the single-tracked KTM East Coast Line has neither been double-tracked nor electrified. It continues to utilize its original level crossings and token signalling from the colonial era with diesel locomotives that haul trains at maximum speeds of 80–90 km/h. Instead, what has received considerable publicity and funding is the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which was planned as a standard gauge, double-track railway link connecting Port Klang to Kota Bharu in the northeastern state of Kelantan via Putrajaya in Kuala Lumpur. The objective was to connect the east coast states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan with the key economic regions on the west coast and to carry both freight and passengers. The project was approved in 2016 and it was reported that this project to build a 538.5 km railway line 'is being financed by China as a part of its Belt and Road

Initiative' (Anonymous 2017) and would begin in 2017. However, in the last few years, the project has been affected by changes in government and the network itself has been realigned and extended to a total of 665 km, as the work is scheduled for completion by December 2026.

Despite these massive transformations over half a century, Ming et al. (2018) are not optimistic about the future of the KTM network in Malaysia, given in their view its relatively limited financial performance and the operational challenges the company faces. They call on the Malaysian government to reconsider 'the benefits of increasing rail traffic, both passenger as well as freight' (2018: 42) and propose 'reducing carbon emissions' in the larger cause of climate change. They also highlight that the modernization of railways in Malaysia has not kept abreast of the global best practices with regard to sustainable development and that the authorities have not addressed environmental concerns in modernizing the railway network. Despite this negative report card, there is little evidence at this point that the modernization projects of railway networks in Malaysia will be slowed down. Beyond these financial calculations and issues of environmental degradation, the railway networks constitute a key element of the contemporary transportation system and are indispensable to everyday movements across the country.

Despite the fact that KTM ties were severed with Singapore by July 2011, the KTM story remains incomplete without a narrative about developments in the island's railway landscape following independence. In 1965, Singapore left the Federation of Malaya, attaining independent nation status. However, as per the terms of the separation, the FMSR retained possession of its railways on the island and the lands on which its tracks were situated – and trains continued to run from Singapore northwards to Malaysia. Notably, since the 1970s, the Malaysian government has attempted to undo the deep historical KTM links with Singapore. In recent decades, this arrangement has been the cause of numerous political disagreements between the government authorities in Singapore and Malaysia, often hitting a raw nerve on both sides. This peculiar agreement – where a railway network owned by one government literally runs through lands of another nation – has surfaced in controversial discussions about territorial sovereignty, land ownership and national economic development plans.

Three important historical moments stand out in processing this unique situation: 1918, 1990 and 2010. First, on 25 October 1918, according to the terms of the Singapore Railway Transfer Ordinance, 217 hectares of land (stretching over 20–30 km) in Singapore was leased for use by the FMS. The lands on which the FMSR tracks were laid were leased from the Straits Settlements to the FMSR for 999 years. This stretch of leased land was meant strictly for use by the railways. According to the terms of the contract, if the land was used for any other purpose, it would have to be returned to the Straits Settlements, without cost (Devadas

2021; Nathan 2002). Strangely, this part of history seems to have been occluded in contemporary discussions, leading to misplaced claims and counterclaims about land ownership and sovereignty on both sides.

The next key moment which unsettled this longstanding arrangement came on 27 November 1990, when the leadership of both countries signed a Points of Agreement (POA) and agreed 'to depart from the 1918 Railway Ordinance' (Nathan 2002: 400). The Malaysian authorities offered to vacate the 26 km of railway land, with the agreement that both sides would jointly redevelop the railway lands, with Malaysia holding a majority 60% stake. This plan seemed sound in theory, but key disagreements prevented its execution. The Malaysian position was that the POA could be actualized only when the KTM services stopped at the Tanjong Pagar Station, without stating a clear timeline for this. Another factor for Malaysia was the 'fear that it might eventually be forced to give proprietary control over some or all of KTM's land in Singapore' (Nathan 2002: 401).

Furthermore, Malaysia chose to retain its customs and immigration point at Tanjong Pagar in the middle of the island rather than at Woodlands close to the Malaysian border where Singapore moved its customs, immigration and checkpoint in July 1995. Devadas notes the peculiarity of this move: 'passengers had the bizarre experience of being granted legal entry to Malaysia at Tanjong Pagar before legally exiting Singapore at Woodlands' (2021). There seemed to be no political will to resolve these differences, even at the highest levels of leadership.[6] However, in 2010, the moment of reckoning did arrive when a new generation of political leaders agreed to honour the terms of the POA drafted two decades earlier. The new agreement was for Singapore to exchange railway lands leased to the FMSR and KTM at Tanjong Pagar, Bukit Timah, Kranji and Woodlands with Malaysia for other land parcels of the same value in Singapore. Kassim noted the irony of this situation, especially for Singapore:

> So what was legally supposed to be returned for free will now largely be paid for by Singapore – at a price that is now the subject of mutual valuation and final negotiations. A Malaysian paper, *The Star*, reported that a valuation exercise last year estimated the total land value to be up to S$4bil (RM9.5bil). (2010: 2)

Observers agreed that Singapore seemed to be on the losing side of the bargain. But the deal was sealed in a spectacular, theatrical mode, as the Sultan of Johor drove the last train out of Tanjong Pagar Station on 30 June 2011. The next day, the railway station founded in Singapore in 1932 was permanently closed. Subsequently, all Singapore rail and customs operations were moved to the Woodlands Train Checkpoint. This brought eighty years of railway history in Singapore to an end, severing the island nation-state from rail connectivity with

its northern neighbour. Moving to the next phase swiftly, the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) published a notice in Singapore's local media announcing the dismantling of the railways in Singapore:

> From 1 Jul to 17 Jul 2011, minor works will be carried out at the Bukit Timah Railway Station and the railway crossings at Kranji Road, Sungei Kadut Avenue, Choa Chu Kang Road, Stagmont Ring, and Gombak Drive. Members of the public should avoid these work areas which will be cordoned off … Works to remove the railway tracks along the rest of the former railway line, except for the 3 km stretch from Rifle Range Road to the Rail Mall, will commence from 18 July 2011. The removal works include the clearance of minor buildings, sleepers, tracks, cables, gates, posts and debris around the various sites from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands. Other items to be removed include railway equipment, such as signal lights, level crossings, controllers and traffic lights. The removal works are to be fully completed by 31 December 2011. (Singapore Land Authority and Urban Redevelopment Authority 2011)

In 1932, Sir Cecil Clementi – who had boasted about the rail connectivity of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, which he thought would stand for perpetuity – could not have known that this would end less than a century later. The latter was a historic moment and captured the imagination of Singapore's rail enthusiasts and the general public, with an outpouring of nostalgia, passion and emotions about the end of an era.[7] Moving forward to 2015, the KTMB terminated 'all long-distance passenger trains in Singapore' (Anonymous 2015b), thus ending international train rides at the Woodlands Station in Singapore. Instead, a commuter shuttle service between Johor Bahru and Woodlands was introduced, crossing the causeway in less than five minutes, making seven round trips daily. Additionally, regarding the plans for a high-speed rail between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, an agreement was reached in 2016 between the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong. This 330 km railway initiative had been a part of Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme. While there was considerable enthusiasm and commitment to this project (Barrow 2016), this was derailed by political disagreements and was finally cancelled in 2021.

Following the removal of the rail tracks from Singapore, the declaration and preservation of its route as Singapore's 'Rail Corridor' have been hailed by Singapore's heritage communities, environmental activists and railway enthusiasts alike. The Tanjong Pagar station building is now 'protected', having been declared a national monument by Singapore, and thus will not fall prey to redevelopment and urban renewal plans. However, a new mass rapid transit station

is being built at the now-closed Tanjong Pagar Station and is expected to be completed by 2025. The station master's house and railway staff quarters at Bukit Timah station have been refurbished under the auspices of the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the National Parks Board, to be preserved as heritage projects. On 1 July 2022, these sites were declared a 'community node' and a railway-themed café, '1932 Story', housed in the former railway staff quarters, was opened opposite the old Bukit Timah Railway Station building.

Given the long history of the co-presence of the railway and religious infrastructures in Malayan regions that has been documented in this project, it is worth asking the following questions: how were these infrastructures oriented to each other and with what consequences? What have been the effects of emplacing religion within the universe of railways in moments of colonial and postcolonial modernities? I argue that colonial railways in British Malaya had a slight head start in being conceived and built first. The lands surrounding railway quarters, stations and yards were made sacred through the efforts of railway employees, principally its labour, soon after, but just barely so. It would be accurate to state that religious and railway infrastructures in the colonial period were produced *almost concurrently*. As discussed earlier, the colonial authorities were driven by instrumental motives to accommodate the desires of railway employees to establish places of worship. But more than a century later, a different kind of postcolonial modernization project had to contend with the prior presence of long-established sacralized railway landscapes in Malaysia and Singapore.

Urban Modernity Meeting Religious Worlds

The theme of overlapping, intersecting secular and religious worlds is explored evocatively in Mukul Kesavan's 1995 novel *Looking through Glass*. I was led to this text when reading M. Aguilar's important work *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (2011). In his novel, Kesavan re-creates the pathos of the 1947 partition of British India, grounding the plot, characters and the travails of everyday life at a fictitious railway station. His positioning of a mosque 'between the railway tracks' (Kesavan 1995: 188) utilized as a narrative device was as striking as it was effective. In this imagined railway landscape, Kesavan locates the mosque 'precisely between platforms one and two, so conspicuously out of place that it was almost invisible' (Kesavan 1995: 188). In a key passage from the novel, the protagonist observes the goings on at the mosque, perched on an overbridge, as he strains to hear what the *maulaana* (Urdu, respected Muslim leader) is saying to his congregation. However, he only catches fragments of his discourse because 'a shunting locomotive thundered past platform four' (ibid.: 189) and the sounds of a 'whistling train' (ibid.) drowned out the *maulaana*'s (Arabic: teacher, scholar) voice. This novel expresses the

ordinariness of juxtaposing profane and sacred domains typically thought of as oppositional and incommensurate, and problematizes the binary (Aguilar 2011: 98) – a view that resonates with the perspective adopted here. What is an imagined, fictitious reality of a 'railway mosque' in this novel represents the lived experiences of Indian, Hindu railway labour in Malaya, whose efforts produced sacralized railway premises and engendered the interface of religious structures and the railways as symbols of modernity and mobility (Aguilar 2011).

Speaking more broadly, whether religions can be grounded in contemporary urban cityscapes and those of the future – and how both are reimagined consequently – are questions that have engaged scholars globally (Bunnell and Goh 2018; Poon 2008; Siemiatycki 2005). For example, Poon's (2008) work on Guangzhou city shows the tussle over urban spaces between the Chinese government's modernization projects and the religious communities' desire for manifesting religiosity publicly in urban landscapes. Poon demonstrates how individuals can reclaim public city spaces by assigning them alternative meanings and symbolism – something that is aligned with my ethnographic work on similar themes in urban Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. In another instance, my research from Singapore has highlighted unconventional, alternative, 'third' spaces – public roads, sports stadiums, swimming pools, community halls, former movie theatres (Sinha 2008), shop houses, homes and hidden parcels of state land (Sinha 2005) – that religious practitioners colonize and infuse with religious meaning, even if only momentarily (Sinha 2016). As such, these efforts *do* disturb and destabilize the precisely delineated spatial boundaries drawn by policy makers and bureaucrats across sharply marked secular and sacred sites.

In this context, the case of the Sri Maha Sakthi Mohambigai Amman Temple, which carries the postal address 'Mid Valley Megamall, Kuala Lumpur, 58000', is edifying for several reasons. The backstory is that the site on which a new mall was to be built held six hundred homes of poor families, ten private homes and a Hindu temple (Chu 2018). The IGB Corp Bhd, charged with this construction project in the 1990s, acquired the residential sites through rehousing and compensation, but made the rather unusual decision to retain the temple and its Bodhi tree within the new mall. Instead of being demolished, the temple was rebuilt on a bigger site of 30,000 sq ft and the developers even sponsored its construction (ibid.). The mall was redesigned to incorporate this popular place of worship, which was believed by devotees to be highly efficacious. M.K. Sen, the Managing Director of the Mid Valley Megamall, persuaded the largely non-Indian and non-Hindu board of directors to keep the temple in the mall. He considered this to be the 'most challenging and heart-wrenching project, but also the most fulfilling' (ibid.). Not only this, according to Sen, the subsequent financial success of the mall was also attributed to the presence of this sacred site within its premises (ibid.). The future of the temple was secured as it was given a lease

of ninety years and the rent to be paid by the temple community was fixed at a mere RM 10 per month (ibid.). The newly built mall did open in 2000 and the 'temple in the mall' model has been touted as the successful integration of commercial, secular, sacred and spiritual realms. Kozlowski et al. (2020) are optimistic that for the Malaysian capital city, 'elements of urban infrastructure could work as an essential mediator 'beyond community', allowing inclusive social structures to be built, despite cultural and religious tensions existing within the city'. The Mid Valley solution certainly exemplifies this and has been often invoked as a model since it opened, even in recent disputes between developers and temple custodians.[8]

A similar tale envelops the case of the Sri Marathadi Muneeswaran Temple in Singapore. This is another good counterexample to the idea that urban modernity must necessarily be hostile and antithetical to religious sensibilities. This temple, originally built in the neighbourhood of Singapore's Changi Prison in Jalan Bena, was demolished in 2004 and an industrial, factory complex was built in its place. Over the years, the company reported financial losses and rumours were rife about strange, inexplicable sounds and sightings in the newly constructed buildings. The North Indian owners of the company sought out the temple, which had been moved into the Housing and Development Board (HDB) apartment of its caretakers and implored them to return to the Jalan Bena premises. Going the extra mile, the new owners allocated space for rebuilding the temple on the exact same spot it had originally occupied, and also provided a separate entrance for devotees to access the premises as well as some financial support. Strikingly, even after the temple had been demolished in 2004, devotees returned to the site to conduct prayers and make offerings of flowers and fruits in the belief that the deity was still present there.

For devotees, this episode signalled that the deity Muṉīsvaraṉ had 'come home', attesting to his will and staying power. Interestingly, since the temple's 'homecoming', the company reported commercial success, reinforcing the devotees' belief in the deity's powers and his wish to return to his favoured spot. The 'temple in an industrial site' was still standing and thriving when I visited in late 2021, sustained by a committed community of devotees. In the most recent twist in the tale, this industrial complex has been sold and the temple was asked to vacate the premises yet again. Not surprisingly, the temple and its deity have now been moved into another industrial space in the eastern part of Singapore, with a grand opening ceremony conducted in the new site by the temple custodians in April 2022. In a somewhat ominous tone, the devotees have now declared that the deity will not return to the site it occupied for almost seven decades.

Remarkably, these two examples illustrate possibilities for emplacing socio-cultural-religious worlds in projects of urban modernity. Their success and longevity against the odds, expresses that it is occasionally possible for profane and

religious agendas to be aligned through compromise, cooperation and interdependence, and that pockets of spirituality can and do coexist within modernist frames. Nonetheless, these are rare instances, even if they have become something of urban legends.

In Singapore and Malaysia, land acquisitions by the state for infrastructural projects, including around railway premises, are not recent events. In the newly created nation-states of Singapore and Malaysia, political leaders and urban planners prioritized the need for economic development in the name of modernity. However, the discourse of a forward-looking, progressive orientation has confronted the built environment of living spaces, including secular and religious structures. Thus, in a neoliberal framework, compromises over clearing and acquisition of land earmarked for development have been few and far between. Religious structures were hardly prioritized in development agendas, even though religion is recognized as a key element in these multireligious societies. In both contexts, state policies on 'rational' land use for the larger public good translated into aggressive urban renewal programmes with land clearances and wholesale demolition of pre-existing structures, not discriminating between buildings used for religious or secular purposes.[9]

Drawing on my recent ethnographic work, I present four outcomes of the railway and religious infrastructural encounters in postcolonial moments: demolition and resettlement of temples and temple communities which were marked as 'squatters'; survival of temples in railway premises, but with reconfigured physical boundaries; negotiations over rental sums to be paid to RAC; and, finally, a determined resistance (albeit a brief one) to railway eviction and removal notices.

The first of these consequences relates to the clearing of lands around railway premises, removal of squatters and land acquisitions for the double-tracking project in Malaysia, which can be dated back to the 1970s. These efforts have intensified over time and have lingered in contemporary moments. Railway modernization projects saw the demolition of old railway stations and the construction of new ones, with land acquisitions and the eviction of communities in and around railway premises. Removing 'railway squatter communities' from railway lands in Singapore and Malaysia has been controversial and has attracted public attention, even as the 'problem' of railway squatters has persisted through waves of railway modernization. In Malaysia, the Emergency (Clearance of Squatters) Regulations (ESCR) of 1969 gave 'power to local authorities to enter any state land … to demolish squatter's [*sic*] hut' (Jalil, Maidin and Salleh 2018: 2). Together with this, the Land Acquisition Act (1960) and the National Land Code (1965) (Matsui and Lee 2003) accorded absolute and non-negotiable powers to local authorities to evict illegal squatters on railway lands and to destroy immovable properties therein:

> Under Regulation 4 of the ESCR, local authority [*sic*], its agents or servant [*sic*] may enter into such lands by day or night to demolish any squatter hut on such lands. The authority is empowered to remove any person or movable property in any squatter hut and to demolish any of the hut. Under this regulation, there is no requirement to serve any notice to the evictee on the State Land. (Ibid.: 26)

According to the Railways Act 1991, 'all properties and assets of the railway [*sic*] in Peninsular Malaysia are vested in the Railway Asset Corporation' (Jalil, Maidin and Salleh 2018: 21). This amounts to an oversight of a 'total area of 30,777.41 acres' (ibid.) across the country. KTM owns a significant amount of railway reserve land, which is defined in terms of the distance of 66 ft from the centre of the tracks, extending to both sides. These land segments on either side of the railway tracks, which are meant to be kept clear for maintenance and safety operations, are known as railway reserve lands and no encroachment is permitted here. However, it has been observed that over time, these spaces have become 'a place of residences [*sic*] and worship, and commercial activities' (ibid.: 23). The more nationalist of these discourses, which privilege economic efficiency, have argued that the illegal occupation of railway lands is counterproductive from the perspective of development agendas and leads to the loss of potential profits through less than maximum utilization of the lands (Jalil, Dahlan and Arshad 2018). If Kesavan's 'railway mosque' had existed in the real world of railways in Singapore and Malaysia, it would have been classified as a 'railway squatter' – an obstacle to be eliminated.

Despite this assortment of legal mechanisms and procedures, the evacuation of land surrounding railway premises has been exceedingly difficult for the authorities. Despite concerted efforts, it was reported that the number of squatters on railway land remained 'high' even in 2018, with the authorities noting the urgency of finding appropriate solutions to the 'escalating numbers of railway squatters on public lands' (ibid.: 23). KTM authorities have been embroiled in numerous protracted legal challenges to the eviction and relocation notices they have issued, with disputes arising over compensation. The phenomenon of railway squatting has been coupled with the notion of illegal occupation of these lands. This provides justification for railway authorities to act to evacuate and reclaim these lands, all within the framework of legislative and administrative provisions. Jalil, Maidin and Salleh note with surprise the 'government's tolerance' for squatters occupying state land well into the twenty-first century, explaining that this possibly was due to the high 'costs of resettlement and eviction of squatters' (2018: 24). Others have also noted that the reluctance to move on squatters relates not just to the politicization of squatter settlements (Yusof et al. 2004), but also the prohibitive cost of providing alternate housing to displaced squatters.

Research on the subject suggests that the emergence of 'squatters' in Malaysia has a long history, dating back to the 1870s (Johnstone 1983). Others have traced the squatter problem to the inadequate provision of housing for labour working in the mines and public works departments by the British (Jalil, Maidin and Salleh 2018) and the poor agrarian communities. Problems relating to inadequate and unaffordable housing have escalated post the Second World War (Matsui and Lee 2003) and continue even in the present, with major Malaysian cities dealing with significant squatter communities. Matsui and Lee cite a 1999 survey, which reported that 'the actual number of squatters in Malaysia (except Selangor)' (ibid.: 175) was a staggering 409,792, about 1–2% of the total Malaysian population.

The 'problem' of squatters on railway land in Singapore has been in the public eye since at least the 1970s. The diplomatic disputes, claims and counterclaims over these lands, which hosted the tracks of first the FMSR, then the MR and, finally, KTM, have been popularly thought of as *belonging* to Malaysia. This has been the perception on both sides of the Causeway and is a view that has even been erroneously expressed by some politicians. The common sense in Singapore has been that since these lands are Malaysian property, Singapore laws do not apply here. Furthermore, since the territories are far from the seat of governance in Malaysia, enforcing Malaysian laws here was almost impossible. As such, these spaces have been perceived as free for all to use. The reserve lands alongside the tracks – also leased to the railway authorities – have been appropriated by residents of Singapore for housing, farming, raising poultry and religious purposes, as seen in the building of Chinese and Hindu temples. This is true for the functioning KTM tracks as well as the abandoned railway lines in Singapore (Lai 2010, 2011).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s with the islands' own urban renewal projects, Singapore too faced the 'problem' of squatters on railway lands and the KTM authorities had to deal with their long-term presence on railway lands, in anticipation of development plans for the railways. In one example, the *Singapore Monitor* contained an article from 1985 in which Abdul Rahim Osman, the Director of Commerce of MR, was cited as saying that 'squatters living on railway land would "definitely have to vacate"'. The piece also noted that 'some of these families have lived beside the track for as long as 20 years' and their living quarters 'are less than 10 m from the track' (ibid.). Osman justified this action on grounds of safety and the danger posed to families living close to the tracks. However, he offered another reason for clearing railway lands: 'we also have to make way for development – such as building of a double track and relining tracks at some point' (ibid.). He signalled the finality of this outcome, adding that: 'We have already given notice to most squatters in Malaysia to quit the premises. It is just a matter of time before the Singapore squatters will be given notices to clear the railway land too' (ibid.).

Figure 6.2. Demolition in progress, the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Mengkibol, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

Unsurprisingly, 'railwaymen temples' on railway lands in both countries were also considered to be 'squatters', albeit of a different kind. Many of the early temples built by railway labour along the stretch of the tracks have been demolished, leaving no material traces. Some have been abandoned over time and claimed by other caretakers, moving into nonrailway hands. Yet, numerous others have been moved away from their original sites. Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Paloh, Johore is a good example of the latter. This temple was famously sited on the old Paloh Railway Station, which started operations in 1909. The temple was demolished in 2013, long before the Paloh Railway Station itself began to be upgraded in 2019–20. I recall the temple on the platform on earlier train journeys and visited the old station several times in my recent trips before it was demolished. I was able to document physical traces of the temple's once-upon-a-time presence on the station platform visually. During my 2017 field trip, I witnessed the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple at Mengkibol being demolished (Figure 6.2).

Just as the railway modernization project unfolded in waves, so have the demolitions of religious structures on railway precincts. Temples along the Gemas–Johor Bahru stretch of the track have had a longer presence compared to those on the tracks that were double-tracked and electrified much earlier. Of those that have shifted due to urban renewal and modernization projects, many had expressed a preference for being relocated to railway premises. Indeed, I was surprised to find that many of the 'affected' and relocated temples still occupied KTM lands, even along the sections that have been double-tracked and electrified.

Removing railway squatter communities has severely impacted homes, farms and places of worship, and individual lives and livelihoods, with parties involved in long-term and difficult negotiations about adequate compensation over complete or partial demolitions and relocations (Matsui and Lee 2003). In one example, the temple committee of the Sri Vaitheesvarar Temple, Tampin, approached the district and land office in Alor Gajah to purchase the 20,000 sq ft of reserve land on which the temple is situated. This is an old temple that has survived the double-tracking project. The committee had the confidence to approach the authorities because it has legitimacy and legality, having registered the temple in 1966. Expectedly, they were directed to the KTM authorities to pursue their wish to purchase and own the land. This has not yielded the desired outcome and the temple continues to be a tenant, paying rent to the KTM authorities as per the terms of the TOL contract.

An account of land acquisitions, evictions and demolitions of housing and places of worship on railway premises is an integral part of KTM's modernization drive. These pre-existing sacralized landscapes were marked as obstacles that had to be removed, despite their politicization in many instances. The progressive development of railways was privileged in the rhetoric of

modernization, with the resolve to move and/or demolish all structures viewed as encroachments. In fact, authorities have cited the *problem* of railway squatters on the stretches of the KTM line as a key cause of numerous delays in efforts to modernize the railways. Evacuations have relied on legal instruments and have resorted to forcefully ejecting illegal occupants and demolishing places of worship, farms and residences.

A second effect of railway-religion infrastructural interface was somewhat unexpected given the logic and resolve of railway modernization efforts. My fieldwork revealed that many registered Malaysian Hindu temples that stood in the path of KTM's modernization project had in fact survived. I encountered some remarkable stories of how 'railwaymen temples' had *escaped* demolition or lost a only small portion of their premises, in a close brush with railway development schemes. I learnt that generally this was due to the involvement of surveyors and engineers from India, who were employed by IRCON and deployed on the ground to assess sites affected by track double tracking and electrification projects. These experts negotiated with temple representatives and I learnt that in practice, railway infrastructural paper plans were often reconfigured and tweaked to accommodate existing registered temples. I heard repeatedly that these engineering experts (possibly but not necessarily Hindu) were sympathetic to the plight of the temples in question and made efforts, within given constraints, to save them. My interlocutors shared that many of these engineers also worshipped at the temples when they surveyed sites and appreciated that for devotees these were spiritually energized spaces. According to my interlocutors, the IRCON personnel were willing to rework development plans, altering and shifting the course of rivers, drains, tunnels, bridges and the positioning of the tracks – often by very small margins – to preserve as much of the temple space as possible. I encountered many of these temples along the west coast tracks that had already been upgraded. These were instances of modernist, technological projects that ended up accommodating the temple community's right to retain places of worship on lands marked as sacred, albeit through specific human interventions and perhaps due to a shared religious worldview. For example, Prakash from the Gemas temple shared that the land housing its Nākam'mā shrine and the storage area had to be only 'slightly relocated' during the double-tracking and electrification project. Other than this, the temple survived the railway modernization project, in part due to intercessions by Indian railway engineers and land surveyors who, he said, 'figured out' how to 'save the temple'. In another example, Vijay, a graphic designer in his fifties from Kluang, worked in an NGO and fought to save the temple communities living in the neighbourhood of Kampung India. He too noted the help and advice of an 'Indian officer' who tried to help temples that had been served demolition notices:

actually, there was an Indian officer involved in the project. He was from India; he has retired already. But he came down to Johor, it was his last project. He came down, he tried to avoid disturbing all these temples – in the upgrading project. He said, if your temple, like we want to keep it, you should keep it within your boundary, then we will leave it. He called every chairman and secretary of the village and temple and he personally interviewed and said that. It is not like he is Indian … but he wanted to help. He said do not do more building of the temple outside the boundaries. He already gave an unwritten warning. But people did not listen to that.

Then there were stories of the well-meaning RAC or KTM officials – Chinese, Malay and Indian – who were understanding and helped the temples to continue to occupy KTM lands by making adjustments to development plans, often successfully. I was also told that some KTM officials themselves had witnessed the 'power of the temple' and were uncomfortable with 'disturbing' spiritual forces on these sites, and so refused to order demolition of temples. Vasanti, from the Muneeswaran Temple in Kampung India, which was given multiple relocation notices, noted the power of the goddess even over the railway modernization project:

> There is one story of a consultant here: this Kuala Lumpur consultant was the one in charge, Marimuthu – he came in 2012. He said Am'man̲ is very strong here. He said he will adjust alignments to keep the temple here when they started the project. They brought him back from retirement. He said 'Am'man̲ brought me back and I am working on this project'.

Vasanti believed firmly that the temple had managed to evade the persistent demolition notices due to Am'man̲'s power. However, I learnt that the four temples that were housed in Kampung India were ultimately demolished following the commencement of the double-tracking and electrification of the Gemas–Johor Bahru line in 2018. The registered temples amongst these were given alternative sites and some compensation and have moved, while the those without legal status remain homeless.

The third outcome of encounters between religion and modernist forces is tied to the complexities of negotiations with railway authorities over the obligatory rent to be paid under the terms of the TOL. This emerged as a strong refrain in my conversations with numerous temple caretakers. The practice of rent collection has a long history in the Malayan context, where railway authorities have functioned as landlords. At the time of my fieldwork between 2017 and 2019, these amounts that were to be paid to KTM varied considerably,

mediated by the size of the occupied site. However, overall, these amounts have gradually increased over the years. For instance, Mohanan, the caretaker of the Muniswarar Temple in Kamunting, shared that in the past, he used to pay a small sum of RM 10 per month, but in recent years he had been asked to pay RM 250 per month, which is a strain on temple finances. Similarly, Nalan, the caretaker of the Railway Sri Muneeswarar Temple in Tanjong Rambutan, claimed that this piece of land was 'given by the British to the railway workers' and the temple had 'stopped paying rent thirty years ago'. The authorities dispute his claim over the site and have served notice for the temple to be moved. Although he had been paying KTM RM 110 per year, he stopped payments when the amount became exorbitant. Nalan refused to either move or pay the high amounts requested, leading to something of a stalemate. This pattern was evident in numerous temples I visited during my fieldwork.

To some extent, these refusals destabilized the authority of the RAC as a rent collector. Given these refusals, the RAC appears not to function as an effective and efficient landlord, even though the terms of the TOL contract were clearly not honoured by temple custodians. It appears that apart from sending repeat notices, which many temple managers and caretakers routinely ignored, the RAC officials have so far not taken firmer action in response. My fieldwork data suggest that in the case of registered temples, the authorities appeared to exercise greater caution. This is due to several high profile cases where public contestations and legal battles with RAC have dragged on for decades. Subhas, a key member of Tumpat's Kuil Muthu Mariamman's leadership, shared his difficult negotiations with the railway authorities over payment of rent. He stated that several ensuing disputes are yet to be resolved and the situation has reached a kind of bureaucratic stand-off:

> They [temple founders] managed, of course, to get some property. What we call TOL property, which is now not the temple land … slightly to the left, where we have the hall and the *kurukkaḷ*'s [Brahmin priest's] house that is on railway land … we are renting that from Malayan Railways. The rest of it is owned by the temple. We are entitled to it. It is a railway temple, whichever way you look at it. Its history is intertwined with the railway. So far, we are paying them RM 10 a year. For donkey's years. Several years back they doubled it to RM 20 a year. Now, suddenly they made a revision and are demanding something like RM 250 a month. It is the RAC. So I fought them. I am no longer the president; I am still an elder … so I am also sort of in charge of communicating with the railway authorities and after ding dong here, ding dong there. Finally, I persuaded my boys to agree to RM 250 per annum and not prolong it. But something went wrong, in the sense that the technicalities are not going to work and

we have not signed anything. So for the purposes of rental, we have not paid rental for several years … for about four years.

Subhas, like many other railwaymen temples custodians across Malaysia, is embroiled in a longstanding bureaucratic tussle with RAC over the annual rents to be paid:

> That is when I had a fight with RAC. I sort of accused them of bad faith. They were picking on us. So, imagine the … you work out the ratio of the increase. From RM 10 a year, all the way to RM 250 a month. What kind of mathematics is that – you know? So, I accused them of bad faith mildly. They said no, no … and said, in Perak, there was a temple that had agreed to such and such amount. So I said, I do not know anything about that. But actually, I believe that in our case, there was an error of calculation by the officials who looked at our case … sitting in the office somewhere. They thought … I think they made a mistake that we were sitting on 15,000 sq m of their property. When, in fact, it is only 15,000 sq ft, you see. When they worked it out, they might have gotten scared, 'what, so much land' and all that? So they revised the rental based on that … But we already clarified and said OK to RM 250 a year but we are waiting to sign the final papers.

On a 2017 field trip to Ipoh, I heard a similar story from Kumaran, who started his 33-year-long career with KTM as a porter and then became a linesman. Although he was originally from Kuala Lumpur, I met him as the caretaker of the 'more than hundred-year-old' Muniyandi Temple in Kuala Kangsar. He told me that this temple was originally built near the tracks by railway labourers and the temple site was impacted by the double-tracking project of the West Coast Line. Kumaran had long fought the legal removal notices he received, but in 2008 had no choice but to move to new premises, near the newly built Kuala Kangsar Railway Station. He also reported 'some tensions' over rent payments. He shared that the temple used to pay a rent of RM 10 per month in the old location, but he was asked to pay RM 250 per month when he moved the temple to the new site. When I interviewed him, the registered temple had not paid any rent for the past two years. He was thankful that the temple lease had nonetheless been renewed, but he admitted that the temple community felt vulnerable, given the unsettled rents and administration tensions with the authorities.

Then there were cases of temples that had been served demolition and relocation notices, but it was the KTM authorities that refused to accept the rents the temple managers wanted to pay, in an explicit denial of existing TOL contracts with the temples. For instance, Palani, from the Sri Sivalingeswarar Temple

along the railway tracks in Johor Bahru, shared that the temple had been given notice to move many times since the 1990s, when the railways were starting to replace wooden sleepers with concrete ones. But he said that he was thankful that this work was supervised by 'engineers from India', who decided that the temple need not be moved. Thus, although the temple *lost* some of its land during the course of this work, the surveyors argued that the 'tracks could go around the temple'. Palani added that the KTM authorities had refused to accept rent since the 1990s, hoping that this would compel the temple to move. But he added casually 'they keep sending warning notices and letters', which he said he just 'ignored'. The temple was still standing in April 2019 when I visited. Given that this is a 'properly registered temple', Palani expects compensation in the form of an alternative temple site and funds if he is forced to move when the double-tracking and electrification project eventually reaches Johor Bahru.

Finally, I documented some explicit resistance by temple communities in the face of removal and demolition notices. Here I share details of two such cases I documented during fieldwork. The first of these comes from the Kampung India community in Mengkibol, on KTM's West Coast Line, where homes of residents – human and divine – were earmarked for demolition during the double tracking and electrification drive along this section of the route. This was a controversial case involving the relocation of an entire village of sixty-two families (Chinese and Indian) and four Hindu temples, all defined as *illegal squatters* on railway lands, even though these premises, I was told, did not 'technically' encroach upon reserve railway lands as the following discussion clarifies. In 2017, I spoke to one key member of the community, Vasanti, who displayed a firm resolve to fight eviction notices:

> No other places fighting. We are the only ones fighting. The others were forced to accept. Of course, the unregistered ones have no choice. The Malaysian Hindu Centre is of no use … we will fight for the village. We still fight. Nobody helped. I was once a reporter … I wrote about this village. But no one came to help. They labelled me as the opposition. We sent a letter to Najib. He ask [*sic*] to stop everything till the elections. The local politicians were not willing to help. They were forcing people to leave.

Another member of the community, Vijay – who was also involved in this effort to save the village – shared that although 'the houses were far away from the railway tracks, the government still wanted to demolish them'. To help this effort, he founded an NGO called G-SKIM (Gelang Selamat Kampung India Mengkibol). He was disappointed that although they 'went up to Najib and to the highest level of Government and the Sultan of Johore, nothing happened'. He elaborated that it

was only in July 2017 that a Malay officer from the district land office in the area had offered to negotiate with the community. He proposed a plan for relocating the families that had been living in Kampung India for four generations (about eighty years). He described the plan as follows:

> So, there is a housing area that is developed right opposite the village, one road separating the village, 20 to 30 m away. So he came up with a suggestion: why not take the houses there – a win-win situation – just opposite the kampong … We went and discussed it with the villagers and they agreed. You know, by then, only eleven houses remained out of the sixty. The others were demolished. They took the compensation – each house, 42,000 ringgit – and went.

Vijay explained that the village residents were told that they had no right to compensation because they were considered squatters, even though their houses were not on railway land:

> Yes, they are considered squatters. But they were given permission by KTM to build the houses. The KTM land is only 66 ft from the left and right of the KTM tracks, from the centre of the tracks. Anything above that is state/government land. So, most of the village houses were 90 ft away … they were not within the 66 ft. So that is the reason we fought. Anything bounded by 66 ft, we cannot claim, it is naturally the KTM land. It is gazetted already.

This battle to save the village had been fought since 2012, but was eventually lost. The negotiations began in December 2011, when the village representatives met with officers from the district and land office. They were told initially that all the buildings and structures 'beyond 66 ft of the tracks' will be retained, but Vijay said 'they changed the story two weeks later'. The issue appeared in the news and was also politicized, given that these negotiations and contestations coincided with the Hindraf[10] movement in Malaysia. I learnt that one active participant from the Hindraf leadership had visited the village to 'join the fight'. Vasanti stated that journalists from Hindraf and *Malaysiakini*[11] had also published articles about the plight of the village. But these community spokespersons noted despondently that none of the local representatives of national political parties, such as the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), offered any assistance to save the temples or the village.

The clearing of these lands was in preparation for the electrification and double-tracking of the Gemas–Johor Bahru stretch of the KTM. This project had been

delayed for many years, but began in 2018 and about sixty percent of the work had been completed by October 2022. After five long years of fighting, many of the village residents caved in and accepted the offered compensation, either by way of alternative housing or cash, and moved on. The human residents of the village were not the only ones who were served removal notices. There were four Hindu temples, founded and maintained by the villagers, which stood in the way of the railway development efforts. At the time of my fieldwork in 2017, all four temples were intact in their original sites by the tracks and functioning. These temples declared a long presence in the area: the Muneeswaran Temple claimed a hundred-year-old history, as did the Lakshmi Ganapati Temple. Likewise, representatives of the Marathadi Nagakanni Temple and the Kaliamman Temple claim that these were built more than seventy-seven years ago. Speaking to the specific coordinates and legal standing of these temples, Vijay said:

> OK, these Nagakanni and Ganapati temples, they are far, they are above the 66 ft but the government still wants them to relocate … wants to move them out. But we are still fighting. For the Nagakanni Amman Temple, we are still fighting. Yeah, it is more than 100 ft away. The Ganapati Temple, the Maha Bhadrakaliamman Temple, also 90 ft away. Further away, you will see the *ayyā* temple built by the KTM workers – hundred years old. This one will definitely go. Yes, because too near. Unless God saves it.

Vijay recounted, with some irony, that the temples and homes were built in this area with the unofficial blessings of KTM officials in the old days:

> So, permission to build the temples was given by KTM. These people were not working with the KTM but they were living along the tracks. Those days they called these officers, the Indian labourers called them, *kampiturai*: officers working with KTM. Most of them were Ceylonese Tamil. So they built their temples and houses there. The *kampiturai* said 'if you want to come here, build your house – yes – but 100 ft away'. Because only 66 ft belonged to KTM. So these people – many from the nearby estates – came along to build the temples and houses near the tracks, after getting unwritten permission from these officers. So, this is the history of the *kampong*.

The official registration of the temples was another key issue in addition to whether these temples encroached on railway lands. However, Vijay argued that registration did bestow some legality and thus offered some room for negotiation, even if it did not guarantee absolute protection:

> Registration is everything. If I am from a registered temple, I can fight for
> it. All the temples here are registered. Only the ayyā temple is not regis-
> tered. I told them to register five years ago. Now they have no choice –
> they have to go.

However, Vijay was under no illusions about the inevitability of these temple
demolitions even with registration: 'of course they are going to proceed with it.
That is definitely going to happen. But I do not know when'.

The second example of resisting the authorities is the rather high-profile case
of the Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam in Singapore, the last and
possibly the most unyielding of the railway squatters on the island. I first learned
about this temple in January 2011 and conducted some fieldwork there over the
next few years. I documented the premises and its surroundings visually, and
interviewed the-then priest, temple caretakers and devotees. The temple then
stood next to the existing KTM tracks and living quarters of Malayan railway
workers. This structure was intriguingly close to a site where a small Muṉīyanti
temple built in 1932, and to which the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth
in Singapore traces its history. This unregistered temple occupied a plot of
merely 30 sq m under a flyover at the intersection of Queensway and Portsdown
Avenue. The temple, which had been active since 2009, had been sustained by
a community of about a hundred regular devotees. It seems to have been named
deliberately with the prefix *thaandavalam* (Tamil, 'rails'), signalling a clear link
between the temple, its deity Muṉīsvaraṉ and the railways.

Although the temple custodians were aware that the temple occupied the
site illegally, they formalized themselves through a management committee and
engaged a part-time priest to perform regular prayers at the temple, sourcing
logistical support – such as water and electricity – on their own. The temple
caretakers shared that the temple was at least sixty years old and was built by
railway workers housed in the nearby quarters. Over the years, I have learnt
that the story of the temple's origins is marked by ambiguity and controversy.
There seemed to be some clarity when I was able to determine the source of the
black-and-white image on the book's cover in February 2022. I learnt that the
1932 Muṉīyanti temple in or around the same location was built by a gentleman,
Dharmalingam[12] – a *mandore* with KTM – who lived with a large family in the
nearby quarters. Yet, in a different version of the temple's history, another gen-
tleman, Adaikalam Annathurai,[13] the temple's treasurer in 2016, shared in sev-
eral statements he made to the local press that he had been associated with this
temple since his teenage years. He added that when the temple became bigger
and moved in the 1970s to a location nearby, the original structure was aban-
doned. Following this he said, with his friends, he 'stepped in' to care for it. The
assertion of this direct link to the 1932 Muṉīyanti temple has been challenged

by the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth, which also claims a historical kinship with the old 1932 temple. To put it mildly, the three temples appear to share a complex relationship. Based on my 2022 interview with Sureshan, the son of Dharmalingam, the temple's founder, it would seem that the 1932 Muṉīyanti temple, is claimed as a predecessor by two Muṉīsvaraṉ temples built subsequently on the same site.

Even after the removal of the railway tracks from the island of Singapore, due to the historic 'land swap deal' between the Singaporean and Malaysian governments, this temple remained on the site it had claimed until 2017. After 1 July 2011, the land on which the temple sat was marked as state land[14] under the specific charge of the SLA, whose representatives had been negotiating with the temple community to move the temple. The temple's story came into the limelight *after* the tracks were removed. Numerous articles appeared in the press since 2011 when the temple was first given notice to relocate. The temple's refusal to move, its appeal to Members of Parliament and their intention to approach higher authorities, its Facebook appeal and campaign to 'save the railway shrine', and its ongoing tussle with the authorities all increased public interest in the temple.

For more than five years, the temple had been issued multiple notices and deadlines, and was eventually served with an 'encroachment advisory'. The temple authorities were asked 'to vacate the state land immediately' or face legal action and, ultimately, eviction. The temple community then stated a desire to either stay in the same location or be moved to a nearby site, given the historical connectedness of the temple with the railways. On the other hand, the SLA argued that the temple occupied state land illegally and inhabited 'land that is not zoned for religious use, but is part of the Rail Corridor, which will be redeveloped in the future' (Mokhtar 2016). It also cited 'public health and safety reasons' (ibid.) for moving the temple, given that a generator-supported gas cylinder was being used for cooking and lighting at the premises. While the SLA acknowledged the 'sensitivity of the issue', it argued that it had granted sufficient time for the temple to be relocated and that the temple's appeal had received due 'consideration' (ibid.). As such, the official position was that no further negotiations were possible on this matter.

In parleying with the temple, the SLA had involved the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB) to seek an amicable solution. However, these attempts were not successful. The HEB spokesperson shared that 'one of the Hindu temples offered to house the shrine's deity, but this was rejected by representatives who cited a difference in the observance of rituals' (ibid.). Interestingly, as part of this offer, the temple in question had suggested that they would even 'retain the deity's name' (Leow 2016) but the caretakers of

Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam were not persuaded. In the end, the latter temple had no choice but to move, finally acknowledging that it had no rights over this plot of state land. But the dogged determination of the temple community saw them hold out for five years, something that surprised the authorities as well as members of the public. The SLA shared publicly that other structures along this stretch of the KTM tracks, such as Chinese temples, had also been 'operating illegally' and 'were asked to move' (ibid.). According to the same report:

> the SLA has never had to issue a legal notice or go to the courts over such cases. In one case in 2011, an unauthorised Taoist shrine on State Land near Tanglin Halt and Commonwealth Drive was relocated to the Taoist Federation, in accordance with rituals. (Ibid.)

There was public admiration for the tenacity shown by the temple community in standing up to the authorities, who were criticized for their non-negotiable stance. At the same time, the ultimate demolition and removal of the temple were also predictable, given the fate of religious and secular structures in the history of urban renewal projects in Singapore.

While the discussion in this chapter has revealed moments of refusal and resistance as well as room for some negotiation and compromise with the authorities, there were obvious limits to all of these. Barring further delays, the entire KTM network on the West Coast Line and its various branch lines will have been double-tracked and electrified by mid-2023 altering the railway geography of the region completely. In the process, railway and state lands would have been cleared of remaining squatters, communities and material structures such as housing, places of worship and commercial sites. In this sense, postcolonial and technological modernity, augmented by state power and the force of a development narrative, would have only *seemingly* won the day, a discussion I elaborate in the concluding chapter.

Moving the discussion forward, I close this chapter with the notice that my research on 'railwaymen temples' and conversations with interlocutors surfaced topics that I had not anticipated at the start of my inquiries. These themes were related explicitly to the socioeconomic impoverishment of the minority Malaysian Indian community – many of whose ancestors were immigrant colonial labour who had *literally* built the country - and concerns about their economic future in a political context dominated by communal politics. Surprisingly, the emergent complex, thoughtful and impassioned discussions about race, religion and nationalist politics in the country were prompted as my interlocutors raised questions about the value of the research I was doing, beyond any academic merit.

'Is the Government Going to Do Anything for Us?'

Even though my research interlocutors were generous and helpful, and patiently answered my queries about temples on railway sites, almost all of them wanted to know why this research was important and what it would achieve. What was the point of my historical research on Malayan railways? Would the book based on my field research change material conditions for the Indian community in Malaysia? Could they expect government authorities to do anything for them? Like other ethnographers, I too encountered these questions consistently during my fieldwork, and I always attempted to give a response. Unsurprisingly, it had been far easier to explain the motivation for the research and its value to academic audiences, publishers, colleagues and students, and at conferences and seminars. I learnt very quickly that I confronted a bigger challenge in facing a tougher crowd with my interlocutors. My responses, such as 'I am trying to talk about railway labour who have been ignored', 'I am writing about ordinary people who built the railways and the temples' or 'It is important to tell these stories so that the future generations do not forget', were arguments that had sounded persuasive, meaningful and fresh within scholarly settings, but sounded hollow, feeble and ineffective, even to me as I articulated them to my interlocutors. In addition, I had not anticipated that my research interest in the history of the railways in Malaya would lead me to deliberations about ethnic and nationalist politics in contemporary Malaysia.

Of the many encounters of this nature, the one at the Vināyakar Temple at Tampin left a deep impression on me. I had arrived at the temple on one of our road journeys on a Sunday afternoon in February 2017. One of the temple custodians, Anand, was extremely generous with his time and showed us around the temple and the surrounding areas. We had walked into a community outreach event the temple had organized on this day. The committee members had invited teenagers and young adults from Indian families living in nearby estates and the larger neighbourhood to a workshop on garland making and flower arrangement. Anand requested that I speak to this group about my ongoing research. With some hesitation I agreed. However, as I shared my findings about the history of temples and railways, I struggled to strike the right chord with the audience, which was extremely respectful and heard me graciously. After I had finished, the youthful group was encouraged to share their views or ask me questions. It was clear that most listeners were only politely interested in what they had heard and some inquired about my field trips and what my research had demonstrated. But there were others who asked quite bluntly 'what is the point of talking about history … how is this going to change the lives of poor Tamils in Malaysia?' and 'How will your work help people like us?' Speaking honestly and candidly, I admitted that my research would indeed not change material conditions for

the Malaysian Indian community. I could only reiterate that it was important 'to not forget the contributions of Tamils to building Malaysia', that 'the labourers were the ones who built the first Hindu temples in the country' and that 'ordinary people's work is not remembered and this must be corrected'. My responses continued to be met with a good dose of scepticism and I knew that I had not had a good day in court.

However, I was gratified that a handful of young women, who were teacher trainees, seemed somewhat interested in my latter replies. The women shared that their family members – grandfathers, fathers and uncles – had worked with the railways and in estates, but as one of them (23 year old Kripa who aspired to be an educator) noted, 'we never talk to them about this, their work, what they did … we do not think their words are important'. Another young woman, 24 year old Sundari who wanted to be a social worker, said 'maybe I will talk to my father who worked in KTM and find out some more'. At the time, if I myself had known about my family's railway past, I could have shared this as a partial inspiration for embarking on this research. I could have offered the justification that this was about *my family history too.* I suspect that this personal connection would have created more of an interest and intrigue in my project, or even justified it.

Nonetheless, through this encounter, I was struck by the impassioned poignancy of discussions about the economically disadvantaged clusters of Malaysia's minority Indian community, to which many in this temple crowd belonged, and their strong sense that something needed to be done to change this – and urgently. This reminded me of conversations with scores of Indians who were former railway personnel, all of whom recalled that Indians had been unfairly evacuated from KTM from the 1970s, and that pioneering Indian railway men and women had been sidelined and ultimately retired from the services. Others used more graphic language as they stated openly that Indians had been 'kicked out' of KTM with the gradual replacement of the railway workforce by ethnic Malays. Former railway staff also observed the irony that after having built and sustained the railways for more than a century, Indians were presently non-existent in KTM. Given this scenario, it is perhaps unsurprising that the former railway workers who had built railwaymen temples and were still active in the temple scene were the most supportive of my research and could relate to its objectives. Many in this cluster felt aggrieved, like Prakash from the Gemas temple, who stated: 'We Indians built KTM and now we are out.' Many of my interlocutors expressed that the '*Malaya*-nization', '*Malay*-nization' and modernization of the railways in Malaysia were interrelated and had led to the *de-Indianization* of the railway services. The 'ejection' of Indians from the KTM was cited by my interlocutors as evidence of their marginalization, and the hopelessness they conveyed was moving.

Since independence, the minority Indian community in Malaysia, embedded within an Islamic state, has had to deal with a distinct set of economic and socio-political factors. Against this backdrop, in general, the 'large' number of Hindu temples across the present Malaysian landscape has been observed by residents and visitors alike. Additionally, this phenomenon registers surprise that this is even possible in a *Muslim* country. Despite the generic subjection of non-Islamic groups to a state-based Islamic bureaucracy, Malaysian Hindus feel particularly anguished, the situation being compounded by the continuing socioeconomic and political marginalization (Baxstrom 2008; Gomez and Alagappar 2018; Shekhar 2008; Stenson 1980; Willford 2002) of the larger Indian community. While the demolition of places of worship for urban renewal initiatives is neither unique nor novel for Singapore and Malaysia, Hindu temple demolitions across the Malaysian landscape, especially since 2006, have been visible and reported publicly. Members of the Malaysian Indian community have been galvanized and asserted that these demolitions infringe on their rights as full citizens of a multi-religious society. Temple demolitions have been viewed as targeted and intolerant attacks on Hindu religious institutions by the custodians of an Islamic state.

In response, in 2007, Hindraf organized demonstrations and protests (Bunnell et al. 2010; Sundara Raja et al. 2013) with support from NGOs, opposition politicians and non-Indian Malaysians. In the wake of the outcome of the March 2008 general elections in Malaysia, with a poor showing of the ruling party and clearly reduced electoral support from the Indian community, the playing field for non-Muslims had shifted in critical ways. There seemed to be enhanced sensitivity towards non-Muslim religions, even as there were simultaneous signs of reactionary Muslim responses that sought to assert Islamic supremacy in the country. Yet, admittedly, Malaysian Hindus were emboldened and empowered in a post-Hindraf moment. Interestingly, assertions of Hindu religious rights were divided into demands for social, cultural and economic rights for the beleaguered Malaysian Indian community. Nevertheless, even in 2017, my interlocutors felt that they continued to remain second-class citizens in Malaysia and that the country 'now belonged to the Malays'. Many observed that Malaysian Indians continued to struggle economically and that they had not benefited from Malaysia's new economic policies and the community remained marginalized (Anbalakan 2003; Chakraborti 1996).

Against this backdrop of impecunious material realities of clusters of the Malaysian Indian community, using railways as a lens triggered unanticipated narratives about the political dynamics of the socioeconomic and political worlds inhabited by my interlocutors. However, at present there seems to be traction in Malaysia for highlighting histories of ethnic minorities and marginalized communities, although far greater academic and scholarly intervention is required (Pillai 2021). It is indeed heartening that in the last decade, there has been

enhanced public interest in, and, acknowledgement of the invisibility faced by South Indian labour and their critical role in building Malaya's transport infrastructure. For example, blogs, websites and online articles have highlighted the role of the Malaysian Sikh community in building the Thai–Burma railways.[15] There has also been the public articulation of the fact that the key contributions of South Indian labourers remain unacknowledged and unappreciated in official narratives.[16]

The discussions in the preceding chapters have already attested to the phenomenon of devotees and temples *returning* to enchanted sites in older railway premises where the railwaymen temples used to be, reinforcing their attachment to these sites and their materialities. As we move towards the end of this book, the narrative comes full circle. My research has highlighted that pockets of sacrality and religious community life tenaciously insert themselves even in transformed, modernized railway landscapes. Apart from the various outcomes of the interface between religious and railway infrastructures discussed in this chapter, another consequence of this encounter is manifested in the building of *new* temples in the modernized railway premises, thus sacralizing them. Devotees denote both old and new railway sites as having spiritual energies: the former are already seen as animated, reflecting divine efficacies accumulated over time, while the latter are approached as locales embodying sacred potentialities, particularly given their continued connection with the railways. Invoking the notion of sedimented, intertwined histories, the conclusion reiterates that in the present, sacred spaces in railway precincts reflect the accretion of past experiences, while carrying the seeds for producing religious futures.

Notes

1. See https://www.mot.gov.my/en/land/reports/quarterly-statistics-of-rail-transport#InplviewHash09148bae-2259-4d3b-9444-f2755b07fb01=Paged%3DTRUE-p_SortBehavior%3D1-p_FileLeafRef%3D2018%25204%2520%252d%2520SUKU%2520IV%25202018-p_ID%3D331-PageFirstRow%3D16 (retrieved 27 January 2023).
2. The actual remaining length of the railways varies according to the accounting systems used. Briginshaw (2001: 13) estimates the total length to be 1,672 km.
3. Anonymous 2007.
4. It is notable that the CRCC built its first rolling stock plant under the Zhuzhou Electric Locomotive company in Batu Gajah, Malaysia – the first outside China. This facility will 'assemble trains for Kuala Lumpur's Ampang Line and 160 km/h class 93 inter-city EMUs for Malayan Railway Corporation (KTMB), with capacity to assemble up to 100 vehicles per year' (Anonymous 2015a).
5. According to Datu Seri Wee Ka Siong, President of the Malaysian Chinese Association, 85% of the Gemas-Johor Baru Electrified Double Track project has been completed and the project is expected to be completed by mid-2023. Retrieved 27 February 2023 from https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/11/16/

gemas-jb-ets-almost-ready-to-run#:~:text=KLUANG%3A%20The%20 Gemas%2DJohor%20Baru,%2C%20Perlis%2C%20to%20Johor%20Baru.

6. It is striking that in the 1970s, the governments of Malaysia and Singapore had discussed the possibility of closing the Tanjong Pagar Station and stopping the north–south line at Johor Bahru.

7. Railway heritage tours were numerous and popular in the aftermath of the track removal project, allowing Singaporeans to relive railway memories. These tours involved the expertise of railway hobbyists and academics alike, such as the architectural historian Chee-Kien Lai. Based on tours and his research, Koh Heng Tong produced the illustrated book *Last Train from Tanjong Pagar* (2014), which was described by its publishers as follows: 'Seamlessly blending fact and fiction, Koh Hong Teng has produced a timely and thought-provoking graphic homage to our trains and not only the physical journeys but also the human connections they have made possible.'

8. In another example from Kuala Lumpur, the structure of the Sri Maha Muniswarar Temple has been retained close to the newly built railway station at Sungei Buloh. This registered 'railwayman temple' is historically associated with the nearby railway quarters.

9. According to an article in *The Straits Times* on 4 October 1987, a statement from the Prime Minister's office in Singapore reveals the following data: over a period of thirteen years, starting in 1974, '23 mosques, 76 suraus (prayer houses), 700 Chinese temples, 27 Hindu temples and 19 churches had to make way for public development'. For Singapore, the acquisition of land has led to a noticeable increase in the percentage of land owned by the state. Starting with 31% state land ownership in 1949, by 1985 the percentage of land owned by the state had climbed to 76.2% (Phang and Kim 2013: 127).

10. The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) is a coalition of NGOs that was founded in 2009 to support Hindu rights and promote the interests of the minority Indian community in Malaysia. Hindraf took up the cause of Hindu temple demolitions across the country, which had escalated in 2006 onwards.

11. *Malaysiakini* (Malay, 'Malaysia Now') is a multilanguage online news portal, which publishes news in Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and English. It is tremendously popular and has been billed as the top choice of digital media platform among the public.

12. Not a pseudonym.

13. Not a pseudonym.

14. Through these public discussions, all parties continued to express the view that prior to July 2011, the temple was located on land belonging to Malaysia, but now it was under Singaporean jurisdiction. Indeed, this has been a widespread view held by the Singapore and Malaysian public as well as the authorities.

15. See https://www.sikhnet.com/news/forgotten-sikhs-siam-burma-death-railway%C2%A0 (retrieved 25 April 2022).

16. See https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/602669 (retrieved 25 April 2022).

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CONCLUSION

Sedimented, Intertwined Histories

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This book has argued that a history of railway construction in colonial Malaya is a powerful lens for analysing the interlocking accounts of Indian labour migrations, and the sacralization of these landscapes by labouring communities, who also constructed the region's modern rail transportation infrastructure. Moving between these intersecting narratives, I have charted railway-building and religion-making efforts of labourers and the consequences these carried, through colonial and postcolonial moments in Malaysia and Singapore. Turning to and mapping my research on diaspora Hinduism in these regions over two decades, I have inserted myself consciously into the book's narrative, sharing details of my ethnographic work across these spaces and moving analytically between temporalities.

The book bridges the literature on railway construction and infrastructure development in colonial Asia and on religion and migration, bringing these into productive conceptual conversations. Locating this work at the intersection of infrastructure studies and railway studies has allowed me to present an anthrohistorical account of railways and religion in these two countries, while also addressing gaps in these bodies of scholarship. Narratives of railway construction, maintenance and operations seldom give the same priority to railway labourers as compared to railway engineers and sponsors, nor is the work they performed given due visibility and value. In response, this book has taken a different path by prioritizing railway labourers – their everyday experiences, perspectives and voices. Fundamentally, I argue that in Malaya, the interface of the railways (symbols of industrial colonial capitalism and technological modernity) with sacred structures (symbols of piety and religiosity) was mediated by labourers and their *labouring* and *nonlabouring* practices. This incongruous and unexpected convergence has been a key driver for this book, allowing me to push methodological and analytical boundaries.

Attempts have long been made to see points of convergence between history and anthropology, particularly in relation to the question of the methodologies used. As a result, fields of study denoted as anthrohistory and ethnohistory emerged in the 1960s. These approaches foresaw value in the interface of the ethnographer's method of immersive fieldwork and the historian's concern with temporalities, providing valuable perspectives for theorizing the ongoing dialectic of past and present. In this project, an eclectic approach to research methodologies has been valuable for analysing material and symbolic features of economic, cultural and religious domains. Methodologically, I turned to a historical approach along with ethnographic research to map the intertwined processes of railway building, religion making and labour migration in the specified regions. However, in a refreshed take on an old problematic, these disciplinary border crossings provided a critical lens for reviewing current disciplinary research practices in anthropology as well.

Thus, my ethnography has led me to reconceptualize field sites, fieldwork and data/knowledge, and thus curate novel epistemologies, concepts and methodologies – efforts which have been driven by my engagement with the economic and cultural-religious worlds I sought to understand. A belated realization of my own family's historical association with the colonial railways in India – through my maternal grandfather's professional life as a permanent way inspector – enmeshed my biography with the current research in unexpected ways. This has enabled me to claim in the end, albeit tangentially and unknowingly, that I was tracing my own untold family history as much as narrating the lives of my interlocutors, although the former inevitably remains an incomplete project. However, this awareness served as a key reminder of the value of biographies and life stories as knowledge-making and sense-making tools. This stance not only reiterates my commitment to decolonizing research methodologies but also determined my relationship with interlocutors and led me to elicit personal stories as well as tales of 'railwaymen temples' in this book.

Indian Hindu migrant workers who built Malaya's railways in the first half of the twentieth century erected temples along tracks and other railway premises where many of them lived in labour lines and railway quarters. Strikingly, in a colonial context, railways and temples were produced almost in tandem. Furthermore, railway labourers were able to sacralize the very landscapes that manifested symbols of technological modernity under the auspices of a colonial regime. The *religion-making* efforts of colonial labour clearly shaped sacred futures in these regions too, given that my 2017–2019 research journeys revealed ninety-four functioning 'railwaymen temples', where village deities from Tamil Nadu and a ritual complex for venerating these thrive. Thus, labourers appear here not only as railway workers but also as *producers* of religious landscapes, who have infused these domains with new meanings and modalities. However,

with respect to labour-building religious infrastructures, I do not approach these interventions as *weapons of the weak* or as acts of *resistance* per se. Rather, I conceive of labourers as active, historical participants in *making* and *reproducing* everyday Hindu religiosity, *as* they built and sustained the railways.

In this book, railway and religious infrastructures – produced historically and in the present – have also constituted my research sites. Indeed, railway premises across Malaysia and Singapore, including the length of the railway tracks in these regions and the religious edifices embedded therein, carry traces of religiosity and modernity. The tracks and spaces associated with the railways, as well as the practices and processes that occurred therein, assumed centrality in my work, shifting and expanding my conception of the 'field' and 'field site(s)'. This research demanded that I work with radically different notions of the latter, given that approaching these as discrete, spatially and temporally bounded entities, would have been limiting and problematic. The emergent data in this project further required me to rethink the ethnographic process itself, and also momentarily suspend its normative understanding as long-term field research. The exigencies and particularities of fieldwork for this book instead required me to generate data while on the move. Many encounters and exchanges with interlocutors on my rail and road journeys were indeed *fleeting* and would not satisfy the rigorous conditions of long-term and sustained fieldwork. I am aware that in some anthropological quarters, these short-term conversations and encounters would be considered superficial, fragmentary exchanges, incapable of generating meaningful knowledge. Thus, I was led to contemplate the epistemological status of seemingly isolated and brief snippets of conversations which were accessed in passing moments, and which could not be clarified, elaborated and confirmed, something that is possible in planned, scheduled and repeat interviews. However, at the end of my research journeys, the knowledge produced through these conversations has allowed me to demonstrate that in sum, these *episodic* and momentary fieldwork encounters were indeed consequential and generated important materials as well as insights. It is worth emphasizing too that I have not proposed *ethnography on the mo*ve as a fashionable, innovative substitute for immersive fieldwork. Rather, I argue that in the context of this research, I found this strategy to be appropriate for generating and processing emergent data.

Despite recognizing the value of *ethnography on the move* and practising it myself, I acknowledge and remain committed to the strengths of deep ethnography, which I approach as a research methodology that provides 'thick description' (Geertz 1973), via in-depth interviews and prolonged research through sustained human interactions. Long-term ethnographic research in Singapore and Malaysia has indeed enabled me to draw on the rich everyday lives of railway labourers and the nuanced stories of railwaymen and the temples they built, in order to make sense of connections between humanly constructed and nonhuman worlds.

Road and rail trips I undertook along the west and east coasts of Malaysia and Singapore structured the book's narratives, imbuing it with a sense of immediacy and discovery. This research demonstrates that the temples in railway premises were produced and sustained in a context of colonial capitalism, which was itself driven fundamentally by geopolitical and economic considerations. This is a perfect instance of modernity and sacrality not just coexisting but also showing an apparent convergence of interests, transcending the often-assumed distinction of the sacred/religious and secular/profane binary and antipathy across these. In fact, my ethnography reveals that modernity and technology, it would seem, have a fluidity and 'softness' (Bauman 2000) that sometimes lead to unexpected alliances with religiocultural and political agendas.

These ethnographic materials and insights have also enabled me to reconceptualize *infrastructures* as *social* sites, which embody and express meanings. Thus, it is not surprising that railways as a manifestation of modernist, technological infrastructure, purportedly secular and profane, can embody and connote cultural, religious and political registers. Further, even the course of tunnels, tracks, rivers and bridges themselves can be altered in response to the exigencies of the sociocultural and religious worlds they encounter. In negotiating and resisting development projects, railway and religious infrastructures also become the sites where individual agency and capacities have been – and can be – asserted. Further, as this study has revealed, these sites have generated powerful narratives about communal and interethnic politics in Malaysia. My ethnographic work has enabled me to conceive of religious and railway infrastructures as active and responsive to the sociocultural and political worlds of which they are constitutive, and my research has approached these as social spaces that bring together human, nonhuman and humanly constructed worlds.

Inspired by the rich scholarship on the subject, my research has led me to further reconceptualize the notion of infrastructure itself. For instance, the idea of infrastructures as enchanted is an exciting emergent strain in the literature. Based on their pioneering work in Peru, Harvey and Knox have conceived of roads as 'enchanted sites of contemporary state-craft' (2012: 521); elsewhere they approach 'road infrastructure as spaces of social and cultural interaction, where state power is actualized' (Harvey and Knox 2015: 167). Lambertz (2020) too views waterways in Congo as enchanted, while Holloway (2006) speaks of 'enchanted spaces' from a 'geographies of religion' perspective. However, I was first enthused by the idea of enchanted infrastructures when I heard my interlocutors talk about the permanent ways as energized spaces. The latter conceive of railway sites, dotted with the temples that their ancestors had built, as sacred. Furthermore, their approach *even* to the materiality of railway premises as well as railway hardware itself (tracks and trains) as *enlivened* due to the presence of spiritual powers, demonstrates the entanglements of material and symbolic

features of infrastructures. In another stimulating observation, Swanson rightly notes that the railways have the 'ability to add to more-than-human scholarship' and that while 'railroads are material projects … they are also more-than-human, or multispecies, ones' (2020: 274). I agree with Swanson but as she also astutely observes, 'railroads clearly rank among the core structures of world-making that are as pernicious as they are productive' (ibid.: 277). Thus, a deeper scrutiny of the railways in Singapore and Malaysia has allowed me to draw attention to the more debilitating effects of railway modernization projects on sociocultural and religious lives. However, it is important to highlight that for me, creative conceptual foci emerged forcefully in reading the railways *beyond* elements that loom large and are evident in first encountering them: their modernity, technology and materiality.

A historical perspective has revealed that while a colonial modernity was not necessarily hostile to religion, a postcolonial, neoliberal, developmentalist mentality is far less tolerant of cultural and religious worldviews, and is overtly resistant to sharing the spaces with the latter. This research has emphasized the dramatic reconfigurations of sacred landscapes in Singapore and Malaysia through encounters with urban development programmes, not to mention the modernization of the railways. Religious sites have had to step aside for roads, railways, highways, housing, commercial and industrial sites. *Making way* has meant that places of worship have been demolished or moved, while many have ceased to exist. As this book has documented, older temples on railway premises have been demolished, transforming cultural and religious landscapes and deeply impacting everyday religiosity. Even the tracks, trains and bricks-and-mortar assets of the railways, despite their solid materiality, have fallen prey to waves of modernization and development schemes. The permanent ways and rolling stocks have been replaced with newer models, and modern stations and staff living quarters have been built. Yet, through railway infrastructural transformations and a changing Malaysian and Singaporean political economy, the complex and layered processes of religion making in locales associated with the railways have also been paradoxically *refreshed*. Thus while the old KTM tracks have fallen into disuse – disassembled and ultimately retired – many of the temples built along these tracks have *persisted* – renewed and energized. The vulnerability of temples, but also their relative longevity – some of which have outlasted even the hardware of railway infrastructure, which has been replaced by sophisticated technology – was palpable and striking through my research. Ironically, sacred landscapes reflect resilience and seem to have a comparatively longer shelf life vis-à-vis modernist railway infrastructures, despite the oft-presumed superior, lasting power of the latter. In contrast, the former – despite changing economic and political configurations and dramatically altered patterns of land use – have flourished, surviving sturdy, industrial railway infrastructures.

I have reconfigured Amitav Ghosh's question about traces and footprints as follows: how does one remember 'those people who did not have the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time' and how does one access 'those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world' (1992: 16–17)? With the turn to mechanized methods of track maintenance in modernized railways in Malaysian, Indian gangline workers were made redundant, with the remaining workers no longer needing to be housed near the tracks. Spaces alongside new railway tracks thus presently stand bare, marked by a series of absences: no temples, no living quarters and no track maintenance labourers. History has pointed to signs of labourers as religion makers and railway builders in colonial Malaya. This book has illustrated the unique value of using *tracing* as a methodological and conceptual device for making evident the noted labouring and nonlabouring capacities of railway labourers. As is well known, identifying the footprints of economic, sociocultural, religious and political practices – particularly in their abstract manifestations – poses fundamental epistemological challenges for social sciences. This is so because, even in adopting interpretive and constructivist frames, the latter remain staunchly empirical. My turn to *tracing* has enabled me to map both the visible and indiscernible features of railway and religious landscapes. My research efforts have shown that not only do their *traces* persist materially, but that their memories are also embedded in individual and collective recollections. Notably, in eliciting *temple stories* and *temple maps* from interlocutors, I have presented what might be deemed *intangible* footprints/markings of labour-making railways and religion.

In this study, the notions of absences/presences and visibility/invisibility have offered much food for thought, both epistemologically and conceptually. As I learnt from my interlocutors, the legacy of the railways and their tracks as enchanted and efficacious persists with an unshakeable tenacity. In some cases, this was evident in the founding of new temples by descendants of Malayan Indian labourers (with and without railway connections), along refurbished railway tracks and railway premises, which were enlivened with sacred sensibilities. Thus, even new railway premises and the spaces alongside modernized tracks – *outside* the newly built electric fences – have been sought out and reoccupied for religious use. In other cases, devotees returned to the former 'railwaymen temple' sites, simply because these were believed to still be efficacious and infused with divine energies, even in the absence of physical traces of sacred structures. Thus, I found multiple instances where devotees have *returned* to these transfigured sites *as if* they were still animated with spirituality and retained their efficacy. In revisiting these spaces, religious actors have constructed powerful sacred imaginaries, even when observationally *there is nothing to be discerned physically.* For devotees, sacrality and efficacy are engraved into these temple sites and their very materiality, simply by virtue of their their historical sacred geographies. It

would seem that the absence of material and architectural markers of religiosity is irrelevant in such a vision.

For me, these observations have provoked contemplations about the materiality of sacred sites, and their spiritual efficacies, across timeframes. Specific slices of ethnography have led me to recognize the *sedimented* and *intertwined histories* of sites where the original 'railwaymen temples' were built. For my interlocutors, these locations are seen as densely packed with accumulated and interconnected historical experiences, sociocultural and religious meanings and memories. My work has documented, unpacked and analysed these through ethnographic and historical methodologies. I had initially conceived of *temple stories* and *temple maps* primarily as lenses for learning about the past of Hindu temple landscapes in Malaya. However, at the end of my ethnographic journeys, I appreciated that these narratives in fact *bridged temporalities* – in bringing together discourses about the past, present and future – a recognition that speaks to my conceptualization of *traces* in all their spatial and temporal richness and fullness as signs, *not* remnants and leftovers.

As I walked through old, abandoned Malaysian railway stations at Labis, Mengkibol and Layang Layang, I glimpsed the past in the rubble and debris of demolished 'railwaymen temples', the foundations of which had been laid more than a century ago. At the same time, through my ethnographic work, I saw a different kind of history making at work: the *fashioning of new religious geographies and histories* around railway lands that had been first sacralized by railway labour in the colonial context. I was also aware that my own documentation of railway and religious infrastructures would soon become *historical* knowledge, given the inevitable transformations in the railway landscapes of Malaysia and Singapore. Indeed, I have learnt through my networks that many of the railwaymen temples I had documented along the West Coast Line from Johore Bahru to Gemas have been demolished since I finished my fieldwork in April 2019.

Retelling railway histories in this book has meant centring railway labourers as well as prioritizing the documentation of how they lived and worked. However, the more significant aim has been to think through how labour communities, their lives and contributions are to be conceptualized and memorialized. The acknowledgement of the nonlabouring (religion-making) lives of labour in this project disturbs and unsettles conventional portrayals of labour that predominantly emphasize their labouring capacities. In addition, while the method of *tracing* has revealed enduring imprints of both sacrality and modernity in the present, its invocation also connotes an ethical and political stance in documenting and rendering visible the marginal and marginalized everyday lives of railway labourers. Thus, narrating railway histories in alternative modes has also meant acknowledging the humanity of labour that was denied in a colonial context of unequal power relations, a sentiment that unfortunately persists in postcolonial

contexts too. As Srinivasan et al. write of their project: 'So, we embarked upon this journey of tracing the *human roots* of the railways in India, embedded in the socio-cultural polity of India' (2006: x, emphasis added). Ultimately, for me too, the desire to reveal the underlying, hidden but vital humanity of railway labourers speaks forcefully and with urgency in this book.

Given the ethical and political tenor of the methodological and analytical choices I have made in this study, it is only fitting that the book closes with the voices of my interlocutors. Many shared that sustaining old railwaymen temples and building *new* temples near KTM lands continued to be important to them, so that, in the words of Prakash from the Gemas Muneeswaran Temple, 'our children do not forget what our fathers, grandfathers did for railways, this country … to remember the Indian connection with railways' and that, as Anand from the Tampin Vināyakar Temple stated, 'Tamils don't disappear' from the history of Malaysia. Individuals like these, most of whom hail from working, lower middle- and middle-class backgrounds, have taken enthusiastic ownership of this memory-making project and cherish (even as they sometimes romanticize) the *Railways–Indians* connection in Malaysia.

However, memory-making processes are mediated by politics, as remembrances of the *same* historical episodes are registered and weighted differently, and the efforts of marginalized constituencies are predictably given less importance in official, institutional accounts. Yet the desire to pass these legacies on to future generations is powerful and moving, precisely because of the multiple erasures, silences and invisibilities of the Indian community's contributions in historical records, mainstream scholarship and nationalist discourses. These efforts are rendered more poignant given the impoverished state of a significant segment of the Malaysian Indian community even today. This book has contributed in small measure to the larger redress required: to envision spaces where the historical contributions of labourers in building Malaysia and Singapore can be made visible so as to privilege their perspectives, to recognize that their efforts shaped the future economic, sociocultural religious landscapes of these regions, and, above all, to hear their voices and dignify their lives.

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APPENDICES

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Appendix I

'General rules for working open lines of railway in British India administered by the Government', *PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT, NOTIFICATIONS*. No. 174, Dated Simla, 7 May 1892, https://www.mlis.gov.mm/mLsView.do;jsessionid=CFC34BC421DAD00097222A8EACA8B018?lawordSn=8648 (retrieved 25 January 2023).

SECTION IX.

Maintenance of permanent –way.

Road to be inspected daily.

112. Every portion of the permanent way must be inspected daily on foot by some authorized person responsible for its condition; and bridges and all other works (including signals and signal wires) must be regularly inspected in accordance with special instructions.

Defects in wires, &c.

113. (1) Each ganger must report to the Inspector of Permanent way when any telegraph post on his length of line appears to be in an unsafe state, or any of the signal or telegraph wires are broken, slack, entangled, or touching each other or any building. He must also see that all grass, creepers, boughs of trees, and rubbish are removed from the wires.

(2) Where the maintenance of the telegraph posts and wires is under the control of the Government Telegraph Department, the removal of grass, creepers, boughs of trees, and rubbish will be carried out by the Government Telegraph

officers, and all reports of defects in posts or wires should be made to the officers of that Department by the Inspector of Permanent way.

Lifting permanent way.

114. In lifting the permanent way, no lift shall be greater than 3 inches at once, and then it must be effected in such a manner as not to occasion any sudden change of gradient. Both rails must be raised equally and at the same time, and, if possible, the ascent must be made in the direction in which the trains run.

Ballast thrown up.

115. Ballast must not be thrown up between the rails to a higher level than 3 inches on the standard gauge, or higher than rail level on the metre or other narrow gauge, and it must be thrown as much as possible on the outside of each line, or between the two roads. The rails must be kept clear of gravel, ballast, and other material.

Blasting.

116. No blasting shall be allowed on or near to the railway without the authority of the authorized officer.

Gates to be closed.

117. Gangers must close and fasten all gates they find open, and report the circumstances.

Duties of ganger in case of floods.

118. Each ganger must, in the event of a flood, carefully examine the action of the water through the culverts and bridges on his length of line; and should he see any cause to apprehend danger to the works, he must immediately exhibit the proper signals for the trains to proceed cautiously or to stop, as necessity may require, and inform the Inspector of Permanentway thereof; and, until the Inspector arrives, he must take precautionary measures for securing the safety and stability of the line.

Fire.

119. In the event of a fire occurring upon or near the line, the men employed on the line must take immediate measures for putting it out.

Cleaning of signals.

120. Gangers must keep clean the working parts of signals, unless the duty is otherwise specially provided for.

Line to be kept clear.

121. Each ganger must keep his portion of the line clear and safe, and the fences in repair; and if any sheep, cattle, or other animals be on the line or within the fences, he must immediately remove them, and report the circumstance to the Inspector of Permanentway.

Defective materials.

122. (1) Gangers must see that all broken chairs, rails or sleepers, or other defective materials, are removed from the road with the least possible delay, and sound materials substituted.

Materials to be kept clear of rails.

(2) All tools, rails, sleepers, pieces of iron or wood, and other implements or materials must be carefully placed so as to be quite clear of the line, and at least 3 feet away from the rails.

Custody of mate-rails.

123. Each Inspector of Permanentway will be held responsible for the security of all rails, chairs, sleepers, and other permanentway materials in his district. They must be kept clear of both lines and properly stacked.

Platelayers and labourers when train is approaching.

124. When a train is approaching, platelayers and labourers must stop work and stand clear of all the lines.

Materials found on the line.

125. Each ganger will be responsible for collecting any coupling chains, hooks, pins, iron, or other materials which may be found on the line, and for having them conveyed to the nearest station.

Permission to be obtained before commencing work on line.

126. No person may put in any points and crossings without the written authority of the authorized officer, or begin or perform any operation which will involve danger to trains or traffic without the previous permission of the Inspector of Permanent way, or some other authorized competent person, who must himself be present to superintend such operation, and who shall be responsible that all

necessary signals are shown and other precautions taken as prescribed in Rule 127 or Rule 128, as the case may be, before the commencement of work, and that such signals and precautions are continued until the line is again clear for trains or traffic. But in cases of emergency, when it may be necessary for safety to replace or turn any rail or otherwise obstruct traffic before the inspector of permanent way can arrive, the ganger or other person in charge of the gang must take all necessary steps to protect trains and traffic as prescribed in Rule 127 or Rule 128, as the case may be.

Work in station limits.

127. (1) Whenever it is necessary within station limits to change or turn a rail, or in any manner to obstruct the line, or to do any work of a character to make the exhibition of a signal necessary, the permission of the station-master must be first obtained by the ganger, and the work must not be commenced until all necessary signals have been placed at "danger;" and the signals must remain in that position until the station-master is informed by the same ganger that the line is again clear and safe for traffic.

(2) The ganger must in addition protect the operations by hand signals.

Works outside station limits.

128. Whenever outside station limits a rail has to be taken out, or the line is from any cause not safe, a "danger" signal must be exhibited, and two detonators placed on the line, ten yards apart, at a distance of at least three quarters of a mile on a gradient of 1 in 250 or steeper, falling in the direction of the obstruction, or half a mile on a flatter or rising gradient or on the level, in rear of the place of obstruction on a double line, and in both directions on a single line, and hand signals must also be exhibited at the place where the work is being done.

Signals when repairing line.

129. When repairing, lifting the line, or performing any operation so as to make it necessary for a train to proceed cautiously, the ganger must himself be present at the spot, and must send a man on a double line backwards, and on a single line in both directions, at least a quarter of a mile, and as much further as the circumstances of the case render necessary, to exhibit a "caution" signal so as to be plainly visible to the driver of an approaching train.

He must also exhibit another "caution" signal at the site of the repairs. If the ganger has any doubt whatever as to the line being in a fit state to pass a train at slow speed, he must invariably display "danger" signals as laid down in Rule 128 instead of the "caution" signals herein prescribed.

Rail not to be displaced in a fog or storm.

130. In no case, except when absolutely necessary, is a rail to be displaced or any other work to be performed by which an obstruction may be made to the passage of trains during a fog or storm; and in every case the times for effecting repairs which involve the stopping of trains must be so selected as to interfere as little as possible with the passage of the traffic.

Protection of lorry, truck, or trolly on line.

131. A lorry or truck, loaded or empty, used for conveying materials or a light trolly so loaded that it cannot be readily removed from the line, must on a double line be taken in the same direction as that in which the trains run, and must be followed at a distance of not less than half a mile by a man with "danger" hand signals and detonators. In the case of a single line, where trains run in both directions, such lorry, truck, or trolly must be protected in both directions.

Responsibility for lorries and trollies.

132. No lorry used for the conveyance of material, or trolly used for the conveyance of men, may in any case be placed on the line, except by the authorized person who is responsible for its proper protection and use according to special instructions.

Security of lorries and trollies.

133. (1) No lorry or trolly shall under any circumstances be attached to a train; and all lorries and trollies, when not in use, must be taken off the rails, placed well clear of the line, and the wheels secured with chain and padlock.

Main line to be clear.

(2) No wagon, truck, lorry, or other impediment shall be allowed to be on any part of the main line within ten minutes of a train being due, except on lines worked on the absolute block system, when the time must not be less than five minutes; and, excepting in cases of accident or absolute necessity, all repairs must be effected, and the line made clear and safe for the passage of trains, not less than ten or five minutes, as the case may be, before a train is due or expected.

Lorries, &c., not to run during a fog.

134. No wagon, truck, or lorry shall be run, if it can be avoided, except during daylight, and when the weather is sufficiently clear for a signal to be distinctly seen at a distance of half a mile. Whenever it is necessary to run a truck or lorry at night, or during a fog, it must be protected by the prescribed lights.

Trespassing.

135. No trespassing upon the railway shall be allowed, and no person other than a railway servant shall be permitted to walk on the line unless provided with a license to do so signed by an authorized officer of the railway.

Trespassers.

136. Gangers and others employed on the line must order off the railway all trespassers, and these, if they persist in remaining, may be immediately removed from the railway by, or by the direction of, any railway servant.

Articles found on line.

137. All luggage, goods, or articles found on the line must be taken to the nearest station, and a report made containing the best information that can be obtained respecting the train from which they may have fallen.

Appendix II

CHAPTER VI.

'RULES FOR REGULATING THE CONDUCT OF RAILWAY SERVANTS, AND GENERALLY FOR REGULATING THE TRAVELLING UPON, AND THE USE, WORKING, AND MANAGEMENT OF THE RAILWAY',

https://www.mlis.gov.mm/mLsView.do;jsessionid=CFC34BC421DA-D00097222A8EACA8B018?lawordSn=8648 (retrieved 25 January 2023).

SECTION I.
General.

Obedience to instructions.

292. Each person in railway service must devote himself exclusively to the service of the railway on which he is employed, residing at whatever place may be appointed, attending at such hours as may be required, paying prompt obedience to all persons placed in authority over him, and conforming to all the rules of the railway.

Pay.

293. The pay of every railway servant always includes his services during all hours, whether early or late, as may be determined from time to time by his superior.

Absence from duty.

294. No railway servant may, under any circumstances, absent himself from duty without proper permission.

Supply of copy of rules.

295. (1) A copy of these rules shall be supplied to each railway servant who understands English, and who is in any way connected with the out-door working of the railway, or with the working of trains.

(2) Each native subordinate, who is in any way connected with the out-door working of the railway or with the working of trains, and who is unacquainted with the English language, shall be provided with a translation, in a language which he understands, of these rules, or of all such of them as relate to his duties.

Servants to be acquainted with rules and to keep copies.

296. Every railway servant must make himself acquainted with the rules supplied to him, and must produce his copy of the rules when required. If the copy be lost, defaced, or torn, he must apply to his immediate superior for a new one, which will be supplied at the cost of the servant. Any railway servant who should have a copy and is found without one is liable to punishment.

Station-masters, foremen, &c., responsible that their subordinates are acquainted with rules.

297. Station-masters, foremen, and gangers are responsible that the subordinates working under them are acquainted with all the rules relating to their respective duties.

Obedience to rules.

298. Every railway servant is bound by the terms of his employment to obey these general rules.

All persons must assist in carrying out rules.

299. Every servant is required to assist in carrying out the rules, and must immediately report to his superior any infringement thereof, or any occurrence affecting the safe and proper working of the railway, which may come under his notice.

Uniform.

300. Every railway servant required to wear uniform is to appear in it, clean and neat, when on duty.

Conduct of servants.

301. The conduct of all railway servants must be prompt, civil, and obliging. They must at all times afford every proper facility for the business to be performed, and be careful to give correct information.

Improper language.

302. Swearing and immoral language and violent altercations and threats are strictly prohibited.

SECTION V.

Inspectors, platelayers, gangers, and others employed on the permanentway.

Duties of inspectors.

333. The inspector or person in charge of each district of the line will be held responsible for the condition of the permanentway and works in his district. He must keep an account of all materials used, and must see that none are wasted. He must also report promptly to the Engineer in charge of the district all accidents and all defects in the road or works that may interfere with the safe running of trains.

Gangers.

334. In each gang of platelayers or men repairing the permanentway, there shall be a ganger; and the inspector of Permanentway for the district must take care that every ganger is provided with a copy in the vernacular of such of these rules as relate to his duties; also with proper signals, a permanentway gauge, and all necessary tools, which the inspector of permanentway must inspect at least once a month, and ascertain that the gauges are correct, that the tools and signals are in good order, and that no article has been lost.

Supply of lamps and signals to platelayers.

335. Each gang of platelayers or labourers must be supplied by the inspector of permanentway for the district with two sets of flag signals, two hand signal lamps, and a proper number of detonators. Each ganger will be held responsible for having his signals constantly in proper order and ready for use.

Observation of rules.

336. The inspector must take care that all rules are observed, and report any departure from them to the authorized officer.

Register of names.

337. Each inspector must have a register of the name and place of residence of all the gangers employed in his district, so that in case of accident he may be

enabled to call upon them to summon their men immediately to assist in any way that may be required; and should any obstruction take place, caused by slips or other sudden emergency, each ganger must immediately collect the men required.

Gangers to explain rules.

338. Each ganger is responsible that the subordinates working under him are acquainted with all the rules relating to their respective duties.

Custody of tools.

339. Each ganger is responsible on his own length of line for the security of tools and implements supplied to him.

SECTION VI.

Signalmen and Pointsmen.

Regular attendance when on duty.

340. Signalmen and pointsmen must not during their period of duty leave the signals or points of which they have charge.

Hand signals.

341. Signalmen and pointsmen must have with them, when on duty, hand signal lamps, which must be lighted when necessary and flags.

Care of points.

342. Pointsmen must be careful to keep their points clean and clear, and whenever a train has passed, they must remove anything that may have got within the points, so as to prevent them from closing.

Injured points to be reported.

343. Whenever points, crossings, or guide rails are injured or damaged, the pointsman must immediately report the circumstance to his superior officer, and, if possible, to the nearest inspector of permanent way.

Appendix III

Thomas' Temple Map

Viewing temples while making a train journey in Malaysia always intrigued me as a child and even today. Whenever I took the train as a child (mostly between Kuala Lumpur and Butterworth), I would always insist that I sleep/sit facing a window, since I could view most temples that way. Please note that some of the temples stated above may have been demolished, due to the double-tracking project along the west coast. Significant temples/shrines that I can recall situated along the railway tracks are as follows:

Butterworth–Johor Bahru Line

1) Prai River Temple (located within the KTM Garage in the railway town of Prai, Penang) – I spent four years here as a child, from 1986 to 1990. I could see the temple from my railway quarters home, situated about 100 m away from this temple. There would usually be Kavadis at this temple during the Chithirai Pournami festival. I can still recall hearing the screams and drumming emanating from this temple as a child.

2) Prai Locomotive Shed Temple (also located within the KTM Garage in Prai) – this temple was seldom used, except for sacrificial ceremonies that would take place occasionally. My father informed me that he would sometimes take a nap at this temple, as it was the only place he could make himself comfortable, within the locomotive shed.

3) Small Munisvaran Temple (located at Lorong Kerjasama 1, Bukit Tengah, Penang).

4) Murugan Temple at Jalan Pusing, Batu Gajah Perak (located about 100 m away from the track, and across Jalan Pusing)

5) Temple at Tapah Road Railway Station, Perak (located adjacent to the Station Building, beside the tracks).

6) Ganesha Temple Jalan Stesen, Kuang, Selangor.

7) Temple along the tracks beside Sungai Buloh Station, Selangor.

8) emple along the tracks about 200 m from the Kepong Station, Kuala Lumpur.

KL–Johor Bahru Line

1) Small shrine at Kajang Station, Selangor.

2) Small shrines (about two or three) before hitting Seremban Station, Negeri Sembilan.

3) Mariman Temple, just before Seremban Station, Negeri Sembilan.

4) Temple between Seremban and Senawang Station, Negeri Sembilan, along Jalan Rahang (if I'm not mistaken). I particularly remember this place because I think I witnessed a 'trance' session once while passing by this place by train – the participants were mostly men, dressed in red veshtis.

5) Munisvaran Shrine within the KTM Yard in Gemas, Negeri Sembilan.

6) Temple, just after Labis Station, in Johor.

7) Ganesha Temple, just after Renggam Station, in Johor. It has a rather big statue of Ganesha.

8) Paloh Station Temple, Johor, located within the station premises. However, I happened to read in a blog some time ago that this temple has been demolished, although I cannot verify this.

9) Temple adjacent to Kluang Station, Johor, located right beside the tracks.

10) Munisvaran Temple, beside the track at Jalan Tun Abdul Razak 1/1 Johor Bahru.*

11) Kali temple (glass temple), beside the track at Jalan Tun Abdul Razak 1/1 Johor Bahru.*

* Both temples are located beside each other, if I'm not mistaken.

Sentul Batu Caves Branch Line

1) Kali Temple beside railway tracks, at Jalan Kasipillay, Kuala Lumpur.

2) Munisvaran Temple along the tracks, just after Batu Caves Station (the Batu Caves Murugan temple is also a stone's throw away from the station, although the temple was built prior to the existence of the station).

KL Port Klang Branch Line

1) Mariamman Temple, near Petaling Station, Kuala Lumpur.

2) Murugan temple, along tracks, slightly before Port Klang Station, Selangor

East Coast Line

1) Not that many temples, but I remember one at Kuala Krai, Kelantan, not far from the railway station.

Appendix IV

List of Railwaymen Temples in Malaysia with Muṉīsvaraṉ as the Presiding Deity (Map 4.1)

1) Arulmigu Sri Muniswaran Temple (Railway), Johor Bahru, Johor.

2) Kuil Sri Muniyandi/Muneeswaran, Kampong Central, Paloh, Johor.

3) Ayya Temple, Kluang, Johor.

4) Ayya/Muneeswaran Temple, Gemas, Negeri Sembilan-Johor border.

5) Muneeswaran Temple, Genuang, Johor.

6) Berhala Saiva Muneeswaran Keretapi, Gemas, Johor.

7) Ayya Temple, Kampong India, Kluang, Johor.

8) Kuil Maha Sri Siva Vaal Muniswarar Alayam, Tampin, Negeri Sembilan.

9) Sri Muniyandi Temple Railway, Bukit Tembok, Negeri Sembilan.

10) Muneeswaran Temple, Bukit Tembok, Negeri Sembilan.

11) Kuil Sri Arunachaleswarar, Bukit Tembok, Negeri Sembilan.

12) Loco Shed Muneeswaran Temple, Bukit Tembok, Negeri Sembilan.

13) Kuil Sri Maha Muniswarar Aalayam, Serdang Lama, Selangor.

14) Kuil Sri Muneeswran Alayam/Arulmigu Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Kennison Brothers, Batu Caves, Selangor.

15) Railway Muneeswaran Temple, Shah Alam, Selangor.

16) Kuil Sri Muneeswaran, Kampar, Perak.

17) Muniswarar Temple, Kamunting, Perak.

18) Sri Jada Muniswarar Temple, Taiping, Perak.

19) Muniyandi/Muneeswaran Temple, Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

20) Railway Sri Muneeswarar, Tanjung Rambutan, Perak.

21) Sri Maha Muniswarar Temple, Batu Gajah, Perak.

22) Muneeswaaran Temple, Parit Buntar, Perak.

23) Kuil Sri Raja Jadamuni, Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor.

24) Sri Ratta Muneeswaran Alayam, Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor.

25) Muneeswaran Temple, Serendah, Selangor.

26) Sri Maha Muneeswarar Temple, railway quarters, 12½ miles, Sungei Buloh, Selangor.

27) Dewa Sri Muneeswarar Temple, Arau, Perlis.

28) Sri Muniswarar Temple, Perai, Penang.

29) Kuil Dewa Jada Muniswarar, Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

30) Sri Muneeswarar Temple, Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

31) Muneeswaran Temple with Nagamma Shrine, Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

32) Muneeswaran Temple, Kuala Lipis, Pahang.

33) Muneeswaran Temple, Gua Musang, Kelantan.

34) Railway Thirumurugan Temple, Kuala Kerai, Kelantan.

List of Railwaymen Temples in Malaysia with Am'ma<u>n</u> as the Presiding Deity (Map 4.2)

1) Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Paloh Station, Johor.

2) Kuil Dewa Shree Maha Mariamman, Chamek, Johor.

3) Kui Sree Maha Mayana Kaliamman, Kluang, Johor.

4) Sri Maha Mariamman, Jalan Hospital, Kluang, Johor.

5) Devi Sri Maha Bathra Kaliamman Alayam, Mengkibol, Johor.

6) Sri Mahapathira Kaliamman Temple, Kluang, Johor.

7) Sri Marathdai Nagakanni Temple, Kluang, Johor.

8) Sri Parasakthi Amman Temple, Kluang, Johor.

9) Karu Mariamman Temple, Batu Anam, after the station, Johor.

10) Loco Hill Kaliamman Temple, Gemas, Johor (100+ years old).

11) Maha Mariamman Temple, Labis, Johor.

12) Nagamma Shrine, Labis, Johor.

13) Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Mengkibol, Johor.

14) Durgai Amman Temple, Layang Layang, Johor.

15) Sri Vaitheeswara Thaiyalanayagi Amman Temple, Tampin, Jalan Stesen Keretapi, Negeri Sembilan.

16) Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Seremban, next to the station, Negeri Sembilan.

17) Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Railway, Bukit Tembok, Negeri Sembilan.

18) Sri Meenakshi Sundereeswarn Temple, Sentul, Selangor.

19) Kuil Dewi Sri Veeran Pathra Kaliamman, Batu Caves, Selangor.

20) Sri Bhagwathy Amman Alayam, Batu Caves, Selangor.

21) Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Sungei Buloh, Selangor.

22) Sri Maha Mariamman Pecheyiamman Temple, Serendah, Selangor.

23) Maha Kaliamman Temple, Kampung Kasipillay, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur.

24) Maha Mariamman Temple, Kepong, Kuala Lumpur.

25) Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Batu Gajah, Perak.

26) Sri Kalumalai Mahakaliamman Temple, Ipoh, near the station, Perak.

27) Dewa Maha Kaliamman Temple, Ipoh, near the station, Perak.

28) Devi Sri Maha Kaliamman Temple, Kampar, near the station, Perak.

29) Sri Maha Mariamman Kuil, Temoh, Perak.

30) Ambal Kovil, Behrang, near the station, Perak.

31) Sri Maha Letchumy Temple, Slim River, near the station, Perak.

32) Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Behrang, Perak.

33) Sri Mangalanayagi Amman Devasthanam, Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

34) Kuil Sri Kamatchi, Padang Besar, near the station, Perlis.

35) Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Arau, Perlis.

36) Dewan Railway Sri Maha Mariamman, Alor Setar, Kedah.

37) Kuil Muthu Mariamman, Tumpat, Kelantan.

List of Railwaymen Temples in Malaysia with Sanskritic Deities as the Presiding Deity (Map 4.3)

1) Lakshmi Ganapathy temple, Kluang, Johor.

2) Sri Balasubramaniam Temple, Gemas, Johor.

3) Murugan Temple, Labis, Johor (from near the railway tracks, now an agamic temple).

4) Vinayagar Temple, Rengam, Johor.

5) Sri Bala Thandyuthapani Temple, Gemas, Johor.

6) Sri Arunachaleswarar Loko (Railway), Depot KTM, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan.

7) Kuil Sri Arunachaleswarar, Bukit Tembok, Negeri Sembilan.

8) Sri Subramaniyar Swamy Kovil, Kajang, Bangi.

9) Murugan Temple, Port Klang, Selangor.

10) Vinayagar Temple, Rawang, Selangor.

11) Vinayagar Temple, Kuang, Selangor.

12) Sri Sumuga Valampuri Vinayagar Temple, Kampung Kasipillay, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur.

13) Pulliayar Temple, Ipoh, Perak.

14) Sri Subramaniar Hindu Devastahanam, Parit Buntar, Perak, Jalan Stesen.

15) Vinayagar Temple, Parit Buntar, Perak.

16) Murugan Temple, Tapah Road, Perak.

17) Sri Sidhi Vinayagar Temple, Behrang, Perak.

18) Sri Panchamoorthy Krishnar Temple, Tanjung Malim, Jalan Keretapi, Perak.

19) Kuil Sri Seva Vinayagar Hindu Paribalana Devasthanam, Perai, Penanag.

20) Vinayagar Temple, Perai, Penang.

21) Subramaniam Temple, Gurun, Kedah.

22) Sri Subramanaswamy Temple, Gua Musang, Kelantan.

List of Railwaymen Temples with Muṉīsvaraṉ as the Presiding Deity in Singapore (Map 4.4)

1) Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Kampung Bahru, Tanjong Pagar, Singapore (demolished).

2) Sri Thandavaalam Muneeswaran Temple, Tanglin Halt, Singapore (demolished).

3) Sri Muneeswaran Temple, 3 Commonwealth Drive, Singapore.

4) Sri Muneeswaran Temple, 14th milestone, Woodlands Road, Singapore (demolished).

Appendix V

Appendix III

(See paragraph 22 of Ceylon Report.)
Ceylon Labour Commission, Trichinopoly
Ceylon Labour Commission, Thiruchinapalli [in Tamil]

Recruiting for Ceylon…..

——————————— Coolies need for the Estate ———————————

——————————— Adjacent to the Post office ———————————

Conditions for working in the Estate

1. Coolie for One Day	Male person	Female person	Boy or Girl
Rupees.	Rupees.	Rupees.	Rupees.
Anna. Paisa	Anna. Paisa	Anna. Paisam	Anna. Paisa
Estate Work ————	From ————	From ————	From ————
Quarry Work ————	From ————	From ————	From ————

2. If you work hard, you can earn more.

3. The earnings will be handed to the coolie's directly by the Estate Sahib every month.

4. The sahib will look into all complaints immediately and will do the needful to resolve them. The coolies will always have access to the sahib. He knows their language.

5. The sahib will help coolies who wish to send money or letter to their hometown.

6. Free housing, medicine and firewood will be dispensed to the coolies.

7. Good drinking water will be made available.

8. Coolies can worship according to their religious beliefs. Festivals and celebrations can be according to their individual traditions (emphasis added). Free schools are available for the education of the coolies' children.

9. Work equipment like baskets will be given free-of-charge.

10. Good quality rice will be given for discounted price to the coolies.

11. Matters regarding travel are as follows:

Important Notice

Departure for Ceylon is not mandatory for coolies. It is entirely based on personal preference. There is no rush to provide an agreement letter.

All coolies are being registered in places where there are Ceylon Labour Commission Agents. So, their relatives can get information about the coolies through these agents.

From the day the coolies register to go to Ceylon to the time they embark on the ship, not only will they be provided bountifully with everything necessary, but they will also be protected from the harassment of their supervisors (kangany) and their money will be safeguarded.

_____   _____

Agent CLC   Ceylon Labour Commission

Date

Notice

1. You must not recruit coolies who live adjacent to tea, coffee and rubber estates in South India.

2. You must not recruit minors or married women without obtaining the permission of their parents and their husbands. Those who do so will be liable for punishment. Also, you must not recruit persons unfit for coolie labour.

3. You must not bring coolies from recruitment depots.

4. If you encounter any problem, you may appeal to the Ceylon Labour Commissioner Sahib in Thiruchirappalli either in person or through a letter or telegram. He will then make enquiries.

5. Herewith it is made clear that if those who are recruiting coolies through this document engage in any illegal activities which are against the law, then only they are liable for punishment for their actions. The employees of Ceylon Labour Commission will not be held responsible in any way whatsoever.

<div align="center">

Important Warning

</div>

This document belongs to Ceylon Labour Commission. Those who possess this document do not have the right to either sell it or pawn it. Those who retain this document as surety and compensate with either money or property will be liable for severe punishment ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯

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Glossary

❧

Non-English Words Used in the Book

Key: English (E), Hindi (H), Malay (M), Punjabi (P), Tamil (T)

agamas (S): literally, 'that which has come down'. A set of texts regarded as revealed, to which the Tantras and most of the rituals of the major temples make a reference. A body of mythological, ritual and philosophical material not included in the Vedas.

ālyam (S): temple.

am'ma (T): mother.

am'maṉ (T): generic name for mother goddess.

āti Tirāviṭa (T) (H. *adi Dravida*): 'untouchable' sectors of the Indian caste hierarchy.

ayyā (T): father, grandfather, sir.

bhakti (H) (T. *pakti*): attachment, devotion, fondness for, homage, worship and piety.

caivam (T) (H. *saivam*): vegetarian.

cakti (T) (H. *Shakti*): female energies, powers.

cāmi vīṭu (T): literally, 'god's house', referring to temples and shrines housing deities.

chappati (H): Indian bread made of wheat.

civaliṅkam (T) (H. *Shivalingam*): an abstract or aniconic representation of Civā.

Company ke naukar (H): literally, 'servants of the Company'. Refers to those in the employment of the East India Company that was founded in 1600 and dissolved in 1874. This joint stock trading company arrived in India for trade and commerce, but also ended up governing and ruling the country for several centuries.

cūlam (T) (H. *Shulam*): trident.

dhobies (H): washermen, washerwomen.

ellai kāval teyvam (T): guardian deity of boundaries/borders.

girmitiyas (H): indentured Indian labourers.

godown (H): a warehouse or place for storing goods.

gutka(s) (P): a term whose etymology can be traced back to the Sanskrit word 'gud' (to guard or preserve) or gunth (to enclose, envelope, cover); it refers to abridged versions of the sacred literature of Hindus, Jains and Sikhs.

ista devata (S) (T *ista teyvam*): literally, wished, desired, liked, cherished, favoured, preferred deity.

kambing (M): goat.

kangany (T): overseer, foreman.

kāval (T): guardians, security guards.

kāval teyvam (T): a tutelary deity who may have once been tied to a specific ecology, lands, territories and lineages.

klings: a word used in Southeast Asia that was initially neutral, associated historically with the South Indian kingdom of Kalinga, but eventually became a derogatory term used to refer to all those of Indian (and South Asian) descent, and especially to colonial Indian labourers.

kōpuram (T) (H. *Gopuram*): temple gateway.

kūḻ (T): rice porridge.

kulā tēyam (T): household, ancestral deities.

kumpāpiṣēkam (T) (H. *kumbhaabhishegham*): dedication and installation of deities during an Agamic temple's consecration ceremony.

maami(s) (T): aunties.

makan (M): to eat; food.

*mandore(*s): possibly of Portuguese origin, from the word *mando*, 'to command, order'. In South and Southeast Asia, the term *mandora* is used to refer to those who supervise other workers on estates, plantations and public works projects. In the railway services, the term refers to 'gangers' (supervisors) and permanent way inspectors.

maṇṭapam (T) (H. *mandap*): temple hall.

maulaana (H., from Arabic): a respected Muslim leader.

mistri (H): supervisor of manual labourers. *Maistry*, a derivative from this root, refers to a master workman or foreman.

modagam (T): a popular South Indian dish served during prayers for Lord Ganesha.

muni (H): a sage, seer, ascetic, who possess magical powers, treads and becomes one with the gods.

muruṅkaikkāy (T) (E. *murungakkai*): a type of vegetable.

naṭumaṭam (T): walking, moving god.

negara (M): nation, nationalist.

pangu (T): a share.

paṇṭāram (T): according to the *Tamil Lexicon*, its multiple meanings include a religious mendicant, a caste of non-Brahmin Saivites who sell garlands of flowers. It also refers to a caste as well as a profession.

piracātam (T) (*H, prasad*): offerings during prayer.

pūcāri (T) (H. *pujari*): priest.

pūjai (T) (H. *puja*): prayers.

punjavat (T) (H. *panchayat*): committee.

Ramcharitmanas: literally, the 'Lake of the deeds of Rama'; this is a poem composed in the Awadhi language by the sixteenth-century bhakti poet Tulsidas, in praise of the deity Rama.

ramlila(s) (H): staging and performance of stories and mythologies from the Hindu epic *Ramayana.*

satsang (H): umbrella term for a variety of Hindu religious activities.

tāṇṭavāḷam/thaandavaalam (T): rail.

taṭṭu (T): plate; tray.

tōcai (T) (H. *Dosa*): popular South Indian savoury pancake.

ūr (T): home; hometown.

utcav (T) (H. *utsav*): processional festivals.

vēṣṭi (T): single piece of unstitched waist cloth/wrap.

List of Deities

Civā (T) (H. *Shiva*): literally, 'auspicious', also the god of ascetics, the god of cosmic destruction as the second member of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu.

Kali (H): literally, 'the black goddess' – one of the chief manifestations of the goddess.

Kāḷiyam'maṉ (T): a malevolent aspect of the mother goddess. A popular village deity in Tamil Nadu who is worshipped for relief from cholera.

Karuppaṇacuvāmi (T): the name of a 'minor' male deity who is widely popular, sometimes as an attendant or a guardian to village goddesses and often independently in rural South India, especially Tamil Nadu. *Karuppaṇ* is the Tamil word for 'black' or 'dark' and the deity is often depicted as such.

Kiruṣṇā (T) (H. *Krishna*): god of protection, compassion, tenderness and love.

Makālaṭcumi (T) (H. *Mahalakshmi*): Hindu goddess of wealth, power, fertility and prosperity.

Māriyam'maṉ (T): a malevolent aspect of female power or shakti in Hindu mythology. The deity is approached as a village deity in Tamil Nadu and constitutes a vital element of South Indian folk religion. She is worshipped in the belief that she protects against illnesses and diseases like chickenpox and measles, and is also known as the goddess of rain (T. *mari*). She is a central deity in the firewalking festival of *Tīmiṭṭi*.

Maturai Vīraṉ (T): a Hindu male deity popular in Tamil Nadu, said to be an attendant to mother goddesses, worshipped as a village deity and protector of boundaries, seldom found in household altars.

Muṉīsvaraṉ (T): has multiple identities; approached as a guardian deity of boundaries as well as an incarnation of the deity Shiva. He is popularly

worshipped as a village deity in Tamil Nadu and not typically kept within homes, but on the boundaries of villages.

Muṉīyanti (T): a 'minor' deity who is firmly located in Hinduism's 'folk' tradition prevalent in Tamil Nadu. The deity is said to favour meat and blood, and is known as an 'unclean god' according to Agamic interpretations.

Murukan (T) (H. *Murugan*): the chief deity of the Tamils and the brother of Vinayagar and the second son of Shiva and Parvati. Also known as the god of war and associated with hilltops and mountains as favoured spots. The festival of Tai Pucam and the practice of carrying *kavatis* is associated with *Murukan,* who is hugely popular with Tamils in the Hindu diaspora.

Nākam'mā (T) (H. *Nagamma*): serpent goddess.

Pairavar (T): known as the guardian of boundaries and as a non-Sanskritic deity, often placed outside shrines of other deities. He is accompanied by his 'vehicle' – a dog.

Parvati: literally, 'daughter of the mountain', daughter of the Himalayas and wife of Shiva.

Periyācciyam'maṉ (T): a malevolent aspect of the mother goddess. The mythology surrounding her worship relates to childbirth and pregnancy. Women pray to her to prevent misfortune to a newborn baby and for a safe childbirth.

Piram'mā (T) (H. *Brahma*): known as the 'Creator' and the first amongst the Hindu trinity; the god of creation, knowledge and the sacred texts known as the Vedas.

Samayapuram Māriyam'maṉ (T): a form of the mother goddess Durga or Maha Kali or Aadi Shakthi, whose worship is prevalent across Tamil Nadu. One of her prominent temples is located in the town of Samayapuram in Trichy, where she is known as *Mahamayi*.

Turkā (T) (H. *Durga*): a major Hindu goddess, associated with protection, destruction of evil, motherhood and wars. She is often depicted as a maternal figure, appearing visually as a beautiful woman with many arms, each carrying a different weapon, astride a tiger or lion, defeating a demon.

Vināyakar (T) (H. *Vinayagar*, *Ganesh*): the elephant-headed deity, son of Siva and Parvati, revered as the remover of obstacles and as heralding good luck and all things auspicious. He is a popular deity across India and the religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.

Viṣṇu (T) (H. *Vishnu*): the third member of the Hindu trinity, this deity is charged with protecting and preserving the universe.

List of Festivals

āti (T): refers to the Tamil month from mid-July to mid-August, ritually an important month for women and mother goddesses.

Kārttikai (T): the South Indian festival of lights, celebrated on a full moon day in the month of *kārttikai.*

Kul festival (T): the festival of 'porridge offering' to mother goddesses, a communal practice rooted in Tamil Nadu villages.

Māṭṭu Poṅkal (T): *māṭṭu literally* means 'bull'. The expression refers is the third day of the festival Poṅkal, a harvest festival that honours cattle and their role in ensuring a good harvest.

Mahācivarāttiri (T) (H. *Mahashivaratri*): literally, 'the great night of Civā', an annual festival dedicated to the Hindu god Civā. It is celebrated on a night when the deity performed the cosmic dance, *Tandava*.

Navarāttiri (T) (H. *Navaratri*): a nine-day festival in honour of the goddess Durga and her numerous representations.

Poṅkal (T): a festival celebrated by Tamils in mid-January. Literally, it refers to a mixture of rice, dal, milk and jaggery, cooked together in a pot, and is symbolic of abundance and prosperity. The four-day festival celebrating a good harvest includes the washing and decorative painting of cattle that are fed *poṅkal*.

Pūccūriṭal (T): literally, the ritual of 'flower showering' in the worship of mother goddesses, especially Māriyam'maṉ.

Rutra Apiṣēkam (T) (H. *Rudra Abhishekam*): bathing of the icon of Shiva with the accompaniment of appropriate ritual chanting and offerings.

Timiṭṭi (T): the festival of firewalking celebrated in Tamil Nadu, a week before the festival of *Tīpāvaḷi*. The festival is observed in honour of the goddess Draupati Amman, who is seen as an incarnation of Māriyam'maṉ.

Tīpāvaḷi (T) (H. *Diwali*): literally, 'row of lights' the festival of lights celebrated across India. Broadly, it represents the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, drawing from different Hindu mythologies.

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