

*Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains: From the Straits Settlements to Singapore.* By Vineeta Sinha. Dordrecht: ARI-Springer, 2011. 284 pp.

With this book and her earlier monograph, *A New God in the Diaspora? Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore* (2005), Vineeta Sinha has arguably provided the most comprehensive and insightful scholarly examination of Hinduism in Singapore in recent times.

In *A New God in the Diaspora?* Sinha furnished a fascinating ethnographic account of how diasporic religiosity is being fleshed out in the worship of a guardian deity (*kaaval deviam*) transplanted from Tamil Nadu to Singapore by migrant labourers nearly 170 years ago. By contrast, the book under review takes up the well-known Weberian thesis of the influence of rational-bureaucratic administration on religious practices to examine closely the morphing of Hindu temple life in the Straits Settlements in the colonial and postcolonial milieux. It pays particular attention to Singapore. Sinha draws inspiration from Frank Presler's *Religion under Bureaucracy* (1987), which mapped the position of religion in India.

In a similar vein, the book under review seeks to decipher how local Hindus have negotiated an evolving culture of secular bureaucracy that was originally imposed from outside the faith but later taken up by Hindus in governing themselves. What emerges in the study is an intriguing genealogy of intentional and unintentional entanglements or, as Sinha phrases it, a series of "religion-state encounters" as enacted in the "Hindu domain".

To reconstruct the changing tenor and durability of these encounters, Sinha combed through two main collections of archival materials, in addition to consulting secondary sources and contemporary newspaper articles (in English and Tamil). The annual reports of the Straits Settlements pertaining to the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (MHEB) from the time of its establishment in 1905 up to the end of the pre-war period constitute the first

source. The second collection was drawn from the board minutes of the SMHEB (the Singapore Hindu Endowment Board from 1968, when the Muslim Endowment Board was created) from 1907 to 1979.

Sinha begins the inquiry by revisiting the “religious question” in the Straits Settlements during the early period of British colonial rule. Her analytical method is to “isolate ‘strategies in use’ rather than assume that the articulated policies and pronouncements on religion, which typically invoked the rhetoric of ‘non-interference’ and religious neutrality, actually operated on the ground” (p. 45). Historical ethnographic records suggest that the British authorities did have a rather liberal stance towards non-Christian religions. They allowed the building of temples, mosques, gurdwaras, and other religious structures through the provision of land grants in the Straits Settlements. Sinha speculates that one “strong motivation for such encouragement was inspired by the desire to appease migrant workers and provide an incentive for them to settle in the colony, and thus provide ready labour to serve the vital politico-economic needs of the English East India Company (EEIC)” (p. 60).

Interestingly, it was the unanticipated conspicuous public performances of religiosity by Chinese and Indian devotees in the shape of “loud” street processions held during religious festivals (and funerals) that consistently generated heated debates among the European public over the years. In particular, one question deliberated at length was whether a British (and Christian) government should handle “these manifestations of non-Christian religiosity in a space that had not been colonized but ceded by agents of the EEIC” (p. 61f). Eventually, no bans or restrictions on processions were imposed. Arguably, this stance was largely informed by the principle of “non-interference” in religious matters in the day-to-day governance of her colonized subjects first proclaimed by Queen Victoria in 1858.

Nevertheless, Sinha contends that it would be a mistake to see the colonial discourse of “non-intervention” as indicative of actual non-involvement by the British authorities in matters pertaining to

religion. Instead, what was discernible over time was a “new managerial approach to religion, one that was dominated by the need for order and regulation increasingly achieved through legislation” (p. 81). This central claim is unpacked in greater detail in the remaining chapters of the book.

Chapter Four thus examines the circumstances and political logic leading to the passing of legislation in the British parliament of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance (MHEO) in 1905 for administering non-Christian religions in Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. Modelled on the English Charity Commissioners Act (in India), the Ordinance in effect bypassed an array of self-governing native councils (like *panchayats*) in non-Christian places of worship. Government intervention was eventually deemed necessary because of numerous reports of “impropriety”, “abuse of power”, “financial mismanagement” and the high incidence of disputes in temples, many of which ended up in British courts for arbitration. With the formation of the MHEB, it was hoped that an efficient, rule-based administration of religious endowments would eventually preclude heavy reliance on the courts (pp. 87 ff).

Sinha argues that the MHEO is a significant historical and contradictory document. It marks the transition to a particular kind of colonial attitude towards non-Christian religions, albeit not always by conscious design. In brief, the MHEO symbolizes the “loss of autonomy and submission to external governance” and epitomizes the shift to submitting religious beliefs and practices to an administrative logic (p. 96).

Chapter Five looks specifically at the institutional history of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Board as it functioned in Singapore through analysis of hitherto unmined board minutes, covering a period of more than sixty years. What is revealed is an evolving administrative logic which became more or less set by the 1950s. Among other developments, increasing autonomy was incrementally granted by the Board to the local management committees of the temples that it administered. Moreover, the make-up of the Board’s membership eventually included more

members of the “worshipping communities” and extended to the Parsee community. In sum, the minutes convey an image of the Board as a constant paternalistic spectral presence among the religious institutions that it administered.

Chapter Six continues the motif of the earlier chapter by focusing more specifically on the administration of Agamic Hindu Temples and the observance of a major Hindu festival, Tai Pucam. In the case of the former, it is noted that financial matters were often given close attention and priority. For example, an accounting system for “vow money” — known as the “chit system” — devised to put “considerable distance between the money paid by the worshipper and the priest” (p. 186) has persisted to the present and conveyed (perhaps unintentionally) implications regarding who has been perceived really to “own” temples. Temple priests, while respected for possessing religious expertise and skills, were also rendered salaried employees of the Board in juxtaposition to the array of deities whom they served. Similarly, in the putative interest of maintaining “order” and decorum, stipulated changes to the ritual practices of devotees during street processions in Tai Pucam have reshaped the substance of the festival itself. As Sinha observes, the “successful enactment [of Tai Pucam] involves a tremendous amount of non-ritual/secular labour and coordination on the part of the organisers” (p. 230).

Chapter Seven takes the discussion on the perceived role and powers of the SHEB up to the current period. In contrast to the early formative period, several subsequent amendments to the Ordinance have widened the scope of the SHEB’s activities, to include those that are technically “non-temple-related”. They include the acquisition, mortgage, and development of property and a range of educational programmes. It is perhaps ironic that a secular statutory body like the SHEB, ostensibly conceived to look after the interests of the faithful, has morphed to become an entity generally perceived by the Singaporean Hindu public today as “too authoritarian” and pervasive in its influence. At a quotidian level, this is experienced by the ordinary devotee in its managerial

acts of codification and standardization of religious expressions and practices. Sinha observes that this ethos is not an isolated case. It is consonant with Singaporean politics and society at large, in which as an expression of its transcendent sovereign status the “state relies on the legislative and bureaucratic apparatus to legitimate its intervention in the religious domain” (p. 249).

*Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains* is an excellent and pioneering work of scholarship on the management of religious institutions and religious practices in Singapore. Not only is it fine-grained, with meticulous attention to historical and ethnographic detail, it is also finely balanced in portraying both the durability and mutability of the social practices of differently positioned human agents with differential emotional investments in religion. Moreover, what is also revealed are the wider historical and sociological implications of the montage of actions (intended or otherwise) embodied in codified secular administrative rules. These powerful texts constitute a principal feature of the terrain on which post-colonial religious subjects have to navigate, even if their moral compasses are putatively derived from the world of the spirit.

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