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to find that many of the former have persisted and even outlasted the solidity of railway infrastructures, which have been replaced by newer, more modern prototypes.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.

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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 laypersons 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

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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

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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:

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> 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

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Mun̲īsvaran̲ 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 –

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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

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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:

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> 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 Mun̲īsvaran̲ 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

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> 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 remembered 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 temple. 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 miraculously 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

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

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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.

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Map 4.1. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Malaysia, with Muṉīsvaraṉ as the presiding deity.
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Map 4.2. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Malaysia, with Am'maṉ as the presiding deity.
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Map 4.3. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Malaysia, with Sanskritic deities as the presiding deity. © Lee Li Kheng, used with permission

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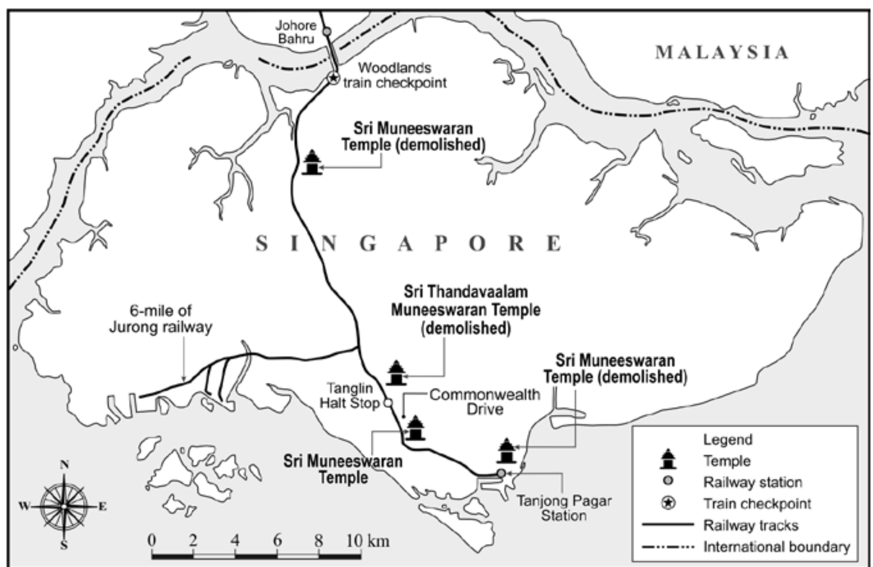

Map 4.4. Map of 'Railwaymen Temples' in Singapore, with Mun̲īsvaran̲ as the presiding deity. © Lee Li Kheng, used with permission

Grounding Mun̲īsvaran̲ and Am'man̲ on Malayan Shores

During my field trips, I encountered some of the oldest 'railwaymen temples' for Mun̲īsvaran̲ and Am'man̲ 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.

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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.

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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 archetypical 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

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

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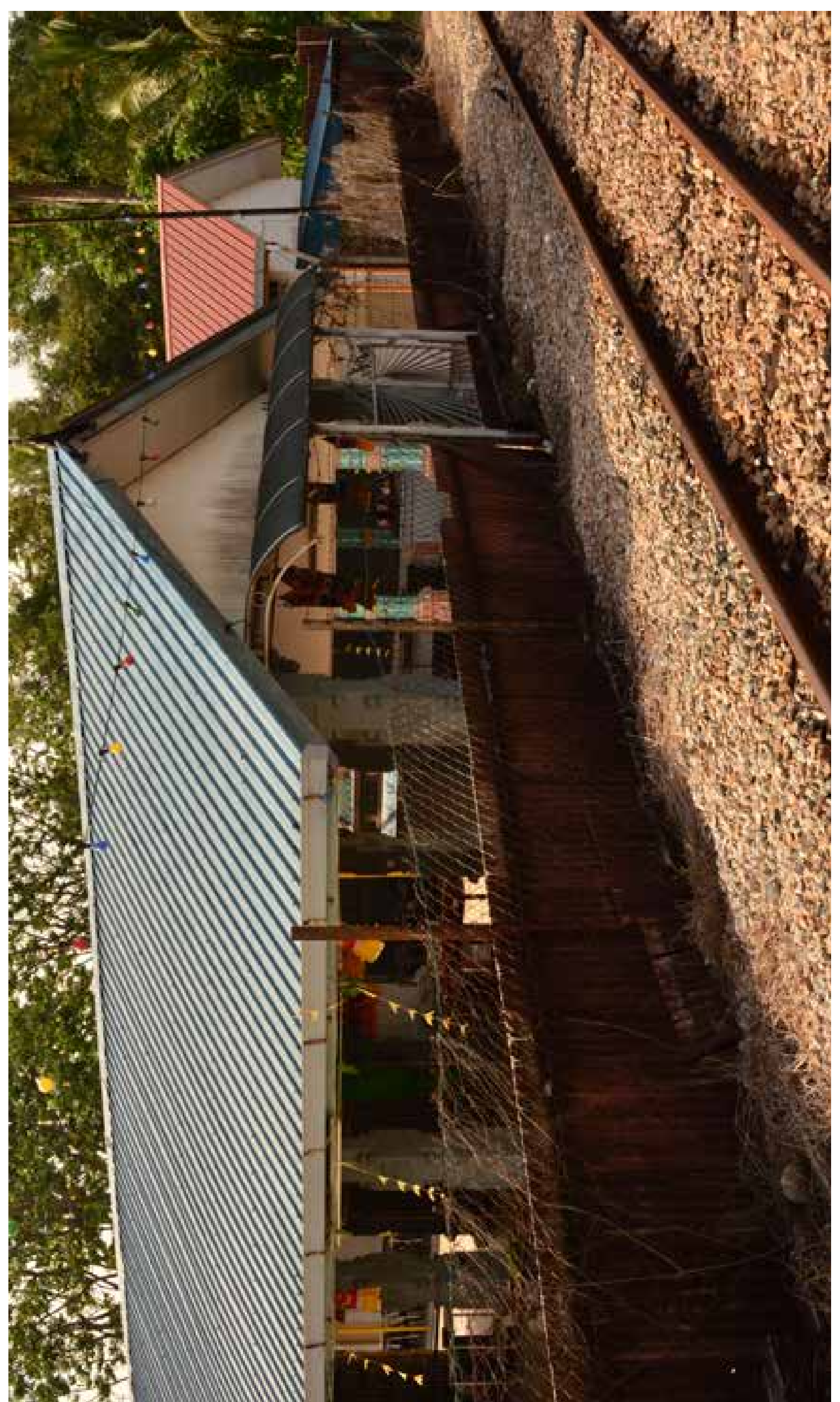

Figure 4.3. Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Jalan Hospital, Kluang, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

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

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rather recently and do not appear to have a known link to the railways. I came across only one Muṉīsvaraṉ railway temple in Kuala Lipis, Pahang. There is also a famous Am'maṉ 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 Muṉīsvaraṉ 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

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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

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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

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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.'

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MALAYAN RAILWAY.

Permit No. 227

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

Mr. [illegible] [illegible], 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 ~~calendar month~~ 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

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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

ASAL

KERETAPI TANAH MELAYU

PENDUDOKAN SEMENTARA TANAH KERETAPI

No. PERMIT ..... [illegible]

PERMIT INI TIDAK BOLEH DI-PINDAH MILEK

Nama Pendudok ..... [illegible] Temple ..... No. KPPN .....

Alamat ..... Bukit Tembok, Seremban .....

Sewa ~~Bulanan~~ Tahunan ..... [illegible]

Makud Pendudokan ..... [illegible] Hindu .....

Pendudokan ini ada-lah terta'alok kapada sharat2 yang di-persetujui yang di-lampirkan bersama ini.

Bertarikh pada ..... 10th ..... haribulan ..... OCTOBER ..... 1975.

Tempoh surat kebenaran pendudukan sementara ini akan tamat pada [illegible], 1975.

(CHUAH [illegible] HEE)

[illegible]

KERETAPI TANAH MELAYU

Bagi pehak Pertadbiran Keretapi Tanah Melayu.

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

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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.

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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

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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

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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'ma<u>n</u>, 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'ma<u>n</u> 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 Mu<u>n</u>īsvara<u>n</u> and Vināyakar, brought from other temples in the area that were being demolished. Viknesh did not deny Mu<u>n</u>īsvara<u>n</u>'s power, but expressed a firm preference for Am'mān – 'We call him Ayyā, the Malays

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call him Datuk (Malay for grandfather). He is also very powerful but I only pray to Am'maṉ' – 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 Muṉīsvaraṉ 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 Muṉīsvaraṉ and Muṉīyanti 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'maṉ 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

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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

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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.

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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'maṉ 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

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> 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'maṉ'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:

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> 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'maṉ icon that had become worn out over the decades was buried within the temple premises. New icons for Am'maṉ, 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

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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.

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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.

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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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