# 6

## Railways and Religion
## Negotiating Colonial and Postcolonial Modernities

### Intersections of Railway and Religious Landscapes

A historical perspective, with a focus on the transformations in transport networks and religious infrastructures, has been productive for probing the religion-railways interface in Singapore and Malaysia. This chapter narrates the contemporary story of the colonial railways grounded on Malayan soil, more than a century ago. Here I argue that scrutinizing railway modernization projects in these regions highlights the encounters of religious and cultural elements with economic and technological developments. Expectedly, this interaction has taken multiple forms with diverse outcomes – some anticipated, others not so. As I have demonstrated earlier in the book, the construction of railways and the building of Hindu temples on railway sites emerged almost contemporaneously in the colonial period. I suggest that at this time, there was no palpable and inevitable dominance of one infrastructural form over the other, despite the obvious power inequalities between the colonial authorities and colonized populations.

Thus, in a moment of colonial modernity, railway-related locales were also spaces where religious practices were enacted in sacred structures produced therein by colonial railway labour, often with the blessing and even support of colonial authorities. In contrast, in moments of postcolonial and neoliberal modernity experienced in the two nation-states of Singapore and Malaysia – starting from the 1970s but firmly in place since the 1990s – the narrative of economic and technological superiority was dominant, displacing all other sensibilities, including those driven by sociocultural, ethical and religious considerations. I argue that the emergent reasoning and mode of operation of the former

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have marginalized all other societal narratives and often sought to eliminate pre-existing and longstanding cultural representations and modes of living, privileging modernity and development above all else, for claims of a larger societal good. Anything standing in the path of these modernization and development efforts has thus typically been viewed as obstacles and encroachments to be justifiably removed in the name of progress.

To begin with, the dramatic makeover of the railways in these two countries over the last five decades or so required extensive clearing of squatter communities from railway reserve lands. Embedded in the broader trope of economic development and urbanization, the reconfiguration of railway networks was assumed to be both inevitable and desirable. This logic was aligned with an emphasis on engendering a mode of transportation that was focused primarily on moving passengers rather than transporting raw materials, labour and commodities. This motivation translated into the acquisition of new lands and the re-appropriation of railway reserve lands for upgrading the railways. The attendant processes entailed ejecting squatters off railway properties and assets (tracks, stations, workshops, locomotive sheds, abandoned quarters, etc.) as well as demolishing living spaces (slums, squatters and quarters) and sites where cultural-religious lives were once sustained (religious structures). Admittedly, freight movements were still key in the reconfigured railway system in the new economic landscape. Yet, already by the 1980s, short commuter trains were introduced, and by mid-1995, the KTM Komuter network provided local rail services in the Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley areas. Over the next decade, the colonial railways had transitioned into a commuter railway network with the setting up of KTM Komuter with a network spanning more than 550 km along the west coast of Malaysia. Remarkably, this commuter network alone had moved close to 34 million passengers in 2017.[1] With a further extension, the KTM ETS (Electric Train Service) was established in 2010, and provided rail services between major Malaysian cities on the west coast. Together, the KTM rail, intercity and commuter networks facilitated long and short-distance passenger travel and were well integrated into the everyday lives of Malaysians and Singaporeans.

Through these moments, neoliberal and technological modernity stood tall and assumed a hegemonic position against which other discourses and practices, including cultural and religious imaginaries, were deemed subordinate and even irrelevant. The nationalization and modernization of colonial railways in Malaysia were related processes which impacted the future of the railways in Singapore as well. The project of 'Malayanizing' the railways in these regions, which is discussed next, sets the stage for detailing the convoluted interface of religions and railways in the postcolonial period in these two countries.

## The Story of Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM)

The modernization of the railways in Malaya can be dated to the mid-1950s. This massive infrastructural project required substantial capital, land and expertise, not to mention the requisite technology. The first diesel locomotive was introduced into MR in 1957. These replaced the longstanding steam engines and revolutionized train travel across the country. This historic moment signalled the beginning of the railway upgrading project, with the eventual end of the steam locomotive in 1974. The KTM came into existence in 1962 with the push for nationalizing and localizing the railways. It had a long run of three decades and operated until 1992 when the fully government-owned and corporatized entity Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) was formed. Built-in the standard 1 m gauge (1,000 mm), the total track length of these railways in 2017 was roughly 1,658 km,[2] reduced from the earlier 1,700 km with the removal of about 42 km of tracks from Singapore after 30 June 2011.

In addition to the main West Coast and East Coast Lines, the KTM also run several branch lines, which currently offer freight services to and from ports, while others are dedicated to passenger services. However, these branch lines, which were tied specifically to the colonial extractive economy and were no longer functional, were closed in the 1970s: the Batu Arang line, which had been operational since 1915, was closed in 1971; the very first rail tracks, which were laid in 1885 from Taiping to Port Weld, were shut in 1972. By the mid-1980s, there was tremendous enthusiasm for modernizing the railways. Shamsuddin foretells the promise of a modern railway network for Malaysia and notes approvingly:

> Malayan Railway management is already exploring the possibilities of building a wide gauge high speed railway, investigating other ways to provide dependable transportation in the decades ahead … In recent years, as funding was available, steam has been replaced by diesel traction as motive power, track has been upgraded and heavy liner-on unit trains introduced. (1985: 1)

These anticipated changes were seen as progressive and extolled as enhancing passenger experience of railway travel. These were also expected to have great economic and commercial significance in bolstering convenient and easy transportation of freight, such as coal and palm oil. Shamsuddin makes the following observations about the passing of railway traditions and the changing of guard, all within modernist frames and without any seeming regret, lament or disappointment:

> Not only has steam locomotion gone to the scrap heap but traditions are changing and old-time railwaymen are going on pension, the craftsmen with an eye, ear, and feel for setting a steam loco vale timing is being replaced by the young expert with his calibrated instruments who tunes today's diesel engines and electrical controls to very fine limits to obtain peak performance from the entire class of locomotives. (Ibid.)

Ironically, these modern diesel engines that replaced steam locomotives would themselves be rendered obsolete in time to come. In the meantime, with corporatization in 1992, all KTM assets, including railway lands, were consolidated under the ownership and management of the Railway Assets Corporation (RAC), a federal statutory body established under the Railway Act of 1991. Ming et al. (2018) introduce this new entity briefly:

> RAC was established to manage the assets of the KTM railway, namely the track and the stations, to free KTM from costs such as track and station maintenance and enhancement. RAC also has a role to play in developing the railway infrastructure so that KTM can focus on its role as a railway operating company. Under this model, RAC would be the main asset manager of railway assets in Malaysia and KTM would be the main service provider by utilising assets owned and managed by RAC (p. 27).

Under this arrangement, KTMB existed as a company under the Ministry of Finance and was wholly owned and subsidized by the Malaysian government. Over time, there have been suggestions that KTMB should be privatized, but the idea of complete privatization (Lee 2001) has neither been accepted nor acted upon by the Malaysian state, which is presumably hesitant to 'free' the railways from state regulation. The ghost of KTM's privatization has continued to lurk in deliberations over time, but has yet to materialize. While the political authorities may see privatization as a way of addressing the dwindling finances of the railways, this was not welcomed by the railway unions for obvious reasons. Even in 2012, the Railwaymen's Union of Malaya objected to the possibility of privatization 'due to fears over the future of the railway's 5,500 staff' (Bigland 2012: 24).

Attesting to its good financial health, until 1995, KTMB was largely profitable. However, by 1996, it was facing several challenges – the high cost of leasing locomotives from the Indian Railways, lower revenues from property development and deteriorating infrastructure – and was reporting a loss of RM 25 million a year (Briginshaw 2001: 14). The day-to-day management of the railways was then turned over to Marak Unggul Consortium, Renong Group, Diversified Resources Berhad (DRB) and Bolton Properties. According to Ming et al. (2018), the intention was for this consortium:

> to reduce the government's financial burden in enhancing and expanding the railway's infrastructure. However, in 2001, the government cancelled this arrangement and scuppered plans for a KTM privatization due to the high debt levels of Renong and the failure of this consortium to inject capital into KTM.

The Malaysian government argued that in proposing the privatization of KTMB, Marak Ungkul had 'failed to meet the terms of its original contract which required the group to reach agreement regarding privatization. However, the decision coincided with a major reorganization of the Renong Group after its financial collapse' (Anonymous 2001). Other changes in the railway modernization project included the computerization of passenger experience services, such as ticket sales and reservations, and the train operation management and accounting systems, which also reduced the need for station operation staff. These upgrading and modernizing efforts have reconfigured the methods of track maintenance, signalling and telecommunication, with a shift away from traditional manual systems that required large labour pools.

Briginshaw notes a direct link between the modernization of the KTM – especially the gradual replacement of manual track maintenance methods with automation – and the reduction of track maintenance staff. This severely affected continual employment options for the foot soldiers of the railways – the railway labourers – who had been maintaining the tracks manually up to this point:

> Track maintenance is being further mechanised with the purchase of sleeper changing machines, tampers, tack recording cars, and ultrasonic flow detection equipment. The new equipment has enabled the number of track maintenance staff to be reduced during the last five years. (Briginshaw 2001: 13)

Briginshaw also notes that since 1998, several initiatives had been enacted to improve the financial standing of the railways. One of these, he notes, was the 'acceleration of the policy to reduce the size of the workforce, which has been cut from 7595 in 1992 to 5077 last year (i.e. 2000)' (ibid.: 14), adding that this translated to 'a 17% increase in productivity last year in terms of the amount of revenue generated by each employee' (ibid.). In implementing mechanization systems, a sizeable labour pool of the permanent way staff was indeed made redundant. The transformative expansion of the railways, with more trains running at faster speeds, signalled the transitioning of colonial railways to a contemporary passenger rail network through the 1980s and 1990s. It is not surprising that these modernization schemes caused some consternation amongst railway workers and were resisted by railway unions for decades.

The project of nationalising colonial railways in Malaya was entangled with the aspiration for decolonization, and was also impacted by the Malayanization movement, which has deep historical roots. The beginning of the latter has been traced to the 1920s, with a primary objective of ensuring appointments of local personnel to the administrative service. Yeo has observed that the process gained momentum in 1956 (1973: 85) and had two key dimensions:

> Firstly, it involved the recruitment of local officers as the administration expanded and its expatriates left the country. Secondly, Malayanization sought to replace the expatriates in top senior posts by local men so that policy formulation and execution would come under local control. (Ibid.: 75)

Yeo emphasized that 'Malayanization was primarily a political issue' (ibid.) and not just an administrative matter. Following independence, the push for Malayanization was driven by the logic of laissez-faire capitalism. However, its method of implementation translated into preferential treatment for ethnic Malays outlined thus:

> Malaysia's 'New Economic Policy' espoused a philosophy of free-market capitalism but in practice modified this significantly in pursuit of national goals … In the process national corporations acting mainly on behalf of the Malay ethnic group bought controlling shares in many multinational enterprises over a period of years. Regulations provided for progress towards a pattern of capital ownership in which at least one-third would be Malay, for the most part held through organizations set up for this purpose, and strong preference was given to Malays in employment policy, the award of contracts, and opportunities for advancement. (Brookfield et al. 1995: 49)

The implementation of new economic policies favouring the employment of Malays in the railways coincided with the modernization of the railways. Malayanization processes heralded new economic policies, which impacted all industries, with the effect of increasing the recruitment of more Malays into the railways as well. Additionally, Indian staff in the railway services who had reached the-then retirement age of fifty-five were not offered extended contracts. My conversations with former railway staff who were Indians, consistently highlighted that these national level policies negatively impacted their livelihood and they confirmed that the employment of Indians in KTM and subsequently KTMB was not prioritized. My interviews revealed a sense of alienation and bitterness amongst those Indians who had worked with these two entities. For example, Prakash, from Gemas, declared that he had no interest in continuing to work

with KTM after retirement: 'No interest. Now majority, all Malays – not much incentive for us. If one Indian guy retires, two Malays come in. You cannot see a Tamil station master now.' Tharman, a retired *mandore* from Layang Layang, reiterated this sentiment: 'When we joined, all were our own people. Just one or two Malays. The rest were our men. From the supervisor to the coolies – all were our men.' He expressed his frustrations over what he saw as the unfairness of KTM's ethnically differentiated re-employment and recruitment policies. He too had refused an extension that he was offered on a matter of principle:

> Malays are more in this field now. Why are they not giving us an opportunity? When we were working, they never gave us an extension. The Malays continue working till they turn 65 years old … By right, they must retire once they reach 60 years but the Malays are working till 65. During our time that was not the case. Is there such a thing as a legal system? If you do not trust me you do not need to give me the work. So, why should I work for you? They do not give Indians the job even though we have the skills.

Selvam, whom I met in 2018 and who worked with the KTM in Kuala Kangsar as a part of the Workshop Gang, noted wistfully:

> Indian labourers built the railways, the roads. Now it is KTM – *Melayu* – only for Malays – and they do not work. Hardly any Indians or Tamils, in KTM after retirement – do not have Tamils. Indians know railway work; they built the railways with their hands.

As to why there were 'so few' Malays in the railways historically, Tharman reasoned that: 'They would leave their jobs – they found it hard. The Malays could not bear the heat and would leave.' He suggested that Indians and Malays displayed different work ethics:

> Not sure why but they [Malays] were afraid to do the jobs because they thought this would spoil their hands, so they would not come. The Malay worker will come today and leave the next day. Our people took the responsibility to do it. They had a conscience and a family, they used to bear that in mind and work hard. That is why our people could sustain it.

Like other former staff working in the Construction and Way and Works Departments of the KTM, Prakash, Tharman and Selvam expressed that working in the railways was a matter of pride for *them* – meaning Indians – who took ownership of the railways and were committed to their success.

The modernization of the railways saw international and local companies vying for upcoming profitable projects. In 2001, Lee noted that 'the Malayan Railway double-tracking project is the biggest infrastructure project to come on stream in the country and the construction giants are already lining up for a share of the pie'. The eventual turn to international expertise – that is, Indian and Chinese companies –with Malaysian government funding from 'barter trade' (Brookfield et al. 1995: 49) was paid to them through crude palm oil. Malaysia's turn, especially towards Indian railway expertise, was not surprising given the long history of railways in India. In May 2001, KTM 'awarded a US$1.8 billion contract' to Indian Railway Construction Limited (IRCON) India, a government of India undertaking with the Ministry of Railways. IRCON was charged with the responsibility 'to double track, re-signal and electrify the remaining 342 km of the northern line from Ipoh to Butterworth and Padang Besar on the Thai border' (Briginshaw 2001: 15). A 31 km-long rail line between the ports of Tanjung Pelepas and Kulai was opened in 2002, which was constructed under the auspices of IRCON at the cost of RM 500 million (US$131 million) 'under a trade barter arrangement which involved the exchange of palm oil' (Anonymous 2002). The company reported that GCU, a member of Aurecon Group, was appointed 'to work on temporary shoring designs to facilitate Stage 2 construction for Section 2 of the Gemas – Johor Bahru Electrified Double Track Project' (Aurecon n.d.). Running more trains at faster speeds on the refurbished tracks was intended to boost economic and industrial activity in towns and cities along the railway routes. The project also included the construction and upgrading of twelve existing stations and the creation of a new station in Senai near Johor's airport. Depots, land viaducts and bridges were also to be built along the route. On the website of the Aurecon Group, which is an international engineering and design company, the modernization of the Gemas-Johor Bahru track was explained as follows:

> The railway lines aim to improve connectivity for residents living in towns along the route, spur economic development in Central Johor and to facilitate large-scale cargo shipments by rail between Malaysia's two largest ports, Port Klang and Port Tanjung Pelapas. (Ibid.)

The Chinese government, which has a long history of funding infrastructural projects globally, has also had a presence in railways in Malaysia. In one example, the Chinese government had agreed to 'a MR 6 billion palm oil barter deal for electrification and track doubling' (Briginshaw 2001:15) of 297 km of track between Seremban and Johor Bahru. In 2004, the modernization work for the section between Rawang and Ipoh, a track length of 175 km, was 'awarded to a consortium led by Mitsui, Japan' (Anonymous 2000). The contract for the

signalling system was awarded to Siemens AG, for automatic ticket vending machines and the power transformers to Omron Corp, and for communication and electric systems and equipment to Adrantz, Germany (Lee 2001).

As further evidence of reliance on foreign multinationals for railway equipment, KTMB planned to secure twenty diesel-electric locomotives from General Electric, United States, in 2003. For this, the Malaysian government paid 200,000 tonnes of palm oil and palm oil products worth USD $60 million (Anonymous 2001). The modernization of the railways in Malaysia was materialized in a piecemeal, fragmented manner, leading to uneven railway development. However, the end goal was unambiguous for the Malaysian government and the plan was:

> to transform Malaysia's single-track colonial-era West Railway, which runs the length of the mainland from Johor Bahru to Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Padang Besar, into a modern, 160 km/h, high-capacity electrified route for both passengers and freight. (Bigland 2012: 25)

The electrification phase of the railway's modernization in Malaysia had begun relatively early, in the 1990s. The first tracks to be electrified were sections of the West Coast Line in the Klang Valley. The first electric trains were launched in 1995, running between Port Klang and Sentul, and between Rawang and Seremban, where the double-tracking and electrification projects had begun in 1989. But it was only after 2007 that the pace of electrification along the west coast tracks was accelerated. Consequently, the double tracking project between Rawang and Ipoh was completed in 2008 and the Port Klang and Batu Caves branch lines were electrified by 2010. In 2013, the stretch of rail between Seremban and Gemas was double-tracked and electrified, and fast Electric Train Service (ETS) services ran on these tracks in the same year. While the project was conceived as early as 2002, it was only in 2014 that the stretch of rail between Ipoh and Padang Besar was double-tracked and electrified, with ETS services beginning in 2015.

Under the banner of the KTM ETS, electrified trains have been running on these tracks at speeds of 140 km/h, connecting key Malaysian cities on the west coast in dramatically reduced travel times. Yet, the modernization of the railways in Malaysia has been far from seamless. While many projects have materialized, others have been delayed in the face of execution challenges, even though plans have long been in the pipeline. For instance, the electrification and double-tracking of the Sentul–Batu Caves route started in 2006 and was completed four years later in 2010 at a cost of RM 515 million (Weng 2006). In another example, the electrification and double-tracking of the 179 km Rawang–Ipoh route were earmarked for completion in 2003, but only materialized in 2008.[3] Other projects

that have suffered from delays include 'the RM 12.5 billion Ipoh-Padang Besar and RM 3.45 billion Seremban-Gemas projects … originally scheduled for completion in 2013 and 2012 respectively, but each of these projects experienced a year-long delay in completion' (Ming et al. 2018: 30). The various upgrading projects across the vast railway network required a huge investment of capital. Ming et al. (2018: 30) note that 'the entire double tracking and electrification project from Padang Besar to Johor Bahru is expected to incur a total cost of RM 36 to 40 billion to the federal government'.

The efforts to modernize the Gemas–Johor Bahru section of KTM tracks have been in the public limelight and mired in a series of controversies and delays. The first phase of the double-tracking and electrification project in Gemas–Padang Besar was completed in 2013 (Hutchinson and Zhang 2020) while the final phase was completed in November 2015. But the Gemas–Johore Bahru section was the last portion of the West Coast Line to be upgraded. This project, which is currently in progress, had been plagued by several delays 'due to land acquisition issues along the route' (Khoo 2018), although the plan was conceived in 2009. At the time, contracts were awarded to Global Rail Sdn Bhd and its Chinese partner, China Intraglobe, which proposed completing the work for RM 5 billion. This did not materialize as well and the contract was then offered to the China Railway, but which also failed. These failures related to the issue of what percentage stake local and international companies would have in the contract

**Figure 6.1.** Electric fencing on the boundary of Sri Meenakshi Sundereswarar Temple, Sentul, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

for a joint venture, even though earlier decisions on this had been reached in 2001. According to Lee:

> the apportioning of job responsibilities in the double-tracking project has been fixed. Local participation is to be confined to project management and civil works while foreign partners are to benefit from consultancy services and supplies contracts. (2001: 2)

Despite these lingering issues, with the YTL Corporation coming on board in 2018, the local arm of the joint venture, the Johor Bahru–Gemas project finally moved forward. The joint venture between the China Railway Construction Company (CRCC)[4] and SIPP-YTL secured the prized contract that had eluded several railway construction entities. Initially, the contract was awarded to the following Chinese companies in October 2016: China Railway Construction Company (CRCC, 40%), China Railway Engineering Corporation (CERC, 30%) and China Communication Construction Company (CCCC, 30%). However, in the absence of a local partner, the project was politicized and stalled. After multiple protracted delays, the electrification and double-tracking drive of this stretch began belatedly in 2018 and is ongoing. The project was expected to be completed by the end of 2022 at a staggering cost of RM 9.5 billion (Hutchinson and Zhang 2020)[5] but completion is now projected to mid-2023. On this stretch, the modernizing work has included: laying electrical cables; conversion from single to double track; replacement of diesel locomotives with high-speed electric trains; enhancement of freight volumes in providing connectivity to Port Klang and Tanjung Pelepas, and increasing passenger and commuter traffic and cutting travel time. Another key feature was the introduction of modern signalling systems and the removal of level crossings. Traditionally, wooden sleepers were used across the railway network. These were gradually replaced by concrete sleepers and the aim was for total replacement on all segments of the West Coast and East Coast Lines in due course.

In contrast, the single-tracked KTM East Coast Line has neither been double-tracked nor electrified. It continues to utilize its original level crossings and token signalling from the colonial era with diesel locomotives that haul trains at maximum speeds of 80–90 km/h. Instead, what has received considerable publicity and funding is the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which was planned as a standard gauge, double-track railway link connecting Port Klang to Kota Bharu in the northeastern state of Kelantan via Putrajaya in Kuala Lumpur. The objective was to connect the east coast states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan with the key economic regions on the west coast and to carry both freight and passengers. The project was approved in 2016 and it was reported that this project to build a 538.5 km railway line 'is being financed by China as a part of its Belt and Road

Initiative' (Anonymous 2017) and would begin in 2017. However, in the last few years, the project has been affected by changes in government and the network itself has been realigned and extended to a total of 665 km, as the work is scheduled for completion by December 2026.

Despite these massive transformations over half a century, Ming et al. (2018) are not optimistic about the future of the KTM network in Malaysia, given in their view its relatively limited financial performance and the operational challenges the company faces. They call on the Malaysian government to reconsider 'the benefits of increasing rail traffic, both passenger as well as freight' (2018: 42) and propose 'reducing carbon emissions' in the larger cause of climate change. They also highlight that the modernization of railways in Malaysia has not kept abreast of the global best practices with regard to sustainable development and that the authorities have not addressed environmental concerns in modernizing the railway network. Despite this negative report card, there is little evidence at this point that the modernization projects of railway networks in Malaysia will be slowed down. Beyond these financial calculations and issues of environmental degradation, the railway networks constitute a key element of the contemporary transportation system and are indispensable to everyday movements across the country.

Despite the fact that KTM ties were severed with Singapore by July 2011, the KTM story remains incomplete without a narrative about developments in the island's railway landscape following independence. In 1965, Singapore left the Federation of Malaya, attaining independent nation status. However, as per the terms of the separation, the FMSR retained possession of its railways on the island and the lands on which its tracks were situated – and trains continued to run from Singapore northwards to Malaysia. Notably, since the 1970s, the Malaysian government has attempted to undo the deep historical KTM links with Singapore. In recent decades, this arrangement has been the cause of numerous political disagreements between the government authorities in Singapore and Malaysia, often hitting a raw nerve on both sides. This peculiar agreement – where a railway network owned by one government literally runs through lands of another nation – has surfaced in controversial discussions about territorial sovereignty, land ownership and national economic development plans.

Three important historical moments stand out in processing this unique situation: 1918, 1990 and 2010. First, on 25 October 1918, according to the terms of the Singapore Railway Transfer Ordinance, 217 hectares of land (stretching over 20–30 km) in Singapore was leased for use by the FMS. The lands on which the FMSR tracks were laid were leased from the Straits Settlements to the FMSR for 999 years. This stretch of leased land was meant strictly for use by the railways. According to the terms of the contract, if the land was used for any other purpose, it would have to be returned to the Straits Settlements, without cost (Devadas

2021; Nathan 2002). Strangely, this part of history seems to have been occluded in contemporary discussions, leading to misplaced claims and counterclaims about land ownership and sovereignty on both sides.

The next key moment which unsettled this longstanding arrangement came on 27 November 1990, when the leadership of both countries signed a Points of Agreement (POA) and agreed 'to depart from the 1918 Railway Ordinance' (Nathan 2002: 400). The Malaysian authorities offered to vacate the 26 km of railway land, with the agreement that both sides would jointly redevelop the railway lands, with Malaysia holding a majority 60% stake. This plan seemed sound in theory, but key disagreements prevented its execution. The Malaysian position was that the POA could be actualized only when the KTM services stopped at the Tanjong Pagar Station, without stating a clear timeline for this. Another factor for Malaysia was the 'fear that it might eventually be forced to give proprietary control over some or all of KTM's land in Singapore' (Nathan 2002: 401).

Furthermore, Malaysia chose to retain its customs and immigration point at Tanjong Pagar in the middle of the island rather than at Woodlands close to the Malaysian border where Singapore moved its customs, immigration and checkpoint in July 1995. Devadas notes the peculiarity of this move: 'passengers had the bizarre experience of being granted legal entry to Malaysia at Tanjong Pagar before legally exiting Singapore at Woodlands' (2021). There seemed to be no political will to resolve these differences, even at the highest levels of leadership.[6] However, in 2010, the moment of reckoning did arrive when a new generation of political leaders agreed to honour the terms of the POA drafted two decades earlier. The new agreement was for Singapore to exchange railway lands leased to the FMSR and KTM at Tanjong Pagar, Bukit Timah, Kranji and Woodlands with Malaysia for other land parcels of the same value in Singapore. Kassim noted the irony of this situation, especially for Singapore:

> So what was legally supposed to be returned for free will now largely be paid for by Singapore – at a price that is now the subject of mutual valuation and final negotiations. A Malaysian paper, *The Star*, reported that a valuation exercise last year estimated the total land value to be up to S$4bil (RM9.5bil). (2010: 2)

Observers agreed that Singapore seemed to be on the losing side of the bargain. But the deal was sealed in a spectacular, theatrical mode, as the Sultan of Johor drove the last train out of Tanjong Pagar Station on 30 June 2011. The next day, the railway station founded in Singapore in 1932 was permanently closed. Subsequently, all Singapore rail and customs operations were moved to the Woodlands Train Checkpoint. This brought eighty years of railway history in Singapore to an end, severing the island nation-state from rail connectivity with

its northern neighbour. Moving to the next phase swiftly, the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) published a notice in Singapore's local media announcing the dismantling of the railways in Singapore:

> From 1 Jul to 17 Jul 2011, minor works will be carried out at the Bukit Timah Railway Station and the railway crossings at Kranji Road, Sungei Kadut Avenue, Choa Chu Kang Road, Stagmont Ring, and Gombak Drive. Members of the public should avoid these work areas which will be cordoned off … Works to remove the railway tracks along the rest of the former railway line, except for the 3 km stretch from Rifle Range Road to the Rail Mall, will commence from 18 July 2011. The removal works include the clearance of minor buildings, sleepers, tracks, cables, gates, posts and debris around the various sites from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands. Other items to be removed include railway equipment, such as signal lights, level crossings, controllers and traffic lights. The removal works are to be fully completed by 31 December 2011. (Singapore Land Authority and Urban Redevelopment Authority 2011)

In 1932, Sir Cecil Clementi – who had boasted about the rail connectivity of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, which he thought would stand for perpetuity – could not have known that this would end less than a century later. The latter was a historic moment and captured the imagination of Singapore's rail enthusiasts and the general public, with an outpouring of nostalgia, passion and emotions about the end of an era.[7] Moving forward to 2015, the KTMB terminated 'all long-distance passenger trains in Singapore' (Anonymous 2015b), thus ending international train rides at the Woodlands Station in Singapore. Instead, a commuter shuttle service between Johor Bahru and Woodlands was introduced, crossing the causeway in less than five minutes, making seven round trips daily. Additionally, regarding the plans for a high-speed rail between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, an agreement was reached in 2016 between the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong. This 330 km railway initiative had been a part of Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme. While there was considerable enthusiasm and commitment to this project (Barrow 2016), this was derailed by political disagreements and was finally cancelled in 2021.

Following the removal of the rail tracks from Singapore, the declaration and preservation of its route as Singapore's 'Rail Corridor' have been hailed by Singapore's heritage communities, environmental activists and railway enthusiasts alike. The Tanjong Pagar station building is now 'protected', having been declared a national monument by Singapore, and thus will not fall prey to redevelopment and urban renewal plans. However, a new mass rapid transit station

is being built at the now-closed Tanjong Pagar Station and is expected to be completed by 2025. The station master's house and railway staff quarters at Bukit Timah station have been refurbished under the auspices of the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the National Parks Board, to be preserved as heritage projects. On 1 July 2022, these sites were declared a 'community node' and a railway-themed café, '1932 Story', housed in the former railway staff quarters, was opened opposite the old Bukit Timah Railway Station building.

Given the long history of the co-presence of the railway and religious infrastructures in Malayan regions that has been documented in this project, it is worth asking the following questions: how were these infrastructures oriented to each other and with what consequences? What have been the effects of emplacing religion within the universe of railways in moments of colonial and postcolonial modernities? I argue that colonial railways in British Malaya had a slight head start in being conceived and built first. The lands surrounding railway quarters, stations and yards were made sacred through the efforts of railway employees, principally its labour, soon after, but just barely so. It would be accurate to state that religious and railway infrastructures in the colonial period were produced *almost concurrently*. As discussed earlier, the colonial authorities were driven by instrumental motives to accommodate the desires of railway employees to establish places of worship. But more than a century later, a different kind of postcolonial modernization project had to contend with the prior presence of long-established sacralized railway landscapes in Malaysia and Singapore.

## Urban Modernity Meeting Religious Worlds

The theme of overlapping, intersecting secular and religious worlds is explored evocatively in Mukul Kesavan's 1995 novel *Looking through Glass*. I was led to this text when reading M. Aguilar's important work *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (2011). In his novel, Kesavan re-creates the pathos of the 1947 partition of British India, grounding the plot, characters and the travails of everyday life at a fictitious railway station. His positioning of a mosque 'between the railway tracks' (Kesavan 1995: 188) utilized as a narrative device was as striking as it was effective. In this imagined railway landscape, Kesavan locates the mosque 'precisely between platforms one and two, so conspicuously out of place that it was almost invisible' (Kesavan 1995: 188). In a key passage from the novel, the protagonist observes the goings on at the mosque, perched on an overbridge, as he strains to hear what the *maulaana* (Urdu, respected Muslim leader) is saying to his congregation. However, he only catches fragments of his discourse because 'a shunting locomotive thundered past platform four' (ibid.: 189) and the sounds of a 'whistling train' (ibid.) drowned out the *maulaana*'s (Arabic: teacher, scholar) voice. This novel expresses the

ordinariness of juxtaposing profane and sacred domains typically thought of as oppositional and incommensurate, and problematizes the binary (Aguilar 2011: 98) – a view that resonates with the perspective adopted here. What is an imagined, fictitious reality of a 'railway mosque' in this novel represents the lived experiences of Indian, Hindu railway labour in Malaya, whose efforts produced sacralized railway premises and engendered the interface of religious structures and the railways as symbols of modernity and mobility (Aguilar 2011).

Speaking more broadly, whether religions can be grounded in contemporary urban cityscapes and those of the future – and how both are reimagined consequently – are questions that have engaged scholars globally (Bunnell and Goh 2018; Poon 2008; Siemiatycki 2005). For example, Poon's (2008) work on Guangzhou city shows the tussle over urban spaces between the Chinese government's modernization projects and the religious communities' desire for manifesting religiosity publicly in urban landscapes. Poon demonstrates how individuals can reclaim public city spaces by assigning them alternative meanings and symbolism – something that is aligned with my ethnographic work on similar themes in urban Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. In another instance, my research from Singapore has highlighted unconventional, alternative, 'third' spaces – public roads, sports stadiums, swimming pools, community halls, former movie theatres (Sinha 2008), shop houses, homes and hidden parcels of state land (Sinha 2005) – that religious practitioners colonize and infuse with religious meaning, even if only momentarily (Sinha 2016). As such, these efforts *do* disturb and destabilize the precisely delineated spatial boundaries drawn by policy makers and bureaucrats across sharply marked secular and sacred sites.

In this context, the case of the Sri Maha Sakthi Mohambigai Amman Temple, which carries the postal address 'Mid Valley Megamall, Kuala Lumpur, 58000', is edifying for several reasons. The backstory is that the site on which a new mall was to be built held six hundred homes of poor families, ten private homes and a Hindu temple (Chu 2018). The IGB Corp Bhd, charged with this construction project in the 1990s, acquired the residential sites through rehousing and compensation, but made the rather unusual decision to retain the temple and its Bodhi tree within the new mall. Instead of being demolished, the temple was rebuilt on a bigger site of 30,000 sq ft and the developers even sponsored its construction (ibid.). The mall was redesigned to incorporate this popular place of worship, which was believed by devotees to be highly efficacious. M.K. Sen, the Managing Director of the Mid Valley Megamall, persuaded the largely non-Indian and non-Hindu board of directors to keep the temple in the mall. He considered this to be the 'most challenging and heart-wrenching project, but also the most fulfilling' (ibid.). Not only this, according to Sen, the subsequent financial success of the mall was also attributed to the presence of this sacred site within its premises (ibid.). The future of the temple was secured as it was given a lease

of ninety years and the rent to be paid by the temple community was fixed at a mere RM 10 per month (ibid.). The newly built mall did open in 2000 and the 'temple in the mall' model has been touted as the successful integration of commercial, secular, sacred and spiritual realms. Kozlowski et al. (2020) are optimistic that for the Malaysian capital city, 'elements of urban infrastructure could work as an essential mediator 'beyond community', allowing inclusive social structures to be built, despite cultural and religious tensions existing within the city'. The Mid Valley solution certainly exemplifies this and has been often invoked as a model since it opened, even in recent disputes between developers and temple custodians.[8]

A similar tale envelops the case of the Sri Marathadi Muneeswaran Temple in Singapore. This is another good counterexample to the idea that urban modernity must necessarily be hostile and antithetical to religious sensibilities. This temple, originally built in the neighbourhood of Singapore's Changi Prison in Jalan Bena, was demolished in 2004 and an industrial, factory complex was built in its place. Over the years, the company reported financial losses and rumours were rife about strange, inexplicable sounds and sightings in the newly constructed buildings. The North Indian owners of the company sought out the temple, which had been moved into the Housing and Development Board (HDB) apartment of its caretakers and implored them to return to the Jalan Bena premises. Going the extra mile, the new owners allocated space for rebuilding the temple on the exact same spot it had originally occupied, and also provided a separate entrance for devotees to access the premises as well as some financial support. Strikingly, even after the temple had been demolished in 2004, devotees returned to the site to conduct prayers and make offerings of flowers and fruits in the belief that the deity was still present there.

For devotees, this episode signalled that the deity Muṉīsvaraṉ had 'come home', attesting to his will and staying power. Interestingly, since the temple's 'homecoming', the company reported commercial success, reinforcing the devotees' belief in the deity's powers and his wish to return to his favoured spot. The 'temple in an industrial site' was still standing and thriving when I visited in late 2021, sustained by a committed community of devotees. In the most recent twist in the tale, this industrial complex has been sold and the temple was asked to vacate the premises yet again. Not surprisingly, the temple and its deity have now been moved into another industrial space in the eastern part of Singapore, with a grand opening ceremony conducted in the new site by the temple custodians in April 2022. In a somewhat ominous tone, the devotees have now declared that the deity will not return to the site it occupied for almost seven decades.

Remarkably, these two examples illustrate possibilities for emplacing socio-cultural-religious worlds in projects of urban modernity. Their success and longevity against the odds, expresses that it is occasionally possible for profane and

religious agendas to be aligned through compromise, cooperation and interdependence, and that pockets of spirituality can and do coexist within modernist frames. Nonetheless, these are rare instances, even if they have become something of urban legends.

In Singapore and Malaysia, land acquisitions by the state for infrastructural projects, including around railway premises, are not recent events. In the newly created nation-states of Singapore and Malaysia, political leaders and urban planners prioritized the need for economic development in the name of modernity. However, the discourse of a forward-looking, progressive orientation has confronted the built environment of living spaces, including secular and religious structures. Thus, in a neoliberal framework, compromises over clearing and acquisition of land earmarked for development have been few and far between. Religious structures were hardly prioritized in development agendas, even though religion is recognized as a key element in these multireligious societies. In both contexts, state policies on 'rational' land use for the larger public good translated into aggressive urban renewal programmes with land clearances and wholesale demolition of pre-existing structures, not discriminating between buildings used for religious or secular purposes.[9]

Drawing on my recent ethnographic work, I present four outcomes of the railway and religious infrastructural encounters in postcolonial moments: demolition and resettlement of temples and temple communities which were marked as 'squatters'; survival of temples in railway premises, but with reconfigured physical boundaries; negotiations over rental sums to be paid to RAC; and, finally, a determined resistance (albeit a brief one) to railway eviction and removal notices.

The first of these consequences relates to the clearing of lands around railway premises, removal of squatters and land acquisitions for the double-tracking project in Malaysia, which can be dated back to the 1970s. These efforts have intensified over time and have lingered in contemporary moments. Railway modernization projects saw the demolition of old railway stations and the construction of new ones, with land acquisitions and the eviction of communities in and around railway premises. Removing 'railway squatter communities' from railway lands in Singapore and Malaysia has been controversial and has attracted public attention, even as the 'problem' of railway squatters has persisted through waves of railway modernization. In Malaysia, the Emergency (Clearance of Squatters) Regulations (ESCR) of 1969 gave 'power to local authorities to enter any state land … to demolish squatter's [*sic*] hut' (Jalil, Maidin and Salleh 2018: 2). Together with this, the Land Acquisition Act (1960) and the National Land Code (1965) (Matsui and Lee 2003) accorded absolute and non-negotiable powers to local authorities to evict illegal squatters on railway lands and to destroy immovable properties therein:

> Under Regulation 4 of the ESCR, local authority [*sic*], its agents or servant [*sic*] may enter into such lands by day or night to demolish any squatter hut on such lands. The authority is empowered to remove any person or movable property in any squatter hut and to demolish any of the hut. Under this regulation, there is no requirement to serve any notice to the evictee on the State Land. (Ibid.: 26)

According to the Railways Act 1991, 'all properties and assets of the railway [*sic*] in Peninsular Malaysia are vested in the Railway Asset Corporation' (Jalil, Maidin and Salleh 2018: 21). This amounts to an oversight of a 'total area of 30,777.41 acres' (ibid.) across the country. KTM owns a significant amount of railway reserve land, which is defined in terms of the distance of 66 ft from the centre of the tracks, extending to both sides. These land segments on either side of the railway tracks, which are meant to be kept clear for maintenance and safety operations, are known as railway reserve lands and no encroachment is permitted here. However, it has been observed that over time, these spaces have become 'a place of residences [*sic*] and worship, and commercial activities' (ibid.: 23). The more nationalist of these discourses, which privilege economic efficiency, have argued that the illegal occupation of railway lands is counterproductive from the perspective of development agendas and leads to the loss of potential profits through less than maximum utilization of the lands (Jalil, Dahlan and Arshad 2018). If Kesavan's 'railway mosque' had existed in the real world of railways in Singapore and Malaysia, it would have been classified as a 'railway squatter' – an obstacle to be eliminated.

Despite this assortment of legal mechanisms and procedures, the evacuation of land surrounding railway premises has been exceedingly difficult for the authorities. Despite concerted efforts, it was reported that the number of squatters on railway land remained 'high' even in 2018, with the authorities noting the urgency of finding appropriate solutions to the 'escalating numbers of railway squatters on public lands' (ibid.: 23). KTM authorities have been embroiled in numerous protracted legal challenges to the eviction and relocation notices they have issued, with disputes arising over compensation. The phenomenon of railway squatting has been coupled with the notion of illegal occupation of these lands. This provides justification for railway authorities to act to evacuate and reclaim these lands, all within the framework of legislative and administrative provisions. Jalil, Maidin and Salleh note with surprise the 'government's tolerance' for squatters occupying state land well into the twenty-first century, explaining that this possibly was due to the high 'costs of resettlement and eviction of squatters' (2018: 24). Others have also noted that the reluctance to move on squatters relates not just to the politicization of squatter settlements (Yusof et al. 2004), but also the prohibitive cost of providing alternate housing to displaced squatters.

Research on the subject suggests that the emergence of 'squatters' in Malaysia has a long history, dating back to the 1870s (Johnstone 1983). Others have traced the squatter problem to the inadequate provision of housing for labour working in the mines and public works departments by the British (Jalil, Maidin and Salleh 2018) and the poor agrarian communities. Problems relating to inadequate and unaffordable housing have escalated post the Second World War (Matsui and Lee 2003) and continue even in the present, with major Malaysian cities dealing with significant squatter communities. Matsui and Lee cite a 1999 survey, which reported that 'the actual number of squatters in Malaysia (except Selangor)' (ibid.: 175) was a staggering 409,792, about 1–2% of the total Malaysian population.

The 'problem' of squatters on railway land in Singapore has been in the public eye since at least the 1970s. The diplomatic disputes, claims and counterclaims over these lands, which hosted the tracks of first the FMSR, then the MR and, finally, KTM, have been popularly thought of as *belonging* to Malaysia. This has been the perception on both sides of the Causeway and is a view that has even been erroneously expressed by some politicians. The common sense in Singapore has been that since these lands are Malaysian property, Singapore laws do not apply here. Furthermore, since the territories are far from the seat of governance in Malaysia, enforcing Malaysian laws here was almost impossible. As such, these spaces have been perceived as free for all to use. The reserve lands alongside the tracks – also leased to the railway authorities – have been appropriated by residents of Singapore for housing, farming, raising poultry and religious purposes, as seen in the building of Chinese and Hindu temples. This is true for the functioning KTM tracks as well as the abandoned railway lines in Singapore (Lai 2010, 2011).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s with the islands' own urban renewal projects, Singapore too faced the 'problem' of squatters on railway lands and the KTM authorities had to deal with their long-term presence on railway lands, in anticipation of development plans for the railways. In one example, the *Singapore Monitor* contained an article from 1985 in which Abdul Rahim Osman, the Director of Commerce of MR, was cited as saying that 'squatters living on railway land would "definitely have to vacate"'. The piece also noted that 'some of these families have lived beside the track for as long as 20 years' and their living quarters 'are less than 10 m from the track' (ibid.). Osman justified this action on grounds of safety and the danger posed to families living close to the tracks. However, he offered another reason for clearing railway lands: 'we also have to make way for development – such as building of a double track and relining tracks at some point' (ibid.). He signalled the finality of this outcome, adding that: 'We have already given notice to most squatters in Malaysia to quit the premises. It is just a matter of time before the Singapore squatters will be given notices to clear the railway land too' (ibid.).

**Figure 6.2.** Demolition in progress, the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Mengkibol, 2017. © Ravinran Kumaran, used with permission

Unsurprisingly, 'railwaymen temples' on railway lands in both countries were also considered to be 'squatters', albeit of a different kind. Many of the early temples built by railway labour along the stretch of the tracks have been demolished, leaving no material traces. Some have been abandoned over time and claimed by other caretakers, moving into nonrailway hands. Yet, numerous others have been moved away from their original sites. Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman, Paloh, Johore is a good example of the latter. This temple was famously sited on the old Paloh Railway Station, which started operations in 1909. The temple was demolished in 2013, long before the Paloh Railway Station itself began to be upgraded in 2019–20. I recall the temple on the platform on earlier train journeys and visited the old station several times in my recent trips before it was demolished. I was able to document physical traces of the temple's once-upon-a-time presence on the station platform visually. During my 2017 field trip, I witnessed the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple at Mengkibol being demolished (Figure 6.2).

Just as the railway modernization project unfolded in waves, so have the demolitions of religious structures on railway precincts. Temples along the Gemas–Johor Bahru stretch of the track have had a longer presence compared to those on the tracks that were double-tracked and electrified much earlier. Of those that have shifted due to urban renewal and modernization projects, many had expressed a preference for being relocated to railway premises. Indeed, I was surprised to find that many of the 'affected' and relocated temples still occupied KTM lands, even along the sections that have been double-tracked and electrified.

Removing railway squatter communities has severely impacted homes, farms and places of worship, and individual lives and livelihoods, with parties involved in long-term and difficult negotiations about adequate compensation over complete or partial demolitions and relocations (Matsui and Lee 2003). In one example, the temple committee of the Sri Vaitheesvarar Temple, Tampin, approached the district and land office in Alor Gajah to purchase the 20,000 sq ft of reserve land on which the temple is situated. This is an old temple that has survived the double-tracking project. The committee had the confidence to approach the authorities because it has legitimacy and legality, having registered the temple in 1966. Expectedly, they were directed to the KTM authorities to pursue their wish to purchase and own the land. This has not yielded the desired outcome and the temple continues to be a tenant, paying rent to the KTM authorities as per the terms of the TOL contract.

An account of land acquisitions, evictions and demolitions of housing and places of worship on railway premises is an integral part of KTM's modernization drive. These pre-existing sacralized landscapes were marked as obstacles that had to be removed, despite their politicization in many instances. The progressive development of railways was privileged in the rhetoric of

modernization, with the resolve to move and/or demolish all structures viewed as encroachments. In fact, authorities have cited the *problem* of railway squatters on the stretches of the KTM line as a key cause of numerous delays in efforts to modernize the railways. Evacuations have relied on legal instruments and have resorted to forcefully ejecting illegal occupants and demolishing places of worship, farms and residences.

A second effect of railway-religion infrastructural interface was somewhat unexpected given the logic and resolve of railway modernization efforts. My fieldwork revealed that many registered Malaysian Hindu temples that stood in the path of KTM's modernization project had in fact survived. I encountered some remarkable stories of how 'railwaymen temples' had *escaped* demolition or lost a only small portion of their premises, in a close brush with railway development schemes. I learnt that generally this was due to the involvement of surveyors and engineers from India, who were employed by IRCON and deployed on the ground to assess sites affected by track double tracking and electrification projects. These experts negotiated with temple representatives and I learnt that in practice, railway infrastructural paper plans were often reconfigured and tweaked to accommodate existing registered temples. I heard repeatedly that these engineering experts (possibly but not necessarily Hindu) were sympathetic to the plight of the temples in question and made efforts, within given constraints, to save them. My interlocutors shared that many of these engineers also worshipped at the temples when they surveyed sites and appreciated that for devotees these were spiritually energized spaces. According to my interlocutors, the IRCON personnel were willing to rework development plans, altering and shifting the course of rivers, drains, tunnels, bridges and the positioning of the tracks – often by very small margins – to preserve as much of the temple space as possible. I encountered many of these temples along the west coast tracks that had already been upgraded. These were instances of modernist, technological projects that ended up accommodating the temple community's right to retain places of worship on lands marked as sacred, albeit through specific human interventions and perhaps due to a shared religious worldview. For example, Prakash from the Gemas temple shared that the land housing its Nākam'mā shrine and the storage area had to be only 'slightly relocated' during the double-tracking and electrification project. Other than this, the temple survived the railway modernization project, in part due to intercessions by Indian railway engineers and land surveyors who, he said, 'figured out' how to 'save the temple'. In another example, Vijay, a graphic designer in his fifties from Kluang, worked in an NGO and fought to save the temple communities living in the neighbourhood of Kampung India. He too noted the help and advice of an 'Indian officer' who tried to help temples that had been served demolition notices:

> actually, there was an Indian officer involved in the project. He was from India; he has retired already. But he came down to Johor, it was his last project. He came down, he tried to avoid disturbing all these temples – in the upgrading project. He said, if your temple, like we want to keep it, you should keep it within your boundary, then we will leave it. He called every chairman and secretary of the village and temple and he personally interviewed and said that. It is not like he is Indian … but he wanted to help. He said do not do more building of the temple outside the boundaries. He already gave an unwritten warning. But people did not listen to that.

Then there were stories of the well-meaning RAC or KTM officials – Chinese, Malay and Indian – who were understanding and helped the temples to continue to occupy KTM lands by making adjustments to development plans, often successfully. I was also told that some KTM officials themselves had witnessed the 'power of the temple' and were uncomfortable with 'disturbing' spiritual forces on these sites, and so refused to order demolition of temples. Vasanti, from the Muneeswaran Temple in Kampung India, which was given multiple relocation notices, noted the power of the goddess even over the railway modernization project:

> There is one story of a consultant here: this Kuala Lumpur consultant was the one in charge, Marimuthu – he came in 2012. He said Am'maṉ is very strong here. He said he will adjust alignments to keep the temple here when they started the project. They brought him back from retirement. He said 'Am'maṉ brought me back and I am working on this project'.

Vasanti believed firmly that the temple had managed to evade the persistent demolition notices due to Am'maṉ's power. However, I learnt that the four temples that were housed in Kampung India were ultimately demolished following the commencement of the double-tracking and electrification of the Gemas–Johor Bahru line in 2018. The registered temples amongst these were given alternative sites and some compensation and have moved, while the those without legal status remain homeless.

The third outcome of encounters between religion and modernist forces is tied to the complexities of negotiations with railway authorities over the obligatory rent to be paid under the terms of the TOL. This emerged as a strong refrain in my conversations with numerous temple caretakers. The practice of rent collection has a long history in the Malayan context, where railway authorities have functioned as landlords. At the time of my fieldwork between 2017 and 2019, these amounts that were to be paid to KTM varied considerably,

mediated by the size of the occupied site. However, overall, these amounts have gradually increased over the years. For instance, Mohanan, the caretaker of the Muniswarar Temple in Kamunting, shared that in the past, he used to pay a small sum of RM 10 per month, but in recent years he had been asked to pay RM 250 per month, which is a strain on temple finances. Similarly, Nalan, the caretaker of the Railway Sri Muneeswarar Temple in Tanjong Rambutan, claimed that this piece of land was 'given by the British to the railway workers' and the temple had 'stopped paying rent thirty years ago'. The authorities dispute his claim over the site and have served notice for the temple to be moved. Although he had been paying KTM RM 110 per year, he stopped payments when the amount became exorbitant. Nalan refused to either move or pay the high amounts requested, leading to something of a stalemate. This pattern was evident in numerous temples I visited during my fieldwork.

To some extent, these refusals destabilized the authority of the RAC as a rent collector. Given these refusals, the RAC appears not to function as an effective and efficient landlord, even though the terms of the TOL contract were clearly not honoured by temple custodians. It appears that apart from sending repeat notices, which many temple managers and caretakers routinely ignored, the RAC officials have so far not taken firmer action in response. My fieldwork data suggest that in the case of registered temples, the authorities appeared to exercise greater caution. This is due to several high profile cases where public contestations and legal battles with RAC have dragged on for decades. Subhas, a key member of Tumpat's Kuil Muthu Mariamman's leadership, shared his difficult negotiations with the railway authorities over payment of rent. He stated that several ensuing disputes are yet to be resolved and the situation has reached a kind of bureaucratic stand-off:

> They [temple founders] managed, of course, to get some property. What we call TOL property, which is now not the temple land … slightly to the left, where we have the hall and the *kurukkaḷ*'s [Brahmin priest's] house that is on railway land … we are renting that from Malayan Railways. The rest of it is owned by the temple. We are entitled to it. It is a railway temple, whichever way you look at it. Its history is intertwined with the railway. So far, we are paying them RM 10 a year. For donkey's years. Several years back they doubled it to RM 20 a year. Now, suddenly they made a revision and are demanding something like RM 250 a month. It is the RAC. So I fought them. I am no longer the president; I am still an elder … so I am also sort of in charge of communicating with the railway authorities and after ding dong here, ding dong there. Finally, I persuaded my boys to agree to RM 250 per annum and not prolong it. But something went wrong, in the sense that the technicalities are not going to work and

> we have not signed anything. So for the purposes of rental, we have not paid rental for several years … for about four years.

Subhas, like many other railwaymen temples custodians across Malaysia, is embroiled in a longstanding bureaucratic tussle with RAC over the annual rents to be paid:

> That is when I had a fight with RAC. I sort of accused them of bad faith. They were picking on us. So, imagine the … you work out the ratio of the increase. From RM 10 a year, all the way to RM 250 a month. What kind of mathematics is that – you know? So, I accused them of bad faith mildly. They said no, no … and said, in Perak, there was a temple that had agreed to such and such amount. So I said, I do not know anything about that. But actually, I believe that in our case, there was an error of calculation by the officials who looked at our case … sitting in the office somewhere. They thought … I think they made a mistake that we were sitting on 15,000 sq m of their property. When, in fact, it is only 15,000 sq ft, you see. When they worked it out, they might have gotten scared, 'what, so much land' and all that? So they revised the rental based on that … But we already clarified and said OK to RM 250 a year but we are waiting to sign the final papers.

On a 2017 field trip to Ipoh, I heard a similar story from Kumaran, who started his 33-year-long career with KTM as a porter and then became a linesman. Although he was originally from Kuala Lumpur, I met him as the caretaker of the 'more than hundred-year-old' Muniyandi Temple in Kuala Kangsar. He told me that this temple was originally built near the tracks by railway labourers and the temple site was impacted by the double-tracking project of the West Coast Line. Kumaran had long fought the legal removal notices he received, but in 2008 had no choice but to move to new premises, near the newly built Kuala Kangsar Railway Station. He also reported 'some tensions' over rent payments. He shared that the temple used to pay a rent of RM 10 per month in the old location, but he was asked to pay RM 250 per month when he moved the temple to the new site. When I interviewed him, the registered temple had not paid any rent for the past two years. He was thankful that the temple lease had nonetheless been renewed, but he admitted that the temple community felt vulnerable, given the unsettled rents and administration tensions with the authorities.

Then there were cases of temples that had been served demolition and relocation notices, but it was the KTM authorities that refused to accept the rents the temple managers wanted to pay, in an explicit denial of existing TOL contracts with the temples. For instance, Palani, from the Sri Sivalingeswarar Temple

along the railway tracks in Johor Bahru, shared that the temple had been given notice to move many times since the 1990s, when the railways were starting to replace wooden sleepers with concrete ones. But he said that he was thankful that this work was supervised by 'engineers from India', who decided that the temple need not be moved. Thus, although the temple *lost* some of its land during the course of this work, the surveyors argued that the 'tracks could go around the temple'. Palani added that the KTM authorities had refused to accept rent since the 1990s, hoping that this would compel the temple to move. But he added casually 'they keep sending warning notices and letters', which he said he just 'ignored'. The temple was still standing in April 2019 when I visited. Given that this is a 'properly registered temple', Palani expects compensation in the form of an alternative temple site and funds if he is forced to move when the double-tracking and electrification project eventually reaches Johor Bahru.

Finally, I documented some explicit resistance by temple communities in the face of removal and demolition notices. Here I share details of two such cases I documented during fieldwork. The first of these comes from the Kampung India community in Mengkibol, on KTM's West Coast Line, where homes of residents – human and divine – were earmarked for demolition during the double tracking and electrification drive along this section of the route. This was a controversial case involving the relocation of an entire village of sixty-two families (Chinese and Indian) and four Hindu temples, all defined as *illegal squatters* on railway lands, even though these premises, I was told, did not 'technically' encroach upon reserve railway lands as the following discussion clarifies. In 2017, I spoke to one key member of the community, Vasanti, who displayed a firm resolve to fight eviction notices:

> No other places fighting. We are the only ones fighting. The others were forced to accept. Of course, the unregistered ones have no choice. The Malaysian Hindu Centre is of no use … we will fight for the village. We still fight. Nobody helped. I was once a reporter … I wrote about this village. But no one came to help. They labelled me as the opposition. We sent a letter to Najib. He ask [*sic*] to stop everything till the elections. The local politicians were not willing to help. They were forcing people to leave.

Another member of the community, Vijay – who was also involved in this effort to save the village – shared that although 'the houses were far away from the railway tracks, the government still wanted to demolish them'. To help this effort, he founded an NGO called G-SKIM (Gelang Selamat Kampung India Mengkibol). He was disappointed that although they 'went up to Najib and to the highest level of Government and the Sultan of Johore, nothing happened'. He elaborated that it

was only in July 2017 that a Malay officer from the district land office in the area had offered to negotiate with the community. He proposed a plan for relocating the families that had been living in Kampung India for four generations (about eighty years). He described the plan as follows:

> So, there is a housing area that is developed right opposite the village, one road separating the village, 20 to 30 m away. So he came up with a suggestion: why not take the houses there – a win-win situation – just opposite the kampong … We went and discussed it with the villagers and they agreed. You know, by then, only eleven houses remained out of the sixty. The others were demolished. They took the compensation – each house, 42,000 ringgit – and went.

Vijay explained that the village residents were told that they had no right to compensation because they were considered squatters, even though their houses were not on railway land:

> Yes, they are considered squatters. But they were given permission by KTM to build the houses. The KTM land is only 66 ft from the left and right of the KTM tracks, from the centre of the tracks. Anything above that is state/government land. So, most of the village houses were 90 ft away … they were not within the 66 ft. So that is the reason we fought. Anything bounded by 66 ft, we cannot claim, it is naturally the KTM land. It is gazetted already.

This battle to save the village had been fought since 2012, but was eventually lost. The negotiations began in December 2011, when the village representatives met with officers from the district and land office. They were told initially that all the buildings and structures 'beyond 66 ft of the tracks' will be retained, but Vijay said 'they changed the story two weeks later'. The issue appeared in the news and was also politicized, given that these negotiations and contestations coincided with the Hindraf[10] movement in Malaysia. I learnt that one active participant from the Hindraf leadership had visited the village to 'join the fight'. Vasanti stated that journalists from Hindraf and *Malaysiakini*[11] had also published articles about the plight of the village. But these community spokespersons noted despondently that none of the local representatives of national political parties, such as the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), offered any assistance to save the temples or the village.

The clearing of these lands was in preparation for the electrification and double-tracking of the Gemas–Johor Bahru stretch of the KTM. This project had been

delayed for many years, but began in 2018 and about sixty percent of the work had been completed by October 2022. After five long years of fighting, many of the village residents caved in and accepted the offered compensation, either by way of alternative housing or cash, and moved on. The human residents of the village were not the only ones who were served removal notices. There were four Hindu temples, founded and maintained by the villagers, which stood in the way of the railway development efforts. At the time of my fieldwork in 2017, all four temples were intact in their original sites by the tracks and functioning. These temples declared a long presence in the area: the Muneeswaran Temple claimed a hundred-year-old history, as did the Lakshmi Ganapati Temple. Likewise, representatives of the Marathadi Nagakanni Temple and the Kaliamman Temple claim that these were built more than seventy-seven years ago. Speaking to the specific coordinates and legal standing of these temples, Vijay said:

> OK, these Nagakanni and Ganapati temples, they are far, they are above the 66 ft but the government still wants them to relocate … wants to move them out. But we are still fighting. For the Nagakanni Amman Temple, we are still fighting. Yeah, it is more than 100 ft away. The Ganapati Temple, the Maha Bhadrakaliamman Temple, also 90 ft away. Further away, you will see the *ayyā* temple built by the KTM workers – hundred years old. This one will definitely go. Yes, because too near. Unless God saves it.

Vijay recounted, with some irony, that the temples and homes were built in this area with the unofficial blessings of KTM officials in the old days:

> So, permission to build the temples was given by KTM. These people were not working with the KTM but they were living along the tracks. Those days they called these officers, the Indian labourers called them, *kampiturai*: officers working with KTM. Most of them were Ceylonese Tamil. So they built their temples and houses there. The *kampiturai* said 'if you want to come here, build your house – yes – but 100 ft away'. Because only 66 ft belonged to KTM. So these people – many from the nearby estates – came along to build the temples and houses near the tracks, after getting unwritten permission from these officers. So, this is the history of the *kampong*.

The official registration of the temples was another key issue in addition to whether these temples encroached on railway lands. However, Vijay argued that registration did bestow some legality and thus offered some room for negotiation, even if it did not guarantee absolute protection:

> Registration is everything. If I am from a registered temple, I can fight for it. All the temples here are registered. Only the ayyā temple is not registered. I told them to register five years ago. Now they have no choice – they have to go.

However, Vijay was under no illusions about the inevitability of these temple demolitions even with registration: 'of course they are going to proceed with it. That is definitely going to happen. But I do not know when'.

The second example of resisting the authorities is the rather high-profile case of the Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam in Singapore, the last and possibly the most unyielding of the railway squatters on the island. I first learned about this temple in January 2011 and conducted some fieldwork there over the next few years. I documented the premises and its surroundings visually, and interviewed the-then priest, temple caretakers and devotees. The temple then stood next to the existing KTM tracks and living quarters of Malayan railway workers. This structure was intriguingly close to a site where a small Muṉīyanti temple built in 1932, and to which the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth in Singapore traces its history. This unregistered temple occupied a plot of merely 30 sq m under a flyover at the intersection of Queensway and Portsdown Avenue. The temple, which had been active since 2009, had been sustained by a community of about a hundred regular devotees. It seems to have been named deliberately with the prefix *thaandavalam* (Tamil, 'rails'), signalling a clear link between the temple, its deity Muṉīsvaraṉ and the railways.

Although the temple custodians were aware that the temple occupied the site illegally, they formalized themselves through a management committee and engaged a part-time priest to perform regular prayers at the temple, sourcing logistical support – such as water and electricity – on their own. The temple caretakers shared that the temple was at least sixty years old and was built by railway workers housed in the nearby quarters. Over the years, I have learnt that the story of the temple's origins is marked by ambiguity and controversy. There seemed to be some clarity when I was able to determine the source of the black-and-white image on the book's cover in February 2022. I learnt that the 1932 Muṉīyanti temple in or around the same location was built by a gentleman, Dharmalingam[12] – a *mandore* with KTM – who lived with a large family in the nearby quarters. Yet, in a different version of the temple's history, another gentleman, Adaikalam Annathurai,[13] the temple's treasurer in 2016, shared in several statements he made to the local press that he had been associated with this temple since his teenage years. He added that when the temple became bigger and moved in the 1970s to a location nearby, the original structure was abandoned. Following this he said, with his friends, he 'stepped in' to care for it. The assertion of this direct link to the 1932 Muṉīyanti temple has been challenged

by the Sri Muneeswaran Temple, Commonwealth, which also claims a historical kinship with the old 1932 temple. To put it mildly, the three temples appear to share a complex relationship. Based on my 2022 interview with Sureshan, the son of Dharmalingam, the temple's founder, it would seem that the 1932 Mun̲īyanti temple, is claimed as a predecessor by two Mun̲īsvaran̲ temples built subsequently on the same site.

Even after the removal of the railway tracks from the island of Singapore, due to the historic 'land swap deal' between the Singaporean and Malaysian governments, this temple remained on the site it had claimed until 2017. After 1 July 2011, the land on which the temple sat was marked as state land[14] under the specific charge of the SLA, whose representatives had been negotiating with the temple community to move the temple. The temple's story came into the limelight *after* the tracks were removed. Numerous articles appeared in the press since 2011 when the temple was first given notice to relocate. The temple's refusal to move, its appeal to Members of Parliament and their intention to approach higher authorities, its Facebook appeal and campaign to 'save the railway shrine', and its ongoing tussle with the authorities all increased public interest in the temple.

For more than five years, the temple had been issued multiple notices and deadlines, and was eventually served with an 'encroachment advisory'. The temple authorities were asked 'to vacate the state land immediately' or face legal action and, ultimately, eviction. The temple community then stated a desire to either stay in the same location or be moved to a nearby site, given the historical connectedness of the temple with the railways. On the other hand, the SLA argued that the temple occupied state land illegally and inhabited 'land that is not zoned for religious use, but is part of the Rail Corridor, which will be redeveloped in the future' (Mokhtar 2016). It also cited 'public health and safety reasons' (ibid.) for moving the temple, given that a generator-supported gas cylinder was being used for cooking and lighting at the premises. While the SLA acknowledged the 'sensitivity of the issue', it argued that it had granted sufficient time for the temple to be relocated and that the temple's appeal had received due 'consideration' (ibid.). As such, the official position was that no further negotiations were possible on this matter.

In parleying with the temple, the SLA had involved the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB) to seek an amicable solution. However, these attempts were not successful. The HEB spokesperson shared that 'one of the Hindu temples offered to house the shrine's deity, but this was rejected by representatives who cited a difference in the observance of rituals' (ibid.). Interestingly, as part of this offer, the temple in question had suggested that they would even 'retain the deity's name' (Leow 2016) but the caretakers of

Sri Thaandavaalam Muneeswaran Aalayam were not persuaded. In the end, the latter temple had no choice but to move, finally acknowledging that it had no rights over this plot of state land. But the dogged determination of the temple community saw them hold out for five years, something that surprised the authorities as well as members of the public. The SLA shared publicly that other structures along this stretch of the KTM tracks, such as Chinese temples, had also been 'operating illegally' and 'were asked to move' (ibid.). According to the same report:

> the SLA has never had to issue a legal notice or go to the courts over such cases. In one case in 2011, an unauthorised Taoist shrine on State Land near Tanglin Halt and Commonwealth Drive was relocated to the Taoist Federation, in accordance with rituals. (Ibid.)

There was public admiration for the tenacity shown by the temple community in standing up to the authorities, who were criticized for their non-negotiable stance. At the same time, the ultimate demolition and removal of the temple were also predictable, given the fate of religious and secular structures in the history of urban renewal projects in Singapore.

While the discussion in this chapter has revealed moments of refusal and resistance as well as room for some negotiation and compromise with the authorities, there were obvious limits to all of these. Barring further delays, the entire KTM network on the West Coast Line and its various branch lines will have been double-tracked and electrified by mid-2023 altering the railway geography of the region completely. In the process, railway and state lands would have been cleared of remaining squatters, communities and material structures such as housing, places of worship and commercial sites. In this sense, postcolonial and technological modernity, augmented by state power and the force of a development narrative, would have only *seemingly* won the day, a discussion I elaborate in the concluding chapter.

Moving the discussion forward, I close this chapter with the notice that my research on 'railwaymen temples' and conversations with interlocutors surfaced topics that I had not anticipated at the start of my inquiries. These themes were related explicitly to the socioeconomic impoverishment of the minority Malaysian Indian community – many of whose ancestors were immigrant colonial labour who had *literally* built the country - and concerns about their economic future in a political context dominated by communal politics. Surprisingly, the emergent complex, thoughtful and impassioned discussions about race, religion and nationalist politics in the country were prompted as my interlocutors raised questions about the value of the research I was doing, beyond any academic merit.

## 'Is the Government Going to Do Anything for Us?'

Even though my research interlocutors were generous and helpful, and patiently answered my queries about temples on railway sites, almost all of them wanted to know why this research was important and what it would achieve. What was the point of my historical research on Malayan railways? Would the book based on my field research change material conditions for the Indian community in Malaysia? Could they expect government authorities to do anything for them? Like other ethnographers, I too encountered these questions consistently during my fieldwork, and I always attempted to give a response. Unsurprisingly, it had been far easier to explain the motivation for the research and its value to academic audiences, publishers, colleagues and students, and at conferences and seminars. I learnt very quickly that I confronted a bigger challenge in facing a tougher crowd with my interlocutors. My responses, such as 'I am trying to talk about railway labour who have been ignored', 'I am writing about ordinary people who built the railways and the temples' or 'It is important to tell these stories so that the future generations do not forget', were arguments that had sounded persuasive, meaningful and fresh within scholarly settings, but sounded hollow, feeble and ineffective, even to me as I articulated them to my interlocutors. In addition, I had not anticipated that my research interest in the history of the railways in Malaya would lead me to deliberations about ethnic and nationalist politics in contemporary Malaysia.

Of the many encounters of this nature, the one at the Vināyakar Temple at Tampin left a deep impression on me. I had arrived at the temple on one of our road journeys on a Sunday afternoon in February 2017. One of the temple custodians, Anand, was extremely generous with his time and showed us around the temple and the surrounding areas. We had walked into a community outreach event the temple had organized on this day. The committee members had invited teenagers and young adults from Indian families living in nearby estates and the larger neighbourhood to a workshop on garland making and flower arrangement. Anand requested that I speak to this group about my ongoing research. With some hesitation I agreed. However, as I shared my findings about the history of temples and railways, I struggled to strike the right chord with the audience, which was extremely respectful and heard me graciously. After I had finished, the youthful group was encouraged to share their views or ask me questions. It was clear that most listeners were only politely interested in what they had heard and some inquired about my field trips and what my research had demonstrated. But there were others who asked quite bluntly 'what is the point of talking about history … how is this going to change the lives of poor Tamils in Malaysia?' and 'How will your work help people like us?' Speaking honestly and candidly, I admitted that my research would indeed not change material conditions for

the Malaysian Indian community. I could only reiterate that it was important 'to not forget the contributions of Tamils to building Malaysia', that 'the labourers were the ones who built the first Hindu temples in the country' and that 'ordinary people's work is not remembered and this must be corrected'. My responses continued to be met with a good dose of scepticism and I knew that I had not had a good day in court.

However, I was gratified that a handful of young women, who were teacher trainees, seemed somewhat interested in my latter replies. The women shared that their family members – grandfathers, fathers and uncles – had worked with the railways and in estates, but as one of them (23 year old Kripa who aspired to be an educator) noted, 'we never talk to them about this, their work, what they did … we do not think their words are important'. Another young woman, 24 year old Sundari who wanted to be a social worker, said 'maybe I will talk to my father who worked in KTM and find out some more'. At the time, if I myself had known about my family's railway past, I could have shared this as a partial inspiration for embarking on this research. I could have offered the justification that this was about *my family history too.* I suspect that this personal connection would have created more of an interest and intrigue in my project, or even justified it.

Nonetheless, through this encounter, I was struck by the impassioned poignancy of discussions about the economically disadvantaged clusters of Malaysia's minority Indian community, to which many in this temple crowd belonged, and their strong sense that something needed to be done to change this – and urgently. This reminded me of conversations with scores of Indians who were former railway personnel, all of whom recalled that Indians had been unfairly evacuated from KTM from the 1970s, and that pioneering Indian railway men and women had been sidelined and ultimately retired from the services. Others used more graphic language as they stated openly that Indians had been 'kicked out' of KTM with the gradual replacement of the railway workforce by ethnic Malays. Former railway staff also observed the irony that after having built and sustained the railways for more than a century, Indians were presently non-existent in KTM. Given this scenario, it is perhaps unsurprising that the former railway workers who had built railwaymen temples and were still active in the temple scene were the most supportive of my research and could relate to its objectives. Many in this cluster felt aggrieved, like Prakash from the Gemas temple, who stated: 'We Indians built KTM and now we are out.' Many of my interlocutors expressed that the '*Malaya*-nization', '*Malay*-nization' and modernization of the railways in Malaysia were interrelated and had led to the *de-Indianization* of the railway services. The 'ejection' of Indians from the KTM was cited by my interlocutors as evidence of their marginalization, and the hopelessness they conveyed was moving.

Since independence, the minority Indian community in Malaysia, embedded within an Islamic state, has had to deal with a distinct set of economic and socio-political factors. Against this backdrop, in general, the 'large' number of Hindu temples across the present Malaysian landscape has been observed by residents and visitors alike. Additionally, this phenomenon registers surprise that this is even possible in a *Muslim* country. Despite the generic subjection of non-Islamic groups to a state-based Islamic bureaucracy, Malaysian Hindus feel particularly anguished, the situation being compounded by the continuing socioeconomic and political marginalization (Baxstrom 2008; Gomez and Alagappar 2018; Shekhar 2008; Stenson 1980; Willford 2002) of the larger Indian community. While the demolition of places of worship for urban renewal initiatives is neither unique nor novel for Singapore and Malaysia, Hindu temple demolitions across the Malaysian landscape, especially since 2006, have been visible and reported publicly. Members of the Malaysian Indian community have been galvanized and asserted that these demolitions infringe on their rights as full citizens of a multi-religious society. Temple demolitions have been viewed as targeted and intolerant attacks on Hindu religious institutions by the custodians of an Islamic state.

In response, in 2007, Hindraf organized demonstrations and protests (Bunnell et al. 2010; Sundara Raja et al. 2013) with support from NGOs, opposition politicians and non-Indian Malaysians. In the wake of the outcome of the March 2008 general elections in Malaysia, with a poor showing of the ruling party and clearly reduced electoral support from the Indian community, the playing field for non-Muslims had shifted in critical ways. There seemed to be enhanced sensitivity towards non-Muslim religions, even as there were simultaneous signs of reactionary Muslim responses that sought to assert Islamic supremacy in the country. Yet, admittedly, Malaysian Hindus were emboldened and empowered in a post-Hindraf moment. Interestingly, assertions of Hindu religious rights were divided into demands for social, cultural and economic rights for the beleaguered Malaysian Indian community. Nevertheless, even in 2017, my interlocutors felt that they continued to remain second-class citizens in Malaysia and that the country 'now belonged to the Malays'. Many observed that Malaysian Indians continued to struggle economically and that they had not benefited from Malaysia's new economic policies and the community remained marginalized (Anbalakan 2003; Chakraborti 1996).

Against this backdrop of impecunious material realities of clusters of the Malaysian Indian community, using railways as a lens triggered unanticipated narratives about the political dynamics of the socioeconomic and political worlds inhabited by my interlocutors. However, at present there seems to be traction in Malaysia for highlighting histories of ethnic minorities and marginalized communities, although far greater academic and scholarly intervention is required (Pillai 2021). It is indeed heartening that in the last decade, there has been

enhanced public interest in, and, acknowledgement of the invisibility faced by South Indian labour and their critical role in building Malaya's transport infrastructure. For example, blogs, websites and online articles have highlighted the role of the Malaysian Sikh community in building the Thai–Burma railways.[15] There has also been the public articulation of the fact that the key contributions of South Indian labourers remain unacknowledged and unappreciated in official narratives.[16]

The discussions in the preceding chapters have already attested to the phenomenon of devotees and temples *returning* to enchanted sites in older railway premises where the railwaymen temples used to be, reinforcing their attachment to these sites and their materialities. As we move towards the end of this book, the narrative comes full circle. My research has highlighted that pockets of sacrality and religious community life tenaciously insert themselves even in transformed, modernized railway landscapes. Apart from the various outcomes of the interface between religious and railway infrastructures discussed in this chapter, another consequence of this encounter is manifested in the building of *new* temples in the modernized railway premises, thus sacralizing them. Devotees denote both old and new railway sites as having spiritual energies: the former are already seen as animated, reflecting divine efficacies accumulated over time, while the latter are approached as locales embodying sacred potentialities, particularly given their continued connection with the railways. Invoking the notion of sedimented, intertwined histories, the conclusion reiterates that in the present, sacred spaces in railway precincts reflect the accretion of past experiences, while carrying the seeds for producing religious futures.

**Notes**

1. See https://www.mot.gov.my/en/land/reports/quarterly-statistics-of-rail-transport#InplviewHash09148bae-2259-4d3b-9444-f2755b07fb01=Paged%3DTRUE-p_SortBehavior%3D1-p_FileLeafRef%3D2018%25204%2520%252d%2520SUKU%2520IV%25202018-p_ID%3D331-PageFirstRow%3D16 (retrieved 27 January 2023).
2. The actual remaining length of the railways varies according to the accounting systems used. Briginshaw (2001: 13) estimates the total length to be 1,672 km.
3. Anonymous 2007.
4. It is notable that the CRCC built its first rolling stock plant under the Zhuzhou Electric Locomotive company in Batu Gajah, Malaysia – the first outside China. This facility will 'assemble trains for Kuala Lumpur's Ampang Line and 160 km/h class 93 inter-city EMUs for Malayan Railway Corporation (KTMB), with capacity to assemble up to 100 vehicles per year' (Anonymous 2015a).
5. According to Datu Seri Wee Ka Siong, President of the Malaysian Chinese Association, 85% of the Gemas-Johor Baru Electrified Double Track project has been completed and the project is expected to be completed by mid-2023. Retrieved 27 February 2023 from https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/11/16/

gemas-jb-ets-almost-ready-to-run#:~:text=KLUANG%3A%20The%20Gemas%2DJohor%20Baru,%2C%20Perlis%2C%20to%20Johor%20Baru.

6. It is striking that in the 1970s, the governments of Malaysia and Singapore had discussed the possibility of closing the Tanjong Pagar Station and stopping the north–south line at Johor Bahru.
7. Railway heritage tours were numerous and popular in the aftermath of the track removal project, allowing Singaporeans to relive railway memories. These tours involved the expertise of railway hobbyists and academics alike, such as the architectural historian Chee-Kien Lai. Based on tours and his research, Koh Heng Tong produced the illustrated book *Last Train from Tanjong Pagar* (2014), which was described by its publishers as follows: 'Seamlessly blending fact and fiction, Koh Hong Teng has produced a timely and thought-provoking graphic homage to our trains and not only the physical journeys but also the human connections they have made possible.'
8. In another example from Kuala Lumpur, the structure of the Sri Maha Muniswarar Temple has been retained close to the newly built railway station at Sungei Buloh. This registered 'railwayman temple' is historically associated with the nearby railway quarters.
9. According to an article in *The Straits Times* on 4 October 1987, a statement from the Prime Minister's office in Singapore reveals the following data: over a period of thirteen years, starting in 1974, '23 mosques, 76 suraus (prayer houses), 700 Chinese temples, 27 Hindu temples and 19 churches had to make way for public development'. For Singapore, the acquisition of land has led to a noticeable increase in the percentage of land owned by the state. Starting with 31% state land ownership in 1949, by 1985 the percentage of land owned by the state had climbed to 76.2% (Phang and Kim 2013: 127).
10. The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) is a coalition of NGOs that was founded in 2009 to support Hindu rights and promote the interests of the minority Indian community in Malaysia. Hindraf took up the cause of Hindu temple demolitions across the country, which had escalated in 2006 onwards.
11. *Malaysiakini* (Malay, 'Malaysia Now') is a multilanguage online news portal, which publishes news in Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and English. It is tremendously popular and has been billed as the top choice of digital media platform among the public.
12. Not a pseudonym.
13. Not a pseudonym.
14. Through these public discussions, all parties continued to express the view that prior to July 2011, the temple was located on land belonging to Malaysia, but now it was under Singaporean jurisdiction. Indeed, this has been a widespread view held by the Singapore and Malaysian public as well as the authorities.
15. See https://www.sikhnet.com/news/forgotten-sikhs-siam-burma-death-railway%C2%A0 (retrieved 25 April 2022).
16. See https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/602669 (retrieved 25 April 2022).

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