

Book Reviews

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Temple Tracks: Labour, Piety and Railway Construction in Asia. By Vineeta Sinha. Leiden: Brill, 2023. xiv+323 pp.

The construction of roads and railways in the colonies was part of the global capitalist enterprise by colonizing powers. For this project, the connectivity between sites of raw material extraction and the ports through which it was exported was essential. *Temple Tracks* is about the social geography and history of Hindu temples along the railway networks of what used to be Malaya under British imperial control, now the region that roughly includes Malaysia and Singapore. The many temples that the author was able to track down, including those that have now disappeared from the landscape or been relocated elsewhere for the modernization of the railway in these countries, had been built by Indian labourers employed by the colonial railway authority, the Federated Malay States Railway, from the late nineteenth until mid-twentieth century. They were convicts, coolie and indentured labourers who had been imported from India by their British colonial masters to build a vast network of railways in the region.

From the early 1880s until the mid-1950s, their labour had been instrumental in the development and maintenance of colonial architecture and infrastructure in Malaya—including government offices, places of worship, hospitals, prisons, bridges, roads and living spaces, and of course, most pertinently for this book, the railway, which, as the author notes, emerged even before the roads in the region. As Malaya turned into a strategic site of colonial expansion and extraction—for example, as one of the largest producers of tin and rubber, relying on cheap labour from India—the railway men,

living with their families along the tracks, had been providing the manpower for the construction, maintenance and operation of the network for all those decades. However, post-independence economic policies favouring the employment of Malays, along with the modernization of the railway network, led to the displacement of the Indian workers. A sense of alienation and bitterness set in among them as their historical role and their lifeworld began falling into oblivion in the context of nationalist modernization drives. *Temple Tracks* brings to life the history and stories of these families and communities behind the establishment and development of the railway as a vital infrastructure.

Blending skilful ethnographic research with a unique way of doing historical archival work, this book convincingly portrays the railway labourers as active producers of religious landscape and history-making agents. Under British imperial control, for example, Indian railway workers transformed the alien lands and treacherous terrains on which they lived into sacred places that allowed them a sense of home by building temples for deities who, they believed, had accompanied them. These were often popular and homey deities that protect “the small people”. One of the most important deities with special kinship and bonding with the railway people was Munīśvaran, a “simple man’s god, ordinary worker’s god” (p. 208). Munīśvaran, according to the author, is a “refugee god”—a god constantly on the move, displaced and rendered seemingly powerless by recent urban and railway development projects. Yet, many of the temples devoted to him are still active, attracting followers even when they have been evicted from the vicinity of rail tracks.

In tracking the social, communal and religious life conducted around the many temples that railway people had built, the author insists on paying attention to both the labouring and non-labouring capacities of colonial labour. This focus opens up the conceptual terrain for considering how the people providing the labour power for the colonial-capitalist expansion project also, in the author’s words, “laid the foundations for the sacred landscapes and railway infrastructures of the future”, allowing us to see them as “pioneering

religion makers” (p. 10). Apart from excellent archival work driven by wide-ranging regional comparisons, the author’s methodological approach of “tracing” is highly productive in establishing contact with past lifeworlds and social systems and connecting them to the present. She meticulously follows the footprints these railway-related temples have left behind even when they are no longer standing. These are remnants of non-labouring lives commonly left out of the colonial archives, in which labour and worker welfare were treated as economic inputs. They include individual and collective memories, temporalities and digital signs. Intriguingly, as she found out during the research, the migrant trajectories of her own extended family were closely connected to this collective history. This work of tracing led her to the insightful realization that, in her words, “practitioners, railway tracks, engines ... indeed, the lands on which these are sited—are all enchanted, animated and enlivened” (p. 33).

To read *Temple Tracks* is to enter into a lifeworld that has been made to disappear but comes alive in the caring narrative and sharp analytical voice of an anthropologist able to conjure both historical imagination and ethnographic insights to show the human capacities for creating social and cultural lives against all odds. The book will make highly instructive reading for scholars and students of global labour history and the anthropology of labour, and, indeed, anyone interested in the social life of the colonial labour that was crucial in shaping the infrastructure and landscape of present-day Southeast Asia.

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