Introduction

Methodological Musings, Analytical Signposts

Opening Frames

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

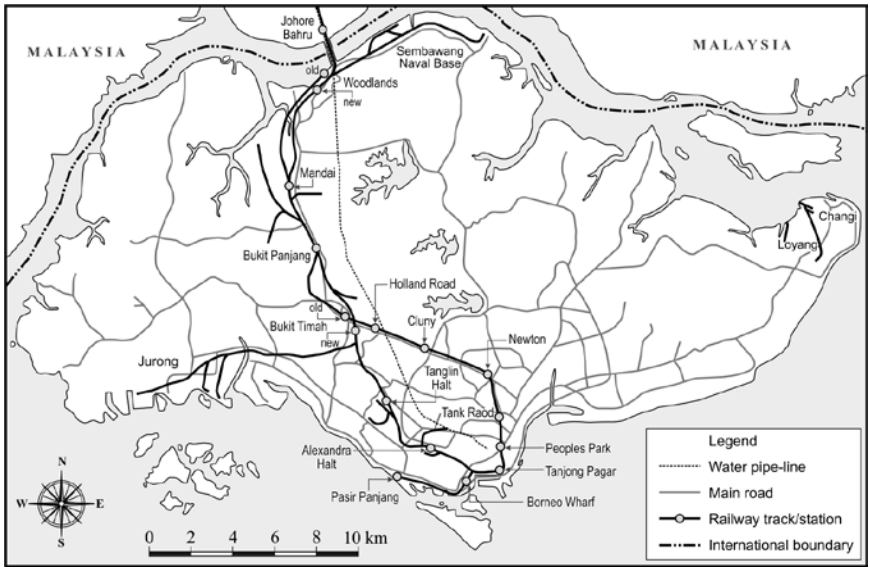
The visibility of numerous Hindu temples along the railway tracks in Singapore and Malaysia has long been an intriguing puzzle for observers – residents and visitors alike. However, given my prior research on Hinduism in these regions, these phenomena were hardly surprising to me. Nor did the physical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

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

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

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

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



Map 0.2. Railway Networks in Singapore. © Lee Li Kheng, used with permission.

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

Foregrounding Colonial Labour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reading Railways and Religion through an Infrastructural Lens

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mapping Sacralized Railway Landscapes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ethnography on the Move

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tracing as Method and Concept: Surfacing Visible and Invisible Terrains

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An Anthrohistorical Endeavour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Book Takes Shape

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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