

CONCLUSION

Sedimented, Intertwined Histories



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 move* 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 Malaysia, 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.

References

- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid modernity*. Oxford: Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. ‘Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture’ in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 3–30.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 1992. *In an Antique Land*. London: Granta Books.
- Harvey, Penny, and Hannah Knox. 2012. ‘The Enchantments of Infrastructure’, *Mobilities* 7(4): 521–36.

- _____. 2015. *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Holloway, Julian. 2006. 'Enchanted Spaces: The Séance, Affect and Geographies of Religion', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 96(1): 182–87.
- Lambertz, Peter. 2020. 'Enchanted Infrastructures: Risk, Belonging and Salvation on Congo's Inland Waterways', *Workshop on Conceptualising Religious Infrastructures, 24 September 2020*. Frobenius-Institut. Retrieved 27 January 2023 from <https://frobenius-institut.de/en/61-new/738-workshop-conceptualising-religious-infrastructures>.
- Srinivasan, Roopa. Tiwari, Manish. Silas, Sandeep (eds). 2006. *Our Indian Railway: Themes in India's Railway History*. New Delhi: New Delhi Foundation Books.
- Swanson, Heather Anne. 2020. 'Why Railroads Now? Anthropology of Infrastructure and Debates around "Green" Transit', *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 10(2–3): 270–82.