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Methodological Musings

Trawling Singapore's Urban Religious Landscapes

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

(Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 1993, pp. 16–17)

Marginal and Invisible Terrains

Following Ghosh, just as traces of “ordinary” lives are rarely found in the archives, I argue that lay engagements and experimentations with (urban) futures through enacting everyday lives and practices—implicit processes which do not culminate in durable spatial imprints—remain “undocumentable” and are often unnoticed by governments, urban planners, and social scientists alike. In this paper I argue that in-depth ethnographic work (through immersion in the field, a sustained fieldwork period and nar-

rative interviews) can reveal the ways in which individuals imagine sacred urban futures in Singapore—a city that is continuously being transformed by bigger and more powerful stakeholders. An anthropological lens allows the critical notice that elites and various kinds of authorities *only appear* to have a monopoly on envisioning more lasting (urban) futures *and* that ordinary city-makers and/or religion-makers are important players as well. How these everyday attempts at making and re-making urban sacred spaces and imagining urban futures can be surfaced remains a methodological challenge for social scientists.

Making sense of religious practices and discourses in urban, multi-religious contexts within the boundaries of a nation-state has been my core and dominant research interest. Despite the numerically small size of the Hindu community (now 5.1 percent) in Singapore, Hinduism has a robust and vibrant presence here, witnessed in the persistence of theistic devotional practices in homes and temples, the public celebration of rituals and festivals as well as the rise of new deities, festivals and Hindu religious movements. Yet it is striking that on the whole, this field has attracted marginal interest amongst scholars. There has been little academic curiosity about the Hindu community on this island nation-state, apart from undergraduate student research through the 1970s and 1980s and some scholarly publications by visiting academics. As such one cannot speak of a body of indigenous scholarship on Hinduism in Singapore, seen as a minority religion of marginal interest in the regional, geo-political configuration of Southeast Asia. My research began against this background reading of Hinduism as a “minority” religion and the notice that this has been an under-researched religion in the Southeast Asian region generally, but particularly in Singapore.

The analysis of Hinduism amongst “overseas” Hindu communities is a dynamic field of study and reveals that a religion can be meaningfully practiced and sustained in locales far removed from its place of origin. My sustained intellectual scrutiny of this field has enabled critical engagement with different bodies of scholarship in the Sociology and Anthropology of religion.¹ I have articulated specific research questions about enactments of Hindu practices against the backdrop of the island’s urban, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, cosmopolitan, socio-cultural, religious, and political complexity. One strand of my work has mapped forms of everyday religiosity amongst Hindu communities in Singapore and to a lesser extent in Malaysia.² The continuing appeal of popular/folk Hindu practices and sensibilities in the urban, multicultural, secular, cosmopolitan space of Singapore and its interactions with reformist imaginings of Hinduism is an exciting field of study. My interest in globally linked Hindu communities beyond Indian

shores has seen me tracking the folk deity “Muneeswaran” and his historical movement out of rural Tamil Nadu into Malaya and then his continuing relevance for the everyday religious lives of Singaporean and Malaysian Hindus. I have scrutinized the transformation of this deity’s identity from “folk” to “Sanskritic” proportions and his “return home” (to India in this novel image) as a “new deity” infused with enhanced prestige and efficacy. I have consciously and explicitly retained an ethnographic focus on the everyday functioning of Hinduism, while locating its practice within the context of an urban, secular nation-state, structured according to bureaucratic, pragmatic rationality. Documenting forms of Hindu religiosity on the island including the growth of new festivals, temples, and deities has confirmed the creative strains within diasporic communities. My work in folk Hindu domains has led me to notice religious syncretism and hybridity in enactments of everyday religiosity. I have documented the interaction between folk/popular Hinduism and folk/popular Taoism in Singapore’s religious landscape. These crossings of demarcated religious boundaries seen as impermeable have (perhaps not unsurprisingly) been received by segments of Singaporean Hindus and Taoists themselves with surprise and intrigue.

A related theoretical concern has been to ask how devotional Hindu religiosity in a diasporic site like Singapore has been possible at all *in practice*, given the need for material paraphernalia and religious expertise for its sustenance and reproduction. My work on Hinduism and commodification processes highlights that the production of ritual objects as commodities in a global marketplace draws Hindus as devotees, consumers and prosumers into the dynamics of capitalist relations. I have theorized the processes through which these commodities are produced and distributed and consumed as ritual objects by Hindus globally. The variety of objects required in the practice of Hinduism, and the fact of their incorporation into the global capitalist system of markets and commodities does mean their necessary commercialization, but this by no means leads to a desecration of the religious realm. For overseas Hindu communities, the easy availability of “prayer things” (as commodities) which circulate and can be exchanged across transnational boundaries is vital for enacting everyday religiosity. Singapore’s urbanism and its identity as a global city have inevitably impacted possibilities for expressions of religiosity. My research poses these related queries: Is there room in the city for manifestations of the sacred? Does the city allow religious actors to seek points of engagement with its built environment? How are profane city spaces used and appropriated for religious expression and how are these sites re-configured consequently? Does the sacred have a place in the future city?

My empirical and analytical focus on “Singaporean Hinduism” has served well as a lens for exploring institutions, practices, and social relations in Singapore’s religious domains and its interface with the realm of politics. Remaining with this “same” field of study over a long period has afforded me critical familiarity and allowed me to see nuances and complexities that superficial research encounters would have missed. Researching South Indian Hinduism in Singapore as an “outsider” on account of my Indian citizenship and coming from a Bihari, Hindi-speaking, Hindu family background, I confronted a rather *unfamiliar* Hinduism: the observance of Thaipusam and Fire-walking festivals, the worship of deities from the rural Tamil Nadu, the distinct form and architecture of South Indian Hindu temples, hearing Brahmins priests chant sacred mantras in the Tamil language and being told that Hinduism was a “minority” religion and the Indians an ethnic minority in Singapore. None of this resonated with my consciousness as a 12-year-old who had moved with her North Indian Bihari Hindu family from India where neither “Indians” nor Hindus are defined as minorities. Yet subsumed as an “Indian” and a “Hindu” *like others* within Singapore’s Hindu fold, I *was marginal* in multiple modes and yet read externally as part of the Singaporean Indian/Hindu mainstream.

Quite apart from my fringe identity and positionality in Singaporean social life, it would seem that intellectually too, I have been drawn to theorize marginal socio-cultural, religious, and political sentiments and sensibilities in my research on religion. My honors thesis dealt with modern Indian reform movements in Singapore (clearly on the fringe) although my MA thesis focused on what would be recognized as “mainstream” Hinduism on the island. Returning to Singapore’s religious landscape post-PhD (and away from my dissertation medical anthropological work where I deconstructed the concept of medical pluralism with a strong interest in alternative healing strategies), was a turn to folk and popular Hindu domains in Singapore and Malaysia. The “mixed-up” everyday sites—marked by interactions, practices, alliances and solidarities across carefully delimited religious traditions of “Hinduism” and “Taoism”—are clearly at odds with official constructions of the same, and thus on the edges—often rationalized as eccentricities and aberrations. In retrospect, thus, I seem to have had an intriguing and productive relationship with the notion of marginality. I am aware that this has been possible because of my privileged positionality along some but not all axes. This has afforded self-awareness and critical reflection, not to mention perspectives, which have allowed me to “see” things which would have remained hidden otherwise and to find value in *making*

visible that which has been obscured. Scrutinizing the routes my research has traversed in this reflexive mode, the related notions of marginality and invisibility appear pivotal and lend coherence and rationale to my research inquiries. Certainly, “marginality” itself is a complex notion, experienced in different modes, and is not always “productive”. Indeed, when conjoined with inequalities and oppressions, marginality produces vulnerabilities too.

Methodological Turns: Bridging Ethnography and History

My undergraduate exposure to the twin disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology as at the joint Department of Sociology (and Anthropology) at the National University of Singapore has meant that my research efforts have been marked by an inter-disciplinary stance. From the outset, I was drawn to the qualitative approach in the social sciences. My turn to Anthropology saw me pursuing a PhD in this discipline. Anthropology has conventionally required practitioners to identify a “field”—a place where research is carried out—rendering this primarily a territorial entity—although this idea has been sufficiently problematized and unpacked.³ Further, the conventional idea of the ethnographic “field” in Anthropology has been marked by the specter of “otherness”/“strangeness” in “unfamiliar” spaces, contrasted to the familiarity and intimacy one experiences at “home”. But for some time now even anthropologists have not worked with the notion that ethnographic fieldwork should be done “away from home”. The reality is that for a variety of reasons, many ethnographers have and do undertake fieldwork in familiar spaces, places which they may call home, and certainly in urban locales. Neither is this a new phenomenon, there being a long history of anthropological work being done in one’s backyard. As an ethnographer I approach “ethnography” as a mode of generating materials/data but I also recognize its tremendous analytical and theoretical value. Relying on ethnographic methods and logics has not only generated particular kinds of research material but also enabled me to undertake a nuanced theorizing about layered and multifaceted lived, everyday religiosities within the urban, multi-cultural milieu of Singapore.

My biographical experiences and positionality within the “field” have inevitably configured and impacted how I have thought about and done “fieldwork”. A situation of continually being in a “fieldwork moment”, of always being connected with a field under study, is typical for many contemporary ethnographers like myself. For me, this embedded-ness translates to “never being out of the field”, a stance that I have to continuously

navigate. Anthropologists who have to travel away from home for fieldwork have commented on my good fortune that I “can do fieldwork anytime.” Indeed, I am fully aware of the associated “privileges” of my situation: the ease, the access, the familiarity and the contact with a set of practices and social relations that facilitate research and which cannot be undervalued. Yet, this can be seen as a “burden” as well as a “blessing”. It is an exaggeration to even suggest that I am doing fieldwork all the time; it is more accurate to speak of “intensification and augmentation of fieldwork moments”. In the present, being connected to respondents through social media, text messages, WhatsApp, and email means constant knowledge flow about what is happening in the field—almost 24/7. I have had to consciously “step out” of fieldwork mode and achieve distance from the field even as I am inevitably enmeshed within it. Certainly the options of “getting out” and “switching off” from ever-present fieldwork moments do exist. I do exercise these with the awareness that an uncomplicated “return” to fieldwork at a later more suitable time, has to be negotiated delicately. Given my long-term association with Singapore’s religious domains, I have forged strong ties with individuals and communities such that mutual rapport and regard mark my relationship with my respondents. As an ethnographer I am mindful that the human dimension of fieldwork and commitment to social relationships are priorities. These alliances have afforded numerous fieldwork opportunities and enabled easy access to information about what is happening in everyday religious lives of practitioners. This has been especially important in my ability to know about, access, and be admitted *legitimately and ethically* to the marginal and invisible religious domains which I have also been able to write about.

My own ethnographic work has been empirically grounded on the island nation-state of Singapore. The city-state is a place where I live, raise a family and work, and by now have an everyday familiarity with—having lived here since my teenage years. However, this familiarity has been learnt and produced through long-term engagement and participation with everyday socio-cultural and religious life on the island—rendering what was once strange, now taken-for-granted. I have relied on fieldwork, face-to-face, in-depth interviews, and participant observation as appropriate research methods, in seeking to convey the density, complexity, and nuance of everyday religiosity. My research interests have seen me trawling the island in Housing Development Board (HDB) neighborhoods, in wet markets (fresh produce), car parks, hawker centers, railway tracks, roadside shrines, ‘jungle temples’ (sacred sites hidden from public view—see Figures 22.1, 22.2 and 22.3, all of which were taken in 2004), home temples, and sacred sites in

industrial estates. Visual documentation of these sites has complemented individual narratives I have elicited and my own observations of goings on in these locales. In trawling the island's sacred spaces I have found it useful to turn to Marston et al.'s notion of a "site" as

a material location characterized by differential relations through which one site is connected to other sites, out of which emerges a social space that can be understood to extend, however unevenly and temporarily, across distant places.⁴



22.1 A shrine for the deity Muneeswaran being set up along the railway tracks at the Tanjong Pagar Station (near Kampung Baharu). The shrine has now been demolished.

I have indeed identified connections, relations and networks amongst apparently randomly scattered sites. But additionally, these sites are dynamic and enlivened through a range of practices that animate them.

In my work I have also been drawn to historical methods. As an ethnographer, I have interpreted archival material through the lens of ethnography. Fieldwork, coupled with a historical imagination, allows present circumstances to be understood in terms of what has happened before. I approach the past as a commentary on the present, and consider ways in

which the past offers a set of resources for alternative future-making. In these endeavors I am guided by theoretical reflections in anthropology that have theorized the relationship between history and ethnography and value archival research as a legitimate and valid part of anthropological work.⁵ The idea that fieldwork, coupled with a historical imagination, allows present circumstances to be understood in terms of previous conditions, finds



22.2 A temple for the deity Kaliyamman, set up in a jungle clearing in Yio Chu Kang. The temple no longer exists in this location.

strong resonance in this mode of thinking. Brown's logic that "ethnohistory is all about the crossing of boundaries, of time and space, of discipline and department, and of perspective, whether ethnic, cultural, social, or gender-based"⁶ appeals to me as does Farriss' view that ethnohistory is "anthropology with a time dimension or history informed by anthropological concepts."⁷ The ethnographer's method of participant observation and the historian's concern with time-frames provides a valuable perspective for charting continuities or discontinuities across timeframes. As an anthropologist my treatment of historical data is such that I am interested in abstracting ethnography from archival material.

One aspect of my research has dealt with the reconfiguration of the religious architecture of the island through encounter with urban devel-

opment initiatives. Religious sites have often had to make way for building of roads and highways, housing and industrial sites. “Making way” has meant that places of worship (registered and otherwise) have been moved, demolished, and indeed many have ceased to exist. Yet practitioners have “returned” to these transformed, transfigured sites as if they continued to be animated with spirituality. In making sense of this practice I have found



22.3 A temple for the deity Siva, set up in Riverside/Marsiling region of the island. The temple has been moved to another location.

Amitav Ghosh’s statement about historical footprints and “*traces*” in his text, *In An Antique Land*, to be extremely powerful. Taking liberty with Ghosh’s original statement, I rephrase his question: how does one remember “*those people who did not have the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time*”? And being true to Ghosh, how does one access “*those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world*”?

These questions have triggered further research questions about relationships between the *physicality* of places and associated spiritual efficacies. How/where can religious sentiments and sensibilities be “inscribed upon time” in the absence of physical evidence? My research has shown that even with the physical disappearance of places of worship, for practitioners the sacredness of these sites strongly persists as they seek “*those*

barely discernible traces". I suggest that religious "footprints" and "traces" (both in physical terms and their imprint in individual and collective memories) are invoked to register "presence" of sacred powers even in the "absence" of material, physical markers of religious edifices. Here the binaries of "absences"/"presences", "visibility"/"invisibility" offer food for thought. Religious actors imagine and construct sacred landscapes even in the absence of physical coordinates of religious structures. Sacrality/efficacy are engraved into spaces—and kept alive in individual memory and consciousness—even in the absence of material or structural evidence. This has led me to recognize *sedimented histories* of the urban religious spaces I have mapped. I argue that these need to be unpacked to reveal layered experiences that have accumulated over time. My ethnography reveals a long list of sites in Singaporean folk Hindu and Taoist domains, spaces with religious actors *remember vividly*: the places where the temples "used to be"; these sites are imprinted in individual and collective memories and these places still deemed to be efficacious and powerful *and* visited by practitioners. Driven by this logic, the "return" to these original sites (which have now been reconfigured as secular spaces—industrial, commercial sites, etc.), *as if* they continued to retain their sacrality and were marked by efficacy regardless of the physical transformations, demolitions and the disappearance of these spaces.

Actualizing Religious Aspirations: "Religion Making" at Work

In the course of my research on religion in Singapore (and Hindu and Taoist domains in particular) over the last two decades, I have had the opportunity to observe the island's religious landscape and document both its dynamics and shifting contours. I have found it useful to invoke the notion of "religion making"—as a set of political practices that are rooted in the fundamental aspiration to conceive and sustain enchanted, spiritually infused worldviews—in an urban, modern, and cosmopolitan milieu, not to mention alongside and within highly instrumentalist, pragmatic, and bureaucratic frames of Singaporean society.⁸ The everyday religious lives of the Hindu and Taoist communities in Singapore are vibrant and dynamic: practitioners have founded places of worship, religious institutions, and organizations and sustained domestic and public rituals and festivals. These latter can be interpreted as expressing or communicating a set of desires and aspirations for practitioners, some of which are stated consciously while others remain implicit.

My work in folk Hindu domains reveals the strong desire to connect with a particular religious-cultural inheritance—the world of folk traditions and “old ways”—manifest through a particular ritual complex and existing alongside a dominant Sanskritized, literate Hindu tradition. The narrative suggests that reviving these “forgotten” ways offer meaningful connections to ancestry and to a history. While “proper” Hinduism evident in the official Hindu temples command a considerable mass following, the “old ways” show robust signs of being revived in Singapore and Malaysia. Here I have also heard the desire for democratization, gender equality, and greater lay involvement in the organization, direction, and management of a religious domain, previously (and traditionally) the province of religious specialists. In my conversations with Hindus who favor folk Hindu complex, I heard of their wish to disengage from traditional forms of religious authority and expertise. Further, the informality here allows for utterances, claims, counterclaims, and statements about different dimensions of Hindu worship to be articulated as “genuine” simply because they are experientially real.

Hindus in the diaspora have nonetheless reconfigured inherited traditions through processes of religious hybridization and syncretism. This is seen in the emergence of new religious movements, the identification of local gurus, new deities, festivals and rituals, new forms of interaction and liaisons with cultures and religions. This is seen in the convergence of Hindu and Taoist domains in Singapore and Malaysia. Despite efforts to organize, codify, and delimit the Hindu realm, religious pluralism and religious syncretism continues to be the norm. Not only does one witness the incorporation of elements from within different Hindu strands, but also easy borrowing from “non-Hindu” religious traditions—including Taoism and Roman Catholicism. Practices and ideas which may be considered transgressive and illegitimate by religious authorities are considered normal from the perspective of religious actors who participate in these realms. In the realm of religious practice, ethnic and religious labels are irrelevant for those who are more concerned with “doing” religion and being religious, than placing themselves in bounded religious categories. One also witnesses a desire for religious experimentation and innovation and to building new religious solidarities and communities.

Given the scarcity of urban sites which can function as sacred locales and the restrictions of public enactments of religiosity (such as processions and other religious rituals), religious communities in Singapore strive to discover alternate sites (domestic, public, and virtual: “jungle temples”, “home temples”, sports stadiums, swimming pools, community halls, and

cyberspace) where religiosity can be enacted. I have described these sites as “realms of possibility” where doctrinal prescriptions and procedures do not hold sway and indeed cannot be enforced in the absence of religious authority. Instead, here individual initiative, experience, and interpretation take precedence. These informal sites are imagined by practitioners as “unregulated spaces” where devotees feel a freedom to express their religiosity, without constraints. Explicitly, devotees are critical of attempts to standardize or centralize worship in temples, and rules and regulations are seen as repressive, controlling and thus unwelcome.

Uncertainties over permanence and sustainability of sacred spaces I have encountered do not seem in fact to make for shortened horizons of future-making, planning, and aspiration. If anything, the very condition of vulnerability seems to motivate individuals and groups to imagine grander futures and to constantly be in a “future-making” mode—in the search for new sites to be made sacred. Amongst groups of devotees the hunt for alternative sites where shrines could be established was even picked up as something of a challenge. While being quite aware of the debates and controversies of invoking the concept of “diaspora” I have approached this as a space/site which creates possibilities for religious innovation and experimentation. Here the concern with ensuring a connectedness with “pasts” (understood as “ways of the ancestors”—in India and in Singapore) and histories become modes of imagining better futures. Singaporean Hindus I have interacted with engage in what have been denoted “extreme/unconventional/backward” ritual practices; these are often enacted (and indeed only possible in) “unauthorized spaces”—both of which are perched on the margins of mainstream Hindu religiosity in Singapore. These segments of the Hindu community do feel vulnerable and are focused on the future given precisely the uncertainties of finding suitable physical sites where their preferred ritual complex could be sustained. It was thus impossible for conversations to not veer towards “the future” in the (ethnographic) present of fieldwork moments.⁹

In this concluding section I have itemized elements of “religion making” through the creative energies and religious imaginaries of practitioners who see themselves as creating religious worlds in contrast to the world of “big temples”. The latter are viewed as elitist and state-led which seek to sanitize, marginalize, and ultimately eliminate folk religious worlds. Without romanticizing these efforts as “weapons of the weak”, the desire for constructing alternative religious worlds and animating them through alternate practices and sensibilities persists. In my research I have recorded not just the articulated religious aspirations of Singaporean Hindus but also

their attempts to *actualize* them concretely. I have also witnessed here deliberate self-marginalization as a mode of *realizing* religious sentiments and aspirations—an inherently political act. But this is not framed by actors as resistance or willful transgression. Rather individuals have articulated this as a commitment to particular religious sensibilities, the desire to be autonomous and self-determining and to function both outside secular officious frames and those dictated by doctrinal pronouncements.

Notes

- 1 See Vineeta Sinha, *A New God in the Diaspora? Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore* (Singapore University Press and the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2005); Vineeta Sinha, *Religion and Commodification: Merchandizing Diasporic Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Vineeta Sinha, *Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains: From the Straits Settlements to Singapore* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).
- 2 See Vineeta Sinha, “Merging Different Sacred Spaces: Enabling Religious Encounters Through Pragmatic Utilization of Space?” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 37, 3 (2003) 459–94; and Vineeta Sinha, “‘Hinduism’ and ‘Taoism’ in Singapore: Seeing Points of Convergence” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, 1 (2008) 123–47.
- 3 See Akhil Gupta and James Fergusson, eds., *Anthropological Locations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 1.
- 4 S. A. Marston, K. Woodward and J. P. Jones, “Flattening Ontologies of Globalization: the Nollywood Case” *Globalizations* 4 (2007) 45–63, 45.
- 5 See Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Bernard S. Cohn, “History and Anthropology: the State of Play” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980) 198–221.
- 6 See Jennifer Brown, “Ethnohistorians: Strange Bedfellows, Kindred Spirits” *Ethnohistory* 38, 2 (1991) 113–23, 116.
- 7 See N. M. Farriss, “Indians in Colonial Yucatan: Three Perspectives” *Spaniards and Indians in South-eastern Mesoamerica: Essays on the History of Ethnic Relations*, eds. M. J. MacLeod and R. Wasserstrom (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 1–39, 1.
- 8 See Michael Dickhart and Andrea Lauser, eds. *Religion, Place and Modernity; Spatial Articulations in Southeast Asian and East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) for broader research on sacred spaces and modernity in Asia.
- 9 See Fred Myers, “Future Directions for Cultural Anthropology” *Anthropology News* 31, 9 (2009); “Anthropology of the Future, Ethnographies of the Present”. Silver Dialogue, NYU Arts and Science, New York, U.S.A. (2004). <http://as.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu-as/asSilverDialogues/documents/Fred%20Myers%20Essay.pdf>.