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Preface

From Apparent Endings to Unknown Beginnings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vineeta Sinha
June 2023

Note

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

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

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

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

Abbreviations

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

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