

*A New God in the Diaspora?: Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore.* By Vineeta Sinha. Singapore: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and Singapore University Press, 2005. 339 pp.

The book is a first of its kind in documenting the rise of a God amongst Hindus outside the Indian subcontinent. As an observer of the development of Muneeswaran in Singapore, both as a lay worshipper and as an academic, I found the book to be extremely thorough in its rigour of fieldwork. The documentation of Muneeswaran worship will be extremely useful for many related studies on Tamils in Singapore, and by extension for the understanding of Indians and religion in Singapore. The author deserves recognition for the thoroughness with which the book has been completed. The author, a Bihari Hindu, who for all practical purposes would have been an outsider to all the Tamil dimensions of social life in Singapore, has been successful in using her ethnographic materials to give a theoretical form to the worship and ritual complex surrounding Muneeswaran worship in Singapore.

The study as indicated by the author describes the making of a 'new' god among Tamil Hindus in Singapore and West Malaysia. A being known only as *Muniandy* among early migrants from Tamil Nadu has become a God amongst sizable population of Hindus, even though his worshippers also include non-Hindus as well as non-Indians. The book clearly shows how an entity, sometimes known for its malevolent tendencies, has evolved into a deity and now has become a god enjoying the status of being worshipped in the sanctum-centorum of at least four temples in Singapore and many others in Malaysia.

A historical overview of South Indian migration and settlement in Singapore is useful to this book review. I also promote the use of terms like 'Tamil Hindus' and 'Tamil Hinduism' to mean the social domains in which language and culture tend to project different meanings than in the way they are subsumed in being termed as Indians and Hindus. Singapore has been a unique place where a society of migrants could be assumed to easily forget what their

family and community elders communicated to them in terms of religious practices. Despite the many projects that the Singapore state has pursued in order to create a nation-state, Tamil Hindus just like others have retained cultural practices that have undergone innovation. In the case of Tamils, just when the state was catching up to create ideal Indian Singaporean citizens of them, the development projects needed more manpower. In the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of Tamil Hindus from West Malaysia drifted into Singapore to work and stay. One area that they contributed was the religious arena. As many of them were from small towns and semi-urban areas, they shared the worship of deities like Muneeswaran and helped to strengthen that area of Tamil Hinduism that was being threatened by state actions which included urban redevelopment and the move to public housing flats. Thus today, there are thousands of Tamil families from West Malaysia who have members either working in Singapore or have become permanent residents or citizens of Singapore. Just when everyone thought Singapore had a settled population of Tamils, another wave of direct migrants from South India have landed on Singapore consisting of both unskilled and skilled migrants.

All these have had important ramifications in the way Tamil Hinduism has undergone changes. The scene formerly largely dominated by Amman and Murugan, now has competing religious gatherings that are equally vibrant like the Sai Baba gatherings, Ayyapa Swami gatherings as well as Muneeswaran devotees. In addition, there are also many traveling 'divine mothers', astrologers, 'swamis', traditional healers, film stars and many others who come to partake of the wealth that is being generated by all these diasporic Indians as well those who have become Singaporean Indians having no links with the villages from which their forefathers came from.

The above overview is useful in answering questions as to how fourth and fifth generations of Singapore Hindus could easily be attracted to the revival of village based religiosity while living a modern, urban lifestyle. Many incoming groups are reinforcing the notion of Muneeswaran.

The book takes the notion that *Muniandy*, sometimes equated to *Muni*, has become *Muneeswaran* in Singapore. What if these have always existed in different dimensions of social life in South India and have been fused as one by temples wanting to become *agamic* temples and mythology creating devotees. The author is right in pointing at Muneeswaran being a guardian deity in a tower of Madurai Meenatchiamman temple, but is he similar to *Muniandi* and *muni*. The author uses the translation of *muni* as sage, but a review of the many hymns that call for personal protection, like those of *kavasa padalgal* (*Kanda Shasti Kavasam* etc.) will show that '*muni*'s roam in the realm of *pey* (devils) and are considered equally malevolent. The notion of *Muniandy* as a *kaval theivam* in Tamil villages is also problematic. The Tamil village or '*uur*' has two components — the '*uur*' itself and the '*cheri*' that is considered outside the '*uur*'. Caste Hindus live in the *uur* while untouchables live in the *cheri*. Even though this geographical division could have blurred in contemporary reform driven administrations of Tamil Nadu, the migrants until the 1950s came from such clearly delineated geographical boundaries. In most '*uur*'s *Muniandy* was even outside the village and did not compete with other *kaval theivams* whose role was looking outward, protecting the *uur* from external entities, while Amman took care of the '*uur*' itself. There is a blurring of boundaries between the divine entity of *Muneeswaran* with malevolent forms of *Muni* and *Muniandy*. In Tamil Hinduism, there are '*kaval theivam*' and other entities that are prayed to ward off their gaze on humans. In Tamil Nadu villages entities like *Muniandy* and *Periachi* are to be appeased so that they do not disturb the lives of humans. *Periachi* is prayed to after a newborn child has lived the first thirty days. It becomes a thanksgiving prayer than invoking protection. A similar prayer is offered to *Muniandy* outside the village or at specific sites for avoidance than protection. Is the pairing of *Muneeswaran* (or *Muniandy*) and *Periachi* arises from the domains in which these deities are appeased than worshipped?

The volume while concentrating on the four *agamic* temples does not explain well how these temples survived the onslaught of urban renewal and neglect of Hindu elites who would want to

ignore their existence. Besides the fact of them being mainly on Malayan Railway land, the organizational leadership of the temples needs to be documented clearly to account for their survival and innovation. While the author is right in pointing out freedom that is expressed by those following *Muneeswaran* (*Muniandy*) worship in their *kattu* (jungle) temples, it is to be noted that the fathers of these men were the backbone of the trade union and political movement both in Malaya and Singapore. In Singapore, the Tamil working class has been exorcized from the trade union movement. In a politically sanitized Singapore, their role has been reduced. This could also account for *Muneeswaran* rising amongst them. A 'free' and 'wandering' entity in the form of *Muniandy* or *Muneeswaran* is a natural leader for men in search of meaning and action in a rapidly changing society.

Vineeta has been able to account how a formless entity '*Muniandy*' has been given a form as *Muneeswaran*. The author, however, has not asked the question why other '*kaval theivams*' have not assumed 'Godliness'. What about comparing the process of the spread of *Muneeswaran* worship to that of the Sai Baba movement. Just as *Muneeswaran* worship is 'a highly personal, intimate, and often emotional relationship with the deity' (p. 46), the Sai Baba or Ayappa Swami gatherings have also similar features. Are *agamis* temples dedicated to *Muneeswaran* only for *Muneeswaran*? What balance is there between *Muneeswaran* worship and other divine entities? After all *Murugan* and *Amman* worship predominate the 'festival' landscape of Singapore.

The author has rightly pointed out the four dimensions of *Muneeswaran* worship. These include the four *agamis* temples, the ten *Saivite* and *Amman* temples in which he is a peripheral deity, 'jungle' temples and in homes. The book, however, has failed to include pilgrimage to the *Muneeswaran* temples and *Muniandy* sites in South Malaya as an additional dimension. *Muneeswaran* has no pilgrimage centres in Tamil Nadu. But his devotees have created centres in West Malaysia, which have become destinations for pilgrimages. This would account for pilgrimage centers to be located

in South Malaya (p. 12) than in Tamil Nadu. A parallel exists in the case of *Murugan* and *Amman* who have many pilgrimage centers in Tamil Nadu as well as in West Malaysia. Just as in the case of *Murugan* and *Amman*, *Muneeswaran* now has a universal existence when devotees undertake pilgrimages.

Chapter 6 represents an interesting chapter in creating a theoretical framework to the vast ethnographic data collected. While recognizing the notion of plurality among Hindus, the text goes through the theoretical grounds for locating the styles of religiosity surrounding the veneration of *Muneeswaran*. The author rightly points out the vast literature that has accumulated in European languages about Hinduism and notes how they have brought 'an overemphasis on scriptural-theological dimension of Hinduism' (M.N. Srinivas, 1976, pp. 28–90). Just when it is expected that this study would exorcize 'orientalism' in the study of Tamil Hinduism using the ethnographic data, the conclusion ends with a sociological accounting of the rise of *Muneeswaran* as the risen God. The ethnographic data is very rich enough to problematize Hinduism itself and exorcize all the orientalist notions that have crept in. A reading of *Thirumuller's Thirumanthiram* would have provided a better alternative to view Tamil Hinduism than all the sociological categories.

The text uses words like the 'Hindu community' and 'Hinduism' very loosely. *Muneeswaran* has risen. Has *Muniandy* been left to his own realms to wander freely the domains human do not occupy in Singapore? The commodification and marketization process in agamic temples also need to be accounted for in the rise of *Muneeswaran*. As these temples as well as shrines need more and more money to maintain the semblance of a Tamil Hindu temple, *Muneeswaran* may have been a better alternative to *Muniandy*. As all their fund raising goes to pay the inflated costs of land and building, marketization of *Muniandy* as *Muneeswaran* is being promoted to attract funds and voluntary labour from the devotees and non-devotees alike to give him a status of an *agamic* divinity.

The book is written densely and the people of the ethnographic data may not have the literary ability to comprehend it. It may be

useful for the author to have this book published in Tamil as well as render an easily readable version for *Muneeswaran's* devotees and other Singaporeans. A Tamil version of the book would enable the Tamil Hindu literati to contribute in ways that is not available in all the research published in western languages.

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