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Sojourning with Muṉīsvaraṉ the 'Railway God'

Mobile Hindu Deities

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

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

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

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 233.

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

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

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

Articulating the Mun̲īsvaran̲–Railways Encounter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The second Mun̲īsvaran̲ temple with strong railway links in Singapore that was familiar to me was the Sri Muneeswaran Temple at Kampung Bahru, which has since been demolished. This temple was located within the compound of Singapore's Tanjong Pagar Station. Despite the lack of official recognition and

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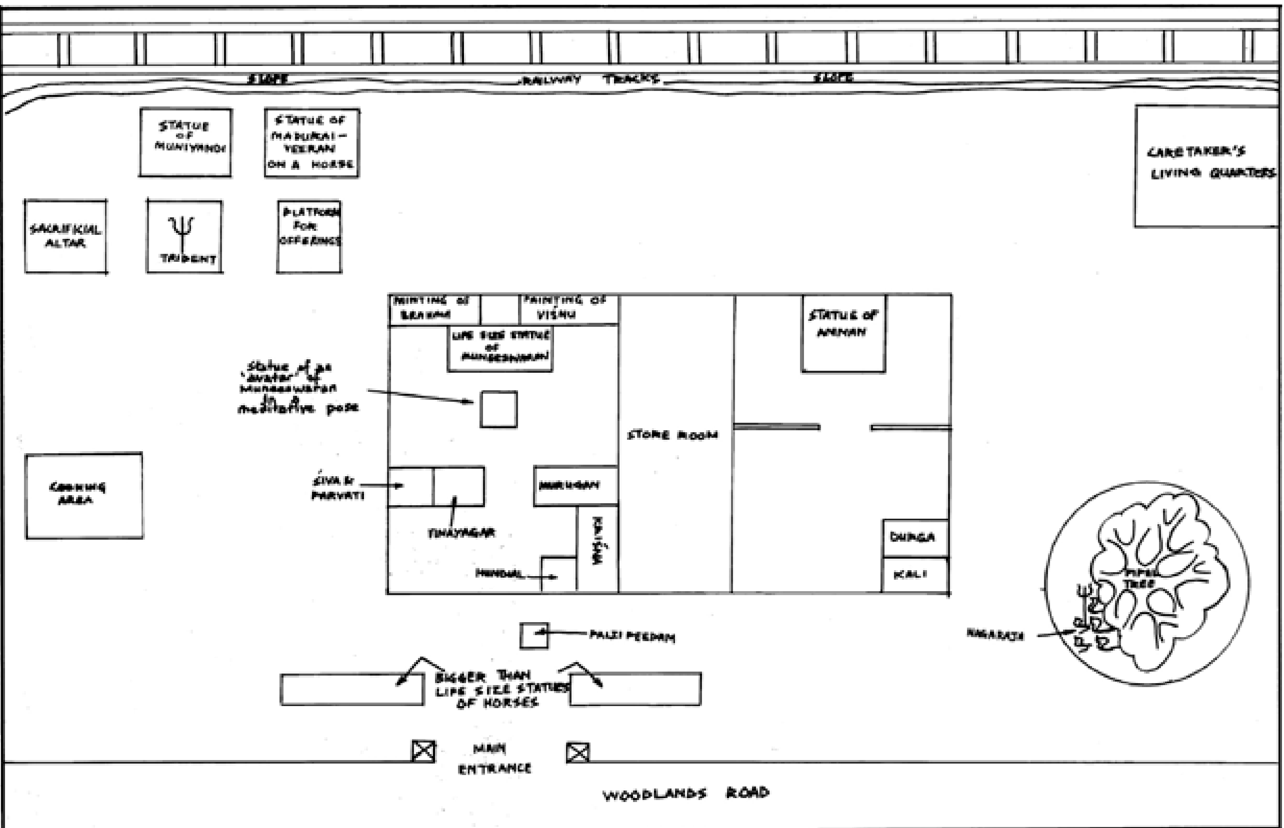

Figure 5.1. Plan of Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple, Woodlands Road, 1988. Source: Sinha 1988. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple Tales

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

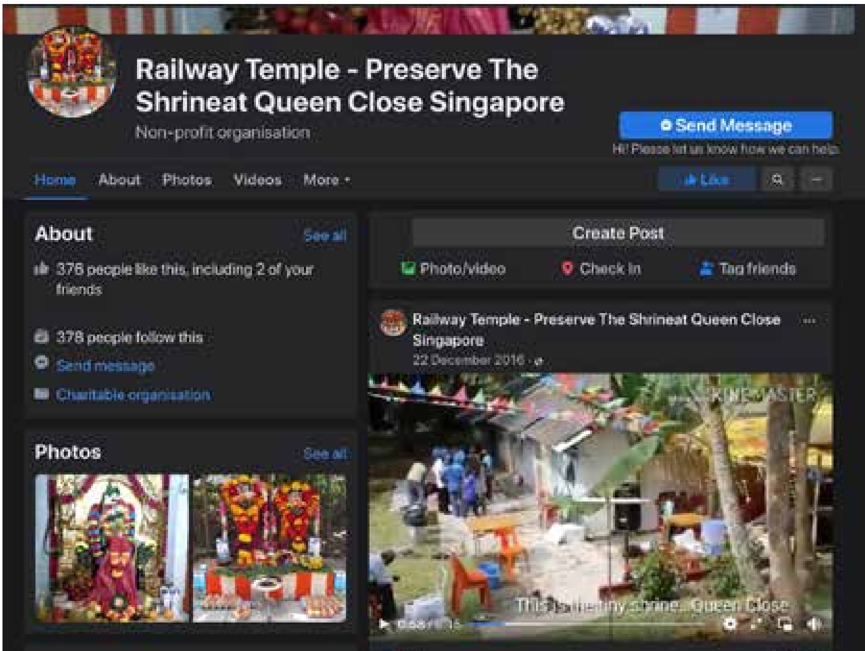

Figure 5.5. Screenshot of the Facebook page for the railway temple at Queens Close, 2022. © Vineeta Sinha, used with permission

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Producing Muṉīsvaraṉ Mythologies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> My grandma told me this. So, the people who came to build temples, they used a stone because those days, the people from India, they did prayers to prevent mishaps. You can hear the tinkling of the anklets. Till today we see *ayyā*. No such thing as fear of Muṉīsvaraṉ. He is very powerful. We can feel his presence because he is our family deity.

Rather than push these deities to the boundaries of human habitation, as was the practice in Tamil Nadu, in Malaya homes and resting spaces for Muṉīsvaraṉ and other guardian deities were built in/near living quarters and workspaces; his devotees kept the deity close to them. Given the everyday realities of labourers'

Figure 5.6. Signboard of Sri Muniandy Temple, Railway, Bukit Tembok, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

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Figure 5.7. Muneeswaran Temple, Kampung India, Mengkibol, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

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lives, I repeatedly heard that those working with the railways sought refuge and protection in Muṉīsvaraṉ and other guardian deities for themselves as well as their work tools and working environments.

These accounts strongly suggest that Muṉīsvaraṉ's remit and functionality have been seamlessly expanded by his devotees in alien, foreign territories to include railway tracks and railway infrastructures as new sites over which the deity exercised his protective powers. Devotees explained this complex relationship of Muṉīsvaraṉ with the railways as follows: the deity shielded devotees against various railway-related dangers, but also protected railway tracks, trains, stations and quarters from natural disasters and ravages. My interlocutors shared that the possibility of accidents on the tracks – with the loss of life and damage to and destruction of tracks and trains – was seen as one of the biggest dangers in the railways. The need for safety was thus cited as a key attraction for turning to Muṉīsvaraṉ. Some former locomotive drivers I spoke to even stated that they felt safe driving trains in the dead of the night, in the knowledge that *ayyā* was travelling with them, showing them the way and averting catastrophes. Muṉīsvaraṉ was thus seen as protecting the railways as much as safeguarding his devotees against risks associated with the railways, which in the early days, were less than perfect as machines and embodied risks.

Hari, a committee member from the Commonwealth Muneeswaran Temple, shared that railway labourers prayed to Muṉīsvaraṉ and implored him to 'make sure no accidents happen' on the tracks and to keep 'passengers, drivers, everyone safe'. Subramaniam, another committee member, noted that railway labourers would pray to the deity that there should be no accidents in areas under their watch and supervision, adding that there were indeed 'no accidents' in areas where there were *ayyā* temples. From this perspective, devotees saw Muṉīsvaraṉ extending his influence as a divine guardian over new dominions, not just spatially but in fact expanding his jurisdiction over the protection of machinery, infrastructure and, indeed, technology itself.

Together with gods and goddesses, ritual practices for venerating them were also transported to Malaya. The longstanding presence of a folk Hindu ritual complex in these regions confirms devotees' preference for the 'nonvegetarian' character of these deities. In the literature, these have been denoted as 'extreme rituals', which include practices like enacting trances, animal sacrifices, offering cigars and alcohol, and 'self-mortification' rituals undertaken by devotees to appease these deities and to sustain their powers (McNeal 2009; Sinha 2005). In the contemporary period, Bhasi (2021) notes the rising trend of worshipping *kula teyvam*, such as Muṉīsvaraṉ, in Malaysia via enacting these rituals.

These practices certainly marked the many Muṉīsvaraṉ 'railwaymen temples' I visited during my recent fieldwork. Many of these temples had not been *saivized* or Agamized and adhered to a ritual complex for venerating Muṉīsvaraṉ

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as a nonvegetarian deity. Thus, I met large numbers of devotees and temple custodians who were committed to this latter feature of the deity's identity, whose capacities were seen to be enhanced through the enactment of these rituals, which reform-minded Hindus in Singapore and Malaysia typically find objectionable and inappropriate (Sinha 2005). However, a handful of the temples have distanced themselves from this cluster of rituals and have made Muṉīsvaraṉ into a *Caivite*, vegetarian deity, to be approached through the agamic rituals conducted by Brahmin priests. These also happen to be the larger temples, which are supported by a stable, established community of devotees and have access to finances as well as social and cultural capital to aspire towards respectability. Prominent examples of these temples include the following: Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth Drive, Singapore; Arulmigu Sri Muniswaran Temple (Railway), Johor Bahru; *Ayyā*/Muneeswaran Temple, Gemas; Kuil Maha Sri Siva Vaal Muniswarar Alayam, Tampin; Sri Maha Muniswarar Temple, Batu Gajah; and Railway Thirumurugan Temple, Kuala Kerai.

The story of the Kuil Maha Sri Siva Vaal Muniswarar Alayam in Tampin, illustrates well the complex processes of Agamization, which have been approached through the concept of Sanskritization (Srinivas 1956). This temple occupies KTM land and Muthu, a member of the temple's management committee, estimated that it is 'probably around seventy to eighty years old'. As a registered temple, it has not faced demolition or relocation threats. I visited the temple in 2019 and found no Muṉīsvaraṉ sanctum there, the presiding deity being *Civā.* Muthu highlighted that 'this is a *Caivam* temple – no cutting now – probably done in the old days'. He added that these reformed ritual practices prioritize the principles of *ahimcai* (Tamil, 'nonviolence'; Sanskrit, 'ahimsa') and the temple committee discontinued animal sacrifices on ethical grounds. He shared that some elderly members of the temple community remember that it was originally built for Muṉīsvaraṉ through the initiative of railway workers. Muthu has been associated with the temple for more than two decades, but has no railway connection, although some of the committee members do. The temple has conducted several consecration ceremonies, with another one planned in a couple of years. It is still situated opposite the old Tampin railway station, close to the railway quarters. Two to three rows of these quarters were still standing, in a dilapidated condition, when I was there and some were occupied by the Malay staff of the KTM.

The Agamization[11] of temples like this has included the aspiration for performing consecration ceremonies, producing a 'vegetarian deity', lodging Muṉīsvaraṉ in the *Caivite* tradition and securing Brahmin priests as ritual experts, resulting in what devotees consider to be an explicit taming of the deity (Sinha 2005: 79). Yet, other temples, such as the Muniswarar Temple, Kamunting, have adopted a hybrid approach – they observe vegetarian rituals inside the

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temple, but allow nonvegetarian rituals outside – appealing to the deity's as well as the devotees' sentiments. Several railwaymen temples that began specifically with Mun̲īyanti and Mun̲īsvaran̲ as primary deities now include Sanskritic deities in the temple's pantheon, while still remembering and retaining the historical link with Mun̲īsvaran̲ and the railways. This is evident in the case of the Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple, Sentul and the Railway Thirumurugan Temple, Kuala Kerai, where the leadership made conscious decisions to not only register Am'man̲ and Murukan̲ as presiding deities, but also to rename the temples to reflect this change.

Bracketing essentialist, homogeneous and monolithic approaches to conceptualizing Mun̲īsvaran̲ – or any other Hindu deity for that matter – has been productive in my research. Certainly, the hybrid, mutable and dynamic character of Mun̲īsvaran̲ – where his status as a guardian deity is conjoined with his identity as an incarnation of *Civā* – render questions about his original and authentic self somewhat redundant and superfluous for devotees. Similarly, concerns about locales where the deity is 'at home' and sites where he is 'out of place' seem to be pointless for them. Guided by these perspectives, like his devotees, I avoid the presumption that Mun̲īsvaran̲'s primary identity is confined within the frames of a localized deity, grounded in the ecology and rural, agricultural setting of Tamil Nadu, and his efficacy thus limited to this environment. Nor do his devotees accept that the latter is the deity's 'natural' homeland, even though his Indian origins are explicitly acknowledged. Notably, his devotees emphatically deny that his potency is diminished in diasporic locales or that his capacities can only be fully and genuinely realized in his 'authentic' home. He is certainly not viewed as an enfeebled deity, lacking efficacy in the lands his devotees have adopted as their new home.

My long-term ethnographic research on the mobilities of deities beyond their local territories and the narratives of his devotees lead me to reject – like his devotees – the notion that these deities are destabilized and their powers neutralized in these transnational shifts or that they are 'out of sync' and powerless in the new locales they inhabit. The complex processes that transport and emplace deities in diasporic settings have been well theorized by Maunaguru's (2020, 2021) research on Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus who have built temples and sustained Hindu religiosity in diasporic locales. My conversations with Mun̲īsvaran̲'s diasporic devotees as they narrated their experiences and sentiments about the deity vouch for his visceral and primeval presence in their lives. For devotees, the deity has certainly found his feet in new terrains – he is now defined by new modalities and has acquired different and even enhanced capacities, needed by his devotees in altered contexts. In fact, Mun̲īsvaran̲ has been envisioned and reimagined in the consciousness of the first generation of Tamil railway labour communities and in the memories of their descendants. These clusters have

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collectively crafted new mythologies about him and reinterpreted his identity as a *kāval teyvam*. a tutelary deity who may have once been tied to specific ecology, lands, territories and lineages, but who has also acquired distinctive dispositions on Malaysian and Singaporean shores.

In the hands of his devotees, Muṉīsvaraṉ has escaped a one-dimensional, rigid identity: he continues to be marked as energetic, forceful and dynamic as his personality shifts and mutates, refusing to be contained in an inherited template. Devotees argue that the deity's potency and agency originate precisely from this refusal to be imprisoned either spatially or through a fixed set of attributes and functions. The data from my research on the place of Muṉīsvaraṉ in the history of railway building and religion making in Malaya reveal that devotees see the exponential reach of his capacities, given the multitude of unforeseen modes in which he can exist and exercise his efficacies. In my previous research, I had documented Singapore and Malaysia-specific stories about Muṉīsvaraṉ that circulated amongst his devotees, for example, Muṉīsvaraṉ as a SARS[12] warrior (Sinha 2005). The narrative of Muṉīsvaraṉ's entanglement with the railways offers yet another iteration of the deity's repute and eminence in the universe of his veneration – a construction that is vigorously sustained by the current generation of his devotees, some of whom are the descendants of railway labour.

This chapter has argued that Muṉīsvaraṉ's very name, character, sphere of influence and the mythologies about him have been marked in complex modes in being associated with the railways. I have demonstrated that new folklore about Muṉīsvaraṉ have been created in his association with the railways even as his persona as a guardian deity persists firmly. Remarkably, the deity has been accorded novel powers, some of them linked to the nature of railway work and others allied to features of railway infrastructure itself. Conversely, in closing this chapter, it is intriguing to reflect on what, if anything, of the railways has been imbibed by Muṉīsvaran and what have the railways taken from the deity. For a start, his devotees have transcended the materiality of railway premises and the tracks themselves, transforming these into enchanted and animated sites. This held true for the first-generation railway labourers who built temples, but this inheritance has been cherished and retained by their descendants as much as by other Hindus who seek to resacralize modern and upgraded railway sites.

Devotees have shown an inspired appetite for establishing temples for Muṉīsvaraṉ in new railway vicinities and some have even succeeded in these efforts, despite facing tremendous challenges in this regard. New temples for other deities have also sprung up on railway premises, which are perceived by devotees as highly efficacious *because* of their proximity to the railway lands. Interestingly, I found this to be the case even on stretches of the railways that have been double-tracked and electrified. My interlocutors demonstrated considerable ingenuity and creativity in sourcing sites close to modernized railway

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infrastructures and also in hunting down sites where the 'old' Muṉīsvaraṉ temples 'used to be' and making concerted efforts to populate these sites with new temples. Naresh from the Bukit Tembok temple explained this desire thus:

> When you build a temple and many people have prayed there, then the place has a lot of energy and vibrations. Even if the temple is gone, the place is still very powerful. You can feel it. God is still there. That's why our people like to go back. Temple gone, still, we go. That is also why people want to start new temples in the same place.

This is a sentiment I heard persistently during my interactions with Hindus in Singapore and Malaysia both in earlier phases of my research and more recently. My fieldwork at the Amman Temple, Paloh Railway Station, the Amman Temple, Layang Layang Station, the Muniyanti Temple, Queensway, Singapore and the Sri Muneeswaran Temple at Kampung Bahru, Singapore attest to this strong conviction amongst devotees that railway lands are spiritually charged and that deities wish to stay here. Interestingly, I also came across numerous new temples that had been built close to or on old 'railwaymen temple' sites, driven by religious sensibilities that interpret the very materiality of spaces marked with divine energy. Furthermore, conjoining the history of the railways with Muṉīsvaraṉ seemed to be a way for my interlocutors to remind themselves and others about the long and deep historical connections between Indian labourers and the railways in Malaya. This reminder was made poignant in the observations made by Muthu from the Tampin temple: 'Paḻaiya nāṭkaḷ rayilvē il 80–90 catavītamāṉatu namatu makkaḷ iruntaṉa' (Tamil, 'In the old days 80–90 per cent in the railways were our people') and reiterated by Damodaran from Sentul: 'Last time, railways were all our people. Now we are out, only Malays' – sentiments expressed by numerous others I encountered and spoke to on my journeys.

The marginalization and evacuation of Indians from the railway services, which began with the nationalization of the railways in Malaysia in the late 1950s and intensified in the 1960s and 1970s, were highlighted in practically every conversation I had about the history of the railways in the country. My interlocutors argued that it was crucial to ensure that temples near the railway tracks and the stations were protected from demolition and relocation so that the contributions of Tamil migrants in building railways are not forgotten. My interlocutors saw the evacuation of Indians from the railways as deliberate, politically motivated and unjust. The desire to ensure the presence of temples near the railways was thus justified due to the latter and seemed to be a way of addressing and registering the 'absence' of Indians from the railways.

The depressed socioeconomic position of the minority Indian community in Malaysia was another factor for claiming something of a golden railway past

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when Indians were in charge and had the power to imprint their dominant presence on the railways. The drive to build new temples for Muṉīsvaraṉ and other deities in and around new railway precincts seemed to be a project of collectively, visibly and publicly memorializing the role of Indian labour in building railways in Malaya. This commitment appeared to me to centre on religion as much as it did on politics, complicated themes that are elaborated in the next chapter. These latter discussions also shift the lens to postcolonial moments and examine the fate of the railways in Singapore and Malaysia against the backdrop of not only the modernization drive of the railway infrastructures, but also the larger development, urbanization and nationalization projects in these nation-states.

Notes

1. See Maunaguru's (2020, 2021) important works on these themes in the context of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu diasporas.
2. This organization was founded in 1924 'to fulfil the religious, social and cultural needs of the Brahmins living in Singapore … It was later registered formally in 1949 under the "Societies Act" when the sabha activities were revived after a brief period of disruption during World War II' (retrieved 25 January 2023 from https://www.sdbbs.org/about-us).
3. *Tāṇṭavāḷam* means 'rail' in Tamil.
4. Not a pseudonym.
5. See Sinha (2014) for the story of the Jalan Bena Muṉīsvaraṉ Temple, Singapore. This unregistered but old temple was founded in 1956 by Hindu employees of the PWD in its then-residents' quarters in Jalan Bena on the east coast of the island. The temple was demolished in 2004 when a new industrial complex was built on the site. My long-term research with the temple and its community revealed that even after all material and architectural traces of the temple were erased following demolition, devotees continued to return to the site to make offerings of food and flowers and to simply be present in a space that they deemed sacred, as it was inhabited by their revered deity Muṉīsvaraṉ. Many devotees were convinced that their *ayyā* was still there. The temple did in fact return to this same site in 2007, after the owners of the industrial complex invited the temple custodians to re-establish the temple that had been demolished earlier. This further vindicated devotees' belief in the deity's power and that the deity could not be dislodged against his will.
6. The Queensway Muṉīsvaraṉ deity was located in this new site temporarily as the temple committee continued to seek a more suitable location. Despite my efforts, I have not been able to locate where the deity is now. I have heard rumours that the deity has either been moved to Malaysia or to another Chinese temple in Singapore, both of which I have been unable to verify.
7. *Keretapi* is the Malay word for 'railways'.
8. Tamil for 'male goat' and a shorthand reference for animal sacrifices as part of the ritual complex for venerating nonvegetarian deities.
9. https://www.mycensus.gov.my/index.php/census-product/publication/census-2010/691-characteristic-of-living-quarters-2010 (retrieved 25 January 2023).
10. Walter (2005) notes the centrality of sacred trees and groves in Tamil Nadu villages, which are also believed to be the abode of local deities.

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11. Scholars of religion in Malaysia (Lee and Rajoo 1987; Subramaniam 2006) have used the concept of Sanskritization to denote what I have labelled ‘agamization’ in my research.
12. Singapore experienced an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), a viral infection of the respiratory system, in 2003. As I was doing fieldwork in 2003–4, I routinely heard devotees describe Muṉīsvaraṉ as a ‘SARS warrior’. They argued that the deity’s protective powers are mobilized to keep his devotees safe, regardless of the dangers they faced.

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