

## *Book Reviews*

*Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia.* By Andrew C. Willford. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007. 346 pp.

The book is about the created Tamil identity owing to the way Malaysia has gone about constructing its national consciousness since 1971. Studies of Indians in colonial Malaya and later Malaysia have always described the various divides amongst Indians without examining the socio-psychological responses to either the British Colonial elite or the Malay elite constructions of society on working-class Tamils. Despite the earlier millennium-long interactions between Tamils of South India with the Malay Archipelago, contemporary groups categorized as “Malays” have disavowed the “Indians” and “Hindu” from their contemporary imaginaries. Most studies, so far, have taken on a macro-sociological view of “Indians” in Malaysia without giving in-depth attention to the “Tamil” perspective of the evolving society in Malaysia. Willford’s work on the Tamil identity in Malaysia has brought a fresh insight into giving the needed emphasis to Tamils in any study of Malaysian society.

Willford shows how the economic and political marginalization of a large section of Malaysian Indians has witnessed a renaissance of religious revivalism among Hindus. Festivals like Thaipusam and Adi Puram with attendant elaborate temple rituals are visible among the working class. The growth of neo-Hindu organizations is also visible among elite Tamils. The crafting of Malay consciousness has brought Tamils of various classes and castes to feel as members of a community, which was not possible in the colonial period. The author, however, is careful to examine whether these have linkages to transnational movements. In the absence of explanations of exogenous factors, Tamil identity in Malaysia has been shaped by

their continued political and economic marginalization and by the suffering experienced by the stigma and discrimination attached to their identity. The Malaysia state, instead of creating a nation out of its citizens, has become the arbiter of privileges and sanctions.

The book shows that the efforts of the Malaysian state to create marginality among the Tamils are resisted. Resistance is elaborated as a desire to surmount and transcend the sociopolitical through spiritual instruments. Chapters 3 to 7 clearly elaborate the efforts of the Tamils to respond to the growing power of the state to implement their marginalization. Chapter 3 shows how the increasing Islamization of Kuala Lumpur is linked to the rising ritual identity among Tamils. Tamils resist and reinvent their identity by the practice of penance, which Willford shows with citations from the Kural to be an instrument always present among the Tamils. Here penance takes the form of the growing popularity of festivals like Thaibusam and Adi Puram. The Tamil cultural revival, centred primarily in the Kuala Lumpur vicinity, is in response to the discourse on Islamization. But the revival is done selectively in promoting certain types of rituals that capture the imagination of most working-class Tamils. Suffering in the borderland of marginalization are correspondingly shown in the penance by “body-piercing” and self mortification ritual assertions of Tamil identity. Willford equates it aptly with “divine madness”. In Chapter 4, urbanization, modernization, and Islamization are seen as having led to the Hindu religious revival. The discussion notes that the revival of Tamil ritualism may be inspired by the very hopelessness among elite Indians as well as non-elite Indians. They give expression to repressed emotions. The power of *sakti* or the primeval female energy appears to have arisen in direct response to the paternalistic support of the state for Malay Islamic modernism. The writer argues that hope and despair are mingled in the devotees’ efforts to transcend their sufferings in being marginalized against the rise of Malay Islamic urbanism of Kuala Lumpur city. As rising Islamization is perceived as stigmatizing the practiced Hinduism of the Tamils, spiritual power is seen as the only weapon in the struggle. The powers of Tamil women, as evident from

literature and everyday life, are seen as possibilities for overcoming injustice (p. 12).

Responses among elite Indians are ambivalent as a result of their close association with British colonial rule. As occupants of middle-class society, their interaction with the Malay bureaucracy is as close to what they may have experienced under colonial rule. In the new milieu, however, they too feel estranged both from working class Tamils as well as rising Malay Islamic sentiments. Their ambivalent position is discussed in Chapter 5 of the book. While tracing the evolution of the Hindu religion in the past, the author uses individuals as well as organizations to indicate the reinterpretation and renaissance of Hinduism among elite Indians. It is interesting to note how some of these individuals and groups view Hinduism as transcendental in being like a banyan tree under which Hindu culture is the essence of much of Southeast Asian culture. Some of the groups, like the Temple of Fine arts, are shown as undertaking projects that have cultural resonance for the past while reaffirming contemporary Indian identity in Malaysia. Neo-Hindu movements like the Ramakrishna Mission and the Divine Life Society also find revival among Malaysian Indian elites. Some of these elite revival groups also attracted a large proportion of Ceylon Tamils and Malayalees. Despite the elite orientations of these neo-Hindu groups, they share Navarathri, dedicated to the female aspect of divinity, with the other non-elite working class Indians. While the elite English-educated Indians enjoyed a higher status in colonial Malaya, their eminent position has become compromised in post-colonial Malaysia where they have faced economic challenges with the promotion of Malays in jobs, education, and housing and political challenges as the Malaysian Indian Congress and others vied for support from non-elite Indians. They have taken to religion with ecumenical rationalism that includes *bhakti* (devotion), gurus, and neo-Hindu organizations.

Willford's work is monumental. Just as Michael Stenson's book on *Industrial Conflict in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), proved a turning point in the analysis of Indians by

reflecting on their political economy rather than mere descriptions of their migration and settlement in Malaya, Willford's book may direct future researchers to observe the socio-ritual responses of people and its power among marginalized people. Historical events have already shown the consequences of such power of marginalized people in their *makkal sakti* (people's power) in the March 2008 general elections. Though the book was published a year before the Malaysian political earthquake, its predictive capability is admirable.

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