Vineeta Sinha

Religion-State Encounters in Hindu Domains

From the Straits Settlements to Singapore

ARI
ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE
National University of Singapore

Springer

A silver chariot procession during the 1969 Thaipusam festival at the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, Singapore. Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission

Religion–State Encounters in Hindu Domains

ARI – SPRINGER ASIA SERIES

Volume 1

The Asia Research Institute (ARI) is a university-level research institute of the National University of Singapore (NUS). Its mission is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on Asia. The three themes of the ARI-Springer Asia Series – Cities, Religion, and Migration – correspond to three of ARI's research clusters and primary research emphases. ARI's logo depicts rice grains in star-like formation. Rice has been the main staple food for many of Asia's peoples since the 15th century. It forms the basis of communal bonds, an element of ritual in many Asian societies, and a common cultural thread across nations and societies.

For further volumes:
http://www.springer.com/series/8425

Vineeta Sinha

Religion–State Encounters in Hindu Domains

From the Straits Settlements to Singapore

 Springer

Vineeta Sinha
Department of Sociology
National University of Singapore
11 Arts Link
115750 Singapore
socvs@nus.edu.sg

for Akash and Ashish

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

AMLA	Administration of Muslim Law Act
AWARE	Association of Women for Action and Research
CPF	Central Provident Fund
CC	Consecration ceremony
DK	Dravida Kazhagam
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
DPM	Deputy Prime Minister
EIC	East India Company
EEIC	English East India Company
EXCO	Executive Committee Member
FMS	Federated Malay States
GRC	Group Representation Constituency
HDB	Housing and Development Board
HEA	Hindu Endowments Act
HRCE	Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department
HRCEB	Hindu Religious Charitable Endowments Board
IRCC	Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles
IRO	Inter-Religious Organization
LISHA	Little India Shopkeepers' and Heritage Association
LMS	London Missionary Society
MHEB	Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board
MHEO	Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance
MMHEB	Malacca Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MUIS	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura
NCCS	National Council of Churches of Singapore
PHEB	Penang Hindu Endowments Board
PMHEB	Penang Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board
SAB	Sikh Advisory Board
SC	Select Committee
SCORE	Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises
SHAB	Singapore Hindu Advisory Board

SHEB	Singapore Hindu Endowments Board
SMHEB	Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (1906–1952)/Singapore Muslim and Hindu Endowments Board (from 1952–1968)
SS	Straits Settlements
TRA	Tamil Reform Association
UFMS	Unfederated Malay States
URA	Urban Renewal Authority
VOC	Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie

Contents

List of Tables

List of Maps

List of Figures

Chapter 1
Making Sense of Religion and State Encounters: Locating Religions in Secular States

Students of religion have displayed heightened interest in 'uncovering connections between religion and politics',[1] particularly within the framework of secular states. The research in this field has generated a compendium of analytical tools and a conceptual language for engaging this multi-dimensional domain. For instance, scholars have found it useful to invoke the concept of 'secularism', the related ideas of 'separation of church and state' and 'state non-interference in religion', to make sense of encounters between these realms. Other efforts have seen the generation of measures such as 'government involvement in religion' (GIR)[2] and 'separation of religion and state' (SRAS), to gauge the relationship between state and religion. Specifically, questions are asked about a few of these variables: Is there an official state religion? Are religions legislated? Is there religious discrimination? And, is there government regulation of minority and majority religions? Jonathan Fox's survey of global religions notes that 'there is a wide diversity in the relationship between religion and state',[3] even as he concludes that between 1990 and 2002, government involvement in religion has increased globally.

The historical and empirical project presented here is grounded in a desire to theorize 'religion–state' relations in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, secular city-state of Singapore. The core research problematic of this project has emerged out of the confluence of two domains, 'religion, law and bureaucracy' and 'religion and colonial encounters'. Few studies have focused on the enfolding of religious institutions within bureaucratic structures, a rare example being Franklin Presler's *Religion under Bureaucracy: Policy and Administration for Hindu Temples in South India* (1987). Drawing inspiration from this text, my work has two core objectives: one, to articulate the actual points of engagement between institutions of religion and the state, and two, to identify the various processes, mechanisms and strategies through which relations across these spheres are sustained. While I avoid the assumption that states over-determine religious domains, I also recognize the capacity, as well

---

[1] Asad (1999, 178).

[2] Jonathan Fox's *A World Survey of Religion and the State* (2008) uses the GIR and SRAS to assess government input in regulating the religious domain between 1990 and 2002.

[3] Fox (2008, 350).

as the authority, of such states to organize, regulate and dominate religious spheres. Crucially, I do not assume the 'state' to be a homogeneous, monolithic entity. Instead, I hold that in practice states are defined by tremendous institutional and organizational complexity, operating through a network of mediating administrative, bureaucratic and legal mechanisms.

This latter notice constitutes a key starting point for this project. The thematic foundations of this book rest on disentangling the complex interactions between religious communities, individuals and the various manifestations of the Singapore state, relationships that are framed within a culture of bureaucracy. This is accomplished through a scrutiny of Hindu domains in the island nation-state, from her identity as part of the Straits Settlements (see Map 1.1) to the present day. The
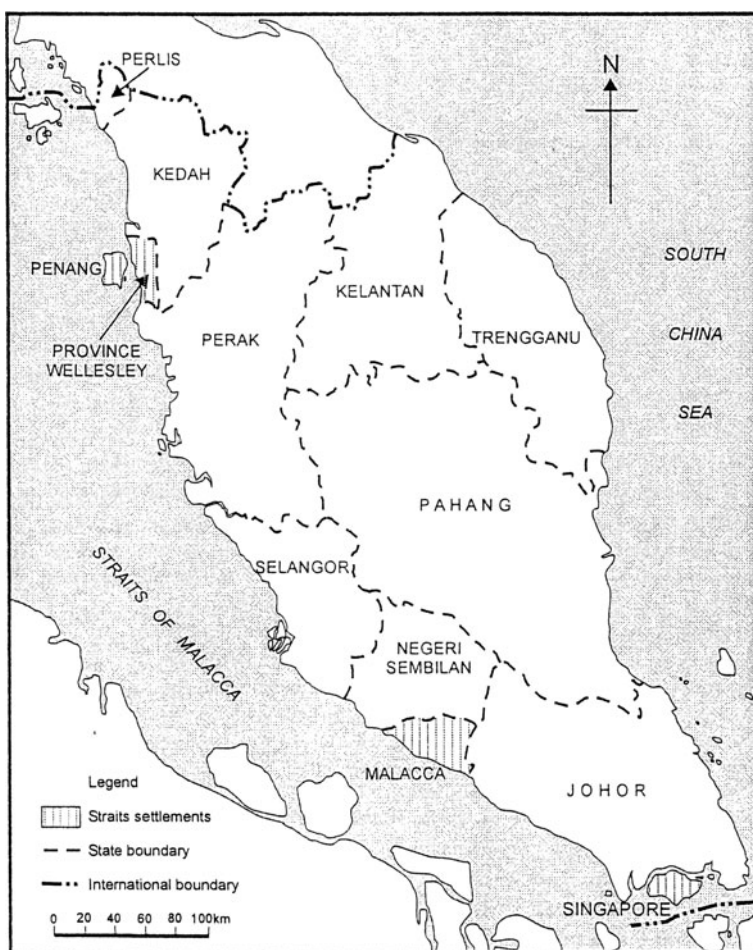
Map 1.1 A map of the Straits Settlements showing Singapore, Penang and Malacca

empirical and analytical emphases of this book rest on my engagement with the realm of Hinduism as it is conceived, structured, framed and practiced within the context of a strong state in Singapore today. Ethnographically, I focus on Hindu temple management and the observance of Hindu festivals and processions, enacted within administrative and bureaucratic frames.

There have been significant recurrent emphases in theorizing religion–state encounters. One is the invocation of the 'church–state' dichotomy questioning if a degree of separation is possible between these two polarities,[4] while another strand has invoked 'secularism'[5] as an analytical tool. The method adopted here departs from these lines of enquiry by adding another dimension. I begin with the question of what it means for religions to be embedded within the frames of a strong state, built upon a rational, bureaucratic administration. In exploring the dynamics of religion–state interactions in a secular, religiously plural context, I seek to establish how expressions of religiosity are influenced by a robust culture of bureaucracy. While it is critical to attend to formal legislative frameworks and codes, I concur with Demerath III that

> . . . clearly one must probe behind the formalistic façade to find the true relations between a society's religion and government.[6]

It is necessary to move beyond formal, legalistic interpretations of 'secularism' and 'secular states', towards the actual practices between religions and the state, something that this project seeks to accomplish for Singapore. Admittedly, the old question of what constitutes the 'secular' continues to be debated,[7] revisited most recently in Charles Taylor's impressive volume, *A Secular Age* (2007). The text begins thus: 'What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?'[8] While Taylor offers three possible responses to what 'secularity'[9] connotes, his discussion produces less clarity about the historical and conceptual relationship between 'secular', 'secularism' and 'secularization'. The analytical disentangling of these latter terms is something that Jose Casanova engages with. He draws these distinctions of the

---

[4]In particular, analyses of American politics have been dominated by the invocation of the wall of separation between church and state and the need to preserve this. See for example, Davis (1991), Jelen (2000), Kramnick (1986) and Lambert (2003).

[5]Scholars operating out of an Asian context have found it valuable to turn to 'secularism' as a political doctrine, even as they have criticized it. Heng and Ten's (2010) recently edited volume carries essays on the relationship between states and versions of secularism in Asia. Indian social scientists have debated vigorously about the applicability of secularism to the subcontinent, notably including such scholars as Irfan Engineer (1995), T. N. Madan (1987), Nandy (1990) and Tejani (2008). Edited volumes by Srinivas (2007), Needham and Sunder Rajan (2007) and Bhargava (1998) have all highlighted problems with the notion of secularism.

[6]N. J. Demerath III (2003, 24).

[7]See, for example, Warner et al.'s *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (2010).

[8]Taylor (2007, 1).

[9]These are as follows: one, 'the emptying of religion from public spaces', two, the decline of belief and practice and, three, new conditions of belief or lack thereof (ibid. 2). He finds the third interpretation to be the most meaningful and worth pursuing.

secular as 'an epistemic category', secularism as 'a worldview or political ideology', and secularization as 'a conceptualization of historical processes'.[10] Rather than approach 'secular' and 'sacred' as mutually exclusive and oppositional categories, I have found Talal Asad's ruminations of 'the idea of the secular' a fruitful place to ground my interpretation. His observations that '"religion" and "secular" are not entirely fixed categories'[11] and that 'the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion'[12] caution against the presumption of a strict dichotomy of 'sacred' and 'secular'. Asad further argues that secularism is much more than the functional and institutional separation of religion and the state.

> Secularism as a political doctrine arose in the modern Euro-America. It is easy to think of it simply as requiring the separation of religious from secular institutions in government, but that is not all it is. Abstractly stated, examples of this separation can be found in medieval Christendom and in the Islamic empires—and no doubt elsewhere too. What is distinctive about 'secularism' is that it presupposes new concepts of 'religion, 'ethics' and 'politics' and new imperatives associated with them.[13]

As such the emergent notion of the 'secular' carries important implications for how the 'religious' domain itself is to be conceptualized, reiterating its status as a 'relational' concept, something that is confirmed in my analysis of Singapore.

Given the historical and religious-cultural grounding of the concept, critics have argued that 'secularism' is ethnocentric and suggested that the various meanings attributed to it may not be relevant, especially to non-Western, non-Christian, post-colonial states. Yet, the ideas within the concept of 'secularism' have not been rejected entirely. For example, alternative 'non-Western' varieties of secularism have been proposed[14] and the concept continues to be debated and re-conceptualized even in the current scholarship on religion.[15] Furthermore, a survey of multi-religious societies reveals highly varied and, at times, contradictory interpretations of the consciously adopted political ideology of secularism. Indeed, projects that seek to theorize the location of religions within secular state boundaries are confronted with a phenomenal diversity of arrangements in practice.[16] My analysis of Singapore's religious landscape adds to this complex picture.

_____

[10]Cited in Warner et al. (2010, 4, footnote).

[11]Asad (2003, 25).

[12]Ibid. 200.

[13]Asad (2003, 1).

[14]Proposed by scholars like T. N. Madan, Andre Beteille, Dipankar Gupta and Ashis Nandy, as well as Mani Shankar Aiyar, who are theorizing the Indian context.

[15]See, for example, Michael Warner et al.'s *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (2010).

[16]Some examples include the following: Sweden was formally a religious state under the Lutheran Church of Sweden but is also one of the world's most secularized societies; India is an officially secular nation with a religiously diverse population and where some parties hold the view that the state is not secular enough in being rigorously neutral amongst contesting religious groups; France, where the *laicite* model of a secularist state protects religious institutions from some types

After almost 150 years of British colonial rule, Singapore adopted the contours of a secular nation-state, an event described by a key political sociologist as 'an ignoble birth'.[17] In many ways, the shift to this political arrangement was inevitable, but emerging out of colonialism, the secular state model was nonetheless an imposed one. Yet, the very idea of the nation-state itself is a relatively recent development in the broader sweep of human history.[18] The obvious artificiality[19] that characterized the Singapore nation also meant that it did not, and could not, conform to any given model definition of what the nation or the nation-state was 'supposed to be'. The various political configurations in Singapore's history have left an indelible mark on its contemporary principles of governance and administration. In the transition to political independence and secular nationhood, these principles were largely carried over, revealing firm continuities with a colonial past. The emergent nation-state carried the administrative framework and legal institutional arrangements imposed on it by historical circumstances of colonial rule. In fact, they constitute a principal feature of its inheritance. Like many other facets of everyday life in Singapore, the practice of religions is also regulated by a set of laws, administrative norms and bureaucratic procedures, conferred upon it through the experience of colonialism. In the pages that follow, I aim to map these parameters that frame the supervision and management of religion, highlighting their impact on religious expression.

Upon self-government in 1959, full independence in 1963, and its ejection from Malaysia towards nationhood in 1965, the political leadership of Singapore assumed responsibility for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity. From the outset, local leaders have recognized the centrality of religion in the lives of communities, but also regarded it as a sensitive subject, following the tumultuous period in the 1950s and the riots of 1964. In view of this recognition, members of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society were assured of their right to profess a religion (or not) and the freedom to practice it. Singapore's political leadership inherited a population that is far from secularized. A large proportion[20] of her citizenry today declare adherence to religious traditions amidst significant numbers of non-believers. While the Singapore state recognized religious diversity amongst its citizens, it approached religion with a view to uniform, effective management, bestowing 'sameness' and homogeneity on them all. An additional feature was the invocation of the political ideology of 'secularism', which led to its self-definition as a secular state.

---

of state interference, but also places some limitations on public expressions of religiosity; Italy, where Roman Catholicism is espoused by a majority of the populace but which severed political connections with the Vatican in 1986; Vietnam and China, where there is evidence of religious repression by the state but which are by no means secular societies.

[17] Chua Beng Huat, in Hong and Huang (2008, Foreword, viii).

[18] Peter Worsley notes that 'the rise of the nation-state is a modern phenomenon. Its origins, in Europe, date back only two centuries' (1998, 1040).

[19] Chua (1995), Hill and Lian (1995) and Puru Shotam (1998).

[20] According to *Singapore Census of Population, 2000*, the percentage of Singaporeans who claim to have a religious identity stands at 86.2%, while those that declare themselves 'non-believers' (including atheists, agnostics and free thinkers) are reported to be 14.8%.

Importantly, although a secular stance was adopted, religion was not factored out of the equation of political governance. Over time, religion has been valued by the Singapore state as a moral and cultural resource, but also potentially destabilizing.

It was further incumbent on a secular nation to formulate rules that defined its jurisdiction and its obligations towards its citizens, as well as their rights. The Constitution of the Republic of Singapore carried these codes and like other such texts, broadly speaking,

> ... is the fundamental law of the state, which contains the legal rules constituting state institutions and delineating their authority.[21]

Singapore received its own new constitutions in 1948 and 1955, which sketched the contours for self-governance, full independence and ultimately nationhood. Kevin Tan observes that 'constitutions are the penultimate social contracts'[22] and the 'most august of a nation's legal instruments'[23] and 'encapsulate the ideals of a nation, stating in clear (sometimes not so clear) terms, how a society is to be run'.[24] But he also notes that these 'are necessarily flawed'[25] and, I would add, essentially impossible to actualize in practice. Furthermore, constitutions have a visionary tone and border on idealism. They may not be the best tools to fashion interactions of a political leadership with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity, except in broadly emblematic and figurative modes.

As it stands today, Singapore's Constitution[26] enunciates the individual citizen's right to religious freedom and the right of religious communities to manage their own affairs.[27] Religions are granted this autonomy provided they do not engage in any '... act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality'.[28] This proviso, that the state has the right to intervene in the religious domain to preserve national interests and security, is encapsulated in practically all secular states' constitutions today. Notions of religious freedom, religious equality

---

[21] Edge (2006, 12).

[22] Kevin Tan (2004, 98).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Kevin Tan also notes that the Singapore Constitution has been amended several times since independence to address the question of protection of racial and religious minority rights and multiracial representation in politics (Kevin Tan 2004).

[27] Article 15(1): Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it. Article 15(2): Every religious group in Singapore has the right to perform the following three functions: (1) to manage its own religious affairs; (2) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and (3) to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with the law.
Article 16(2): Every religious group in Singapore also 'has the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and therein provide instruction in its own religion, and there shall be no discrimination on the ground only of religion in any law relating to such institutions or in the administration of any such law. (*Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*)

[28] Article 15(4) of the *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*.

and religious neutrality are also nominally codified here and in other political and legal documents. These enshrine a formal commitment to the individual citizen's rights to religious expression without government interference. This achieves the formal separation of the 'church and state' in the claim of a secular, nation-state, what Habermas sees as 'a prominent expression of the transition to modernity'.[29] The latter is a metaphoric reference to the idea that religious and political institutions should be kept separate from and independent of each other's influence. Notably, in this equation, the secular government adopts an 'atheist' position rather than an anti-religious stance. Apart from signalling the state's intention to be neutral *vis-à-vis* religious matters, this articulated secular attitude allows the state to locate its political authority beyond all other interests, such that it cannot be held hostage to the interests of any group, religious or otherwise. For secular nation-states, the Constitution is the supreme authority, and for administrative purposes, the state recognizes no higher authority, particularly no divine/supernatural authority. Furthermore, the Singapore state's legitimacy rests on its declared equality of treatment of all its citizens.[30] It presents itself as an impartial intercessor that can mediate between dissenting parties and avoid being charged with favouritism or partial treatment of any religious group. Today, Singapore is defined unequivocally as a secular state. However, the designation of Singapore or India as a 'secular' state is not as straightforward as one might think. As noted by Nikki Keddie,

> No state today is entirely secular or entirely non-secular . . . At the opposite, no state yet seen has been purely secular, whether the word is used to mean state separation from religion or state control of religion.[31]

Given my interest in state regulation and management of religious domains, the legal dimension is important in this project because of the 'regulatory intent'[32] embedded in laws.[33] The Constitution is by no means the only legal document that impacts the religious domain and regulates the practice of religion in Singapore. Several other

---

[29]Habermas (1987, 308).

[30]The historical contract, made with the formerly British rulers of Singapore, obliged the formulators of the Singapore Constitution to include the clause that the Government must undertake to safeguard the interests of its 'racial and religious minorities', in particular, members of the Malay community. This is carried in Article 152 of the Constitution of Singapore and 'guarantees protection to minorities in general and which obliges the Government to safeguard and promote the interests of the Malays in Singapore' (Kevin Tan 2004, 99). Kevin Tan also notes that 'Article 152 has never been invoked, challenged or questioned in court of law. As such, its impact, if any, has been psychological rather than legal' (ibid. 104). Further, Article 153 requires the legislature to 'make provision for regulating Muslim religious affairs and for constituting a council to advise the President in matters relating to the Muslim religion'.

[31]Keddie (2003, 242).

[32]Clark and Dear (1983, 128).

[33]Of course, laws can serve other functions as well. In examining Muslim women and law in India, Vrinda Narain (2008) demonstrates the complex and contradictory nature of state legislation in being complicit with patriarchal structures of authority. But she also suggests that the law could be a tool for engendering social change, revealing her faith in the emancipatory potential of the law, while being aware that it can also be 'an emissary of the state'.

pieces of legislation can be (and have been) activated to manage irregularities within the religious sphere, including instances of religious discord or attempts to incite the same. These are the Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act,[34] the Charities Act, the Undesirable Publications Act, the Societies Act and the Penal Code. These laws can be invoked in the event of 'subversive' and 'illegitimate' use of religion, or in instances of incitement of religious disharmony. A recent law, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, passed by the Singapore Parliament in 1990, was added to the existing legislation. Its proponents argued that the existing set of laws were too disproportionate and severe to handle cases of incitement of religious animosity and the use of religion as a front for engaging in political activities. Two other pieces of legislation that affect the Muslim and Hindu communities today need mention. The first is the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) and the second is the Hindu Endowments Act (HEA), both of which evolved from the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance(MHEO), passed for the Straits Settlements in 1905. The former is a document that encapsulates all Muslim affairs on the island, while the latter created the Singapore Hindu Endowments Board (SHEB).[35]

In addition to these laws, the practice of religions in Singapore is subject to the norms, procedures and regulations imposed by a number of mediating institutions and what I call 'manifestations' of the state, such as the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the Singapore Police and the Traffic Police, to name a few. Analysts have observed that both 'a panoply of state institutions ... and para-statal institutions . . . and other 'soft' mechanisms'[36] exist in Singapore, as do a 'comprehensive arsenal of general laws which may be utilized to limit religious freedom'.[37] This project highlights the impact these 'para-statal institutions', 'soft mechanisms' and 'soft law instruments',[38] such as committees, councils, statutory boards, etc., have on regulating religious practice on the island. For instance, religious groups need to secure permits, licenses, clearances and approvals for the right to hold public rituals and festivals, or to organize religious discourses by visiting spiritual figures.

Working within these parameters, religious communities are free to establish organizations in the practice of their faith, but must be registered under the Societies Act in order to function legally. Approval from the registering authorities is fairly straightforward, provided the group in question demonstrates itself to be a 'religious' one and agrees to abide by a set of specified regulations. Religious bodies also need to be registered as a charity[39] under the Charities Act should they be involved

---

[34]Historically, Malaysian Federal Law is the origin of the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act, which continue to be applicable in Singapore. See Shiau (2004) for a fuller discussion.

[35]Legally, the functions of the SHEB are confined to managing the religious endowments vested in four Hindu temples, but in practical terms, its current portfolio is far more expansive.

[36]E. Tan (2002, 85).

[37]Tan and Thio (1997, 905).

[38]E. Tan (2008, 73).

[39]If registered as a charity, religious organizations are obliged to make available their annual reports and audited financial statements to the Commissioner of Charities.

in social welfarism. This further subjects religious organizations to a body of rules, including an obligation to be audited, to reveal details of their financial records and their involvement with commercial activities. These requirements apply equally to traditional religious institutions (such as churches, mosques, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist temples and Sikh *gurdwara*s), community-linked religious bodies, as well as the plethora of 'new religious movements' and new spiritualities that have a strong presence here.

Historically, community-led initiatives have established religion-specific associations that are viewed as national representative authorities and consulted by various government agencies and the political leadership on a range of religious issues. These include the Singapore Buddhist Federation (SBF), formed in 1948. It defines itself as 'the parent body of Singapore Buddhist organisations and followers',[40] promoting cultural, educational and social welfare activities. The Taoist community has seen the emergence of two organizations in the 1990s, the Taoist Federation of Singapore (1990) and the Taoist Mission (1996). Both carry reformist overtones concerned with organizing the religion in order to arrest its decline and to address public ignorance and prejudice about Taoism. The Christian community is represented by the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS), founded in 1948. It brings 'together the major Christian denominations and churches in Singapore'[41] and the Singapore Council of Christian Churches (SCCC), which defines itself as the national body affiliated to the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC). The Roman Catholic Archdiocese for Singapore was established in 1972 and oversees the 31 Catholic parishes on the island. The Sikh Advisory Board (SAB), which was formed during the colonial period, 'advises the Government on matters concerning the Sikh religion and customs and the general welfare of the Sikh community'.[42] Not all religious groups associated with the major religious traditions are affiliated with these bodies and many choose to operate independently. Nor do these larger umbrella entities have any legal or spiritual authority to regulate religious behaviour or discipline any religious group.

While there is no central, coordinating body for Hinduism, a large number of linguistic and cultural bodies define the Indian and Hindu community.[43] In the absence of such a body or a recognized spiritual Hindu leadership, the Hindu Endowments Board SHEB (which now includes members of the Hindu Advisory Board) is a statutory board and a secular, administrative body. It is often called upon to offer Hindu perspectives on issues such as inter-faith dialogue, religious harmony and terrorism. Finally, Muslim affairs on the island come under the purview of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), which also

---

[40]The Singapore Buddhist Federation Foundation was founded in the late 1990s and registered under the Societies Act and is also a registered charity. It was renamed the Singapore Buddhist Community Foundation in 2005. See http://www.buddhist.org.sg/sbf/about (accessed on 8 June 2010).

[41]http://www.nccs.org.sg/NCCS/Home.html

[42]http://www.sikhadvisoryboard.org

[43]See Sinha (1987).

manages most mosques on the island. Both SHEB and MUIS are defined as government organizations in a secular state framework and are currently under the purview of the Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports (MCYS), itself part of the government infrastructure. The institutional management of Muslim affairs by MUIS and of the 4 prominent Hindu temples by the SHEB (see Map 1.2), is a puzzle that provided the initial impetus for this piece of research.
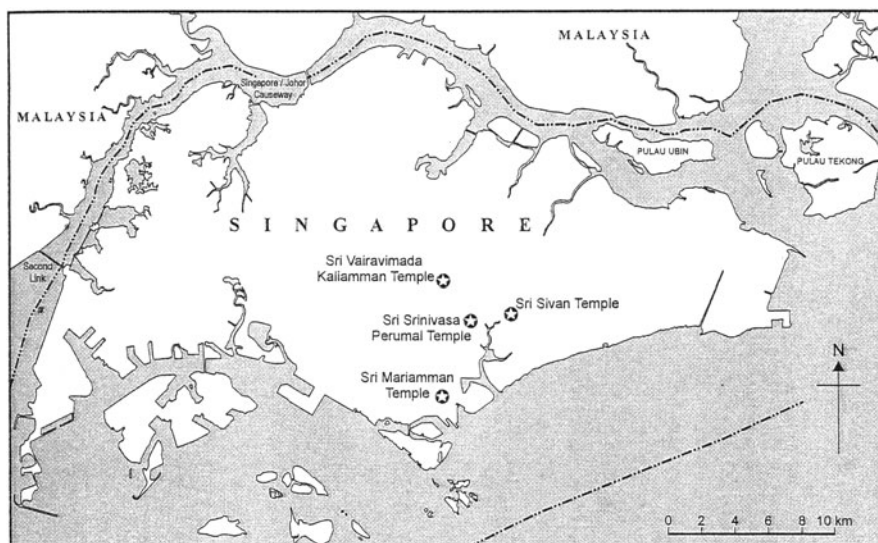
Map 1.2 A map of the island of Singapore showing the four temples administered by the Singapore Hindu Endowments Board

While the various religious groups have the autonomy to manage the internal affairs of their respective communities, they also derive their authority from state recognition as national representative bodies, seen to offer legitimate religious interpretations of a range of issues. In practice, these various religious authorities are consulted both by government agencies and by the political leadership on religious matters. Singaporeans easily recognize these organizations and leaders, who are featured in the public domain (via the local print and visual media) as 'official' representatives of religious communities. These representatives are also visible in organizations such as the Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore, a private, inter-faith initiative that traces its roots to 1949, the more recently formed National Steering Committee (NSC) on Racial and Religious Harmony and the Presidential Council of Religious Harmony (PCRH).[44] Referring to the latter, Kenneth Tan

---

[44]For the local Sikh and Hindu communities, there is a vacuum in terms of traditional religious leadership that can offer spiritual guidance and counsel. While other religious groups are represented by an abbot, a pastor, a monk, a mufti or an archbishop, the Sikh and Hindu representatives

describes this method of relating to religious leadership as a '... skilful practice of state corporatism, where the traditional leadership of religious communities and groups is, to some official degree, co-opted, making it more difficult for them to challenge the state since their legitimacy is also derived from the state'.[45] Thus these religious institutions and organizations do not necessarily have an oppositional relationship with state and government institutions. Religious leadership of the various communities is often embedded within government-level or national-level steering committees, councils and boards. Not only do they endorse values espoused by the latter but they are also frequently constrained by this association. In a curious stance, the Singapore state simultaneously endorses and circumscribes religion.

There is no state religion in Singapore and there has never been a Ministry of Religion, although the affairs of religious communities fall within the ambit of the MCYS today.[46] Instead, several national-level bodies play an advisory role and potentially supervise the religious domain. For example, the establishment of the PCRH is provided for in the MRH Act, and this has been incorporated in Article 76 of the Republic's Constitution. It functions to report to and advise the Minister of Home Affairs on issues relating to religious harmony. The first such Council was appointed in August 1992 and was led by a Chairman and between 6 and 15 members, who are representatives of various religious traditions or individuals who have distinguished themselves in public service. The NSC on Racial and Religious Harmony operates similarly, with representation drawn from 'top leaders of apex religious organizations as well as racial and community-based organizations'.[47] A Government Minister chairs it with several government leaders on board as well. The group is defined as 'the national forum for apex ethnic and religious groups to dialogue and build trust across racial and religious groups in Singapore'.[48] In January 2002, in a state-led initiative, the then-PM Goh Chok Tong proposed the setting up of Inter Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) in each of Singapore's 84 constituencies. These were conceptualized as a network of community groups which were meant to develop rapport and cement inter-racial, religious ties across the diverse communities.[49] The MCYS recently reported that about 90% of the 750 or

---

on these committees are drawn from secular, administrative bodies like the Sikh Advisory Board and the Hindu Endowments Board/Hindu Advisory Board, respectively.

[45] Kenneth Tan (2010, 342).

[46] In previous incarnations this used to be known as the Ministry of Social Affairs and then the Ministry of Culture.

[47] MCYS Media Release No. 36/2006, 'Government Appoints National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony' (7 October 2006).

[48] Ibid.

[49] Additionally, he encouraged schools, workplaces and other social organizations to establish what he called Harmony Circles (HCs), 'to help spread the movement of inter-racial confidence building more extensively at the ground level' (Opening Remarks by the Then-PM Goh at the Dialogue with Young Malay/Muslim Professionals, 2 February 2002). Upon his suggestion, a Code on Religious Harmony was also drafted. This is essentially a pledge, not a law, and is meant to reflect moral values and norms that should guide the practice of religions locally, bearing in mind Singapore's multi-religious and secular context.

so registered religious groups in Singapore were members of the IRCCs,[50] which are very active in promoting opportunities for inter-faith interactions and exchanges. In addition to framing the playing field for religions, these apparatuses are collectively engaged in different kinds of ideological work. These sustain the national agenda of fostering racial and religious harmony amongst a multi-religious citizenry. The idea that religious differences emerging from this pluralism could lead to religious discord, destabilizing social relations amongst the populace, is a persistent feature of the Singapore state's discourse on religion.

However, it must be noted that registration in the above-mentioned modes is not mandatory for the right to hold specific religious beliefs. A great deal of religious activity on the island (across religious traditions) occurs outside the parameters set by official and legitimated interpretations of religiosity. There is evidence for the pervasiveness of popular, unofficial and amorphous forms of religiosity, as well as individuals who declare adherence to some of the banned and deregistered[51] religious groups. For instance, homes are used as Taoist and Hindu temples, where mediums hold séances. Religious preachers also offer discourses in homes of followers, while independent churches meet in country clubs and commercial sites. These pockets of religious activity are typically located on the margins of mainstream religious boundaries, very often by choice. Many (but not all) of these are unregistered religious groups, something that the relevant bodies and officials are fully aware of. Despite not being registered, private, independent religious initiatives have found support amongst lay individuals and have hitherto been able to function informally in Singapore. However, recent developments may alter the playing field for these informal expressions of religiosity in the years to come.[52]

This brief survey of legislation and a mapping of bureaucratic structures unveil the scaffolding which shapes administration and regulation of religious affairs on the island. Moving beyond this, I propose that the actual details of such management require in-depth empirical scrutiny. Having to operate within the given legal parameters necessarily subjects religious groups to a coterie of laws and bureaucratic rules, regulations and procedures that impact the enactment of everyday religiosity. Most critically, mapping this network of laws and organizations reveals the various points of contact between institutions of religion and those of the state. Furthermore, both the state-affiliated institutions and committees and the national-level religious bodies interact routinely, often sharing a relationship of mutual interdependence. State presence is discernible in the religious sphere through a series of mediating bureaucratic institutions that regulate public religiosity on the island.

Ultimately, the strategy I have adopted generates the following critical questions that have framed this research and which the rest of the book responds to. How is the state secular in Singapore? What is the place of religion in the official, public state

---

[50]MCYS Media Release No. 36/2006.

[51]Just to mention two select examples, I have encountered Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses in the course of my fieldwork in Singapore.

[52]I pick up strands of this discussion in the concluding chapter.

discourse in the history of Singapore? How is the religious domain administered and regulated by legislation and bureaucratic procedures? Do the latter undermine the capacity of religious groups to function autonomously? Posing larger theoretical questions about the relationship between state policy, law and religion makes this project important beyond Singapore. How does a secular state balance the desire of religious communities for autonomy and right to self-determination with its commitment to regulating the religious domain for the larger good? Do the guarantees of religious freedom and state non-interference in religious matters compromise the state's commitment to the 'secular project'?

Given the complex and peculiar circumstances of the Singapore story, attention to the historical dimension is indispensable for making sense of the current scenario of religion–state relations. Historically, Singapore has been a part of several geopolitical entities, including being colonized by the British. This interest takes me back to the entity known as the 'Straits Settlements' (SS), an administrative unit of British colonial initiative, under which rather diverse and scattered geographical spaces—Malacca, Penang and Singapore—were united between 1826 and 1945. The British retained control of the regions first through the commercial involvement of the English East India Company (EEIC) and then its political and administrative governance as a Crown Colony. My research interest in the region was sparked initially by the question of what the colonial attitude to religion was during shifting political conditions. A closer scrutiny of the SS led me to pose these specific queries: Was there a clearly articulated colonial policy with respect to non-Christian religions? What was the impact of the British policy of 'non-interference' in religious affairs? How was this negotiated in practice? What lay behind the colonial logic of administering religious institutions? Did the legislative regulation of religions signal state interference? Why were only non-Christian, minority religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism, subject to legislative and administrative supervision? In the absence of similar legislation for other non-Christian communities like the Buddhists and Taoists, what other regulatory mechanisms existed for them?

Ultimately, this book addresses the question of state management of religion for Singapore through colonial and post-colonial moments. I narrate the complicated story of religion–state encounters in Singapore from its identity as a part of the SS to its status as a secular state. I explore the impact of specific moments in Singapore's past in shaping 'secular-religious' encounters in the present. Through these historical moments, the state machinery has determined the fields within which religions exist and operate. The blueprint for state management of religions was inherited from the colonial context. Instead of being transformed or rejected, this model was normalized in the post-colonial phase of the nation's existence. In practice, a commitment to the ideologies of 'secularism' and 'non-interference' perhaps cannot be fully honoured by states, reiterating above all else their rhetorical and symbolic value. I argue that given the legal and administrative logic that frames the practice of religions in the present, various manifestations of the Singapore state do inevitably interfere routinely, systematically and, most critically, legitimately with the affairs of religious communities. The state does not have a 'hands-off' attitude to religion.

Evidence suggests that over time the state has had a firm and explicit interest in meticulously regulating the religious domain. However, one needs to go beyond this notice. Analytically, I make this move by considering what 'intervention' and 'regulation' mean in the Singapore context. I also ask what constitutes the basis for the widespread 'legitimacy' of state regulation of religion. Under what conditions might this be challenged and queried by citizens, if at all? Indeed, given the expectations that citizens have of how states should function, are some kinds of state 'intervention' deemed to be inevitable and even expected of the state?

In Singapore, the mandate of the state to act as an arbiter and mediator is legally given by the Constitution and a system of other legal documents and pronouncements. Students of Singapore politics have described its brand of governance as 'pragmatic secularism'[53] and 'qualified secularism'.[54] While 'illegal intervention', i.e., acting outside the bounds of law and legal jurisdiction, is obvious and unambiguous, it is far more challenging to articulate wherein lies the *legitimacy* of bureaucratic state intervention in religious matters. The broader organization of social and political life inevitably encloses the sacred domains within a highly rationalized mentality, framed by bureaucratic, administrative and legislative boundaries. An important guiding principle is to highlight the uniqueness of Singapore's religious landscape, especially its culture of bureaucracy and its impact on expressions of religiosity. Indeed, what does the Singapore story convey about state regulation of the religious domain? The material I present in the following pages describes how religions operate *within* a bureaucracy. Such an approach recognizes that the processes of standardization and bureaucratization mark the religious domain. At the same time, these do not diminish the importance of religion in society. These processes reconfigure the religious sphere and pose challenges for sustaining particular religious sentiments. But they can also stimulate innovation and creativity on the part of practitioners.[55]

For the contemporary period, the project is driven primarily by a concern to theorize encounters of the secular state (through a range of mediating 'para-statal' institutions) with religious communities located within its boundaries. A move to the present enables me to shift theoretical gears and examine the functioning of religions under bureaucratic conditions, designed and enforced by the post-colonial state. Moving from Singapore's colonial past to the present scene enables discussions about continuities or disjunctures with regard to the state's tone and attitude towards religion.

The book carries a narrative about the complex and ambivalent location of religious communities within particular socio-political arrangements, straddling colonial and post-colonial moments. It also moves between historical and contemporary material, with a view to using the past as a commentary on the present. The historical and contemporary data I present demonstrate the value of 'symbolic

---

[53]Kenneth Tan (2010, 339).

[54]Thio (2008, 80).

[55]Sinha (2005).

power' in the state's discourse on religion. They enable me to demonstrate that the discrepancy between 'what is done' and 'what is said' may be far from duplicitous. In reiterating the need for articulating the *nature of encounters* across the religious and political domains, the arguments offered here can contribute to conversations about state management of religions. To facilitate a more focused discussion (and to connect with my contemporary interest in making sense of forms of Hindu religiosity), the project draws specifically on ethnographic and historical material from Hindu domains in Singapore.

1.1   Turning to the Hindu Scene in Singapore

The fact that this research project is both familiar and novel for me requires some elaboration. My current interest in exploring interactions between religion, law and bureaucracy in a secular society is the product of my previous research engagements with the sphere of religion in Singapore. In 1985, my independent sociological research began with my honours thesis research on the subject of 'Modern Indian Religious Movements in Singapore'. In my Master's thesis, I moved on to provide an ethnographic account of 'Singaporean Hinduism', a linguistic description that my research has nudged me towards. More recently, I have been engaged with theorizing forms of Hindu religiosity in urban Singapore through my focus on the realm of 'popular' religious expressions. Through these projects, I have consciously retained an ethnographic focus on the everyday enactments of Hinduism. My substantive research has thus far concentrated on Hindu festivals, rituals, deities and temples, but with the strong awareness that this religion (like all others here) has to operate within administrative and legislative boundaries prescribed by the logic of pragmatism.[56] I have demonstrated that 'Singaporean Hinduism' is subject to a variety of regulative, administrative and disciplinary mechanisms, particularly in its public manifestation.

I have been conscious about locating the practice of Hinduism within the institutional framework provided by such bodies as the Hindu Endowments Board and the Hindu Advisory Board, both of which were founded in the colonial context of early twentieth century. Although these two bodies have been central in my previous research, for the most part, my awareness of the administrative and bureaucratic structures within which Hinduism functions has constituted what I would describe as 'background knowledge'. While I had considered such information crucial for theorizing expressions of Hindu religiosity on the island, I had not conceptualized this field as more than a context, a milieu, against which I presented my real, substantive interest in Hindu temples, deities, festivals and rituals. By contrast, in this project, the analysis of this 'institutional backdrop' comes to the forefront and is finally brought into sharp focus. I approach the bureaucratic, organizational and legal frameworks which regulate the practice of Hinduism here as an independent,

---

[56]See Chua (1985).

autonomous field of study in its own right, and not just a means to understanding some other more crucial dimension of Hinduism.

Finally, theorizing the location of religion in a secular state is a related research interest that drives these queries specific to Hinduism. I have previously examined notions of multi-religiosity, religious harmony, religious tolerance and secularism in Singapore and the role of the state in managing a religiously diverse society.[57] With the present research, I have an opportunity to integrate these twin intersecting research areas. That is a focus on Hinduism and the location of religion within secular state boundaries. While the book is empirically grounded in Hindu domains, I use the details of this case to explore larger 'state–religion' relations in Singapore. The ethnographic material allows me to achieve these twin aims: one, to establish the role of the state in regulating religion and two, to document how individuals negotiate a culture of bureaucracy, themes that have yet to be comprehensively theorized for Singapore.

A lacuna I have noted in my earlier work and address through all my research[58] relates to the status of Hinduism as an under-researched religion in Singapore.[59] This observation is also supported by other commentators.[60] For the contemporary period, some sociological and anthropological works on Hinduism in Singapore are now available, in the form of both published material and unpublished student research. With some exceptions,[61] even for the 1970s and 1980s, social science research on the religious life of Hindus is patchy and has to be gleaned from more generic socio-political and religious accounts of the Indian community in Singapore.[62] The picture is even more dismal in the search for historical data about Hindu practices, festivals and institutions. For example, my research has not highlighted any scholarly accounts of Hinduism in the SS, especially in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century fares somewhat better in this regard with the presence of several academic accounts of the socio-cultural and religious aspects[63] of the Indian community in Malaya. These gaps in the literature have made the task of reconstructing the nineteenth century Hindu scene a challenging undertaking. Even in the material that exists, little or negligible attention has been paid to institutional analyses of Hindu organizations and temples.

This piece of research addresses this unevenness by adding both a crucial historical dimension and an institutional emphasis to my analysis of Hindu domains. The

---

[57]Sinha (1997), (1999), (2003a).

[58]Sinha (2005).

[59]Interestingly, Malaysian Hinduism has fared much better in this regard with many more important social scientific and historical accounts of Hinduism and the Indian community in these societies (see Collins 1997; Lee 1982, 1989; Mearns 1987, 1995; Wilford 1996, 2007; Yeoh 2001). For Hinduism in Indonesia, see Howe (2001), Ramstedt (2004) and Reuter (2008).

[60]Arumugam (2002) and Tong (2007).

[61]See Arasratnam (1966, 1970) and Babb (1974a, 1974b, 1976, 1978).

[62]See Ampalavanar (1972, 1969), Lee and Rajoo (1987), Nair (1972), Puru Shotam (1998) and Yeo (1984).

[63]See Ampalavanar (1969), Arasaratnam (1966, 1970) and Palanivel (1971).

work I have done thus far as a student of religion in Singapore society provides both
the impetus and the background expertise to undertake the current piece of histor-
ical and ethnographic research. I have noted in my earlier work that the Singapore
state operates by managing the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of its citizenry
by invoking essentialized, homogeneous, monolithic racial and religious categories.
I now move to articulate both the historical roots of this framing and its effect on
shaping constructions of Hinduism on the island. My research familiarity with the
diverse modes in which 'Singaporean Hinduism' is manifested in the present has
prompted me to peer into Singapore's past to query what it means for religions like
Hinduism to be located within the urban, secular, nation-state of Singapore, having
emerged as such out of a colonial experience.

Concentrating on the colonial period, I explore the basis for the administration
and supervision of non-Christian religions in the SS. One option conceptualized by
colonial authorities was regulation through legislation. This logic culminated in the
formulation of a unique piece of legislation for the SS—the MHEO—of 1905. Cases
of mismanagement of Hindu and Muslim religious endowments in the SS led to the
inauguration of the MHEO. This was explicitly designed to restore order by creat-
ing an institution, the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (MHEB),[64] for
each of the three settlements in Penang, Singapore and Malacca. I embark on an
historical ethnography of the MHEB by tracing the particular mechanisms through
which its practices and norms were conceived, constructed and acted upon. I also
reflect on the consequences (deliberate or otherwise) of these decisions, including
their impact in the present. I reconstruct the institutional history of the Singapore
MHEB (SMHEB). I articulate the rationale for its foundation and detail its realm
of jurisdiction, the 'work' it performed and its cumulative effects on substantive
features of religions whose endowments it administered. Within the frames of colo-
nial policy, the SMHEB, supported by the 1905 Ordinance, institutionalized the
administration and regulation of specific features of 'native' religions. Under the
supervision of this board, Hindu and Muslim (and in the case of Singapore, Sikh and
Parsee) endowments came under institutional (governmental) scrutiny. Their man-
agement could be legitimately 'taken over' by the Board in the event of managerial
and financial irregularities. A focus on this law and the institution it made possible
enables me to tease out the relations between law, colonial policy and religion. The
aim being to articulate interactions between the representatives of the colonial state
and religious communities.

As dictated by law, members of the SMHEB were appointed by the Colonial
Governor and drawn exclusively from the Civil Service. This meant that the Board
was primarily British-controlled. It was only in 1949, fairly late in the day, that a

---

[64]It is important to highlight that following the Indian example, the MHEB was founded to
administer endowments vested in religious institutions of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Parsees.
A comprehensive account of the work performed by the MHEB requires attention to the manage-
ment of endowments across these religious communities, and the internal comparisons would be
insightful. Yet, bearing in mind the enormous scale of such a project and the value of a focused and
meaningful discussion, I concentrate here on the administration of Hindu religious endowments.

handful of Hindu and Muslim members were appointed to the SMHEB. In administering religious endowments of non-Christian communities, the SMHEB relied on 'native management committees' (appointed by the Board for each endowment) and learnt from them about dealing with the day-to-day affairs of the temples and mosques. The Board handled and controlled all financial matters while the latter were charged with undertaking all other 'non-financial' affairs. The Board members were aware that the MHEB was a secular entity and did not have either the competence or the legal jurisdiction to speak/act on matters of a religious nature. In theory, the role of the MHEB was circumscribed within managerial and administrative limits. However, my analysis of the actual 'work' performed by the Board demonstrates that it unintentionally, but invariably and inevitably, intruded in the very religious spheres it sought to consciously steer clear of.

The analysis reveals the dynamics of colonial state operation *vis-à-vis* religious and customary practices, something which has yet to be satisfactorily undertaken for the region. Apart from articulating this field empirically, I use the presented case material to deconstruct the rhetoric of colonial discourse on 'non-interference' and highlight the embedded contradictions. The evidence we have for the SS suggests that it was not always possible to adhere to the articulated ideology of non-intervention in relating to colonized subjects. This recognition allows me to propose the following crucial distinction between 'principles of governance' and 'strategies in use'. The former were available as more or less universal, codified normative procedures about the colonial state's position on the religion of its subject populations. The latter had to be devised on the ground by colonial administrators (such as magistrates, policemen, registrars, etc.), who were required to maintain law and order. In practice workable strategies were formulated, sometimes spontaneously. In concrete terms, decisions and actions on the ground did not always coincide with the articulated 'hands off' colonial policy but, in fact, often registered radical departures from it.

Moving forward in time, I introduce a comparative strand in the analysis through my focus on the persistence of the SMHEB in its contemporary incarnation as the Hindu Endowments Board in Singapore,[65] and I detail the evolution of the SHEB, its infrastructure, and its realm of jurisdiction, complementing my treatment of its predecessor, the MHEB. The transition of the SMHEB from a secular 'administrative body' to SHEB that became increasingly engaged with 'religion' and with managing Hinduism itself is a slippage that Hindu leadership of the 1970s did not find problematic. The 'shifting portfolio' of the SHEB in the 'work' it has performed and the tone it has adopted has framed the parameters of officially sanctioned Hindu practices and institutions on the island. The administration of religious endowments (and, thus, the religious institutions) via bureaucratic rationality and a pragmatic orientation has shaped the ritualistic and substantive domains of Hinduism as well.

---

[65]The persistence of the Penang HEB (PHEB) and the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department (HRCE) in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu offer a valuable comparative perspective.

However, this determination was not intentional but simply inherent in the work description of the board. It is ironic that, unlike its colonial counterpart, the SHEB does not reveal self-awareness about its 'secular' identity or its administrative brief. Nor did it exercise vigilance to ensure that it did not stray into decision-making about 'religious/spiritual' matters. The paradox and enigma of this contrast have shaped the theoretical concerns of this project. But let me first turn to a discussion of methodologies that have supported my enquiries.

1.2 Abstracting Ethnographic Insight from Archives

How I have thought about the unit of analysis in this project needs some discussion. Theoretically, the major concern of the book lies in making sense of the relations between various actors (as individuals and clusters) in religious and political spheres at different historical moments. A concern to theorize the present requires attention to the historical dimension, especially in the desire to account for practices and discourses that are now taken for granted to the extent of being naturalized, normalized and most importantly, ahistoricized. This has meant making a series of inter-related moves in time and space. I first move from the present nation-state of Singapore to its SS heritage; I then shift from a particular focus on Hinduism to a concern with religion in general in both these time frames and finally, I negotiate the widely scattered spaces of Singapore, Penang and Malacca across a time span of almost 200 years.

Given the conceptualization of this project, of necessity, the adoption of a multi-disciplinary perspective has been critical. This attitude towards pluralism applies to the methodological dimension of this work too. Because the project is historical and engages the contemporary period, the methodology adopted reflects this double focus. In concrete terms this has required attention to the issue of 'what constitutes data' for this project and how its 'unit of analysis' is conceptualized. The reach of the project has meant a reliance on several bodies of data, both secondary and primary. I combine archival research for the colonial period with ethnographic fieldwork in present-day Singapore. But more importantly, the approach adopted is inter-disciplinary, in that my methods of conceptualizing data, accessing them and subjecting them to analysis, have drawn fruitfully from the fields of sociology, anthropology and history. Given a qualitative, socio-historical outlook favoured here, pre-existing data sets were not available for analysis and examination. Rather, the corpus of data has been constructed to detail the processes through which 'state–religion' encounters can be deciphered. The supporting evidence I rely on has been assembled with the research agenda in mind and, in this sense, is obviously 'constructed'. The data did not pre-exist in any archive as a constellation that I could access and interpret. Rather, I was led to various fragments of data by the specific turns and twists my research has taken. I use this emergent body of material to narrate the management of religion in the SS and in post-colonial Singapore.

The historical dimension of the project is grounded in archival work with various data sets. Colonial newspapers and periodicals in English (e.g., *Singapore Free Press*, *Indian Daily*, *Indian Daily Mail*, *The Straits Times*) and in Tamil (*Singai Nesan*, *Tamil Murasu*) have been crucial for tracking developments in the religious landscape of the regions in question. Selected correspondence between Governor, SS and the British Government has allowed me to examine colonial policy on religious matters. Official information carried in the Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements (1907–1945) has allowed me to depict the beginnings of the three Boards in the SS and their methods of operation in broad, generic terms. However, these sources are also limited given that these administrative reports are consciously crafted and constructed documents, with an awareness of who their audience would be and how the data therein would be interpreted. Thus, the reports tend to be officious in tone, are somewhat formulaic in terms of content and present rather truncated and brief accounts of the Board's proceedings. I use the data carried therein with these necessary caveats.

For recent developments with respect to the legal framing of Hinduism in Singapore, I have consulted Singapore Parliament Select Committee hearings on the founding of the SHEB and tracked the legislative history of the HEA since its formulation. Additionally, I was fortunate to gain access to a body of unanalysed archival material, which I present here. To begin with, the project was possible because I had access to this unanalysed data set. These are the 'Minutes of Meeting of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board' for Singapore between 1907 and 1979. These records are complete with the exception of the years 1941–1946, spanning the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. During this period, the Board did not seem to have held any meetings. The material I perused carries crucial historical data about the origin and development of the SMHEB, as well as the 'work' it performed. A novel contribution I make is that this book brings to light archival materials which are subjected to sociological and anthropological scrutiny for the first time.

Though these documents are valuable, and the prospect of subjecting them to a sociological and historical analysis is exciting, again a few qualifications are in order. No historical record is 'complete' and, in fact, as historians[66] remind us, it is problematic and erroneous to speak of 'wholeness', 'totality', or 'entirety' of data in reconstructions of the past. More typically, absences, silences and missing data (either accidental or by design) are to be expected. The minutes of the SMHEB meetings certainly display this limitation. Thus, while this body of material is insightful for the information it carries, it is perhaps even more fascinating for the things that may have been omitted. The latter do not minimize the value of the available data, but allow me to pursue certain lines of enquiry precisely from the notice of the missing pieces. It is possible, in this case, to demonstrate that there are indeed omissions and gaps both by reading between the lines and by cross-checking with other sources of data, ethnographic and historical. In interpreting the

---

[66]Carr (1961) and Collingwood (1993).

archival material, I have also tried as far as possible to retain the practice of identifying agency and identity of historical actors, without accepting the archives as an objective documentary record.

As an anthropologist my treatment of historical data is such that I am interested in abstracting ethnography from archival material.[67] In this endeavour I am guided by theoretical reflections in anthropology that theorize the relationship between history and ethnography.[68] Crucially, these have struggled with the question of how archival research can be positioned within anthropological work.[69] Practitioners have recognized merit in the interface of anthropological and historical methods and theories even as this mode of conceptualizing 'historical anthropology' has been critiqued.[70] I agree with Axel that at any point in time, 'we understand ethnography and the archive as having a relation, one that is mutually constitutive'[71] and that the discourse on dialogue and exchange across history and anthropology mistakenly assumes an artificial separation across these disciplines epistemologically and intellectually. My own interpretation of 'historical anthropology' is such that I see a meaningful synthesis between ethnographic data my fieldwork has generated and the analysis of archival material. I also view these as contributing towards theorizing both contemporary circumstances and past events. Efforts to conjoin methodological and theoretical contributions from history and anthropology bring to mind the ethnohistorical method, coming into its own in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Krech III[72] suggests that Clive Kessler may have been amongst the first anthropologists to highlight the value of combining 'ethno historical and archaeological data'.[73] In diverse socio-cultural settings, anthropologists and historians have experimented with this union/convergence and attempted to draw on ethnology, oral traditions, folklore and artefacts to produce historically informed accounts of communities. The term *ethnohistory* (understood simply and literally as 'the writing of history from the native's perspective'), both as process and product, has itself been mired in controversy. Historian James Axtell has described it as a 'disciplinary hybrid',[74] Brown describes ethno-historians as both 'Strange bedfellows and kindred spirits',[75] while Krech III notes that 'There are sharp disagreements over what constitutes ethnohistory'.[76] Consequently, descriptors like 'historical anthropology' and 'anthropological history' have also been experimented with. Yet, numerous others have embraced the

---

[67]In this I follow Cohn's injunction to 'treat the materials of history the way an anthropologist treats his fieldnotes' (1987, 2).

[68]Appadurai (1981), Asad (2002), Axel (2002), Cohn (1987, 1996), Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), Dirks (1987) and Mathur (2000).

[69]Des Chene (1997).

[70]Axel (2002, 30).

[71]Axel (2002, 17).

[72]Krech III (1991, 347).

[73]Ibid. 347.

[74]Axtell (1979).

[75]Brown (1991, 1).

[76]Krech III (1991, 348).

label and described their work as 'ethno-historical'[77] without finding this problematic. In my view, the issue of whether to denote my research as 'ethno-historical' or 'historical anthropology' is less fruitful than the recognition that I approach past events and practices as a meaningful commentary on the present; that I utilize textual analysis of a body of archival material to reflect on continuities or discontinuities in my chosen field across historical time frames; that I rely on primary interview data to complement archival analysis and that my theorizing is infused with anthropological and historical sensibilities. 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'[78] appeals to me. Farriss' view that ethno-history is 'anthropology with a time dimension or history informed by anthropological concepts'[79] has been meaningful in framing my research inquires. Additionally, my analysis of the contemporary status of the SHEB serves as a further reflection on the archival material under scrutiny, not to mention the continued importance of historical manoeuvres on present-day 'religion–state' relations.

My position is that the intersection of the ethnographer's method of participant observation and the historian's concern with temporality provides a valuable perspective for engaging in an ongoing dialectic between past and present. I agree with Gille and O'Riain (2002) that

> Ethnographic research can be a powerful entrance into such interpretation of archival material, often aided by analyses of social memory. Contemporary stories regarding historical events can be measured against the archival record to reveal how historical events are reconstructed and contested as part of contemporary culture. While ethnographic interpretation can be aided by historical materials, *the detailed knowledge of the contemporary site can cast new light on archival materials and the intended and unintended consequences of historical actions* (emphasis mine).[80]

Anthropological fieldwork and its techniques of data collection and analysis have received considerable critical attention[81] from practitioners, even as they have been valorized by others. My methodological commitment to anthropology as a tool for accessing firsthand ethnographic data is reflective of my training in this academic constituency and the value that I place on its assortment of ethnographic skills. To speak to developments in Singaporean Hinduism for the contemporary period, I have relied on firsthand ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore. Over the last three years, I have been engaged in conducting face-to-face interviews that have generated important conversations and interactions with a range of actors in Singapore Hindu domains. Some of these include present and past members of the Hindu

---

[77]The long list of scholars working on 'native' communities in North America, Africa, Oceania and Asia furnishes excellent examples. Within the South Asian context, the writings of Appadurai (1981) and Dirks (1987) are illustrative of this method.

[78]Brown (1991, 116).

[79]Farriss (1983, 1).

[80]Gille and O'Riain (2002, 288).

[81]Raybeck (1992).

Endowments Board (HEB) in Singapore, individuals involved with the management of the HEB and privately-managed temples, and lay Hindus.

The approach I adopt here is an eclectic mix of disciplines and methodologies in being historical, anthropological and sociological, and grounded in archival and ethnographic research. The arguments and data offered in this book contribute to conversations about the location of religion in secular contexts by articulating the nature of encounters across the religious and political domains in a specific historical, empirical context. On the basis of the historical and ethnographic material that I present, I engage theoretical questions about the location of religions in secular settings. I make a strong case here for a focus on the *socio-political contexts* and the *bureaucratic and administrative remits* within which individuals and religions are embedded, and where social processes and interactions unfold. The discussion in the following chapters is held together by this unifying theme: that in colonial and post-colonial contexts, decisions, practices, actions and non-actions on the part of bureaucratic and organizational entities create an environment within which specific features of religiosity are enabled while others are restricted.

The book unfolds as follows: Chapter 2 moves towards the Malayan regions, with a focus on the principles of governance in the SS; Chapter 3 details the religious landscape of nineteenth-century SS and asks how expressions of religiosity were possible under bureaucratic conditions and legal frameworks created by a colonial state; Chapter 4 documents the historical circumstances and logic that led to the passing of the MHEO of 1905; Chapter 5 details the institutional history of the SMHEB and scrutinizes the reasoning which led to the view that the administration of religious endowments was essential in the SS, and turns to in-depth discussions of Singapore's Hindu domains therein; Chapter 6 argues that administrative responsibility over religious endowments affected religious institutions (Hindu temples) and festivals (*Tai Pūcam*)[82] and Chapter 7 examines the contemporary status and identity of the SHEB, in the notice that its current role has become enhanced in ways that were not prescribed by the 1905 MHEO or the HEA of 1968. In closing, I argue that religious actors can and do negotiate the culture of bureaucracy prevalent in Singapore and successfully navigate the relevant administrative, bureaucratic and legal frameworks. This recognition carries enormous insight for theorizing state intervention in Singapore's religious landscape.

---

[82]There are many variants of this word in Anglicized renditions: 'Thaipusam', 'Tai Pucam' and 'Taipusam' (in academic and popular literature) as well as '*Tai Pūcam*', the transliterated Tamil description, which I have opted for in this book.

Chapter 2
Governance in the Straits Settlements, 1796–1874

2.1 Preamble

This is a critical 'framing' chapter that outlines the emergence of the 'Straits Settlements' (SS) as a region and relates how the widely scattered spaces of Singapore, Malacca and Penang were brought together as a single administrative unit. Drawing on existing rich scholarship about the politico-economic history of these territories, I reconstruct the colonial context of the region with respect to the principles of governance operating at the time and ask if, and how, these shaped, facilitated or obstructed expressions of ethnic and religious identities, particularly in the public sphere. The specified time frame 1796–1874 is relevant for the reason that the former year marked the acquisition of Penang by Francis Light on behalf of the English East India Company (EEIC), while the year 1874 reflects what Turnbull labels 'a casual, almost imperceptible shift of attitude in the Colonial Office'[1] towards Malaya in the institution of the British Residential System. This move towards British protectionism and control in the Malay states had an enormous impact on the region. This political stance was formalized in the Pangkor Treaty of 1874, reflecting a firm and decided shift away from the earlier declared policy of non-intervention. My interest in this swing away from the earlier stance of British non-involvement in Malayan native affairs is to abstract those elements of the discourse that are relevant for articulating the style of governance *vis-à-vis* ethno-religious communities in the SS. I begin by providing the necessary context, through a discussion of the historical circumstances which led to the creation of the SS and its eventual (but unwilling) status as a colony.

2.2 Constructing a Region

The British were but one party amongst a larger group of European traders, merchants and colonial administrators, including the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and French, who ventured forth in the age of discovery and overseas travel, to

---

[1]Turnbull (1974, 239).

acquire trading monopolies and commercial success in parts of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Starting in the sixteenth century, Portuguese, Dutch, French and English traders and merchants were attracted to the spice islands of the Indonesian archipelago and trade in items from India and China. The various European powers contested and jostled each other for access and monopoly of these lucrative trade routes and zones, although the expansion of steamship tonnage from 1865 onwards and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 would lead to more intensified travel and contact between Europe and Asia.[2] Numerous joint-stock companies were formed to provide the capital and facilitate these long-distance travels and dealings. Although their original ambitions were to secure profitable trade regions in Asia, exercise trade monopolies and secure profits, they also planted in the colonies the seeds of Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity.[3] Various Protestant denominations from England and Holland argued that religion and the spread of Christianity could be a motive for expansion and overseas trade. However, in the early years of the seventeenth century, religious presence in the EEIC and the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) was minimal and confined to chaplains ministering to the spiritual needs of European settlers, rather than being concerned with preaching to the indigenous peoples.[4] The EEIC long resisted the pressure from missionaries for more aggressive religious policy in Indian territories.

2.2.1 From Economic Interests to Political Control

Scholars have noted that these earliest European incursions into the East were driven by economic imperatives. They have also stressed that it is difficult to isolate economic interests from political ones. The EEIC came into existence through a Royal Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I on 31 December 1600. After a long and momentous run, it evolved from a commercial entity into a virtual empire and was dissolved in 1858. The DEIC was formed in 1602 and remained in existence until 1798, while the French EIC lasted from 1664 to 1769. The Swedish EIC was a later venture in existence from 1713 to 1813, while the lesser-known Dutch West India Company was formed in 1621 and was dissolved in 1791. Through the seventeenth century, the Dutch East Indies was controlled by a joint-stock trading company, 'Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' (VOC), or the DEIC, which in 1602 was awarded by the Dutch Parliament, monopoly of commercial and trade-related dealings in the region. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the VOC

---

[2]Chiang (1978, 165).

[3]For example, the Portuguese introduced Catholicism to Indonesia, especially in Flores and East Timor, while the Dutch brought Lutheran and Calvinist varieties of Protestantism to Indonesia in the sixteenth century.

[4]The colonies sometimes became the battleground for settling internal rivalries and religious clashes. For instance, the VOC policy in Indonesia placed a ban on Roman Catholicism in the region. Roman Catholic priests were sent to prisons or punished for preaching in response to the tensions between Protestant and Roman Catholic groups in Europe.

sought to dominate the profitable trade in the Indonesian region through military and political domination, which it exercised in the region until the year 1799, after which its interests in Indonesia were transferred to the royal family in Holland. In all these cases, as with the EEIC, while the specifics varied considerably, one thing remained constant: In their forays into the East Indies, these companies began with the impetus for trade and commercial gain, but moved gradually to territorial acquisition and politico-military domination, with some semblance of civil government ultimately leading to colonial rule by European powers.

The fore-mentioned joint-stock trading companies indeed found that securing profits and monopolies had to be facilitated with some degree of control over territories where they traded. This was the case even with the hassles of involvement with affairs of local communities, a position the EEIC scrupulously avoided both in their Indian territories and in the Malay Archipelago. However, as Dutch and British colonial ventures in these locales were, in the first instance, explicitly economic in nature, the earliest areas of European notice in Southeast Asia were surveyed as commercial outposts for the 'Company' and territorial conquest was not a primary interest. Dutch presence in the Indonesian islands since the late sixteenth century had sealed their status as a dominant European commercial power in Southeast Asia. Of course, the British had retained a marginal presence in the region through their trading outpost in Bencoolen since 1685. However, by the eighteenth century, Dutch mercantile supremacy was challenged seriously by the British who wanted a bigger stake in the profitable spice trade in the Archipelago and, thus, a measure of control over the lucrative China trade, a mainstay of the EEIC. At this time, the weakened Dutch, lacking territorial and political dominance in the region, 'lost' Malacca in 1795, Maluku in 1795–1796 and Java in 1811—all to the British.[5] However, internal European political circumstances and domestic politics necessitated the preservation of cordial relations between Holland and Britain.[6] Additionally, both governments wanted to avoid creating a situation where other European players and/or competitors would be tempted and emboldened to enter a commercially- and politically-fragmented maritime Southeast Asia. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 was negotiated to whittle out parts of Southeast Asia for mutual benefit—primarily the Indonesian islands and the Malay Peninsula—between the Dutch and the British, and to signal their respective command and authority over specific territories. The two European powers agreed on a 'hands off' policy over particular spaces, and regions changed hands like merchandise. The British surrendered their acquisitions in Sumatra and Java, as well as Bencoolen, and the Dutch relinquished their dominion over their remaining Indian territories. In the final analysis, the British held the island of Singapore and the regions north thereof. They, thus, secured the Straits of Malacca and were able to protect vital trade routes between India, Ceylon and China. Meanwhile the Dutch exercised total commercial monopoly in Java and Sumatra, including islands beyond these territories in the Indonesian archipelago.

---

[5]Tarling (1993, 26).
[6]Tarling (1969, 1993).

A brief historical detour is necessary in order to detail the story of the SS. The allure of profit and trade monopolies through commerce in the East, involving various European powers and the intense rivalry, competition, antagonism and sometimes duplicity and deceit amongst them led to trafficking in these territories. These also imposed artificial and new boundaries, thereby determining the political dynamics of the region.

2.2.2 The Naissance of the Straits Settlements

Mary Turnbull, a prominent historian of British Malaya, notes that the geographical entity SS 'were the East India Company's most incongruous offspring'.[7] This was clearly not a pre-existing territorial unit. Rather, it was consciously but fortuitously put together by the British, driven ultimately (if reluctantly) by the logic of administrative convenience for the express purpose of facilitating successful commerce in the Straits of Malacca. The three constituting building blocks of the SS were dispersed physically and were merged into one unit primarily under the weight of a managerial logic. However, this by no means suggests that the establishment of the SS in 1826 under the authority of the EEIC was the outcome of a planned strategy or policy decision. As has been observed by countless scholars of British Malaya, the possession and custody of Penang and Singapore were 'historical accidents' whereas Malacca was the one sought after as desired bounty.

The 'Straits Settlements' was a name given to the administrative entity formed by Singapore, Penang and Malacca and also included at various points—Labuan, Cocos Keeling Islands and Christmas Island. The story of the SS must begin with the founding of Penang, which was ceded to the EEIC on 17 July 1786 by the Sultan of Kedah on the basis of negotiations with Captain Francis Light who, acting on behalf of the Company, arbitrated a treaty with the Sultan for British rights and authority over the island. After a series of financial negotiations, Penang was finally bought by the EEIC for a sum of 6,000 Spanish dollars in 1798. In 1796, Penang served as a penal settlement and received convicts from the Andaman Islands. Between 1805 and 1826, Penang was administered as a separate presidency of the Indian Empire but, in 1826, was encapsulated in the SS.

Similarly, although Stamford Raffles was aware of British reluctance to commit itself in Malayan regions given the 1816 treaty with the Dutch, he decided nonetheless to single-handedly procure Singapore through a treaty with the Temenggong of Johore, the Chief of Singapore. The 'Treaty of friendship and alliance' enacted in 1819 stated the terms of cession: The indigenous rulers 'granted full permission to the Honorable EEIC to establish a factory or factories at Singapore or on any other parts of his Highness' Dominions', while Article 2 of the treaty bound both parties to the following conditions:

---

[7]Turnbull (1972, 1).

It is however clearly explained to, and understood by his Highness, that the English Government, in entering into this alliance and in thus engaging to afford protection to his Highness, is to be considered in no way bound to interfere with the internal policies of his states, or engaged to assert or maintain the authority of Highness by force of arms.[8]

One sees an early articulation of the principle of non-interference in the 7th Article of the 'Memorandum by Stamford Raffles' concluded in June 1823:

The British government do not interfere at present in the local agreement of the countries and islands subject to their Highnesses' authority, beyond Singapore and its adjacent isles, further than to afford them general protection as heretofore.[9]

In essence, both parties promised more than they were in a position to realistically deliver—an annual payment and protection from enemies. Singapore remained subordinate to Fort Marlborough, at Bencoolen, the EEIC's primary trading post in Sumatra established in 1685, but came under the direct administration of the Government of Bengal in 1823.

The British secured the town of Malacca from Dutch control in 1795, thus threatening Dutch trading monopoly in the Straits of Malacca. But over the next few decades, the two European powers were locked in a lengthy tussle about who should 'own' Malacca. The town was returned to the Dutch in 1818 before finally being relinquished to the British in 1824—an outcome of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty. Even with the possession of Malacca, Penang and Singapore by 1825, the British government was less than enthusiastic about its acquisitions,[10] except that it gained non-hostile ports of call for its ships moving between the Indian subcontinent and China, through the Straits of Malacca. This functional role of the new settlements was accepted unambiguously by the EEIC authorities in the early days.

Singapore and Penang, thus, became British 'possessions' through the daring nerve of two British citizens, by accident and certainly not by design of the British government or the EEIC. Britain was more concerned with the India and China trade at the turn of the eighteenth century, and did not pay much attention to commercial opportunities in the Malayan regions. The British settlements in the Malayan regions were unambiguously 'established to serve the cause of trade'[11] and principally 'to protect the China trade, which consisted largely of the exchange of tea from Canton with the opium of Bengal'.[12] The China trade was a huge source of revenue for the

---

[8]IOR – G34/10 – ff127–131. 'TREATY of FRIENDSHIP and ALLIANCE concluded between the Honorable SIR THOMAS STAMFORD RAFFLES, Lieutenant-Governor of Fort Marlborough and its dependencies, Agent to the Most Noble FRANCIS, MARQUIS OF HASTINGS, Governore-General of India, etc., for the HONORABLE EEIC on the one part, and their HIGHNESSES SULTAN HUSSIN MUHAMMED SHAH, Sultan of Johore, and DATOO TUMUNGONG SRI MAHARAJAH ABDUL RAHMAN, chief of Singapore and its dependencies, on the other part.'

[9]Newbold (1839, 489).

[10]At this time, Britain was less interested in acquiring territories as colonies as such claims implied some responsibility of governance, administration and financial commitment.

[11]Chiang (1978, 1).

[12]Ibid.

EEIC and helped it to defray the cost of its administration in the vast Indian Empire. It is, therefore, not surprising that with the loss of monopoly over the China trade in 1833 began the Company's financial downfall and led to its eventual bankruptcy in 1858. As the Dutch had discovered, with supremacy over the Straits of Sunda, one central route in the region, the control of trade networks between Europe, India, Southeast Asia and China was crucial. The British sought to dominate the other primary route in the Straits of Malacca, hence the urgency of securing a trading post in the Malay Peninsula. The British and the Dutch were economic rivals and the British, entering the game in the Archipelago a little later than the Dutch, were motivated nonetheless to challenge pre-existing Dutch commercial monopoly in the region.

The SS[13] was organized in 1826 as the fourth presidency of India, and administered as a unit under a single Governor, located in Penang, which was also its seat of government, but under the charge of the Governor-General in India. The first capital of the SS was Georgetown, on Penang Island. The SS was of strategic importance for the EEIC. In 1832, Singapore was made the administrative centre and its economic activities grew rapidly to make it the leading trading hub in the Straits of Malacca. Turnbull notes that

> By the mid-nineteenth century the Straits Settlements offered striking justification of the theories of free trade, light taxation and *laissez-faire* government. Their development stood in strong contrast to the financial and political tribulations of the parent Company, with its increasingly unfashionable policy of commercial monopoly, restricted immigration and closed bureaucracy.[14]

The British did recognize the value of the SS when, during the Opium War of 1839–1842, it provided valuable logistical support to the British fleet. However, the colonial authorities were not entirely convinced that the transfer of the SS to the Crown would be an asset rather than a liability. After much debate and discussion, in 1867 the SS did become a Crown Colony, and its charge was transferred from the Calcutta government to the Colonial Office in London. The colonial constitution granted to the Settlements recognized the power of a Governor, who was assisted in the task of administration by an Executive Council and a Legislative Council. A Civil Service was also established which was charged with the day-to-day administration of the colony. The days of the SS as a colony came to an end in 1946. This was followed by the autonomous establishment of Singapore as a Crown Colony, while Penang and Malacca became part of the Malayan Union in the same year. This constitutes the politico-economic climate in which the early foundations of Singapore, Penang and Malacca had their rather uncertain and unwelcome beginnings as part of British Malaya. The actual administration of these regions was to change hands several times and vacillated much over the next century, expectedly

---

[13]Singapore remained under the direct control of the Supreme Government of India via the East India Company until 1826. Penang was ruled by a separate Penang Presidency. Malacca changed hands between the Dutch and the British twice until being settled to the latter in 1824.

[14]Turnbull (1972, 1). Also see de vere Allen (1970).

with profound and enduring consequences. It is to a discussion of these events that I turn now.

2.3 Principles of Governance in the Straits Settlements

Anthony Webster in his book *Gentleman Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East-Asia, 1770–1890* (1998) draws attention to 'the diversity of British imperial rule in the region'.[15] This is certainly the case in British Malaya. Over the span of British colonial rule, the latter was a complex entity, composed of nine constituent states with three types of administration, all of which in varied modes served to reinforce European hegemony in the region.[16] In the SS, we find the most direct form of administration by a legislative council with its affairs being directed by Downing Street. It was here that policy decisions of the Colonial Office were made based on information provided by the Governor of the Settlements. While the focus in this book is on the SS, it is important to contextualize its mode of administration within the larger Malay world. In the Federated Malay States (FMS), Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, established in 1895, there was a higher degree of decentralized administration and the four states were bound by the Treaty of Federation signed on 1 July 1896. Given the earlier acquiescence of the British Residential System, the FMS was declared a protectorate of Great Britain, which continued to have authority over matters of defence and foreign affairs. Greater prestige and autonomy was accorded to the Sultans as local rulers in dealing with non-political, domestic issues and especially over customary and religious matters. The Sultans agreed to a system where they could legitimately be 'advised' on all matters (with the exception of Malay custom and religion) by British Residents assigned to their respective states. The administrative machinery was provided by the Federal Council established in 1889, with a High Commissioner (who was also the Governor of the SS), at the helm. He was supported in this task by a team composed of the Resident-General, the Sultans, the four state Residents and four nominated unofficial members, an arrangement that changed only with the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1941. Finally, in the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS), constituted by the northern states of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah, Perlis[17] and Johore, a system of protectionism was instituted and British advisors appointed to each state, but there was also much greater autonomy for local rulers. However, this collection of Malay states was treated by the British as a singular administrative entity. All of Malaya was occupied by the Japanese in December 1941 for a period of 5 years. However, with the Japanese surrender and the return of the British in 1946,

---

[15]Webster (1998, 261).

[16]Thompson (2001, 91) (cited in Kratoska 2001).

[17]With the signing of the Bangkok Treaty in 1905, Siam renounced its political authority over the northern Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis to the United Kingdom.

the Federation was no longer the operative regional category. Instead, in 1946, the SS, FMS and the UFMS were brought together as a singular 'Malayan Union'.

2.3.1 Tentative and Reluctant Administration

Scholars[18] have noted that Malayan regions were rather peripheral to the bigger concerns of the British Raj and when it did make an appearance on the horizon of British interests, in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, it was both to fortify the Empire and to secure and bridge the India–China trade,[19] specifically the trade in tea.[20] The successful grasp over this was the principal anxiety for the British in the Far East and in Southeast Asia. However, K. C. Tregonning, the eminent historian of the Malay Peninsula, taking a broader historical perspective, has this to say about the status of the region:

> For most of its history, the Malay Peninsula has been on the flank of greater empires, either in Southeast Asia itself (empires which have controlled it) or in India and China (empires which have influenced it). Denied the ample flat land a great civilization demands, the Malay Peninsula has been, almost invariably, a subsidiary of greater empires elsewhere in Asia.[21]

Writing several decades later, Margaret Shennan makes a similar observation:

> Malaya has never gripped the imagination of the British nation as vividly as the splendours of the Raj or the arcane riches of China. To the English middle class, a post in the Malayan administration lacked the cachet of the Indian Civil Service or the attractions of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known); and the Church of England found Muslim Malaya an unpromising mission, less rewarding than India or China with their hungry hordes. As the Empire grew, the Victorians had many distractions, and the Malay States were undoubtedly a low priority. [. . .] The cavalier attitude of politicians and the press was mirrored by the lack of awareness on the part of ordinary British citizens about what was going on before or after British intervention.[22]

Captain Francis Light, a trader by profession, arrived in Penang on 15 July 1786 with a body of Marines and hoisted the British flag on 11 August 1786, the eve of the birthday of Prince of Wales, and re-named the island 'Prince of Wales Island'. The instructions he received from Fort William, Bengal, on 2 May 1786 read as follows:

> We are now to proceed to give you such instructions as in the present stage of this briefings appear necessary, previously appointing you to the charge and superintendence of the island of Pinang on the part of the English East India Company, with the entire command of all the forces, military and marine and with the Government of all inhabitants whether European

---

[18]Shennan (2001), Tarling (1969) and Tregonning (1965).

[19]Tarling (1969).

[20]Tregonning (1965, 5).

[21]Ibid. 1.

[22]Sheenan (2001, 14–15).

or Indian who may reside there with the Honorable the pleasure of the Court of Directors shall be known.[23]

Despite the inherent imperial tone of this directive and the semblance of responsible governance given to the Captain, in essence, Francis Light was given minimal administrative support and more or less left on his own to manage the affairs of the island. On the contrary, the Government at Fort William requested Light to 'furnish us with a plan for the internal government and police of the island'[24] and 'that it be left to Mr. Light to preserve good order in the settlement as well as he can'[25] (ibid. 47). That the EEIC was not inclined to offer enhanced support for governance is revealed in the value accorded to the newly-acquired territory, the Bengal Government reminding Light in 1788 that 'It is our wish to make use of the island as much as possible in a commercial view only'.[26] Neither was there unanimous support for the cession of Penang. Governor-General Cornwall was less than enthusiastic about Light's new acquisition, stating his reservations in no uncertain terms:

> I will not go so far as to say that in the present embarrassed state of the company's finances I would have recommended the undertaking; before any advantage can be expected, expenditure to a large amount must be made which cannot be supplied without encroaching upon funds already appropriated to answer a variety of urgent demands. What in a more prosperous state of the Company's finances might have been highly advantageous, may from the reverse prove burthensome if not prejudicial. My objections go rather to the time in which this measure has been resolved upon, than to the measure itself.[27]

This tentative and hesitant attitude towards the promise of Penang would haunt its administrators in the future as the men left to manage it struggled to campaign for decades for a more effective administration on the island. In 1787, Light made an appeal to the Bengal Government imploring for some mechanism to maintain law and order on the island, and again in 1794 for a regular government, law and courts; however, the indifferent and apathetic stance continued.[28] But, in 1800, Penang was given some guise of regular government with the appointment of a Lieutenant-Governor under the Bengal Government. No proper system was put in place until 1807, 20 years after the founding of Penang. This was accompanied by formulation of instructions for the administration of civil and criminal justice which were codified in a set of regulations. There was a clear recognition, even at this early stage, of the diversity of peoples on Penang Island:

---

[23]IOR – G34/2, 105

[24]Tregonning (1965, 42).

[25]Ibid. 47.

[26]Similar sentiments were conveyed to Light in the first set of instructions sent for taking charge of Penang, 'Our principal object, as we have already said, is to secure a port of refreshments for the ships of our nation' (G34/2, 110).

[27]Cited in Tregonning (1965, 45).

[28]Tregonning (1965, 46).

> The laws of the different peoples and tribes of which the inhabitants consist, tempered by such parts of the British law, as are universal application being founded on the principles of natural justice, shall constitute the rules of decision in the Courts.[29]

In 1805, Penang became a fourth presidency in the Indian government together with the Presidencies of Bombay, Bengal and Madras and some attempt was made to develop judicial regulations. Before the granting of the First Charter of Justice in 1807, the affairs of the island were at best approached through minimal and ad hoc administration through the presence of individual civil servants and their initiatives. In the treaty, concluded by Stamford Raffles in 1819 for the cession of Singapore, we see the same preoccupation with administration of justice and also recognition that different communities may be governed by their own laws. According to Article VII of the treaty,

> The mode of administering justice to the native population shall be subject to future discussion and arrangement between the contracting parties, as this will necessarily, in a great measure, depend on the laws and usages of the various tribes who may be expected to settle in the vicinity of the English factory.[30]

Raffles' treaty with the Temenggong came with the further undertaking that

> In all cases regarding the ceremonies of religion, and marriages, and the rules of inheritance, the laws and customs of Malays will be respected, where they shall not be contrary to reason, justice or humanity. In all other cases, the laws of the British authority will be enforced with due consideration to the usages and habits of the people.[31]

The British declared policy of non-interference was also conveyed to the Temenggong in this early treaty, which was, of course, not legally binding for either side:

> The British Government do not interfere at present in the local arrangement of the countries and islands subject to their Highness's authority, beyond Singapore and its adjacent islets, further than to afford them general protection as heretofore.[32]

It is not surprising that the primary concern at this time was a strategy for the maintenance of law and order and keeping peace on the island—given the presence of convicts therein but with some awareness that the 'laws and usages of tribes' should be factored into any administration of justice in these territories. However, beyond this notice there is little in these early regulations and charters (see Fig. 2.1) for the moral responsibility of catering to the socio-economic and civil needs of the native

---

[29]Braddell (1931/1982, 9).

[30]IOR – G34/10 – ff127–131. 'TREATY of FRIENDSHIP and ALLIANCE concluded between the Honorable SIR THOMAS STAMFORD RAFFLES, Lieutenant-Governor of Fort Marlborough and its dependencies, Agent to the Most Noble FRANCIS, MARQUIS OF HASTINGS, Governor-General of India, etc., for the HONORABLE EEIC on the one part, and their HIGHNESSES SULTAN HUSSIN MUHAMMED SHAH, Sultan of Johore, and DATOO TUMUNGONG SRI MAHARAJAH ABDUL RAHMAN, chief of Singapore and its dependencies, on the other part.'

[31]IOR – G 34/10 – ff127–131. 'TREATY of FRIENDSHIP and ALLIANCE.'

[32]IOR – G 34/10 – ff127–131. 'TREATY of FRIENDSHIP and ALLIANCE.'

Year	Legislation
1807	**First Charter of Justice for Penang** – Introduced a legal system based on English Common Law – Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales Island
1819	**Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between Stamford Raffles and Sultan Hussin Muhammed Shah and Tumungong Sri Maharajah Abdul Rahman**
1826	**Organization of Penang, Singapore and Malacca as Straits Settlements under the charge of the English East India Company, Calcutta Office**
1826	**Second Charter of Justice** – Extended to Singapore and Malacca – Introduced a legal system based on English Common Law – Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca
1855	**Third Charter of Justice** – Court of Judicature split into two jurisdictions: 1. Singapore and Malacca 2. Penang and Province Wellesley
1867	**Transfer of the Straits Settlements as a Crown Colony** Under the charge of the Colonial Office in London
1867	**The Government of the Straits Settlements Act**
1874	**Signing of the Pangkor Treaty** – Introduction of the British Residential System – Applied only to the states of Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan

Fig. 2.1   A timeline of comparative legislation in the Straits Settlements

populations, or the rhetoric of a civilizing mission. The latter strain makes an appearance much later on in British colonial discourse in Malaya, but not with the same passion and intensity as in India, and thus with somewhat different consequences.

Braddell has observed that 'the period of legal chaos in Penang'[33] ended with the granting of the First Charter of Justice and the establishment of a Court of Judicature in Penang. The Court was constituted by the Governor, three Councilors and one other judge also known as the Recorder. Its influence was defined thus (emphasis added):

---

[33]Braddell (1931/1982, 11).

The Court is to have the jurisdiction and powers of the Superior Courts in England and the several Justices, Judges and Barons thereof 'so far as circumstances will admit' and it is to exercise jurisdiction as an ecclesiastical Court '*so far as the several religion, manners and customs of the inhabitants will admit*'.[34]

Granting the native populations due regard for their religions, the 'First Charter'

. . . secures to all the native subjects the free exercise of their religion, indulges them in all their prejudices, pays the most scrupulous attention to their ancient usages and habits.[35]

The ethno-religious pluralism of the population of Penang is acknowledged in a system that introduced statutory law of England into British Malaya. However, the omission of native law in the First Charter finds extended commentary subsequently in *Regina v. Willans* (1858), where Sir Benson Maxwell, R., notes thus:

The exclusion of native law is also remarkable in the clause empowering the establishment of small debt's Courts. Although it is provided that the jurisdiction of those Courts may be ethnical instead of local, if thought advisable, nothing is said about applying native law to native cases, but it is merely required that the 'Administration of Justice' shall be adapted, so far as circumstances permit to 'the religions, manners, and customs of the native inhabitants, while the Rules of Practice are to conform, as nearly as may be to the Rules of the English Courts of Request.

It may be said that with respect to at least two classes of Orientals, Mahomedans and Hindoos, their laws are part of their religions, and that the Charter includes the former when it mentions the latter. This might be so, if the Charter were a Mahomedan or Hindoo instrument, but law and religion are too distinct in their nature and to English apprehension, to be treated otherwise than as distinct in the construction of an English Charter.[36]

What is notable about these pronouncements is that the concern with ethnic and religious identities emerges only in relation to the Company's preoccupation with such issues as the administration of criminal and civil justice, land laws, marriage and inheritance of property as in the Indian context. The British abolished traditional criminal laws and introduced a British criminal procedure code. They refrained from introducing secular laws in the fields of personal laws of the natives. As such, in dealing with marriage, divorce and inheritance issues, the British retained personal laws of the different religious communities. However, the legal process was in the hands of British judges who adjudicated on cases interpreting religious personal law, often with problematic outcomes. The British sense that the ebb and flow of the daily life of 'Hindoos' and 'Mahomedans' is strictly dictated by religious law and stricture carried in the *Dharmasastras* and the *Koran*, not only served to artificially organize, arrange and codify the systems, but also led subsequently to their ossification, inflexibility and, thus, unworkability in real life.

However, British rule meant that Islamic family law was applied to the Muslims and Hindu law to the Hindus in the Settlements. It is also unsurprising that the operative categories which were invoked amongst the 'Orientals' were 'Mahomedan'

---

[34]Ibid. 12.

[35]Purcell (1948, 49, f).

[36]Braddell (1931/1982, 18).

and 'Hindoo'—again emphasizing the Indian connection, while no reference is made here to the religion of the ethnic group considered to be most successful commercially—the Chinese community. This also reaffirms the British view of the Malayan regions as largely 'Muslim' despite the movement of different ethnic and religious groups into the territories by the early decades of the nineteenth century, largely but not solely as a response to trade in the British settlements.

With the acquisition of Malacca and Singapore as trading posts for the Company, the 'Second Charter of Justice' was eventually granted in 1826 for the extension of the Court of Judicature in Penang to these places, with their annexation into the SS. Prior to the Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca had no organized system of laws in Singapore. Braddell notes (emphasis added),

> It seems clear from Sir Stamford Raffles' Memorandum of 1823 that Malay law and custom were enforced; but the same state of legal chaos prevailed in Singapore until 1826 as had prevailed in Penang up to 1807. Justice was sought to be administered by the Resident with the assistance of the Sultan and the Dato Temenggong, but in 1824, Mr. Crawford, then Resident, reported upon the state of legal chaos in the island. *He administered Chinese and Malay law but had no power over the Europeans.*[37]

It is interesting indeed that the Recorder mentions administering Chinese law. It would be accurate to surmise that Malay law refers to customary practices and Islamic law, but the reference to 'Chinese law' is less transparent. By all accounts, the latter meant 'customary practices' particularly with reference to the familial domain, including marriages, adoptions and inheritance issues. Freedman argues that the introduction of English laws into Singapore 'frequently refused to allow Chinese custom in the realm of family matters'.[38] He further notes,

> From the abandonment of indirect rule in 1826 until the present time the Colonial courts have wrestled with the incorporation of Chinese customary law into an essentially English legal system.[39]

In fact, customary law was not deemed to be applicable in all instances of criminal behaviour. In 1846, the Recorder for Penang, Sir William Norris, in passing judgement at the famous trial of Soonan, the Malay who had run 'amuck', was heavily criticized in an article of *The Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*. But this was embedded in broader statements about non-interference in the religious affairs of the natives:

> We now come to consider the judges observation on the merits of Religion, which cannot but be considered to be as extrajudicial in a country where different creeds are professed and where government has declared itself bound not to interfere with the Religious prejudices of the Natives [. . .] but since Religious liberty is allowed wherever the British flag is spread, the base conduct of a person professing a particular creed does not justify from the Bench any remarks against the creed itself because the judge professes one Religion and the culprit another; We are well aware of the strict habits of piety and the constant practice of Christian

---

[37]Braddell (1931/1982, 23).

[38]Freedman (1950, 98).

[39]Ibid.

duties which mark the worthy Recorder [. . .] remarks which, with a holy glow of piety, would grace the pulpit or platform, but which obviously appear somewhat unnecessary, and out of place when addressed from the Bench and directed to a class of people whose Religious principles we have bound ourselves, as a government, not to intermeddle with.[40]

In 1830, the administrative headquarters of the SS were moved to Singapore, and this political unit was governed under the aegis of the Bengal Presidency, but the administration of the region was deemed to be inefficient given a weak civil service.[41] Through these years, the watchword in the day-to-day running of these places was 'non-intervention'.[42] This was not driven by any noble agenda, but rather conditioned partly by practical, fiscal considerations and partly by the desire to not take on any responsibility for administering these new settlements. The EEIC, in whose name these territories were claimed as British outposts, refused in these early years to accept any political affiliation or accountability, with their financial commitment being minimal and reluctant. The Company's trading posts were viewed primarily as commercial investments, not territorial responsibilities.[43] According to Cowan,

> Even if officials in the Straits Settlements felt a responsibility for affairs in the Peninsula, and even if Governors occasionally acted up to and beyond the letter of the treaties, and spoke of the states being 'under British protection,' it is clear that the Company and the Indian Government did not regard them as being so. It is indeed doubtful whether the East India Company's Directors or the members of the Indian Government knew or cared about the extent of their treaty commitments in Malaya. Certainly they had no interest in the area outside the British settlements, and no intention of playing a decisive part in Malayan politics.[44]

The situation, in fact, deteriorated after 1833, when the EEIC lost the monopoly of the China trade, and its finances dwindled, which reduced its commercial interest in the area. The problem was primarily financial: The administration of these trading posts cost more money than it was able to generate. In 1851, its charge was handed over to the Supreme Government of India but with few benefits accruing for the inhabitants of the SS,[45] with no representation from the region in matters of policy and law formulation, thus marginalizing it further. The question of financing the affairs of the SS surfaced persistently without being satisfactorily settled. But this was not a problem unique to these territories. As Tregonning has observed, 'the problem of raising a revenue was in effect a problem general to all British settlements in the Orient'.[46] The EEIC was stretched financially even before the loss of its lucrative supremacy over the China trade in 1833. Repeated appeals, arguments

---

[40] 15 July 1848, *The Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 3.

[41] Turnbull (1972, 59).

[42] Albertini and Wirz (1982), Lo (1957), and Looi (1995).

[43] Tarling (1993).

[44] Cowan (1961, 19–20).

[45] Cowan (1961, 59).

[46] Tregonning (1965, 59).

and recommendations implored for greater attention to the affairs of the Settlements, including the suggestion for the imposition of taxes on trading practices. An early example of a lucid and comprehensive counter-argument to the latter, and appealing to the Colonial Office to assume greater responsibility, comes from John Anderson[47] in 1840, and merits being quoted in some detail:

> With respect to raising a revenue for defraying the expenses of these settlements, very decided objections have been offered to the levying of duties on imports and exports. Seeing that the East-India Company has been deprived of the monopoly of the China trade, and that the Straits' settlements are no longer of any value or importance to that Company, it may be inquired whether this is fair, as they should have been dispossessed of so many of their former privileges, they should still be required to bear the whole expense of their maintenance, civil, military, and judicial; or whether it would not be expedient—with reference to the existing state of affairs in China, and the entire cessation by the Company of all commercial dealings—that these settlements should be transferred to the Crown, and be maintained at the expense of the State, in the same manner as the Island of St. Helena, the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, etc. Considering the encroaching spirit of the Dutch authorities in the neighbourhood, and the aspect of our political and commercial relations with China, this transfer, while it would relieve the East-India Company from expensive and to them useless settlements, would perhaps be more beneficial to the nation, at least to our manufacturers and merchants, as being more likely to stop the encroachments of the Dutch, and ensuring a more ready attention, on the part of the Ministers of the State and the Government in England, towards the redress of grievances, which have been much complained of, particularly as regards the infraction by the Dutch of the treaty of 1824; and our political relations with the neighbouring native states generally—such as Siam, Cochin China, etc.—would be placed upon a firmer and more solid footing.[48]

As we know, this advice was not acted upon for another 15 years. In the meantime, in 1855, a 'Third Charter of Justice' was granted for governance of the region, as a result of which the Court was split into two—one having joint jurisdiction over affairs in Singapore and Malacca and the other over Penang and Province Wellesley. Furthermore, this Charter declared that English law would apply 'only to criminal cases, and that civil law was to be administered by the canons of native customs'.[49] There was a strong sense that to ensure the administration of justice to the native populations, changes would have to be made to English laws, as noted by Sir Benson Maxwell in his judgment in the case of *Choa Choon Neoh v. Spottiswoode*, 1869:

> In this Colony, so much of the law of England as was in existence when it was imported here and is of general (and not merely local) policy, and adapted to the conditions and wants of the inhabitants, is the law of the land; and further, that law is subject, in its application to the various alien races established here, to such modifications as are necessary to prevent it from operating unjustly and oppressively on them.[50]

---

[47]John Anderson, Esq., Late Secretary to Government of these Settlements.

[48]Anderson, John, 'On the administration of justice in the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca, and the Government of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca.' *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 2, 1840.

[49]Freedman (1950, 97).

[50]Braddell (1931/1982, 62).

Continued bureaucratic neglect by the India Office and strong petitioning from the mercantile community in Singapore eventually forced the hand of the British government to assume administrative responsibility of the SS. After more than a decade of pressure from European merchants and the local press, for the transfer of the administration of the SS directly to the Colonial Office in London, 1 April 1867 saw the passing of The Government of the SS Act to facilitate this move. As a Crown Colony, the Crown had total control over all affairs of the region and the SS government had the autonomy to formulate and pass legislation appropriate for local conditions, with the Governor as the primary decision maker and head of the executive and legislative arms of the government.[51]

2.3.2 Towards Greater 'Interference'

It would not be an exaggeration to describe 'governance' in the SS from its founding in 1826 to 1874 as spartan, casual and neglectful, although the rhetoric of non-intervention and non-engagement with local issues continued to be the clarion call of the authorities. The signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874 between the British and the Sultan Abdullah of Perak is of enormous historical importance, in recognizing and specifying the official and legitimate involvement of the British in the economic and political affairs of the region. Historical data show that this treaty was the outcome of a number of complex factors, including the Sultan of Perak's appeal to the British for their assistance and protection in settling local political disputes and conflict with other parties over the control of tin mines in Perak. The British did not refuse this invitation to arbitrate and fully capitalized on the moment in an effort to secure a stronghold on the trade in tin in Perak. The terms of the treaty recognized Sultan Raja Abdullah as the ruler who was to be given a monthly pension of 1,000 Mexican pesos, but would in turn abide by the advice of an appointed British Resident (whose salary would be paid by the Sultan) on all matters except those dealing with religious and customary practices of the Malays. However, the role of traditional Malay rulers was inexorably transformed in the enforcement of this mode of governance, in particular reducing their economic role and contribution, together with that of the Malay population as a whole.[52] A prime motivation for the establishment of the Residential System by the British lay in the intense and bitter power struggles and conflicts typifying the Malay states. According to Webster,

> The weakness of central state authority, and internal conflicts, eventually threatened the security of British possessions. Informal influence, the cheaper and preferred British political strategy for dealing with the Malay states, was no longer sufficient to protect British interests. The residency arrangements were an imposed settlement of the various internal conflicts, and evolved quickly into *de facto* formal rule. But the structures of traditional Malay authority were preserved superficially, with the Sultans continuing to enjoy enormous wealth and ceremonial prestige, to pacify Malay opinion. In practice, the British

---

[51]Stahl (1951, 39).
[52]Freedman (1960).

controlled revenue, public expenditure, defence and even the various royal successions. It was formal rule masquerading as advice, and Colonial Office officials made no effort to disguise the fact in their communications with each other. Federation in 1895 underlined the reality of British formal rule.[53]

For the Malayan regions, the earlier British policy of non-intervention[54] in native affairs was dramatically transformed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The reasons for this were several: altered economic circumstances in Southeast Asia and the rapid growth of the SS (particularly of Singapore as a strategic base for entrepot trade), growing political escalation between Malay rulers and, finally, 70 years of British association in the Malayan regions, although 'disapproved [. . .] could not be undone'.[55] Starting in September 1873, Britain's political affiliation with the Malay states was officially sanctioned by the Imperial Government in London. In the words of the then-Secretary of State, Lord Kimberly, these were the instructions for the new colonial policy in Malaya (emphasis added):

> Her Majesty's Government have, it need be hardly said, no desire to interfere in the internal affairs of the Malay States; but looking to the long and intimate connection between them and the British Government, Her Majesty's Government finds it incumbent to employ such influence as they possess with the native princes to rescue, if possible, these fertile and productive countries from the ruin which must befall them if the present orders continue *unchecked*.
>
> I have to request that you will carefully ascertain, as far as you are able, the actual condition of affairs in each State and that you will report to me whether there are in your opinion any step which may properly be taken by the Colonial Government *to promote the restoration of peace and order and to secure protection to trade and commerce with the native territories*. I should wish you, especially, to consider whether it would be advisable to appoint a British officer to reside in any of the States. Such an appointment could, of course, only be made with the full consent of the Native Government, and the expenses connected with it would have to be defrayed by the Government of the Straits Settlements.[56]

Such sentiments served to consolidate economic interests and political control in the region through the assertion of legitimate colonial authority over natives as subjects. Thus, a 'Residential system' was instituted, in which a British Resident was appointed for each of the Malay states. The authority of the native chief/ruler[57] still held supreme in all matters relating to 'Islam and Malay custom'[58] but the Resident reigned supreme over matters of general administration, maintenance of law and order, and control of all revenues. This was a novel method of control engendered by the British in a period that was typified by an escalation of more aggressive

---

[53]Webster (1998, 260–61).

[54]Lo (1957), Looi (1995), and Dharmalingam (1995).

[55]Cowan (1961, 263).

[56]Cited in Winstedt (1944, 28).

[57]The acknowledgement of the symbolic power of the Malay rulers continued until 1946, when they were stripped of their power completely.

[58]Cowan (1961, 6).

colonization, driven by economic incentive, in a 'forward policy',[59] seen also in the altered stance of the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago and the French in Indo-China. Of the Residential system, Turnbull notes,

> Within weeks of arriving in Malaya, Clarke made agreements with three Malay rulers for British Residents to be attached to their states, and laid the foundations for the relentless spread of British protection over the whole peninsula.[60]

The road to greater intervention was, however, a rocky one, and the policy of appointing Residents to Malay states was resisted and received with hostility, seen most dramatically in the murder of the British Resident sent to Perak. Thus, with the move away from the policy of non-intervention inherited from Company rule, the British authorities even as they had second thoughts about the policy, given local resistance, could not easily extract themselves elegantly without requisite loss of prestige. Given the tensions brought into open by the new system, they were resolved to be minimally involved in the administration of the Malay states and in the words of the Governor, Sir William Jervois, 'to adhere to a line of policy which will, as far as possible, avoid a further and especially an undefined and uncertain extension of our political responsibilities in the Malay Peninsula'.[61] In any case, the new approach to governance could not at the time be labelled a method or a system, with these descriptions only surfacing retrospectively. As Chai notes,

> The decision to intervene, however, was not followed by any detailed plans as to how a British Officer was to act. Although the Governor was expected to exercise his discretion, British Officers were placed in the Malay States to supervise and administer the Government without any specific instructions as to how they were to do it. Eventually the combination of personalities and circumstances produced something of a method of administration in the State of Perak which proved to be decisive in the evolution of the Residential system in Malays.[62]

This is further evidence that the 'colonial project' was by no means a coherent, well-thought out, pre-articulated agenda but, in fact, emerged gradually and over time in response to the exigencies and constraints of local conditions, through decisions and assessments made by individual agents of the British Empire on the ground.

This brief political and administrative history of the SS[63] reveals that a number of governing powers were responsible for overseeing the affairs of the regions encapsulated within. Specific state policies and practices with regard to any societal domain, whether health or religion, undertaken at particular points, only make

---

[59] Chai (1967, 3).

[60] Turnbull (1974, 1).

[61] Cited in Thio (1969, xxi).

[62] Chai (1967, 4).

[63] The Malayan Union was formed by the British in 1946 but this excluded Singapore (which was, thus, retained as a separate Crown Colony and administered as such), partly because of its tremendous economic advantage to Britain and partly because its inclusion would have upset the carefully-preserved ethnic balance of the newly-formed Union. Singapore's incorporation would have resulted in a numerical dominance of the immigrant Chinese *vis-à-vis* an indigenous Malay community (Rose 1962).

sense through a realization of this intricate and multifarious arrangement *vis-à-vis* governance and administration of these territories. The next chapter turns to the religious landscape of nineteenth-century SS and elaborates how this field was managed by various authorities. The discussion provides historical data with respect to the strategies and procedures that were devised through the nineteenth century for the management of ethnic and religious communities in the SS, paying attention to the various responses by members of these groups to these methods and policies.

Chapter 3
The 'Religious Question' in the Straits Settlements

3.1 Preamble

The administration of 'native' affairs and the underlying colonial logic at work in a managerial approach to political governance have been the subject of much scholarly interest. For example, we know of the deep and systematic interference by colonial administrators into native affairs, including the supervision, regulation, policing and sometimes persecution of non-Christian religious traditions in former colonies.[1] Such an analysis has yet to be undertaken for British Malaya. Any account of European colonial encounters with the non-European world has, from the outset, to be embedded in a series of caveats. No generic, universal statements will be appropriate and it would be a folly to speak of a singular colonial experience. How European colonial powers dealt with the religious beliefs and practices of their non-Christian subjects in the territories they administered is a theme that has been exceedingly popular with students of colonial history. The interface between non-Christian religions in the colonies and the British Empire is a complicated and convoluted subject, requiring precise, careful and thorough handling of particular kinds of historical material. This chapter has two aims: one, to depict the complexity of the religious landscape in nineteenth-century Singapore, Penang and Malacca, and, two, to detail the strategies which the colonial authorities used to manage such ethno-religious pluralism. In an effort to piece together British approaches to dealing with religions in the Straits Settlements (SS), my focus 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. This comparison of explicit policy and workable practical devices reveals important gaps between the two and, more importantly, allows me to demonstrate the processes of compromise, negotiation and concession that authorities on the ground were engaged in. Thus, I make an important conceptual distinction between 'principles of governance' and 'strategies in use'. The former are typically stated in rhetorical terms in treaties, charters and agreements, whereas the latter become obvious through a focus on how the

---

[1]The British treatment of Burmese Buddhism is an obvious example. See Smith (1965) for details.

authorities routinely dealt with and managed religious practices and behaviour. The emphasis in such an articulation is to highlight the value of differentiating between a stated plan of action and the actual practice on the ground in real, concrete situations implemented and translated by colonial administrators.

3.2 Religions in British Malaya

Encounters between agents of colonialism and religions of colonized populations have fascinated scholars globally, and the field is marked by a burgeoning and exciting social science and historical literature.[2] In comparison to the nuanced African and Indian material on the subject, one struggles to find similar works in British Malaya. This lacuna can partly be explained by the rather different terms on which British colonialism was translated into practice in the region and the mode in which it affected colonized peoples. While there was clear resistance to colonial forces in British Malaya, by and large, the impact of colonialism in places like Singapore and Malaysia has been interpreted in rather benign terms, using the language of non-violence and non-confrontation. Certainly in the SS, British input from the nineteenth century is perceived to have had a modernizing effect, engendering economic progress and commercial success, revealing the biases of colonial historiography.[3]

Turning to the impact of colonial rule in British Malaya, the scholarship is thin, although some crucial works are available to us. Generally speaking, at a scholarly level, there seems to have been little interest in exploring the possibly more insidious and destructive impact of colonial rule in British Malaya, a rare exception being Syed Hussein Alatas' *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (1977). In this book, Alatas documents not just the structure and tone of imperial rule but how colonialist narratives were internalized and normalized by colonized populations, leading to their failure either to recognize the pitfalls of such ideological manipulation or to act on it. He says,

> The Malay ruling party inherited the rule from the British without a struggle for independence such as that which took place in Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. As such there was also no ideological struggle. There was no intellectual break with British ideological thinking at the deeper level of thought.[4]

Other examples include Edwin Lee's *The British as Rulers: Governing Multi-racial Singapore, 1867–1914* (1991), which describes British attitudes especially towards

---

[2]In particular, the body of research on this subject from the Indian subcontinent and parts of Africa is voluminous and rich. For India, see Appadurai (1983), Dirks (1987) and Van der Veer (2001); for Africa, see Elbourne (2003), Etherington (2005), Daughton (2006), Chidester (1996) and Porter (1999).

[3]King (2007, 97).

[4]Alatas (1977, 152).

Chinese and Mohammedan secret societies, which were heavily involved in the religious life of their respective communities in the SS, and were sometimes involved in violent clashes during public religious processions. Not surprisingly, the colonial authorities were suspicious of these events, which were declared 'dangerous'. Reflecting a broader pattern in British colonial responses to such 'risk', i.e., the threat to law and order, the problem was solved through legislation in 1882 to suppress the activities of these societies. In places like Burma, Java and Vietnam, religion became a rallying point for anti-colonial sentiments and for agitations against the Crown and Christianity; interestingly, this was not the case for the Malay Archipelago. It is striking that British Malaya is largely absent from the discussion in Reynaldo Ileto's important work on 'Religion and anti-colonial movements'[5] in Southeast Asia in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, Ileto notes just a few instances of 'open conflict with religious overtones'[6] in the Malay states. However, some theoretical insight in the field of colonial regulation of racial and religious communities is now available through some recent works, notably an edited volume by Daniel Goh et al. that examines colonial state input in the production of multiculturalism[7] in British Malaya and deconstructs colonial discourse and practice; Jean Debernardi's work on the 1867 Penang riots and the regulation of the Chinese community thereafter is particularly instructive. In the aftermath of the riots, while the Chinese community 'gained greater recognition for their religious practices',[8] they were also subject to greater degrees of control particularly with respect to the activities of the sworn brotherhoods, which were ultimately suppressed through legislation in 1890. The regulation of religious and cultural expressions of the Straits Chinese community in the public domain occurred within a broad 'policy of religious tolerance',[9] a pattern that is also evident in the material I present *vis-à-vis* the Hindu community in the SS.

It is not without significance that the British powers continued to conceptualize the Malay Archipelago as a predominantly Malay and 'Muslim' region, despite the obvious religious pluralism of the territories, certainly by the turn of the nineteenth century. Christian missionary societies, however, did have an early presence in the Malay Archipelago. They directed their proselytization activities to the non-Malay sectors, as they were constantly reminded of the dangers of inciting social conflict and alienating native rulers and chiefs by trying to evangelize to Malays and Muslims.[10] For Christian missionary groups, this region was, however, not a first choice for launching their evangelical work; rather, it was the shores of

---

[5]Ileto (1992, 193–244).

[6]Ibid. 226–27.

[7]Goh, Daniel, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden and Khoo Gaik Cheng (eds) 2008. In another piece, Daniel Goh (2007) has explored related dimensions of these themes in his earlier comparative work on the Philippines and Malaya in scrutinizing the relationship between colonialism and ethnography.

[8]Debernardi (2004, 53).

[9]Ibid. 39.

[10]Means (1982, 2006), R. Goh (2005) and O'Sullivan (1986).

China that the European missionary groups sought. However, due to restrictions on Western missionaries entering China, representatives of the London Missionary Society (LMS) had to seek other sites for their operations. Certainly, this is not to suggest that the SS was deemed unsuitable for spreading Christianity. For instance, much has been written about Stamford Raffles' openness to missionaries, evident in his welcoming attitude to Christian missionary groups. This provides some evidence for the conflation of political and missionary work in the region. Interestingly, Raffles' views on Muslims and Islam as a religion varied over time and vacillated between an early positive portrayal of Islam and later anti-Islamic views,[11] which served to justify a perception of the region as carrying potential for missionizing work. However, given the geo-politics of the region and the original terms of governance and administration of the SS by the English East India Company (EEIC), the enthusiasm for missionary work had to be tempered with caution for reasons already mentioned.

3.3 Reconstructing the Religious Landscape of Nineteenth-Century Straits Settlements

An attempt to map the religious landscape of nineteenth-century SS within the terms of this project was exacerbated by a number of factors. To put it mildly, it has been a challenge to reconstruct this terrain for two related reasons: the first has to do with the ways in which the SS as a region has been conceptualized in the social science and historical literature, while the second relates to the lack of scholarly sources which deal with the subject of religion in these regions during British colonial rule. The vast and rich body of historical writings[12] about the Settlements, including colonial historiography and nationalist histories, has routinely highlighted the vital economic value of the region in the course of increasing British economic engagement in Malaya, something which eventually cemented their geo-political ascendancy in this part of the world. This scholarship on the region has been defined by an over-emphasis on approaching this constructed regional entity through a commercial lens which has highlighted the significance of the region for the expansion of British trade and heightened entrepreneurial activity. While there is strong justification for such foci, this emphasis has meant that far less scrutiny has been directed at the socio-cultural and religious dimensions of life under colonial rule in the SS.[13]

The trope of these territories as wastelands, devoid of significant human habitation, articulated by early traders who functioned as agents of the EEIC, served well the justification for territorial occupation and declaration of control over lands

---

[11] Syed Muhd. Khairudin Aljunied (2005).

[12] Bastin (1960), Hall (1968), Lach (1969), Kratoska (1983, 2001), Sardesai (1977), Tarling (1962, 1963, 1966, 1969, 1975, 2001), Trocki (1990, 1993, 1999) and Turnbull (1971, 1972, 1981, 1989).

[13] Tong makes the point that 'pre-independence records are mostly silent on religion' (2007, 53) for Singapore but this certainly applies to the SS as well.

rather than peoples, thus bypassing the charge of conquest and invasion. The founding of Penang and Singapore are especially rife with statements to the effect that in the early days of British arrival, these were desolate, deserted, unpopulated spaces with no semblance of settled societal existence. Nonetheless, they were portrayed as carrying tremendous potential for development through the stimulus of British trade in the region. The presence of a 'few Malay families'[14] in Penang noted by Francis Light and a hundred or so inhabitants in Singapore noted by Stamford Raffles were, interestingly, deemed to be inconsequential and certainly not viewed as obstacles to attaining the goal of securing new and strategic trading posts for the commercial needs of the Company. The migrant communities that were subsequently attracted to the Settlements through the impetus for trade constituted a population which was typified by a myriad of ethnic communities from varied regions, speaking a multitude of languages and adherents of a range of religious traditions. There is evidence to confirm the incidence of non-Christian religious activity and thus of religious pluralism in this region from the earliest decades of the nineteenth century. For example, we know that places of worship and other religious organizations were established by Chinese and Indian migrants to Singapore and Penang as early as the 1830s.[15] The SS in the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of religious institutions, as well as the enactment of religious processions and the observance of religious festivals in the public domain. However, my research has unearthed but a handful of scholarly works on the religious landscape of nineteenth-century SS.[16] Some early published sources include J. D. Vaughan's *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements* (1879), which is an account of the 'Babas' of Penang, furnishing details of festivals, temples and life-cycle rituals of this community; Charles Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (1849), which carries information that is not based on research or in-depth study, but nonetheless documents mid-nineteenth century observance of public festivals, such as Churruck Pooja in Singapore; W. Murray's chapter on 'Religious Singapore' in Walter Makepeace et al.'s edited volume *One Hundred Years of Singapore* (1921), which is instructive with respect to the state of Christianity on the island. Furthermore, it is possible to abstract some details of religious life in Singapore, Penang and Malacca from the broader historical accounts of British presence in Malaya and Southeast Asia.[17] With some important differences in emphasis, these works collectively convey a strong sense of religious pluralism

---

[14]Logan, J. R. (1857). Enquiry into Chinese grievances at Penang. *Singapore Free Press*, 10 December.

[15]Two examples include the Sri Mariamman Temple and the Thian Hock Keng Temple in Singapore founded in 1827 and 1839, respectively, both of which have evolved.

[16]For the post-colonial period, we are on much firmer ground as far as research on religion in Singapore and Malaysia is concerned. In fact, one is inundated with the scholarship on religions from at least the mid-1960s onwards.

[17]Foremost amongst these are Mary Turnbull's *The Straits Settlements 1827–67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (1972) and *A History of Singapore, 1819–1975* (1977); K. C. Tregonning's *The British in Malaya: The First Forty Years 1786–1826* (1965); Donald Nonini's,

in the SS, defined by the co-presence of elements from a range of religious traditions of both indigenous and imported varieties. Comparatively speaking, we have more information on Islam in Malaya under British administration, some of which include unpublished student research.[18] Dharmalingam's and Talib's contributions are especially important, being based on comprehensive archival research, revealing important insights about how the colonial state dealt with Muslim endowments and with Islam in Malaya. They also reflect on the ways in which Islam and Islamic law were subsequently conceptualized in highly essentialized and monolithic modes, traces that persist into the present. Contributions by scholars like Gordon P. Means on colonial policies *vis-à-vis* the practice of Islam have been instrumental for understanding the political development of Malaysian society; Moshe Yegar's work details British involvement with Islam during the colonial period and the conflicts thus generated between *Syariah* Law and Common Law, while Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman's research on *adat* laws in the colonial period is highly insightful. It is notable that such in-depth, historically nuanced work has not yet been undertaken for other religious traditions in the SS, especially Hinduism. Jean DeBernardi's important research on the Penang Chinese[19] community, including its religious life in the colonial period, fills many important gaps in our knowledge about religious and cultural diversity in the SS.

A further problem arises from the unequal breakdown of treatment of religious developments in Singapore, Penang and Malacca, respectively. In fact, information about religious activity in the region is uneven for the three settlements. Not surprisingly, we have far greater knowledge about the religious profile of Malacca (including during the pre-British period) as compared to Penang and Singapore. Lach notes that knowledge of Malacca prior to the sixteenth century is patchy and has to be gleaned from 'archaeological evidence and foreign sources'.[20] One crucial exception is the *Sejarah Melayu*,[21] the indigenous Malay language text that carries descriptions of Malacca in the 1500s, including the conversion of its third ruler, Sri Maharajah Muhammad Syah, to Islam around the middle of the fifteenth

---

British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900–1957 (1992); Carl Trocki's *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800–1910* (1990).

[18] Two excellent examples of the latter are Naimah Said Talib's 1981 thesis, 'British Policy towards Islam in the Straits Settlements (1867–1941)', and Vanaja Dharmalingam's 1995 thesis, 'The British and the Muslim Religious Endowments in Colonial Malaya'. I have also found unpublished student research and theses to be invaluable in discussions relating to the governance and administration of the SS. See Lo (1957), Looi (1995) and Tan (1957).

[19] DeBernardi (2004).

[20] Lach (1965, 505).

[21] The *Sejarah Melayu* (*The Malay Annals*) is dated between 1500 and 1550s (see Winstedt 1961; Wheatley 1961) and is a Malay literary work written in the classical Malay language in old Jawi script. The single volume chronicles the establishment of the Malacca sultanate and is believed to have been compiled and edited by Tun Sri Lanang, the adopted pen-name of the author who was Tan Muhammad and a *Bendahara* (Prime Minister) to the Sultan of Johore. The work was commissioned by Sultan Alauddin Riyaaat Shah of Johore.

century, but compiled only much later.[22] We also have access to early accounts of Christian evangelical activity in Malacca from narratives of Portuguese missionaries and travelers, such as Tome Pires and Diogo Lopes de Sequeira.[23] Christianity was not received without antagonism from the Malay community but, despite the conflict between the Muslim and Portuguese traders, the city acquired prominence as a 'Catholic city' and 'became a major centre of missionary activities in Asia by the late sixteenth century'.[24] In stark contrast, this sort of detailed historical knowledge about the religious sphere is not available to us for either Penang or Singapore.

Details of the religious demography of Singapore, Penang and Malacca are available to us in a number of administrative reports and colonial records for the nineteenth century. These numerical stock-taking efforts culminated in surveys and census of population of British Malaya, which were far from regular, but which nonetheless carried data about the ethnic and religious identities of the resident groups. In particular, my surveys of colonial newspapers have furnished additional insights not just because they carry details about religious events, but also because they have enabled me to get a sense of the public discourse about the same. Within the context of the project, the substantive material of two key English newspapers in the SS, the *Singapore Free Press* and *The Straits Times*, provide historical narratives which I use here with due scepticism about their claims to factuality and objectivity. I am fully aware that this source carries many limitations, including critical questions about authorship. Also, while newspapers may reflect public opinion about social, religious and political issues, these articulations are themselves shaped by agendas which influence the nature of reportage. Nonetheless, I argue that newspapers assume a centrality in this research as an important resource. They carry ethnographic details making it possible to approach them as data in addition to the content in colonial dispatches, memos, letters and administrative reports and surveys.

Thus, the data presented here are gleaned from an assortment of sources, some explicitly governmental, others scholarly and yet others more journalistic and anecdotal. Collectively these reaffirm the tremendous religious complexity of the British Malayan population for the nineteenth century and further allow a glimpse into how this diverse scene (especially in public) was supervised and managed by colonial authorities. The latter theme can be approached via several routes. For instance, one could focus on the granting of land to religious communities for building places of worship, or examine the granting of public holidays to mark the religious observance of the different communities,[25] or consider the colonial attitude towards the use of fireworks in religious festivities. Here, I focus on two different arenas that

---

[22] See Andaya and Ishii (1992, 516). The authors note that the event is presented as divine revelation but that there is no certainty about the precise date of the conversion of Malacca to Islam.

[23] Lach (1965, 505–07) and Teixeira (1961).

[24] Lee and Ackerman (1997, 115).

[25] We learn that in 1900, and referring to the Chinese New Year, 'Government allows only two days as holidays, the festivities really extend to half the month' ('The Chinese New Year,' *The Straits Times*, 26 January, 1900, 3).

allow me to demonstrate the ways in which regulatory authorities interfaced with religious communities in the SS: the building of places of worship and the public enactment of religious processions.

3.3.1 Non-Christian Religions in the Straits Settlements

Despite the rhetoric of the SS being 'wholly uncultivated and uninhabited',[26] in a number of early dispatches to the Bengal government, Francis Light makes the following observations about Penang (emphasis added):

> It is become necessary to have some regulations established for the peace and safety of individuals. Our inhabitants are composed of Chinese, Malays, Christians, Choolias, Siamese and Tannoes. The Siamese and Chinese are nearly of the same religion and manners, the Malays, Choolias and Tannoes are Mohomedans and governed by Mosaic Law. A strict police for the punishment of such offences as disturb the public peace is sufficient, while each sect are governed by their own municipal laws.[27]

> [...] from the *great diversity of inhabitants, differing in religion, laws, language and customs*, a constant and patient attention to their various complaints must be afforded; and that to endeavour to subject these people to our strict military law and discipline would soon depopulate the island of all the most wealthy and useful inhabitants.[28]

According to J. R. Logan, Francis Light describes the arrival of immigrants into Penang and the assurances he gave them about protecting their rights to practice their religion:

> In 1792 Mr. Light reports that Syed Hu-sain and Syed Jafir, Malays of Arab descent had come with their very large families. They claimed a written declaration of respect for their laws and for their authority over their own people. Mr. Light promised them that a reasonable, and, as far as the general welfare would permit, an independent authority would be allowed them over their families and dependents, 'and that their religions, laws and customs would be undisturbed.'[29]

Two decades after the founding of Penang, the agents of the Company were making statements testifying to the remarkable diversity of the native population in Penang:

> [...] and many of your Majesty's subjects and many Chinese, Malays, Indians and other persons professing different religions and using and having different manners, habits, customs and persuasions have settled there and if due encouragement shall be given to the said settlement is it to be hoped that it will increase considerably in its population and commerce.[30]

---

[26]IOR – G 34/8, 1–8, 'The East India Company's petition for Letters Patent establishing a Court of Judicature at Penang to the King's Most Excellent Majesty', 28 March 1805.

[27]S.S. (F). R. Vol. 2 Penang to Bengal, 7 May 1787 (cited in Tregonning 1965, 46).

[28]Logan, J. R. (1857). Enquiry into Chinese grievances at Penang. *Singapore Free Press*, 10 December 1857.

[29]Ibid.

[30]IOR – G 34/8, 1–8, 'The East India Company's petition for Letters Patent establishing a Court of Judicature at Penang to the King's Most Excellent Majesty', 28 March 1805.

Of course in the early years of the settlement the authorities were willing to do all that was necessary to 'fill the island with inhabitants'.[31] However, Tregonning observes that even without proper administrative support and minimal resources, in the early years, Francis Light managed the plural population of Penang well:

> Under his sensible, tactful rule the most diverse of peoples lived amicably with one another. Chinese, Indians, Malays, Siamese, Burmese, Achenese, Eurasians and Europeans, sprung from different stock, worshipping different gods, with different laws and ways of living, all settled and developed. This was no small achievement.[32]

Settlement patterns in Penang reveal the presence of large numbers of Indians from the earliest years of the Company's possession of the island, a trend that continued up to the 1850s especially with the growth of the plantation economy on the island, which brought in large numbers of Indian labour. Turnbull notes that already 'By the 1790s Indians were coming into Penang at the rate of 1,300–2,000 a year'[33] largely as labourers and petty traders primarily from South India. While in the 1830s, the Indian community stood second numbering 11,000 strong, after the 18,000 Malays and before the 9,000 Chinese,[34] by the 1850s the picture had changed dramatically. In 1858, the total population of Penang stood at 58,000 with the Chinese being the majority community, followed by the Malays and the Indians. Even in the early years, Francis Light encouraged the emigration of the Chinese into Penang being of the view that they were 'the only people of the East from whom revenue may be raised without expense and extraordinary efforts of government'.[35]

The island of Singapore 'was the most lively, successful and full of activity and it was to Singapore that the ambitious went to seek 'streets paved with gold'.[36] Being a free port, where no duties and taxes were levied on trade practices, this settlement drew scores of immigrants in the early years, in comparison to Malacca and Penang. By the year 1827, it soon had a predominantly Chinese presence as its population grew from 10,000 in 1824 to a staggering 81,000 in 1860. The percentage of Chinese in Singapore reached approximately 65% of the total population, far outnumbering the indigenous Malay presence.[37] According to the 'Census of Singapore and its dependencies taken under orders of government in the months of November and December 1849',[38] a range of nationalities and religions amongst a total adult population of 52,891 is captured thus: Amongst adults of named nations[39] are included the 'Europeans, Eurasians, Armenians, Arabs, Balinese, Boyanese,

---

[31]Logan (1857).

[32]Tregonning (1956, 50).

[33]Turnbull (1972, 8).

[34]Turnbull (1972, 8).

[35]Cited in Turnbull (1972, 9).

[36]Turnbull (1972, 21).

[37]Ibid.

[38]*The Straits Times*, 26 February 1850, 5.

[39]Already at this point the three groups that are dominant demographically are the Chinese, Malays and the natives of India.

Bugis, Caffries, Chinese, Javanese, Jews, Malays, N. of India, Parsee and Siamese',
while their religions are denoted as 'Christian, Jews, Parsees, Mahomedans, Hindoo
and Buddist'. The Indian community arrived in Singapore much later in compari-
son to Penang and Malacca, but by 1860 the latter had 'displaced the Malays as the
second largest community in Singapore'.[40] Thus, the ethnic and religious pluralism
that typifies contemporary Singapore has deep, historical roots from its days as a
British colony.[41]

In contrast to Singapore and Penang, Malacca was the least cosmopolitan and
diverse of the settlements particularly in the rural areas, and the only one that was
predominantly Malay and remained thus. However, in 1826 it 'was the largest and
most populous of the Straits Settlements'[42] with '31,000 inhabitants, two-thirds of
whom were Malay'[43] and there was anticipation that this settlement could be devel-
oped. In these early decades of Company rule, its inhabitants also included Chinese,
Malays, South Indians and Eurasians. By the year 1860, almost three-quarters of its
population of 68,000 was Malay. Despite numerous efforts by the British to develop
Malacca, especially its agricultural base, the region did not flourish and neither did
it attract migrants like the other two settlements. According to Thomas Braddell, the
then police magistrate of Malacca, 'The general characteristic of the Malacca terri-
tory is the want of life and bustle.'[44] In terms of religious diversity, there is early
evidence here of Roman Catholicism through Portuguese rule, Hindu elements from
as far back as the fifteenth century, Islam since the seventh century and Buddhist and
Taoist practices amongst its Chinese settlers.

Thus, the early population of the SS was defined by Chinese religionists, Taoists
and Buddhists from China, Hindus, Sikhs and Parsees from India, indigenous
Muslims together with Muslims from India, as well as Roman Catholics and
Protestants, both Asian and European. A comprehensive account of the religious
landscape of the SS would of necessity have to attend to the visibility and presence
of all these religious groupings in the SS, an enormous task that is beyond the ambit
of the present project.[45] To enable a focused discussion, I concentrate on the places
of worship and socio-cultural and religious expressions of the Hindu community.
However, this is prefaced with a brief account of the religious life of the Straits
Chinese community.

The Chinese community has strong roots in the SS and we have strong evidence
that they imported into this new locale their religious beliefs and practices and
sustained them here vigorously. Vaughan also notes amongst the Straits Chinese

---

[40]Turnbull (1972, 22).

[41]Nathan (1921).

[42]Turnbull (1972, 15).

[43]Ibid.

[44]T. Braddell, JIA, vii (1853) m 74 (cited in Turnbull 1972, 21).

[45]See Robert Tan (1962).

the practice of 'worshipping the dead',[46] the 'great pomp and ceremony'[47] of their funeral processions and the elaborate observance of the Chinese New Year. Historians and students of religion have noted the early presence of Chinese temples, pagodas, tombs and cemeteries in Penang, Malacca and Singapore[48] and highlighted that their architecture reflects similarities with religious structures in China. Evidence of Chinese temple-building activity in the SS (from as early as the seventeenth century) has been reported by scholars. Some of the temples were built on land donated by the Straits government 'in perpetuity for religious purposes to the Chinese community'.[49] In these early years, besides serving the community's religious needs, the temples also functioned as the official administrative centre and a court of justice for the Kapitans.[50] Ong notes that these early Chinese temples in Singapore, many of which began as modest 'joss houses', were syncretic in bringing together Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian elements[51] and also had strong affiliations with dialect-based clan associations. Importantly, the temples were more than places of worship but served also as a focal point for the migrant community and offered social, educational and welfare support to new arrivals from China.

The Hindu temple scene in the SS was equally vibrant and dynamic by the mid-nineteenth century. Temples are deemed to be central to the religious life of Hindus. A famous proverb in Tamil, 'kovil illatha oorilay kudi yirukka vendamm' implores Hindus not to inhabit a place where there are no temples, a dictum that was certainly followed closely by nineteenth-century Hindu migrants to Malaya. The practice of building a 'sami veedu' (Tamil, literally 'god's house') near residential spaces and work areas was widespread in these early decades of the nineteenth century, particularly in the absence of bureaucratic and administrative constraints about where gods could be housed and what styles of religiosity were appropriate in venerating these deities. Early temple building followed a similar pattern across the SS: there were South Indian and North Indian variants where caste preferences were expressed with regional, ethno-linguistic communities making their own contributions. The predominance of migrants from South India meant that a large number of temples were built for the gods of Tamil Nadu, especially those from the folk, popular

---

[46]Vaughan (1879, 34).

[47]Ibid. 31.

[48]Kohl (1984) and Vaughan (1879).

[49]Kohl (1984, 84).

[50]See Debernardi (2004) for details of how the Kapitan system was used to manage the Chinese community in Penang. A 'Kapitan China' signified a title and a position created by the Portuguese and adopted by the Dutch and the British to manage the affairs of the local Chinese community, using customary, religious laws. In Penang, prominent members of the community, including heads of sworn brotherhoods, were appointed to the position and could administer the community, even try cases and kept track of birth, marriages, death and new arrivals (Debernardi 2004, 25). See also Goh (2010) for the complexities of the Straits Chinese identity which complicated considerably colonial efforts to regulate the community.

[51]Ong (2005, 31).

base of Hinduism. The popularity of village deities like *Amman*, such as the various mother goddesses, and *kaaval deivam*, the guardian deities, such as Muniyandi, Muneeswaran, Karuppanaswamy, was evident in the innumerable structures built for their veneration.

In Penang, the presence of Indians can be dated to the arrival of domestic servants, sepoys and camp followers with Francis Light[52] in 1786. Soon after, with the stimulus of trade in the region, larger groups of Indian traders, moneylenders, sepoys and coolies followed suit. These included both Hindus and Muslims, and the religious life of the migrants was expressed through the building of temples and mosques wherever they settled. Ramanathan notes that 'Obviously the British authorities encouraged, or at least tacitly supported this activity.'[53] This turn toward solid structures and buildings reflects the British sense of Church as legitimate. As in India, the local agents of the EEIC also made land grants to members of the Hindu community. For example, the Mahamariamman Temple in Penang's Queen Street, now an established Agamic temple, was built on land granted by the British authorities in 1801. Similarly, the land for the Ramar Temple in York Close, Penang, was granted to a Ranee Dhoby, by the British Lieutenant-Governor George Leith, in 1802. The centre of *Tai Pūcam*[54] celebrations, the by now-famous Bala Thandayuthapani Temple in Waterfall Road, Penang, in 1892, was 'granted an eleven-acre hillside property nearby for the location of a proper temple'[55] by the British authorities, although its origins are dated to the mid-nineteenth century. Some prominent and wealthy community-based Agamic-style temples built by the Chettiar and the Ceylon Tamil communities are also noteworthy in the early history of Penang. In addition to labour-line temples and urban temples, a distinct type of temple emerged in the plantations of Malaya. This process has been well documented by Ramanathan. He observes (emphasis added),

> Until the 1870s, the Indian population was mainly concentrated in the Straits Settlements. Following the establishment of plantations for spices, sugar and coffee in Penang, and Province Wellesley in the later 18th and early 19th Century, more Indian labour was brought in. The living conditions in these early plantations were appalling but the British authorities did offer the Indian labourers some incentives as toddy and *opportunity to build temples.*[56]

He also notes that with time, as the conditions on the plantations improved, the plantation owners themselves set up temples for the workers. These early tin and shack set ups were gradually enhanced and the 'plantation temples were maintained

---

[52]Ramanathan (1995, 74).

[53]Ibid. 74.

[54]There are many variants of this word in Anglicized renditions: 'Thaipusam', '*Tai Pūcam*' (used in academic and non-academic literature) and '*Tai Pūcam*' the transliterated Tamil description in romanized text. I have opted to use *Tai Pūcam* in this book so as to be consistent with the method used to denote other Hindu festivals, i.e., through their Anglicized description.

[55]Ibid. 172.

[56]Ibid. 76.

by a small sum of money deducted from the laborer's pay'.[57] The plantation management also made provision for a day to be set aside as the annual temple festival and sponsored it. As these were in the main temples dedicated to village deities,[58] they were served by non-Brahmin priests and managed by a committee called a *panchayat*, constituted by 'senior and influential overseers and the clerical staff of the plantation'.[59] What is of critical importance, in the context of this research, is Ramanathan's notice that '. . . some of the European plantation managers were generous and helped build large temples that rivaled some of the urban ones',[60] even as these places of worship '... were under the watchful eyes of the estate management'.[61] As in the Indian context, the British authorities did participate in the temple festivals and did not strictly adhere to the declared British policy of non-interference or non-involvement:

> In case of conflicts relating to religious practices and the conduct of the temple's management, the matter was referred to the estate manager for arbitration. The European plantation manager, and subsequently the Asian manager, was accorded the status of the honorary chairman[62] of the temple and during festivals he was awarded respect and temple honours similar to Indian kings and notables.[63]

The building of Hindu temples in Singapore can be dated to the 1820s, as is evident from a number of sources[64] which allow us to reconstruct the nineteenth-century Hindu landscape[65] on this island. To begin, the marking of particular spaces on the island as 'Indian' or 'Hindu' was certainly not accidental. It reflects early patterns of settlement, as determined by the larger politico-economic logic of British Colonial Government, via the workings of the EEIC. The latter's plan to apportion parts of the island for occupation by different groups of 'natives' is apparent in the indelible mark of emergent racial spatialization on the island. The residential and employment segregation by race resulted in specific concentrations of these groups across the island. As such, the designation of what is known today as 'Little India' as an

---

[57]Ibid. 83.

[58]Ramanathan (1995) notes that the largest number of temples dedicated to village deities, such as Mariamman, Muniyandi and Aiyyanar, were located on Malayan plantations.

[59]Ibid. 84.

[60]Ibid. 83.

[61]Ibid.

[62]In subsequent years, this practice has proved to be somewhat controversial, when with the establishment of the Hindu Endowments Board, its Chairman was accorded the same privilege. This has certainly been a point of contention in Singapore, a discussion I undertake in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

[63]Ibid. 84.

[64]Mialaret (1969), Mohd. Ali (1985) and Rajah (1975).

[65]It is striking that 23 of the official Hindu temples in Singapore today were registered before the Second World War. Only one temple was registered as a new temple society in the post Second World War period and this is the Arulmigu Murugan Temple in Jurong East and which was recently renovated and held its *kumbabhishekam* ceremony in November 2004, bringing the official number of Hindu temples on the island to 24.

Indian space has deep historical roots. These areas were first identified as 'Kampong Kerbau' (Malay for 'Buffalo Village') named so because of the cattle and related trades in this swampy locale. The belt of Hindu temples in the area is a function of the early, selective presence[66] of caste groupings amongst Indian Hindus who were assembled in the area. Likewise, the concentration of Indians in railway services meant their housing was located in close proximity to the railway tracks, while the Keppel Road area—with its demand for labour in the port and harbour industries—also became a distinctly 'Indian' area. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, all these spaces have been marked by a conspicuous presence of Hindu shrines and temples. Significantly, many of these were established and maintained by organized Hindu groups and associations, such as the Port of Singapore Authority workers, the Pasir Panjang Power Station Hindu Employees and the Malayan Railway Workers.[67] Historical evidence suggests that particularly in the early days of Indian arrivals to Singapore, small make-shift shrines, no more than an altar, a stone statue, a rock, a trident, a small-built structure, etc. were placed under trees on hills, along roads and railway tracks across the island, and worshipped as divinity. This was especially the case in the 'Indian areas', such as the Sembawang and Naval Base areas, the Tanjong Pagar and dock areas, Woodlands and, of course, the Serangoon road district. These served as focal points for the community of new arrivals from India, making them feel at home in unfamiliar lands.

As in the Indian context, the EEIC awarded 'plots of land for the construction of religious edifices, including a Hindu temple, an Indian-Muslim mosque and a Chinese temple'.[68] We know that the Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road, also known in the early years as the Shetti Vinayagar and Gothanda Ramaswamy Mariamman Temple or Kling Chapel, was originally built as a small shrine on a piece of land granted by the British government in 1822, attesting to the popularity of mother-goddess worship in the religious lives of Hindus at this early stage in Singapore's history. Here are some interesting background details for the ultimate selection of the present location of the temple:

> East India Company's initial development plan was to house different religious buildings within the same district. However, as there was no freshwater supply at the Telok Ayer site awarded for the construction of the Hindu temple, the Indian community headed by Narayana Pillai rejected the offer. The Indians were then offered plot in the canal area, around the present Stamford Road. Before any action was taken, however, owing to changes in colonial town planning another plot of land at South Bridge Road was offered in place of the former.[69]

Other Hindu temples on the island that can be dated to the nineteenth century include the following: the Sri Krishnan Temple in Waterloo Street managed today by the Malayalee community is dated to the 1870s; the Sri Sivan Temple is one of the

---

[66]Siddique and Puru Shotam (1982).

[67]These have been accurately described as the 'labour Line temples' (Ramanathan 1995) and stretched across the Malay Peninsula.

[68]Hindu Endowments Board (2006, 30).

[69]Ibid.

oldest on the island and is dated to the 1850s in the Orchard Road area, where it remained till 1983, when it had to be relocated to make way for the mass rapid transit system; and the simple, original edifice of the Veeramma Kaliamman Temple in Serangoon Road was built by 'a group of Indians from Bengal' in the 1890s. One of the few Vaisnavite temples in the midst of a predominantly Saivite Hindu population of Singapore, the Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road, one of the four temples managed by the Singapore Hindu Endowments Board, is dated to 1855. The original plot of land 'measuring 2 acres 2 woods and 24 poles was bought from the EIC in 1851 for 26 rupees and 18 annas',[70] for constructing the first shrine of Visnu in Singapore. In further developments, the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board, which managed the affairs of the temple from 1907, acquired an adjacent plot of 'land from the East India Company on 15 August 1912 on a 999-year lease at an annual fee of one Straits Settlements dollar'.[71]

Given the absence of plantations in Malacca and thus the much smaller numbers of Hindus there in the first half of the nineteenth century, its temple-building scene was expectedly different from the intensity of such practices in Penang and Singapore, both of which had much larger concentrations of diverse, migrant Indian Hindu communities. Additionally, the dominant Malay Muslim population of Malacca meant the greater preponderance of mosques. However, there were some prominent examples of early Hindu temples here. A good example being the Sri Poyyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple, which stands on a site given by the Dutch and was built in the 1780s by the Hindu community of Malacca.

In the preceding discussion, I have listed examples of early Hindu temples in Penang and Singapore which subsequently became established and prominent. Some of these temples with rudimentary beginnings as shrines over time evolved into Agamic temples, modelled after temple complexes in Tamil Nadu. A few have been in existence for almost 200 years, a testimony to the resilience, perseverance and tenacity of the migrant Hindu communities in these regions. However, it would be inaccurate to list only these named temples as proof of the spiritual fortitude and determination of Hindu migrants. This would be unjustified in view of the overwhelming evidence that early Hindu arrivals to British Malaya constructed small make-shift shrines near their living quarters and workspaces, which have been labelled 'labour-lines temples', 'estate temples' and 'plantation temples'. In these initial years, it was the shrines that served as focal points for the community and catered to its religious needs, providing comfort and solace in an unfamiliar space. These unnamed religious edifices have not left any physical traces of their existence, especially in the increasingly urbanizing spaces of Penang and Singapore, as they developed and modernized rapidly. Yet, the fact that these shrines, normally founded in the name of village deities from Tamil Nadu, continue to sprout (and persist) in urban Singapore and Penang and certainly in rural parts of Malaysia, somewhat indiscriminately, even in the contemporary period,[72] suggests that these

---

[70]Ibid. 35.

[71]Ibid. 40.

[72]Sinha (2005).

were the religious structures that early Hindu arrivals set up in Malaya. Ultimately, the building of more permanent structures for housing deities previously without temples (in the Indian context) provided profound legitimacy for them and made the Malayan scene markedly different from the South Indian context. These anonymous, unmarked shrines, together with statistical figures of arrivals to the new colony, the widespread establishment of temples therein and records of the early observance of festivals such as *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti*, constitute the historical data which attest to the strong Hindu presence in the SS through the nineteenth century.

An essential point that surfaces from this historical ethnography is the rather liberal stance of the British authorities towards the building of Chinese and Hindu temples, mosques, *gurdwara(*s) and other religious structures. Such expressions of religiosity were not discouraged but, in fact, supported in different modes, including, as we have seen, land grants for constructing religious edifices. Certainly, 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 EEIC. But whatever the drive, the absence of restraints and control in this arena, undoubtedly, enabled expressions of non-Christian religions and facilitated their early institutionalization in the SS.

A portrayal of the religious scene in nineteenth-century SS would certainly not be complete without an account of Christianity, which had an early presence in the region, soon after the cession of the regions.[73] Christian presence in British Malaya has been documented quite thoroughly, both through efforts of academics and input from Christian groups who have an interest in unearthing the history of Christianity in the region. A fairly detailed picture about Christianity comes to us from various kinds of data about narratives of missionary activity in the region.[74] The general scholarly view is that colonial rule in Southeast Asia created favourable conditions for missionary work[75] but with the proviso that colonial authorities did not welcome Christian missionaries or their work with open arms. Speaking to the history of Protestant missions in Southeast Asia, Salemink makes this observation (emphasis mine):

---

[73]A discussion that would enhance this theme is missionary presence in the region and the impact of missionary work on non-Christian inhabitants in the SS.

[74]Robert Hunt's edited volume *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History* (1992) is an important text that fills many gaps about the coming of Christianity to Malaya, including details of Catholic and Anglican missionary work in the region. Ronnie O'Sullivan's unpublished dissertation of 1986, *History of the London Missionary Society in the Straits Settlements, 1815–1847*, is a work that offers a rare glimpse into the religious landscape of the SS at the turn of the nineteenth century via a focus on the operations of the LMS, branches in Penang, Malacca and Singapore. Finally, Robbie Goh's *Christianity in Southeast Asia* (2005) and *Sparks of Grace: History of Methodism in Asia* (2003) offer useful historical details of Christian and missionary presence in Southeast Asia.

[75]Robbie Goh notes that 'the spread of Christianity in Southeast Asia is connected, in complex ways to European colonial interests' (2005, 2). See Sng and You (1982) for trends within Christianity in Singapore.

> The British, Dutch and (after 1898) American colonial administrators were somewhat indifferent to the missionary endeavour, and did not encourage proselytizing among the dominant population groups that already adhered to one of the world's religions, in order to avoid antagonizing and hence politicizing these religious categories. *This is not to say that there was no connection between colonialism and missionization.*[76]

It is notable that in Southeast Asia, Christianity did not win converts 'under coercion by Colonial Governments'[77] and that the turn to the religion was 'a willing rather than an enforced phenomenon'.[78] The discourse on the spread of Christianity in Malaya did not assume the moral, civilizing tone of saving 'primitive native souls' that was pervasive in India. R. Goh makes the crucial point that

> The boost that was given to Christianity by colonialism in Southeast Asia largely consisted of establishing the kind of socio-political order in which the missionaries had the confidence to work and move, and which allowed the missionaries to participate in social transformation through educational, medical and welfare projects.[79]

As far as the SS was concerned, it is well known that Francis Light welcomed to this region the French Catholic priests who were expelled from Siam. Already by 1805, Penang had been considered by the LMS as a base for its mission 'beyond the Ganges' though it eventually set its roots in Malacca. The LMS also had missionaries in Singapore and Penang but with limited success and their work was oriented primarily towards China. The various denominational churches that existed in the SS were committed primarily to ministering members of the European community, rather than to the 'native' populations. We know, for example, that missionary activity in the Settlements was somewhat restricted, given the various treaties and agreements that were formulated between EEIC officials and local rulers such that Malays were to be largely excluded from Christian missionary activity. The 1874 Treaty of Pangkor was crucial in this regard as matters of religion and custom were outside the sphere of British jurisdiction. According to Northcott,

> The Treaty's main concession to the Malays was that their religion and customs would not be interfered with and this protection acted as a brake to missionary work amongst the Malays.[80]

Even the work amongst the non-Malay communities in the SS was slow and gained momentum only in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. Missionary work was directed primarily at the migrant Chinese and Indian communities in Penang, Singapore and Malacca and they formed a

---

[76]Salemink (2007, 6).

[77]Goh makes the point that there were differences here. For example, the Dutch in Indonesia were far more interventionist as compared to the British in Malaya, who seemed less interested in directing and regulating local customs (2005, 6).

[78]Goh (2005, 6).

[79]Ibid. 6–7.

[80]Northcott (1992, 40).

majority of the converts as well.[81] Scholars have further noted that significant conversions to Protestant versions of Christianity in various Southeast Asian countries were 'numerically very limited during the colonial era'[82] and only intensified after independence.

3.4 Strategies for Managing Public Expressions of Religiosity

While religious pluralism has defined the SS from the early decades of the nineteenth century, for the most part, the 'authorities' were content to leave the members of the various non-Christian communities to manage their own affairs in keeping with the broad articulated policy of non-interference. The latter applied specifically to the Malays and to Islam, but, in fact, the same attitude was extended to the religions of the Indians and Chinese. The colonial state was largely focused on efficient administration and management of a diverse population so as to ensure order and stability, and displayed a concomitant lack of interest (even disregard) for the private lives of its subjects.[83] This stance reinforced the colonial state's claimed neutrality as arbiter and mediator amongst different native communities. Here, the British were clearly working out of the 'Enlightenment compromise', which relegated religion to the private life of citizens, a sentiment that has also carried over into a secularist, post-colonial framework of governance. While the public performance of festivals amongst early Indian and Chinese migrants and the establishment of their places of worship have been reported since the early decades of the nineteenth century, the 'official' concern with the proper management of the religious domain, i.e., non-Christian religious traditions, was not articulated until about the end of the nineteenth century, and formalized through legislation only in 1905.

It is notable that there were few restrictions and controls on the building of places of worship across the SS or their day-to-day functioning through the nineteenth century, but eventually did become formalized and bureaucratized at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, the evidence strongly suggests that the EEIC encouraged and even facilitated the establishment of religious institutions through land grants and also allocated specific sites for the building of religious edifices for the various migrant communities. In addition, already in the early decades of the nineteenth century, non-Christian religions were conspicuous in the public domain in yet another mode, via religious processions associated with festivals and customary practices that appeared regularly in the streets of Singapore, Penang and Malacca and marked religious and cultural observances amongst Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Taoists. It was this visibility of religion in the public domain that led to intense public debates in the SS about how a British, Christian government should handle these manifestations of non-Christian religiosity in a space that had not been colonized

---

[81] Goh (2005, 50).

[82] Salemink (2007, 7).

[83] Daniel Goh (2007).

but ceded by agents of the EEIC. As I will demonstrate, this distinction between 'colonization and conquest' on the one hand, and 'cession and acquisition' on the other hand (as was the case with the SS) was repeatedly alluded to and deemed to be relevant in some of these discussions about whether it was 'normal' and 'natural' for migrants to transplant and sustain their traditions in foreign territories.

Religious processions, involving the physical movement of the sacred through a designated territory, were integral to the religious life of migrants in the SS. I argue that subjecting religious processions to sociological analysis reveals complex socio-cultural and political dynamics at work. Historical data from a variety of sources confirm that the various religions were visible and conspicuous in the public domain in these early years. For example, the observance of annual Hindu temple festivals, *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* (fire-walking), all involved chariot processions, pulled by bullock carts in Singapore and Penang. On the basis of historical data, their incidence can be traced back to at least the mid-nineteenth century.[84] Probably the early instances of chariot processions amongst Hindus in Singapore were initiated by groups of devotees associated with Hindu temples, to mark religious festivals. In these early years, images of deities were placed on wooden chariots which were either pulled by devotees within temple grounds or in the streets, or pulled by bullock carts.[85]

However, chariot processions did not occur only in relation to Hindu festivals. *Singai Nesan*, a weekly Tamil newspaper published in Singapore, was probably the first Tamil-language newspaper published by and for the Diaspora and operated between 1887 and 1890. This served as a platform for raising issues of social and religious importance for public discussion. It is striking that the subject of religion appeared regularly in its featured articles. In facilitating such discussion it defined its existence 'for the good of the public'.[86] An entry from the journal reports that in June 1887, the Mohammedan, Hindu and Chinese communities of Singapore observed 50 years of Queen Victoria's rule over Singapore.[87] The Hindu community marked this event with a grand worship at Mariamman Temple and also held chariot processions starting from three Hindu temples, Subramaniam Temple, Perumal Temple and Kaliamman Temple.[88] Another article reports that on this occasion,

---

[84] Ampalavanar (1969), Arasaratnam (1970) and Buckley (1902).

[85] The book *Beyond Divine Doors* (2006), published by the Hindu Endowments Board, carries photographs of chariot processions, including one of Sri Drowpathai Amman in the 1930s, organized by the South Bridge Road Sri Mariamman Temple, which dates to 1827.

[86] 4 July 1887, *Singai Nesan*, 5.

[87] My own interviews with Hindus confirm the incidence of bullocks pulling chariots on the occasion of Hindu festivals, such as *Timiti* and *Tai Pūcam*, up to the early 1960s. The latter practice came to an end with the passing of the Cattle Act in 1964. Thereafter, the streets of Singapore have seen only motorized and vehicular chariot processions are typically organized under the auspices of registered, Agamic temples in relation to observance of Hindu festivals or temple *thiruvizha*. In recent years, non-temple societies are also making a pitch to enact religious processions and achieving some degree of success in this department (Sinha 2008).

[88] 27 June 1887, *Singai Nesan*.

the Hindus decorated eight chariots for a procession.[89] Additionally, both the Tamil festivals of *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* also entailed foot processions involving large numbers of participants, typically between the two temples. These processions certainly occurred in the estate or plantation temples but also in the urban spaces of Singapore and Penang. An 1860 article in the *Singapore Free Press*, critically commenting on the latitude granted to the Hindus and Muslims in public celebration of their festivals in Singapore, observes,

> The Hindoos and Mahomedans have not been so much interfered with, except as regards the convicts, who having in former times been permitted to an almost unrestrained license in parading the streets and throughfares, came to be considered as having a sort of vested right to make their processions, so that when the European community remonstrated against their continuance, Mr. Blundell, the then Governor thought it would be dangerous to prohibit them![90]

Colonial management of processions—religious or otherwise—in the public sphere was certainly marked by government surveillance and supervision. There was also criticism of Hindu festivals or rituals by the authorities and the British public. Yet, these did not culminate in the imposition of bans or restrictions on Hindu processions. However, from about the middle of the nineteenth century, the various processions enacted by the Chinese and Muslim communities, both in Penang and Singapore, were the object of much discussion and controversy. It is to this specific discussion that I now turn.

From the 1840s, the English-language press in the SS regularly carried entries about complaints and protests from its European inhabitants about the very public and 'loud' public observances of Chinese festivals, including Chinese New Year and Chinese funeral processions. From time to time, the press also included passionate arguments and counter-arguments from members of the public (primarily British) about whether these public festivities should be allowed in the SS, a colony of the British Crown. For the purpose at hand, the content of some of these articles further allows me to extract information about reportage of Chinese processions (for Chinese New Year, funerals and marriages), the typically disparaging and judgmental commentaries on them and the measures adopted by the local authorities to supervise the proceedings and to handle any disturbances created. In the following pages, I provide a select sample of these by way of illustration. In an article of *The Straits Times and Straits Journal of Commerce* in 1846, we see an appeal for greater vigilance and enforcement during the approaching Chinese New Year in Singapore. The fact that this cautionary note is sounded even *before* the episode suggests a familiarity with the order of expected events and an obvious attempt to circumvent a repetition of the same:

> At the end of the present month the Chinese new year will be ushered in with the usual license to the dissipated to gamble, discharge crackers, and perform other and equally to them agreeable demonstrations of joy and festivity. The new year will commence on the

---

[89] 4 July 1887, *Singai Nesan*, 6.

[90] 12 January 1860, *Singapore Free Press*.

29th January, by which time Police force should be augmented as a temporary measure to afford full protection to the lives and property of Her Majesty's good lieges.[91]

Here is another account, in the same newspaper 2 months later, of the preparations that were made in expectation of 'Huey Disturbances' in Singapore at the funeral procession of the head of the Hueys, described as 'a secret and powerful society of the Chinese':

On Thursday last another disturbance arising out of the Huey funeral ceremony, was anticipated. The troops and artillery were in readiness, but nothing took place.[92]

On the same page, appears a longer article 'Huey Funeral Disturbances', which reiterates the fears and concerns of the authorities about the impending trouble and disorder on this occasion:

On Tuesday last the town of Singapore was comparatively in a state of siege in consequence of some apprehensions on the part of the authorities that disturbances would arise on that day; indulgence in such fears if not in a great measure the working spirit of the commotion contributed greatly to extend it, by causing alarm in the breasts of the quiet, loyal and well disposed. The head of the HUEYS, a secret and powerful society of the Chinese, expired about eighteen days since and an application was made last week to the magistrates to grant permission to bury the body with due form, procession and outward display usual on occasion of the funeral of the chief of the order.[93]

We learn that permission is required for burying 'the body with due form', holding a funeral procession and 'outward display'. The next few lines of the report provide additional information about the current regulatory practices *vis-à-vis* public processions of the time:

The magistrates consented to allow a procession to be formed, provided the number of followers did not exceed one hundred; and with the condition that the procession pass through the direct line of road to the Burial-Ground.[94]

The article reports that although 'The heads of the Hueys had acquiesced in the arrangement', on the day of the funeral, thousands of Chinese turned out for the funeral procession and were met by the Superintendent of Police, Mr. Cuppage, and his Deputy, Mr. Dunman, with a police force that tried to stop the procession but that was clearly ineffectual to handle the large crowds. The procession proceeded with men carrying banners and shouting slogans along roads unspecified in the permit but believing the pageant to have been sanctioned by the Resident Councilor himself. Physical violence followed between members of the police and the participants, and culminated in many injuries and some deaths. However, the procession having transcended the terms of the permission found the 'Police disposed to yield', which the author rationalizes for the following reason, and is at the same time critical of the police for their inaction:

---

[91] 14 January 1846, *The Straits Times and Straits Journal of Commerce*, 2.

[92] 14 March 1846, *The Straits Times and Straits Journal of Commerce*, 2.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

One hundred and fifty Police peons armed with Clubs and Muskets allowed the rubicon to be passed, because it was not thought prudent to hazard a battle where the odds in favour of the multitude, were great, so far as numerical strength was concerned. The Police allowed the rabble to pass, not because they *could not* prevent their doing so, inasmuch as they did not make a trial; but simply because they *would not attempt* to hinder them, or oppose a partially disciplined and well armed force to the rabble, whose only means of attack or defence were the Knives used to cut meat before putting it into their mouths! One hundred armed men ought to have driven the entire mob into the sea.[95]

However, with the arrival of greater reinforcements, the procession was prevented from going into town and the threat of 'pillage and destruction' averted. While the conduct of the Chinese is severely criticized, the report is even more scathing in its condemnation of the authorities both civil and criminal, including the Governor, Resident Councilor, Sheriff, Deputy Sheriff and the Superintendent of Police for accompanying the procession and 'unwittingly doing honour' to it out of either 'curiosity or fear'. This overture/gesture of participation in an event by authorities who should have been restoring order and discipline is mocked in the report which points out their incompetence in no uncertain terms. This single report of a Chinese funeral procession in the streets of Singapore in the mid-nineteenth century provides a rare gaze into a socio-religious, political scene brought into sharp focus by a seemingly mundane everyday life ritual, an event that reveals defiance and boldness of a section of the Chinese community and vexed, uneasy, ineffective and hesitant local authorities challenged by the dynamics of governance on the ground.

However, in this instance, it is not surprising that the authorities chose the path of restraint and moderation. Through the first half of the nineteenth century, we have seen that the mechanism for the maintenance of law and order in the SS was underdeveloped and fragmented, a point continually raised by civil and criminal authorities. The existing British Civil Service and the police force were small, disorganized, strained and clearly overburdened.[96] Appearing in the same publication, 2 days later, a follow-up report provides further details of the post-funeral proceedings. The report concludes that the violence following the desecration of the grave of the leader of the Huey involved two rival Chinese gangs. What is notable here yet again is the harsh critique of the authorities which, despite prior knowledge of planned events, did not act to take appropriate steps to prevent the 'disturbances':

These series of disturbances, real and apprehended, demand remark. That great blame is due to the authorities, throughout the whole disgraceful proceedings, there cannot be a question of doubt. The civil authorities are highly to be blamed, inasmuch as measures were not taken to prevent assemblages on the day of the funeral, notwithstanding that the authorities were well aware what was contemplated. The Magistrates of Police were forewarned and ought to have been forearmed.[97]

---

[95] Ibid.

[96] Expectedly, with the transfer of the SS to the London Office, there were greater opportunities, potentially, for developing a more unified law enforcement mechanism and a criminal justice system.

[97] 18 March 1846, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 2.

The report goes on to itemize in detail all the measures that should have been adopted by the Police, following the model in India,[98] failing which it avers it was not surprising that they and the law were defeated by violence. Interestingly, this report also mentions a notice in Chinese, bearing the words 'the official chop chop' that was 'posted on the walls of the leading thoroughfares,' discouraging the Chinese to join the Hueys and written in a disciplinary, threatening and authoritative tone, but its source is ambiguous:

> The undersigned is directed to give notice to all the inhabitants of Singapore, that having settled extensively in this settlement in various professions as Husbandsmen, and Artificers, Tradesmen they ought to behave themselves and live peaceably and amicably to endeavour themselves to be respected as good inhabitants which is far better than joining the Hueys to injure one another and oppose the laws of the country. Such conduct is that of barbarians, and is regarded as most shameful. NOTICE is hereby given, that no processions of Hueys will be permitted through the Streets nor will arms be allowed to be carried. Should any venture to oppose this order, the Constable or Police have authority to beat you (to death) and you will have no redress. It is the duty of everyone to obey this order—April 14th 1846, or 19th day 26th moon Chinese Era.[99]

The need for this intense policing of Chinese processions is argued to be necessary in view of their strong links with what the British termed 'secret societies'. It has been argued that the term itself is a colonial construction[100] given the fact that its activities and affairs were shrouded in secrecy and veiled from the authorities, and thus a source of anxiety for them. Other ways of denoting these entities have been offered: *huey*, *kongsi*, clan, meaning 'brotherhood,' rather than gangs. But this demonizing of the groups justified their close scrutiny and the harsh treatment doled out to them. It has also been noted that the Hueys which did exist revealed intra-Chinese conflict, rather than British–Chinese conflict,[101] and altercations which resulted in the Singapore riots of 1854 and the Penang riots of 1867, both of which involved rival Hueys, largely between members of different dialect groups amongst the Chinese. But this also involved Indians and Malays and were thus multi-ethnic in character,[102] although they have been stereotypically labelled a 'Chinese' phenomenon. These groups were not illegal and while they were monitored closely, they were not suppressed by the British during this period.

The funeral processions of the Chinese in the SS were indeed spectacular displays, visually stunning and, it would seem, gastronomically pleasing. Their

---

[98]DeBernardi (2004, 44) notes that 'In 1856, the Indian government introduced a new police act that gave the police comprehensive powers to control processions, to prevent obstruction in the streets, and to license public performances of music.' However, the Chinese community in Penang resisted police efforts to restrict their processions and their use of public space. They found a sympathizer in James Logan, an advocate 'for political reform and religious tolerance' (ibid. 49).

[99]Ibid.

[100]Lee (1978) and Lim (2000).

[101]Lee (1978).

[102]Ho (2002).

enactment certainly attracted public interest and the scrutiny of the authorities. Here is one description of such a funeral in Singapore in 1846:

> The funeral canopy was richly decorated with gold and silver; the ornaments were numerous, and the amount of Chinese lanthorns [sic] surprising. The bier was supported on the shoulders of seventy four men. Malay and Kling bands of music played alternately on a variety of musical instruments. Roasted pigs, and whole pigs roasting before portable fires carried by several coolies; soups, hot and seasoned, stewed macaroni and other edibles in abundance were distributed amongst the followers. The whole wore more the appearance of a convivial festival than a funeral procession—the feasting lasted until the ceremony of internment was over and even then no less than eleven roasted pigs and unroasted swine were carried away unscathed![103]

Speaking of the proclivity and passion of the Chinese in the SS for performing processions in the streets of Penang, Vaughan's tone is critical but in closing, the comparative perspective he provides is as pointed as it is amusing:

> One wonders that such practical people, whose whole time is devoted to the acquisition of wealth, should waste their money upon such absurdities; yet they can be scarcely ridiculed when we think of the absurd processions that occur in civilized London. The writer witnessed the Lord Mayor's show in 1874 and was much struck by its strong resemblance to the Chinese processions in the Straits.[104]

Interestingly, it was not only the Chinese public observances which were watched by the authorities. The Muslim procession of *Muharram* was another such event that provoked a cautionary stance from local administrators. *Muharram*[105] is an annual Shia festival which amongst the community 'is observed with great pomp and show'.[106] The 10-day festival involves a procession on the last day when representations of Husain's tomb, called *tazia* (meaning 'mourning') or *tabut* (meaning 'coffin'),[107] are carried in the streets and buried in a body of water. This was a practice that was imported into the SS by the South Indian Muslims in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In both Singapore and Penang, the festival had also attracted convict labour who had become heavily involved with its celebration, especially with the 'White and Red Flag Societies', but the event was restricted some years later. Charles Buckley, writing of the events planned for Singapore for the year 1857, reports thus:

> It having been reported in August that the local government intended to allow the convicts the liberty of parading the streets during the Mohurrum festival, the withdrawal of which in the previous years had led to very riotous acts on their part, a number of gentlemen addressed the Governor pointing out the inexpediency of allowing convicts any such license.

---

[103] 14 March 1846, *The Straits Times and Straits Journal of Commerce*, 2.

[104] Vaughan (1879, 47).

[105] *Muharram* is the name of the first month of the Muslim year and gives the festival its name. It is associated with 'the days of mourning spent by the Shias in commemoration of the martyrdoms of Ali and of his sons Hasan and Husain, (Murdoch 1904/1991). de Tassy (1997, 50–57) provides some contemporary details of the festival.

[106] de Tassy (1997, 50).

[107] Ibid. 53.

> The Governor in reply stated that permission had been given to the convicts to parade certain streets outside their lines—and that this permission has been granted under the conviction that to refuse it would have the effect of needlessly exasperating the convict body, and of driving them to acts of desperation more dangerous to the peace and good order of the town than those which occurred the previous year. The convicts, after all, declined to avail of the permission given to them![108]

The connection of the festival in these early days with convicts and prisoners stigmatized it; it was thus increasingly seen less as a religious event and more as an occasion and opportunity for 'dangerous' elements to associate freely without supervision. Indian convicts too became renowned for their 'riotous behaviour during religious processions'.[109] The controls that were instituted over the Mahommedan 'secret societies' subsequently also influenced and altered the pubic processions during the festival of *Muharram*.[110]

Here is an earlier account of the festival in Singapore from the year 1850 that appears in the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, a narrative that highlights its numerous objectionable elements:

> During the past week the town has been in a state of disquietude arising from the noisy festivities of the Mohurrum, or Mahommedan new year [...] To all the noise and discordant sounds attendant on these festivities we have not the least objection, if what we complain of was confined to natives' ears near the race-course, or other place where they could enjoy so called music and revel to their hearts content: But to allow, for several successive days, and nights, the nuisances incidental to the Mohurrum to be perpetrated in every part of the town is a disgrace to the conservators of Peace the magistracy, or whoever sanctioned it, or shut their eyes to the outrages offered to decency and good order. With what appearance of fairness can the Justices in Quarter Sessions or the Police Magistrate mulet [sic] an unlucky wight [sic] for committing a nuisance, such for example as allowing a cow or goat or sheep to stray on the public road, when for ten or twelve days every kind of noisy and indecent revelry is permitted in all the streets of the town, and parties dressed as tigers and buffoons, or denuded of clothing, armed with swords and other weapons, strut about frightening horses and blocking up thoroughfares. Since the Mahommedan portion of the population must have their ullums, ashoorkhana and taboots, let their processions be confined to certain streets or limited to the race-course, that public decency and decorum be no longer outraged by day, or the slumbers of the quite otherwise disposed portions of the

---

[108]Buckley ([1867]/1965, 657). Buckley further notes that in May 1842, in Singapore the government 'refused to allow the Klings to have a procession and to carry their taboot around town' for fear that they would end in rioting (p. 375).

[109]Edwin Lee ([1991], 168).

[110]Wynne ([1941]). Triad and Tabut: A survey of the origin and diffusion of Chinese and Mohammedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula AD 1800–1935, 190–191. This comprehensive document carries fascinating data about the operations of the 'secret societies' and the ways in which their activities were regulated by the authorities. Although this festival was subsequently associated with convicts, its importation into Penang, Malacca and Singapore was through the presence of members of the Indian regiment stationed in these places, and observed initially as a 'religious' event by both Hindus and Muslims from South India. Wynne suggests that between 1860 and 1890, the festival in Malaya 'degenerates' and is transformed from a purely religious festival to one that begins to have criminal associations through the influence of thugs, known increasingly by the name 'boria'.

inhabitants be disturbed by the shouts of the multitude or the wretched din caused by the spleen-exciting musical instruments known as the Dhol, Seetar, Pongee and Munjeera.[111]

Apart from depicting some discerning ethnographic observations about the festival, the report is ultimately about the inconvenience of the event from the point of view of noise pollution, traffic congestion, outraging of 'public decency and decorum', sleep disturbances, 'frightening horses' and subjecting humans to distasteful music. Together with these objections, a seemingly simple solution is also offered—one of physical containment—even as the authorities are criticized for sanctioning the event in the first place.

One encounters an identical discourse in discussions of Chinese New Year through the settlements. The mode in which the Chinese ushered in their new year invited much public commentary. One persistently emergent theme was the firing of crackers for the duration of the 2 weeks that the festival was celebrated, an occurrence which particularly seemed to inflame passions of the British inhabitants. In response to public protests at this being allowed freely, restrains were instituted in 1848. This was not something the Chinese accepted without resistance. Here is an example of a retort, and not so veiled a threat, to the imposition of these unfair controls and the partial treatment directed at the Chinese, mounted on placards[112] posted around the island of Singapore:

> We think that it is now more than 20 years since Singapore was established, and annually the firing of crackers during the Chinese New Year was allowed. But this year the Constables on no account will allow Gambling, or even the firing of crackers. We wish to ascertain why? That during the Kling and Malay New Year firing of crackers are allowed. Is it because we Chinese are not equal to the Klings or the Malays. If there are any intelligent Chinese amongst us, they would have gone to the Police and remonstrated about last night's affair, and also we can join in a body and put a stop to all business in the market which will be but proper. But if that cannot be done—do not bid at all at the sale of Farms this year. If anyone shall bid he shall be reckoned worse than a dog.[113]

The author of this piece goes on to support police controls on the firing of crackers within the precincts of the town, citing legislation drawn from the Indian context:

> By a recent act of legislative Council of India the firing of crackers, squibs etc. is disallowed within the town, no prohibition being made or it is considered necessary for the suburbs and villages, where they may crack and squib to their heart's content.[114]

---

[111] 19 November 1850, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce.*

[112] The press in the SS noted the preponderance of 'inflammatory placards' amongst the Chinese and called for greater policing of their posting on walls and street corners. Calls were made for enforcing the law with respect to the presence of unregistered printing presses operated by the Chinese. It is clear that the use of placards was one method used by members of the Chinese community to publicize their grievances about restrictions on opium farms and their unhappiness with the Police—and to disseminate important news. The colonial authorities were reminded that this 'system should be checked' as it was 'unlawful and dangerous' (26 February 1854, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 2).

[113] 16 February 1848, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 2–3.

[114] Ibid. 2.

Despite the restrictions, however, there seems to have been little change in the enthusiasm for firing crackers during Chinese New Year in subsequent years judging by the letters of complaints that continued to pour into local newspapers. One that appears in the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* in 1853 laments the

> [. . .] grievous nuisance at present being inflicted on the public. During the festival now being celebrated, the Chinese inhabitants, at various hours daily discharge fire-works and other explosive missiles in the high roads and from the doors and windows of the houses on each side of the streets.[115]

The lengthy tirade revisits the inconvenience to the public, the noise from the 'loud beating of the gongs and the uproar produced by the ignition of gunpowder', the danger to riding in coaches from fearful horses, endangering 'lives and property', not to mention a fire hazard. The writer ends on a somewhat humorous note, adding that no person living under these circumstances would be able to secure any protection from insurance companies. A call is also made for making 'some arrangements' including in the future 'some amendment in Police regulations' that would allow the Chinese to continue the 'custom and observance' that would safeguard 'public safety and convenience'.

In the following year, a similar complaint appears in the same periodical, about the New Year celebrations in Penang, in response to a public notice about closure of roads in Georgetown, to facilitate the observance of the event by the Chinese. The argument here is that 'No authority in Pinang can thus make over public thoroughfares to any section of the community for a single hour'[116] and the authorities are again censured for their liberal stance. In a generous gesture, the option of being confined within limited boundaries is offered as a solution:

> No one would object to the Chinese celebrating their New Year in their own way in bye streets exclusively occupied by them, with the assent of the Magistrates in Quarter Session, but to cede some of the principal thoroughfares to them from 4 P.M. to 8 A.M. for seventeen days, is a stretch of authority that looks very like fear to offend. Perhaps the worst ingredient in the din and danger attending Chinese holydays is the firing bushels upon bushels of crackers on the streets and public roads in front of their houses.[117]

It is interesting that discussions about these public processions in the SS were often entangled in and embedded within the discourse on law, order and the maintenance of public peace and harmony, thus making it difficult to extricate from this discussion statements about religions per se. Much of this had to do with the deep-seated and serious involvement of 'secret societies', as well as of convict labour, in religious festivals in Singapore and Penang.[118] Singapore was a British penal station since 1825 and often its inhabitants raised concerns about crime and disorder in society as a result of the presence of convicts. Such concerns were given concrete

---

[115]15 February 1853, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 5.

[116]7 March 1854, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 4.

[117]7 March 1854, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 4.

[118]Lee (1991) and Lee (2000).

validation after the Singapore riots of 1854 and the Penang riots of 1867, both of which involved rival secret societies and led to ethnic (and seemingly religious) clashes on these occasions of religious processions. This provided further augmentation of the official rhetoric which continued to righteously declare that these debates were not about suppression of religions but their appropriate regulation for the preservation of order in the public domain, and in view of the fore-mentioned riots, appealed to common sense and reason. Clearly, the cited examples are just a sample from numerous others in the archives, but they serve to make the necessary points.

Another dominant refrain in these debates about public expressions of religiosity focused on the context in which they were carried out. More than one commentator on the subject noted that the SS was a British colony governed by a Christian nation and it was objectionable that the excesses of non-Christian customary practices should be permitted in these territories. On the occasion of the opening of a new temple in Singapore in 1852, a religious procession of deities is described by a writer to the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* as a carnival and attended by almost 40,000 Chinese not just from Singapore, but also Malacca and Johore. Using strong language, the writer condemns the disrespect shown to the Sabbath by the Chinese:

> So eager were they to complete the arrangements connected with their procession-display that the whole of the Sabbath was openly desecrated by erecting booths, in every street of the town, and the performance of their so-called music, as also the marching of processions which commenced immediately after sundown. In a British settlements where nineteenth-twentieths of these people are aliens, in a Christian country, with a well-paid government chaplaincy these Pagan ceremonies, openly performed in violation of all decency, are a scandal upon the Christian religion, and a reflection upon the parties who gave their sanction to the proceedings.[119]

The fact that this occurred during 'Passion Week—deemed the most sacred of all the fasts of the Church of England' was considered inflammatory, leading the writer to mock the principle of religious tolerance:

> [. . .] and this open desecration not only of Holy week but of Sabbath is viewed as toleration, just as if religious liberty consisted in allowing the mummeries of alien Pagans to triumph over and offer violence to the followers of another religion, that professed by the governing authority. This is toleration with a vengeance.[120]

A strong sense of moral and religious outrage typifies this argument. Together with this sense of righteousness, others observed that since the Chinese and the Indians were migrants to the SS, which was not home to them, they could not expect to have the right to observe these festivals in foreign lands. Charles Buckley, describing the incidence of 'Churruck Poojah' in Singapore in 1844, in highly negative and disparaging terms, makes this further comment:

---

[119] 13 April 1852, *Straits Times Journal and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 4–5.
[120] Ibid.

> We think that Government is blameable and altogether in the wrong in permitting this or any other cruel and disgusting native rite to be practised in these Settlements. There may be some appearance of reason in saying that in Hindostan the Hindoos ought to be allowed to practice their rites and ceremonies without molestation or hindrance, and that it might be dangerous or impolitic to forbid them. But even this argument, untenable as we deem it, and which in India, in the case of Suttee, a practice regarded by Hindoos as of the most sacred and paramount nature, has been successfully disregarded, does not apply with any great force here, since the Hindoos are mere foreigners in these Settlements, which may be looked upon as founded and settled by Europeans and therefore governed according to their laws and customs.[121]

The argument made here was that there was no moral imperative for the British to permit the migrant groups the right to indulge in their customary practices, in a land that is in essence 'British', particularly given the trope of the territories being 'empty lands' before British arrival. Here is a final illustration of this line of thinking:

> It appears to us a great mistake to allow the Chinese and the other Asiatics resident here such unlimited license in the way of processions as is at present granted to them. They are in a very different position from that they would occupy if this was their native country, and the British here by cession or right of conquest. It is proper in India or elsewhere, where Europeans, on occupying a country, find a large population with their religions, laws and customs fully established, that toleration and respect should be shown to the usages of the native population, however inconvenient, wherever the same are not positively inhuman or immoral, but it is quite another affair in regard to Singapore. Singapore was obtained by cession, and when first taken possession by the British there were no Chinese or natives of India proper here, its only inhabitants being a few fishermen or pirates, who we suppose did not much trouble themselves with processions or celebrations. The law of the settlement was therefore the English law, and the manners and institutions of which had to be conformed to, were those of the British nation. The Asiatics, Indian or Chinese, who came here, did so for the purpose of trade or seeking a livelihood, and they had no claim whatever to introduce into this place, or practice, any of their usages which were in the slightest degree calculated to inconvenience or annoy any other part of the population.[122]

In a further twist and a return to the hallowed motto of non-interference, and a declaration about what constitutes 'religion proper' for the natives, the writer concludes in this patronizing tone:

> Very unwisely, in our opinion, great latitude has been allowed to Hindoos, Mahomedans and Chinese—not in the practice of their religions with which there is no ground to interfere,—but in the matter of processions which are not essential parts of their religious observances, but on the contrary are often condemned by the more respectable natives, who refuse to take part in them.[123]

The related idea that it is unfitting for a Christian government to encourage such native festivities, which are not 'religious', a discourse often heard in the Indian context, also makes an appearance here, however with the admission that in India there is some obligation towards the natives in this regard. Here is such an observation with regard to the celebration of Moharrum:

---

[121] Buckely (1867/1965, 417).

[122] 21 January 1860, *Singapore Free Press.*

[123] Ibid.

[…] seeing that we live under a Christian government, not bound, as in India, to foster any obligations and encourage the native festivities; or because all religions are tolerated ought every variety if nuisance we winked at, the laws be virtually suspended and officers of Police be directed to close their eyes to these gross breaches of the public peace. What still more surprises us is the fact of European constables and peons accompanying each taboot, thereby imparting to the thing the approving sanction of the Christian authorities, to the Mahomedan carnival.[124]

Members of the Chinese community on their part were expectedly displeased over this welter of criticism and imposition of controls. In Penang, the Chinese community had its sympathizers and ambassadors, including James Richardson Logan, a prominent journalist and lawyer[125] who publicly took up this cause on their behalf. Consequently, he produced a lengthy and detailed article entitled 'Enquiry into Chinese grievances at Penang', which was published in the December 1857 issue of the *Singapore Free Press*. The 'report' that he produces, in my view, constitutes an important historical document which merits thorough analysis for the reason that reveals a great deal about the religious landscape of Penang in mid-nineteenth century. Its analysis also provides concrete details about local, on the ground approaches to handling public religious expressions, in contrast to the generic pronouncements about British religious policies in the colonies. Logan begins with a reminder and provides important historical precedence for maintaining the status quo with regard to safeguarding the religious rights of the residents of Penang (emphasis added):

The fact of the actual exercise by the Chinese and other Asiatics of their national manners, habits, customs and persuasions is thus recognized and sanctioned by the Charter of the Court,—for that fact is placed foremost amongst the reasons for granting the Charter. There is nothing in the provision by it for the administration of justice that curtails the rights which the Asiatics previously possessed. It does not profess to make any change in the law of the colony. It assumes that laws already existed and it merely provides machinery for their regular administration. It expressly makes provision for the security of 'the rights' of the inhabitants, but it leaves those rights as they were. *Throughout, great tenderness and respect has been shown for the various creeds and habits of the population*.[126]

Logan goes on to provide further evidence to demonstrate that in the administration of civil and criminal justice in the Court of Penang, native law was administered 'for a time' but where British law was to be applied it was always with the following proviso, bearing in mind the religious sensibilities of the colonized populations:

The Court is to frame its process, and the Rules and Orders for its execution, 'with an special attention to the different religions, manners and usages of the persons who shall be resident or commorant within its jurisdiction, and accommodating the same to their several

---

[124] 19 November 1850, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 5.

[125] James Richardson Logan was the proprietor, publisher, editor and contributor to the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* which he founded himself in 1847. In all, 13 volumes of the journal were published between 1847 and 1863 (Tiew 2003).

[126] J. R. Logan (1857). Enquiry into Chinese grievances at Penang. *Singapore Free Press*. 10 December 1857.

religions, manners and usages and to the circumstances of the country, so far as the same can consist with the due execution of law and the attainment of substantial justice'.[127]

He argues forcefully that the administrative practices of Penang up to the middle of the nineteenth century have 'left untouched the right which each class has to exercise of its own religion, manners and customs'. It is striking but not surprising to note the extent to which SS officials saw the territories as part of the British Indian Empire which it was, and very much governed by the rules that were applicable there, which may be more questionable. Here is an important statement from Logan (which expresses more generally held views on religious tolerance in the SS as in India), reiterating the Indian connection and noting the context as a crucial comparative, reference point for the Malayan territories (emphasis added):

> *The Indian Government has always been distinguished for its just and wise toleration of the religions and customs of the various races over which its jurisdiction extends. The principle of entire equality in such matters, which is yearly acquiring a wider hold on public opinion in England, has been, from the first, the basis of British India administration.* It would have been strange if this principle had been suddenly cast aside in Acts so closely and largely affecting the Asiatic population. They leave it in full force. They provide carefully and minutely for public health, comfort and convenience and for the protection of person and property, but they nowhere place any interdict on religious and social usages that are harmless in themselves. They do not deprive any class of a single festival or observance. *They merely make provision that, in celebrating these festivals and observances, the law of public nuisances,* so far as it is adapted to the place and people*, shall be more promptly and effectually enforced.*[128]

This provides strong evidence for the continuity in discourse with the practice adopted in the Indian situation. But this also to some extent again demonstrates the power of this discourse as a rhetorical and strategic device. In India, the broad outlines of the policy of religious tolerance were retained emblematically, but in concrete terms there had been important changes, such as more aggressive missionizing and enactment of legislation to institute socio-religious reforms of 'popular practices'. These shifts were nonetheless veiled in official pronouncements about liberalism towards non-Christian religions. Logan concludes thus (emphasis added):

> It results that the public religions and social observances of the Chinese in Penang have now the double sanction of law and usage. *Neither the local Police nor the Local Government have lawful authority to suppress any of them.* They can be restricted,—and their natural development with the growing population be checked,—by the Legislature, or by the Chinese themselves in deference to the wishes of Europeans.[129]

Here, Logan points to a central guiding principle for the management of religious communities in the SS: The idea that within the broadly articulated maxim of religious tolerance and non-interference, regulation can only be provided for through the force of police and local government. Most crucially, he notes that these authorities did not have the power to suppress or outlaw these processions and observances.

---

[127]Ibid.

[128]Ibid.

[129]Ibid.

He also notes that suppression would be possible through legislation or via self-regulation by members of the Chinese community themselves. In a passionate discourse that is clearly at odds with the assumption of a superior position, Logan argues for the equality of rights of the Chinese, other Asiatic groups and Europeans. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, this argument is coupled with the observation of Chinese contributions to the commercial success of the island (emphasis added):

> The increase of the Chinese is one of the necessities and conditions of the prosperity of the colony, as it always has been. Other races must accept the fact that a large part of the town, including the principal streets, is mainly Chinese. With a few exceptions, their processions are, in a great measure, confined to these streets. They have never shown a desire to obtrude needlessly on the European part of the town, and the other Asiatics do not complain of their celebrations. It has sometimes been said that the Chinese must accommodate their religious observances to the habits and feelings of the Europeans because this is a British colony. But the population, not the flag furnishes the true rule in such Settlements. The Chinaman is here by invitation and by right as much as the private Englishman, the Frenchman or the American. The European resident has no social privilege denied to the Asiatic. The largest and most permanent portion of the population has, at least, an equal claim to have its habits and feelings in such matters consulted by the other classes. The temporary European sojourner finds himself an unit amidst hundreds of Chinese natives of the place, and his superiority in creed and culture, when not merely nominal, will *manifest itself in superior toleration and benevolence*.[130]

This argument was no doubt somewhat rare for the times and most likely not shared by too many of Logan's European counterparts in the SS, judging by the numerous voices protesting the freedom allowed to the Chinese to conduct their religious festivals in public unchecked. At the same time, Logan makes clear in his report that he is not arguing that the Chinese should be their own masters in deciding the manner of their public celebrations at the expense and inconvenience of other communities. He agrees that some measure against possible excesses is necessary but cautions against adopting legislation as a natural and inevitable solution. He also articulates a reluctance to overtly interfere in matters of religion, a point the Indian and the Straits government had expressed on numerous occasions for their respective territories:

> Creeds are everywhere personal, not territorial; and where mutual accommodation is encouraged, there will be little occasion for any direct interference, legislative and executive, with matters which every wise Government prefers to leave, as much as possible, to the gradual influence of time and education.[131]

Whatever their size and scale, the enactment of processions in the SS served a multitude of functions for the religious communities in question, including the spreading of divine power, marking of territory, enhancing unity and solidarity within the community, registering religious distinction and difference, not to mention their use as political occasions. The last was clearly the case in the Moharrum processions in the SS, which by definition were not political, but which had been politicized by rival

---

[130]Ibid.
[131]Ibid.

Chinese and Mohammedan 'secret societies' and 'gangs', thus providing the colonial authorities with legitimate grounds to institute greater restrictions and controls on their enactment. Still, there was caution all around. The British tread carefully on the road to legislation and seemed to veer in that direction only as a last resort.

It is also important to bear in mind that over time, the different communities in the three settlements were subject to varying kinds of colonial administration and control. There was no singular policy that was applied universally to all racial and religious groups. For example, Freedman notes that in the early years of Singapore's settlement,

> the Chinese population was indirectly controlled by the British through a system of headmanship by *Capitans China*. Under this form of loose supervision the only legal rules and mechanism applied to the Chinese were of their own choice and devising.[132]

After the end of this system, the internal affairs of the Chinese population remained outside British gaze until the closing decades of the nineteenth century, which saw greater government intervention in an effort to control the 'secret societies'. Two such measures that were introduced were the legislation to register associations and the appointment of a Chinese Protectorate in 1877, the first Protector being William Pickering, whose role is detailed by M. Freedman:

> The Protector came to take statutory powers under such legislation affecting the Chinese as the Societies Ordinance, the Women and Girls Protection Ordinance and the Labour Code. His general function was to effect liaison between the government and the Chinese population, or, perhaps more correctly, between the authorities and the poorer and more newly immigrant sections of the Chinese. Outside the limits of his statutory powers he exercised a wide quasi-judicial function by keeping disputes among Chinese out of the courts and settling them by judgments enforced by nothing more than the prestige and implicit power of his office.[133]

With respect to curbing the activities of the 'secret societies', the first firm and concrete step was taken in 1867 with the Peace Preservation Act, also known as the Banishment Act, which provided for the deportation of those found to be members of the Hueys, followed by the Dangerous Societies Suppression Ordinance of 1869. Both of these in practice had limited powers and no legislative bite to them, beyond the requirement of registration of societies before they could function, but could not ensure their suppression. It was only with the Societies Ordinance of 1890 that legislative powers were finally accorded to the authorities to approve societies before approving them for registration.[134] This ushered a future where the question of the illegality of prohibited societies became moot.[135] Even back in the mid-1850s, legislation with respect to the Chinese Hueys was not viewed as an obvious or inevitable

---

[132]Freedman (1950, 97).

[133]Ibid. 98.

[134]See DeBernardi (2004), Ho (2002) and Lee (1991).

[135]Other measures that were instituted by the British included the founding of the Chinese Advisory Board in 1889 and which lasted until 1933. This was 'an institution set up by the Chinese Protectorate for British "indirect rule" of the Chinese communities' (Kuo 2003). It was meant to provide a formal link between the British government and the Chinese community. While it was an

option. In 1853, a writer to the *Straits Times and the Singapore Journal of Commerce* had argued thus:

> We do not advise hasty legislation, or recommend the introduction of any cause of discontent, or suggest the adoption of any measures of espionage. The true interests of good government are not advanced by sowing among a people, or a vast section of it, the seeds of bitter strife, and introducing a war of opinions and passions. So long as the object of any associations in the body politic is *known* to be innocent, they are justly entitled to the fostering care of a wise government [. . .] Neither the Executive nor the Judicial authorities carry their reasoning or arguments a step beyond the right to associate—a liberty which is the undoubted privilege of every British subject.[136]

I argue that this reluctance towards enacting legislation typified the stance of the Straits government in other societal spheres as well, and seemed to have been used as a final resort. This hesitation and caution in my view reflected their reading of laws as final, inflexible and unworkable. Not to mention that this posture would mark the style of governance as high-handed, authoritative and controlling, something to be avoided especially in relation to religious affairs. In fact, time and again throughout the nineteenth century, we have seen that the general European public in the SS was of the view that the local civil authorities were not firm enough, lacked the authority and the moral courage to impose greater restraints and controls (a point which by the way contradicted the declared policy of non-interference and the stance of religious tolerance) on public observations of religious practices. These were deemed to be jarring to European sensibilities and also morally objectionable, not to mention that general nuisance and disruption these created and the apparent danger they posed to the other inhabitants of the settlements. In fact, the members of the Courts and the Police were explicitly accused of being too lax and too lenient and pandering towards the natives. In a more scathing tone, the Police and the Recorder were also often deemed cowardly, lacking in nerve and daring, easily cowed by the numerical strength of native groups and thus fearing defeat. It is interesting that the idiom of 'fear' is often raised in these critiques. There is a great deal in these criticisms of the local authorities. However, the apathy and latitude demonstrated by the authorities in my view are not failures or limitations, but rather 'strategies in use'—which they relied on to manage a specific situation. These included pacifying fraying tempers and passions by 'participating' in a potentially mob-like situation, or a group of 100 policemen retiring sensibly before a 6,000 strong procession, directed at self-preservation, rather than being clearly outnumbered and 'defeated'. The latter outcome would have raised more problems from the perspective of future attempts at asserting colonial authority. Not resorting to arms and physical violence on a religious occasion was a strategy for maintaining the sanctity of hallowed policy of religious tolerance.

---

important platform to serve grievances, it had no power to act more effectively. However, important leaders of the Chinese community in Singapore, including members of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, were appointed to the Board. See also Lee (1978), Lim (2000), Fong (1990), Yen (1987) and Frost (2002).

[136] 25 October 1853, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 4–5.

Despite this public condemnation of the authorities, there were indeed restrictions and restraints imposed on public expressions of religiosity in the SS. We have seen that in order to hold religious processions, permits had to be obtained from the Magistrate or the Police. The granting of these licenses was conditional and depended on the groups agreeing to and adhering to a set of stipulations.[137] These included the number of participants in the processions, the physical routes it would have to follow, the areas it would have to avoid and the times during which these could be held, the restrictions on indiscriminate firing of crackers. However as we have also seen these conditions were not only violated, but difficult if not impossible to enforce.[138] Not surprisingly, members of the police were on hand to ensure law and order, regulate traffic[139] and guard against potential disturbances, chaos and disorder. We have also seen that repeated calls were made for the physical containment, meaning spatial marginalization, of these observances and practices to the native sectors of the settlement, away from the spaces occupied by Europeans, so the latter could be protected from the annoyance and vexation these festivities caused. It is also crucial to recognize that despite these public protests and complaints these events were never banned or outlawed in the Settlements, although a number of other restrictions were gradually introduced by the turn of the twentieth century.

Although the British authorities found Chinese and Indian processions and observances annoying and often critiqued them, (indeed questioned their spiritual value), these practices were, nonetheless, permitted and occurred in the public domain regularly. No bans on religious and customary practices were instituted in the SS in contrast to India, where a number of such practices were banned by law within the context of a broader social reform and missionizing agenda. In this connection, knowledge and familiarity especially with the Indian example are of immense comparative value for the latter regions given the fact that the SS was politically under the charge of the Indian government from 1858 and thus came under its administrative and legislative jurisdiction. Yet, it is striking that decisions in the SS and British Malaya did not always observe the Indian examples and follow suit.

The 1858 proclamation of Queen Victoria and the later Montagu–Chelmsford Report for the Government of India affirmed the principle of 'non-interference' in dealing with religious matters, and which colonial administrators were expected to adopt and implement in their day-to-day management of colonized populations. However, as historical data reveal, in practice the idea of 'non-intervention' sat rather uncomfortably with other colonial ideals of proper governance and administration of native affairs, not to mention the hallowed goal of 'civilizing'

---

[137] 'This was the last night of the Chinese New Year in which cracker-firing is allowed' ('Chinese New Year,' *The Straits Times*, 15 February 1900, 2).

[138] 'Sundays were excepted from the virtual permission to hold carnival, but we are told that the Police in one part of town had some difficulty to stopping the volley of crackers' (7 March 1854, *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 4).

[139] Here is an account of the annual Chinese festival where 'there was a large crowd of natives and Chinese as spectators, and the efforts of the European police were taxed to the utmost to regulate traffic' ('Chinese Festival,' *The Straits Times*, 16 February 1900, 2).

non-Christian subjects. It is important to remember that 'non-intervention' did not imply non-involvement and lack of engagement by colonial authorities in matters pertaining to religion. In different parts of the British Empire, religious policy took several routes, within the generic ambit of the declared blueprint of non-interference. These paths included sometimes protection, patronage, administration, regulation and supervision of native religions. In real terms, this engagement began with treaties, charters and agreements and moved on to the enactment of legislation to ban specific religious/customary practices—such as suttee and hook swinging—on moral, rational grounds even while the language of non-interference echoed in the background. In cases where the principle of non-interference did seem to operate, it was motivated less by the desire to maintain a respectable distance than by intellectual, missionary and political debates taking place in Britain.[140] What I find particularly striking about the colonial discourse on religion is that in the ideas of 'religious neutrality', 'religious tolerance' and 'non-interference', there is slippage across their boundaries. Indeed, no conceptual distinctions are recognized or made in this tripartite invocation; all three terms slide and blend into one whole, and are presented in a singular mode.[141]

My argument is thus that through the nineteenth century, the colonial context in the SS was not, by and large, detrimental for expressions of non-Christian religiosity and, in fact, facilitated religious activity even in the public domain. As the preceding discussion for the SS has highlighted, in practice, and on the ground, things took unexpected turns. The agents of colonialism found themselves enmeshed in local circumstances, engaged, participated and involved with religious affairs of the natives, sometimes due to practical necessity, at other times on the force of public opinion or simply by choice. As colonial administrators on the ground discovered, ideals of religious tolerance and non-interference could not be translated into practice without alienating and offending sensibilities of some party—either at home or in the colonies. In concrete terms, depending on the exigencies of the situation, a careful and cautious mix of neutrality, tolerance and non-interference was the norm. A focus on the SS suggests that imperial religious declarations, supported by ideas of tolerance and non-interference, were, in fact, elements of symbolic and emblematic manoeuvres which were ideologically gratifying. This also crystallized with the righteous and dignified stance of secular governance and appealed to the British sense of justice and fair play. In practice these very ideas of tolerance, neutrality and *laissez-faire* policy *vis-à-vis* 'religions' of the natives were indomitably and resolutely criticized by important pressure groups in British domestic political landscape of the time, both by politicians and Christian missionaries, who had rather different ideas about the proper undertaking of a Christian government and how it should conduct itself when confronted with 'heathenism' in the British dominions.

---

[140]Dharmalingam (1995, 18–19).

[141]This is highly problematic as the three descriptions do connote and carry different sets of meanings.

After the transfer of the SS to the Crown, its status as a colony obliged London to take greater notice of its administrative needs and, thus, to allocate greater resources and assume more governmental responsibility. Its policies with respect to religion restated the ideal of religious tolerance and non-interference, conditions that were drafted into the treaties, agreements and charters entered into with local chiefs and rulers especially with regard to Malay customary practices and religious observances but not confined to them. However, as I have demonstrated, these principles of non-interference and absolute religious tolerance could not be translated exactly into practice and from the terms of these policies were inevitable. On the ground, the approach of the local civil and judicial authorities was driven by exigencies of the milieu. In typical British fashion, the adopted method was a combination of adherence to the broad articulated principles of religious tolerance and non-involvement and a new vocabulary of regulation, supervision, management and rational direction. With this new tone and terminology, as the nineteenth century wore on, new institutional structures and mechanisms were formulated and established throughout the British Empire, including in the SS. Disengagement from the religious affairs of the natives also entailed recourse to legislation and circumscribed the appropriate and legitimate realm of government engagement with 'heathen' religions.

With the growing political involvement of the colonial authorities in the affairs of the SS in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, other societal spheres are also penetrated, including the religious realm. This is an appropriate moment to turn to a discussion to Hindu domains in the SS, which I use to demonstrate the emergence of a new managerial approach to religion, one that was dominated by the need for order and regulation, and this was interestingly achieved with the aid of legislation, a route that the British were largely unwilling to traverse in earlier periods of colonial rule. The next chapter details the creation of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance of 1905 designed to ensure 'order and stability' in the administration of religious endowments in the SS. However, it is important to remember that in the latter, even the declared colonial policy of 'withdrawal' from native affairs did not in real terms achieve the stated desire for extrication. The Colonial Government may no longer have provided protection, patronage and financial support for religious institutions of non-Christian religions, but it continued to be involved in supervisory and managerial roles even as it established select committees and advisory boards for ensuring order in the religious domain.

Chapter 4
The Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance, 1905: Recourse to Legislation

4.1 Preamble

This chapter begins by documenting the logic that led to the passing of the first piece of legislation in the British Parliament, the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance (MHEO) of 1905, designed to administer religious endowments of non-Christian communities in the Straits Settlements (SS). This allowed for the formation of a permanent board, the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (MHEB), in each of the three settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca. I argue that the tropes of 'chaos' and the 'need for order' offered the official rationale for this institutional mechanism and the legitimate regulatory control it was assumed it would provide. Most crucially, this was in line with the overall rhetoric of civilizing subject populations through rational, objective means, in this case through a piece of legislation and an impartial, bureaucratic institution—the MHEB. Here, I detail the functional jurisdiction of the MHEB and its mode of operation, against a background of the history and logic that led to its constitution.

The evidence for the vibrancy of a religiously-plural SS was offered in the previous chapter. While the public performance of festivals especially led to questions about law and order, these were permissible and certainly no restrictions existed *vis-à-vis* private expressions of religiosity. However, an 'official' concern with the 'proper management' of the non-Christian religious domain began to be articulated at the end of the nineteenth century, notably with important input from members of native communities themselves, a concern which was eventually formalized in legislation. This was an event of immense consequence not least because both the law and the institution it engendered ultimately had the effect of regulating non-Christian domains in the SS, albeit through its given task of administering religious endowments.

4.2 The Need for 'Order': The Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance

At the turn of the twentieth century, the need for some official mechanism to institute 'order' appears to have been inspired by increased incidence of reports of

'mismanagement' of religious places of worship in the SS, highlighted to the authorities by Hindu and Muslim communities. In the early days of the colony, affairs of religious institutions were largely self-regulated either by founders, trustees or appointed committees, constituted by prominent figures of the respective communities. However, many 'problems' and 'irregularities' were reported in this mode of administration and the different communities seemed to be divided over what would be the best way to remedy both this situation and the discontent it generated. The appeal for government intervention was indeed made by sectors of the concerned religious communities themselves. This invitation to the authorities heralded a new mode of governance in these regions, which saw the creation of organizations and institutions, in the form of advisory boards and committees, culminating eventually in the MHEO. This law was deemed necessary in view of the 'chaos' and 'disarray' that was seen to typify the management of Muslim and Hindu endowments at the time. The Colonial Government felt a need to institute what it saw as firm and decisive moves to provide the necessary 'corrective' measures. It is interesting that the invoked tropes of management and supervision constituted part of the new language of governance and, more importantly, served to buttress the Colonial Government's rhetoric of 'non interference'. The need for 'order' in the religious sphere is explicated, avoiding the language of control and domination in favour of a discourse on management and supervision. To facilitate the task at hand, data for this chapter are derived primarily from the Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements (1905–1928),[1] select colonial correspondence and extracts from the Tamil journal *Singai Nesan*[2] (1887–1890).

It is helpful to reflect on the circumstances and arguments that were forwarded to make a case for legislating the administration and management of religious endowments in the SS. A key document in this connection is the 'Report on the Committee for the better administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments',[3] which carries crucial data about the history of the Ordinance XVII of 1905, as the MHEO was labelled. This report was appended

---

[1]It is important to note that information about the MHEB in these annual reports is not consistent across the various years, but is somewhat scattered and fragmented over time. While the annual documents carried detailed reports of the MHEB in Singapore, Penang and Malacca within the first decade of its founding, providing particulars of its functioning, this enthusiasm seems to have waned over time. In fact, beyond 1916, the reports on the MHEB are not carried in the annual departmental reports of the SS. However, rather abbreviated information can be extracted from some compilations of these annual publications up to 1928.

[2]The *Singai Nesan* was an important journal that was published in Singapore and only ran for a brief 4 years, from 1887 to 1890. Its content carried a wealth of historical information about the socio-cultural and religious scene in Singapore and, in particular, details of the Hindu and Muslim communities on the island for these years. I am extremely grateful to Ms. Nagah Devi for painstakingly translating this entire collection of Tamil articles into English. My citations of these articles in this book are from their English translation.

[3]'Report on the Committee for the better administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments.' This document is dated 26 September 1905 and was authored by the then-Attorney-General of the SS, W. R. Collyer.

to copies of 'An Ordinance for the better Administration of Mohammedan and Charitable Endowments', which was already passed by the Legislative Council on 8 September 1905. The opening remarks of the author of the Report, W. R. Collyer, read thus:

> There has been from time to time a number of Religious Trusts both Mohammedan and Hindu founded and endowed in the Straits Settlements. No special provision has hitherto been made by law for the management of these trusts as is usual in Mohammedan countries, and, as might be expected, many of these foundations, owing to the neglect or the dishonesty of those in charge of them, have fallen into decay; and in many cases their funds have been wasted and their property dissipated by litigation arising from the animosity of rival claimants of the right to administer the funds.[4]

We also learn from this Report that a commission had been appointed in 1903 'to report upon the Moslem Religious foundations'. The appointed committee consisting of Mr. J Bromhead Matthews, Mr. L. M. Woodward and Mr. A. H. Lemon had made 'a convincing and exhaustive report [...] and in consequence of that report it was decided that legislation was necessary'.[5] It is notable that a single Ordinance came to apply to both the religious endowments of the Muslims and the Hindus. The inclusion of the latter seems to have been an almost afterthought (emphasis added):

> Though the most important of the native Religious Endowments are the Moslem Wakafs, there are a considerable number of Hindu Religious foundations suffering the same evils from the same causes. It was thought best therefore to provide in the same enactment for the *management* both of Moslem and Hindu foundations.[6]

In an earlier statement dated 23 February 1905, W. R. Collyer had argued in a similar mode about why this piece of legislation was necessary:

> The object of this Ordinance appears from the preamble. There are a number of Mahomedan and Hindu religious and charitable foundations in the Colony, the trusts of which have been in many instances greatly abused and neglected. The want of some authority to deal with such institutions has been long felt, and it has been decided to give the Governor power, when he considers it necessary, to appoint trustees to manage any such foundation, with powers somewhat analogous to those of the Charity Commissioners of England. It will be seen that many of the clauses of the Bill are taken from the Charity Commissioners Acts 1853 and 1858.[7]

The English Charity Commissioners Act provided the blueprint and inspiration for the named Ordinance. Surprisingly, at this time no overt, explicit connections or references were made to similar, pre-existing pieces of legislation in the Madras and Bengal presidencies of the Indian Empire. The arguments in these articulations is interesting for several other reasons: one, it seems to assume a total absence of local authority in this domain by glossing over the presence of native councils and *panchayat*(s) that did exist and which managed the religious institutions

---

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] 'Objects and Reasons,' *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 14 April 1905, 777–781.

in question; and two, this emphasis on the inevitability of imposing order through an external mechanism obscures and bypasses existing attempts at self-regulation and self-governance. I pursue these points in greater detail using data from Hindu domains in the SS. There is indeed historical evidence that points to the existence of *panchayat*(s) (councils) for the management of Hindu temples in Penang[8] and Singapore[9] in these early days. The membership of these *panchayat*(s) was drawn from key figures in the local Hindu community.[10] For Penang Hindu temples, K. Ramanathan suggests that in the early years there was little controversy and the temples seem to have been managed well under the leadership and direction of the *panchayat*(s).[11] The conflicts that emerged subsequently within the Penang temples had to do with the issue of their ownership and hence control, when the original grantee had either passed away or returned to India, and claims and counter-claims *vis-à-vis* rights and privileges over temple affairs made by relatives and descendants.[12] We know that a similar situation prevailed in Singapore Hindu temples: A prominent example comes from the Mariamman Temple disputes between 1887 and 1890 over the appointment of a proper *panchayat*[13] to manage the affairs of temple, the right to carry out animal sacrifices[14] on its premises and the right to collect monies[15] for rituals performed in the temple. Thus, it would be fair to say that the scene in Singapore and Penang *was* fraught with tensions and disputes. The pervasive in-fighting certainly created discontent amongst local Hindus.[16] The clashes and disagreements, interpreted by clusters of Hindus themselves as 'problems' and 'irregularities', emanating from this mode of administration were reported as such

---

[8]Ramanathan (1995).

[9]Arasaratnam (1970).

[10]Ampalavanar (1969) and Arasaratnam (1970).

[11]Ramanathan (1995, 171).

[12]Ibid. 172.

[13]'Mariamman Temple', *Singai Nesan*, 24 September 1888, 45, column 2: 'Last Sunday, there was a gathering in Mariamman temple. A meeting that gathered a huge crowd however did not turn out any results. The meeting was in relation to the selecting of the *panchayat*. While some confirmed their votes, 2 or 3 *ubayakarar*s were not agreeable to the terms. When all 10 executive members cannot reach a unanimous agreement, how can the *panchayat* be executed?'

[14]'Goat Sacrifice', *Singai Nesan*, 25 July 1887, 18, column 6: 'Last Wednesday, there was a flag post raising ceremony in Mariamman Temple. Some recommended goat sacrifice, while another majority group disagreed, and finally with the help of two others, the goat sacrifice took place. It is felt that people are carrying out unnecessary rituals according to their pleasures only because no proper panchayat is in order.'

[15]'Mariamman Temple', *Singai Nesan*, 12 September 1887, 50, columns 2–4: 'In the morning (6 am) of 18th September, devotees gathered at the Mariamman Temple to carry out an *ubayam* for Amman. But the *Ubayakarar* refused to give the temple donation money to the relative of Narayanan Chetty. This drama dragged on until 10 am. The relative refused to let the ritual be completed until the money was given to him. The people had no choice but to give him the money. The people decided to file a case against him later on. However, since the relative has been placed in charge of collecting tax money and donation money during rituals, he is also in charge of the temple donation box.'

[16]Arasaratnam (1970) and Kho (1980).

to colonial authorities. Indeed, the latter were not unfamiliar with these clashes as the Hindus in SS had shown their proclivity for taking their disputes before the British Courts for settlement through arbitration, which carried legal weight and were at least in theory, obligatory and enforceable. According to K. G. Tregonning, a disproportionate number of cases—up to 80%—that appeared before the juridical authorities in Penang in any one year came from members of the Indian community, and a large number of them involved temple disputes.[17] Numerous examples from the management of the Mariamman Temple (see Fig. 4.1) in Singapore from the closing years of the nineteenth century attest to the fact that dissenting parties routinely resorted to the Courts to mediate conflicts,[18] something they seemed quite

Fig. 4.1 Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road, 1900 (image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

---

[17]Cited in Ramanathan (1995, 176).

[18]'Mariamman Temple,' *Singai Nesan*, 24 October 1887, 70, columns 3–4: 'During the Navarathri festivity, there were some disagreements and verbal fights between two groups of Ubayakarars. Henceforth, a case has been filed against Muthaiya Mestri by Vaithiyalingaapathar. An offence like this where offending words are passed in public in a sacred place is subject to a year's hard labour at the prisons. The court however took sympathy upon the accused and offered terms for an amicable settlement whereby the accused is willing to offer apologies and cease from such untoward behaviour in the future.' 'Mariamman Temple Case,' *Singai Nesan*, 24 October 1887, 69, columns 2–3: 'This temple's management has been faulty for the past 18 years. A. Varatharaj Pillai who was appointed the receiver for the past 2 years has been giving $850 to the court, but it is not known to what use the *panchayat* has put this amount [. . .] In the case file, amongst some of the important decisions was to remove a relative of the Chetty from the position of the receiver

comfortable with. Ramanathan cites the large number of lawsuits as a reason for the SS Ordinance and also notes the Indian connection:

> The increasing number of lawsuits over the control of public temples by individuals and groups probably saw a need for the enactment of such an ordinance in the Straits Settlements. The issues of contention between the trustees and devotes also appeared to be similar to that in India, and direct administrative control over temples which had serious problems or disputes over ownership, may have been on the way out. The ordinance was first used for temples which were set up on land granted by the British authorities. This was a way of ensuring that the grant, given for common purpose of worship, was indeed used for the common good. It appears that the act was meant to unblock the courts and deter others form filing further lawsuits of such nature.[19]

What is striking here is that this rationale, of course, could not have been (and indeed was not) articulated by the Colonial Government for bringing into effect the Ordinance in question. The logic which could be legitimately enunciated by the Straits authorities was instead located in the incidence of widespread administrative chaos in the realm of religious institutions and the abuse of their funds and endowments. In any case, legal recourse and access to the Courts, as a mode of administering justice, could not have been denied to any inhabitant of the Settlement, given the Charters of Justice that had been earlier framed for the region. At least one implicit guiding principle for the enactment of Ordinance XVII was to discourage the reliance upon the Courts as a taken-for-granted route for settling temple disputes relating to mismanagement, something that would have entailed the expenditure of tremendous manpower and resources on the part of the colonial authorities. Furthermore, the purpose seemed to have been served well by the Ordinance as Ramanathan notes,

> [. . .] for once the ordinance went into operation, there were few cases forwarded to the Courts for arbitration.[20]

The need for an efficient, legal, rule-based administration of religious endowments was thus premised on the widespread prevalence of strife, chaos, abuse and impropriety in the day-to-day functioning of religious institutions in which these were vested. The argument for necessary and legitimate intervention was carried in the privileging of order and propriety in this domain. It was assumed that these could be achieved through a proper managerial stance, delivered by an objective, impartial institution itself constituted by rational, honest individuals. What is striking in such thinking is that there was no acknowledgement that not only was there evidence of self-management of religious institutions in the SS, but there was also some attempt at self-regulation of this highly controversial domain. However, government intervention through legislation was considered the only certain and inevitable solution.

---

and to appoint someone else. Temporarily, Sheriff Norris has been appointed the receiver and the Chetty's relative's duties end with this order.'

[19]Ramanathan (1995, 177).

[20]Ibid. 179.

4.2.1 Towards Legislation

As evidence of self-direction and concrete measures taken to remedy the state of affairs with regard to temple administration and management, I offer some evidence from the events at the Mariamman Temple in Singapore at the close of the nineteenth century. Here, temple leaders tried to chart a new direction for the management of the temple's affairs by calling for a new problem-free *panchayat* and stipulating a set of rules and regulations for the conduct of its members. We learn that the temple had approached the Courts and obtained approval for a new *panchayat* in 1887, following the 'financial mistakes' by the earlier *panchayat* committee members. Mr. Varatharaja Pillai, a 'well-respected and highly esteemed elder', had taken it upon himself to formulate a set of 10 laws for the welfare of the temple and as a form of service to the Hindu community. An article in the *Singai Nesan* lists these laws in full and offers an editorial comment:

> If these laws are sanctioned and put into effect, then the committee members will not have scope to misuse the temple funds for their own personal consumption and faulty accounts can be prevented. The new recruits who are interested in joining this new committee, if they do not agree with these rules then can probably be noted as those who are entering with the intent to cheat the temple and public of their funds.[21]

Other statements calling for self-policing included a call for appointing suitably qualified individuals to the temple management committees:

> The new members who are going to be recruited inside the new panchayat need to be wealthy men. They ought to own their own land and be free of debts (including any forms of rent) and need to be leading a comfortable lifestyle. Or they need to be at least those who are esteemed in society and who take a personal interest in the welfare of the commoners and are highly esteemed in society.[22]

But clearly these efforts were not free from opposition, with plenty of dissidents and detractors, with legal recourse being sought by the concerned parties in many cases. In a *Singai Nesan* report of 1887, we note,

> To prevent any mishandling of the temple funds as well as involvement in dirty politics, Varatharaja Pillai has requested for some declarations and for them to be effected. While one group advocated it, the other (the people who are swindlers apparently) rejected the terms. Hence this case is now in the Supreme Court, awaiting decision.[23]

It is important to highlight that such efforts were not confined to the Hindu community in Singapore. The editors of the *Singai Nesan* implored Singapore's Muslims to heed the example of the Mariamman Temple in formulating declarations for the proper functioning of the South Bridge Road mosque:

> Dear Muslim brothers, Please [sic] look at the last page of this newspaper. You shall notice the Mariamman temple's declarations. Those declarations, if similarly implemented in your

---

[21] 'Mariamman Temple,' *Singai Nesan*, 25 July 1887, 17–18, columns 3–5.

[22] *Singai Nesan*, 25 February 1889, 143, columns 3–4.

[23] 'Mariamman Temple case,' *Singai Nesan*, 24 October 1887, 69, columns 2–3.

mosque shall yield good funds, ensure integrity in the management of the mosque as well as inculcate good values in all.[24]

It is obvious that the two communities articulated connections across their situation in the perception of common needs and challenges. In a further development, it was reported in the pages of the *Singai Nesan* a week later that action needed to be taken to improve the physical condition of the South Bridge Road mosque and to provide better resources for its management. We also learn the threat of government intervention if the community failed to act:

> This mosque is in a dilapidated condition. We have heard of this news several times and have reminded our brothers who have overlooked this matter. The government wants the Muslims to take action soon in improving the conditions of the mosque and if not, warned that repercussions shall follow. It is the Muslim's duty to reconstruct the mosque [. . .] Ten possible efforts to rebuild the mosque are stated. Even if at least one of the requests is fulfilled, it is considered a great help.[25]

These requests and appeals to the public seemed to have had the desired effect as we learn that a year later, a new *panchayat* had been set up for the mosque:

> A notice has been sent out to form a new *panchayat* for the Mosque Qutub Miran since the old panchayat was dissolved. Five Muslims have been chosen. Everyone has faith that this new panchayat will fulfill their roles well and renovate the mosque and administer it well.[26]

It is therefore evident that there *was* some attempt at self-governance and self-policing amongst the local Hindu and Muslim communities, even if they were not entirely successful. Indeed, we do not know if options like this were encouraged and supported for more effective and transparent administration of temples and mosques or were even formulated as alternatives, quite apart from being considered feasible. However, it would be historically inaccurate to present the formulation of the law as the imposition of the Colonial Government's will on its native subjects. There were undoubtedly individuals who disagreed with the direct involvement and interference by a Colonial Government in religious matters, heralded by this piece of legislation.[27] At the same time, some sectors of the Hindu and Muslim communities in the SS explicitly called for legislation, and were not averse to appealing for British support in their internal disputes, by resorting to the legal machinery and more informally through lobbies and petitions.[28] An editorial comment carried in the 4 July 1887 issue of the *Singai Nesan* spoke favourably and idealistically of the fact that

---

[24] 'South Bridge Road Qutbaab Mosque,' *Singai Nesan*, 15 August 1887, 29, columns 3–4.

[25] 'South Bridge Road Qutbaab Mosque,' *Singai Nesan*, 22 August 1887, 33, columns 3–4. The article lists the 10 requests, including the building of the mosque and the setting up of a Muslim court.

[26] 'Mosque panchayat,' *Singai Nesan*, 23 July 1888, 14, column 1.

[27] See Ampalavanar (1969), Arasaratnam (1970) and Palanivel (1971).

[28] Dharmalingam (1995).

> In India for instance, the Islamists and Hindus sit together on one board and consult each other on their own community's grievances and seek each other's consultations on their matters. Thereafter which they inform their Indian government. These matters are also brought to the attention of the Parliament in England. There ought to be no fear in bringing up matters worthy of productive discussion. Likewise, the aim of this journal in Singapore is to bring to the public attention, your grievances and social issues.[29]

A somewhat rosy picture, in highly appreciative terms, is painted of the Indian scenario in these following statements from the editors of the same journal with calls made for the same system to be instituted in Singapore:

> The mosques and temples in India are currently under the government's gazette. Since the accounting system has been made transparent and government officers have to approve it on a regular basis, there are no problems or conflicts arising there. In the local scene, however, even though the events at the mosque and temple are conducted well, there is no proper accounting system in practice even with the presence of a *panchayat* [...] Also it will be good if a new law is to be effected for Hindu temples and mosques by the government councils. Recently, it has been in the news (both the English and Tamil medium), that the Mariamman Temple lacks a proper *panchayat* and there has been a request put forward for characters of worth and honour to come forward to help out in the new *panchayat*. If only the government councils can effect a law that makes it mandatory for the new *panchayat* to act according to the rules and regulations as meted out by the government.[30]

Clearly this sector of the community welcomed the framing of binding and enforceable rules and regulations in a piece of law that would, as they saw it, solve problems relating to mismanagement of religious institutions and their funds. This wish was actualized in the brief of the Ordinance XVII of 1905, which in its original formulation was a mouthful, being entitled 'An Ordinance for the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments'. It was passed at a meeting of the Legislative Council on 8 September 1905 and approved by the Governor of the SS on the same day. It was to have an interesting legislative history not to mention a long life. We learn that the prototype of the Charitable Trusts Acts of England, versions 1853, 1855 and 1860, was used in the first drafting of the bill and it also emulated practices for regulating Charity Commissioners in England.[31] In its original formulation, the Governor in Council had the powers to appoint official trustees in cases of endowments which either did not have trustees or had been mismanaged. Interestingly, it did not stipulate that a permanent board be instituted. However, a special committee, comprising of W. R. Collyer, J. O. Anthonisz, Hugh Fort and John Anderson, formed to consider the draft of the bill, had made a set of recommendations[32] which were interestingly incorporated in the final version of the bill. The committee made four principal amendments: one, the establishment of a permanent board as a corporate entity in each of the three settlements to administer

---

[29] 'To our subscribers,' *Singai Nesan*, 4 July 1887, 6, column 4.

[30] 'Mosques and Temples,' *Singai Nesan*, 25 February 1889, 134, columns 1–2.

[31] 'Report on the Committee for the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments.'

[32] Report of the Special committee appointed to consider the Bill 'For the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments', dated 11 July 1905.

endowments which have been mismanaged; two, vesting the board thus constituted with powers to enquire into the management of any endowment, including those not administered by the board, and to report to the Governor; three, that the board would entertain all requests for advice from trustees of any endowment; and four, that no legal proceedings could be initiated against any endowment administered by the board, without sanction from the board.

Before the Ordinance was finalized and appeared in this form, several amendments were suggested by Mr. August Huttenbach, a qualified juror who was appointed a member of the Penang Legislative Council in 1894. Mr. Huttenbach's recommendations seemed rather more interventionist in calling for greater powers to be given to the board. He had suggested changes to the bill which would lead to the 'compulsory registration of all endowments whether well or ill-managed' and 'the supervision of the accounts of all endowments'.[33] The Select Committee appointed to consider his proposals did not accept these recommendations on the basis of the following logic (emphasis added):

> The Committee are unanimously of opinion that the Board will have sufficient general powers to deal with endowments outside of their administration under sections 12, 13 & 14 of the Bill, and that the additional powers suggested by Mr. Huttenbach to be given to the Board, *might cause needless irritation and annoyance in the case of endowments which have afforded no grounds for dissatisfaction*.[34]

As far as I have been able to determine, no members of native communities whose religious institutions this bill would be applied to were consulted in the process of formulating this bill. However, in the fore-mentioned quote from the Select Committee there appears to be an effort to keep peace with these communities, by circumscribing the role of the board rather than according it over-reaching powers. Adopting the latter route would not have allowed the authorities to argue that this legislation was needed on grounds of rampant mismanagement and abuse of funds, and not an interventionist tool for the administration of all religious endowments in the SS. Clearly, extending the reach of the board beyond the 'problematic' endowments would nullify the stated rationale for the very existence of the board and violate the principle of 'non-interference'.

In its final appearance, the Ordinance, known in an abbreviated mode as the 'Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance, 1905' accorded to the Governor of the SS the legal power to appoint a permanent board in each of the three settlements. The board would be constituted by

> [...] three or more Commissioners one of whom at least shall be an Officer of the Government for the administration, management and superintendence of endowments and

---

[33] Report of the Select Committee appointed to consider Mr. Huttenbach's proposed amendments in 'The Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Bill.' The document is dated 5 September 1905 and signed by four members of the Select Committee consisting of W. R. Collyer, J. O. Anthonisz, Hugh Fort and John Anderson.

[34] Ibid.

to make rules for the meeting of such Boards and the conduct of the Proceedings at such meeting and for the conduct of the business of such Boards and of the Officers.[35]

In the law, the parameters of an 'endowment' are specified in detail. The only religious identity that is explicitly defined here is 'Hindu', although this is a somewhat residual category and the incorporation of 'Sikh' within its larger fold is also significant though not surprising, given the connection made with India as their place of origin. Notably, the terms 'Mohammedan', 'Christian' and 'Buddhist' are left undefined and this omission is striking in itself:

> In this Ordinance the word 'endowment' means any endowment in land or money heretofore given or hereafter to be given in support of any Mohammedan Mosque or Hindu Temple or Mohammedan or Hindu Shrine or School or other Mohammedan or Hindu pious religious charitable or beneficial purpose.
>
> 'Hindu' includes Sikh and any branch or variety of religion professed by natives of India except the Christian, Buddhist and Mohammedan.[36]

It is further interesting that a *single* body was constituted to manage the affairs of the various non-Christian religions in the SS. The selection of the 'Hindu' and 'Mohammedan' communities makes sense given the Indian experience of the British, and their familiarity with 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' as relevant, operative categories. In this ordinance we see attempts at legislating affairs of 'non-Christian' religions, but with the exception of Buddhism and Taoism, which are interesting exclusions.

The Governor in Council was granted over-reaching powers to appoint and remove Commissioners to the board and on the recommendation of the latter could order any endowment in the settlement to be administered by this body corporate under the following three conditions:

1) Any endowment has been mismanaged;
2) There are no trustees appointed for the management of any endowment; or
3) It would be otherwise to the advantage of any endowment that the same should be administered by the board in that settlement.[37]

Administration of an endowment would also mean that all its property, moveable and immoveable, would from that point onwards be vested in the board which would be charged with the responsibility of managing it for the purpose for which it had been intended. The board would also be assisted in its administrative task by a 'Committee of Management' which would 'act under the control of the board'. Appointments to, and removals from, such a committee would be made by members of the board and it would be constituted by

---

[35] Section 3(1), An Ordinance for the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments, 8 September 1905.

[36] Section 2, Ordinance No. XVII, 1905.

[37] Section 4, Ordinance No. XVII, 1905.

[. . .] at least one Officer of the Government being a member of the Board and of one or more person or persons professing the religion to which such endowment is applicable.[38]

The board was to be treated *as if* it was, in fact, a trustee of the endowment in question and thus its powers were outlined on this premise. The board was to have power:

1) From time to time to appoint and from time to time to remove any officer of any such endowment;
2) To receive and collect the income of the endowment;
3) To expend such income

   a) In defraying the expenses of management of the endowment including the payment of such fees to the board as the Governor shall in each case determine;
   b) In carrying out the purposes of the endowment.[39]

Additionally, the board was empowered to query the financial status of any endowment in a settlement and to ask for a statement of accounts from its trustees, and to examine and question them. Non-compliance, meaning a refusal to be questioned and to show relevant documents and statement of accounts, constituted an offence and the guilty party was liable to conviction. The requisite punishment for a first offence would be a fine of 200 Straits dollars and for repeat offenders a fine of 50 Straits dollars 'for each day during which the offence is continued'.[40] Finally, it is not surprising that the Ordinance had adequately provided for the protection of the board, the endowments it administered, and its funds and incomes from the possibility and complication of litigation. Section 13 of the Ordinance clearly spells out the relevant details, and is important to quote here in full (emphasis added):

Before any legal proceeding for obtaining any relief or order or direction concerning or relating to any endowment or the estate funds property or income thereof shall be commenced or taken by nay person there shall be transmitted by such person to the Board notice in writing of such proposed proceeding and such information as may be requisite or proper or may be required from time to time by the Board for explaining the nature and objects thereof. *The Board if upon consideration of the circumstances they so think fit may by an order under their seal authorise or direct any such proceeding to be commenced* or taken with respect to such endowment either for the objects and in the manner specified or mentioned in such notice or for such other objects and in such manner and form and subject to provisions for securing the endowments against liability to any costs or expenses and to such other provisions for the protection or benefit of the endowment as the Board may think proper. And the Board may by such order as aforesaid require and direct that any proceeding so authorised by them in respect of any endowment shall be delayed during such period as shall seem proper and every such order may be in such form as the Board shall think fit. *Save as herein otherwise provided no legal proceeding for obtaining any such relief order or direction as aforesaid shall be entertained or proceeded with by the Supreme Court or by any other Court or Judge except upon and in conformity with an order of the*

---

[38] Section 6(2), Ordinance No. XVII, 1905.

[39] Section 7(1), (2) and (3), Ordinance No. XVII, 1905.

[40] Section 11, Ordinance No. XVII, 1905.

said Board. Provided always that this enactment shall not extend to or affect any legal proceeding in which any person shall claim any property or seek any relief adversely to any endowment.[41]

It is quite clear that this legal document had consciously included this clause to defend the interests of the board and its practices against legal proceedings. It also sought to avoid becoming embroiled in communal politics or ideological polarities. This manoeuvre certainly reflects the astuteness, shrewdness and prescience of those drafting the law. Even so, the idea that the board and its affairs could only be brought before a court of law *with its own authorization and assent is a remarkable ruse* and worthy of admiration at the level of legal craftsmanship and as a principle of governance. It is perhaps to be expected, given that this proposal was made by a committee led by W. R. Collyer, the then-Attorney-General of the SS. That the committee acted with full knowledge of the implications of including this clause in the Ordinance is aptly reflected in their own words:

> Section 13 gives to the Board the same power of controlling litigation relating to religious endowments as is conferred on the Charity Commissioners by Section 17 of the Charitable Trusts Act 1853. This is a very important provision in this country where so great a part of the funds of religious endowments are spent in litigation.[42]

What is even more striking is that there was no provision in the Ordinance for the possible 'return' of once mismanaged endowments to the local community suggesting that the 'take over' of endowments by the board was in effect irreversible. Thus, the placing of the endowment under the administrative charge of the board was essentially a final act, with the crafters of the law having included no clause for the possibility of self-governance by the community and no legal avenues for the board to extricate itself from this managerial role if necessary.[43]

In my reading, the MHEO is an important historical document that marked transition to a particular kind of colonial attitude towards non-Christian religions in the SS. Some scholars[44] have seen in this simply an administrative, bureaucratic instrument that did not register interference in religious matters or affect the substantive practice of religions. On the basis of my data, I make a rather different argument and am more inclined to agree with V. Dharmalingam, who sees the MHEO defined by 'classic contradictions in British attitudes'[45] towards the issue of 'non-interference' in religious matters. I suggest that the conception and enactment of the MHEO and its stated administrative role culminated in a firm shift away from the notions of 'non-interference' in the religious sphere. However, this was not

---

[41]Section 17, Ordinance No. XVII, 1905.

[42]'Report on the Committee for the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments.'

[43]In fact, this did become an issue in Singapore in the 1930s with the demand by the Sikh community for the return of the Sikh *gurdwara* to the community as an expression of the right to self-governance and self-determination.

[44]See Mudaliar (1976) for Tamil Nadu and Ramanathan (1995) for Penang.

[45]Dharmalingam (1995, 24).

by conscious design, but rather unexpected though inevitable outcome of institution-alizing administration of religious institutions. The early agents of the English East India Company (EEIC) in the SS, who typically veered away from direct involve-ment or engagement with local religious institutions, favoured a hands-off policy. However, the later officers of the SS carried a rather less liberal and flexible attitude towards native religions. That these later figures were critical of, and disapproved, native religious customary practices was evident in many statements and utterances about the religious processions, rituals and festivals in the SS even though they were not banned.[46] This piece of legislation marked a particular kind of intervention in religious affairs—through legislative and administrative mechanisms—through control of endowments vested in religious institutions, paving the way for granting 'legitimate' governmental authority in this domain. As is evident from my discus-sion of the MHEO, its very language and phraseology reveal layers upon layers of regulation: regulation of persons, resources and monies, decisions and the legal process itself. Far from perpetuating the hallowed rhetoric of non-interference, the MHEO did signal and symbolize loss of autonomy and submission to external gov-ernance. It epitomized intrusion to the extent that it dramatically altered the milieu and circumstances in which religions functioned by incorporating them into a cen-tralized and bureaucratic framework, now to be supervised and managed by a body of rules constructed according to an administrative logic. The jurisdiction of the MHEO potentially extended to all religious institutions in the Settlement, and the threat that they could be 'taken over' if they misbehaved was a constant feature. Additionally, the scrutiny that the MHEO legitimized—both on the part of the board and members of native communities who could highlight relevant cases of trans-gression and misconduct to the authorities—no doubt had disciplining and deterring effects. According to Yong, British colonial rule in Malaya

> [...] was marked by the extensive use of legal and legislative mechanisms of political and ideological control over colonial subjects. In other words it was management by moral persuasion, and by law, enacted through a normal process of consultation and debate in the Legislative Council or Federal Council followed by Colonial Office sanction.[47]

He provides an example through his discussion of how the British used law-enforcement mechanisms as a strategy to control Chinese nationalism and Malayan communism. I argue that these insights can be extrapolated to suggest a wider rel-evance and used to make sense of the use of legislation in other areas as well, including the religious:

---

[46]For example, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, the various processions undertaken by the Indians, Chinese and the Malays were never seen to be 'properly religious' or the activities of the partic-ipants 'pious' enough, for the governing authorities. The latter were suspicious that these were merely the front for other more insidious political practices involving gangs and secret societies, which then legitimized not only their greater surveillance, but also justified the various restrictions imposed on their enactment.

[47]Yong (1997, 128) (in Brook Barrington).

> The colonial authorities either enacted or amended various laws which served as an all-powerful political weapon to refine, streamline, broaden, and tighten political control and management techniques. Increasingly a substantial body of legal and legislative mechanisms was overtly used to control rising Chinese nationalism generally and Malayan communism in particular.[48]

While legislation in the religious sphere came late to the SS in the form of the MHEO, the British through their experiences in India, Burma and Sri Lanka already had enormous prior familiarity with devising laws to deal with socio-cultural and religious practices and institutions. Sometimes legislation served the task of regulation by administration, and at others it curtailed these practices by imposing requisite restrictions and bans.

In the interest of a comparative discussion, I detail the course that colonial administration of religions took in the Indian context. Given the vast Indian territories and the socio-political and religious complexities within, no uniform or standard colonial policy on religion was possible. Thus, any discussion relating to India must necessarily be specific with respect to region and time frame. I focus on developments within the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, given the historical links between this region and the SS. Attention to the procedures, codes and laws formulated for approaching the 'religious question' in the Madras Presidency during the colonial period and in the state of Tamil Nadu after the independence of India is useful. I argue that while various developments in the legal and political landscape in Tamil Nadu impacted Malayan Hindu discourse through the 1930s and 1950s, the fate of Hindu practices and festivals in British Malaya traversed a rather different course. Thus, while it is important to recognize and theorize key connections between socio-religious, political and legal events in India and in British Malaya, I also make a case for viewing the latter as an autonomous locale which was marked by a series of novel developments.

In his research on temples and political development, Christopher Baker argues that from the closing decades of the nineteenth century, we witness increasing government interference and a desire for greater centralized control in the administration of Hindu temples in South India:

> Between 1878 (only fifteen years after the Madras Government had been forced to relinquish control over temples) and 1915, twelve bills to reform temple administration and to re-impose government control were drafted in Madras. Most of these were the work of the select circle of lawyers and administrators which the Madras Government looked to for advice and administrative assistance. This circle, known loosely as the Mylapore group, could see how to build their own empire within the husk of the Raj.[49]

In the twentieth century, the Tamil Nadu state's involvement with the management and control of Hindu temples and the administration of endowments was codified in a piece of legislation that was enacted in 1925. According to C. Mudaliar,

---

[48]Yong (1997, 128) (in Brook Barrington).

[49]Baker (1975).

Act I of 1925 was an important in the history of the Hindu religious endowments. It was the first law relating purely to Hindu religious endowments, enacted by the Legislature. It was, however, not the first law in the field, its precedents being the Regulation VII of 1817 and the Act XX of 1863. Like the Regulation VII of 1817, it centralised all the powers of supervision and control in a centrally constituted Board and like the latter it established the local committees to supervise the religious institutions under their jurisdiction.[50]

In the spirit of offering protection to the properties of religious institutions, the jurisdiction of the Act extended to include both Hindu temples and *maths* but excluded Muslim endowments,[51] although a joint board for managing Hindu and Muslim endowments was considered in 1922 but not followed through. The idea of a joint board was revisited by the Government in 1936, something that was already present in the discourse on the subject as far back as the mid-nineteenth century (emphasis added):

The Government, it is understood, have decided to evolve an agreed scheme for enlarging the scope of the Hindu Religious Endowments Act, so as to include within it Muslim endowments also. The Government view is that it would not be feasible to constitute a separate Board for *Wakf* properties on the lines of the Board for Hindu religious endowments as the revenue from the contributions that might be levied on income from such properties, would not be sufficient to meet the expenditure involved. A *practical solution* to the problem, in their opinion, is to constitute a single board to supervise the administration of Hindu and Muslim endowments.[52]

A committee composed of Hindus and Muslims was set up to examine this proposal and make its recommendations to the Government. The proposal for a joint board was not thought to be feasible and, thus, the proposal did not materialize. Its critics argue thus:

[...] though there would be illegality in the constitution of a common Board, the legislation on the subject would be highly controversial and would lead to endless confusion and difficulties.[53]

There seemed to be two issues at work: one, reluctance both on the part of the Muslim community and the government to legislate state control of Muslim religious endowments and two, the unfeasibility of a joint board for Hindus and Muslims. After much deliberation, an act for the administration of Muslim endowments, Act XXIX of 1954, which allowed for the constitution of a 'Wakf Board', was passed. Unsurprisingly, the language and tone of the Act, as well as the powers and functions of the latter, were similar to both the MHEB and the Hindu Religious Charitable Endowments Board (HRCEB), given that they were using the same broad

---

[50]Mudaliar (1976, 77). I have found Chandra Maudaliar's study, *State and Religious Endowments in Madras* (1976), to be invaluable resource in reconstructing relations between the spheres of law, policy and religion in the state of Tamil Nadu, both during the colonial period and after Indian independence.

[51]Mudaliar (1976, 78).

[52]'Hindu-Muslim Endowments in Madras,' *The Indian*, 1 February 1936.

[53]Ibid. 364.

template as a model. The jurisdiction of the Wakf Board, like its two counterparts, was administrative and supervisory:

> The Board is vested with general powers of superintendence of all Wakfs in the State and has to ensure that the Wakfs are properly maintained, controlled and administered and income duly applied to objects and purposes for which the wakfs were created. Besides this, the Board has responsibility of maintaining records of the Wakfs, give directions for the administration of the Wakfs, frame schemes for better management of Wakfs, scrutinize and approve budgets submitted by Mutawallis, to arrange for the auditing of accounts, to appoint and remove Mutawalli etc.[54]

C. Mudaliar argues that this 'duplication' of agencies in the existence of the Wakf Board and the HRCEB was counter-productive and 'leads to wasteful expenditure and inefficiency'.[55] But more than this, in the Indian context, the ambiguity relating to the establishment of a common board was enmeshed with political questions about avoiding a 'sensitive' and controversial subject and the need to avoid possible state interference in administering endowments of the Muslim community—issues which did not forestall the passing of the Madras Act of 1959 for the Hindu endowments. Interestingly, in the SS, such themes had not surfaced in the framing of the MHEO or the founding of the MHEB.

In the meantime, the 1925 Act had a short lifespan being repealed in 1927, when the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act or the Madras Act of 1927 was passed by the Justice Ministry, having been passed in the Madras Legislative Council on 17 September 1926.[56] Although this Act was created in the Colonial period, it is important to bear in mind that under the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms, which were aimed at greater self-governance, it was Indian members who formulated the details of the Act. Speaking of the 1927 Act, C. Baker writes,

> It did not signify a great change in British interference with the temples. Indians created the most important parts of the Act and Indians implemented its provisions. The Madras Government wrote the first draft, but this only provided for stronger district committees and better schemes of administration. It was a Select Committee composed of Indian members of the Legislature which included the *maths* in the legislation, widened the powers of the district committees and set up a central Endowments Board with jurisdiction over all the temples and their endowments in the province. The Board and the ministers were to nominate district temple committees and to arbitrate in local disputes over temples and their properties. With these provisions, a good deal of central control was imposed over the temples, and the significance was not lost on contemporary observers.[57]

Not surprisingly, even though the Act was the product of 'Indian' input, opinions were divided on whether a law which granted such overwhelmingly powers to the State was necessary and it certainly seemed to contradict the government's declared stance of 'non-interference' in religious matters:

---

[54] Ibid. 370.

[55] Ibid. 377.

[56] Mudaliar (1976, 81).

[57] Baker (1975, 85).

The act was thus one of the most controversial and important pieces of legislation in Madras Presidency under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. The formal legislative debate over the act extended over three years and in printed form runs to more than a thousand pages. At an ideological level, discussion revolved around the merit of two contrasting principles for temple-state relation: noninterference and protection. Fastening on a key nineteenth-century term, the bill's opponents attacked the HRE bill as a deep and flagrant intervention in the religious affairs of Hindus, and thus contrary to the long-standing British guarantee of noninterference. The bill's supporters, in contrast, sought support from South Indian culture, particularly from the principle that protection of Hindu temples by the state is an ancient Indian tradition, a tradition moreover which is expected by the Indian public and which is essential to the welfare to the institutions themselves. The debates gave a lasting imprint to this distinction, which has continued to shape nearly all subsequent argument about temple-state relations in Tamil Nadu.[58]

Despite the critique, the Act prevailed and provided for the appointment of the HRCEB. This was constituted as a statutory body charged with the supervision and administration of endowments of Hindu religious institutions. The HRCEB was constituted of a President and two to four Commissioners who were all nominated by the state government. The 1927 Act was embroiled in many legislative amendments over the next two decades, in an effort to streamline the Board and its functions. Through a series of recommendations by important individuals, a shift in mood was gradually discernible such that eventually, it came to be that the Government would be directly involved with the administration of Hindu religious endowments, rather than leave it to the Board. Already in 1946, the latter was dissolved:

An official Bill to provide for the better administration of Hindu religious and charitable institutions was also published. The bill vests the general administration of such institutions in the Government who will appoint a Commissioner for the purpose. The Hindu Religious Endowments Board will cease to exist.[59]

Not surprisingly, this Government 'take over' in the internal management of temple affairs which would signal the end to self-governance and self-determination was naturally opposed by 'temples interests' who failed to block it:

The Select Committee on Madras Religious and Charitable Endowments Bill defeated an attempt to shelve the measure and decided to proceed despite powerful opposition from vested temple interests. The Committee decided Wednesday to appoint Temple Committees with statutory powers for managing and supervising temples and religious institutions in the Province. Members of the Committees will be appointed by the Government.[60]

As such the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act came into effect in 1951, which after a series of foundational amendments, rested in the Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act XXII of 1959 and came into force with effect from 1 January 1960.[61] They also led to the founding of the 'Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Administration Department' as part of the

---

[58]Presler (1987, 29).

[59]'Hindu religious institutions,' *Indian Daily Mail*, September 1946.

[60]'Committee to manage and supervise temples,' *Indian Daily Mail*, 26 September 1949.

[61]As noted by Frank Presler, the legislative history of this Act is complicated. See Presler (1987, 23–34) and Mudaliar (1976) for details.

infrastructure of the Tamil Nadu Government and a Minister for Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments appointed at the helm. The Bill was also heavily criticized and seen to be a violation of the principle of secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution and an infringement of Article 26 in the same. A sustained critique came from Mr. Patanjali Sastri, a member of the Madras Legislative Council and a former Chief Justice of India. He argued 'that rigid departmental control over the religious institutions and the management was against the secular nature of the Indian Constitution'.[62] He argued further:

> Thus the religious denominations are allowed the right to manage their own affairs on matters of religion. I need hardly say that the management of temples and management of *maths* are essentially and primarily [...] managements [sic] of matters of religion [...]

Essentially, Mr. Sastri and others who advised caution in this matter were concerned about whether the principle of non-interference could be guaranteed given the greater state role (and thus control) implied in the founding of the named department. Here, it is notable that the trope of non-interference becomes an issue of secularism, signalling a serious shift in discourse.

Interestingly, for Penang, K. Ramanathan argues that the MHEO and the MHEB served as a 'fair deterrent' and relevant parties were kept in check. This for him renders the Bill a 'success'. By contrast, my analysis not only highlights the controlling and interfering effects of the MHEO, but further contends that the reach of this law (together with the MHEB) transcended the straightforward business of supervision and management of religious endowments. The latter framed the parameters within which Hinduism in the SS took form and, in fact, shaped various features of the religion itself, the subject of the next chapter. For now, I turn to the 'body corporate', the MHEB, made possible by the MHEO and detail its institutional history, as well as its mode of operation in the SS.

4.3   The Founding of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards for the Straits Settlements

In the Annual Report of the Straits Settlements for 1905, the Acting Colonial Secretary, E. L. Brockman, announces that together with a host of other laws, 'an important Ordinance dealing with Mohammedan and Hindu Religious Charitable Endowments, many of which in the past have been greatly mismanaged', was passed.[63] The MHEB, a corporate body, was instituted for the administration, management and supervision of various religious endowments (in land and money) which were deemed to be in need of external supervision. The management (and 'take over') of an endowment was lawful and could be ordered by the Governor of the SS in the event of 'mismanagement' of the endowment, in the absence of

---

[62] Mudaliar (1976, 308).

[63] 'Annual Report of the Straits Settlements, 1905.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 5: 1901–1907*, 490.

legitimate trustees and if it was deemed to be 'to the advantage of the endowment'. All the land, monies and property (movable and immovable) of the endowment in question were vested in the Board. A Secretary and the various members of the Board were appointed by the Governor of the SS. The Boards were not large entities, being constituted only by about three or four Commissioners, in addition to the Secretary. There is also a strong sense that members of the public saw the MHEB as a 'government body' and the endowments under their administrative charge as being under 'government control'. This probably had a great deal to do with the individuals who were appointed to the MHEB, a majority of whom were drawn from the SS Administrative Service, for example, the Solicitor-General, Collector of Land Revenue and Commissioner for Lands.[64] This was even more so after 1948, when appointments to the Board were *ex-officio* ones, rather than individuals nominated in their personal capacity. But even in the early days, the role of the Board was perceived by the lay public to be much more expanded and its influence more pervasive than it may have been in reality.

From its inception, the members of the MHEB were all European, civil servants and municipal officers with little knowledge and experience of issues relating to the Hindu or Muslim communities. But this was not deemed to be a problem as the official function of the Board was the administration of endowments, for which familiarity with religious matters was not relevant or necessary. The idea that members of the various religious communities should be represented on the Board does not even seem to have surfaced, either in discussions of the relevant authorities leading up to the institution of the Board or beyond. Members of religious communities had a different viewpoint. The exclusion of local Hindus and Muslims created much discontent within the two religious communities. The more public and vocal demands for representation came from the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) in Singapore in the 1930s, which petitioned the Colonial Government to seek greater representation of Tamil Muslims and Hindus in the MHEB.[65] It was rather late in the day, in 1948 (almost half a century after the constitution of the MHEB), that a concession was made in this direction. This event is marked in positive, glowing terms in the minutes of the Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (SMHEB) meeting of 29 December 1948, and a striking contrast to the earlier attitude and resistance expressed by Board members:

> The Chairman opened the proceedings by extending a welcome to new members, in particular, the 4 unofficial members who has recently been appointed to the Board. These

---

[64]In fact, a suggestion was already made in 1915 that appointment of Commissioners to the Board should be *ex-officio*: 'The Board further desire to suggest to His Excellency that the Municipal Engineer be appointed a Commissioner by virtue of his office and not in his private capacity' (Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 6 September 1915).

[65]Upon independence of Singapore in 1969, the latter Board split into two, leading to the autonomous existence of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) and the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), which is today still charged with the management of the same four Hindu temples and the celebration of two prominent festivals— *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti*.

appointments, he said were a landmark in the history of the Board. With the new appointments, there were on the Board representatives of the various communities (i.e., Muslim and Hindu) whose interests were looked after by the Board. These new appointments would be of great assistance to the Board with their special knowledge and experience of affairs.

In Singapore and Penang, the MHEB[66] was formed in 1905 while the Malacca Board was only constituted in 1908 (see Fig. 4.2). The Penang Board figured prominently in dealing ultimately with 16 Muslim endowments and 4 Hindu temples at full strength, while the Singapore branch was more active in supervising 4 Hindu endowments (see Fig. 4.4) and a small number of Muslim, Parsee and Sikh endowments (see Fig. 4.3). Although the Penang Board was formed in 1905, by the year 1908, it was administering six mosques and one Hindu temple. Remaining true to the spirit of the Ordinance, in the year 1908, it undertook the supervision of two Hindu temples and one mosque, bringing the total under its charge to nine, under these following circumstances,

> The management of the Mariamman Temple at Butterworth and of the Hindu Sri Kunji Bihari Temple was vested in the Board under Orders in Council. In the former case the endowment has been hampered by aimless and confused litigation for many years. In the latter case there was negligent administration.[67]

It is also notable that the religious institutions that were 'taken over' in Penang not only were involved in protracted legal proceedings, but were those to which the Colonial Government had made land grants in the first place.[68] Meanwhile, the Malacca Board was concerned exclusively with Muslim endowments[69] and mentions 'Hindoo temples and endowments' for the first time in its annual report of 1915:

> Towards the close of the year, the Honorary Secretary initiated an enquiry into the Hindoo temples and endowments. The latter are small, the temple funds consisting mainly of voluntary contributions. Some accounts were inspected. Temple administration is at present too fertile a source of strife amongst the devotees.[70]

An example from the experience of the Malacca Board is instructive and it would seem that religious institutions were not 'taken over' before a comprehensive enquiry of the account books and assessment of the size of the endowments:

---

[66]As a matter of comparative interest, it is noteworthy that in the Indian context, the Hindu Religious Endowments Board was formed in 1926 under the Madras Act II of 1927 (Presler 1987, 28–29). Prior to this of course, a fair number of controversial laws were formulated under Company Raj, by the EIC in relation to government involvement in matters of religion.

[67]'Administrative Report, Penang 1909.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 6: 1908–1914*, 404.

[68]Ramanathan (1995, 174).

[69]As far as I can determine, the Malacca Board at no point administered any Hindu temple.

[70]'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca,' 1915, 29.
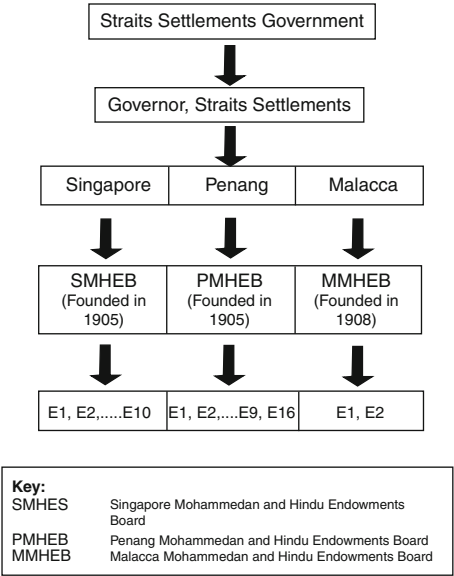
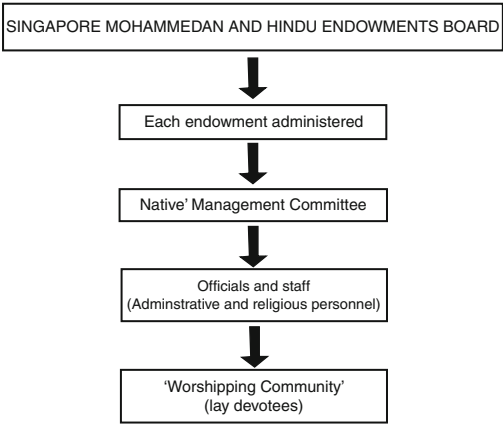**Fig. 4.2** Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards in the Straits Settlements

Fig. 4.3 Organizational structure of the Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board

Fig. 4.4 Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road, 1950s–1970s (image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

> In February and March an inquiry was held into the affairs of the Kampong Ulu Mosque which resulted in the management of the mosque and its endowments being vested in the Board in May, 1909.

> Returns were obtained from all the other mosques and Hindu temples but no steps were taken with reference to any of them, the endowments in all cases were very small and do not cover their expenses.[71]

Following this specific discussion the annual report of the Malacca Board for the year 1910 reads thus:

> An inquiry into the affairs of the Kampong Kling Mosque was held in May, and though the mosque was found to be deeply in debt to the Nathir and his wife, the accounts had been correctly kept and the affairs of the mosque well managed. No action was taken with regard to other Mohammedan and Hindu endowments.[72]

In this particular case, the mosque was left in the hands of the Nathir although the accounts were regularly called for and it appears that the Board also continued to advice the managers of the mosques, a situation that remained constant according to

---

[71] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 110.

[72] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1910', in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 356.

annual reports until 1928. In any case, there is evidence to suggest that the Boards do not seem to have been too happy to assume supervision of all religious institutions, especially those with meagre or negligible endowments. In the event of the latter, they would become a liability given that their revenue would not be sufficient to cover the expenditure entailed in sustaining the religious institution in question. The Board Commissioners were not paid for their services, although the question of whether they ought to be remunerated for the work performed, especially given the difficulty experienced in recruiting and retaining members, surfaced periodically in Board meetings over the next few decades. Yet, the expenses for the maintenance of the endowments were many, as we see from the following account and occasionally loans had to be secured:

> The expenditure at present consists in the payment of salaries of the mosque officials, light-
> ing and other mosque expenses and repairs to houses belonging to the trust. In view of
> pending litigation and to pay for considerable repairs rendered necessary to the houses
> by the neglect of the former Nathirs a loan of $1000 was obtained from the Government,
> without this the revenue would not have covered the expenditure.[73]

This loan, which was not interest-free, was subsequently settled in full by 1911 after being granted Government permission to repay it in installments. We also have some sense of the huge disparities in sums used for the payment of salaries for personnel at mosques and temples and that spent on repairs and litigation. For the Kampong Ulu Mosque in Malacca, we learn that 'the salary of the sweeper was raised from $8 per mensem to $9 per mensem as from June 1st [...] with the advice of the Executive Engineer a contract for general repairs amounting to over $650 was entered into'.[74]

This attests to the fact that while the SS Government argued that it was necessary to pass a law and to institute an entity to ensure that religious endowments were not mismanaged, it clearly did not make available any funding to render this ser- vice to the people of the Settlements. Yet, the various functions of the MHEB were articulated as a duty and a responsibility performed by the Colonial Government for the benefit of the people of British Malaya.[75] For instance, the annual report of the Malacca Board for the year 1915, which only administered one mosque, ends on this note:

> The members of the Board perform a useful public service, and deserve the thanks
> especially of the Muhammadan Community.[76]

---

[73] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909', in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 110.

[74] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1910,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 356–359.

[75] Presler (1987) notes this to be the case for the HEB in Tamil Nadu as well.

[76] 'Administration Report, Malacca, 1915.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941*, *Vol. 7: 1915–1921*, 252.

While the Board members were not paid for their services, other than the Board secretary, this possibility was not by any means ruled out. In fact, the phraseology of the MHEO provides for this possibility upon the discretion of the SS Governor. Thus, the income from the endowment could be used to carry out the purposes of the endowment but also (emphasis added),

> In *defraying the expenses of the management of the endowment including the payment of such fees to the Board* as the Governor shall in each case determine.[77]

The annual reports of the Boards in all the settlements were obliged to include the accounts for the year, detailing both income from the different endowments and the expenditure that ensued. The mode of operation was such that the revenue of the endowment was naturally expected to pay for the maintenance of the religious institution in question. When this did not happen, the endowment ended the year in debt. The Secretary of the Singapore Board confirms this in the following statement for the year 1910:

> It will be noticed that the income of the endowment fell short of the expenditure for the year; this is due to the fact that all repairs, new furniture, and fittings have been paid for out of the income, there being no special fund to provide for such services.[78]

However, the law also provided for funds to be made available to particular endowments in need, monies from the general Board funds, as a loan which would subsequently have to be repaid. For example, for the year 1910, the Singapore Board registered a balance of $2,927.01 which was used for the following purpose:

> This fund has been utilised on several occasions to make temporary advances to particular endowments to assist them in carrying out repairs when their own balances were insufficient.[79]

There was nonetheless a ceiling on how much of the endowment's income could be used for administrative purposes, and this amount varied over the years. For the Penang Board for the year 1914, we learn that only 5%[80] of the Board's total revenue could be used to defray administrative expenses. This seems to have been universally applied across the three Boards in the SS and the percentage also remained constant for many years after as we learn from the annual report of the Malacca Board for the year 1924:

> The 5 per cent on the collections made on behalf of the Kampong Hulu mosque brought in $680 and the only charge was the allowance of $240 to the Secretary and Treasurer. The

---

[77] Presler (1987, 2).

[78] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1910,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 355.

[79] Ibid. 356.

[80] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1914', in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 213.

income was therefore considerably in excess of its normal expenditure, and the year closed with a credit balance of $1415. The financial position was therefore most satisfactory.[81]

The revenue of the Board is thus derived from the 5% charge on the mosque collections, and the care and supervision of the religious endowment was not funded by the colonial state. The emphasis on the 'financial position' of the Boards appears as the most prominent item for annual reportage to the Legislative Council. Even in the year of the most abbreviated of reports which routinely appear from 1915 onwards, the minimal four-line mention of the MHEB report in the general Administrative Report of the Settlement includes data about 'Revenue', 'Expenditure' and the bank balance, carried forward. The overwhelming preoccupation with documenting and accounting for the monies collected and spent is quite striking. In a very important sense, this colonial accounting strives to accord legitimacy to the Board, its role and function, and provides evidence of efficient, orderly management and administration of religious endowments by an objective party. The contrast, particularly with previous instances of mismanagement of funds and abuse of power and the disorder and chaos that typified these times, is made all the more stark with reportage that reiterates a balanced, measured and sensible utilization of endowment funds and shows the respective religious institutions to be thriving.

Expectedly, the MHEB reports carry negligible, if any, information about any problems and controversies the Board may have encountered in the course of conducting its business. Rather, one gets a sense that everything is functioning efficiently and smoothly and there are no tensions, obstacles or difficulties faced by the Board in its administration of religious endowments. On the whole, the data carried in these reports and the documentation carried therein are meant to demonstrate the utility, function and efficiency of the MHEB in an effort to legitimate its very founding. As such, expectedly, no controversies, problems, tensions and difficulties are detailed in the reports which were meant to be presented to members of the Legislative Council in Britain.

It could also be argued that the reach of the MHEB in the Settlements was rather restricted given that they were dealing with only a small number of endowments (and thus with a minority of religious institutions) and their task was merely 'administrative'. But what exactly did administration of religious endowments entail? I argue that it is necessary to deconstruct and tease out what 'administration' meant by paying attention to the actual 'work' undertaken by the MHEB. This is something I undertake more fully in the next chapter but make some preliminary remarks on the subject here. We learn from the annual report of the Penang Mohammedan and Hindu Trust Endowments Board for the year 1908 that (emphasis added)

> The business of the Board is continually increasing and it will be necessary to increase the expenditure in paying for clerical and professional services. The Board is doing excellent *work in preventing the diversion of Trust Funds and useless litigation*.[82]

---

[81] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1924.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 8: 1922–1926*, 247.

[82] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1908.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855–1941, Vol. 6: 1908–1914*, 417.

It is revealing that already within the first few years of its existence the Board saw itself as being successful in curtailing wastage of endowment funds on 'useless litigation', inadvertently reiterating a primary implicit rationale for its establishment. However, in the early years of the Board's existence, litigation continued to be an issue; this was especially the case when it took over a new endowment and also had to bring to a closure the outstanding legal controversies associated with the endowment, as was the case with the Sri Kunji Bihari Temple in Penang:

> A Hindu temple founded by a Bengali and known as the Sri Kunji Bahari Temple in Penang Road was vested in the Board by the Governor's Order in Council and its management taken over on December 1st. The endowment, which had been negligently administered by a receiver appointed by the Supreme Court in 1895, owns some fairly valuable property which should yield a good income on the expiration of the present leases with low rentals and after the houses have been thoroughly repaired. The available assets will, however, all be exhausted in meeting the large bill which has not yet been presented for lawyer's costs and court proceedings.[83]

That the Board had some unfinished business to settle is seen in two good examples abstracted from the experiences of the Malacca Board, in the 2 years following its constitution. Its annual reports for 1909 and 1910 end with the following statements:

> Attached is a statement of the revenue and expenditure from 18th May, 1909, when the Board assumed control, it has a credit balance of $827.68, but part of this is liable for legal advice and action.[84]

> Litigation is pending to recover improper payments made by a former mosque official and to obtain an interpretation of the Will of DATO SAMSUDIN who made the original endowment.[85]

It would appear from the number of meetings held throughout the year that the Boards were very active in the early years of their founding: For example, the Penang Board held a total of 10 meetings in the year 1908 and 9 meetings in 1909, a number that was reduced to much smaller numbers in subsequent years. In the early years, the practice seemed to be hold meetings once a month but there was not regularity to this, as in some years there were as few as three/four meetings a year; for instance the PMHEB held four meetings in 1920. In later years, this practice was regularized and rules drafted which required the Board meet only once quarterly, a task that would have been less onerous and demanding especially for the clerical staff of the Board, in particular the Secretary, whose job it was to write the minutes of meetings. A large part of the Board's work was bureaucratic, involving a great deal of paperwork, and occupied the time and energies of the Board members as is evident from many statements like these in the annual reports:

---

[83] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 109.

[84] Ibid. 110.

[85] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1909.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855–1941, Vol. 6: 1908–1914*, 312.

> Nine meetings were held by the Board during the course of the year. Apart from this much of the time of the members is taken up by attending to an ever-increasing volume of correspondence.[86]

Additionally, the Board was charged with supervising, overseeing and managing the financial affairs of the various endowments. The Board was authorized to manage the financial affairs of all endowments vested in religious institutions under its charge. These included land, funds and movable properties, as well as any income accruing from the properties. It could, thus, receive and collect income from the various endowments and also expend the income as it deemed necessary for the maintenance of the endowment. In this ordinance 'endowment' was defined to mean 'any endowment in land or money heretofore given or hereafter to be given for the support of any Mohammedan or Hindu shrine or School or other Mohammedan or Hindu pious religious charitable or beneficial purpose'.[87] Many of the latter were landed property, which were owned by specific religious institutions, and were tenanted. The MHEB really functioned as a landlord collecting rents from the various tenants. Despite having the statutory right to do so, the Board clearly struggled in its endeavour to collect rents without problems, there being countless incidents of rent arrears and requests by tenants to settle monies owed in installments. An example comes from the following account by the Secretary of the PMHEB, who notes the difficulties in having to rely upon existing legal channels to try to recover rents and thus arguing for greater powers to be bestowed on the Board:

> The tenants have hitherto been in the habit of paying their monthly rents at the end of the month or even later, but all tenants have now been notified that their rents fall due on the first of the month. Considerable difficulty has been found in making them observe this condition of their tenancy which has frequently had to be enforced by legal proceedings. It would be of material assistance to the Board if they could recover their rents by the same powers of seizure and sale as in the case of Municipal rates and taxes and of rents due to the Crown. At present process has to be taken out in the District Courts and summonses served. The time spent in these somewhat dilatory proceedings gives an excellent opportunity to defaulting or dishonest tenants to evade paying their lawful dues.[88]

Another example is seen in the experience of the Malacca Board:

> All rents due from house property were collected, but $14 due from lands was not collected. Since 1911 arrears of land rent have accrued, totaling $55, vide Appendix C.∗ Steps are being taken to enforce payment and it is hoped to collect all arrears during the current month (January).[89]

---

[86] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 109.

[87] Ordinance No. XVII, 1.

[88] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 108.

[89] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1915,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 28.

There are related instances of the Board successfully obtaining legal judgement against various 'errant' parties but failing to enforce it in practice. The Malacca Board's ongoing tussle with a Mohamad Bin Othman is reflective of some of the difficulties it faced. The named gentleman was a former Nathir of the Kampong Ulu Mosque administered by the Malacca Board. We learn that, in 1909, the Board had obtained a judgement against the former Nathir:

> Judgment for over $600 was obtained against MOHAMED BIN OSMAN on account of money spent by him from the mosque funds in litigation in connection with a dispute as to the nathirship. Nothing was recovered, as no property of the defendant could be traced.[90]

The exact sum of $664.27 continued to evade the Board as is evident from the statement in its annual reports in subsequent years. The Malacca Boards' report for 1915 records:

> A judgment against one MOHAMAD BIN OTHMAN for $664.27 dating from 1909, remained unpaid. The debtor is at present ostensibly without assets or employment.[91]

On the basis of my scrutiny of the annual reports of the MHEB from 1909 to 1928, it is not possible for me to establish if the money was ever recovered by the Board, as after 1915, there is no further mention of this case in the annual reports. However, it is clear that for those 6 years, the Board did make an effort to enforce the judgement and had made enquiries of and had full knowledge of the former Nathir's financial standing. It is evident that a great deal of the Board members' time must have been taken up with pursuing outstanding claims and arrears, handling correspondence related to this pursuit and communicating with the courts about litigation matters.

The Board also engaged in the buying, selling, investing of property and seeking insurance for them in the name of the endowment. It clearly had the legal authority to make decisions about all of these, bearing in mind the interest of the endowment. Two examples from the Malacca MHEB report for 1921 and 1922, respectively, are as follows:

> Land at Pengkalan Rama acquired for the new Municipal market was sold for $13,337 and after reference to the Court awarded to the Kampong Ulu Mosque as part of Dato SAMSUDIN'S Trust Estate. The money was partly used in the purchase of a property at Heeren Street and a loan on a mortgage.[92]

> As a result of the sale of houses at Mill Road, the Board had at its disposal a large sum of money and this was utilized for the purpose of purchasing two valuable house [sic] at Riverside, which were immediately let at $250 and $200 per month. The price paid for the houses was $40,500 and $35,000 respectively. The Board had every reason to be satisfied

---

[90] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1910,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 359.

[91] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1915,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 28.

[92] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1921.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 7: 1915–1921*, 337.

with these two purchases as both were made at rock bottom price and were exceptionally good bargains, the sites being excellent and the buildings in a very good condition.[93]

Furthermore, it had the responsibility to commission repairs, rebuilding and renovation works of the various endowment properties and had to deal with engineers, architects and builders, all of which was no doubt time-consuming and scrupulous but caution was always the order of the day. A good example is at hand from the experiences of the Penang Board in 1909:

> A local architect was employed by the Board to prepare designs for the enlargement and improvement of the Kapitan Kling Mosque, the Acheen Street Mosque and the Nagore Mosque. House property belonging to the Masjid Langgar and to the Alnisah Mosque requires renovation. The Board has here an opportunity of doing something permanently to embellish the town, provided the funds are forthcoming. Plans should be very carefully considered.[94]

The evidence documented by the Board members itself suggests that it dealt with practically every aspect of the endowment under its charge in so far as it required the expenditure of endowments funds. The engagement of the Board with such detailed minutiae meant that the Board was in supreme administrative and supervisory control of the endowment in question. Crucially, its jurisdiction extended beyond the endowment per se to the very religious institutions themselves. It is important to highlight that mundane control of money, financial resources and accounting practices did reconfigure the dynamics of the institution in terms of the operational logic it ultimately produced. For instance, it now dealt with the recruitment and appointment of all personnel of temples and mosques, the decision being made on the basis of available funding and how this was to be utilized: It decided on how many personnel were needed, how much they were to be paid and if their salaries needed to be raised. Here is a fairly long, revealing account of the kind of work the Malacca Board was concerned with on a day-to-day basis in 1915:

> In the course of the year extensive repairs and improvements were made to the mosque. The buildings and flagstaff were colour washed and painted. The interior of the mosque was paved with marble tiles from the Ipoh quarries, the old brick tiles being removed and utilized for the court-yard. Electric light was installed at the expenses of certain members of the congregation. The Board contributing $62 for the installation of 5 pendant 50 C. P. lamps in the North verandah. The mosque now presents a very handsome appearance and the attendance has largely increased. The mosque officials remained the same as last year. In November, Bilal TAPA BIN ALI resigned and was replaced by H.AHMAD BIN H. MOHD. HUSIN. The wages of the Bilal and rent collector were increased by $3 and $1 respectively.[95]

---

[93] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1922.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 8: 1922–1926*, 610.

[94] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1909.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 6: 1908–1914*, 404.

[95] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1915,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 29.

Another preoccupation of the Boards, which was provided for by law, entailed investigating and making enquiries about religious institutions against which complaints from members of the public were received and then reporting this annually. The Malacca Board seemed to have been active in conducting such enquiries and assessing if a particular religious institution needed to be brought under its management:

> Complaints were made against the conduct of some of the members of the Committee of Management of the Kampong Kling Mosque in Goldsmith Street and some allegations made in respect of the Hindu Temple at Gajah Berang which were receiving the attention of the Board at the close of the year.[96]

Again, the Malacca Board seemed to be in no hurry to take over the administration of the Hindu temple in question. The report for the following year reads thus:

> In connection with some allegations made in 1921 in respect of the Hindu Temple at Gajah Berang, the Board conducted an enquiry and found no evidence to warrant interference. The submission of a quarterly return of accounts to the Board was however ordered and also the posting of a Tamil copy thereof at the Temple. This was insisted on throughout the year.[97]

This also provides evidence that the Board was not just an ornamental entity and indeed continued to be 'active'. No wonder then that it was viewed by SS religious communities as having the legal power and authority to effect changes and to get things done. What is further striking in this reportage is the nature of the language used by the Board secretary: The use of such words as 'interference' and 'ordered' certainly contradict the articulated claim that the Board was designed to be non-interfering and non-controlling, its role merely being supervisory and administrative. The Board continued to monitor the affairs of the temple and apparently the temple itself complied with the orders made by the Board as reported in the annual report for 1924:

> The accounts of the Gaja Berang Hindu Temple were regularly submitted to the Board and copies posted in the Temple.[98]

This Hindu temple in Malacca, in particular, seems to have been plagued by complaints and was under the gun for years before the Board was satisfied that there were no irregularities. The report for 1927 states,

> On complaints made by certain members of the congregation of the Thoropathi Amman Kovil, Gajah Berang, the account books of the kovil were audited. The kovil owns no property but it is maintained by donations raised among the worshippers.

In any case, the MHEB was legally obliged to follow up and make enquires in the event of a complaint against a religious institution, but does not seem to have

[96] Administrative Report, Penang 1921.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 7: 1915–1921*, 351.

[97] Administrative Report, Penang 1922.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 8: 1922–1926*, 610.

[98] Administrative Report, Penang 1921.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 8: 1922–1926*, 246.

initiated any takeover bids of temples or mosques independently of its own accord. But certainly, this added to its work, i.e., making enquiries of endowments suspected of needing supervision, calling for and auditing account books and advising local managers of religious institutions.

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, the Board and its commissioners were legally accorded wide-ranging powers. Yet, the task of administering and managing religious endowments was not undertaken solely by the Board members. From the outset the Board was to be assisted in its task by a 'management committee' appointed for each religious endowment. The latter were also known as *panchayat*(s) and their constitution was provided for in the Ordinance No. XVII of 1905. According to Section 6,

(1) For the purpose of the management of each such endowment the Board shall appoint a Committee of management to act under the control of the Board.
(2) Every such Committee shall consist of at least one Officer of the Government being a member of the Board and of one or more person or persons professing the religion to which such endowment is applicable.
(3) The Board may at any time remove any member of such Committee and appoint another in his place.[99]

These, conceptualized as a council of managers, were appointed for the Hindu and Sikh temples and the mosques by the Boards in all three settlements. They do find mention in the annual reports of the MHEBs but carry paltry information about the nature of their work although their contributions were acknowledged. The reports of the PMHEB in particular note the work of these committees with statements like these:

The work of the Board through its Committees of management is reported to have been harmoniously conducted.[100]

The Committees of Management of the various endowments do their work well as consultative bodies, and the public which attend the various mosques appear to be well content with the conduct of their internal affairs.[101]

The Committees of management have done their work satisfactorily.[102]

---

[99]Ordinance No. XVII of 1905, 'An Ordinance for the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious Charitable Endowments,' dated 8 September 1905.

[100]'Administrative Report, Penang 1908.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 6: 1908–1914*, 417.

[101]'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 109.

[102]'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1910,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 337.

> The Committees of management have done their work well.[103]

> The Committees of management for the different endowments have worked well.[104]

There are occasional statements which suggest that there might have been some dissatisfaction with the management committees as noted in the two following excerpts, but no further details or elaborations are forthcoming in the reports. We also know there were resignations and the Board expressed the view that it was difficult to find appropriate candidates for appointment to the committees:

> The Committees of Management on the whole have done their work well. Mr. SYED HUSAIN AL IDRUS, one of the members of the Committees of Management of the Captian Kling Mosque, retired and had been succeeded by Mr. H.G.SARWAR.[105]

> The Committee of Management have on the whole done their work well. Towards the end of the year Mr. A. O. Merican resigned his place on the Committee of Management of the Captain Kling Mosque. The Board have been unable at present to find a suitable successor to fill the vacancy owing to the inability of the most eligible men to find time for these duties.[106]

I also find it striking that under the direction of the Boards, religious personnel such as *kathi* and priest, were included in the management committees of mosques and temples. For the S. K. Bahari Temple in Penang, we note the following:

> Messrs. M. GOPAL DAS and H. TOOLSERAN were appointed by the Board in the month of November 1915, to form a Committee of management of this temple with the priest and the Secretary of the Endowments Board.[107]

The Malacca Board adopted a similar practice in the management of the Kampong Ulu Mosque in Malacca:

> The Board decided to appoint the Kathi of Kampong Ulu Mosque to be ex-officio a member and Chairman of the Committee of Management.[108]

A rare example of the actual work done on the ground by the management committees comes from the annual report of the SMHEB for the year 1915:

---

[103] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1911,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 69.

[104] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1911.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 6: 1908–1914*, 512.

[105] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1913,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 30.

[106] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1914,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 213.

[107] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1915,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 27.

[108] 'Administrative Report, Penang 1919.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the SS, 1855–1941, Vol. 7: 1915–1921*, 223.

> The Native Committees of Management or 'Panchayat' continued to do very useful work
> in checking the receipts of money, correcting abuses and shortcomings, settling disputes
> among the worshippers, etc.[109]

Apart from conveying substantive details about the role of the *panchayat*, we also get a sense from this excerpt that the administration and management of endowments may have been less than perfect, in the references to 'correcting abuses and shortcomings' and 'settling disputes'. The committees were clearly charged with managing the day-to-day affairs of specific religious institutions and handled whatever problems there might have been on the ground. Yet, they could not act autonomously and certainly had no control over any financial resources the institution possessed. Since the MHEB was legally charged with appointing the native committees of management committees of the various religious endowments, it was in a position to exercise a degree of authority over them. Indeed, the historical records we have access to suggest that the committees were directly under the supervision of the MHEB.

Thus, we see that the 'administration' of religious endowments involved many different parties/personnel and entailed many layers of control; and the power radiated/diffused downwards in a highly hierarchical mode. This is not to say that parties down the line were completely lacking in power and authority. It is certainly true that the management committees, for example, did not have control over the finances of the religious endowments but they exercised authority *vis-à-vis* other parties down the 'food chain', such as the temple and mosque staff who were employees of the Board. I have not been able to locate very many instances of tensions between the Board and the Committees of Management, although this does not mean that they did not exist. In any case, any disputes and conflicts would not be reported in public records and documents. One major incident involving a tussle for control over the management of the Sri Mariammn Temple is reported obliquely in the minutes of SMHEB meetings. The Caulker[110] community, responsible for building the Draupadi sanctum at the temple, bringing fire-walking into the temple premises and organizing it, gradually became entrenched into the management of the temple between the 1930s and 1950s. Technically, although the temple was under the purview of the MHEB during the said years, it was only in 1959 that the 'MHEB took total control of the temple'.[111] It is clear that the Boards needed to establish workable relations with the 'Committees of Management', upon whom they relied to attend to all 'non-financial affairs' of the temple. Occasionally, and not surprisingly, we hear of tensions between the committees of management and the endowment personnel, for instance at the Mariamman Temple in Singapore:

---

[109] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1915,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 25.

[110] Also known as the 'Kalapathukkarars,' who specialized in the repair of boats, and originated from the Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu (Hindu Endowments Board 2009, 15).

[111] Ibid. 16.

> The constant friction between priests and managers at this temple lessened on the return of Mr. R. SINGARAM PILLAI from India, and the retirement of the acting manager, Mr. GOVINDA PILLAI.[112]

There are rare glimpses in the annual reports of problems in the management of temples, which may have been due to personality clashes or disagreements about how to run the affairs of the temple. There were sometimes complaints about misconduct of temple staff:

> Mariamman Kovil: A petition was presented to the Board in September charging the Brahmin at this temple with misconduct, ceremonial and financial. It was referred to the temple Committee for report. The Committee found the first charge unfounded, and in the matter of the second charge recommended a minute account-taking for a period of three months. This recommendation was adopted, and the account was commenced in November.[113]

The investigations prompted by the petition the Board received were extremely consequential as they set into motion a chain of events, including the changes in the management and staff of the Mariamman Temple, and most importantly instituted a new method of collecting vow monies for the temple revenue:

> The Native Committee of management has been made more efficient and new system of collecting temple revenue has been originated. The result shows an increase of over $1,800 under this head although this system was in force but six months.[114]

Behind the rhetoric of restoring order and eliminating chaos in the realm of religious endowments—a prime factor for the formulation of the MHEO—lay the actual management of properties and other resources of endowments that were vested in the Board. The management of endowments meant handling their financial affairs and keeping proper accounts, something previous managers of the endowments had neglected to do, thus, the need for objective and impartial intervention. To understand the significance of the Board's new responsibility, it is helpful to know the revenue of endowments. What was the magnitude of funds the Board was handling? The scale of assets varied considerably across the Boards and the endowments they managed. For example, the Malacca Board, which administered a single endowment vested in the Kampong Ulu Mosque, nonetheless had considerable property:

> The property of the mosque consists of 21 shops and dwelling-houses in the Town of Malacca, a piece of sawah at Tranquerah, a piece of land at Kubu, one at Bukit China,

---

[112] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1913,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 28.

[113] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1913,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 28.

[114] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1914,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 211.

one at Bunga Raya and another at Pengkalan Rama, also two burial grounds at Pengkalan Rama and Pringgit—these are still in use.[115]

Of the three Boards, the PMHEB was the most active soon after it was constituted. Already in 1908, it was administering a total of 7 endowments, the number increasing to 9 in 1909 and 10 by 1912. The details of revenue and expenditure for the endowments it was administering reveal tremendous variation: Its principal endowment was the Captain Kling Mosque, which in 1909 had a revenue of $17,402.71, while its smallest endowment, the Jelutong Mosque, was generating a mere $240.84.[116] Continuing with the same example, the revenue of the Captain Kling Mosque had increased to a total of $22,725.73 in 1911. Through these early years, the three Boards were involved in schemes of renting, rebuilding and repairing the various properties of the endowments using the available funds with a view to increasing their revenue ultimately. As the Secretary of the SMHEB reports for the year 1914,

> The Seranggong Road building scheme was completed at a total cost of just over $48,000 and all the houses have been constantly occupied at rentals which are now returning about 16 per cent on the capital expended [. . .] By the completion of the above building scheme the financial position of all the three endowments administered by this Board has been made stronger and safer.[117]

The report proceeds to compare the incomes and expenditure of the three endowments between 1908 and 1914: The income had risen during this period from $3,384.81 to $11,243.01 and the surplus from $198.68 to $5,078.99. No doubt these impressive figures were cited to make the point that the Board was administering the endowments efficiently by managing its financial affairs without prejudice, purely with the intention of enhancing the value of the properties and other assets.

Some of the work undertaken by the Board was rather elaborate and grand in scale. A good example comes from the renovations of the Captain Kling Mosque in Penang and the money expended in this project can be described as extravagant. Of course, this endowment was the wealthiest of the lot and often loans for renovations and rebuilding of other endowments were made possible by a loan from the surplus funds of the mosque. The endeavour to rebuild the Captain Kling Mosque lasted about 2 years, at the end of which the Board reported on the outcome thus:

> *Captain Kling Mosque*: The repairs, alterations and renovations to this mosque have at last been completed for a total cost of $26,000 and include the rebuilding of the main dome,

[115] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 110.

[116] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office. 108.

[117] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1914,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 211.

the construction of new loggias, the relaying of the whole floor with Italian marble, and the installation of electric lighting.[118]

In the next year, further structural developments were planned to enhance the overall appearance of the mosque and of its neighbourhood, including acquiring and pulling down (with requisite compensation) 'old shop houses'[119] existing on mosque land. The Board reports on the proposed improvements and anticipates the final outcome with some pride:

> *Captain Kling Mosque*: On the vacant land thus left it is proposed to erect this year, at an estimated cost of about $7,000, a minaret which will stand about 96 feet high. The plans for this minaret drawn up by the Board's Architect, Mr. H. A. NEUBRONNER, have been already approved by the Board and it is intended to start work shortly. The Captain Kling Mosque with the addition of this minaret will, it is stated, be the finest building of its kind in the Colony.[120]

Clearly, money was not an issue for this endowment, and the Board could afford to allocate $7,758 for the building of the minaret and a further $3,900 for the new Ablution Tank for the mosque. But it is important to add that this was not the situation with all of the endowments under the control of the Penang Board.

For the same period, a contrasting example comes from the experience of the Malacca Board as it sought to reduce the expenditure of its one endowment. The Secretary of the Malacca Board reports as follows:

> Wages had to be increased, [sic] Mosque ceremonies cost more, and $2,070 was spent in repairs to property. The credit balance at the close of the year was $13,507.[121]

> The financial position of the Kampong Ulu Mosque which the Board controls continued to be satisfactory. Expenditure on mosque ceremonies was more closely scrutinized and a reduction effected.[122]

Another similar experience can be abstracted from the minutes of the SMHEB's meeting in the late 1930s with reference to the expenses for the festival of fire-walking. The money given to the Committee of Management of Mariamman Temple augmented from $300 in 1937 to $693.50 in 1939. In view of this increase, the Board makes the following resolution:

---

[118] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1913,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 29.

[119] 'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1914,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 212.

[120] Ibid. 213.

[121] Administrative Report, Penang 1918.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements* 1855–1941, *Vol. 7: 1915–1921*, 501.

[122] Administrative Report, Penang 1919.' In Robert L. Jarman (ed.) *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements* 1855–1941, *Vol. 7: 1915–1921*, 223.

> It was resolved that the Management Committee be informed that economy should be observed in the matter of fire-walking expenses for 1940.[123]

The Boards were preoccupied with increasing revenues and reducing expenditure, as these examples show in relation to the money spent on 'mosque ceremonies' and 'fire-walking expenses'. Unfortunately the minutes do not provide details of the context in which these statements were made or how a reduction was effected or if there was any resistance to this action. But this observation carries enormous weight for my purpose in seeking to demonstrate that the administration of endowments and the prioritizing of its financial health affected the religious domain as well—a discussion I embark on in Chapter 6.

4.3.1 Advisory Boards in the Straits Settlements

The MHEB was but one group of organizations centred on specific native religious communities in the SS that were formed in the early decades of the twentieth century. These were the various advisory boards attached to religious communities of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. It is noteworthy that there was no legal basis for the foundation of these advisory bodies and, by definition, their role was purely consultative, i.e., not very different from the management committees created for the different endowments. Their role was clearly defined by their nomenclature: They were semi-government bodies and served to advise the Colonial Government on matters pertaining to Islam and Hinduism. It was rather ironic that in the early days, this too was constituted exclusively by British officials. The appointment of only Europeans as members was resented and resisted by Muslims and Hindus. The TRA appealed to the Colonial Government for Hindus to have a greater say in the management of their religion, including in the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB), where the question of proper representation continued to be raised. While in 1927, seven members of the Singapore HAB were Tamil Hindus, in 1932 the Board was reconstituted and Tamil representation was reduced to four members without any explanation.[124] It was only with the restructuring of the HAB in 1949 that greater numbers of representative nominees from all groups of Hindus were appointed to the Board.[125] Additionally, lacking a legal, formal basis for their establishment, they did not have any statutory authority and, thus, their role in practice was rather limited. Thus, for example, they could only petition or request the MHEB on certain matters, but did not have the legal authority to press their case or enforce any changes. In fact, the local assessment of these consultative bodies was not positive and they were read as ineffectual. A case in point emerges from discussions involving the need for a Mohammedan Advisory Board (MAB) in Malacca, which (in comparison to Penang and Singapore) was founded fairly late in the day, only in 1935. We

---

[123] Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 8 August 1940.

[124] Nair (1972, 27).

[125] Arasaratnam (1970, 166).

know that a Muslim Advisory Board and an HAB were instituted in Singapore and Penang in 1915. The Singapore Mohammedan Advisory Board was founded in 1915 and was known in Malay as the 'Majlis Keraja'an Penasihat Islam'.[126] The then-Colonial Secretary, Mr. R. J. Wilkinson, had described the latter as a 'lidah' (Malay for 'tongue') for Muslims, suggesting that the Board should be used as a vehicle for making representations to the government.[127] Interestingly, no such boards were then formed for Malacca. Presumably, given the small Hindu population in Malacca and the fact that no Hindu temples were placed under the administration of the Malacca MHEB, an HAB was not deemed to be necessary or relevant. Surprisingly though, no MAB was founded for Malacca in these early years. However, in the late 1920s there was certainly a desire for this on the part of some members of the Malaccan Muslim community but opinion on the subject was divided. A lengthy article 'Malacca Muslims not to have Board; Failure of 5 Years of Pressure', which appeared in the local English daily *The Straits Times* on 19 December 1934, helps us to reconstruct this segment of the Malacca story. In 1929, the Muslim community in Malacca had appealed directly to the SS government for the establishment of the named board in Malacca, a request which was turned down. In mid-1933, another request was made through the Straits Association Malacca, with the support of prominent Malacca Muslims, but this also met with failure. These successive rejections were puzzling and the writer of the article, a Mr. Abdul, reflects on this turn of events thus:

> This request has again, after a lapse of 15 months been rejected by the authorities, on the ground it is said, that a Mohammedan Advisory Board is not desirable for Malacca. Muslims in Malacca, and also in Singapore and Penang, wonder why a request by the Malacca Muslims, backed apparently by such an influential and important body as the S.S. (M) Association, for the establishment of a Board, the creation of which would not be harmful but useful to the authorities, should be turned down. Perhaps the fact that the Malacca Muslims, are not unanimous on this subject, that there are a small minority, who opposes, for some reason or other, the establishment of such a Board, has something to do with the rejection by the authorities.[128]

Mr. Abdul does not specify why there was opposition to the idea of an MAB in Malacca, but further events reveal the grounds for the lack of consensus on the subject. Interestingly, barely 8 months after the second request was turned down, we learn that Malacca was to have its own Mohammedan Board.[129] The earlier indisposition towards the founding of such a body seems to have been roused by an assessment of the ineptitude of the two Mohammedan Advisory Boards in Singapore and Penang. A cluster of the Malacca Muslim community argued that given the ineffectiveness of the boards in the latter, it was pointless to have one in Malacca. A Mr. Ahmad from Malacca had opposed the plan to have a Board but later

---

[126] 'Malacca Muslims not to have a Board,' *The Straits Times*, 19 December 1934.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] 'Advisory Board for Malacca,' *The Straits Times*, 1 August 1935.

changed his position and became an advocate instead. His early criticism stemmed his negative appraisal of the Singapore Mohammedan Board, which he

> [. . .] did not find of any practical use to the community particularly when some vital questions affecting the Moslem community were down by the Board as it thought that its function was to advise the Government only when asked to advise.[130]

However, Mr. Ahmad was convinced of the feasibility of the Board in Malacca 'due to the prompt action taken by the Singapore Mohammedan Advisory Board in regard to the inspection of Muslim female passengers arriving in Singapore'.[131] In his own words:

> Now it appears that the Board has changed its attitude and is prepared to advise the Government on any question affecting Moslem interest without the Government asking for advice. Compare the chairman's correspondence with the Colonial Secretary in respect of the Post health officials of Singapore and the need for a female inspector to examine female passengers arriving at Singapore, and the Government's prompt inquiry and explanation of the particular occurrence and the assurance that a female inspector is employed to inspect female passengers.[132]

Given his altered position, Mr. Ahmad argued that a Board would be essential for the backward Muslim community in Malacca provided that suitable appointments are made:

> [. . .] for the backward Moslem community of Malacca it is absolutely necessary to have a Mohammedan Advisory Board, if suitable members with knowledge of Islamic laws and men of progressive ideas permitted by Quran and Holy traditions are available [. . .] If the Board, consisting of really suitable persons, can be created, I am sure the uplift of the most backward local community—the Malays—will be greatly accelerated. Let the question be discussed again for the benefit of the Moslem public.[133]

In contrast to the suspicions of the Malacca Muslim community about the need for an advisory board, the Hindu leadership of Malaya seemed to welcome bodies like the MHEB and the HAB with open arms and with great enthusiasm. A good example is the view expressed by the Hindu leadership of the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1933. It argued that it would be viable to have a body like the MHEB in the FMS 'for safeguarding Hindu endowments'.[134] This idea was presented at a public meeting convened in Kuala Lumpur to 'consider the feasibility of requesting the Government' in this regard. Interestingly, the meeting involved the editor of Tamil Nesan, Mr. K. Narasinha Iyengar, and the notice which called for the meeting articulated the rationale and object of such a gathering:

> Enactments for ensuring proper administration of Hindu temples and endowments have been in force in Ceylon for a long time, in the SS since 1906 and in the Madras Presidency since 1923. These enactments were passed at the request of the Hindu public and with

---

[130] 'Advisory Board for Malacca,' *The Straits Times*, 1 August 1935.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid

[134] 'Hindu Endowments; Government asked to assist,' *The Straits Times*, 18 July 1933.

the concurrence of the leaders of the community. After the passing of these enactments there have been no quarrels and litigations concerning Hindu religious properties in the above-mentioned countries. As the properties belonging to Hindu temples in Singapore and Penang have been properly administered those temples have become rich and are always kept in good condition. New temples have also been built in the modern style. But there is no such enactment in the Federated Malay States. As the result of the mismanagement of Hindu religious endowments in these states there have been frequently strife and litigation in the Hindu community. The Hindu public has lost its confidence and faith in the present system of management of the religious properties. In order that such strife and disorder may be prevented in future and that Hindu endowments may be well cared for it is necessary that a 'Hindu Endowments Bill' should be enacted for the Federated Malay States.[135]

Citing precedence from Ceylon, India and the SS, the conveners offered a glowing endorsement of the existing legislation in these places and asked for the meeting to pass resolutions requesting the Colonial Government for a similar law in the FMS and for such a bill to be framed by the Hon. Mr. S. Veerasamy. When put to a vote, 'the meeting, with the exception of four individuals, was overwhelmingly in favour of the two resolutions'.[136] There was, however, some concern that 'the Bill would invite Europeans to come and interfere with their religion', but the conveners explained that with proper management this would not happen. Reiterating the arguments and evidence that had been cited to bring into effect the 1906 MHEO, the Chairman of the meeting declared 'it was high time they approached the Government to set their affairs in order as they had been unable to do it themselves'.[137] There was also a great deal of optimism about what the desired law would achieve and a confidence that Hindus themselves would be appointed to the Board. The latter was somewhat misplaced given the experiences and reality of the MHEB, to which as we have seen no Hindu members were appointed until 1949. Gordon P. Means observes that during the colonial period, Islam was recognized as the official religion in the nine Malay states, including the former four FMS[138] but not in the SS:

> In the three Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore religious policies were governed by the laws of England, as modified by local circumstances. In these three colonies Islam enjoyed no special status, and every religious community was guaranteed equal rights to practice, preach and propagate its faith.[139]

By contrast, the Malay states having adopted a rather different religious policy continued along this route even after the Second World War. To complicate matters, varied policies with respect to the different religious communities in these states were in force. The focus here was on Islam and the administration of Muslim affairs through the founding of Departments of Religion.[140] However, while Islam was supported as a state religion in the FMS, this was not the case in Penang and Malacca,

---

[135]Ibid.

[136]Ibid.

[137]'Hindu Endowments; Government asked to assist,' *The Straits Times*, 18 July 1933.

[138]Means (1978).

[139]Ibid. footnote 6.

[140]Means (1978, 388).

where 'it enjoyed no privileged status, and no government department or Council of Religion assumed responsibilities for administering Muslim affairs'[141] until the Merdeka Constitution in 1957, which made Islam the state religion in the entire Federation of Malaysia. There was no state engagement with administering affairs of the non-Muslim communities in these territories. No such law was thus passed for the administration of Hindu endowments in the FMS, where religious policies took a rather different turn given the history of the Colonial state's engagement with the sphere of religion.

For Hindus in the SS, the decision to establish the MHEB and the advisory boards was to ensure order and efficiency in the affairs of the local Hindu community. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the two Boards seemed to have existed quite independently from each other, with different sets of members and with clearly defined functions: The role of the MHEBs was highly circumscribed having been provided for legally and in particular the authorization to manage the funds and finances relating to these. The stated function of the advisory boards was to advise the Colonial Government on matters connected with Hindu worship and practice. However, without any Hindu members, it was certainly not seen to represent the interests of the local Hindu communities.

For the SS in general, it is critical to ask what the actual effects of the MHEO and MHEB were. Indeed, were they successful in achieving their intended effects of instituting order and removing chaos? I offer a response by turning to the specifics of the Singaporean Hindu case. But, first, I sketch the contemporary Hindu scene on the island, specifically the status of temples within. This discussion is critical to assess the influence of the MHEB on the four Hindu temples it administered and on others by force of example, imitation and self-regulation, both historically and in the present.

The next chapter details an institutional history of the SMHEB, conveys the scope of the 'work' it undertook and reflects on the consequences of the tasks it performed. This discussion enables me to make a key point. There is a prevailing sentiment amongst scholars, laypersons and, indeed, members of the current Boards themselves that the role of the MHEB in the past and that of its future incarnation, the SHEB and the PHEB, was to simply 'administer endowments'. The data I furnish next challenge this reading. My position is that an analytical and critical approach requires one to ask what was meant by 'administration' of temples and mosques, by scrutinizing what these appointed Boards did in practice, and thus look beyond what was articulated in official pronouncements about their intended function and role. Certainly the discrepancy between 'what is said' and 'what is done' would be crucial to follow through. But more than this, the data and analysis I present next confirm that the rhetorical power of what is said tends to often obscure what is actually done, revealing yet again the symbolic force of the former.

---

[141]Ibid. 389.

Chapter 5
Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board, 1905–1968: The Singapore Experience

5.1 Preamble

The Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (SMHEB) was founded in 1905. This chapter focuses on the 63 years of its existence, before it was re-named 'Hindu Endowments Board (HEB)'. One significant change that occurred in 1952 had to do with a change in nomenclature when the Board was designated as the Muslim and Hindu Endowments Board.[1] My aim is to reconstruct its institutional history, as well as to deliver a sense of how it functioned on the ground, outside the formal, official discourse—dictated by a legal document which specified its function in unambiguous terms. In addition to the MHEB reports carried in the larger *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*, I also had access to the minutes of meeting of the SMHEB, for the years 1907–1979. This additional material, a crucial primary source, enables me to present a nuanced account of the workings of the SMHEB, while at the same time facilitating a comparison with the data carried in the MHEB annual reports of the Straits Settlements (SS). Yet, it is important to recognize that the minutes, while supplementing the latter, are themselves not 'total' and 'all inclusive'. Nonetheless, they do allow a glimpse behind and beyond the discourse of officialdom. As I will demonstrate, in different ways, the minutes convey some of the difficulties, obstacles and challenges encountered by the Board in the course of accomplishing its business on a day-to-day basis. One also gets a more transparent view of how certain administrative decisions were made and by whom.

This discussion is presented in three parts: the first delimits the SMHEB's realm of jurisdiction, the second articulates the nature of the work performed by the Board and the third explores the Board's relationship with the large community/public in Singapore and beyond. These segments are sectioned thus to facilitate presentation of material but, as the following pages will make clear, the discussions overlap and intersect both substantively and analytically. Over a period of six decades, the Board

---

[1] Hindu Endowments Board 2009, p. 16. Interestingly, no discussion of this change in terminology appears in the minutes of the Board meetings. The new name does appear in the minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 1953.

witnessed changes in all areas of its constitution—in terms of its make-up, the mode through which it operated, the attitudes it reflected, as well as its practices. In its tenure, it has existed and has had to function under and negotiate different political scenarios, moving from the context of colonization to the Second World War, to the Japanese Occupation and to independent nationhood. Through these transformations it is possible to discern a remarkable uniformity in the way that the Board conducted its affairs over a period of 60 years. This by no means suggests that the Board remained static or that no significant shifts or moves occurred. Yet, I would argue for continuity with a historical tradition, rather than note abrupt ruptures. Given this notice of coherence in the discourse, it has been important for me to reflect on how best to present an institutional history of the SMHEB. I have avoided approaching the minutes via the method of straightforward chronology or in terms of a given historical sequence, structuring the data by time-periods or years. Rather, I have chosen to analyse this corpus of data using a substantive focus, that is, identifying specific issues and themes which I find interesting as points of entry into the affairs of the Board. Adopting this methodological tactic has allowed me to abstract relevant examples from across these six decades with reference to a discussion of particular issues. Even in this selection, as I move across timeframes, I have tried to preserve the integrity of context and circumstance, given their enormous value. Certainly, the Board has been constituted by different sets of individuals with varied attitudes, opinions, inclinations and sentiments. Acting within boundaries framed by the Ordinance, we see the Board members discoursing and negotiating various issues and problematics but always speaking in the end (at least in the recorded minutes) with a singular voice: The Board acted and decided, not its individual members. There appears to be no discord amongst its members, at least none that is reported. The Board had an identity and acted with an agency which persisted even as individuals who constituted it changed. It was after all a 'body corporate' organized according to a series of laws, rules and regulations, and it continued to function in a similar fashion over time, given that it was primarily a bureaucratic entity.

5.2   Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore: Its Realm of Jurisdiction

In comparison to its counterparts in Penang and Malacca, the SMHEB was somewhat unique in the sense that during its tenure of six decades, its administrative task covered a wide spectrum of minority religious traditions on the island. At various points, the Board administered the endowments vested in the institutions of the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and the Parsees. In this survey of the Board's jurisdiction, it is as important to note the areas that were not within its ambit of influence. Notably, in relation to mosques, the Board only dealt with religious institutions of Indian Muslim communities and not those of the Malay Muslims on the island. This is not surprising as the early agreements about a 'hands-off' policy towards

the customs and traditions of the Malay community were binding enough to still be in force in the twentieth century. There seems to have been no attempt to legislate the administration or supervision of mosques and other related institutions founded and managed by members of the Malay community. We know that the parameters of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Ordinance (MHEO) extended to include the 'Buddhist' community as a subsection of the 'Hindu' community but no Buddhist endowment was ever administered by the Board. As a larger comparative statement, the affairs of the large Chinese Buddhist/Taoist community and the non-European Christian communities remained outside the province of legislation. As far as I have been able to determine, Christian churches[2] and Chinese Buddhist and Taoist[3] temples did not come under the administrative purview of colonial authorities in the same way that Hindu temples, Indian Muslim mosques and Sikh *gurdwaras* did. With the exception of the Malay community, a preliminary observation suggests that the 'minority-majority' status of the religious community was a determining factor in this. On the basis of the discussions in Chapters 3 and 4, it would seem that the Colonial Government felt justified in 'interfering' in the affairs of the local Indian community (which was seen as a migrant community) and did not adopt a hands-off attitude, as was the case with the Malay community. Yet, it is curious why the affairs of the other migrant group, the ethnic Chinese, were not similarly scrutinized. This is even more of a puzzle in view of the 'problems' that the British Colonial Government encountered with the Chinese community in the SS, including in Singapore. Of course, the British were familiar with the experience of handling Hindu and Muslim communities given their encounter with these religious communities in the Indian context. They had no such experience with the Chinese community. Furthermore, the ways in which the various ethnic communities were conceptualized by the colonial authorities was also a factor: in India, the Indian community was marked primarily by religion (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Parsee and Sikh) thanks to pre-existing Indological and Orientalist discourses. However, for the Chinese community in the SS, religion was not deemed to be a principal defining feature—the group was rather stereotypically approached as being motivated by, and absorbed with, economic concerns.

The SMHEB was constituted in 1905, as its counterpart in Penang was. Upon the direction of the Colonial Government by an order made on 20 September 1907, the work of the Board began with the administrative responsibility of two Hindu

---

[2]Expectedly, there was no regulatory body for churches in the Straits Settlements in the nineteenth century. The National Council of Churches of Singapore was formed in 1948 and the Singapore Council of Christian Churches in 1956.

[3]Similar regulatory bodies were not established for the Buddhist and Taoist temples, which were managed privately or by the Chinese community. The Chinese Advisory Board (CAB) was established in 1889 to provide a formal link between the British Colonial Government and the Chinese community. It served as a forum for raising concerns and grievances but had no legislative standing and, thus, no power and influence. It also had no authority over the socio-cultural affairs of the large Chinese community. There was also the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce from which the Chinese members of the Legislative Council were drawn.

temples, 'Shetti Vinayagar and Gothanda Ramaswamy Mariamman Temple'[4] and 'Sri Narasimha Perumal Kovil'.[5] The minutes of the SMHEB's meeting of 11 September 1907 read as follows:

> With reference to the Endowment of the Mariamman kovil South Bridge Rd and the Perumal kovil Seranggoon Rd, the following witnesses were examined—V. Nagappa Chettiar, S. T. Sivanadacham, D. N. Veerasamy, H. Somapah, Suhamani. It is decided to report to the Governor that this is an endowment which is not being properly managed, and which should be administered by the Board.[6]

The Board also sought to secure the title deeds in relation to the lands and properties of the two temples under its charge, acting with the awareness of a landlord:

> The Secretary reports that he has been informed that there are certain Title Deeds referring to the Temple properties in the keeping of Messrs Drew & Napier. Resolved that a letter be written to Messrs Drew & Napier inquiring whether this is so and asking that in the event of our information being correct, the deeds be delivered to the Board.[7]

In the early days, the Board in taking over these two temples as part of 'Endowment I', and assuming their managerial responsibility, had to settle some outstanding matters, such as arrears of pay of 'servants of temples whose salaries have not been paid up to date',[8] paying previous managers of the Mariamman Temple for expenses incurred during the 'Thimari festival',[9] calling for the assessment of the value of endowments and their insurance,[10] addressing irregularities in the temple accounts,[11] as well as ensuring the safekeeping of valuables, such as temple jewellery.[12] The Board members also revealed a compassionate side, as seen in the following example:

> The Secretary reports that Abirmai the widow of Narasinga Naidu the founder of Narasinga Perumal kovil is now in Singapore destitute and that she has applied to him for assistance. Resolved that accommodation be provided for her at Perumal kovil [sic] that an allowance of $4 p.m. be made to her.[13]

In addition to the noted instances of what would be legitimately considered more serious affairs occupying the Board members' energies, the latter also find

---

[4]The SMHEB took over the management of the Mariamman and Perumal temples in 1907, followed by Kaliamman Temple in 1909, and finally Sivan Temple in 1915.

[5]Hindu Endowments Board (2005, 60).

[6] The minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 1907 were penned and signed by the Board Secretary on 23 May 1908.

[7]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 23 May 1908.

[8]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 November 1907.

[9]Ibid. This is a reference to the fire-walking festival which had been held at the Mariamman Temple since at least the 1850s.

[10]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 23 May 1908.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 November 1907.

[13]Ibid.

themselves having to attend to less momentous concerns. Interestingly, these also find mention in the minutes of the meeting together with other matters as dismissal of temple staff and the appropriate disposal of temple cattle and pigeons:

> The questions of the dismissal of Palani Pandaram and of the disposal of the cattle and pigeons belonging to the temples are referred to the Committee of Management.[14]

> With reference to the Cattle at the temple in Serangoon Rd, the Municipality having refused to consent to the erection of a cattle shed in the temple grounds, it is resolved that the Secretary approach the trustees of the Chetty Temple with the view of making some arrangement by which the cattle may be kept on the Chetties' cattle farm at Bedok. As to the pigeons at the Mariamman kovil it is decided that the . . .. [text illegible] birds be removed to Perumal kovil where further coops be built for them.[15]

By 1909, the Board is administering a total of three endowments, with the takeover of a Hindu temple and the Parsee Charity Lodge. This is reported in the Board's annual report for 1909:

> Two new endowments have been handed over to the Board during the year 1909:

> (1) The Hindu Temple, 'Kaliamman Kovil,' at Orchard Road, and
> (2) The Parsee Lodge Charity near Tanjong Pagar.[16]

The minutes of Board meeting add the following important information about the 'handing over' of the Kaliamman Kovil:

> An application from a number of Hindus interested in the Hindu temple known as 'Kaliamman Kovil' off Orchard Road is next considered and on hearing the report of the Secretary it is decided that a recommendation be made to His Excellency that the management of the Endowment of that Temple be handed over to the Board.[17]

> Kaliamman Kovil: Orchard Rd: It is decided that a letter be written to Mr. R. G. van Joneson [text unclear] Solicitor for the plaintiff in an action which has been brought in the Supreme Court regarding this Endowment, inviting his attention to provisions of Sec 13 of Ord: XVII of 1905, pointing out that he has not obtained the sanction of the Board to prosecute an action and enquiring what he proposes to do. The Board is unanimously of opinion that the action should not be allowed to proceed further, but that they should themselves enquire into the matter and establish what is due to the Endowment without going to Court, if possible. It is resolved in the meantime to register against houses . . .. [text illegible] Orchard Road the Government notification handing over this Endowment to the Board, if it can be done.[18]

> Kaliamman Kovil: Orchard Road: Read the Secretary's memo of the 3rd Sept 09 and the letter from Messrs Braddell . . .. [text illegible] regarding the accounts of this Endowment and the claim of K. Velu against it. It is decided to postpone consideration of K. Velu's

---

[14]Ibid.

[15]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 July 1908.

[16]'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909', in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements, 1909*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 107.

[17]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 January 1909.

[18]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 January 1909.

claim till the accounts have been gone into. Sanction is passed meanwhile for the Secretary to obtain the assistance of an architect in scrutinizing Naraiana Padayatchy's accounts.[19]

Accounts of Kaliamman Kovil: The Secretary reports that after his going into the accounts of the Kaliamman Kovil Endowment the balance of $1306.66 found due to the mortgagee has been paid off[20] and a reconveyance of the property to the Board obtained. This has necessitated a loan from Mariamman Kovil to Kaliamman Kovil of $660—bearing interest at the rate of 6% per annum. Naraiana Padayatchy has been informed by letter that there is a balance of $581.71 due by him to the Endowment. He has been sent no formal reply but he has been to see the Secretary and disputes the reports the results arrived at. The Secretary further reports that there have been 2 petitions made to the Governor for the restitution of Naraiana Padayatchy as trustee of Kaliamman Kovil but that the Governor saw no reason to revise his order that the Endowment be administered by the Board.[21]

This series of statements allows us to make several inferences: one, that the endowments in question were not simply 'handed over'; two, the takeover was far from a straightforward affair; three, there were many loose ends that had to be tied up in assuming administrative charge of new endowments—involving both paying out monies owed to former trustees and claiming from the same, monies owed to the Board as the new trustees; and four, there is some evidence of challenge and contestation from previous managers, trustees and officials of religious institutions to the Board's takeover bid. These challenges included recourse to the Courts, with little regard for Section 13 of Ordinance XVII of 1905, which required the Board's sanction for any legal prosecution against any endowment managed by the Board.

The annual report of the SMHEB for 1915 states the acquisition of yet another endowment, attached to a Hindu temple, by the Board:

The Sivan Temple, Orchard Road has been taken over by the Board under an Order of the Governor in Council, dated 18th October, 1915, and made in consequence of a report by the Board under section 4(1), (2), (3) of the Ordinance. This temple has been much neglected in every way and most of its property has disappeared. The worshippers are few and the temple cannot be made more attractive to them owing want of funds, lack of space and bad situation. The convicts and laundrymen for whom it was originally intended have died out or left the neighborhood and it is now more of an annoyance than a benefit to its neighbours. Removal to a larger and better site would probably improve its prospects and finances.

The minutes of the Board meeting held between 12 October 1914 and 18 July 1916 furnish greater and better details of the circumstances leading to the takeover of the Sivan Temple in Orchard Road:

The Sivan Temple in Orchard Road: The Secretary also submits to the Board a petition signed by about 100 influential worshippers of the above temple praying that the affairs of this temple be administered by the Board as they are dissatisfied with the management and there are no trustees of the property of this temple and after some discussion the Board

---

[19]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 September 1909.

[20]This information is carried in the annual report of the SMHEB for 1910, but without all other details.

[21]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 April 1910.

unanimously decided to report it to the Governor in Council in accordance with section 4(2) of the Ordinance.[22]

At its next meeting, the Board quickly backtracks on this hasty decision merely on the basis of a petition without first undertaking an investigation as required of it by the 1905 Ordinance:

> With reference to the petition previously brought before the Board, it is resolved that before making any report an enquiry should be made into statements contained in the said petition (1) as to there being no trustees and (2) as to there being mis-management of the affairs of the temple by Messrs Millard and Rodesse under sections 9 & 10 of the Ord. and that Mr. [unclear text]'s assistance be obtained, if possible.[23]

The Board Secretary presents his report into the enquiry, as well as the evidence of witnesses he had interviewed in relation to this endowment. The Board also decides to examine a Kana Ramasamy Pillay alias Ramasamy Raja before its decision to report him to the Governor:

> Kana Ramasamy Pillay the manager is examined under oath by the Chairman as to the affairs of the temple. It was afterwards resolved to report to the Governor that this Endowment should be administered by the Board for the reasons mentioned in section 4 of the Ordinance.[24]

The endowment is finally taken over on 21 October 1915 on the basis of an order made by the Governor in Council. The Board Secretary reports that an inventory was taken of valuables found in the temple. Furthermore, he adds,

> On the recommendation of the Native Committee of Management a Brahmin priest has been appointed to perform the religious ceremonies and to take all fees on payment of $15 a month to the Board in order to cover the cost of lighting and of the water supply. The affairs of this temple have been much neglected and it is hoped that under the present arrangement the priest will take keener interest in improving them.[25]

However, the discovery of the original grant of the site of the Sivan Temple poses some unexpected difficulties about both the future of the temple on the given site and its takeover by the Board:

> The secretary reports that a certified copy of the original grant of the site of this temple which had just been obtained for the purpose of registration under the Ordinance shows that the land was originally granted to Ghoosain Hindus on the express condition that if the land or temple on it was no longer used by these Hindus the grant would become null and void. That the Ghoosian Hindus being no longer in existence either as a community or individually Government might be referred to in order to ascertain if they wish to resume possession of the land or to allow other Hindus to make use of it.[26]

---

[22] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 12 October 1914.

[23] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 November 1914.

[24] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 16 September 1915.

[25] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 16 December 1915.

[26] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 10 May 1916.

A brief follow-up discussion of this matter appears in the minutes of the next meeting, but it is rather ambiguous and does not clarify how the dilemma created by the condition in the original deed was eventually solved:

> The Secretary reports that the opinion of the Hindus is opposed to the removal of this temple and it is decided not to proceed with this matter.[27]

There is no further mention of this issue in subsequent minutes; there are data here, however, to confirm that the Board had, in fact, assumed administration of the Sivan Temple and its endowments, and the question of the original deed was no longer consequential.

According to the MHEB Audit Report of 1925, the SMHEB was administering six endowments vested in four Hindu temples, one Sikh *gurdwara*, one mosque and the Parsee Lodge Charity.[28] Over the next few years, the Board took over the management and administration of two other mosques.[29] The administration of endowments vested in mosques and Hindu temples was explicitly provided for in the MHEO, and in practice there was no ambiguity on the part of the Board members in making a decision about whether these religious institutions should be taken over by the Board. In the case of the Parsee Lodge Charity, however, some questions were raised and here the definition of the word 'Hindu' assumed enormous importance:

> The Chairman brings before the Board an application which has been made to him as Attorney General, by Mr. R. P. Van ??? acting on behalf of one Mancharjee Padamjee (?) for leave to bring an action for the removal of the present trustees of the Parsee Lodge Charity at Tanjong Pagar. The question is first considered whether this is an Endowment falling within the scope of the M & H Endowment Ordinance, in view of the definition of Hindu in Sec 2 thereof. The Board is unanimously of opinion that Parsees are now Natives of India and that the application is consequently are for the consideration of the Board. On the question whether the authority asked for should be granted. The Boards is of opinion that it would be to the advantage of the Endowment that it should be administered by the Board and the Secretary is directed to report to H. E. The Governor accordingly. It is suggested, however, that notices might be issued calling on any who may be concerned to state any objections they may have to this course.[30]

---

[27] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 December 1916.

[28] Hindu Endowments Board (2005) *Beyond Divine Doors*. Singapore: Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple, 61.

[29] In all, the endowments administered by the SMHEB were as follows:

Endwoment I – The Sri Mariamman Kovil and Sri Narasimha Perumal Kovil
Endowment II – Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Kovil
Endwoment III – Parsee Lodge Charity
Endowment IV – Sri Sivan Kovil
Endowment V – Jamea Masjid, Kuchu Palli and Nagore Durgah, and Gafoor Mosque
Endowment VI – Sikh Temple, Queen Street.

[30] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 September 1909.

The issuing of notices about the proposed administration of a particular endowment seemed to be part of the Board's standard operating procedure. Yet, the objections, when they were forthcoming, seldom served to reverse the decision of the Governor,[31] an issue that surfaced in the case of the Parsee Lodge Charity:

> Read a letter from the Colonial Secretary asking for the opinion of the Board on a petition by the Parsis of Singapore, in which they ask that the order made by the Governor for the administration of this endowment by the Board be withdrawn. The Board sees difficulty in cancelling the order made and is further of opinion considering the past history of this endowment, it cannot safely be left to the unassisted management of the Parsi community.[32]

Together with the Parsee community, the Sikhs of Singapore also resisted the SMHEB's takeover of endowments vested in their religious institutions. The Muslim and Hindu communities had welcomed and even initiated the Board's involvement with the supervision of their temples and mosques. In the archives that I have perused, I have not encountered evidence that subsequently any cluster of these communities resisted or opposed administrative control of religious endowments by the Board. The response of the Sikh community to the administration of the affairs of the Queen Street Gurdwara by the Board renders this a clear case of resistance to interference and takeover by colonial authorities. Additionally, this challenge to the government was highly successful, this being the only endowment which after being placed under the control of the Board was subsequently removed from its charge and given back to the community for self-governance. This was a rare decision in response to strong opposition from the small but vocal Sikh community in Singapore. It is critical, therefore, to narrate this story, in this context, possibly the only tale of resistance to government intervention in the administration of religious endowments.

The 'Queen Street Gurdwara', although built in 1921, traces its beginnings to the year 1912. The affairs of this gurdwara came under the supervision of the Board in 1917, a move that was at the time initiated and set into motion by a cluster of the Sikh community:

> Sikh Petition: A petition signed by over 450 Sikhs requesting the Board to take over the management and control of their Gurdwara or Temple in Queen Street is considered and the Secretary is directed to ask for accounts and to hold on examination under Section 9 and 10 of the Ordinance and to report to the Board.[33]

On the basis of the report prepared by the Board Secretary, a unanimous decision is made to report the endowment to the Government:

---

[31] According to the annual report of the SMHEB for 1910, 'An order for the administration of the Parsee Lodge Charity was made on 4th November 1909, but the Parsis subsequently petitioned His Excellency to set aside that order. His Excellency saw no reason, however, to interfere with the decision arrived at. No definite steps were taken to deal with this endowment in 1909, pending the result of the appeal to His Excellency the Governor' (p. 107).

[32] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 January 1910.

[33] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 December 1916.

The Secretary reports that this temple was placed under the control of the Board by notification No 715 in Government Gazette of the 15th June 1917. A Committee of Management was appointed by the Board in Minute paper of the 23rd June 1917 and the property including a sum of $8775-66, has been taken over. A certain amount of trouble is being caused by the old committee and their friends who have been dispossessed of authority and resent this loss.[34]

The minutes of the Board meeting in the years after this acknowledge that there were difficulties in the administration of the *gurdwara* as a result of continuing internal disputes.[35] During these years, the Sikh community was defined by conflicts, infighting and rivalry amongst members of its three factions—the Majha, Malwa and the Doabha—in Singapore.[36] After assuming administrative control, the Board appointed a committee of management, ensuring that all sectors of the community were equally represented. Yet, the problems persisted. Apart from this, the Sikh community was essentially dissatisfied with the takeover of the Queen Street Gurdwara by the Board and publicly and vociferously protested this move.[37] Especially in the 1930s, the Sikh community challenged the Government order for this external takeover and attempted to have the MHEO altered through representations made to the Board via their solicitors. Their main grievance was over the lack of self-governance in the administration of the Queen Street Gurdwara. A new system for the management of the *gurdwara* was proposed by its trustees in 1936, to which the Board responded as follows:

The scheme for Management for the Sikh gurdwara temple was considered. The Solicitor General reported the result of certain enquiries he had made respecting the proposed trustees and it was resolved that the Secretary write to Messrs Mallal and Namazie to the effect that, having made enquiries, the Board is not satisfied that the scheme has been sufficiently made

---

[34]Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 12 July 1917.

[35]Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 18 August 1921.

[36]In a related development, the Board was also unwittingly embroiled in controversies between the worshipping community of the Queen Street Gurdwara and a group that wanted to build a new *gurdwara* at the Tanjong Pagar. The latter group was claiming a one-third portion of the $6,000 originally subscribed to the Queen Street Gurdwara. The *panchayat* of the *gurdwara* objected to this proposal and the Board resolved that the decision would rest on determining if the original monies had been given specifically for the 'definite object of building a Gurdwara in Queen Street or whether such money had been given for the general objects of the Sikh religion. Each party was requested to produce any receipts which might facilitate this investigation, (Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 18 August 1921). After hearing from both sides, the Board made an erroneous decision which it had to withdraw subsequently. It had made an order that $4,500 from the Endowment VI funds should be given for the benefit of the proposed gurdwara at Tanjong Pagar. It was later pointed out to the Board via Notification No. 715 of 1917 that the only endowment the Board was charged with administering was the Queen Street Gurdwara. It also had no authority to dispose of its funds for the purpose of another endowment. However, the Board members were concerned that if it rescinded on the promised money to Tanjong Pagar Sikhs, 'it might give rise to an unsuitable satisfaction and discontent and suggest that the matter be reconsidered' (Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 25 February 1922). The Board also decided to approach the Government to have 'the matter finally settled' (ibid.).

[37]Kaur (2002), Tan, T.Y. (1985) and Tan, L.J. (2007).

known to the Sikh community or that the proposed trustees are sufficiently representative of the Sikh Community or will have their support.[38]

An 'alternative scheme for the management of the Sikh Gurdwara'[39] was then proposed by Messrs E. N. Taylor and N. H. Tudor, solicitors for the Board, which approved it with two amendments[40] and forwarded it to the solicitors of the Sikh community for their response. In a letter the Board received from Messrs. Mallal and Namazie, the solicitors for the Sikh community, the community had asked for amendments to the MHEO in relation to the question of the management of the Sikh *gurdwara*. The Board replied as follows:

> It was resolved that Messrs Mallal & Namazie be informed that the Board is not prepared to make representations to Government that the Ordinance be amended (7/35).[41]

However, this was not the end of the matter. Members of the Sikh community then petitioned the Colonial Secretary directly with their request. The Board resolved to write to the Government as follows:

> The Chairman is requested to reply to the government to the effect that in the Board's opinion there is no power under the Ordinance to revoke the Order in Council by which the above Endowment was handed over to the Board and that even if such power existed the Board does not think that it should be exercised.[42]

It is interesting that in this response to the Colonial Government, the Board cites the Ordinance as a basis for maintaining status quo with regard to the administration of the Queen Street Gurdwara and also states that it would not be advisable to revoke the order. Even up to this point the Board seemed to be of the opinion that the continued administration of this *gurdwara* by the Board was the best way forward. However, in 1937, the Colonial Government decided to set up a corporate board of trustees for the Queen Street Gurdwara. The Board minutes do not make any reference to this explicitly, but the entry in the minutes of a meeting on 7 January 1938 states that a management committee had been appointed for Endowment VI. Interestingly, all nine members of the committee were Sikhs, together with one representative from the Board. In the final move towards internal self-government, the minutes of the meeting for 8 August 1940 inform that

> The Secretary reported that the draft Gurdwara Ordinance prepared by Messrs Mallal & Namazie had been unanimously approved by circulation to members. This approval was confirmed by the Board. The Acting Solicitor-General stated that arrangements had been made for the introduction of the bill before the Legislative Council.

----

[38]Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 27 January 1936.

[39]Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 27 April 1936.

[40]Interestingly, one of the amendments stated 'that the names of any Sikh policeman be omitted from the proposed Management Committee' (Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 27 April 1936).

[41]Minutes of the SMHEB meeting of 29 June 1936.

[42]Minutes of the SMHEB meeting of 31 August 1936.

Finally, the Queen Street Gurdwara Ordinance was enacted on 1 November 1940.[43] This allowed for the community to appoint its own board of trustees made up of equal numbers of representatives from the three clusters and not have the Board appoint a Committee of Management for the Endowment. It is curious, however, that even with this final act, which effectively removed the *gurdwara* from the administrative control of the Board, Endowment VI continued to appear in the minutes of the Board meeting as late as the 1960s and was listed as a 'dormant' endowment.

The demand by members of the Sikh community for the right to self-governance was new for the Singapore Board, which had not faced such a scenario in the history of its existence. This also applied to the possibility of handing over the Dunlop Street Mosque to a new management committee. The Board members decided to seek legal opinion as to whether this transference is a possibility, given the nature of existing legislation:

> The matter was then discussed in relation to the proposed handing over of the Dunlop Street Mosque and Sikh Gurdwara Endowments to new trustees and it was resolved that the Solicitor General, Mr. E. N. Taylor and Mr H. R. L. Pyne be asked to record their opinions as to whether, under existing law, the Board can divest itself of property in favour of new trustees.[44]

Despite the absence of legal provisions for the transference of endowments to new trustees, we know that this did, in fact, happen in the case of the Sikh *gurdwara*, where a new management team was appointed by the Court with a representative from the SMHEB. This development also reveals the rationale that guided the formulation of the MHEO in the first place. Of course, a piece of legislation cannot be completely foolproof and cannot be expected to anticipate all eventualities in the future. But it is striking that the drafters of this law did not even consider the possibility that at some point in the future there might be a need for the Board to divest itself of property that had been vested under its care and make some general provision for it in the document.

There were a number of endowments that had been highlighted to the Board as problematic and in need of supervision, but the Board decided not to intervene in these cases either because their investigations revealed no signs of mismanagement or because they were not legally authorized to take over the endowments in question. Some examples of religious institutions which were highlighted to the Board for possible takeover included the following: the Veeramma Kaliamman Temple in Serangoon Road, the Singapore Indian Muslim Society, the Sultan Mosque in Arab Street and the Kampung Kapor Mosque in Dunlop Street. In all these cases, the Board had received complaints from members of the respective communities about

---

[43] As a follow-up to these events, subsequently the administration of the two main *gurdwaras* of the Singapore Sikh community, the Central Gurdwara (Queen Street Gurdwara) and the Silat Road Gurdwara, were vested in the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board formed by an act of Parliament in 1981. This was a statutory Board and a governing authority made possible by a bill introduced in Parliament way back in 1960, 'An ordinance to amalgamate the Queen Street and Silat Road Gurdwara and to place them under an Incorporated Board'.

[44] Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 30 March 1936.

allegations of mismanagement. The Board's approach was to call for an enquiry, make investigations, examine witnesses and, most importantly, call for the account books. In cases where the latter were not in order, invariably the endowment was reported to the Governor for an Order in Council to be made and the endowment taken over by the Board. However, if the Board was not convinced 'that there were sufficiently good reasons for them to take over', then no action was taken. However, the trustees or managers were asked to keep proper accounts and in some cases report to the Board periodically.

A relevant example comes from discussions involving the possible takeover of the Veeramma Kaliamman Temple in Serangoon Road. Mr. Pakirisamy, a newly appointed Hindu member of the Board, had suggested that this temple might be reported to the Governor for takeover by the Board. After making enquiries, the decision of the Board was as follows:

> The Chairman explained, however, that he had investigated the affairs of this temple and that the existing management committee were [sic] confident that they could continue to manage the affairs and had no desire that the endowment be taken over by the Board. The Chairman explained that the temple authorities had shown him the assets and the property of the temple, including the title deeds, jewellery [sic] and the like, and the books. It was agreed that the Chairman should report again to the Board after the accounts had been examined, the Chairman explaining that in his view in the absence of evidence of mismanagement or of a desire on the part of the persons interested in the temple to have it administered by the Board it was not proper to report to the Governor that the endowment should be administered by the Board.[45]

It is notable that in this account of why the endowment should not be reported to the Governor, two variables are considered in making a final decision: absence of evidence of mismanagement *as well as* absence of desire 'on the part of persons interested in the temple'. The second factor, as far as I have been able to establish, did not surface in the early Board decisions to take over administration of religious endowments.

Additionally, it is crucial to note that of the ten endowments the SMHEB was administering in 1960 (of which two were 'dormant', i.e., Endowment VI—Queen Street Sikh Gurdwara and Endowment IX—the Tantawalla Endowment), seven had been taken over by 1925 and the remaining three added to the Board's charge in the interim years up to 1938. No further endowments were placed under the administration of the Board from this point onwards. These data highlight that the enthusiasm for restoring order to the chaotic sphere of religious endowments was strongest through to the mid-1920s. Perhaps one reason could also be that the very presence of the MHEO did have something of a regulatory effect upon native managers of religious endowments who were motivated to 'clean up their act' in order to avoid being taken over by the 'government'—which is how administration by the SMHEB was viewed by the larger public. It also serves to underscore the point that perhaps the Board was reluctant to take over any more endowments unless there were compelling reasons to do so because a takeover implied that the work of the Board would

---

[45]Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 29 December 1949.

be increased. This was not in terms of financial resources, but certainly time, energy and human resources would be required to accomplish the business of administration. The next section delineates the job description of the Board and addresses the issue of what it meant to administer an endowment.

5.3 The SMHEB and Native Committees of Management: 'Work' Performed and the Division of Labour

The Board was formally charged with the administrative responsibility of endowments that were placed under its control. Rather than accept the articulated claim of 'administration' at face value, I argue that this needs to be both problematized and deconstructed. The administration of endowments by the SMHEB meant that it assumed a managerial and supervisory role, within a colonial context and a politics that in explicit terms called for a non-interfering governmental stance. In practice, however, the business of administering religious endowments did inevitably entail a degree of regulation and interference beyond the given job description of the SMHEB. It is helpful to reiterate that the MHEB operated and conducted its work with legal authorization; at the same time, as a body, it was also conscious of its defined role as administrator and manager of temporal affairs. It is another matter that in interpreting this brief, its actual work practices and its mode of operation meant that the Board inexorably engaged with more than just secular matters. The work performed by the MHEB cannot be considered in isolation from the very central role played by the Committees of Management which were appointed for specific endowments. I specify the nature of their relationship and detail the division of labour between these two entities. But first, I outline the structure of the SMHEB, paying attention to the resources and the manpower it had access to.

The SMHEB was constituted by a number of Commissioners who were all appointed by the Governor of the SS. Both the annual reports of the MHEB for all three settlements and the minutes of SMHEB's meeting convey the constant shifts in the Board's make-up. There is regular mention of vacancies given the frequent resignations, transfers and staff movements. One gets a sense that there were difficulties in recruiting Commissioners to the three Boards and also retaining them. There is evidence in the minutes of resignations by members of management committees, sometimes due to familial and business commitments and at other times because of overseas transfers and so on. Again, the minutes are not helpful in interpreting the underlying causes of these resignations. Occasionally, it is possible to guess from the tone of the reportage if the departure of a particular member has been either amicable or acrimonious. For example, the minutes of the Board meeting on 27 July 1936 reports two resignations, where a vote of thanks in the first instance demonstrates the former while silence in the second case characterizes the latter:

> The resignation of Tarmalingam Pillay as member of the Management Committee of the Mariamman Temple was accepted and the Secretary was directed to write to him a letter of thanks for his past services.

> The resignation of V. Narayanasamy, N. Padayatchy and N. Kasturi as members of the Sivan Temple Management Committee is accepted and L. Natarajan who has been transferred to Penang is removed from the Management Committee.

The possibility of remunerating members and Board officials for the services rendered is an issue that surfaces in the minutes of the SMHEB meetings from the outset. We know that the Commissioners were not paid but the Secretary, clerk, accountant (appointed for the first time in 1914) and peon were on the Board's payroll. Their salaries and the possibility of raising them appear in the minutes of meetings and seem to have been decided internally by the Board members themselves:

> It is unanimously resolved that a recommendation be made to H. E. the Governor that the remuneration of the Secretary to the Board be fixed at \$30 pm with effect from 1st October 1907.[46]

A year later we learn that a clerk had been appointed to assist the Board Secretary on his work:

> The Board passes an allowance of \$10 pm for clerical assistance—the payment of this and of the Secretary's allowance to be divided pari passu [text unclear] between the two Endowments now being administered by the Board in proportion to their monthly incomes.[47]

The salary of the clerk was revised and raised with increasing workload:

> Owing to the increase of the clerk's work due to the taking over of the Jameah Masjid and Gurdwara Endowments it is agreed to raise the clerk's salary to \$25 pm.

In relation to the introduction of a new system of collecting monies from the Hindu temples, an accountant is also added to the payroll of the SMHEB:

> That in order to ascertain what sums are received for vows etc and to secure a proper share of these moneys of temple purposes, an accountant be appointed at a salary of \$25-per month.[48]

In 1915, one of the Board members recommends that the Secretary's salary be revised to \$50 per month:

> The Hon'able Mr. F G Piggott referred to the Secretary's salary which he thought should be raised to \$50- per month as in Penang from 1st January 1916. The other Members of the Board agreed but thought this should be referred to again at the end of next meeting when a fuller Board might be present as Mr. Carver just left and Mr. Pountney was absent.[49]

---

[46]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 23 May 1908.

[47]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 17 March 1909.

[48]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 May 1914.

[49]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 16 December 1915.

This proposal was accepted by the Board at the next meeting and further increases to the Secretary's salary were considered in subsequent years. However, the difficulties of the position were conveyed to the Board in 1922:

> The Secretary informed the Board that he had written to the Colonial Secretary stating that he was unable to carry on the duties of Secretary owing to the work and trouble involved and inadequacy of the salary. Having requested the Secretary to withdraw the Board conferred on the matter and subsequently informed the Secretary they were prepared to recommend a salary of $100/- pm but the Secretary would have to find and pay for clerical assistance out of this sum. The Secretary intimated to the Board that he was unable to accept these conditions.[50]

Apart from payments to these office-bearers, the issue of payment to the Board members themselves also makes an appearance in the minutes:

> It was also resolved that the Secretary be authorized to draw out a statement showing the amount of money annually administered by the Board for the various endowments with a view to ascertaining whether there was sufficient justification for the members of the Board to request the Government to sanction the payment of fees to them for their services.[51]

In subsequent meetings, this statement is indeed prepared and presented to the Board:

> The statement of accounts showing the balance at the end of the year in respect of each endowment was placed before the Board with a view to consider the question of applying to Government for the payment of fees to the members of the Board. It was decided that the statement should be circulated amongst the members and that the consideration of the matter should be adjourned until all the members could be present.[52]

At the next meeting, however, there appears to be an abrupt end to these discussions with the decision to 'take no action' without any explanation being offered:

> Payment of fees to the members of the Board: It was decided that no action be taken in this matter but at the next meeting the question of increase to the Secretary's salary be considered.[53]

Perhaps this was too sensitive and controversial a subject to be pursued more aggressively, particularly in view of the fact that there were regular requests by others on the Board payroll—the Secretary, clerk, accountant and peon—for increase in their allowances in view of amplified workload, and who were indeed doing the 'real' work of administering the endowments.

The administrative work of the Board was funded through a 5% rate of commission charged against the various endowments under its supervision since at least as early as 1914.[54] In the following two decades, the raise in the salaries of the Board

---

[50]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 6 April 1922.

[51]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 20 December 1921.

[52]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 17 January, 1922.

[53]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 16 February 1922.

[54]'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1914', in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 213.

officials, especially the Secretary, clerk and bill collector, continue to be debated and effected. Evidently, both the work of the Board and its overhead charges had increased considerably over time. In the absence of contrary evidence (both in the annual reports and in the minutes of SMHEB meeting), it is reasonable to assume that the rate of commission charged against the income of the endowments continued to be used to pay for these services. Thus, the following entry in the minutes of meeting held on 31 July 1934 comes as a surprise (emphasis in the original):

> The Board decides to recommend to the Governor under Section(c) (i) of Ordinance 92 that as from the 1st January 1934 5% of the gross receipts collected by or on behalf of the Board be payable to the Board to meet overhead charges.

However, barely a year later, there is a change in this arrangement. We learn that

> The Secretary reports that the Governor had approved the charging of 7% of the income of Endowments for 1935 to meet overhead charges.[55]

But this change is not to last very long either and recommendations are made to reduce the percentage of this income for overhead charges:

> The auditors' report on the accounts dated 3rd May 1937 is approved by the Board subject to the approval of the Governor under Section 7(c) being obtained for the allocation of 7% of the net income to the overhead charges account. The Chairman is asked to indicate to the Government that in view of the amount standing to the credit of the overhead charges account recommendations will be made at an early date to reduce the 7% rate to a lower figure (14/37).[56]

This rate is, indeed, reduced as the minutes of the meeting of 3 September 1937 reveal:

> The Board asks the Chairman to recommend to Government that the rate of commission to be charged by the Board against the various Endowments be fixed at 5% from the 1st January 1937 until further notice.

However, the matter is far from closed and deliberations over the next few years see the system of securing funds for overhead charges continue to be reviewed. A decision which is a radical departure from the earlier system is taken in 1938 with the following effect:

> It is decided to recommend that as from 1st January 1938 the system of charging a fixed percentage (at present 5%) of revenue for overhead charges should be discontinued and that instead the overhead expenses of the Board for each year should be borne by the Endowments in proportion to their actual revenues for the year.[57]

This system, which seems to have instituted a more equitable method of apportioning contributions from endowments which clearly had varied financial strength, was

---

[55]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 November 1935.

[56]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 June 1937.

[57]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 20 July 1938.

approved by the Colonial Secretary,[58] and seems to have remained in force for some time.

The work of the Board was considerable, given its total administrative involvement with the affairs of the endowments, *as well as* the goings-on in the requisite religious institutions, although the latter was never explicated as part of the Board's work description. Painstaking attention to these domains meant that no matter was considered too trivial or inconsequential for the Board's attention, from the collection of rents to the employment of temple and mosque officials, to paying their salaries, to ensuring that there was adequate lighting and water supply and so on. In particular, the role of the Board Secretary was vital, and his work was probably the most onerous and time-consuming: He was charged with the task of organizing enquiries about endowments about which complaints had been received, issuing notifications about the Board's intention to take over an endowment, liaising with the native committees of management, as well as with solicitors and members of the public, and handling all the resultant correspondence, preparing reports for presentation to the Board members and writing up the minutes of the meetings—which were held quite regularly, sometimes up to 10 or 12 meetings a year.[59]

The business of administering and managing the financial affairs of the endowments could certainly not have been achieved without the assistance of the 'native committees of management', also known as *panchayat*(s). It is crucial to recognize that the 'taking over' of an endowment also meant assuming management of the religious establishment (temple, mosque, *gurdwara*), albeit indirectly. It was through the *panchayat*(s) that the Board handled the day-to-day running of these institutions. It is, thus, important to dissect the relationship between these two entities and establish the precise division of labour between them. The Committees of Management for the various endowments were formed soon after they came under the purview of the Board. This was provided for in the MHEO although in practice this was not always the case, as my discussion of the Sivan Temple and the Parsee Lodge Charity makes clear later in this chapter. For instance, the Committees of Management for the Mariamman and Perumal Temples are mentioned in the minutes of the Board meeting on 23 May 1908, their endowments having come under the Board's jurisdiction by an order made on 20 September 1907. While the *panchayat* had to include one Board member, efforts were made to make enquiries about suitable members of the religious community in question and select them for appointment to the committee. On occasion, the candidates in question declined the appointment and alternatives had to be located, as was the case with the appointment of the newly formed Committee of Management of the Kaliamman Kovil:

---

[58] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 September 1938.

[59] When the meeting of the Board resumed after the Second World War, it was decided that the Board would meet quarterly, rather than once a month (Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 December 1948).

> Mr Piggott is appointed to and accepts a seat on the Committee of Management of 'Kaliamman Kovil' Orchard Road. It is resolved to ask K. Velu to join the Committee and the Secretary is instructed to write to him accordingly.[60]

However, another candidate had to be found as Kona Velu, who held a mortgage over the temple property, declined the Board's offer. Unfortunately, the minutes give no indication of the reasons for Kona Velu's refusal:

> K. Velu not having accepted the invitation of the Board to be a member of the Committee of Management of Kaliamman Kovil, the Board confirms its resolution to ask Mr. V. E. Murugayah Pillay.[61]

To avoid ad hoc appointments, as well as situations where invited candidates might refuse to serve on the Board, there were attempts to institute a more systematic method of selecting members for these committees:

> The Board considered the question of the present mode of procedure in selecting various Committees of Management and decided that in future before such Committees are selected, each community should be asked to submit names to the Board of proposed candidates for the Committees of Management.[62]

This route did not meet with complete success, as we see in the following abstract:

> Election of new Panchayats for the year 1922: As no names have been sent in for candidates for election of new Panchayats no action could be taken.[63]

With specific reference to the election of the *panchayat* for the Sikh *gurdwara*, which came under the control of the Board in July 1917, the Board took pains to ensure that the different factions (and their views) of the Sikh community would be represented on the committee of management:

> Election of new Panchayat for the Sikh Gurdwara: The Board decided that each of the three sections *viz.* Malba, Duabba and Maja be asked to submit the names of five candidates for the Panchayat. The Secretary and Treasurer of the Panchayat to be subsequently elected by these 15 members.[64]

Additionally, the Board clearly wanted to avoid being perceived as taking sides or as favouring any one segment of the community. This impetus to ensure 'representativeness' was inspired less by a concern for democratic ideals and more by an effort to circumvent becoming embroiled in local communal politics and factionalism which continued to persist amongst religious communities.[65] Another good example comes from discussions involving the formation of a *panchayat* for the 'Jamiel

---

[60]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 April 1910.

[61]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 June 1910.

[62]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 August 1921

[63]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 20 December 1921.

[64]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 6 April 1922.

[65]This was evident in the community of worshippers at the Mariamman Temple and the Queen Street Sikh Gurdwara, as well as at the Dunlop Street Gafoor Mosque and Jamiel Mosque in South Bridge Road.

Mosque'[66] in South Bridge Road. This is one of the oldest mosques in Singapore and was founded in 1826 by members of the Chulia community, Indian Muslims from the Coromandel Coast of South India. The Chulias came predominantly as traders and money changers and in addition to the Jamiel/Jamae Mosque, they also founded the Al-Abrar Mosque and the Nagore Durgha. After a long period of self-governance, in 1894, the Jamae Mosque and the Nagore Durgha were placed under a panel of court-appointed trustees because of internal politics within the Indian Muslim community in Singapore.[67] The SMHEB was charged with the administration of the endowments vested in Jamiel Masjid from the year 1917. A series of discussions, involving Board members and factions of the Indian Muslim community, can be identified in these minutes about what would be the most effective mode of managing the Jamiel Mosque, given the claims and counter-claims on it by several groups of Indian Muslims, that is, the Tamil-speaking Chulias and the Malayalam-speaking Malabari Muslims. We learn that in 1935, the Malabari Muslims had sent a petition to the Board about the appointment of a management committee for the Jamiel Mosque. I first present the following slices of data (without my intervention) in order to provide some coherence and continuity to rather scattered discussions on the subject over several years:

> The Secretary reported that the papers relating to the appointment of new members of the Management Committee of the Jamael Mosque and the petition of the Malabari Muslims was still in course of circulation. It was resolved that further consideration be adjourned until the next meeting.[68]

The appointment of new committee members to the Management Committee of the Jamael Mosque was considered in connection with the petition of the Malabari Muslims and it was resolved:

(a) That Mr. K. P. Mohamed Yusoff and Mr. A. M. Mohamed Ismail Talib be appointed members of the Management Committee.
(b) That the Management Committee be asked to consider whether or not they can arrange for a religious teacher with knowledge of Malayalam language to give instruction to Malabari Muslims either in the Mosque or elsewhere and to report to the Board.[69]

The letter, dated 8th April 1936, from the Management Committee, Jamael Mosque, requesting the Board to cancel their resolution electing a Malabari Muslim to their Committee was laid before the Board and it was resolved that a reply be sent to the effect that:

---

[66]In the minutes, the mosque is described as 'Jamiel Mosque' or the 'South Bridge Road Mosque'. Within the local Indian Muslim community this was also referred to as the 'Chulia Mosque' or the 'Big Mosque'.

[67]See Mohd. Ali (1989) and Tschacher (2007) for details.

[68]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 December 1935.

[69]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 January 1936.

(a) The Board, having given very careful consideration to various aspects of the question including the fact that many Malabaris now frequent the Mosque, and having decided that a member of that community ought to be elected to the Management Committee, are not prepared to alter their decision.

(b) That the Board does not agree that the Chulia Muslim Community having the right to exclusive management of the Mosque suggested in paragraph 2 and 3 of the letter of 8th April.[70]

One sees here the Board's determination in handling this issue and we know from other evidence that it seldom cancelled any resolution it had passed or changed any decision it had made. It is obvious that the Board did not want to be dictated by the demands of any community and, thus, set a precedent for the future. There was no ambiguity about the firmness with which the Board was prepared to handle any attempt to challenge its authority or that of the endowment *panchyat*(s). The Board's treatment of this mosque case carried relevance for its management of Hindu temples as well. This was seen clearly in its dealings with the Obayakarars Society[71]:

> Secretary explained that during the past year the promoters of this had started a policy of non-recognition of the official Panchayat, which is the authority recognized by the Board for all non-financial affairs; and produced the proposed Society's rules. It was unanimously agreed not to oppose registration, but to take action at once if the Society when formed acted illegally or interfered with the management of the temples or endeavoured to disturb the Board's approved systems. Secretary was instructed to deal with the Registrar of Society's inquiries in such manner as to obviate necessity of such action in future.[72]

In the case of the Hindu endowments managed by the Board, in the early days the Mariamman Kovil, Perumal Kovil, Kaliamman Kovil and Sivan Kovil were managed internally by a single *panchayat*. This made sense for the Mariamman and Perumal Temples because they were part of Endowment I. However, Kaliamman and Sivan temples, although technically constituting different endowments, Endowment II and Endowment IV, did not have separate Committees of Management formed for them when their administration was taken over by the Board in 1909 and 1915, respectively. For the Sivan Temple, this situation continued till 1922 when on the occasion of proposed renovations for the temple its 'control' by the *panchayat* of another endowment became a moot point:

> Renovation of Sivan Temple: Mr. Rodesse explained to the Board that the renovation of the Sivan Temple, Orchard Road had been suggested by a section of the local Bombay community and that the temple formed part of an Endowment which came under the control of the Panchayat of another Endowment. Mr. Rodesse suggested that if the renovation was to

---

[70]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 April 1936.

[71]Obayakarar's Society refers to a group of volunteers (drawn from the community of temple devotees) who were involved with the organization of the fire-walking festival at the Sri Mariamman Temple.

[72]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 21 October 1925.

be proceeded with, the Board should exercise its powers and elect a separate Panchayat. The names of the following gentlemen were then proposed by Mr. Rodesse and confirmed by the Board for the new Panchayat: Mr. C. T. A. Rai, Mr. Kesavji Jewaram, Mr. Bhasker Rao, Mr. Ankul Chunder Chunder, Mr. Shivalal Dayaram, Mr. A. R. A. M. Thenappa Chitty.[73]

It is interesting that the *panchayat* of Endowment I which had been thus far managing the affairs of the Sivan Kovil objects to this move, but the Board here exercises its right to found a new Committee of Management, and also in the process, reveals why such a step was not taken previously:

> Objection by Panchayat of Endowment I to appointment of separate Panchayat for Endowment IV: The Board directed the Secretary to inform the Panchayat of Endowment I that it is the duty of the Board to appoint the separate Panchayat. This Panchayat was formerly unnecessary because there was nothing to manage but money having now been offered [sic] for the renovation or rebuilding of the temple, a separate Committee of Management must be appointed.[74]

This line of thinking reveals that the Board prioritized the management of finances and conceptualized the role of Committees of Management in terms of handling money matters, much as it perceived its own function. In reality, however, these committees did much more than oversee funds and were deeply embedded in all aspects of the daily ebb and flow of life in temples and mosques, something the Board too acknowledged and, indeed, it relied on these committees to do far more than 'manage money'. Perhaps this is the reason for the objection of the Endowment I *panchayat*, which wanted to remain connected with the other concerns of the temple. For the Kalaimman Temple, the absence of a separate committee of management becomes an issue only in 1926, with the observation that the temple has been run down and uncared for:

> Endowments 1 & 2: Secretary said that Kaliamman Temple was rather neglected. Ordinance required a 'separate' Committee, but Board had hitherto carried this out by appointing separate Committees consisting of the same 5 gentlemen for each. Meeting agreed to leave to Secretary arrangement of a separate Kaliamman Committee if there seemed a local demand.[75]

According to the data in the minutes, this matter is revisited next only 10 years later in 1936 with no explanations about why the matter had not been attended to in the interim. One assumes that the same committee managed the affairs of the Kaliamman Kovil:

> The Board considered the appointment of a Management Committee for the Kaliamman Temple and the Secretary was instructed to enquire of the priest and worshippers whether they had any objections to the appointment of the same management committee as that which manages the Mariamman and Perumal Temples.[76]

---

[73]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 September 1922.

[74]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 20 June 1923.

[75]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 20 October 1926.

[76]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 January 1936.

We are led to presume that there were no objections to this proposal from the Hindu community although this is not explicitly stated in the minutes:

> It was resolved that the following persons being members of the Management Committee of the Mariamman Temple, be elected a Management Committee for the Kaliamman Temple: Mr. T. V. Kumarasamy, Mr. V. Palanisamy, Mr. B. Govindasamy, Mr. Dharmalingam, Mr. Vythilingam.[77]

The Parsee Lodge Charity, Endowment II, taken over by the Board in 1909 also remained without a committee of management till quite late in the day, that is, 1936. Here, too, the Board relied on members of the local Parsee community for making appointments to the committee:

> The question of appointing a Committee of Management for Endowment III, Parsee Lodge Charity, Mount Palmer, was discussed and it was resolved that the Secretary approach the leading local Parsees and ask them to submit the names of suitable persons for appointment as a Management Committee.[78]

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 August 1936 suggest that this call for names was probably unsuccessful, prompting the Board to then hold a meeting with members of the Parsee community:

> It is decided to approve the chairman's suggestion that he should call a meeting of all the known Parsees and endeavour to obtain their opinion as to the appointment of a management committee.

This second approach seems to have generated better results as a committee is finally appointed for this endowment:

> The Secretary reported on the proceedings at the meeting of local Parsees held at the YY [text unclear] Office on the 16th September 1936 and informed the Board that this meeting resolved that the following persons be recommended to the Board for election as a management committee.[79]

It is important to ask why the Board did not strive to appoint separate committees: Could it have been the lack of suitably qualified candidates? Or the unwillingness of members of the Hindu community to serve on these committees which were deemed to be under the direct supervision and control of the Board? Were there any concerns about being co-opted into an entity that was seen as a colonial initiative? Certainly, the data in the minutes of these meetings by themselves do not help in providing categorical/certain responses to these questions. However, it is not without significance that the initiative for seeking governmental input in administering mismanaged temples and mosques in the SS had come from members of Hindu and Muslim communities themselves. Furthermore, the British often presented themselves as benign arbitrators and as even-handed in a fractionalized world, a sentiment if believed on the ground may have allowed them to exercise a degree of control.

---

[77]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 24 February 1936.

[78]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 June 1936.

[79]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 September 1936.

As with the Board itself, the constitution of the Committees of Management was re-configured periodically, many of these being internal movements between the various endowments:

> The Secretary informs the Board that owing to various changes that have taken place in the membership of the Board it is necessary to re-arrange the Committees of Management: that Messrs Sugu [. . .] Pillay and Somapah are the native members of the Committee of Management of Endowment I. M. Murugayah Pillay of Endowment II and M. Pallonjee of Endowment III. The Board thereupon nominates Hon F. G. Piggott as a member for the Committee for Endwoment I, Mr. F. M. Elliot for Endwoment II and Mr. Ball for Endwoment III.[80]

In the case of the Mariamman Kovil, in response to misappropriation of 'vow moneys' by the Brahmin priest, an additional watchdog body called the Council of Managers, specifically named a *panchayat* in the minutes, was appointed:

> That in order to watch both the Accountant and the Aiyer, examine the accounts and moneys received daily, settle disputes assist and support the management with their advice and influence a Council of Managers called Panchayat shall be and is hereby appointed under Section 6. The first members if this Panchayat in addition to the present two Native Managers shall be Govinda Pillay (acting Native Manager). Pakiria Pillay (a former headman of boatmen) Govinda Pillay (former headman of Money Changers) and Vytilingam Pillay (head mandore of Tanjong Pagar). Any vacancy occurring in their member shall be filled up by the Board on the nomination of the other members of the Panchayat.[81]

This abstract also provides insight as to how the role of this *panchayat* is conceptualized, as well as providing information about the identities of the appointed individuals—all prominent members of the local Hindu community. The Board seemed quite liberal with the appointment of native Hindus to this committee and, in fact, recommended that the membership of the *panchayat* be expanded for the following reason (emphasis added):

> In order to provide more *effective supervision and control of the affairs of the temple* the Board further approves of an increase in the number of Hindu members of the Committee of Management and appoints Messrs N. Kathirayson, R. Sopayah, Narasingagam and Poonoosamy Pillay in addition to Messrs H. Somapah, Govinda Pillay and Vytilingam Pillay already appointed.[82]

For my purposes, the opening lines of this segment are vital in making the point that the administrative work of the Board was not strictly confined to managing the funds of the endowments, but in fact extended to 'supervision and control of the affairs of the temple'—albeit through the work of the native managers. However, given that the native committee of management was constituted by the Board, which appointed its members and decided on how the funds of the endowment were to be expended, the committee was ultimately subordinate to the Board.

---

[80]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 April 1912.

[81]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 May 1914.

[82]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 14 August 1914.

The members of the SMHEB seemed to have been opposed to the appointment of native members to the Board. According to the minutes of the SMHEB meeting of 17 November 1921:

> The Board decide [sic] that they do not see the necessity of appointing a Hindu member for the Board as a similar concession might have to be made in the case of the Sikhs and Mohammedans.

This exclusion was not conditioned by the Ordinance and could have been made possible had the Board made such a recommendation to the Governor, but at the time the Board members do not seem to have been open to this idea of inclusion. At times, the Board invoked the legal guidelines given in the Ordinance to suit its preference for a particular course of action. On one occasion, when one of the Board members, Mr. Rodesse, suggested appointing two Hindu members to assist the Secretary, the proposal was not received favourably by the Board, which cited the Ordinance as a limiting factor:

> Mr. Rodesse proposed that in view of valuable services rendered to the Board in the past, Mr. Rai and Mr. M. Kumarasamy be appointed supervisor and collector respectively by the Board for the purpose of assisting the Secretary with the financial affairs of the Board. The Ordinance making no provision for such appointments the proposal was not adopted by the Board.[83]

In terms of the work undertaken, the management committees of the endowments saw to the daily affairs of religious institutions but had to seek approval for any financial expenditure for any activity, including religious ones. It is necessary to discuss the functions of the *panchayat* and the Board jointly even though there was clear division of labor between the two. The members of the MHEB were also quite clear about their own role *vis-à-vis* that of the committees of management (emphasis added):

> It is both unnecessary and undesirable that the President as member of any management committee should attend any meeting of a committee at which matters of a *religious nature* are discussed but that he should attend meeting convened for the purpose of discussing matters of a *temporal nature*.[84]

A good illustration of such thinking is evident in the Board's response to a petition by Mohamed Abdul Gaffor Sahib, for his appointment as a Hanafi Imam to the Jamiel Mosque:

> With reference to the petition of Mohamed Abdul Gaffor Sahib (S.O. 7662/36), the Chairman is instructed to report to the Colonial Secretary that the matter has been referred to the committee of management of the Jamiel Masjid. It appears that about 50% of the worshippers at the Mosque are of the Hanafi sect and the committee of management are of opinion that a Hanafi Imam should be appointed. The committee has promised to make its recommendations in due course. The Board is of opinion that the petitioner should be invited to address his application for appointment to the Committee of management of the mosque. In any case in the opinion of the Board this is not a matter in which his Excellency

---

[83]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 September 1922.
[84]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 April 1935.

should be advised to interfere to the extent o himself appointing an Imam to officiate in a Mohammedan place of worship (22/35).[85]

Once having given the committee of management the authority to make the decision, it is notable that the Board indeed does not interfere further in the matter:

> Recent correspondence relating to Mohamed Abdul Gaffoor Sahib's application for appointment as Hanafi Imam of the Jamial Mosque is reported to the Board. The Board request the Chairman to inform Mohamed Abdul Gaffoor Sahib that the Committee of Management is not disposed at present to appoint a Hanafi Imam and that the Board is not prepared to put pressure on the Committee of Management to compel them to make any such appointment (22/35).[86]

Time and again, the Board emphasized that its role was purely administrative and focused on the financial state of the various endowments. The following view is articulated in the context of the Board's attempt to be more efficient by cutting costs and increasing revenue, its primary concern:

> It was agreed that the essence of the supervision by the Board was to ensure that the income of the properties be kept separate from capital and that expenditure did not exceed revenue of the endowments. The two cases of excess of expenditure over income, *viz.*, Endowments Nos. 1 and 4—the Mariamman and Perumal Temples and Sivan Temples respectively— were carefully examined. The Chairman undertook in these cases to require the management committees to consider means of reducing expenditure. It was also suggested that as well as trying to cut down expenses the Board might consider means of increasing the revenue by a rise in the rents on ground properties, which have been fixed as long ago as 1936, might now be raised by application to the Rent Board.[87]

In relation to the Muslim Advisory Board's decision to dispose the funds of the Arab Street Educational Trust and Habib Noh's Tomb for the teaching of religious knowledge in Government schools, some for Muslim religious schools and the Muslim College and some to the All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society for welfare and charitable works, the Board reiterated its role:

> The Board decided that it had no wish to interfere in the internal management of the trusts except insofar as some proposals appeared to involve the expenditure of capital moneys for purposes other than capital projects; the Board had no other comment to make on the above recommendations.[88]

As standard practice, the Board did not get involved with the day-to-day running of the religious institutions whose endowments they administered. This came under the jurisdiction of the *panchayat*s. Yet, the *panchayat*s were not self-governing, did not have full autonomy and were obliged to report to the Board on all matters. That the Board had the exclusive right to decide on all money matters was of course legally given. In situations involving the expenditure of money, the *panchayat* had no authority to act independently but did occasionally do so and were chastised by

---

[85]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 November 1936.

[86]Minutes of SMHEB meeting held on 27 January 1937.

[87]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 25 May 1949.

[88]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 November 1950.

the Board for this indiscretion. Two examples confirm this reaction: one involving the committee of management of the Sikh *gurdwara* and another, the *panchayat* of the Mariamman Temple.

> The Chairman reports that he wrote to the Management Committee of the Gurdwara Temple asking for the payment of $160/-. No payment was made but the Committee appear to have paid $130/- direct to the M'pality. The Secretary is instructed to request the M'pality not to receive any further payments from any other person than himself and to summon the members of the Committee to appear before the next meeting of the Board.[89]

> The Chairman referred to the statement in the Auditors' reports that a certain expenditure, *viz.*, repairs to the Mariamman Temple, had been incurred without formal authority of the Board and pointed out that this was not correct [. . .] The Board resolved that the former practice should continue and that any non-recurrent or unusual expenditure of a larger amount than $1000 should be incurred only after approval by the Board either at a meeting or, if the matter was urgent, by circulating minutes.[90]

It is striking how meticulously financial accounting was handled in practice. This is reflected in the Board's engagement with the smallest of financial decisions in temples and mosques. The following episodes relating to the increases in the salaries of temple staff *after* approval from the Board are illuminating:

> With reference to the Mariamman Temple Management Committee's letter of the 24th March 1938:
>
> (a) The increase of salary of the temple clerk Mr. Thaver from $30 to $35 per mensem as from 1st April 1938 is approved.
> (b) The increase of salary of Arumuga Pandaram of Kalimmman Temple from $18 to $20 per mensem as from 1st April 1938 is approved.[91]

> The Board confirmed the following financial resolutions of the Committee:
>
> Increment of $1 per mensem to the sweeper of the Mariamman Temple;
>
> Engagement of an assistant at the Mariamman Temple at $6 per mensem from 1st September, 1938.[92]

Apart from sanctioning or disapproving increases in salaries, the Board was also involved in making appointments and removals of temple staff, both religious and secular, on the recommendation of the *panchayat* but always guided by monetary considerations:

> The following recommendations made by the Chairman of the Mariamman Temple Management Committee are approved by the Board:
>
> (a) The appointment of P. V. Sidambaram Iyer to act for K. C. Letchumana Iyer chief priest who proceeded to India on leave on the 15th April 1937.

---

[89]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 November 1935. Unfortunately, this matter is not follow up in minutes of subsequent meeting.

[90]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 25 May 1949.

[91]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 1 April 1938.

[92]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 26 September 1938.

(b) The appointment of A. Palanivelu Pandaram in place of R. V. Veerappa Pandaram at a salary of $13 per mensem as from 1st April 1937.
(c) The appointment of Krishnasamy as sweeper in the Mariamman Temple with effect from 1st April 1937 at a salary of $14 per mensem in place of Rengasamy dismissed.[93]

Even in matters where the Board's approval is not officially required, its confirmation is sought before a decision is considered firm and final. This reveals the Board's involvement with all affairs of the endowments it managed and not just the financial ones, as can be seen in the following instances:

> With reference to the Mariamman Temple Management Committee's letter of the 3rd January 1938:

(a) The peremptory dismissal of the Mariamman Temple watchman Ram Kumar on 24th December 1937 is confirmed.
(b) The temporary engagement of Vengadasamy as watchman from 25 December is confirmed.
(c) The question of the salary of temple clerk Mr. Thaver is adjourned. The Board understands that his salary is the same as that of his predecessor who was dismissed in December 1936 and enquiry must be made as to the reasons for the proposed increase.
(d) The increase of salary of the priest V. A. Mahalinga Ayer from $20 to $25 is approved as from 1st January 1938, it being understood that no assistant priest will be appointed. V. A. Mahalinga Ayer is also confirmed in his appointment.
(e) The expenditure of $84.30 on a Reno filing cabinet for Mariamman Temple is approved.[94]

The standard mode of operation at the time was that the *panchayat* had to propose, recommend or apply to the Board in writing for a particular request; this would be then presented to the Board, which would consider, discuss and review the matter before resolving to either grant approval or not. Very often, the Board would approve the recommendations made but there were occasions on which the assent was not forthcoming. It is important to emphasize that it was primarily financial considerations that led the Board to decide one way or another. Here is a sample of the kind of work the committees of management had to handle and for which they needed the Board's sanction: carrying out repairs, rebuilding or decorative works to temples[95] or Sikh *gurdwaras*,[96] calling for an increase in salaries of temple servants[97] and responding to a request to grant one of the Board's houses free of rent to run the Anglo-Tamil School.[98]

There is evidence from the minutes that the Board did accept the *panchayat*'s counsel on many occasions. The following two examples are vague substantively but

---

[93] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 April 1937.

[94] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 7 January 1938.

[95] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 June 1913.

[96] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 15 June 1927.

[97] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 17 Jan 1922.

[98] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 July 1916.

help nonetheless to make the point that the Board often agreed with the committee's suggestions:

> Recommendations of M' Kovil Committee: Recommendations made to the Board by the Committee of Management of the Mariamman Kovil re Endowment and contained in the minutes of a meeting held by the Committee on the 28th July 1910 are placed before the Board—Resolved that the recommendations be all adopted.[99]

> Petition regarding the Brahmin at Mariamman Temple: The report made by the Committee for the Temple is laid before the Board and is adopted.[100]

Even in the early days, the question of whether the native committees of management could be allocated powers to act in specific situations surfaced in the Board meeting. However, it is not clear what inspired this consideration or whether this was initiated by the Board itself or members of the *panchayat*:

> The question of requesting that some official authority be granted by Government to the 'Panchayat' enabling them to deal with family disputes amongst the Hindus is adjourned for further consideration.[101]

Yet, in 1935, the Board sought to place some restrictions on the role of the *panchayat*, as seen from this comment, which is unfortunately offered without any context or elaboration and, thus, not very insightful:

> The Board agrees that it is desirable to delimit the functions of committees of management.[102]

One could make any number of educated guesses as to what prompted this position: that the *panchayat*(s) were overstepping their jurisdiction or that they were being overburdened with work, but without any further evidence these are mere speculations.

Often, the committees were also 'assigned' work by the SMHEB. Numerous instances are itemized in the minutes, when the Board would direct or instruct the committees of management to undertake an investigation, consult the body of devotees or members of specific religious communities and report back to the Board with its findings, upon which the Board would then make a decision. Some good illustrations include the following:

---

[99]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 15 September 1910.

[100]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 November 1913.

[101]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 July 1916. It is interesting that in these handwritten minutes, the word 'requesting' was inserted after cancelling the original entry 'recommending'. Given the general language in which the minutes have been recorded, this suggests to me that this was a Board initiative. Unfortunately, there is no follow-up discussion of this subject in subsequent minutes.

[102]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 April 1935.

New members of 'Panchayat': On the recommendation of the Native Committee of Management the names of Mariappa Oondariar, contractor, and K. V. Kanniah Naidu, physician, are added to this Committee of 'Panchayat.'[103]

Petition from V. P. Rajah: A petition to the Chairman complaining of an alleged illegal practice of the Panchayat of Mariamman Temple in demanding that certain fees be paid to certain persons not employed by the Temple before granting permits to bury in the Geylang Cemetery is read and the Secretary is directed to call for a report on the subject from the Panchayat.[104]

Decoration of Orchard Road Temple: It was decided to write to the Hindu Panchayat to ask them to ascertain whether the Hindu community as a whole are prepared to sanction the payment out of the Hindu funds of a sum of money to defray the cost of decorating the temple on the occasion of the Prince of Wales visit.[105]

On some occasions, the Board also specified to these committees what course of action it could and could not pursue, including the recourse to legal proceedings. In one particular instance, the committee of the Mariamman Temple wrote to the Board about some difficulties they had encountered with a devotee, Mr. Maruthamuthoo, during the 1937 celebration of the festival of Panguni Ootharam. Here is the Board's response on how this matter should be handled:

The letter dated the 19th April 1937 from the Chairman of the Management Committee, Mariamman Temple and subsequent correspondence is read to the Board. The Chairman is authorized to inform the Management Committee that the Committee is at liberty to write to Mr. Maruthamuthoo and ask for payment of the $6 claimed. No threat of legal proceeding should be made but Mr. Maruthamuthoo can be informed that if he is unwilling to pay the $6 now claimed and to make similar payments on future occasions he and other persons desirous of taking kavadies from Perumal Temple to Veeramma Kaliamman Temple in connection with the Panguni Ootharam ceremony in March in any year will be liable to be excluded from the precincts of the Perumal Temple and treated as trespassers. The letter should add that the Board are not prepared to bring civil proceedings against Mr. Maruthamuthoo or to authorize any such proceedings.[106]

The counsel to the committee is that the committee's next steps to reclaim the money owed for participating in the festival should be tempered with caution. Also, it is not surprising that the Board has to authorize the committee to claim the money as the latter does not have licence to act on its own in financial matters. The Board also seems careful about not wanting to get entangled in legal proceedings perhaps because the small claim was for a religious observance (i.e., the payment of a fee to the temple for the right to carry a *kavadi*) and could become a highly controversial subject if it was given undue publicity through a court case. This reluctance to resort to the courts in dealing with disputes between individuals and temple management committees is evident in the following example as well:

---

[103]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 March 1916.

[104]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 12 July 1917.

[105]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 25 February 1922.

[106]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 June 1937.

> The complaint against N. V. Vandayar is dealt with in the letter of the 29 June 1937 from the Chairman of the Committee of Management of the Mariamman Temple is considered. It is decided that the Chairman of that Committee should be informed that the Board does not see its way to taking any legal proceedings against N. V. Vandayar in view of the fact that the Deputy Public Prosecutor refused to sanction prosecution (7/37).

This disinclination to resort to the courts is furthermore not surprising in view of the very rationale on which the MHEO and the Board were founded—the intention of reducing expensive and unnecessary litigation. It would, thus, be ironic and counter-productive for the Board to now be involved in instigating legal proceedings particularly against individuals entangled in temple disputes.

However, occasionally the Board did slip up and overstep its own limits, in the process embarking on a course of action that was not within its legal jurisdiction. In one instance in the early years of the Board's founding, the members in their enthusiasm opted for legal recourse to render justice to a group of Hindus:

> 'Vilakkadikasu': It having been brought to the attention of the Board that certain authorities in Singapore are in the habit of deducting 1% from the earnings of Hindu [text unclear] carters employed by them for the purpose of performing religious observances, but have retained such monies for their own use. It is resolved that steps be taken to recover monies so collected in 1908 and 1909 and that legal proceedings be instituted against A. T. Govindasamy and his partners Mr. M. K. Murugapa Pillay, A. R. Mariappa, K. Mutoosamy Padayatchy and A. T. Marimattoo of No. A Rochore Canal Road with this object.[107]

The members soon realized that this is not an advisable course of action for the Board to undertake:

> 'Vilakkadikasu': The Chairman informs the Board that Mr. Elliot and himself have considered the matter of the subscriptions deducted from the carter's earnings and have come to the conclusion that the Board has no right to sue.[108]

Despite the hierarchical relationship between the Board and the *panchayat* by the late 1930s, it was clear that the work of the former could not be successfully accomplished without requisite input from the Committees of Management. The minutes of meetings in the closing years of the 1930s reveal that the Board was acceding to the requests and proposals made by the *panchayat*, but importantly *without* altering the existing balance of powers or the standard mode of operation. A statement in the minutes of a Board meeting held on 28 September 1938 reflects this desire for greater interaction and co-operation with the *panchayat*(s):

> The Board considered miscellaneous points raised in the letter of 5th September from the Chairman of the Committee of Management. The Board agreed that closer touch between the Management Committee and the Board is desirable and the Chairman undertook to write to the Committee accordingly.

As the discussion thus far demonstrates, the *panchayat*(s) acted as an intermediary, taking questions the Board had to the larger public and relaying opinions from the latter. The Board as such did not interact directly with the religious communities

---

[107]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 September 1909.

[108]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 January 1910.

whose endowments it administered, and the committees of management served as a link between the two parties. It is crucial to establish if this effort to garner the public's viewpoint was sincere or disingenuous. On the basis of the evidence carried in the minutes, it appears that in seeking public attitudes, the Board was to some extent protecting itself, not to mention being politically savvy, as it clearly did not want to be involved in a controversy by antagonizing religious sentiments, through what for the Board might have been purely administrative and bureaucratic decisions. Deliberations relating to the painting of the domes of the Perumal Temple and the possibility of relocating the Sivan Temple to another site validate these points:

> Perumal domes: The Secretary reports that the reinforced concrete domes at Perumal Temple have been built and that the contract price of $1750 has been paid to Messrs Brossard and Mopin. The ornamentation and painting of these domes by Hindu artists would cost about $600- and the drawings are to be approved by the worshippers.[109]

> Perumal Temple: It was agreed to give the work of ornamenting and painting the domes of this temple to Sopaya whose designs have been approved by the leading Hindus at a cost of $600.[110]

In relation to some ambiguities about the original deed of the Sivan Temple, the Board had suggested that perhaps the temple could be moved to another site, but also wished to consult members of the Hindu community about this proposal. In view of objections from the latter, the Board decided not to follow through this idea of relocation:

> That should Government wish to resume possession of the land a grant of money might be applied for as a kind of compensation for the building erected there in order to put up another Sivan temple on some other land in the possession of the Board. It was decided to adjourn this matter for fuller consideration and to enable the Secretary to ascertain the opinion of leading Hindus on the subject.[111]

> Sivan Temple: The Secretary reports that the opinion of the Hindus is opposed to the removal of this temple and it is decided not to proceed with this matter.[112]

The possibility and desirability of the relocating the temple was again at the forefront of discussions in 1948. This time one of the two newly appointed Hindu members to the Board, Mr. Pakirisamy, objected and the Board took note of his opinion:

> The Chairman reported that this temple in Orchard Road projected beyond the building line of the adjacent buildings. The Municipality had been anxious to straighten the building line. The proposal was made to exchange the property for some other in view of the fact that the site was now extremely valuable to assist the finances of this temple which was not affluent. Mr. Pakirisamy explained that this would be against the religious scruples of the Hindu community. It was agreed therefore to drop the matter of the exchange and that as no notice

---

[109]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 10 May 1916.

[110]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 July 1916.

[111]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 10 May 1916.

[112]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 December 1916.

had been served by the Municipality the Board should do nothing for the present as regards the straightening of the building line.[113]

The presence of the Hindu Board members was clearly important here, as it was a decade later in the midst of plans for the rebuilding of the Sivan Temple:

> Mr. Pakirisamy told the Board that the original plan for the Sivan Temple showed the Main Shrine of Lord Siva facing east. He had received objections from some of the Hindus who worshipped at this temple who wanted the shrine to face Orchard Road since that has been its position for more than a century. As a result of these objections fresh plans had to drawn. Mr. Pakirisamy reported that the plans for now ready for submission to the City Council and as soon as they were approved, tenders for the two temples would be called for.[114]

In another example, the rebuilding of the Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road saw the Board engaged in multi-party discussions, involving the Mariamman Temple committee, the *panchayat* of Endowment I and the Hindu public. The issues debated amongst the concerned parties were the following: whether the Perumal Temple complex should be replaced by a new building, whether funds from Endowment I could be used for this purpose and whether there was enough money to allow this. Here is the gist of the discussion as recorded in the minutes of a meeting held on 17 December 1931:

> Proposed Erection of a New Temple @ Serangoon Road to replace the Perumal Temple: The Secretary said that both the Hindu Advisory Board and the 'Building Committee (whose letter was read by the Chairman) of the Mariamman Temple concurred with its members of the Panchayat of Endowment in pressing this proposition, that it seemed to be quite legal to use End I's funds, that the Accounts of the table showed that funds were sufficient and that the present Perumal Complex was a torture and required replacing [...] The Board considered that as the Endowment was one, there was no objection to the use of funds for Serangoon Road if public opinion approved, and directed the Secretary to obtain written opinions for record from the H. A. Board and the End. I Committee. Subject to this the Board approved a contract not to exceed $25,000 being given to Messrs Swan & Maclaren.

It is notable that although strictly speaking the Board was charged only with the task of administering a set number of endowments, even in the early days of the Board's existence, the broader public (both Hindu and non-Hindu) perceived it to have far-reaching influence and clout. Consequently, through the decades the Board regularly received petitions from members of various religious communities, carrying appeals and proposals that clearly transcended its sphere of authority. The Board on various occasions explicitly drew a line at getting involved with matters of a 'religious nature', and emphasized that their role was to deal exclusively with secular issues. For instance, on the question of decisions about the layout of the Hindu burial ground, the Board declined to comment and directed concerns of the Municipal authorities to the Singapore Hindu Advisory Board (SHAB) instead. But on several other matters, the Board took up issues and pursued them to the end

---

[113]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 December 1948.
[114]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 August 1958.

although they were technically not within the scope of their work. One example is the discussion relating to instituting specific Hindu festivals as public holidays,[115] although the input and the recommendation of the Board did not produce the desired results. Another good example is when the Board received a petition from the Hindu public in Singapore on the subject of registration of Hindu marriages.[116]

These examples reveal that members of the Hindu public viewed the SMHEB to have certain legitimacy, power and most importantly an ear to the Colonial Government. As such, there was probably anticipation that their requests might receive a serious hearing and meet with greater success. The members of the Hindu public could have sent these appeals directly to the Governor of the SS but that they chose to go through the Board is not insignificant. Additionally, the Board does not seem to have been averse to considering these appeals seriously and rendering its own views on the subject. It certainly does not invoke the MHEO or declare that it was bound to act within certain legal parameters or refuse to act on petitions which dealt with subjects outside its sphere of influence.

5.3.1 The SMHEB's Interactions with the Larger Community

Despite sharing a common history and experiences, my research suggests that the Boards in the three settlements interacted little and certainly did not have any formal, institutional relationship. My survey of the material in the minutes of the SMHEB meetings confirms this disengagement. The three boards seem to have functioned rather autonomously. In the minutes, there are only a handful of references to the Penang or Malacca boards and can be easily tallied: I have counted a total of seven such contacts between the Singapore and Penang boards that are mentioned in the minutes. A few of these were explicitly initiated by the SMHEB, while the others were responses to queries by the Penang Board. The SMHEB, finding itself enmeshed in controversies relating to the Sikh community and the Dunlop Street Mosque, resolved to write to the Penang Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (PMHEB) to make enquiries about whether it had ever been involved in divesting itself of any endowment property and, if so, how:

> The correspondence with the Muslim Trust Fund Association was laid before the Board and the Secretary was instructed to write to the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board, Penang, to enquire whether they have ever divested themselves of Endowment property under a scheme.[117]

---

[115]Members of the Hindu public would send petitions to the SMHEB about the declaration of *Deepavali* or Tai Pūcam as public holidays for the settlement. The Board would forward these requests to the SS Governor for consideration.

[116]The SMHEB received also petitions from Hindu clubs and associations about the need for a law to register Hindu marriages in Singapore. The Board forwarded the request to the SS Governor with the suggestion that the Government of India be further consulted in this context.

[117]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 January 1936.

We learn that, in fact, the Singapore Board did write to the Penang and Malacca boards and had received a response. However, this did not assist in finding an easy resolution to the 'problems' *vis-à-vis* the Sikh community's desire of self-management:

> The Secretary reported that letters had been received from the Mohammedan & Hindu Endowments Boards of Penang and Malacca to the effect that they had never divested themselves of any property under a scheme approved by the Court of otherwise transferred property to new trustees.[118]

Another occasion on which the Penang Board is mentioned relates to the only instance of collaboration with the Singapore Board. This related to the possibility of amending Section 15 of Cap. 175 of the MHEO at the initiative of the PMHEB. The latter had obviously sent the proposed amendments to the SMHEB members for their consideration and assent, presumably because the changes could not have been effected without consensus amongst the three boards. I have not been able to trace any evidence for the Malacca Board's involvement in the discussions, but it would be fair to guess that they too were a party to these discussions. The Singapore Board members agreed to the proposed amendments with the caveat that they would like to add a few changes of their own.[119]

Yet another instance where the Penang Board is mentioned is when the SMHEB requested 'the Chairman to obtain, if possible, a copy of the opinion of the legal advisers to the Penang Board and to circulate it to the members of this Board.' The context is the proposed amendments to the MHEO but there is no explicit reference to the previous discussion about changes proposed by the Penang Board. The latter had also contacted its Singapore counterpart with queries about whether its endowments were liable to income tax[120] while the Singapore members had written to inquire about the salary structure for endowment staff.[121] The final reference to the

---

[118]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 March 1936.

[119]The Secretary is instructed to inform the Penang Board that the Board would favour the following amendments:

(i)   add at end of para. (i)
      and the sale, purchase or exchange of any lands for the purpose of conforming with any scheme or plan for the improvement of lands owned by an Endowment, whether such scheme or plan be statutory or otherwise.
(ii) add new paragraph (j)
(j)   investing the funds of nay endowment in titles to immoveable property in the Colony, such titles being freehold titles or grants in perpetuity or leases(other than mining leases) for a term thereof 60 years at least is unexpired at the date of the investment, provided that the land to which nay such title relates, is situate [sic] within the limits of a municipality, and that there are erected thereon at the time of such investment houses or other buildings, the gross rental whereof, together with the land appurtenant thereto, is at the time of such investment not less than 5% of the purchase price of such land (Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 5 July 1939).

[120]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 5 May 1922.
[121]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 6 August 1937.

Penang Board that I have seen in the minutes is on the matter of overhead charges of the Board and salaries of Board staff. The Board passed a number of resolutions regarding these two issues and forwarded these to the Government for approval. The resolutions end with this note:

> The Chairman is asked to address the Government on the subject and to point out that the payments now recommended compare favourably with those made by the Penang Board (19/37).[122]

It is reasonable to deduce from this entry that there must have been some communication and exchange of information between the two boards in order for the Singapore Board to have knowledge of the Penang Board staff's remuneration scheme and to use this as a leveraging point.

What about the MHEB's relationship with other organizations and entities? What were its relations with the wider local religious communities and how did the latter receive and respond to the work of the Board? Were there amicable relations, support or co-operation or were there tensions and resistances to the work of the Board?[123] Although the SMHEB (and indeed the other two boards) seemed to have largely operated autonomously, given the nature of their work at a day-to-day level, they were necessarily brought into contact with a number of civil authorities, socio-religious groups and associations in each settlement. These included the municipal authorities, the insurance companies, lawyers, courts, architects, auditors and the Colonial Government itself. Some of these contacts were inevitable as the Board negotiated issues relating to, for example, the structural and physical maintenance of endowment properties, their tenancy, valuation and insurance. Others were perhaps less welcome and required the Board to formulate a considered and non-controversial response. Prime amongst these were the various advisory bodies appointed to counsel the Colonial Government on religious affairs of specific communities. On several occasions, the Board referred queries about religious matters to the Hindu and Muslim Advisory Boards for their counsel. For instance, in keeping with its policy of only dealing with 'temporal', 'secular issues',[124] the Board responded to a request from the Municipal authorities in the following manner:

> Letter from the Municipal Commissioner asking for Board's views regarding layout of proposed new Hindu Burial Ground. The Secretary was directed to reply stating that the Board was unable to offer any useful comment except to recommend that the matter be referred to the Hindu Advisory Board.[125]

---

[122]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 3 September 1937.

[123]This situation certainly typifies the contemporary period as well, based on my conversations with members of the SHEB and Penang HEB. There seems to have been little desire for interaction or sharing of experiences between these two entities. As for the Malacca HEB, neither of the other two Board members seemed to know anything about it or even be sure of its existence. This situation of disconnect seems to be changing somewhat. Recently, members of the Penang HEB visited the offices of their Singapore counterparts and have initiated conversations with proposals for greater engagement in the near future. I return to this discussion in Chapter 7.

[124]It is important to reiterate that these terms are, in fact, used by the Board members.

[125]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 4 June 1924.

The Board also deferred to the knowledge and expertise of the Mohammedan Advisory boards on many occasions, in requesting nominations[126] for the committee of management or asking them to vet the nominees suggested by others:

> It is decided that the three names submitted by Mr. Mustan to be members of the Management Committee of the Jamiel Masjid Endowment No. 5 be submitted for advice to the Mohammedan Advisory Board.[127]

This process did not seem to be a mere formality as the advice seems to have been acted upon and the Advisory Board's view was considered decisive and consequential:

> The Chairman and Mr. Mohamed Ali bib Mohamed Hashim of the Bankruptcy Office, Singapore, were appointed to be the Committee of Management pending recommendation by the Mohammedan Advisory Board.[128]

Yet, through the years it does not seem to have been open to the idea of any formal relationship with either of these bodies. The SMHEB had many encounters with the SHAB, not by its own design and intention but due to the initiative of the latter. Interestingly, on many occasions, the SHAB transcended its defined role and was quite active on specific issues and did more than just 'advise' the government. Some examples that demonstrate the rather engaged activist position of the SHAB include the campaign to build an appropriate burial ground for Singapore Hindus, the renovation of the Perumal Temple and the need to build a religious school on its premises and the debates and controversies over the banning of the Tai Pūcam and fire-walking.[129] The SHAB was deeply involved in all these 'projects' and was at the forefront of petitioning the Colonial Government (sometimes through the MHEB and on other occasions directly), mobilizing the Hindu public and working together with other Indian and Hindu social and religious associations to achieve concrete changes amongst the Hindu community in Singapore. In fact, these data suggest that the SHAB was quite vocal and its tone far more forceful and resolute in dealing with a Colonial Government and transcended its 'advisory' role by a considerable measure. After independence, however, the stance of the SHAB seems to have become rather muted[130] before it was informally incorporated into the SHEB. In the early days, the SHAB seems to have made an effort to build some institutional links with the SMHEB, which was not always receptive to these overtures. For example, the SMHEB's response to the proposal made by the SHAB was an outright rejection:

---

[126]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 September 1938.

[127]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 July 1936.

[128]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 26 October 1938.

[129]Because the festivals were observed in the MHEB temples and were seen to be sanctioned by the Board (and thus the government), and because the function of the MHEB was, by definition, purely administrative and managerial, it was the HAB that was approached to carry the appeal to the Colonial Government.

[130]See Chapter 7 for details.

> Letter from Hindu Advisory Board, referred by Government, suggesting that one of their members should be appointed both member of this Board 'and of the Panchayat': The meeting unanimously decided to report to that this was inadvisable, and further that it was inadvisable that a Hindu member of the HAB should be appointed a member of this Board but that the Board would always be ready to consider MAB[131] suggestions.[132]

This position, together with objections to the appointment of Hindu, Sikh or Muslims members to the Board (until 1948), reflects gate-keeping strategies at work but can be attributed only in part to a colonial attitude. I say this because an identical request by the HAB in 1962, when there were already four Hindu members on the Board and the political situation rather different, met with the same eventuality,[133] although no explanations were included in this case:

> Appointment of Hindu Members to the Board: The Chairman of the Hindu Advisory Board's letter dated 3rd January 1962 was discussed and the Board decided not to accede to their request. Mr. Kandasamy suggested that the decision be intimated to the Chairman of the Hindu Advisory Board.[134]

In a related mode, as we have seen, the Board, while deferring to the views of the larger public (be they Hindu, Muslim or Sikh) about religious issues, did not welcome any intrusion or interference in the way that it conducted its business. There were several instances when a number of Hindu associations attempted to put pressure on the Board to institute specific changes to its constitution and ask for greater accountability to the public. The Board did not respond favourably to calls for greater transparency of its operations and certainly did not welcome public scrutiny of its accounts. The Board's response was to respond in a firm, non-negotiable and authoritative manner. The resolution passed at a Board meeting on 30 September 1924 minced no words and sent a strong message to the Hindu associations in question, reflecting the powers of the Board. Given that this was a 'government body' the threat carried in the message must have been taken seriously by the parties in question. It is important to quote the account of this meeting (called specifically to respond to this single issue) in full, which showed attendance by all seven members of the Board:

> Minutes of a Special Meeting held at the Colonial Engineer's office on Tuesday the 30th September 1924 to consider what action should be taken by the Board so as to put a stop to interference of certain Hindu associations in Singapore with the affairs of the Board. The Secretary explained the purpose for which the meeting had been called and illustrated his remarks by reading extracts from correspondence in papers nos. 29 of 1923 and 10 of 1924. The subject was then discussed by members of the Board after which the Chairman of the Board the Hon'ble the Attorney General proposed that the Secretary be directed to write

---

[131] The records of the meeting state 'MAB' (Mohammedan Advisory Board), which was also formed by then. I am guessing that this is a typographical error and that the reference was to the HAB.

[132] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 19 December 1929.

[133] This situation was to change dramatically in the 1980s with the 'merging' of the two boards in Singapore.

[134] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 March 1962.

to the various associations concerned intimating that if they continued to interfere with the affairs of the Board steps would be taken with a view to obtaining their dissolution. The proposal was seconded by Deputy Treasurer 'A'[135] and on being put to the meeting was carried unanimously.[136]

The Board was certainly tested through the years by members of the small but active Hindu community in Singapore, which persisted with letters, appeals and petitions about specific issues sent either directly to the Board or via the Government. In 1940, it was the 'Indian Association' which wrote to the Board requesting details of its accounts:

> The Secretary laid before the Board a letter dated 31st July 1940, from the Indian Association requesting that a statement of the Income and Expenditure together with a statement of Assets and Liabilities of the Board's properties be published annually for the information of the public. It was resolved that further enquiries be made as to the exact information required and the manner in which it would be published and that this matter be considered again at the next meeting.[137]

This statement seems to suggest that the Board may be open to this request but the minutes of the next meeting reveal that the Board had, in fact, refused the Indian Association, again with no reasons provided:

> The Secretary reported that since the letter of the Board dated the 5th October to the Indian Association refusing the Association's request, no further communication has been received from the Association.[138]

These discussions were no doubt interrupted by the coming of the Second World War. From the records I have access to, the last meeting before the war seems to have been held on 26 August 1941. I do not have access to the minutes of the meeting held between September 1941 and August 1947. It has also not been possible for me to establish if any regular meetings were held during this period; however, the minutes of the Board meeting held on 9 September 1947 suggest that the work of the Board continued during this period. There are references to the accounts for the years between 1941 and 1946, details from the Auditor's Report are raised, and increases in the salaries of the Board's clerk are recommended. It is interesting that in the years immediately following the Second World War practically no reference is made either to this event or to the Japanese Occupation. I have encountered only two instances where these events are mentioned: one, with reference to the Board practice of holding one meeting a month before the war[139] and two, with reference to whether the Board could attempt to recover the sum of $28,000 collected by the Japanese Custodian during the occupation. On the latter question, the

---

[135]Interestingly, the minutes of the meeting carry detailed identities of all Board members with the exception of the Deputy Treasurer, who is mysteriously identified as 'A.'

[136]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 September 1924.

[137]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 8 August 1940.

[138]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 19 December 1940.

[139]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 December 1948.

Chairman mused, 'It was quite impossible to say if there was any chance of recovery. Any claim would have to be against the Japanese Government as part of their reparations.'[140]

Perhaps the most sustained, comprehensive and collectivized barrage of requests and 'suggestions' came from the Singapore Hindu Sabai.[141] At a meeting in 1956, the Hindu Sabai passed a number of resolutions which were sent to the Board Secretary, who presented them to the Board for its consideration. The minutes do not carry the entire set of resolutions passed by the association but raise for discussion four of its resolutions, one of which the Board acceded but challenged and rejected the remaining three. I present the full text of the resolutions discussed at this MHEB meeting,[142] together with the Board's rejoinder, which reveals an interesting exchange of ideas:

*As regards the 2nd resolution, namely:

'The Hindu Sabai condemns all concerned for having allowed to construct living quarters on the very tombstone themselves in the old Hindu cemetery at Lorong 3, Geylang, and thereby obstructing the periodical rites to be performed in the traditional way.'

Rather than dispute the matter and to avoid criticism the Chairman thought the proper course was to take it that any land where it was doubtful whether the land had been used as a cemetery or not and if the public feeling in the matter was strong should only be used as a cemetery and the temporary buildings should be demolished.

*As regards the 3rd resolution, namely:

'When members of the Hindu Advisory Board and the Muslim & Hindu Endowments Board respectively are appointed, they should be elected by the Hindu community, as a whole, instead of being nominated by the Government.'

[...] the Board's comment was that this was a matter to be decided by the Government but there were obvious difficulties in electing persons by a vague body described as a Hindu community there being no register of members, no qualifications of to vote and no machinery to carry out an election.

*As regards the 6th resolution, namely:

'To request the Muslim & Hindu Endowments Board to publish the annual accounts of the Hindu temples under the control of the said Board in the Tamil and English newspapers for the information of the Hindu public, in addition to its publication in the Government Gazette.'

[. . .] the Board took the view that the expense of such publication which would be considerable could not be justified, but the Board thought that the attention of the Tamil and English newspapers might be drawn to the publication in the Government Gazette; or alternatively the Board publish the accounts at the expense of the Singapore Hindu Sabai.

---

[140]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 25 May 1949.

[141]The Singapore Hindu Sabai was founded in 1954 for the religious and social progress of the Hindu community.

[142]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 26 March 1956.

*As regards the 7th resolution, namely:

'To request the Government to amend the Muslim & Hindu Endowments Ordinance in such a way as to have one Board for the control of the Hindu temples and another for the control of Muslim religious institution [sic].'

[...] the Board were of the opinion that this is undesirable as it would lead to unnecessary complication. The Chairman was instructed to explain that matters concerning the Hindu community were never dealt with without the presence of a Hindu member and similarly as regards Muslim matters; in other respects the advice of the various members of the Board has always proved valuable whatever was the denomination of the member of the endowment which was the subject of discussion.

This rich text enables numerous responses and interpretations. First, while four of the resolutions were connected with the affairs of the Board, it was clearly not in a position to address or change the second and seventh resolutions. Second, the Board members clearly did not have an interest in instituting changes in the areas implied by the resolutions. Indeed, the Hindu Sabai's decision to direct these resolutions to the Board seems rather misplaced. On the question of accounts, it is also interesting that the Board members did not invoke the MHEO but responded instead by noting that apart from ensuring that the board accounts were audited annually, there was nothing else that obliged them to make their financial status more public. However, the tone avoids an authoritarian bent and the Board provides seemingly a considered response and appears to engage the issues rather than dismiss them outright. Ironically, with reference to the call for separate Boards for Hindus and Muslims (a proposition the Board thought to be 'undesirable as it would lead to unnecessary complication'), they were to be proven wrong 12 years later when this did, in fact, become a reality.

The Singapore Hindu Sabai was resolved to be dogged and tenacious even in the face of rebuff and returned yet again to the Board in 1964 with proposals relating to the appointment of Commissioners to the Board and members of the management committees. This time the letter had reached the table of the then Minister for Social Affairs for his consideration. The Board decided to defer its discussion of the matter:

[...] until the Minister's views were known. The Chairman said that he was aware of the views of the Board and that he would convey its views to the Minister when asked by the Minister for his advice.[143]

Unfortunately, the minutes do not explicate what the views of the Board were on this subject, but with knowledge of foresight, it is reasonable to surmise that the Board would have objected to the Singapore Hindu Sabai's proposal to institute a new mode of appointing members to the Board and the management committees of the various endowments. The manner in which SHEB members are appointed even today continues to adhere to the old practices as framed in the MHEO, that is, they are government appointed, rather than elected.

The Board also had important dealings with the Colonial Government itself. It is ironic that while the lay pubic perceived the SMHEB to be a 'government body',

---

[143]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 19 August 1964.

the Board occasionally also had to be reminded that it was a 'non-government'[144] entity. Technically, the SMHEB was a statutory Board brought into existence by an Act of Parliament, and while this status exempted it from some requirements, in other ways, it was treated by the Government like any other bureaucratic authority in the SS. In an earlier instance, we see that the Board negotiated its right to claim land that had also been claimed by the Crown. The disputed land in question was the Geylang Cemetery:

> Geylang Cemetery: The Chairman reported that part of the land occupied by this cemetery was claimed as Crown land and the Board's claim to title by long possession had not been admitted by the Commissioner of Lands who, however, was prepared to give a lease. Mr. Pakirisamy gave the opinion that possession adverse to the Crown for more than 60 years could be established by evidence. It was decided to leave the matter over to Mr. Harvey an opportunity personally to study the papers.[145]

This matter would occupy the Board's energies and resources for the next 3 years that it took to finally settle the matter. The Board also sought legal advice on the question of whether it should accept the Government's offer of a 99-year lease over the disputed land, the Board's rights, as well as its chances of success in court over claims to the land.[146] On 12 June 1950, the matter stood as follows:

> In the meantime Mr. Pakirisamy had gone to a great deal of trouble and traced evidence which pointed to the particular piece of land having been used by the Board as a Hindu burial ground from as early as 1870. The Chairman wondered whether members wished to examine the evidence themselves before referring the matter to a legal adviser. Mr. Harvey requested that he should have an opportunity of first scrutinizing the evidence produced in his capacity as Commissioner of Lands before the matter was put into the hands of a solicitor. It was agreed to submit the matter formally to the Commissioner of Lands who, if he considered that a good title had been made out, could recommend that Government surrender the land to the Board, when the cost of legal advice would be avoided.[147]

Through these negotiations, the Board showed itself to be rather shrewd and certainly did not seem to be cowed by the authority of the Colonial Government. I find it ironic and surprising that here the Board did not see an ally in the latter and viewed itself as 'non-governmental'. But this also strongly suggests that, on specific occasions, there was indeed a distance between the two parties and their interests and agendas did not necessarily coincide. In this instance, the Board members displayed an astuteness in attempting to achieve the best possible 'bargain' for the endowment, without too much financial cost, which was a persistent preoccupation of the Board:

> In accordance with the decision reached at the last meeting, the question of the Board's claim to this land by long possession was formally referred to the Commissioner of Lands who had replied offering the two pieces of land concerned to the Board on certain reduced terms which amounted, in effect to, to a 99-year lease on payment of an annual ground rent of some $1500/-. In the absence of information as to exactly how favourable these terms

---

[144]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 August 1958.

[145]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 25 May 1949.

[146]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 December 1949.

[147]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 12 June 1950.

were, the Board could not decide whether to accept them or to take legal opinion and bring the matter to Court when there was a chance that the land might be awarded to them for nothing. It was agreed, therefore, that the Chairman would circularize the members setting out the evidence which had been obtained by Mr. Pakirisamy, the offer of the Government, the actual value of the land and the uses to which the land was intended to put.[148]

The Board did not give in easily and the members, while convinced that they had a good case if they went to court, were willing to try all avenues to ensure success in their claim. At the same time, they were advised by Counsel to be judicious and temper their confidence with caution:

> The Opinion of Counsel about the Board's claim for a title on long adverse possession of this plot already having been circulated the meeting recorded their view that it would be most undesirable were the Board and Government to be involved in litigation over this property [. . .] On the face of the counsel's opinion that the Board had considerable prospects of success in their claim were it proceeded with, the meeting thought it would not be in order to abandon any claim lightly and that the Chairman should maintain to the Commissioner of Lands on behalf of the Board the suggestion previously made by him as his personal and tentative proposal that the matter be compromised by the grant of a lease by the Crown to the Board of the land not occupied by graves at a rent of—say—a quarter of the economic rent without auction or other onerous conditions and the land occupied by graves to be restricted to its use as a graveyard only and be let without rent. Failing agreement by the Commissioner of Lands on this proposal it was agreed to propose arbitration by an arbiter mutually chosen by the parties or on their failing to agree by one nominated by Government to settle the Board's claim to the land in freehold.[149]

The Board seems to have succeeded in the proposal it had made and obtained a favourable government offer, which the Board members decided to accept without taking the matter to court:

> The Chairman reported that agreement had been reached on the lines indicated in previous meeting—that the Crown grant two 99-year leases to the Board in respect of the land at Geylang which had been in dispute, the land actually occupied as a graveyard being at a nominal rental restricted as to its use to a burial ground, the balance being leased without option at a rent of about one quarter of the commercial rent of the land.[150]

The question of the SMHEB's relationship and interaction with the Colonial Government is interesting not only for historical reasons, but also in helping to provide a useful vantage point for comparisons with contemporary encounters between the HEB in Singapore and Penang with the post-colonial state.

I would argue that from the founding of the MHEB in 1905 to about the late 1940s, a specific system of administration was tried, experimented with and brought in being. By the early 1950s, a determinate infrastructure had been put into place with the need only for minor tweaking, as the Board had to move in tandem with socio-political transformations occurring in British Malaya through the 1950s and 1960s. Many significant changes occurred through these two decades including the

---

[148]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 November 1950.

[149]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 27 March 1952.

[150]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 10 November 1952.

following: the attitude of the Board towards how members of the management committees should be appointed with greater input from 'worshipping communities',[151] greater autonomy and self-direction accorded to the management committees to some extent even in financial matters (but with the Board still firmly in charge of money matters), the reconstitution of management committees across the various endowments, major changes in the constitution of the Board itself, and important amendments to the MHEO. Of these listed changes, I briefly discuss the last two. In terms of membership, 1948 was a watershed year that witnessed a radical departure from regnant practices and saw the introduction of two Hindus and two Muslims to the SMHEB. In an effort to regularize appointments to the Board and to circumvent vacancies conditioned by movement of personnel, in 1948, the Chairman proposed to have these appointments made by office:

> The Chairman went on to explain that the Board was composed partly of Government officials and partly of members of the public appointed by the Governor. There had never been any clear-cut ruling about the appointment of Government officials—whether they were personal appointments of ex officio—but the Chairman had always regarded them as appointments by office. It would be of advantage to have these appointments ex officio in view of the changes of personnel in Government posts. It would save much difficulty and inconvenience to appoint holders of certain posts to be members of the Board instead of appointing them by name. The Chairman undertook to take this matter up with Government with a view to putting this matter on a formal and proper footing.[152]

While the number of members appointed to the Board increased to 11 in the next decade and more locals were appointed, the '2 Hindus, 2 Muslims' formula seems to have remained constant until the year 1961. In this year, there were four Hindu and two Muslim members on the Board, who were joined in 1964 by a Parsee representative, and, in 1966, the number of Muslim members had increased to four, a proportion that remained till 1968 when the Board was split into separate Hindu and Muslim entities.

The post-Second World War period was also consequential in seeing a more liberal attitude towards the constitution of the committees of management for the various endowments. At the meeting on 29 December 1948, the Chairman suggested that greater efforts be made to ensure input from the respective religious communities to ensure appropriate representation. As I see it, although no formal change was instituted at this meeting, this did reflect an attitudinal repositioning. Given the politics of the time, the latter displayed an attempt to shift the balance of power from the Board to the religious communities, whose input in this task was not prescribed in the original legislation:

> The Chairman referred to Section 6 of the Ordinance which gave the Board power to appoint Management Committees of the various endowments. He felt, however, that the worshipping community of each endowment should have a say in the appointment of such committees. There had been an instance recently when representations had been made to

---

[151] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 December 1948.

[152] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 December 1948. This practice was, in fact, instituted for the remainder of the tenure of the SMHEB until 1968.

the Chairman of the Board which indicated that a section of the worshippers of one temple were not entirely satisfied with the constitution of its Management Committee. The Chairman taking the view that there was no evidence that this section was properly representative of any considerable part of the community concerned with the temple had not taken any action in that case but felt that the matter should be brought to the notice of the meeting for their views. It was decided that the Chairman would supply members interested with a list of the persons forming the various Management Committees and it would be left to interested members to approach the Management Committees direct.

In 1958, members of the Board were of the view that the 'Muslim and Hindu Endowments Ordinance should be amended to enable the Chairman to represent the Board in Court and before statutory tribunals.'[153] This view was forwarded to the Solicitor-General, whose response was read to the Board at the next meeting:

> Inche Ahmad bin Mohamed Ibrahim (Ag. Solicitor-General) said that it was likely that the proposed amendments to empower the Chairman to represent the Board in Court and before statutory tribunals would be strongly opposed by the Bar Committee. He added that he himself was of the opinion that it was wrong in principle to expect a Government officer to represent a non-Government body in Court just to save costs.[154]

In the light of this reply, the Board rethought its original proposal:

> After some discussion, the Board resolved not to amend the Muslin & Hindu Endowments Ordinance in view of expected opposition to the proposed amendments.[155]

However, a number of changes to the rules and regulations relating to the appointment of Chairman of the Board were proposed and approved by the Solicitor-General. Other things, however, remained the same, including the ways in which the Board continued to see itself as in charge and in control of various matters. This was revealed in the 1950s and 1960s with reference to several issues. The rebuilding of the Perumal Temple with donations made from the members of the public was one such issue, where the Board asserted its 'ownership' and control of the endowment.[156] Due to lack of adequate funds, and the objections of a section of the Hindu community to the Board's plans for rebuilding the temple, the possibility of approaching the Hindu public for subscriptions surfaced, which then raised the question of who would control the temple. Here is the gist of the Board's position on this matter:

> It was decided that in principle the control of any temple built as a result of public subscription would remain in the Board; that is necessary (and if representations were made to that effect) the Management Committee could be expanded to include members representing those who had subscribed—but it was not for the Board to make any suggestion to that effect on its account, but to wait till it was made; that if a Committee was to be formed

---

[153] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 23 April 1958.

[154] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 August 1958.

[155] Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 August 1958.

[156] In a rare instance, 'the colonial authorities agreed to grant sixty three thousand dollars to MHEB for a detailed renovation of the temple' (Hindu Endowments Board 2009, 17). This was with reference to the rebuilding of Sri Mariamman Temple in the 1930s.

it was for those who had objected to the Board's scheme to do so and raise the funds—in other respects the Board agreed to maintain the position decided at the last meeting.[157]

It is important to note that the Board's discussion is based on a hypothetical situation and not an event that has occurred. It is striking that the Board is anticipating an eventuality where donors might make a claim on the right to control the temple. They seemed to be preparing themselves for this possibility, which reveals not only their foresight but also a will to self-preservation. Another instance which sees the Board asserting its authority over the affairs of the endowments is evident in the following example:

> Referring to Resolution 6 adopted at the meeting of the Hindu Management Committee on 2.3.60, Mr. Roy drew the Board's attention to the fact that services of endowment employees, namely musicians, were still being utilised for non-endowment purposes. The Board discussed the matter and resolved that these employees should be informed that as servants of the Board they should cease forthwith offering services for non-endowment purposes and if they failed to comply with this request they would be dismissed.[158]

This position, which strictly delimits and circumscribes the role of 'servants of the Board', is striking for a number of reasons, not least for demonstrating the bureaucratic and contractual nature of the relationship between endowment staff and the Board. It also shows that the controlling nature of all such organizations carried with it the threat of dismissal. These important historical data are further helpful in moving the discussion eventually towards an account of the relationship between statutory bodies which administer religions (such as SHEB and MUIS) and the secular, nation-state in the contemporary period. Coming to the present, the concluding segment recounts how the SHEB came into existence and examines the first decade of its tenure.

5.3.2 Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore

Despite the negative opinion the members of SMHEB expressed in 1956 in response to the Singapore Hindu Sabai's call for appealing to the Colonial Government to amend the MHEO to enable the establishment of separate Boards for Hindus and Muslims in the SS, serious discussions for this eventuality were under way amongst both parties in Singapore less than a decade later. Although the SMHEB members had thought that this split was 'undesirable as it would lead to unnecessary complications',[159] the Singapore Hindu Sabai was not alone in contemplating the idea of two separate boards for the administration of Hindu and Muslim affairs. We learn from the minutes of the MHEB meeting of 27 April 1966 that a bill for the separate administration of Hindu endowments in Singapore was being drafted:

---

[157]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 June 1953.

[158]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 June 1960.

[159]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 23 March 1956.

> Proposed legislation relating to Hindu Endowments: Having come to understand that a Bill relating to the management of Hindu Endowments is in the course of preparation, the Hindu Commissioners of the Board expressed the view that they should be associated with the drafting of the Bill.

Expectedly, events were also moving on the Muslim side and the Administration of Muslim Law Bill was passed in Parliament first. The Board members were informed about this and asked to make the necessary preparations for the transition:

> The Chairman informed the Board that the Administration of Muslim Law Bill has been passed by Parliament and will probably come into operation on the 1st January 1967. The Bill empowers the Majlis to take over from the Board the administration of Muslim endowments and the Secretary and the Accountant of the Board were requested to spit the accounts of the Board so that in future the accounts of the Muslim endowments will be kept separate from the accounts of the Hindu endowments.[160]

From this point on, things moved rapidly and the Hindu Endowments Bill was passed in Parliament in 1969. However, the SMHEB continued to meet and deal with the affairs of the Muslim and Hindu endowments as a singular entity until the end of 1968. As to the question of who had an input in the actual drafting of the Hindu Endowments Bill, one gets the strong impression that the Hindu members of the SMHEB were associated with neither the preliminary drafting of the Bill nor the revisions made to it subsequently:

> The members of the Board were told by the Chairman that the Hindu Endowments Bill had been redrafted and forwarded to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Hindu members of the Board asked that they be provided with copies of the redrafted Bill.[161]

Before the law pertaining to Hindu endowments came into effect, a Select Committee (SC) was constituted to solicit views of members of the public on the proposed bill. On 28 May 1968, advertisements were placed in all the local newspapers[162] to invite representations to be considered by members of the SC.[163] In all, the committee received five written representations—four from individual Hindus and one from the Tamilian Association, Singapore, all of whom were invited to clarify their written statements in person. The SC's discussions with the five individuals were reported to Parliament on 16 August 1968.[164] It is helpful to reflect briefly on these deliberations in order to highlight the issues which this cross-section of the Hindu public in Singapore had thought important to raise in relation to the

---

[160]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 19 August 1966.

[161]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 9 December 1966.

[162]These were the *Utusan Melayu*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *Tamil Murasu* and the *Straits Times*.

[163]The members who were all Members of Parliament of the Select Committee were Mr. P. Coomaraswamy (Chairman), Mr. N. Govindasamy, Mr. P. Govindaswamy, Dr. Lee Chiaw Meng, Mr. S. Ramaswamy, Mr. P. Selvadurai, Enche Othman bin Wok and Enche Sha'ari bin Tadin.

[164]'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer.

proposed bill. Some issues which surfaced in these discussions include the following: (a) membership of the Board: what criteria should be used for appointment and how these should be decided upon, that members appointed to the Board should be knowledgeable about Hinduism and details of temple worship; (b) role and scope of the new Board, in particular, whether it should supervise the financial affairs of all Hindu temples in Singapore or confine itself to the endowments it administered at the time and (c) problems with regard to existing practices in the management of temples and the tensions between devotees and the managers of Hindu temples. The SC established early on that the latter points were not relevant to the bill under consideration, although interestingly, this was a prominent subject for the five who had written in and occupied a dominant place in the representations themselves. The SC was quite clear on its objective and jurisdiction, and confined the discussion to those points with which it was concerned. In response to two of the representatives' digressions into details of management of particular Hindu temples, the Chairman of the SC reiterated this point:

> Before you go any further, there are certain rules that govern what we can do and what we cannot do. We are not a committee of inquiry into the administration of temples. Parliament has considered a law to provide for a Hindu Endowments Board and management of certain Hindu temples. What we are interested in are proposals to go into the law or your views on proposals which you think should not be in the Bill. It would be wrong for us to let you give expression in this Committee to anything outside this?[165]

> We are not concerned with the day-to-day administration of this Bill when it becomes law except to the extent that we need to frame the law for good administration. We are not concerned with appointments to the Board.[166]

Given such an agenda, the SC concentrated on items (a) and (b) in the abovementioned list. The questions of who should be appointed to the SHEB and the process by which such appointments should be made surfaced as a dominant concern in all five representations made to the committee. One strand of the discussion relating to membership had to do with ensuring that only suitably qualified individuals with knowledge of the procedures of temple worship were appointed. For example, the representation from Mr. A. A. Marimuthu, a watchman in Bukit Merah South School was as follows:

> Attention should be paid in appointing the members to the Board which administers the temples. The persons to be appointed as members should know the rules and regulations of the temple, be pious, be sincere in worshipping, know the methods of worship, be people who know the needs of the public and temples and be respected by the community. They should work without causing inconvenience to the public. They should respect the public

---

[165] 'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, B 14.

[166] This refers to the management committees of temples. 'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, 40.

and persons who offer prayers. It is important that those who are to be appointed as members should not have a dictatorial attitude.[167]

In response, during the deliberations, the members of the SC argued that it would be difficult if not impossible to legislate on questions of whether someone is pious or devoted. The Chairman stated that it would be sufficient to accept this as a guiding principle for appointments but that this request could not be built into the framework of the law:

> The difficulty is that virtues like piety and sincerity are not capable of objective determination. It is largely a matter of opinion.[168]

A similar point was made in the representation of the Tamilian Association, Singapore:

> Members of the Board who are administering Hindu matters should be people with a good knowledge of Hindu rites. If differences of opinion arise or even if the public have differences of opinion on Hindu matters, the only people whom they will approach for guidance will be the Hindu Endowments Board. We therefore feel that it will be better to have people who have a thorough knowledge of, or at least a better knowledge of, Hindu rites than to have people who have no knowledge of Hindu rites at all.[169]

Again, this led to a discussion of what is meant by Hindu rites and whether having knowledge of this can be written into law, something that was not adopted eventually. Some members felt that it was difficult to come to a consensus about what constituted 'Hindu rites,' again revealing the multi-facetted nature of local Hinduism:

> Sir, on this question of Hindu rites, I do not think there will be any common view of what are Hindu rites. There are so many different types of Hindu rites. If you are going to inquire whether a person knows Hindu rites or what kind of Hindu rites he practices, it is going to be very difficult for us to define this sort of thing in the Bill. I was wondering whether we could not just negatively define it and say that a person who sits on the Board shall be a Hindu and leave it at that. At least he cannot be an atheist or a person who is anti-god and just leave it at that. Otherwise it would be a futile exercise because there are the North Indian rites and there are the South Indian rites. Even among the South Indians there are so many different varieties and cults.[170]

The divisions in the Singaporean Indian, Hindu community surfaced resoundingly in the representations of Mr. P. Kannusamy, who asked that the Bill ensure the presence of Singaporean 'Hindu Tamilians' on the Board, as well as temple management committees. The statements from the Tamilian Association, Singapore, and

---

[167]Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, A 1.

[168]Ibid. B 13.

[169]Ibid. B 16.

[170]Mr. Selvadurai. 'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, B 17.

Mr. V. Pakirisamy[171] in different ways also prioritized the Tamil Hindu cluster of Singapore's Indian population. Mr. Pakirisamy suggested that appointments to the Board be made after consulting 'Tamil Hindu leading members of the Republic of Singapore'[172] and that he himself was 'making this representation for the benefit of the Tamil Hindus of Singapore, who are worshippers and devotees of the Hindu temples.'[173] At the same time, he acknowledged the diversity within Hinduism and asked for this to be recognized in the Bill, and made a suggestion to the following effect:

> Add a new interpretation clause—'Hindu' means any person who is a Hindu by religion in any of its forms and developments.[174]

A related theme raised by Mr. Marimuthu emanated from his observation that individuals appointed to the management committees of temples 'seem to have no faith in temple worship'.[175] In a different mode, the same subject surfaced in a joint statement by Mr. N. Thanbalam and M. Thanapathy Naidoo[176], who suggested that no appointment should be made to the Board of a person:

> [. . .] if he has at any time been connected with, or has been a member of any organization or movement one of whose objects is the elimination of temple worship.[177]

And membership in the Board revoked:

> [. . .] if he shall become a member or supporter of any organization or movement whose objects is the elimination of temple worship.[178]

I find these statements interesting because they allow a glimpse into the politics of the Singapore Hindu domain at the time. There were different clusters of this community with rather opposing and contradictory views on a number of issues, including the centrality of temple worship in Hinduism. The two individuals, when asked by the SC if there were any organizations or movements in Singapore which did not favour temple worship or would like to see it abolished listed the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) (which they erroneously equated with the DMK) and

---

[171]Mr. V. Pakirisamy was a man of vast experience in the affairs of the Singapore's Hindu community, having been on the MHEB for 18 1/2 years and 31 1/2 years of serving on management committees of temples. Interestingly, many of his suggestions which were technical and involved questions of legal drafting were drawn from the Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, 1959.

[172]'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, A 12.

[173]Ibid. A 14.

[174]Ibid. A 11.

[175]Ibid. A 2.

[176]Mr. N. Thanabalam was a retired pensioner employed as a temporary hospital assistant and Mr. T. Naidoo was a retired gentleman.

[177]'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, A 3.

[178]Ibid. A 3.

the Arya Samaj as two examples. In a context dominated by social and religious reform, through the 1950s and 1960s, the local Hindu scene was marked by controversies and contestations with respect to the kind of Hindu practices that should be encouraged and adopted here. These were duly reflected in the specific anxieties these two parties shared with the SC. Ultimately, the SC decided that the suggestions could not be used as a criterion for appointment for the following reason:

> If your proposal is accepted—I am trying to look at the difficulties in the administration—how is the Minister to know whether a person is connected with any of these organizations? [...] What steps can we provide for the Minister whereby he can use this as a criterion for membership of the Board? If we put in a provision, we must ensure that it is not open to any sort of abuse.[179]

These two individuals also made the additional suggestion that all private temples in Singapore should submit their accounts to the new Board in an effort to ensure some public accountability for monies collected in the name of a temple:

> We also suggest that a suitable provision be inserted in the Bill to provide for the submission to the proposed Hindu Endowments Board of annual statement of accounts by all privately-owned Hindu temples in Singapore so that the Board may have an idea of what the financial position of such temples are. We do not suggest that all such temples be brought under the control of the proposed Hindu Endowments Board, but feel that the Board should be placed in a position to know the financial standing of each such temple.[180]

The Chairman's response to this suggestion is revealing about the state of affairs on the island about the incidence of Hindu temples and their mode of administration. The members of the SC expressed the following view on this subject:

> Let me put it this way. I personally sympathize with this proposal for this reason. As things are now, anyone who can get premises can put up a shrine there and utilize its religious character to get money from the public. As opposed to that, there are some extremely well managed privately-run temples in that they are outside the purview of the Board—with very strict rules and very strict accounting procedures, like the Chettiars' Temple in Tank Road. How are we to distinguish between the two? Nobody would like to interfere with the Chettiars' Temple which is so well run. At the same time, nobody would like to see the abuses that are going on in certain non-Board temples, especially when anyone can put up a shrine or deity and collect money from the public.[181]

> Mr. Chairman, may I explain that I was also thinking in terms of the same temple in Woodlands, as mentioned by Mr. Thanabalam? There are far too many of such temples and we do not have a proper record of them.[182]

As is well known from other sources, the practice of establishing Hindu shrines 'indiscriminately' continued well into the 1970s and in fact even continues today but

---

[179]Ibid. B 3.

[180]Ibid. A 4.

[181]Mr. Coomaraswamy, the Chairman. 'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, B 8.

[182]Mr. N. Govindasamy. 'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, B 8–9.

with important differences. In the late 1960s, this phenomenon of informal shrines mushrooming across the island was disconcerting to the authorities, as was reflected in the discussions that Mr. Thanabalam and Mr. Naidoo's proposal had triggered amongst members of the SC. Interestingly, this was not confined to Hindu shrines, but the members agreed that a similar problem existed with the Chinese temples and the *keramat(s)* as well.[183] What I find striking, given the tenor of my interest in the subject, is that despite there being several instances of temples whose accounting practices and administration were known to be suspect, they do not seem to have been reported to the SMHEB and certainly the latter did not take over the administration of any such temples, a provision for such an action clearly being provided in the MHEO. In the final analysis, the SC agreed that this was a useful discussion but, ultimately, it was not included in the framework of the law:

> With regard to paragraph 8 of the representation, we can have a general provision to the effect that properly audited accounts of all temples should be lodged with the Hindu Endowments Board, and it is up to the Hindu Endowments Board to look into the matter. In the first instance, the accounts must be properly audited by a public accountant.[184]

While the substance of these discussions provides important insights about issues that were deemed to be important for the future of Hinduism in Singapore, it is as important to consider issues that did not surface. It is notable that all parties assumed the continued need for a law to regulate administration of Hindu religious endowments and for a body like the SHEB even in the context of an independent Singapore. Interestingly, no questions were raised about the possible infringement of religious freedom enshrined in the new constitution if the law remained and certainly no arguments were made for reverting to a situation of self-governance in the management and administration of religious endowments.[185]

The outcome of these conversations between members of the Hindu public and the SC was that the bill was passed with some technical modifications but none of the substantive suggestions made in the representations appeared in the final version. The discourse generated by the establishment of the SHEB is insightful for several reasons: one, it demonstrates that a cluster of the Hindu public thought this was an important historical development and sought to participate in the process by offering their input; two, the Report contains much valuable information (by now historical) about the Hindu scene in Singapore at the time, such as the problems perceived with the MHEB, the administration of temples, as well as the internal strife and divisions[186] within the temple community; three, the conversations reveal that all parties took it for granted that the proposed Board should come into existence and

---

[183]Ibid. B 10.

[184]Mr. Selvadurai. 'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill', Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer, B 9.

[185]One encounters a rather different scenario in Penang in the 1970s and 1980s—a subject I turn to in the concluding chapter.

[186]Some of this strife had to do with the internal management and administration of the temple and the observance of rituals and festivals therein.

no questions were raised about the colonial context which had given rise to the MHEO and the MHEB and whether there was a need for such an entity to continue in the about-to-be independent secular, nation-state of Singapore; and four, even before the SHEB came into being, there were already ambiguities about what its role and function would be. The last is evident in the exchanges about who should be appointed to the Board: They would of necessity be Hindu and Singaporean and while the SC did not legislate with respect to 'knowledge of Hindu rites' and 'piety' as criteria for membership, they were nonetheless assumed by all concerned parties to be guiding principles which ought to be adopted. For me, herein lies the crux of the dilemma about the role of the new Board: While it is true that the SHEB continued to administer the same endowments as the SMHEB with no new powers or territories being assigned to it, at the same time, it is possible to also identify beginnings of what I am calling here 'slippage' from the notion of 'administration of religious endowments' to the rather different idea of 'administration of Hindu affairs' and the further understanding that the latter would be under the purview of the new Board. This slide occurs without being announced or proclaimed but is certainly implicit in some of the data from the Report I have just presented. The refocusing/repositioning appears rather more vigorously (but again without being publicly declared) in the next decade as the SHEB self-defined its role, the mode in which it would conduct its business and the manner in which it was perceived by both members of the Hindu community and the larger Singaporean public within the context of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious Singapore. It is important to reiterate that my reading of these developments does not suggest a conspiracy of any sort or political choreography to facilitate this new direction of the SHEB. Rather, I recognize a more subtle process by which the SHEB settled into a new groove, which was unquestioningly accepted both by Board members and by the Hindu community in general.

These important themes will resurface in Chapter 7 with reference to discussions of the contemporary status of the SHEB. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw upon the experiences and affairs of the first decade of the HEB of Singapore, to demonstrate the ways in which the task of administration nonetheless shaped the substance of an emergent Singaporean Hindu domain. These years constitute a critical formative period in the history of the SHEB—when important continuities with its predecessor, the SMHEB, were reinforced and, more importantly, when new directions were mapped.

This is a good juncture to note details of the Hindu Endowments Act (HEA) of 1968 which made possible the advent of the SHEB, and to briefly relate its legislative history to-date. The 1968 Bill corresponding to this Act read as follows: 'An act to provide for the administration of Hindu and religious and charitable endowments and to repeal the MHEB'. The MHEO of 1905 was clearly the prototype for the formulation of the new Act and while several important differences are evident, and while the language was modern, the spirit of the earlier piece of legislation persisted in the new Act. The latter provided for a Board to be appointed by the Minister for Social Affairs to administer Hindu religious and charitable endowments. The most striking differences between the two items of legislation include

the following: membership to the SHEB was open only to Singaporean Hindus, the duties[187] of the Board Secretary were considerably enhanced, in the event of the takeover of an endowment, its current managers would have access to the Minister to make their case and finally, the caution that temples and other venues administered by the SHEB would not be 'used for political purposes'.[188] A point of relevance to the present discussion is that overall both the general powers accorded to the SHEB and the work it was to perform essentially remained the same: That is, the Board, which was to still administer religious and charitable endowments, was charged with managing their finances and making all decisions about expenditure of funds. In other words, the SHEB was granted all the powers of a trustee of an endowment. Additionally, the Act allowed for Committees of Management to be appointed by the SHEB, 'to act under its control'[189] and the same had the authority to appoint and remove all endowment employees. We see that despite calls from some members of the Hindu community for the SHEB to assume greater powers *vis-à-vis* monitoring the financial status of all Hindu temples on the island, the jurisdiction of the Board remained highly circumscribed in the letter of the law. Significantly, the SHEB continued to be defined as a 'corporate entity' with no legal right (or obligation) to be involved in the religious affairs of the endowments it administered. Chapter 364 of the HEA Act of 1969 was amended in 1973 to change the year of business from calendar year to financial year. It continued in this mode when for the next 20 years or so when, in 1993, several specific rules were modified or introduced: one relating to the number of annual meetings of the SHEB, another allowing for the appointment of sub-committees other than the committees of management by the SHEB to achieve a range of its tasks[190], another to enlarge the make-up of the Board to include a Vice-Chairman and a finance member and for the total to be no less than eight and no more than 12 members, and so on. Two other significant amendments of the HEA also came into being at this time: one, that appointments to the Board were restricted to only two consecutive terms and two, to empower the Board to redevelop its property in joint ventures, to mortgage the same and to raise funds. These amendments received strong support at the Second Reading of the Bill in Singapore Parliament from Mr. Yeo Cheow Tong, the Minister for Community Development, and two Members of Parliament, Mr. S. Chandra Das (Cheng San GRC) and Mr. R. Sinnakaruppan (Kampong Glam GRC). I present in some detail the arguments they advanced in favour of the proposed amendments:

> The Hindu Endowments Board currently manages four temples and owns a property at Serangoon Road in 'Little India'. Following the lifting of rent control in 'Little India', the Hindu Endowments Board intends to redevelop the Serangoon Road property to generate

---

[187] Section 14 of the Hindu Endowments Act.

[188] Section 35 of the Hindu Endowments Act.

[189] Section 18(1) of the Hindu Endowments Act.

[190] Meetings were to be held regularly and not less than four times a year; the Act allowed 'for the appointment of sub-committees for any specific purpose, such as raising funds by means of voluntary subscriptions, donations or contributions for the purpose of exercising its powers, performing its duties and discharging its obligations under the Act'.

funds for the benefit of the endowments. To ensure the success of this project, the Board will be jointly redeveloping the property with a property development company. However, the Hindu Endowments Act, as it now stands, does not empower the Board to mortgage any property or to enter into any joint-venture arrangements. We therefore need to amend the Act to enable the Board to do so [. . .] Sir, over the last two decades the activities of the Board and the temples it administers have grown significantly. The procedures and working arrangements of the Board need to be strengthened and updated. We have therefore taken this opportunity to amend several other sections of the Act to enable the Board to operate more effectively.[191]

Speaking in support of these amendments were two Hindu Members of Parliament (emphasis added):

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill. Sir, the amendments being made now are extremely timely and will certainly go a long way to help the Hindu Endowments Board to function more effectively [...] Sir, the second amendment which gives the Board power to mortgage its property, raise funds, to redevelop its property in joint ventures is definitely a step in the right direction. This amendment would allow the Board to access external funding and expertise. This provision will enable the Board to make use of its assets which are currently nearly idle. With this amendment, the Board can go ahead with the redevelopment of its property in 'Little India' which will really involve the refurbishment of property belonging to the Board according to URA guidelines, allow for a more comprehensive development of shopping units, restaurants and a food court, so that the character of 'Little India' could be retained. Finally there will also be a good flow of rental income from the property for the Hindu Endowments Board. Currently, I am told, Sir, that the Board collects around $16 per annum in rental income. However, with proper redevelopment, I am informed, that this can be easily raised to $2 million per annum. With this income from property development, *the Board will be better placed to cater for the religious, educational and cultural needs of the Singaporean Hindus.*[192]

However, Mr. S. Chandra Das urged vigilance in the choice of collaborators (emphasis added):

Sir, whilst encouraging the Board to go into joint ventures with property developers, the Board, I feel, must exercise extreme care and caution in the selection of joint venture partners. *Consideration must be purely not on commercial basis as there are various other factors to be taken into account. After all, the Hindu Endowments Board is not a pure commercial organization.*

While agreeing with his colleague, Mr. R. Sinnakaruppan offered his own views on the matter and most significantly articulated the 'work' of the SHEB in the 1990s (emphasis added):

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the amendments in the Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill. First I declare my interest as a member of the Hindu Endowments Board. Sir, as Mr. Chandra Das said, the Bill is timely. It would help to structure and improve the administration of the endowments and the projects of the Board. The Board caters to the needs of Hindus in Singapore who comprise Tamil, Malayalee, Telegu, Hindi,

---

[191]Mr. Yeo Cheow Tong, Singapore Parliament Report, Parl. 8, Session 1, Vol. 60, 'Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill,' 18 January 1993, p. 1.
[192]Mr. S. Chandra Das, Singapore Parliament Report, Parl. 8, Session 1, Vol. 60, 'Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill,' 18 January 1993, p. 2.

Bengali, Punjabi, Gujerati and other origins. The Board, through its activities, has become a focal point for the entire Hindu community in Singapore. *In addition to the day-to-day running of the four temples administered by the Board, the Board, for a few years now, has embarked on a number of community services, in response to requests from the Hindu community in Singapore. These include medical counseling, welfare counseling, educational counseling and other educational programmes, and the publication of an informative newsletter called 'Singapore Hindu'. In fact, in the field of education, the Board pioneered the first English-Tamil kindergarten. This kindergarten caters not only to Hindus but also to non-Hindus.*[193]

The bill was passed after a third reading, with the Minister for Community Development agreeing that the amendments were timely and felt that 'We should allow them to maximise the benefits to the Hindu Endowments Board as well as to benefit the Hindus in Singapore.'[194] Additionally, these comments also convey the status and activities of the SHEB in Singapore by the mid-1990s and, thus, reinforce my argument about how the image, influence and role of the Board had been transformed, through a process that occurred gradually but the seeds for which were discernible from the very beginnings of the HEB in 1969.

The first meeting of the newly constituted SHEB was held on 12 May 1969 with a total of ten members, including the Chairman and Board Secretary. With the exception of the latter, who was a civil servant appointed by the Minister for Social Affairs and a Muslim, all other members were Singaporean Hindus with the majority from a South Indian Hindu background. Other than institutionally de-linking from the SMHEB, through a final separation of the accounts of the Hindu and Muslim endowments, among the first items on the agenda of the new Board was the question of its new identity, signified by a seal of the Board. Already at this first meeting, a design for the seal had been conceptualized and designed on the initiative of the Chairman:

Common Seal of the Board: The Chairman showed the members a drawing he had made of a specimen seal with the high tower of the Mariamman Temple in the centre of the round seal and with the words 'The Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore' on the perimeter of the seal. The members of the Board unanimously approved the seal designed by the Chairman.[195]

Despite this endorsement, at the next meeting of the SHEB, the following development is reported:

Common Seal of the Board: It was resolved to insert the word 'AUM' above the image of the high tower of the Mariamman Temple appearing in the inner circle of the round seal, as the word 'AUM' precedes every Hindu invocation.[196]

The selection and acceptance of this seal as marking the authority and identity of the HEB signaled a departure from the imprint of its forerunner, the MHEB, which did

---

[193]Mr. R. Sinnakaruppan, Singapore Parliament Report, Parl. 8, Session 1, Vol. 60, 'Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill,' 18 January 1993, p. 3.

[194]Mr. Yeo Cheow Tong, Singapore Parliament Report, Parl. 8, Session 1, Vol. 60, 'Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill,' 18 January 1993, p. 4.

[195]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 12 May 1969.

[196]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 9 June 1969.

Fig. 5.1   Official seal of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore, in 1909
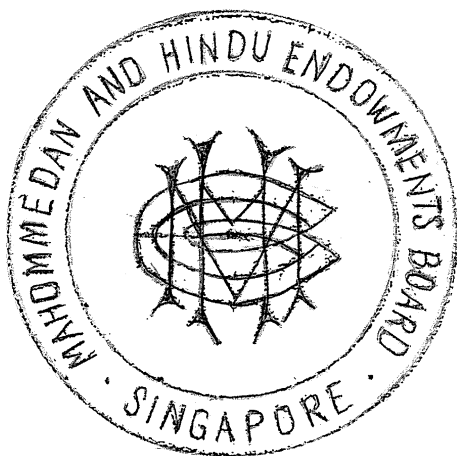
Fig. 5.2   Official seal of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore, in 1913

not incorporate (and, indeed, could not have) symbolism of any religious tradition (see Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4).[197] This is perhaps unsurprising given the political context of colonialism in which the SMHEB emerged and the purely secular role of administration that characterized the logic of its founding. Furthermore, in the administration of religious endowments, the SMHEB members explicitly distinguished between the 'temporal, secular matters' that concerned them and the 'religious, spiritual affairs' that were to be left to the native committees of management and the religious communities themselves to sort out. Even here, as we have witnessed in earlier discussions, such a hands-off policy was not always workable in practice and a certain degree of intervention in religious domains was inevitable. In contrast, with the anticipation of independent nationhood and the right to self-governance, the constituents of the new Board operated with a mentality that

---

[197]The 1913 seal misspelled the first word as 'Mahommedan' (see Fig. 5.2).
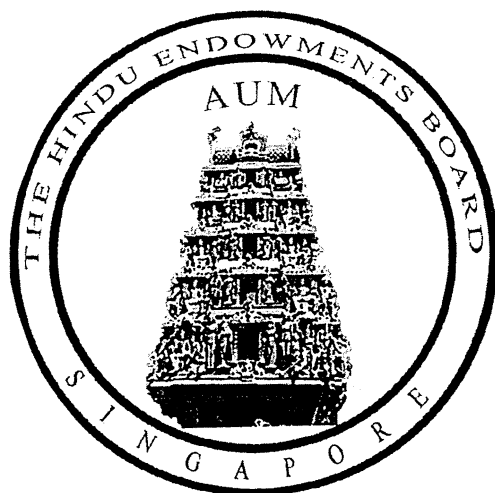
Fig. 5.3 Official seal of the Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore, in 1969
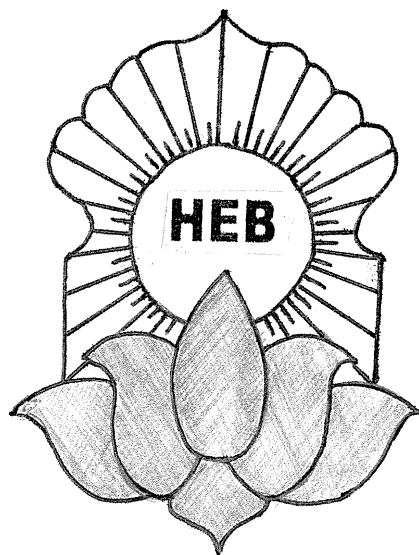
Fig. 5.4 Official seal of the Hindu Endowments Board, Singapore, in 2010

did not require them to recognize the distinction between 'secular' and 'religious' business of the SHEB. It is not only striking that the inscription of the SHEB was unequivocally 'religious' and 'Hindu', but also surprising that this leaning was not at the time perceived by any of the Board members (or by the Hindu community) to be at odds with the administrative work of the HEB—as provided for in the new piece of law and certainly enshrined in the original MHEO.

So what has been the effect of this piece of legislation that first gave birth to the MHEB? As we have seen, there is evidence that while some of the problems of mismanagement of endowments were circumvented, the administrative problems did not entirely disappear; some of the old 'problems' persisted. It certainly introduced greater transparency in accounting practices and put pressure on managers of religious institutions to be more accountable. However, on the basis of the data presented thus far, I would make the further argument that although the Board was overtly concerned only with matters of 'administration', its work 'in practice' could not support the claim to 'non-interference'. While an articulated ideological stance generously granted all subjects of the Crown an equal right to profess and practice their religious faiths, legislative and administrative moves also placed a cluster of Hindu and Muslim institutions in the SS under direct supervision of a government body. If anything, the evidence suggests that the kind of administration the Board was engaged in had the obverse effect: As we have seen, in order to accomplish its work, the Board could not but interfere in the management of religious institutions, and it did so routinely, but not intentionally. The next chapter takes up these issues and highlights the Board's input in framing the domain of Agamic temples and the observance of the festival Tai Pūcam in Singapore, concerns which reveal its deep engagement with 'religious' matters.

Chapter 6
Constructing Hinduism in Singapore: Legitimating Agamic Temples and *Tai Pūcam*

6.1 Preamble

This chapter offers details about the administration of Hindu endowments in Singapore by the Singapore Mohammedan Endowments Board (SMHEB). I argue that its managerial approach shaped both the context and parameters within which Hinduism as a religion found expression. Furthermore, an administrative tone and the adoption of specific practices by the SMHEB created conditions within which particular styles of Hindu religiosity emerged. More importantly, the language of objective administration, marked by the rhetoric of 'non-interference', prompted specific kinds of action (or non-action), thus determining the very domains that were as a matter of declared policy deemed to be outside state jurisdiction. Indeed, it is precisely the objective and systematic administrative regulation of these Hindu domains that has had the effect of framing the fields within which the ritualistic components of the religion are enacted. The supervision that accompanied an administrative responsibility over religious endowments did affect the very functioning of the Hindu temples within which these endowments were vested. I argue that over a period of 100 years, the substantive realm of 'Official Hinduism' in Singapore has been shaped through input from the SMHEB (and subsequently the SHEB), on occasion through explicit actions it has taken and at other moments precisely through a stance of 'non-action'. Concretely, I look at two substantive domains to make my case: first, the realm of Hindu temple administration and second, the observance of a Hindu festival, *Tai Pūcam*.

6.2 Instituting Proper 'Work' Practices

Apart from a secular work description, the inheritance of the SHEB included not only an infrastructure, but, more importantly, a mentality for approaching the administration of religious and charitable endowments through highly rationalized and bureaucratic modes. The prioritizing of financial issues, the careful accounting of endowment incomes and expenditure and the recourse to formal rationality even when making decisions about matters that affected the daily functioning of religious

institutions were bequeathed to the SHEB by its predecessor. Two good examples of adherence to rule-governed behaviour on the part of the SMHEB include the instituting of new accounting practices with regard to collection of temple 'vow money' and the concern with the regulation of conduct within temple grounds.

The first example highlights how the practice of collecting 'vow moneys' was formalized over time. Already in the early days, the SMHEB was confronted with complaints of misappropriation of vow money by the priest at the Mariamman Temple. The Board responded by formulating a scheme that would allow for greater accountability and transparency in temple collections. This system was adopted by the SMHEB 'after consultation with the Managers of the Chitty Temple and many experienced and trustworthy members of the Hindu Community'.[1] Apart from the appointment of an accountant to supervise the collection of temple money, the SMHEB also instituted a system of apportioning the collected money so that the temple would receive its legitimate share. It is important to quote in some detail the corresponding resolutions that were passed because it not only established a practice that was eventually extended to the four Hindu temples whose endowments the SMHEB administered, but also came to define practices in other Hindu temples across the island:

> That in order to ascertain what sums are received for Vows etc and to secure a proper share of these moneys for Temple purposes, an Accountant be appointed at a salary of $25 per month. This Accountant shall receive all moneys paid for vows, prayers and other religious purposes by the worshippers at the Temple, enter the same in a special book and issue tickets in triplicate parts for the amounts received with their face value shall be used as follows:

> The counterfoil of each ticket shall be signed and retained by the accountant, the 2 other portions handed over to the purchaser shall be given to the Aiyer or other priest who is to perform the ceremony required. The Aiyer or priest shall drop one of these portions into a locked and sealed box to be kept by him and retain the other. Every morning the Aiyer shall bring to the Accountant all the portions of tickets retained by him and after comparing the same with the signed counterfoils the Accountant shall take them back and in exchange give the Aiyer a signed receipt for one half of their total face value. The amount of such receipt shall be entered to the credit of the Aiyer and a similar amount representing the other half of the said total face value shall be entered as Revenue under the heading of 'Vow Money.' Once in every week the Accountant shall bring the moneys collected by him together with his books and signed counterfoils to the Secretary's Office and the Aiyer shall bring his receipts and the sealed box of tickets in his charge. After further examination by the Secretary or by his clerk the Accountant's book shall be signed as correct and the Aiyer's receipts shall be redeemed for cash.[2]

The system that was devised essentially put considerable distance between the money paid by the worshipper and the priest, who thus had no contact with the cash paid for religious services that he was performing. He would only receive half of what the devotee had paid, the other half being retained and counted towards revenue for the temple. The scheme is also impressive for the attention to detail and accountability built in at several levels, not to mention that it increased the work

---

[1]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 May 1914.

[2]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 29 May 1914.

of the Board tremendously, especially the Secretary. Subsequently, this practice was modified in the recognition that the Secretary's presence was not essential and, thus, also to reduce his workload:

> Collection boxes: The Board decided that it was not necessary for the Secretary to be present at the opening of Oundial boxes and that is was sufficient for the boxes to be opened and the contents counted in the presence of the clerk to the Board and a member of the Panchayat.[3]

This method is of huge historical significance as this 'chit system' (as it has become commonly known) for offering *arccannai* and other religious services persists into the present and is also found across temples in Tamil Nadu and the USA. The practice carried implications about who owned the temple and also redefined the relationship between the temple, its assets and its 'servants', i.e., the temple personnel. Conventionally, according to the 'popular and scholarly view'[4] a public Hindu temple and all its properties are deemed to be 'owned' by the deity within, and the priests are considered servants of the deity. In India, before interference by the English East India Company (EEIC), the king administered the estates of the temple, protected it and was himself a servant of the deity. However, with external intervention and the advent of the MHEB in the Straits Settlements (SS), the properties of the temple were vested in a corporate body, and the temple staff became its employees and were, thus, subject to its supervision. Furthermore, in replacing the king as the new administrator, the MHEB accepted the roles performed by royalty with regard to protection of its estates, but did not need to have the attitude that it was ultimately subservient to the deity. The rendering of the priest at the temple as an employee also changed his relationship with the devotees and laid the foundation for the ultimate control of the priesthood and other temple personnel in Hindu temples, including those in Singapore.

The second example relates to the introduction of rules by the SMHEB in consultation with the Committees of Management, about what constituted appropriate conduct within temple grounds. The following list of 'do's and don'ts,' formulated in 1935, is enlightening and defines the scope of activities which were considered legitimate within temple grounds and those which were prohibited. The operational logic here was directed at two things simultaneously: one, physically demarcating the temple compound, marking its boundaries clearly and preventing trespassers by erecting structural barriers, and two, specifying behaviour of devotees within the temple precincts and distinguishing between religious/spiritual activities permissible therein and secular activities that were out of place. Here are the details of a notice put up, in Tamil, at the Sri Sivan Temple:

<div align="center">Notice</div>

All are hereby notified that:-

(1) Crowding or staying in the temple, unnecessarily gossiping and shouting are prohibited.
(2) Water from the tap at the temple must not be wasted.

---

[3]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 September 1922.

[4]Ramaswamy, T. S. (2003) *Judicial Solutions for Temple Disputes—A Critical Analysis*. Chennai: RNR Printers, 13.

(3) It is dangerous to climb on the roof of the temple and no one should do so for any
    reason whatsoever.
(4) The temple will close daily at 9 p.m. excepting on those days when functions are held.
(5) Obayakarars are requested to start on the Oobayam day 'pooja' etc at 7 p.m. and finish
    the celebration by 10 p.m.

Proceedings will be taken against those who do not comply with these requirements. The
possibility of fixing some barricade to prevent persons from walking on the Temple roof
was considered and the Government Architect undertook to inspect and report.[5]

The notice reads like a list of rules that individuals are expected to adhere to together
with a not-so-veiled threat of sanctions for non-compliance. No doubt some of the
rules relate to practical issues, like wastage of water and safety of worshippers,
but others like restrictions on 'gossiping and shouting' are vague and yet others
relate to devotees' access to temples and scheduling of temple rituals. Above all,
this list for me is evidence of the dawn of an attitude that signalled adherence to
rule-governed practices that increasingly typified the portfolio of the SMHEB and
the SHEB from the 1970s onwards. This also allowed the Board to legitimately
interpolate into the 'religious' domain and introduce alterations, with instrumental
rationality as its guiding principle.

   The work of the SHEB in the main remained administrative and it continued to
operate simultaneously as trustee, landlord and employer. Its stance continued to
be bureaucratic and it operated according to a set body of rules and regulations. Of
course, in the transition to the SHEB, the members also had the opportunity to make
certain modifications in the way that the Board would conduct its business. One
such significant change was the frequency of Board meetings, which were set by the
SHEB to now occur on a monthly basis.[6] In the first decade of its existence, much
of the Board's energies were taken up with streamlining financial issues, revising
salary structure and terms and conditions of service for endowment employees and
regularizing fees for various religious services conducted at the four temples. In fact,
the significance of these tasks was registered in a special financial portfolio created
to attend to these matters:

The Board resolved to appoint Mr. G. Ramakrishnan, one of its members, to check the
accounts of the temples under the management of the Board and to liaise between the
Board's Secretary and the temple officials in regard to financial matters.[7]

It was also concerned with establishing clearer rules for effective temple man-
agement[8] and formulating rules for the guidance of Committees of Management[9]

---

[5]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 30 December 1935.

[6]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 12 May 1969.

[7]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 23 June 1969.

[8]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 12 June 1970.

[9]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 October 1969.

appointed by the Board. Here is the discussion relating to the creation of rules for the Mariamman Temple:

> Rules for effective management of the Temple: The rules drafted by the Management Committee of the Sri Mariamman Temple were considered by the Board. It was agreed that rules should be formulated to regularise the procedures for devotions undertaken at the Temple [...] The Board felt that as it is now formulating rules for the effective management of the Temple, the rules should be comprehensive and should cover all aspects of religious devotions and ceremonies undertaken by devotees at the Temple. Mr. Ramoo was asked to submit other rules deemed necessary by his Committee so that when they have been approved the Rules could be printed, suitably publicised and distributed to all devotees attending the Temple. The rules must, of course, be enforced without discrimination.[10]

The rules related to the scheduling of prayers in the temple, the performance of *Upayam(s)*, devotees' conduct within the temple, access that devotees had to different parts of the temple, restrictions on entering the sanctum sanctorum of any of the shrines, the kinds of activities that were permissible within the temple, as well as those that were prohibited. Failure to adhere to the rules, of course, carried the eventuality of negative repercussions, i.e., for example, losing the right, in this case, to perform an *Ubayam* at the temple. However, the Board members were not persuaded by the Chairman of the Management Committee of the Mariamman Temple that these rules for religious observances should be legalized in order to be more effective:

> The Board considered the draft rules submitted by the Chairman of the Management Committee of the Sri Mariamman Temple which were drawn up in a legal manner. Mr. Ramoo considered that if the rules proposed are to be enforced, they should be properly promulgated and approved by the Minister as having been made under the provisions of the Hindu Endowments Act. The general view was of the other members of the Board was that it would not seem to be proper for the Minister to promulgate rules under the Act for religious observances and decided that the rules proposed be considered again at the next monthly meeting of the Board in July, 1970.[11]

Apart from rules relating to religious ceremonies, guidelines about the general conduct of the devotees were also itemized. Some examples include the following: 'There shall be no firing of crackers within the precincts of the Temple', 'There shall be no dancing within the Temple', 'Indian classical music concert both vocal and instrumental, and music and Bhajans may be allowed to be performed in the Temple.' In an earlier meeting, the Board had also resolved to prohibit the smoking of *ganja* and drinking of liquor within the temple grounds:

> Smoking of ganja in Temple grounds: Mr. P. Selvadurai said that he understands that ganja is being smoked by some persons in the grounds of the Mariamman Temple. He urged the secretary of the Committee of Management to ensure that the smoking of ganja and the consumption of liquor in the Temple grounds be stopped forthwith. Mr. P. N. Ramoo and

---

[10]Minutes of SMHEB meeting of 12 June 1970.

[11]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 17 June 1970.

Mr. S. Soundara Rajan undertook to look into this matter and said that if they find ganja being smoked and liquor being consumed in the Temple grounds they will do whatever they can to stop it.[12]

These attempts are reminiscent of earlier efforts by the SMHEB to regulate conduct within temple grounds. These endeavours are further interesting for two reasons: one, they are historically significant in revealing the practices that were occurring in temple grounds at the time and, two, the desire to prohibit them shows the beginnings of the administration of temple affairs (as opposed to the administration of endowments) and the dawn of a reformist tone in the business of the Board.

The other major preoccupation of the SHEB was in its role as an employer of temple personnel. The latter, including the religious specialists, were salaried employees of the Board and over the years it had to deal with requests for pay increments, better medical benefits and the granting of bonuses and home leave. The most pressing of these was the salary structure of temple staff and periodic attempts were made to review, revise, regularize and standardize them. Between 1971 and 1979, the salary scheme and benefits of the temple personnel were scrutinized and recommendations made for upward revisions, bearing in mind the higher costs of living and the need to attract and retain priests from India, given that no local alternatives were available. In February 1971, the Board set up a sub-committee to look into the salary structure of employees and to report back to the SHEB:

The terms of the reference of the sub-committee to be: To enquire into and recommend to the Board a proper salary structure with other benefits for employees of the four temples under the charge of the Board, having regard, however, to the financial position of the Board.[13]

Apart from this, in 1973, one of the Board members suggested that the employees should be given a '13th month bonus', and the SHEB responded as a collectivity with managerial shrewdness:

Mr. P. Govindaswamy recommended that the Board should give a 13th month bonus to all its employees. There was considerable discussion on this matter and it was finally agreed that the Board should give a 'Pongal festival' ex-gratia payment amounting to one months' salary to all employees who have served the Board for the past 12 months continuously and pro rata rate to all those who have served less than12 months in the preceding year. This is not to be regarded as a precedent for the future payments.[14]

The sub-committee finally tabled its report on salary review at the meeting of the SHEB on 11 May 1973. All Board members agreed that the salaries of temple staff had to be reviewed and that salary increases were inevitable. At this point, the salaries of the employees of the four temples varied considerably and there was little uniformity. This situation was reviewed continuously and in June 1976 salaries for all Board employees were standardized with the introduction of salary scales and grades.[15] The Board had to revisit the subject in 1979 when it reviewed the

---

[12]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 19 October 1969.

[13]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 24 February 1971.

[14]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 5 January 1973.

[15]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 4 November 1976.

terms and conditions of service of its employees, but decided to go maintain *status quo*. The discussion, however, highlights the constraints on securing priests and the reliance on 'foreign talent' for this:

> Terms and conditions of service: The Board reviewed the current terms and conditions of service approved and introduced for the Board's employees in June 1976. Some members felt that the initial salaries paid to the priests were too low and would not attract good calibre persons. It was suggested that the scales should be revised and only the upper segments of the scales be used. It was, however, pointed out that the salary payments should be commensurate with the level of services provided by the employees and should take into account any additional income derived by them from other sources. The Board also noted that it was unlikely that local persons would be attracted to become priests and that for a long time to come priests would have to be recruited from overseas. As such, the terms and conditions of service offered should take all these conditions into account. After consideration it was agreed that the current scales should remain. New appointees should be offered initial contracts of 2–3 years with possible extensions provided their work performance and conduct was completely satisfactory.[16]

The relationship between the temple priests, *pandaram*, musicians, clerks, accountants, etc. and the Board was purely contractual, based on a formal agreement about terms and conditions for service. The Board, as employer, was in a position to not just hire and dismiss, but also to exercise a measure of control over all employees, culminating in the regulation of priesthood. The latter is consequential for the status of priests in the eyes of the devotees, as well as the agency they actually possessed in directing ritual life at the temple. While the Brahmin priests were acknowledged to possess religious expertise, skills and knowledge, they were nonetheless deemed to be dependent on the SHEB as salaried staff—lacking autonomy and doing only what the Board expected them to do, a perception that persists into the present.

In addition to introducing some uniformity in the domain of salaries for its employees, the SHEB also embarked on a programme to regularize the schedule of *puja* times and initiate the charging of standard rates for the performance of religious ceremonies in the four Singapore temples. A good illustration comes from efforts to streamline the performance of *puja*(s) at the Sri Mariamman Temple in July 1971. The schedule of daily prayers and those to be performed on special occasions, including the *ubayam*s, is set in a 'timetable' by the SHEB and presented to the public via a circular (in English and Tamil) which was posted in the temple and also distributed to the devotees. With respect to daily prayers which were conducted at the expense of the temple, four daily *puja*s—the 'Morning Puja', 'Uchikala Puja', 'Evening Puja' and 'Arthajama Puja'—were named and the time for their performance stipulated. Devotees were also informed that private worship, i.e., *arccannai*, would only begin after the morning and evening daily prayers had been performed.

Prior to these efforts at standardization, the practice had been for the different temples, under the initiative of the management committees, to determine the fees for the religious services offered, but with due approval of the Board. On one

---

[16]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 16 July 1979.

occasion, the latter was not observed, leading the SHEB to serve a timely reminder, asserting its control over the functioning of the temple committees:

> The Board was informed that management committees of temples have in some cases made changes to the rates fixed for *abhishegam*s and other temple services without the approval of the Board. The Secretary was requested to write to the management committees on this and to inform that any proposal to change rates and fees should be put up to the Board for consideration and approval.[17]

In fact, several months later, the move towards standardized rates for religious services across the four temples was completed:

> The Board noted that the existing rates for temple services—*Archana*s, *Abhishegam*s and other *pooja* services were fixed several years ago and tended to vary from temple to temple. With increasing costs of salaries, utilities and temple maintenance expenses, it was necessary for some upward revision and standardisation to be made. After careful consideration of the different rates charged and the reimbursement made to the priests, the Board decided that with effect from 1.8.79, the following uniform rates should be charged in all the Board temples.[18]

This is also an opportune moment to note the relationship between temple committees and the SHEB. While the former had more input and say over temple affairs under the tenure of the new Board, they were by no means free to act without supervision. This was made very clear in the early years of the SHEB. On one occasion, the Chairman of Mariamman Temple was reminded that with reference to the temple committee's decision to increase allowances of temple musicians 'no additional payments could be made except with the specific approval of the Board itself'.[19] On a different matter, one of the Board members noted that

> [. . .] certain actions were being undertaken without reference to the Board. For instance, employees were being dismissed and the Committee was taking upon itself the responsibility of accepting gifts of idols without the Board first being satisfied that the idols are of proper standards, etc.[20]

However, the Board was also cognizant that the Committees of Management were crucial to facilitating its work, as its members volunteered their time, energies and other resources towards the welfare of the temple. Occasionally, it had to remind the Board members that some tasks were best left to the care and responsibility of the temple committees without interference from the Board members. In relation to the on-going renovations of the Sri Mariamman Temple in 1971, on the question of 'temple supervision', the minutes of the meeting of 24 February 1971 read thus:

> The Board commended Mr. Ramoo and his colleagues for the fine work they were doing but felt that since the Management Committee was more au fait with the repair work to be undertaken, it would be better if members of the Board did not interfere with the supervision.

---

[17] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 25 April 1979.

[18] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 16 July 1979.

[19] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 31 March 1971.

[20] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 6 April 1971.

Over time, the SHEB did feel the need for 'greater supervision'[21] in other areas—for example, with regard to 'duties of Temple staff and their conduct towards the public, upkeep of Temple and its surroundings, maintenance of proper security and maintenance of inventory of all Temple property'[22]—and decided to appoint a supervisor to oversee all these areas. With moves like these, one also sees greater and comprehensive involvement of the SHEB in all matters relating to the affairs of the temples, a clear departure from the times of the SMHEB. In fact, it is interesting how the Board members in 1971 viewed the role and status of the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB). The following interpretation surfaced in relation to a dispute between a devotee and the Board over the right to perform an *ubayam* at the Mariamman Temple. The devotee in question refused to abide by the stipulations and restrictions posed by the Board in view of changed times. The latter on the other hand asserted the right to specify conditions arguing as follows:

> The present Board had decided to stipulate conditions for the Ubayam but did not at all de-bar him from conducting his Ubayam, except that he should abide by the conditions stipulated by the Board [. . .] It was the Board's prerogative to stipulate the conditions for the Ubayam, since the Board was the properly constituted body of the Government who had the charge of the four temples of which Sri Mariamman Temple was one of them.[23]

In my view, this 'Circular' is an important document that not only detailed the schedule of prayers, but also specified rules of conduct for devotees within the Temple, asserted the authority and control of the Board to make decisions about the right to carry the *aknik kopparai* and *karakam*,[24] and most controversially outlined the priority and preference for receiving the 'first *kāḷāñci*'[25] after the daily prayers given first to the Chairman of the SHEB, or the Chairman of the Management Committee of the Temple and the 'second *kāḷāñci*' to the *Camayattār*. The last two items in the circular were highly contentious issues, drawing the Board into lengthy debates and discussions with devotees who questioned the priority given to the Chairman of the SHEB as the recipient of the 'first *kalangi*'. Other related discords the SHEB was involved in related to its decision to grant the honour to the Chairman of the SHEB to 'ceremonially dig the fire pit' for the fire-walking ceremony:

> The Board resolved to grant the Chairman, Mr. XX (text unclear), or in his absence, his nominee, the honour to ceremonially dig the fire-pit, to consecrate the fire in the fire-pit and to offer prayers for the successful conclusion of the fire walking to be held on 27th October 1969.[26]

---

[21]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 15 October 1975.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 14 August 1971.

[24]*Aknik kopparai* refers literally to the 'bowl of fire' carried during a ritual at the fire-walking festival. *Karakam* refers to a pot decorated with garlands of flowers that is deemed to contain the sacred power of the goddess.

[25]This refers to the act of giving the blessed offerings made to the gods to honoured individuals.

[26]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 13 October 1969. This, as far as I have been able to establish, was not a practice observed in the days of the SMHEB, which was very careful to delimit its secular role and steered clear from becoming involved in religious issues.

There were objections to this decision from the Harbour Board group, which had traditionally been significantly involved in the fire-walking celebrations at the temple. There was some concern if the festival would proceed smoothly without their involvement as one of its leaders had withdrawn his Upayam in protest:

> He (one of the Board members) asked if the fire-walking ceremony will collapse if the Harbour Board group boycotted the ceremony in view of the Boards' decision to give Mr. XX [text unclear], the Chairman of the Board, the honour of being the first person to dig the fire-pit.[27]

The Board did not change its decision despite the objections but nonetheless some members of the SHEB agreed to a meeting with the leader of the Harbour Board group to seek his co-operation in the festival. Unfortunately, the minutes of subsequent Board meeting carry no details either of this planned meeting and its outcome or whether any related difficulties surfaced in the fire-walking festival for 1969.[28]

The SHEB was clearly treading on new ground here and moving into uncharted territories. The Board proposed other changes and implemented them even in view of questions and objections from Board members and devotees. Some examples include the raising of fees for the performance of *arccannai*[29] for the fire-walking festival in 1975 and the increased rates for weddings in the same year. The Board, while aware of the reality of objections, felt it was justified in undertaking a particular course of action as in the following case:

> Fire-walking Ceremony: Mr. X (text unclear), Chairman of the Committee of Management of the Mariamman Temple, reported that he had received a spate of protests regarding the recent doubling of the fees for various ceremonies held at the Mariamman Temple at the suggestion of the Chairman of the Board. Mr. X [text unclear] said that this was the first time the fees have been increased since World War II and that the new fees have been published in the Tamil Press. Mr. X [text unclear] asked if the said increase in the fees will get the support of the Board in the face of the opposition. The Board agreed to approve the said increase in the fees.[30]

Very early on, some decisions that the Board had taken breaking with custom had to be retracted in view of protests from devotees. One such decision was the following:

> Fire-walking ceremony at Mariamman Temple: The Board resolved that no meeting of Obayakarars shall be held at the Mariamman Temple as in previous years, as it was agreed that such meeting served no useful purpose.[31]

However, a few months later, the following details are recorded in the minutes of the Board meeting of 8 September 1969:

---

[27] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 19 October 1969.

[28] I am aware that some stories that emerge from these minutes unfortunately remain 'unfinished' and their ends points unresolved. Given the nature of the data over which the reader has no control. Some narratives are commenced but ultimately are available to us in fragments, and not always as 'complete' wholes.

[29] Meeting of SHEB meeting, 15 October 1975.

[30] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 13 October 1969.

[31] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 23 June 1969.

> At the request of Mr. X (text unclear), Chairman of the Committee of Management of Mariamman Temple, the Board resolved to suspend its resolution made on 23.6.69 to the effect that no meeting of Obayakarars shall be held at the Mariamman Temple. Permission was then granted by the Board to the Committee of Management to hold such meeting in connection with the fire-walking ceremony to be held shortly.

A more serious break with tradition was a suggestion by the Management Committee of Mariamman Temple to changing the venue of the fire-walking ceremony from the Mariamman Temple to Perumal Temple in 1969. Expectedly this was met with protests:

> The Chairman reported that the sub-committee appointed by the Management Committee of Mariamman Temple has reported that there is likely to be objections from the public to the Management Committee's proposal to hold the next fire-walking ceremony in the grounds of the Perumal Temple instead of in the Mariamman Temple as in previous years. The Chairman expressed the opinion that publicity of this proposal and the support of the Tamil press may be necessary. The Board resolved to defer consideration of this matter for the time being.[32]

In the very next meeting of 8 September 1969, the proposal was withdrawn:

> The Chairman said that the pro-tem Management Committee's proposal to hold the next fire-walking ceremony in the grounds of the Perumal Temple instead of in the Mariamman Temple has been dropped owing to strong opposition.

The instances cited above may arguably have been driven by administrative and bureaucratic considerations, and the Board saw no difficulties in proposing changes even if they registered a break with custom and tradition, and because they were not deemed to carry religious significance. For my argument, however, these are precisely the kind of data that do demonstrate the SHEB's engagement with issues that were substantively religious, even if the new initiatives were not followed through ultimately. In my view, the examples I turn to next make these points even more forcefully. One of the first issues that the SHEB had to deal with early in its term was the employment of musicians in temples. The 'problem' was triggered in part by input from the Controller of Immigration and the Ministry of Culture and their enquiries about the possibility of recruiting Singaporeans or local residents as musicians for the temples. At the time, the Board's response highlighted the inevitability of securing these individuals from India:

> The Board requested the Secretary to reply that to the best of the Board's knowledge, local talent is not available either in Singapore or Malaysia. There are very few such appointments available and the remuneration is not attractive enough to induce local musicians to aspire to be musicians in the temples. The only course open to the Board for such recruitment was to obtain talent from India.[33]

Additionally, this coincided with the difficulties in the temples with respect to securing musicians and retaining them, leading to revisions in allowances to the music parties of the Mariamman and Perumal temples. To assuage these difficulties, a

---

[32]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 11 August 1969.

[33]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 28 April 1970.

novel proposition came from the then Acting Chairman of the SHEB, one which sought to offer a more stable and permanent solution to the problem. It is helpful to narrate in full the arguments and counter-arguments of the need for musical accompaniment in temple ceremonies in order to grasp the essence of the discourse (emphasis added):

> Musical requirements for Temples: Arising from discussion of the two previous items, the Acting Chairman asked members to consider the feasibility of re-organizing the musical requirements for the temples. He adduced the following reasons for his suggestions:
>
> a) From his own personal observations, he noted that a certain Christian church was using tape-recorded music played from the belfry for its purposes. This may be a modern trend in Christian churches and, if feasible, why not adopt the same practice for Hindu temples?
> b) Since there were no talents available either in Singapore or Malaysia the adoption of (a) would not only obviate the need to recruit musicians from India, but also overcome the immigration objections in this regard.
> c) Moreover, by the use of tape-recorded music, the temples could effect considerable savings in recurrent expenditure, and there would not be bargaining difficulties which the Board is now confronted with.
>
> Although members felt that there was merit in the suggestion of the acting Chairman, *the time, however, was not opportune to introduce such a radical change*. At present, the committees of management were trying to introduce certain measures in the temples, and in spite of their efforts there were some strong objections and complaints from certain quarters. *Any further changes now especially of this nature would aggravate the position*. The Board decided to retain the present practice of having pipers, drummers and cymbal players.[34]

These measures[35] were ultimately not adopted for fear that this would antagonize the Hindu populace, in view of opposition at the time to other changes that were being introduced into the temples. Yet, the very idea that an argument about changing a traditional, customary practice (deemed to be essential to temple worship) could be advanced on the basis of modernist thinking and instrumental arguments about savings in cost and freedom from the bureaucratic hassles relating to securing work permits is remarkable. Furthermore, this notice is historically germane as this mode of argumentation, in future, was to be invoked routinely by the SHEB to execute a variety of 'innovations' in the realm of temple affairs, in the name of more effective administration and management.

Additionally, this discourse also reveals an underlying reformist tone that is evident in the way that the SHEB and the temple committees were starting to conceptualize and conduct their business through the 1970s. I sketch the parameters of this emergent pattern through a focus on the following examples. The first illustration is the attention on religious education, long before the Board's Sub-Committee on Education was formed. Already in 1970, a Board member had suggested that

---

[34] Minutes of SHEB meeting, 6 May 1970.

[35] The 'Musicians Training Scheme', initiated by the Singapore Hindu Advisory Board (SHAB), was one measure that was devised to overcome the problem of dependence on musicians from India.

> [...] the Board should obtain the services of a person well-versed in the Hindu religion to give lectures regularly at the temples administered by the Board. After a discussion, the meeting decided to defer consideration of this topic.[36]

Unfortunately, we are not privy to either the discussion that ensued or a consideration of the subject subsequently as no references are made to this in the minutes in the months following the discussion. In the minutes of Board meetings, the subject surfaces again in 1973, but this time with a more formalized programme for religious instruction:

> Mr. X [text unclear] suggested that the Board should take the initiative to look into the possibilities of conducting classes or lectures on Hindu religion with a view to spread knowledge on Hinduism especially among the younger generation of our Republic. The Board agreed with Mr. X's [text unclear] suggestion in principle and authorized the Chairman to correspond with the appropriate authorities in India in respect of this matter.[37]

The Board members certainly thought this was a good idea and endorsed it, and their commitment to the project was registered in the decision to found a sub-committee to explore this option further:

> Mr. X [text unclear] suggested that a sub-committee be enlisted to look into the possibilities of conducting classes or lectures on Hindu religion with a view to spread knowledge. The Chairman then suggested and the Board agreed that a sub-committee be set up with Mr. X [text unclear] as the Chairman and Mr. X [text unclear] and Mr. X [text unclear] as members to study the feasibility of conducting such classes or lectures. The sub-committee should also have the power to co-opt members.[38]

Officially, the Board only approved a sub-committee 'Social & Education' dealing with training courses, social and educational matters in 1975. Over the next few years the sub-committee seems to have been doing the relevant work and its reports approved and endorsed by the Board. In essence, its task seemed to consist of holding talks and lectures:

> Mr. X [text unclear] gave a brief summary of the activities of the Education Sub-Committee and said that so far 5 religious talks have been organized and held.[39]

In a different vein, the education sub-committee was engaged with the introduction of classes on Hinduism in a local school:

> Religious Class: Mr. X brought up a point in connection with St. Patrick School concerning religious period during which Hindu students are reading story books. He proposed that a proper person be appointed to teach Hindu Religion during the religious period at St. Patrick's School. Mr. X also suggested that a token sum be paid to the person appointed to teach. Members fully supported the idea of organizing the religious class and asked Mr. X [text unclear] to arrange for a suitable teacher.[40]

---

[36]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 12 January 1970.

[37]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 15 March 1973.

[38]Minutes of SHEB meeting of 18 September 1973.

[39]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 20 February 1975.

[40]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 10 January 1977.

In another concrete example, the Board was of the view that religious classes should be held at the Hindu temples to teach devotees various *mantra*s for worship:

> Chairman suggested that religious classes be held at the Mariamman, Perumal and Sivan Temples where among other matters, the priests could teach the devotees the 'Ashotram' and 'Shashtranamam'. The Education Sub-Committee could take the initiative in organising such classes.[41]

Over the next few months, we learn that a suitable teacher had indeed been secured and who had liaised with the principal of the said school and prepared a time-table for lessons. In this connection, the Board also sponsored the visit of missionaries from India for the purpose of giving spiritual discourses, and also for a highly pragmatic purpose:

> The Board considered a letter from Mr. X [unclear text] requesting the Hindu Endowments Board to sponsor the visit of Guruji Haridas Giri, a missionary from India and to arrange for his discussions at the temples in Singapore. The Board agreed to sponsor the visit and to pay part of the expenses of the visit up to $2000/-. The Board felt that his visit could be utilised to collect public donations for the Kaliamman Temple Building Fund.[42]

We also know that the Board had agreed for the visitor to give a discourse each at the Mariamman and Perumal temples.[43] Further evidence of the Board's leaning towards religious issues comes from its response and attitude to participation in conferences, seminars and workshops relating to Hinduism. The first such event was the 'Singapore Hindu Religious and Cultural Seminar' held in June 1970, to which the SHEB had been invited. The Board accepted the invitation and decided to nominate two members each from the Committees of Management of three of its four Hindu temples. The operational logic was the following:

> The Board considered the invitation from the Organizing Committee to attend the forthcoming Seminar. After considering the aims of the proposed Seminar and the resolutions that were adopted at the previous Seminar in May 1969, the Board felt that it would be useful to send delegates to participate in the forthcoming Seminar.[44]

The Board also sent a team to the 'World Hindu Cultural and Philosophical Conference', held in Madras in March 1976[45] and also nominated two members to attend the 'World Hindu Conference' in Kuala Lumpur in December 1976.[46] In all these endeavours, the Board was motivated by the notion of service to the Hindu community and an orientation towards reform via explicit religious instruction.

---

[41]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 20 February 1975.

[42]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 25 April 1979.

[43]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 28 February 1978.

[44]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 17 June 1970. Unfortunately, according to the feedback received from the HEB nominees who attended the Seminar, it was not found to be beneficial. The Board then resolved not to send any delegates to future Seminars.

[45]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 23 February 1976.

[46]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 4 November 1976. This decision was queried by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Board subsequently clarified that the members had attended this conference at their own expense.

These emerging concerns with serving the larger Hindu community through various projects were seen to be well within the purview of the Board. Indeed, these ideas were noble and lofty and there is even evidence that members of the Hindu community, as well as other organizations, such as the SHAB, had approached the Board and urged it to take the leading steps for the benefit of the Hindus in Singapore.

There were yet other examples in which specific actions of the Board led to the changes in the actual content of religious rituals, all of them motivated by the logic of formal rationality, something that would be both offensive and shocking to Hindu sensibilities. I offer just two such rituals here together with the reasons for instituting changes in their performance:

> Kumbuduthanam[47]: The Secretary suggested that the Kumbuduthanam which is done during the Fire Walking Ceremony should be completed in one round and not three rounds. This was accepted at the meeting and it was decided that the devotees be informed accordingly.[48]

> Kumberthan: It was resolved that for the next fire walking ceremony, the devotees should only do one round and not three rounds because of the crowd. The secretary was directed to notify the Management Committee.[49]

In another instance, the use of the *chattai*[50] during the fire-walking ceremony was queried by Board members as attempts were made to regulate this practice:

> Chattai: Mr. K said that he saw many persons using the 'Chattai' and he and others had to stop one person near the Sundara Vinayagar Temple from using the 'Chattai'. He said that one or two persons only should be allowed to do this. Mr. R asked whether the use of the Chattai was really necessary. Mr. P said that it was and in actual fact it was the devotee who wants himself to be whipped. The Committee felt that the 'Chattai' should be used lightly and should not hurt anyone. It was agreed to appoint Messrs V, K and S as persons who could use the 'Chattai.'[51]

However, there were also occasions when the Board did not agree with decisions taken by the temple committees with regard to changing the substance of religious rituals. One such example was the ritual of *karupura theepam*[52]:

> The meeting discussed the recent decision by the temple committee with regard to the stopping of the presentation of the *Karupura Theepam* to the devotees. The Secretary of the management committee explained that it was decided to stop the practice during the period preceding the Fire Walking Ceremony because of the large crowds and the inconvenience and time taken. He also stated that there was a loss of income to the temple as the devotees tended to place the money on the Theepa thadu.[53]

---

[47]This refers to the ritual of rolling on the ground as an act of worship. Typically devotees roll around the temple in a clockwise direction as a mark of devotion and penance.

[48]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 4 November 1977.

[49]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 5 December 1977.

[50]This is a reference to the cāṭṭai and its use in the ritual known as cāṭṭai aṭi which was eventually banned in the Perumal and Mariamman temples during Tai Pūcam and fire walking.

[51]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 27 September 1976.

[52]This is part of the Hindu act of *puja*, and refers to the waving of lights before the deity as a mark of honour and reverence.

[53]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 30 September 1979.

However, not all were persuaded by the arguments posed and a decision was made to continue with the ritual on grounds of its religious significance:

> Some members, however, explained that the matter was of some religious importance and that many devotees felt very strongly that their prayers and offerings were not complete without the presentation of the Theepam. After some discussion, the meeting agreed that the presentation of the Karupura Theepam should be carried on as usual except during Ubayam nights.[54]

Of course, the Board and the committees of management acted consensually but because the latter were ultimately under the control of the Board they seldom, if ever, took decisions independently. On the other hand, even when a suggestion came via the temple committees it had to be approved by the Board; hence, they carried its endorsement and it was not possible for them to distance themselves from the final actions.

Collectively, the preceding discussion strongly reiterates the point that the bureaucratic framework (and practices) and instrumental rationality instituted by the SMHEB were carried over, continued and even honed by the SHEB. Most critically, this was applied not just to the work of administering endowments, but extended to management, supervision and regulation of the religious institutions in which these were vested. However, my reading of the available data suggests that in the transition to the autonomous and self-governing new Board in Singapore, this body was more obviously and explicitly concerned about 'Hinduism' and with religious affairs,[55] even as its task, according to the 'new' Act of Parliament which framed its work, remained centred on the administration of endowment funds. Furthermore, the fact that the Board was now composed entirely of Hindu members seemed to render natural the Board's concern with Hinduism, as well as obviate the need for guarding against possible interference in religious matters. In highlighting this shifting and evolving role of the Board, my aim is certainly not to raise questions about the integrity, intentionality or motivation of Board members through the years. For me this represents a fascinating socio-historical process and signals the changing perceptions of the Board by members themselves. Through these varied self-interpretations about what the Board stood for, did members ask themselves these questions: Were the new range of activities, which clearly impinged on religious matters, outside the brief of the SHEB or part of its administrative portfolio? Were they operating within the legal framework provided for by the Hindu Endowments Act (HEA)? If these queries did not surface, why was that the case? On my part, I am faced with another set of compelling questions: How could these queries have escaped the notice of the Board members who were otherwise very

---

[54]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 30 September 1979.

[55]In fact, one of the sub-committees the HEB approved in the year 1975 was called the Religious Affairs Sub-Committee. Others sub-committees which reveal the different preoccupations of the Board in the 1970s were constituted for Finance, Property, Administration Staff and Social Education. Minutes of SHEB meeting, 29 December 1975.

committed to following the legal procedures outlined in the Act? How could the line (however artificial) between 'secular' and 'religious' matters that its predecessors were conscious of, and had navigated so gingerly, not enter the consciousness of the new incarnation of the SMHEB? Did the fact of the 'Hindu' membership of the Board constituted under a democratic, independent government allow these latter concerns to be rendered non-issues/irrelevant and, thus, explain their total absence in the dominant discourse of the times?

6.2.1 Institutionalizing an Agamic-Style Temple and Worship

A new mode of administration heralded by the SMHEB and then the SHEB, together with its endorsement of what was considered to be a 'proper' Agamic temple, led to the production of 'model' religious structures and legitimized a particular style of Hindu religiosity therein. Some crucial elements included the following: (a) the definition of Agamic-style Hindu temples exclusively as 'proper' temples, requiring the services of Brahmins priests, *pandaram*, musicians, expertise and equipment from India; (b) the institution of rules for appropriate behaviour within temple precincts; (c) the codification and routinization of procedures for temple worship; and (d) establishing a new mode of collecting temple revenue and the control of the priesthood as salaried employees. It is striking that these features are primed as legitimate religious practices, but being led by instrumental and bureaucratic rationality. It is important to make the point that the SHEB was not fabricating novel rules and regulations in the enactment of worship within the temples. The Board worked with the view that it was necessary to implement and execute the procedures for temple worship prescribed in religious texts and drawn from model Indian temples. As I see it, the streamlining and standardization of *pooja* time-table and fees for religious services served to formalize the structure and content of worship, which were all important ingredients in producing a particular style of Hindu religiosity in Singapore which was ironically rendered legitimate and authoritative, not least because it seemed to have the force of 'government' endorsement.

In the early days of the SS, Hindu temples founded by individuals or groups were privately-managed and tended to be largely self-governing.[56] As we have noted, this mode of administration led to a variety of disputes involving temples and their managers, which saw the relevant parties resorting to the Courts to resolve these difficulties. Intervention by the Colonial State in an effort to regulate this field led to the emergence of the MHEO. This law provided for the establishment of a Board which was tasked with the administration of the endowments vested in the temples. Eventually, four Hindu temples came under the purview of the SMHEB and were subject to a new mode of management. This development also engendered a

---

[56]See discussion in Chapter 3.

dichotomy between 'privately-managed temples' and 'Board temples',[57] a dualism that continues to typify contemporary discussions. The following exchange between the Chairman of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill and Mr. P. Kannusamy in 1968 reveals both the-noted popular perception and attempts to correct it (emphasis added):

CH: Which temple do you yourself go to normally?
Mr. K: For the last 25 years or so, I have gone to every Hindu temple in Singapore and
          also to *Government Hindu temples*.
CH: I do not think it is correct to call them Government temples?
Mr. K: I mean *temples administered by the Board*.
CH: You mean *temples under the administration of the Board*.
Mr. K: Yes.

Despite this insistence on what might be considered 'technicalities' and getting the phraseology right, that the four temples under the administration of the HEB are 'government temples' is a view that nonetheless continues to be articulated today even as it is challenged by members of the SHEB. I, thus, move the discussion forward by asking this question: What indeed was the substantive effect of placing 'temples under the administration of the Board' and whether this impinged on religious matters? I formulate my response by focusing on two related issues: How did the two Boards conceptualize a 'proper' Hindu temple and what kind of Hindu religiosity did they deem to be legitimate here?

These questions assume a different significance in view of the fact that apart from the 'proper' Agamic temples which are dominant on the island of Singapore today, a historical gaze reveals that from the early decades of the nineteenth century, the religious landscape on the island was typified by a more informal mode of organizing sacred space. Many of today's established temples had such rudimentary beginnings as 'shrines', denoted as *cinna kovil* (Tamil, literally 'small temple'). Historical data attest to the widespread presence of such shrines in mid-nineteenth century Singapore.[58] Local, household and village male and female, non-Sanskritic deities from Tamil Nadu accompanied Hindu migrants and were housed in these shrines across the island. The ritual complex surrounding the veneration of these deities is hardly surprising given the pattern and profile of Indian and Hindu presence in British Malaya since the nineteenth century.[59] Scholars have noted that large numbers of Indians who were brought in as labour (predominantly from Tamil Nadu) to undertake infrastructural work in British Malaya were drawn from the lowest rungs of the Indian class and caste hierarchy, i.e., from the non-Brahmin and Adi-Dravida communities. The veneration of village deities, the observance of

---

[57] A note on terminology: The endowments vested in the four Hindu temples administered by the MHEB led to the common perception that these were 'government temples', a view that continues to be both articulated even today and challenged by members of the HEB.

[58] Mialaret (1969), Mohd. Ali (1985) and Rajah (1978).

[59] Arasaratnam (1979), Mani (1977), Sandhu (1969) and Siddique and Shotam (1982).

'self-mortification' rituals and propitiation of non-Sanskritic deities through ani-mal sacrifices and offerings of blood and toddy have been noted amongst these communities for Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century.[60]

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the SMHEB came into being, the practice of founding such shrines marked the Hindu population on the island. In addition to these numerous shrines that dotted the island, several other Hindu temples also existed alongside. This list includes the four temples which gradually came under the charge of the SMHEB: the Sri Mariamman Temple dated to 1827, the Sri Sivan Temple dated to the early 1830s (first consecration ceremony[61] in 1905), the Srinivasa Perumal Temple dated to 1855 (first CC in 1966) and the Sri Vairavamida Kaliamman Temple dated to the early 1900s. Other prominent examples include the Sri Thandayuthabani Temple managed by the Chettiar community dated to 1859, the Veeramma Kaliamman Temple dated to 1834 (first CC in 1936), Sri Manmatha Karuneshwarar Temple dated to 1888 (first CC in 1937) and the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple dated to 1875 (first CC in 1930). The one temple which seems to have been singled out as a 'model' temple both for its style of management and for its adherence to the Agamic principles was the Chettiar Temple in Singapore. This temple has conducted a CC on 4 April 1859, possibly the earliest known instance of a *kumbabhishekam* ceremony on the island, followed by another one in 1886.

In view of this historical evidence, it would be simplistic to suggest that the SMHEB introduced the concept of an Agamic temple and its corresponding style of worship in Singaporean Hindu domains. Nonetheless, I am arguing that, over time, its various decisions and the practices it instituted not only selectively high-lighted these features,[62] but also ultimately led to their legitimation. In everyday life, Hindus have very clear notions of the differences between formally constructed and consecrated temples and informal, roadside shrines although both are considered legitimate modes of conceptualizing and organizing sacred space. Agamic temples and shrines are not only visually and architecturally varied, but are also defined by contrasting styles of religiosity, drawing upon different strands of Hinduism through attachment to a particular ritual complex and requiring the services of specific categories of religious specialists.

This observation is all the more ironic because in the first half of the twentieth century, for the largely non-Brahmin, Adi-Dravida members of the migrant Hindu population in Singapore Agamic temples were as inaccessible to them as they had been to their ancestors across the oceans. Agamic temples were only opened to Adi-Dravida communities in Malaya after the Second World War, and in response to the removal of bans on temple entries in India itself. In 1947, the Malayan Indian

---

[60]O'Malley (1935) and Whitehead (1921).

[61]consecration ceremony (CC).

[62]There is evidence that the SMHEB consulted prominent members of the local Hindu community and the Chettiar Temple for guidance on particular matters affecting its own administration of Hindu temples.

Congress sponsored a meeting of the managers of 300 Hindu temples in Malaya 'to consider abolition of all social disabilities and caste distinctions in the Hindu religious centers'.[63] The aims of the meeting also revealed current practices of the time:

> The meeting will consider particularly proposed temple entry for all Hindus, irrespective of class or caste distinctions, and abolition of all class or caste distinctions now observed in crematoriums and burial grounds.[64]

The article goes on to state the need for reforms to ensure progress and greater prestige for the Malayan Indian community, noting, however, some resistance from orthodox Hindus in Malaya. The meeting was convened to remove restrictions on temple entry although no official public ban to this effect existed, the final aim being 'equal treatment for all persons', and the Congress was 'determined to prevent any Harijan problem cropping up'.[65] In the Indian context, in April 1946 the Madras Assembly passed the Temple Entry Bill, which conferred 'legal right on all excluded classed to enter temples',[66] a move that was resisted by Orthodox Hindus in India. In the same year, the Madras Council passed another bill that allowed 'Harijans to enjoy and have access to any secular institution for Hindus' and carried 'a penal clause for punishing anyone preventing Harijans from exercising their rights'.[67] Finally in 1949, the Madras Legislative Assembly passed a bill that also opened by law private Hindu temples to *Harijans*.[68]

From the earliest days, despite the absence of Hindu members in the MHEB, some effort seems to have been made to ensure that the architecture of Hindu temples and their renovation and rebuilding conformed to 'Hindu' and 'Indian' precepts. For instance, in relation to the rebuilding of shrines and domes at Perumal Temple, we hear of the 'plans prepared by Hindu decorators',[69] of 'the necessary plaster work and ornamentation will be done afterwards by Hindu workmen'[70] and of 'the ornamentation and painting of these domes by Hindu artists'.[71] In fact, the SMHEB explicitly called for Hindu designs of the domes at Perumal Temple:

> New domes at Perumal Temple: Designs for new domes at Perumal Temple according to Hindu architecture were submitted. The present domes are Mohammedan in style and worshippers object to them. The secretary was instructed to apply for tenders for the construction of these domes and to report.[72]

---

[63]'Malayan Hindu Temple Committees to Meet to Consider Abolition of "Social Disabilities, Caste Distinctions." ' *Indian Daily Mail*, 19 October 1946.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

[66]'Madras Assembly Passes Temple Entry Bill.' *Indian Daily Mail*, 27 December 1946.

[67]'Historic Bill: Madras Gives Harijans New Rights.' *Indian Daily Mail*, 27 December 1946.

[68]'Private Temples also Opened to Harijans.' *Indian Daily Mail*, April 1949.

[69]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 2 June 1913.

[70]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 13 March 1916.

[71]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 10 May 1916.

[72]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 16 December 1915.

Certainly the SMHEB routinely received suggestions and feedback both from members of the Hindu public and the SHAB about what type of temple was appropriate for Singapore. In relation to the rebuilding or possible rebuilding of the Perumal Temple, we learn of the proposal made by these two parties:

> He (Board Secretary) said that the idea of the proposers was that a model temple built more in accordance with the *mantram*s might be built [. . .][73]

This idea of constructing a 'model temple [. . .] more in accordance with the *mantram*s' was a clear reference to the call for adherence to Agamic principles. An examination of literary records from Tamil Nadu reveals that the details of temple rituals were systematized in a series of texts known as *Agamas* for the worship of Puranic and cult Hindu deities in about the eighth century A.D. Today, it is these texts, together with the *Purana*s and *Tantra*s, that are considered authoritative with regard to temple-building procedures and temple rituals. According to these texts, before a deity can be installed and worshipped in a temple, a crucial *kumbabhishekam* (or CC) is performed to invite and invoke the deity to inhabit its icon or image. In fact, the image of the deity is said to derive its power through this ceremony, a necessary component of which is the *pranapratistha* (establishment of life breath) and the giving of 'eyes' to the deity via the *nayanunmilana* ceremony. At the time of the founding of the SMHEB, only one or two Hindu temples[74] in Singapore had performed this CC, but over time this practice has become normalized as more and more temples have been 'Agamized'. Furthermore, the real *puja* of deities can begin only after this ceremony and further requires the mandatory performance of specific rituals, known in the *Saiva Agama* as *nittya pucai*, to be performed by a retinue of temple personnel. We know that few members of the Brahmin priestly category migrated to Singapore, yet we have evidence of Brahmin priests having been employed in Singapore temples even in the early 1900s: for instance, at the Sivan Temple, Perumal Temple and the Sri Thandayauthabani Temple. These priests performed daily rituals entirely both for the benefit of the gods and for individual devotees who approached the deities through the ritual of *arccannai*, which refers to private worship arranged on request and upon payment of fees. In the Agamic temples, apart from the religious specialists (Brahmins and *pandaram*s), an entourage of other personnel, such as singers, musicians, cooks, etc., is required and employed to sustain ritual life within the temple both on a day-to-day basis and especially on festive occasions. During the daily prayers, especially if the deity had been 'invited' and procedurally enshrined in the temple, it has to be properly treated—woken up, bathed, clothed, fed, entertained, married, taken on rides and put to bed at night. A failure to do so would incur the wrath of the deity and offend it. Thus, in order to maintain the daily rituals at the local temples, as well as attend to the religious needs of the devotees, trained Brahmin priests, *pandarams*, temple musicians and singers would have had to be secured mainly from India and occasionally from Sri Lanka

---

[73]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 17 December 1931.

[74]The Tank Road Temple in 1886 and the Sivan Temple in 1905.

and Malaysia. It is clear that an adherence to Agamic prescriptions and observing strict procedures could only have been possible in temples that had the resources to secure the services of the religious expertise and specialists. While the Indian caste system was by no means transplanted with any degree of totality in British Malaya, the temples under the administration of the SMHEB in Singapore saw the need for various categories of religious personnel, such as the Brahmin priests, the assistant *pandarams*[75] and the temple band,[76] including the drummer and the piper.

In the midst of these reformist musings, the ritual complex surrounding the veneration of local, household and village deities has been a stable and tenacious element of 'Singaporean Hinduism'. *Gramadevata*, village deities, were literally grounded in the religious landscape of newly-adopted homelands, and shrines built for them. Some of these village deities, such as Mariamman, Kaliamman and Muneeswaran, subsequently 'grew bigger' and were moved into Agamic temples. The deities experienced upward social mobility that paralleled the improved status of their devotees. The building of 'proper temples' for 'once improper deities' marks the Singaporean Hindu landscape as distinct, in comparison to the Indian context. More importantly, it is essential to reflect on the cumulative effect of a thinking and outlook that favoured Agamic precepts on the status and future of the numerous informal shrines which were founded by members of the lower castes, and that existed alongside the more established temples in Singapore. Would it have led to the perception of shrines as 'illegitimate religious structures' that should either be eliminated or morphed into more respectable Agamic entities?

Certainly the 'Indian connection' was seen to be important in the religious life of the migrant Hindu community in Singapore even in the early decades of the twentieth century. The SMHEB seems to have made an effort to establish what the 'Indian practice' was as a guide for its own actions. With regard to the rebuilding of the Mariamman Temple,

> Secretary stated that Indian practice was for Reconstructions and Pundits' fees to be paid by the Board, a period of about 50 years such as had elapsed being normal interval, while public subscriptions were sometimes taken up for Ceremonial Reopening.[77]

The increasing reliance on India for religious expertise and religious paraphernalia intensified from the 1950s onwards. We learn of the 'idols and vessels'[78] being brought in from India for the Mariamman Temple CC and of consulting and securing plans for the rebuilding of the Perumal Temple from 'Hindu sculptors in India experienced in the work of the required nature'[79] and also the need to recruit the expert skills of a *sthapathy* (temple architect)[80] from India for the latter temple's works. However, while this dependence on Indian expertise was useful and fulfilled

---

[75]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 8 August 1940.

[76]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 3 September 1937.

[77]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 20 October 1926.

[78]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 15 June 1927.

[79]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 12 June 1950.

[80]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 18 June 1953.

the given needs, it also sometimes created problems. In 1955, discussions for the rebuilding of the Perumal Temple had already been in the pipeline for two decades and further challenges surfaced in trying to secure the services of an Indian architect:

> The Chairman in this connection put before the Board the effect of correspondence which had taken place between Mr. Pakirisamy and an Indian architect familiar with the rules and precepts regulating the building of temples according to the Hindu faith as regards such temples as the Perumal temple. For preparing the necessary plans, the Indian architect was prepared to do the work for a fee of Rs. 5,500. It was explained at the meeting that the plans required to be drawn by an architect familiar with the relevant religious precepts and such could only be found in India. They could not, however, submit plans to the City Council not being registered in Singapore. Architects registered in Singapore could submit the plans to the City Council but had not the necessary knowledge of the religious precepts.[81]

The solution was revealing in that it illustrated the political astuteness of the MHEB, as well as its rationalized approach:

> The effect of this was that a Singapore architect must submit plans which would have to be incorporated into the plans as drawn by the Indian architect. An agreement with the Indian architect must require that his plans permit amendments if an examination showed that an alteration not in variance with religious rules, would show a saving in cost and that the copyright passed to the Board.[82]

Continuing the example of the Perumal Temple, we learn of a visit to India by a member of the MHEB to examine temples and to consult architects there[83] of the input by 'skilled workmen who have to come from South India'[84] and the *sthapathy* for doing the ornamental and sculptural work,[85] as well as the need to recruit 'better qualified priests' from India.[86]

Apart from this, the SMHEB and SHEB regularly turned to the 'Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board' of Madras for assistance and guidance on Hindu matters. For instance, the Madras Board was approached for help with recruiting a Chief Priest for the Mariamman Temple:

> Mr. P. N. Ramoo reported that he had not as yet received a reply from the Commissioner, Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments, Madras, to his letter requesting assistance in the recruitment of a replacement for the Chief Priest of Mariamman Temple, who would be retiring in June 1970.[87]

On another occasion, the SHEB approached the Madras Board to arbitrate a dispute amongst devotees at the Mariamman Temple:

> The Secretary reported to the Board that he had received complaints from the devotees of the Mariamman Temple about the replacement of the idol of the Goddess of Sri Dropada

---

[81]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 July 1955.

[82]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 July 1955.

[83]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 28 June 1956.

[84]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 23 April 1958.

[85]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 25 March 1957.

[86]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 11 August 1969.

[87]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 28 April 1970.

Devi by a new idol which was donated to the temple in 1962. The Secretary said that in his opinion the only way to solve this problem was to invite an expert from India to come to Singapore to arbitrate in this matter. He suggested that an expert on Hindu religious rituals could be obtained through the good offices of the Commissioner for Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments, Madras.[88]

However, the Board did not want to bear the cost of hosting this expert in Singapore, but rather wanted the two factions of devotees to sponsor his visit. Unfortunately, I do not have access to minutes of meeting from June 1968 to April 1969, a period of transition, with preparations for the establishment of separate boards for the Muslim and Hindu endowments. Thus, I am not able to establish if the suggestion to consult the Hindu expert from India was ever acted upon. The next reference to this matter appears in the minutes of the meeting of 8 September 1969, where the Board decides as follows:

> The Board resolved that the old copper idol of the goddess Sri Dropada Devi shall be the only idol to be used in the ceremonies in and around the temple on the third day after fire-walking.

Another instance in which the SHEB turned to the Madras Board involved the replacement of wooden deities by brass deities and the relocation of the *navagraham*s at the Mariamman Temple, following complaints from groups of devotees:

> The Secretary pointed out that where the members of the Board are not aware of the correct procedure to be followed in religious matters, the thing to be done is to consult an authority on Hindu affairs and then act on the opinion given to us. If that is done, we can avoid getting into controversy by persons who may not be experts in the field. It was then decided that the question relating to the replacement of the deities in the Mariamman Temple by new brass idols should be referred to the Commissioner, Hindu Endowments Board, Madras, Tamilnadu, for an opinion as to the proper procedure that should be followed when wooden deities are replaced by brass idols.[89]

In the case of the re-siting of the *navagraham*s, it is important to note that, in 1978, the SHEB had to defend and justify a decision made by the SMHEB in 1943. Clearly, the location of these deities had been controversial, and even as the advice of the temple *pandaram* was sought, it was still deemed necessary to seek input from a higher authority:

> He (one of the Board Commissioners) said that he had discussed the matter with Veerappan Pandaram and that he has been assured that there is no objection to the Navakrahams being located at the same place. The Board, however, resolved that in view of the controversial nature of the action taken by the Board some 35 years ago, expert advice should be obtained

---

[88]Minutes of SMHEB meeting, 15 June 1968. It is important to note that at this time the Board Secretary was a Muslim, a situation that continued even after the HEB came into existence. However, in August 1976, the Board members suggested that the 'HEB Secretary should be a Hindu' (Minutes of HEB Meeting, 18 August 1976), a situation that eventually materialized in 1978.

[89]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 14 February 1978.

on the matter and it was decided that a letter should be written to the Commissioner of the Hindu Endowments Board in Madras for his views on the matter.[90]

The physical proximity of Singapore to India and the continued persistence of kinship networks across these two societies facilitated possibilities for interaction in the religious sphere as well. However, these ties were sustained by personal connections, rather than the emergence of any institutional links between the Singapore and Madras Boards:

> The Chairman reported that while on a visit to India in early March 1979 he had contacted the Commissioner for Hindu Endowments Board in Madras Mr. Ganapathy. The Commissioner was very willing to assist the Board in various ways in the following areas:
>
> (i)   Advice and assistance in temple construction.
> (ii) Provision of books and periodicals.
> (iii) Provision of visiting experts and lecturers.[91]

The SHEB was not averse to this offer as seen in its decision to consult the Madras Board in relation to the rebuilding of the Kaliamman Temple:

> The Secretary was requested to write to the Commissioner of the Hindu Endowments Board in Madras regarding the construction of the temple and to seek his assistance for the provision of suitable materials for the building of the main sanctum.[92]

Several implications follow from this notice of the relationship of dependence and connections with Tamil Nadu: Firstly, it is the continuing orientation to India as the locus and authority of Hindu affairs, seen in endeavours to secure religious expertise and other resources. This highlights the extent to which Indian input was deemed crucial for sustaining Hindu practices in the diasporic setting of Singapore.

Secondly, this reliance on an authority like the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments of Madras meant input from the perspective of what Vertovec has called 'Official Hinduism'. I would argue that this led to the selection of specific features of the religion as legitimate, and the exclusion of others as improper. This demonstrates a concern with organizing and purifying Hinduism, something which typified emerging middle-class sensibilities in Singapore, together with a modernist and rationalist rhetoric which aimed to reform, inform and educate local Hindus. Two such sanctioned dimensions were the model of an Agamic-style temple and the corresponding style of religiosity therein—both being placed in the hands of Brahmin priests. The institutionalization and legitimation of these features are not insignificant developments, being early evidence of what I have elsewhere called the complex process of 'Agamization'[93] in Singaporean Hindu domains.

Thirdly, it is reasonable to ask what possibilities for local religious innovation were curtailed given this effort to replicate the Indian model in the Diaspora. Indeed

---

[90]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 30 March 1978.

[91]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 14 March 1979.

[92]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 25 April 1979.

[93]Sinha (2005).

the evidence from Singapore suggests that the potential and promise for religious invention have been limited in the officially framed Hindu domains, given the motivation to do things the Hindu way, or as they are done in India. The signs of diasporic creativity that are evident here have occurred primarily through encounters and interactions of Hindu elements with those from other religious traditions, and are discernible in informal, unofficial (and largely illegitimate) Hindu spaces. This intermingling across religious boundaries and the kind of synergy they have produced have not gained acceptance in Official constructions of Hinduism on the island, as perhaps in other Hindu diasporic locations, such as South Africa or parts of the Caribbean.[94]

6.2.2 Legitimating Tai Pūcam in 'Singaporean Hinduism'

In 2009, a total of 9,089 individuals participated in the *Tai Pūcam* (see Table 6.1)[95] celebrations in Singapore, while the fire-walking festival drew a crowd of 15,907 in the same year (see Table 6.2). In contemporary Singapore, *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* are viewed as unambiguously 'Hindu' festivals, firmly and conspicuously located on the local religious landscape and embraced as legitimate features of Singaporean Hinduism. Their current status and popularity make it all the more difficult to believe that just 80 or so years ago, there was a strong possibility that the two festivals might

Table 6.1 Ticket sales statistics for observance of *Tai Pūcam* in Singapore, 2002–2009 (figures courtesy of the SHEB)

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Pal Kudam	7,897	7,960	7,369	7,021	7,673	7,520	7,500	8,396
Pal Kavati	599	589	523	472	430	416	145	370
Spike Kavati	414	393	368	321	356	305	211	323
Chariot Kavati	42	37	37	30	37	41	33	45
Total	8,952	8,979	8,297	7,844	8,496	8,282	7,889	9,134

---

[94]It was also relatively easier to secure religious objects, personnel and advice from Tamil Nadu, physical proximity to India being an important factor. Whereas it was clearly much harder for, say, migrant Hindus groups in South Africa, Fiji or Trinidad to access the same given the vast distance from Indian shores.

[95]Tables 6.1 and 6.2 carry statistics provided by the courtesy of the SHEB. The numbers who participate in *Tai Pūcam* have clearly risen over the years, with the exception of 'Spiked Kavatis', which peaked in 1998–1999, and since then have declined considerably. This is possibly the result of various measures instituted by the HEB to discourage participants from carrying this type of *kāvaṭi*, which attracts mainly youthful, male Hindu members and whose mode of participation and behaviour at the festival has generated a degree of controversy in the public domain. The festival today draws participation from all quarters of local Hindus, including higher caste Hindus (and Brahmins), and also non-Indians—with large numbers of ethnically Chinese Singaporeans.

Table 6.2 Ticket sales statistics for observance of rituals during the fire-walking festival in Singapore, 2002–2009 (figures courtesy of the SHEB)

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Fire walking (male)	3,112	3,328	3,488	3,624	3,708	3,577	3,661	3,539
Fire pit circumambulation (female)	714	799	753	770	771	802	804	764
Angaprathachanam	1,875	1,846	1,832	1,795	1,700	1,555	1,571	1,424
Kumbiduthandam	6,445	6,189	6,292	5,982	5,868	5,597	5,304	5,155
Maavilakku	1,747	1,651	1,690	1,678	1,653	1,651	1,598	1,629
Paalkudam	2,679	2,760	2,891	2,929	3,052	2,951	3,170	3,399
Total	16,572	16,573	16,946	16,775	16,752	16,133	15,776	15,907

have disappeared from the island altogether. This was due largely to a strong social reformist campaign between the late 1930s and 1950s, led by middle-class, educated sectors of the Malayan Indian community. These clusters viewed the named festivals as backward, barbaric, primitive, superstitious practices which neither carried religious importance nor were sanctioned by the Hindu religious tradition.

The observance of these two festivals in Singapore is historically linked to the emergence of a number of early important Hindu temples on the island, starting in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The Mariamman Temple of Singapore, built in 1827 on a plot of land secured from the Colonial Government for this purpose, continues today to be the site of fire-walking[96] festival, which is believed to have been first celebrated in honour of the Goddess Draupadi in the temple's premises in 1842.[97] Whereas the festival of *Tai Pūcam*, observed in honour of the Tamil god Murukan, is associated with the Singaporean Sri Thandayuthapani Temple, founded by the community of Nattukottai Chettiar in 1859. The celebration

---

[96]While the ritual of walking on fire has been reported amongst members of the early Hindu community in Malaya, it was certainly not unique or exclusive to it. There have been reports of fire walking in Chinese temples in Malacca and Seremban in 1933 and 1934) respectively:

> In the presence of hundreds of people, mostly women, a fire-walking ceremony was performed at the Chinese temple, Pak Tian Kong, yesterday. The 'Kioh' borne by four people, was carried through the glowing embers. About ten devotees, who had previously been on a vegetable diet, took part in the ceremony which is performed once a year. The ceremonies began on Oct. 19 (1st day of the 9th Chinese moon) when prayers were held in which many devotees participated; a procession was held on Oct. 25 culminating in the fire-walking ceremony yesterday ('Fire Walking,' *The Straits Times*, 31 October 1933).

> An interesting ceremony, common in some parts of the country, but not often seen in this State took place at the See Soo Yeah Temple. The spectators included some Europeans watched a fire-walking ceremony. Altogether over 30 persons performed the ceremony. 1,300 katis of charcoal were kept burning from 9 am till 12.30 pm ('Fire-Walking in the Negri,' *The Straits Times*, 6 August 1934).

[97]Hindu Endowments Board (2005, 81).

of *Tai Pūcam* is dated to the very foundation of the temple, which was consecrated on 4 April 1859. The book *Beyond Divine Doors* (2005) narrates the early observance of the festival thus:

> Falling in the Tamil month of Thai, between January and February, the festival has been observed in Singapore since the inception of the Sri Thandayuthapani Temple at Tank Road. In the beginning Thaipusam was celebrated with kavati bearers walking from temples all over the island and ending their devotional procession at Sri Thandayuthapani Temple at Tank Road. The Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple played a vital role in the Thaipusam festival since it was introduced in Singapore and became the first legislated Hindu public Holiday in 1879.[98]

Through the late 1930s and into the early 1950s, specific practices associated with these festivals were viewed by reform-minded Indians and Hindus as primitive and superstitious acts that had no sanction within Hinduism. The Tamil Reform Association (TRA), an organization that brought together middle-class reform-minded Tamils, was at the forefront of calling for radical socio-religious reforms amongst Malayan Indians. The named organization was formed in 1929, initially as a caste society calling itself the *Ahampadiyar Sangam* (Untouchables Association), but was renamed Tamil Reform Association in 1932.[99] This organization led a sustained campaign for reform including a ban on the carrying of *alakuk kāvaṭi* (spiked *kāvaṭi*) (see Fig. 6.2) and walking on fire, in the name of ridding Indian society of degraded practices. According to Arasaratnam,

> From 1936 it published a monthly journal, *Reform*, devoted (as its blurb said) to social reforms. In the very first issue, its editorial declared 'a crusade against all superstitions that disgrace Tamil society.' The Association also published a tri-weekly in Tamil, *Munnetram*, where it carried on lusty propaganda for reformist causes. The earliest activities of this body after its formation were to promote the temple entry movement, and the removal of disabilities against depressed castes.[100]

Although in the early years of its existence, the TRA was perceived as being 'anti-religion', its express aim was not the elimination of religion, but rather the abolition of specific practices of popular religion. These included the practice of animal and blood sacrifices in Hindu temples, worship of low-caste deities, bearing of *alakuk kāvaṭi* and the act of walking on fire, all of which constituted core aspects of religious devotion amongst Malayan Hindus at the time. It is notable that in the socio-religious reformist discourse of these decades the bearing of *alakuk kāvaṭi* and walking on fire were labelled as 'self-torture'[101] and acts of 'self-mortification',

---

[98] Ibid. 79–80.

[99] Ampalavanar (1972, 228).

[100] Arasaratnam (1970, 172).

[101] Oddie (1992, 1995) notes that in the Indian context, such practices as 'hook swinging' were brought to the attention of the colonial authorities in the Bengal, Bombay and Madras presidencies in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Various government orders had been passed prohibiting hook swinging during various festivals—*churuck puja* in Bengal and the veneration of Mariamman, the goddess of smallpox in Madras—on grounds that it caused injury and harm to participants involved. However, Oddie also notes that there was considerable ambiguity about the

the colonial tone being obvious in these pre-existing descriptions, long used in the Indian context and readily inserted into Malayan debates. In the late 1930s, the critique against these practices in Malaya intensified considerably. It is important to remember that the campaign was not against the festival *Tai Pūcam* per se (which was a legitimate form of Murukan worship), but objected to the mode in which it was popularly observed, with a penchant for the spectacular and the theatrical: the piercing of body parts with skewers, rods and needles, which the TRA argued had no religious sanction in the ritual and mythology of Murukan worship. The TRA led the call for a ban on the bearing especially of *alakuk kāvaṭi*[102] (see Fig. 6.1) by Hindus (during such festivals as *Timiti*, *Tai Pūcam*, *Mācimakam* and *Paṅkuṉi Uttiram*), one example amongst others of 'degrading rituals, which opened them to ridicule by the upper-class Indians, the Chinese and the Malays'.[103] Certainly, the *alakuk kāvaṭi(s)*, which involve piercing of cheeks and tongues with needles and rods and the dragging of 'heavy trolleys by means of harness attached to their backs by hooks',[104] under criticism were dramatic enactments and did draw huge audiences (both Indian and non-Indian) to the celebrations.[105] The Singaporean event not only drew crowds from across the causeway, but was a visual feast as well:

> Thaipusam is one of those festivals that attracts devotees from all over the island and Johore, the Chettiar temple at Tank Road being the centre of great animation while a large crowd also collected at the temple at Serangoon Road yesterday to witness devotees undergoing 'tortures.' Amateur photographers assembled in strong force and snapped the devotees as they came out on to the road, a notice posted in the gate prohibiting the taking of photographs within the temple premises.[106]

Members of the TRA appealed to the SHAB to call upon the Government to impose a ban on carrying of these *kavati*s, but with little success as the latter did not want to interfere in religious matters. It is interesting that at the time when the SHAB was calling for the ban, there was already strong mass support for the festivals, these having been present in Malaya for close to a century. In addition, prominent members of the local Hindu community who were associated with temples that observed these festivals supported them and formed an important pressure group.

'illegality' of these practices as the government did not wish to appear to be legislating against customary religious practices, given Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 about the right of religious freedom to her Indian subjects. Of course, in India, the enactment of laws to enforce social and religious reforms has a long history, seen most conspicuously in the banning of *sati* (described as self-immolation by widows) through the efforts of Lord Macaulay in 1829 but also the ban on human sacrifices in the Bengal Presidency.

[102] *Alakuk kāvaṭi* refers to the bigger and more elaborate version of the *kāvaṭi*, made up of a metal structure in which (and to which) metal rods, skewers and needles are inserted. These needles and rods pierce into the skin on the back, chest and thigh of the devotee who carries the *kāvaṭi* during the festival procession.

[103] Ampalavanar (1972, 231).

[104] 'Thaipusam; Celebration of Hindu Festival,' *The Straits Times*, 9 February 1933.

[105] 'Thaipusam; Celebration of the Festival in Singapore,' *The Straits Times*, 23 January 1932.

[106] 'Temple Reception by Chettiars; Thaipusam Festival Ends Tonight,' *The Straits Times*, 21 January 1935.
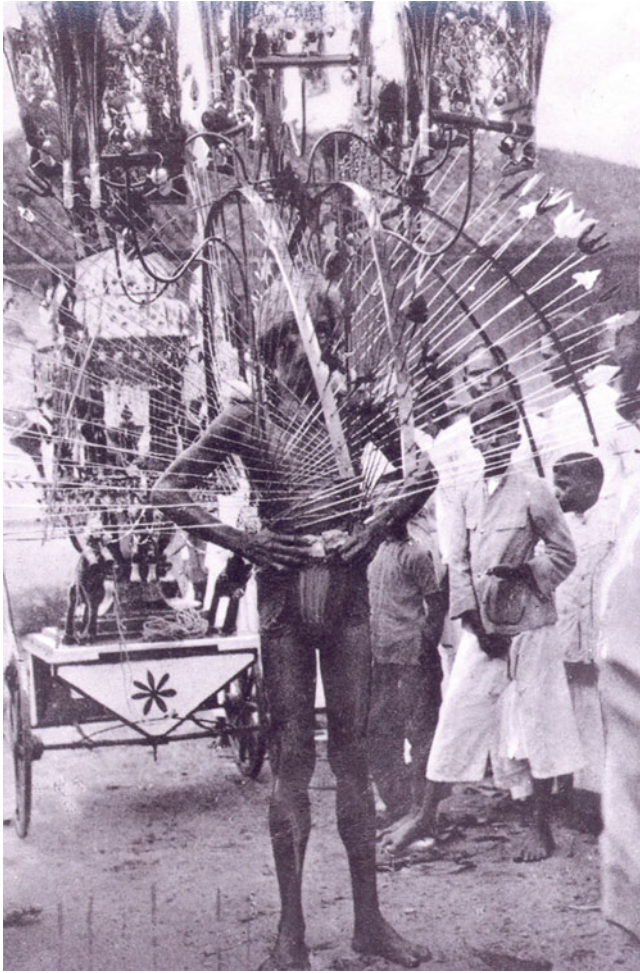
Fig. 6.1 An Indian devotee at the Thaipusam festival in Singapore 1900 (image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

The TRA was quite willing to even contemplate a legislative solution to end these practices, and government interference in religious matters did not seem to be an issue for them. The discussions about passing laws against these practices saw the local Hindu community divided. Wealthier and influential English-educated Hindus did not support the TRA on grounds that a secular state, not to mention a colonial state, should not interfere in religious matters and argued that legislation banning the carrying of *kavati*s would set an undesirable precedence. Neither did the TRA garner sufficient support from significant numbers of lay Tamil Hindus, certainly not from depressed caste backgrounds. The unwillingness of the Colonial Government

Fig. 6.2 Man carrying kavadi during Thaipusam, Singapore, 1950s–1970s (image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

to intervene meant that no legislative action was taken. The members of the TRA (who were largely businessmen, school teachers, journalists and small-scale property owners and from non-Brahmin, Dravidian, Tamil-educated backgrounds) made representations both to the Colonial Government and to the SHAB to intercede with the former on their behalf. In any case, as opinion was divided, the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB) was largely ineffective as it did not have any legal jurisdiction to either call for changes or enforce them. In 1936, 'the association was to write to the government requesting it to enact laws banning Hindu religious practices such as fire walking, blood sacrifices and offerings of toddy, and the carrying

of "alagu kavatis" '.[107] It is interesting that the TRA cited steps taken by the Madras Government in this connection. In a letter dated 2 June 1938 to the SS Colonial Secretary, the TRA wrote thus:

> The Magistrate at Negapatnam issued orders under section 144 of the Madras Criminal Procedure Code that no 'alagu' kavatis would be allowed to participate in the celebrations of the anniversary of "Nellu Kadi Mariamman Temple" and if anyone would contravene or intend to do so, he would be dealt with according to the law.'

> At Porayar (Tanjore District) the magistrates at the camp issued the same order under the said section 144 against 'Olumangalam Mariamman Temple' annual celebrations. Here, the magistrate came to the spot and saw some devotees pricking 'alagus' (iron pins) on their bodies and they were removed by the magistrate personally.[108]

It is certainly the case that a number of government orders were made in the Bengal, Madras and Bombay presidencies about prohibiting 'hook swinging',[109] but whether these orders carried the force of law and rendered this act 'illegal' was a controversial subject which surfaced before the Colonial authorities when they had to manage real situations on the ground. One such episode was the 'Veerasingampet temple riot case'[110] in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, in 1935. The details of the case were as follows:

> Fifty-five men are in the dock—some charged with rioting and others with the murder of a magistrate and, a police sub-inspector and a head constable—following the issue of a Government order prohibiting self-torture as a penance when worshipping Mariamman, the goddess of smallpox, and the fatal disturbance following the attempt to enforce the order.[111]

The case made by the counsel cited the longevity of the practice, as well as Queen Victoria's famous Proclamation of 1858:

> The defence counsel said that the Queen's Proclamation guaranteed protection to her subjects in the observation of legitimate and customary worship according to their belief and that unless the piercing of the body with hooks was prohibited by a legal enactment as in the case of suttee (self-immolation by widows), an administrative order like that issued by the local Government could not be considered to be the law.[112]

The counsel also referred to the Government Order of 1933, which 'forbade the dragging of chariots by means of hooks fixed into the devotees' backs, noting that this order did not include hook piercing and offering this interpretation for the omission:

> The Government, counsel contended would then have prohibited hook-piercing also had they considered it dangerous. But, counsel argued hook-piercing was not as dangerous as other forms of self-torture and hence the omission. Hooks were fixed into the devotees

---

[107] Nair (1972, 31).

[108] Ibid.

[109] See Oddie (1995).

[110] '55 Men on Trial; Self-torture illegal?' *The Straits Times*, 15 October 1935.

[111] '55 Men on Trial; Self-torture illegal?' *The Straits Times*, 15 October 1935

[112] Ibid.

bodies with oil. There was no bleeding and the injuries healed when margosa leaves were applied.[113]

This defence was constructed to circumvent the invocation of Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, under which the Government orders had been made with respect to hook swinging and other forms of 'self-torture'. Despite the arguments made by the TRA and the supporting evidence from India, we read in an article in the 7 September 1938 issue of *The Indian* that the 'Government refuses to intervene' in religious practices in the colony of Malaya:

> At last the Government has spoken and firmly too that it is not prepared to interfere with Hindu religious rites and forbid the carrying of Kavatis or fire walking in the Colony. The Tamils' Reform Association meant well asking the Government to legislate measures to stop such practices as carrying Kavatis on the plea that it was a novelty without any religious importance or significance. But they failed to see that religious ideals and beliefs varied according to the individuals and it would be better if they enlightened the mass on the futility of such practices as Kavati carrying and fire-walking.

It is not without significance that no such law was passed for the SS, especially given the precedence for this in the Indian context. As evidence of the colony's dependence[114] on Indian affairs, in 1949, the Singapore Hindu Association 'wrote to leading Hindu authorities in India asking for some guidance on this question'.[115] A *Straits Times* article of 10 June 1949 reports 'a reply from a leading Hindu, holding a high position in the Government of India, advising them not to agitate for legislation to reform Hindu religious and social practices on grounds that this might eventually lead to the disappearance of piety and religion'.[116] There was no ambiguity in this statement that *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* were viewed as 'religious' events and as such legitimate features of the Hindu religion. The TRA had earlier made precisely the obverse argument to the SHAB, in a letter dated 16 August 1940:

---

[113]Ibid.

[114]It was not only Malayan Indians who relied on India for advice and guidance with respect to Hindu matters, including the legal steps taken there to enforce social and religious changes. The wave of social reform amongst Indian communities was also evident in Ceylon in the late 1940s. An article in the *Indian Daily Mail* of 25 July 1949 reports thus:

> Steps are being taken to introduce legislation to ban the slaughter of goats and fowls in Hindu temples. Hindu religious and cultural organisations feel the practice of slaughtering animals in temples is obnoxious to the tenets of the Saivites, says a Sunday "Observer" report. The Saiva Paripalana Sabha Jaffna, the Vivekananda Society and the Ramakrishna Mission are in the forefront of this movement. Hindu members of Parliament has agreed to support legislation to prevent the slaughter of animals. The Madras Government is being consulted in the drafting of legislation, as the slaughter of animals in temples in Madras has been banned by law.

[115]Arasaratnam (1970, 174).

[116]Arasaratnam is of the view that the author of this opinion was Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then-president of India (ibid.).

> As the practice of loathsome self-mortification with skewers is prevailing in this country
> and in an increasing rate in recent years among the labour classes and as there is mass
> rational opinion against this ill practice, which has neither religious nor moral sanction, the
> Hindu Advisory Board should be requested to consider deeply and to recommend to the
> Government of the Straits Settlements for the abolition of this ill-practice in the same lines
> as that of the Government of Madras.[117]

The strong, negative language in this appeal leaves no doubt that the proponents of
the ban did not view the 'skewering' of the body as an act of piety or religiosity,
reproducing the same logic that reform-minded Hindus, missionaries and colonial
authorities in India had successfully utilized to pressurize the Government of India
to prohibit such practices as 'hook swinging' in the Bengal and Madras presiden-
cies at the turn of the twentieth century[118] and the banning of *Sedil kavati*(s)[119]
in Madras and Pudukkotai states in 1938.[120] The response of the SHAB was to
deflect the appeal by the TRA arguing that 'any resolution for the abolition of the
"*alahu*"[121] *kavati* should come from the general body of the Hindu community'
implying that it did not regard the TRA as the representative body of the Tamil
community.[122] After some attempts, the SHAB failed in its constitutional function
by not carrying this appeal to the Colonial Governor, but rather advised the TRA
to approach the government directly. Failing to pressure the Colonial Government
to pass laws banning 'self-torture', the TRA, together with its supporters, continued
its campaign and appealed instead to individual Hindu temples to effect the desired
changes. Some headway was made in this direction, but it was temporary. The
Second World War interrupted this campaign but it was resumed in 1950,[123] when
the SHAB, the government and, this time, the Trustees of the Chettiar Temple were
presented with a resolution passed at a TRA extraordinary meeting held on 11 March
1950:

> That this meeting requests the Government, the Managing Committee of the Temples, the
> Hindu Advisory Board and the members of the Legislative Council to enact suitable laws
> to stop the self-mortification by piercing the body with long spikes, cutting the tongue and
> walking over fire, etc., on festival days (Letter from TRA to SS Colonial Secretary, Hindu
> Advisory Board, Chettiar Temple, April & March 1950).[124]

Expectedly, the Perumal Temple and the SMHEB are conspicuously absent in this
statement, although this temple (administered by the SMHEB) was a central venue
for the celebration of the festival. The SMHEB was not viewed as an autonomous

---

[117]Nair (1972, 33).

[118]Oddie (1992, 1995).

[119]Ceṭil kāvaṭi is a type of chariot kāvaṭi, denoted as *ter* kāvaṭi in the Malaysian and Singaporean
contexts.

[120]Ampalavanar (1972).

[121]In the literature, 'alahu' and 'alagu' kāvaṭi are alternative linguistic expressions for 'alakuk
kāvaṭi'.

[122]Nair (1972, 34).

[123]Arasaratnam (1966, 1970).

[124]In Nair (1972, 34) and 'Tank Road Temple Bans "Kavadis," ' *Indian Daily Mail*, 8 April 1950.

body, given its links with the government, and, in fact, was one party being appealed to, for the institution of laws against the named practices.

As a result of persistent local pressure and following the ban on *kavati*-carrying by the Madras Government, the Sri Thandayuthapani Temple in Singapore decided to close its doors to *kavati*-carriers at a meeting held on 2 April 1950, and implored other temples in Malaya to follow suit.[125] The editorial of 11 April 1950 in the *Indian Daily Mail* hailed this bold step as timely and essential:

> We heartily congratulate the Management of the Chettiars' Temple at Tank Road on their decision to ban self-mortification by kavadi-carrying devotees during Thaipusam and other festive occasions and we also strongly endorse their appeal to initiate similar reform in the other temples in Malaya.

The article proceeded to restate the by-then commonplace argument about the negative connotations of *kāvaṭi*-carrying as an act of 'self-mortification' and an outcome of 'ignorance and incorrect understanding of the true significance of certain traditions'. In this argument *kāvaṭi*-carrying (by piercing body parts) seemed to have become a metaphor for the broader critique of social and religious customs amongst Indians in Malaya. Furthermore, the social and religious reforms occurring in India (including the removal of untouchability upon the behest of Mahatma Gandhi) are cited as worthy examples to emulate:

> When Hinduism is India is thus being rapidly rid of the many evils that had crept into it, there certainly is no excuse for the Hindus in Malays to retain any of them. In this connection, we must pay a well-deserved tribute to the Management of the Mariamman Temple at South Bridge Road for banning goat sacrifice[126] which too like the kavadi had degenerated into a sort of exhibition for public amusement.

Kāvaṭi-carrying was further denied any devotional substance and declared to be merely for the 'amusement of the public' and a 'disgrace to the community'. The depiction of this act in highly disapproving tones accompanied the justification for its prohibition:

> It is a gruesome sight—this self-mortification of self-torture indulged in by kavadi-carrying devotees. They pierce their bodies and tongues with spikes, needles and other sharp instruments and make a public display of the other communities which is certainly not edifying to the Indians as a whole or the Hindus in particular. This obnoxious practice has no sanction anywhere in the Hindu religion and it is not surprising that even in India it has at last been banned. In Malaya, too, the demand has been made by various sections of the public to prohibit this practice and it is gratifying to learn that the Nattukottai Chettiar Community

---

[125] Ibid.

[126] Again the events in Malaya were inspired by developments in India, particularly Tamil Nadu. In 1950, the Madras Council passed 'a non-official bill prohibiting bird and animal sacrifices in the precincts of Hindu temples in the State. The Bill, already emerged from the Assembly, prescribed fines up to Rs. 300 and simple imprisonment of up to 3 months for priests and persons abetting such sacrifices.' 'No sacrifices in Temple precincts,' *Indian Daily Mail*, October 1950. As a matter of historical interest, goat sacrifices occurred in the Mariamman Temple since at least 1887 and even at that time opinion was divided over whether this was a necessary ritual (in *Singai Nesan*, 25 July 1887, 18).

of Singapore has boldly come forward and banned it altogether in their temple at Tank Road.[127]

However, in December 1950, the Chettiar Temple had to retract this daring decision in the face of overwhelming demand from devotees and submit to mass public opinion. The temple offered its justification in a public notice that was carried in the local Tamil and English press. The notice read as follows:

> Pursuant to the Government Order of the Madras Government, India that forbids the taking of 'Kavadis' with piercing of the human body with sharp needles and hooks in all the important shrines of South India on all important days of ceremonial festivities which amounts to self-torture, the Committee of management has, therefore, come to the conclusion that it is unnecessary to take such 'Kavadis' after a proper deliberation and had notified the Public of their decision. Some members of the Indian Public had written to us asking us whether the above type of 'Kavadis' if taken during the ensuing 'Thaipusam' celebration, would be forbidden. To write to them individually being rather somewhat inconvenient and considering that a publication through the medium of the Newspapers would provide with the information on a large scale to the general Indian Public, we are publishing this notice to cater for a large number of them. Although we consider that taking of 'Kavadis' of the above referred type for the Hindus is not essentially important on 'Thaipusam' day, we would however, not forbid anyone taking such 'Kavadi' entering our Temple on that day and thereby we do not desire to prevent such 'Kavadis' which we inform to the general Indian Public through this notice. Our request is that the Indian Public would kindly co-operate with us in carrying out our desire gradually out [sic] not abruptly to cease this practice of taking 'Kavadis' which means self-torture in one form or another.[128]

This reflected the increasingly widespread public opinion that neither legislation nor outright prohibitions on these practices would be effective measures against them. Instead, the view was that an approach favouring self-realization and education might be better alternatives, a view that had already been articulated in 1938 in view of the Colonial Government's refusal to interfere in religious matters.[129] In 1952, the SHAB's approach no longer called for legislation to prohibit *alakuk kāvaṭi* although the negative tone with respect to such practices continued:

> Alagu Kavadis Must Go: The Hindu Advisory Board at its meeting yesterday decided to appeal to the public to discontinue the 'disgraceful practice' of fire-walking, the carrying of 'Alagu Kavadis' etc. The Board felt that these acts of self-immolation are not edifying to Hindu religion but are mere 'idle ceremonies'.[130]

The furore seems to have subsided somewhat already 3 years later as the same paper reports in a matter of fact (but still judgmental tone) the carrying of *alakuk*

---

[127]'Ban on Kavadi,' *Indian Daily Mail*, 11 April 1950.

[128]'Kavadis for Thaipusam: Chettiars' Temple Committee's appeal to devotees,' *Indian Daily Mail*, December 1950.

[129]'Opinion is divided on Hindu rites, but most people agree on one point that of up-lifting the masses. The views of many leaders show that the man-in-the-street should be taught to judge for himself and religion not forced down his throat at the point of law.' 'Religious Practices in Colony,' *The Indian*, 7 September 1938.

[130]'Alagu Kavadis Must Go,' *Indian Daily Mail*, 23 October 1952.

kāvaṭi during *Tai Pūcam* celebrations at the Chettiars' Temple in Singapore,[131] (see Fig. 6.3) before an audience of 'distinguished' European, Chinese and Malay visitors.

The foregoing discussion has identified the TRA, the SHAB, management committees of temples and reform-minded, middle-class Hindus (including journalists and teachers) as parties which collectively led the campaign to rid Malayan society of fire walking and piercing body parts, as well as the offering of animal sacrifices
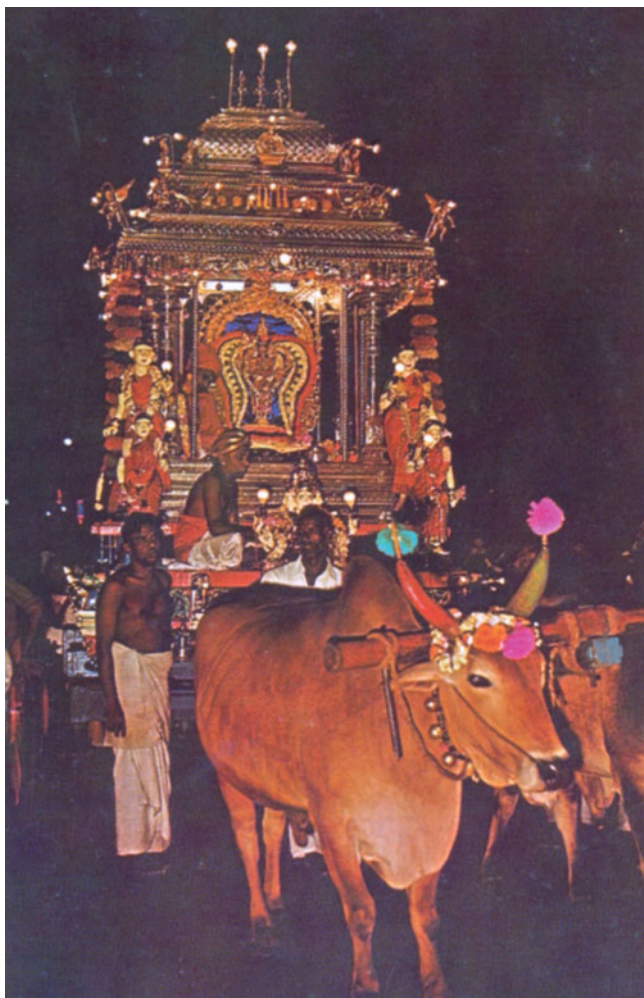
Fig. 6.3 Lord Subramaniam's image being carried around the city on a chariot drawn by bullock carts during Thaipusam, Singapore, 1950s–1970s (image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

---

[131] 'Thaipusam Celebration,' *Indian Daily Mail*, 7 February 1955.

and alcohol to deities in temples. Yet, noticeably, the SMHEB and the management committee of the Perumal temples remained outside these discussions and did not participate in the widely publicized debates. On the part of the SMHEB, this disengagement from the raging debates was certainly in line with its stated position about not interfering in religious matters. Any statement that the SMHEB may have made with regard to banning *Tai Pūcam* and fire walking would have opened it to the charge of religious interference, and a violation of the Colonial Government's declared religious policy. We do know that the SMHEB was not involved with the actual organization of these festivals in the early years of its tenure, a situation that continued well into the 1970s. Instead, the management committees of the relevant temples and, more importantly, groups of devotees and volunteers[132] associated with them collectively attended to the details of organizing these festivals. As such, the minutes of SMHEB's meeting of the early decades of the twentieth century make few, if any, references to the festivals, except for occasional notice of funds paid towards fire walking or the police support provided for *Tai Pūcam*. No doubt this stance of the SMHEB was conditioned by the Colonial Government's explicit refusal in 1938 to intervene in religious matters. The same pattern of silence characterizes the minutes of this Board's meetings from the 1930s to the 1950s, making no mention of the public debate and controversy over the calls for the banning of *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* in Singapore and other parts of Malaya. I have not been able to locate any evidence that the SMHEB articulated or expressed a public position on these matters. However, this body was, in reality, very intimately connected with the subject given that both festivals under scrutiny had traditionally occurred in the premises of temples whose endowments were under its administrative charge, and it certainly approved funds for their observance, in addition to providing both the infrastructure and administrative support for their successful enactment.[133] These 'facts' lent a strong perception that these festivals were indeed sanctioned by the Colonial Government, a view that accorded them a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. In Singapore and Penang, Colonial Governors and other officials were often present at *Tai Pūcam* and fire-walking celebrations, which were observed

---

[132]For example, it is well known that the fire-walking festival was handled largely by the community of Caulkers associated with the Sri Mariamman Temple into the 1970s. It was only from this point onwards that the HEB became institutionally involved with the organizational details of both Tai Pūcam and Timiti.

[133]For example, the Colonial authorities made provisions for the regulation of traffic during the *Tai Pūcam* procession in Singapore, including the closure of specific streets to vehicular traffic and the presence of the police for directing traffic and dealing with parking issues, a practice that continues in contemporary times:

> Special traffic regulations will be in force from 7 p.m. to-day until midnight during the Taipusam procession and fireworks display on Raffles Reclamation ('Taipusam Traffic, Special Regulations for To-night,' *The Straits Times*, 16 January 1930).

In another example, we learn that special trains and buses had been arranged to carry *Tai Pūcam* devotees to Batu Caves outside Kuala Lumpur ('Thaipusam: Batu Caves rush begins,' *The Straits Times*, 19 January 1954.

with pomp and grandeur. Accounts of *Tai Pūcam* celebrations in 1888 are reported in the Tamil journal *Singai Nesan* as follows:

> In Penang, government offices and banks are closed on this day. The royalties and government officials always come and preside at the celebrations. Fireworks lit up the sky. Hefty sums of money are spent on these celebration efforts. While in Singapore, the Nattukottai Chetties spend lots of money in the Subramaniam Temple to provide free food for three days to the public.[134]

> The much awaited festival, Thaipusam is celebrated at a grand scale in Singapore [. . .] The whole place outside the Subramaniam temple is jostling with activity and merry making. Fire crackers are already making their presence felt along the streets. Hindus have hung decorative items and mango leaves and thoranam [. . .] Hindus carry milk pots and kavadis. Some carry milk kavadis while the rest with piercings. There are some who walk on footwear with sharp needles [. . .] Behind follow the chariot pullers, who dance in rhythm to the songs. Many are singing with utter devotion and concentration, encouraging the chariot pullers and kavadi bearers [. . .] The whole Thaipusam procession can last up to 5 days, especially when considering the various rituals and poojas that are conducted.[135]

After the independence of Singapore, the practice of inviting government officials continued in the invitation being extended to the prime minister of Singapore, who graced the event as the guest of honour.[136] In more recent years, a number of government Ministers and Members of Parliament are visible at both these events, including one holding the highest office in the Republic, the president of Singapore.

In these mid-twentieth century debates, reform-minded Hindus and the TRA viewed 'self-mortification' acts as 'popular practices' and mere superstitions, and not 'religious rituals'. The SMHEB, remaining true to its administrative function, refused to be drawn into discussions of a 'religious' nature. Nonetheless, it is precisely this dichotomy between 'temporal' and 'religious' affairs, and the diligence with which first the SMHEB (and post-1969, the SHEB) has carried out its managerial role (in steering clear of the *Tai Pūcam* controversy, but concerned purely with practical, technical details of the festival), that has ironically seen the festival's status transformed from that of a 'self-mortification' rite with no Hindu sanction to a core religious ritual for the Hindu community.

Certainly *Tai Pūcam* has, from the outset, been politicized and used by various parties[137] as a site for raising a host of other issues about the status of Indians and Hindus in a multi-racial, multi-religious setting. A good example of this is the TRA's reduction of the festival in the late 1930s to 'kāvaṭi carrying' which erased all its other dimensions. In places like Singapore, Penang and Kuala Lumpur, it was an important communal affair, bringing together the Indian and Hindu community in a

---

[134] 'Thaipusam Festival,' *Singai Nesan*, 30 January 1888, 125, columns 3–4.

[135] 'Thaipusam Festival,' *Singai Nesan*, 6 February 1888, 129, columns 1–2.

[136] Arasaratnam (1966, 18).

[137] An early example is the presence of a ''Khadi Exhibition at Batu Caves during Thaipusam Festival' where an appeal was made to Malayan Indians: May we appeal to every Indian in Malaya to support the cause of Khadi which is dearer to Mahatma's heart than anything else.' (*The Indian*, 1 February 1939, 9).

social event, with a carnival-like atmosphere, fancy dress processions and fireworks displays,[138] all with huge entertainment value for the general public. The authors of *Beyond Divine Doors* provide an account of *Tai Pūcam* in the early decades of the twentieth century and note its festive and cosmopolitan character:

> Even in its early years, both Singaporeans and tourists alike keenly looked forward to the Thaipusam festival. Many Europeans used to frequent the processions dressed in their summer best with matching hats to protect themselves from the scorching Singapore sun. Children enjoyed the traditional goodies they could purchase from the sweet-vendors with their make-shift wooden stalls which lined both Tank Road and the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple vicinity [. . .] As the festival grew in size, the annual event attracted hawkers and traveling salesmen who were allowed into the temple compound during the festivities. Hawkers with hand carts were charged 50 cents to enter the temple whilst salesmen paid 25 cents each for selling their hand carried wares.[139]

Yet, questions about the 'real' meaning of *Tai Pūcam* and how it should be interpreted surfaced even in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Some of this is reflected in an 1888 article of the *Singai Nesan:*

> The Thaipusam festival at Subramaniam Temple was conducted well. A lot of non-Indians attended this festival. Especially for the English and the Europeans this festival may hold a different meaning and perhaps even hold a non-sacred interpretation. Some English papers have written some rather inaccurate articles portraying the festival in a negative light, due to their lack of knowledge on the procedures and the rationale behind the festival. Due to the Europeans' lack of Sanskrit and Hinduism, it is acknowledged by the Hindu community that the errors were made unknowingly.[140]

The very possibility of a *Tai Pūcam* foot procession in the contemporary context is unique from the point of view of laws that regulate religious processions in Singapore. By law, foot processions (including religious ones) in Singapore have not been permissible since 1973, the only exceptions being made for *Tai Pūcam*

---

[138]The practice of firework displays on the occasion of *Tai Pūcam* seems to be an old one dating to at least 1887 and is found not only in Singapore, but also in Penang and Kuala Lumpur ('Procession and Fireworks,' *The Straits Times*, 15 January 1935). Here is a rather graphic and poetic account of the fireworks display in Singapore during *Tai Pūcam* celebrations being 1937:

> Necklaces of green emeralds tipped with rubies, hung in Singapore heavens last night glittering diamonds cascaded from the sky [. . .] palm trees suddenly formed themselves [. . .] patterns in a variety of colours were woven before the white orb of the full moon [. . .] Below thousands of people, lining the water-front, sitting in motor-cars, on hills, and from the gardens of their houses, looked upwards to see the gorgeous display of fireworks with which the Nattukottai Chettiars were bringing to end their festival of Thaipusam. The fireworks came from Japan some from South India; with the latter arrived two Southern Indian 'shooters' having in their special care rockets which brought a pleasant thrill to Southern Indians. These rockets which shot the Eechamaram and Panamaran palms into the sky and they are trees which are not seen anywhere in Malaya, but are well-known in India. Three thousand dollars worth of fireworks spent themselves leaving ghostly outlines in the pale heavens ('Thaipusam ends in a blaze of fireworks,' *The Straits Times*, 28 January 1937).

[139]Hindu Endowments Board (2005, 80).

[140]*Singai Nesan*, 6 February 1888, 129, columns 1–2.

and fire walking. Another Hindu festival where a foot procession is allowed is the annual event of fire walking, when devotees undertake the 4-kilometre walk from the Perumal Temple to the Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road. Interestingly, it is during the mid-1970s that the SHEB started to become more involved in the organization of both fire walking and *Tai Pūcam*. As has been noted, prior to this, this task was left largely to the management committees of the various temples involved in the festivals. The members were further of the view that the Board should be more active in the organization of Hindu festivals, including *Tai Pūcam*:

> Mr. K expressed regret that the Board did not take an active interest in the organization of the festival (Thaipusam) and hoped that in future years this should be rectified. Mr. M undertook to bring the matter out before the Management Committee of the Sri Perumal Temple. Mr. K added that it should be the responsibility of the Board to undertake and prepare all Hindu festivals in advance. Board members agreed to this and Mr. K undertook to prepare details for the Board's consideration.[141]

What is further notable here is the gradual and easy assumption of 'work' by Board members that transcends the original brief of supervision and management of endowment funds carried in the HEA. More involvement with the organization of the festival translated into the need for the formulation of rules and the suggestion that they be incorporated into law. Interestingly, again no dissenting voices to this proposal from within the Board are reported in the minuets of the meeting:

> Mr. K suggested that rules be drawn up under the Hindu Endowments Act to govern special Hindu festivals, such as, Thaipusam etc. After discussing, members agreed and would look further into this.[142]

Although the legislative route was not followed as suggested, the rules were subsequently forthcoming and were formulated jointly by the Perumal and Tank Road Temples and the HEB:

> Mr. K pointed out that Thaipusam is only a short distance away and that the necessary arrangements should be made so that the festival take places without any hitch. It was suggested that the Hindu Endowments Board and/or the Sri Perumal Temple should meet with the officers of the Chettiar Temple in Tank Road and come up with an arrangement whereby rules and regulations are drawn up and uniformly enforced by the authorities of both temples so that the religious festival takes place in accordance with accepted custom and tradition. The question of using volunteers was left to the Management Committees. The Secretary was asked to write a letter to the Chettiar Temple with a view to having a meeting on this matter if the Management Committee of Sri Perumal Temple would like the matter to be taken up by the Board.[143]

The scale of the festival and the presence of large crowds on the day required co-ordination between the two temples in order to ensure the event occurred without any problems. The concern with maintaining 'proper' decorum of the festival was twinned with the idea of having rules and enforcing them effectively:

---

[141]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 29 January 1976.

[142]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 4 May 1977.

[143]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 5 December 1977.

Mr. K reported that the arrangements at the Perumal Temple so far as Thaipusam was concerned went on smoothly. Approximately 4,000 people were fed and the seizure of the bongo drums resulted in order being maintained, and the flow of kavadis leaving on time. He also expressed regret that the Tank Road Temple had taken no steps to make adjustments to accommodate a large number of kavadi carriers. He was of the view that it was not possible for kavadi carriers to go round the temple 3 times on Thaipusam Day and that the Tank Road Temple authorities should take steps to cease the use of bongo drums to keep the flow and not irresponsible elements to destroy the sanctity of the occasion by indulging in vulgar dances to an alien rhythm on such a holy occasion.[144]

In response to a query by Mr. M. K. A. Jabbar about the playing of musical instruments during *Tai Pūcam*, the then-Minister for Home Affairs Mr. Chua Sian Chin replied in Parliament:

I wish to add that since 1973 religious foot processions, with the exception of Thaipusam, have not been allowed on our public road and only religious processions on vehicles have been permitted. The exception has been made for Thaipusam because the devotees have to carry the kavadi and walk in fulfillment of their individual vows. The walk is allowed because it is a religious rite.[145]

However, the ban on musical accompaniment during religious processions has been applied to *Tai Pūcam* since 1973, a development that continues to be criticized and has remained controversial. This prohibition, instituted by the Singapore Police, was to deal with traffic issues as explained by Mr. Chua Sian Chin:

In the years prior to 1973, music en route was permitted for the kavadi procession. However, the Police observed that with the accompaniment of music, the pace of the procession was slowed down. Further, the supporters, relatives and friends accompanying the devotees tended to dance to the beat of the music and occupied too large a portion of the road. The music also attracted large crowds of spectators. The result of this was that traffic flow was completely disrupted, creating huge traffic congestions in the city. Hence, the ban was imposed in 1973.[146]

As such, the impetus for the ban was not in the first instance led by the SHEB, but imposed by the police given the exigency of holding a foot procession in a highly urban, dense context. In fact, it is less known to the public that the SHEB has, in fact, on several occasions appealed to the relevant authorities to lift the ban on music during the procession, but without success:

On 12th January 1981 the Secretary of the Hindu Endowments Board, Mr. S. Suppiah, wrote to the Ministry of Social Affairs appealing against the ban on music en route. The Ministry of Social Affairs sought the views of the Police who replied that the ban could not be lifted. They gave two reasons in rejecting the appeal of the Hindu Endowments Board. First, the ban applies not only to Hindu processions but also to processions of other religious groups. Secondly, Police experience prior to 1973 showed that music along the route of the kavadi procession aggravated traffic congestion.[147]

---

[144]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 31 January 1978.

[145]Singapore Parliament, No. 5, Session 1, Volume No. 40, Sitting Date 23.3.1981, Section Name: Oral Answers to Questions, Title: Thaipusam Kavadi Procession (Ban on Music).

[146]Ibid.

[147]Ibid.

However, during the *Tai Pūcam* festival, traditional music is permitted within the temple grounds. A festival brochure for 1985 reads as follows:

> Only traditional Hindu musical instruments will be allowed within the temples. Other musical instruments are prohibited and will be seized if found.[148]

However, after almost a century of management and administration, the festival too has been transformed in fundamental ways, some would argue, reshaping radically its ritual dimensions as well. For instance, the revelry, carnival-like and merry-making atmosphere of *Tai Pūcam* in the early years has been increasingly replaced by a stance that seeks to downplay its entertainment and carnivalesque character, through a series of regulations including the ban on the playing of musical instruments along the procession route, a situation rather different from the one described for the event in Singapore in 1935:

> There were a few Europeans present watching the preliminary ceremonies and shortly after nine o'clock, to the music of Tamil pipes and the rhythmic beating of the drums, the procession began, headed by men carrying banners, umbrellas and flares.[149]

More specifically, it is in the last four decades or so that the festival has been reshaped through a number of changes that have been introduced for the more effective management and 'problem-free' enactment of *Tai Pūcam*. As we have seen, despite the criticisms of *alakuk kāvaṭi*[150] through the 1940s and 1950s, no bans were imposed on carrying these during *Tai Pūcam*.[151] In the present context, no *kāvaṭi(s)* are allowed during the fire-walking festival, which is also regulated by a number of procedures spelt out in the festival brochures.[152] The *alakuk kāvaṭi(s)* have continued to be popular with devotees and their presence conspicuous over the

---

[148] Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple and Sri Thandayuthapani Temple 1985, 'Thaipusam; An Appeal to Devotees.'

[149] 'Thaipusam in Singapore.' *The Straits Times*, 19 January 1935.

[150] In contemporary discussions these are labelled as 'spiked kāvaṭi(s)'.

[151] In Singapore, up to the mid-1970s, kāvaṭi(s) were carried not only on the occasion of *Tai Pūcam*, but also fire walking and *Pangguni Uttiram*, and similar concerns were expressed about their popularity on all these occasions:

> The Board agreed to look into the question of restricting the number of Kavadis that are being carried during the Fire-Walking ceremony and that the Management Committee take necessary steps (Minutes of SHEB meeting, 26 April 1974).

[152] Some examples from the 2004 Fire-Walking pamphlet include the following:

- Female devotees are not allowed to perform *Angaprathatchanam*.
- Female devotees and children are not permitted to walk on the firepit.
- Devotees carrying *sembu* (small milkpot) or walking stick, wearing any kind of spikes of anklets will not be permitted to walk on the firepit.
- Pasturised milk will not be accepted for *Abhishegam* or the milkpit.
- Musical instruments (other than those arranged by the Temple) are not allowed in the Temple or during the procession.
- Devotees will not be allowed to offer *Maavilaku* on their body.
- Strictly no 'whipping' of *Chattai* for all participating devotees.

years at the festival celebration. Already in the 1970s, there had been some concern within the Hindu community and the festival organizers about the attraction of young Tamil Hindu males to the festival through the bearing of spiked *kāvaṭi(s)*.[153] It was argued that the festival had become not just a site for this group of Hindus to express their devotion to a range of Hindu deities (not just Murukan), but an occasion for the display of features associated with a particular youth subculture, of male, Tamil underclass. Thus, it was not uncommon to witness a minority group (probably no more than 5% of the participants) displaying instances of drunkenness, aggression, violence, deliberate transgression of rules and expressions of anti-establishment behaviour. This led some Hindus to complain that the festival had lost its religious sentiment and had been turned into a mere spectacle. The SHEB too was concerned about the image of the festival and the need to observe in the spirit of religiosity:

> The Chairman was requested to issue a press statement in connection with the Thaipusam festival impressing the need to observe the festival in its proper religious form.[154]

Despite the formulation of rules that are meant to regulate the festival, to enable the orderly flow of people in specified spaces and time schedules, the 'problems' persist. One such issue is the escalating interest in the bearing of 'spiked kāvaṭi' by young Singapore Hindus. Admittedly, the rising numbers of spiked *kāvaṭi* have been kept 'artificially' down as a result of a number of rules that have been introduced to discourage them: These include increase in fees, introduction of a security deposit, restrictions on their size, height, electrical and other fittings, changes in timings for embarking on the foot procession and finishing them, as well as greater vigilance in the enforcement of these rules with the assistance of members of the police force. Yet, the very existence of these rules has also led to what are incidents of religious deviance and transgression, seen, for example, in smuggling in of non-traditional musical instruments, such as drums, bongos and the improvised use of dustbin lids and their regular 'seizure' by the police year after year at the *Tai Pūcam* procession. The enhanced scale of the festival has led to greater regulation and streamlining of the event, a development that has also been met with criticism by the general Hindu populace. During my own fieldwork in 1986–1987, I had heard repeated complaints that the festival had been 'sanitized' due to the strict restrictions imposed by the authorities and that consequently was losing its religious atmosphere. In 1997, the SHEB again approached the police authorities to relax its ban on musical accompaniment by allowing the playing of traditional music at specific *thaneer panthals* (water stalls) along the procession route and a concession which was not made.

By now, it is common knowledge amongst Hindu devotees that participation in these festivals is governed by a body of rules and regulations, set out in pamphlets

---

[153]It is important to note that in Singapore, up to the mid-1970s, kāvaṭi(s) were carried not only on the occasion of *Tai Pūcam*, but also fire walking and Paṅkuṉi Uttiram. The latter festival continues to be observed today with a kāvaṭi procession at the Sri Holy Tree Balasubramaniam Temple in Yishun Industrial Estate I.

[154]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 29 December 1975.

printed for the events. These brochures are published, in Tamil and English, and made available to members of the public. In addition to detailing the programme of the festival, the brochures also carry an appeal to devotees for their co-operation in adhering to the arrangements that have been made. These include specifications about timing of the event, the routes to be followed and appropriate behaviour during the procession. Many of these regulations are directed specifically at the bearers of 'spiked kāvaṭi' and chariot *kāvaṭi*. For instance, this group of devotees is given a copy of 'Rules, Regulations and Conditions Governing Thaipusam' and they have to sign an undertaking that they have read and understood them. Any breach of these rules carries the possibility of being 'severely dealt with' including the eventuality of being barred from participating in the festival in the future. Some of these rules include restrictions on the length and thickness of rods used by devotees, the height and width of the spiked *kāvaṭi(s)* and the size of the chariot *kāvaṭi*[155] and prohibition of the ritual of *cāṭṭai aṭi* within the temples. Additionally, all spiked *kāvaṭi(s)* have to be 'tagged' as they leave on the procession route; *kāvaṭi(s)* without tags are 'illegal' and are not permitted to perform the final rituals at the Tank Road Temple.

The festival of *Tai Pūcam* is managed and supervised by the SHEB and the management committees of the three Hindu temples historically associated with the event. Given the public character of the festival[156] and the large numbers who participate in them, these parties by necessity have to engage in what I call 'non-ritual labour' in ensuring that the festivals are enacted in an orderly and efficient manner. Being driven by practical and instrumental rationality *and* having to operate under the bylaws and statues of Singapore have meant the institution of procedures and regulations for their effective management. As part of the organizing body, the SHEB together with the management committees of Perumal, Mariamman and the Chettiars' temples has played a leading role in these latter initiatives. The organizers have chosen to reconfigure this as a somber, serious, pious and disciplined religious event, rather than an occasion for public entertainment or merriment.

Despite these multi-facetted controversies and sustained efforts to ban the two festivals through the 1930s and 1950s, *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* have, by now, been rendered legitimate features of Singaporean Hinduism. While the SMHEB was not directly involved in the actual organization of either *Tai Pūcam* or *Timiti*, the fact that they occurred in 'Board temples' (associated with the government) and were presumed to have official endorsement is something that carried enormous weight. It is important to ask what might have happened to these two festivals had the SMHEB and the SHAB collectively taken a position opposing them in the SS, and pressured the Colonial Government to consider banning them, the precedence for this

---

[155]For example, the maximum height of the *kavadi*(s) is 4 m and the width 2.9 m; the size of the chariot is not to exceed 3 ft by 7 ft and they are not to be 'powered or lighted up by generators and shall only contain offerings for Lord Murugan' and 'thaal alagu (spears) shall not exceed 300 mm in length' and 8 mm in diameter.

[156]A foot procession like this involves road closures, securing police permits and employing police officers and volunteers to line the procession routes to direct the devotees and regulate human traffic and for general 'crowd control'.

already being available in the Indian context. This also marks the Singapore scene as different both from Tamil Nadu and the earlier Madras Presidency, where the two festivals were defined as 'popular practice',[157] rather than defining features of Hinduism or as iconic Hindu acts. Based on the historical and contemporary data presented in this chapter, in the case of British Malaya, the 'non-action' of the SMHEB and the Colonial Government was instrumental in sanctioning these festivals and enabling their persistence into the future, albeit unintentionally. It is also a curiosity why there was resistance to the idea of legislating against the bearing of *alakuk kāvaṭi* in Singapore, especially given precedence for this in the Indian context. In the 1930s and the 1950s, the TRA failed in its efforts both in instituting laws against these rituals and in 're-educating' the Hindu public about the 'real' nature of the Hindu religion. Today, the evidence we have strongly suggests that an effort to ban rituals associated with the two festivals would be met with even more resistance and this time precisely on religious grounds, given that the two events have now been textualized and mythologized as legitimate dimensions of Hinduism. For instance, the version of *Tai Pūcam* festival (with *alakuk kāvaṭi*) popular in Singapore and Malaysia connects to the Sanskritic and Saivite tradition relating to the deity Murukan, while the fire-walking festival is directly associated with the cult of Draupadi and, thus, the Mahabharata. A call for banning the festivals cannot be made today, at least not on reformist grounds. Ironically, many local Tamil Hindus today see *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* as distinctly Tamil festivals, as significant markers of a Tamil Hindu identity and valorized as such. In the 1930s to the 1950s, the TRA argued precisely for the Tamil community to distance itself from such 'degraded' practices. However, interestingly, these same events have now been generalized sufficiently to mark Singapore's Hindu-ness, going beyond their originally Tamil roots to embrace all Hindus here and, in fact, transcend its Indian, Hindu origins in appealing to non-Indians and non-Hindus as well. In the present context, *Tai Pūcam*, in particular, is marked further as a national event, appearing on the brochures of the Singapore Tourist Board, which has a rather different interest in appropriating and supporting the festival. The concern with the managerial supervision of a festival that takes place in urban Singapore in the public domain clearly involves a huge investment of energy and resources, undertaken by the SHEB, an administrative body and two prominent Hindu temples on the island. My argument is that a specific concern with managing the successful enactment of a festival like *Tai Pūcam* inevitably (and unintentionally) impacts and ultimately reshapes the substance of the festival itself. Administratively, and in the words of a SHEB member, the organization of the festival is a 'logistical nightmare'. Its successful enactment involves a tremendous amount of non-ritual/secular labour and co-ordination on the part of the organizers. Furthermore, the escalating interest in these festivals and the huge numbers who participate annually in them strongly suggest that they are unlikely to disappear anytime soon from the local Hindu landscape. It has also been instructive to compare the contemporary status and fate of these festivals in

---

[157]Oddie (1992).

Singapore and Tamil Nadu to get a sense of the enormous historical role (however accidental) that the SMHEB and the SHEB have played in etching them firmly on Singapore's Hindu terrains.

This chapter has demonstrated that the practices and agendas of the SMHEB and the SHEB have been consequential in shaping the ways in which Hinduism in Singapore has been officially framed and constructed over time. The definitive role of the SMHEB and the SHEB in shaping an emergent Hinduism for Singapore is evident through the selection of Agamic-style temples and worship, as well as the endorsement of *Tai Pūcam* and *Timiti* as legitimate 'Hindu' festivals. The final product officially sanctioned is a curious mix of Agamic elements and folk Hindu elements, both of which continue to co-exist within the frame of 'Singaporean Hinduism' as legitimate strands. Agamic temples and the mode of religiosity practiced within them have been institutionalized for Singapore, and informal shrines rendered officially as 'unauthorized religious structures'. However, an uneasy tension defines this religious landscape as features of folk Hindu religiosity continue to persist tenaciously and surface in the most unexpected places and configurations. Some aspects of the latter, such as an attachment to what are defined as 'self-mortification' and 'extreme' rituals, are clearly embarrassing to middle-class Hindu sensibilities. It is clear that, after a century, the administrative, managerial and supervisory imperatives of the SMHEB and the SHEB have culminated in gradually institutionalizing and legitimating select dimensions of Hinduism as definitive, conspicuous and prominent. The need for 'order' in the religious sphere was the articulated rationale for establishing a secular entity in the SS. This historical legacy carried in the need for 'management' and 'supervision' of religious endowments was not only embraced by the SHEB, but also refined, groomed and honed in remarkable modes. The adoption of pragmatic, bureaucratic and functional orientations as dominant strains in the Board's operations continue to impact (and transform) the ritual domain of local Hinduism within official frames.

Coming full circle, the next chapter brings the discussion to the contemporary period, through an account of the evolving role of the SHEB. It is striking that this institution continues to exist and operate in a secular state, which also offers its citizens the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, including the right to manage their own religious affairs. Through a focus on developments in Singaporean Hindu domains, I abstract key insights about the encounters between state-appointed bodies and religious communities within a culture of bureaucracy.

Chapter 7
Religion, Law and Bureaucracy

7.1 The Hindu Endowments Board: 1969 to Date

In Singapore's move towards independent nationhood and a new political iden-
tity, there was no effort to disconnect from the administrative practices and legal
mechanisms introduced and instituted during British colonial rule. This is true for
the administration of Hindu and Muslim religious and charitable endowments as
well. With the end of colonial rule some pieces of legislation[1] were revised, refor-
mulated and even repealed, but it is a puzzle as to why the Mohammedan and
Hindu Endowments Ordinance (MHEO) was not scrutinized for a similar fate. The
Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board (SMHEB) was an initia-
tive that emerged in a colonial context where self-governance and self-regulation
of religious and charitable endowments were not seen to be effective measures for
eliminating conflict and instituting order. Since independence, the SMHEB has per-
sisted in new modes as the Singapore Hindu Endowments Board (SHEB) and Majlis
Ugama Islam Singapore (MUIS). The 1905 law was reconfigured and continued as
Administration of Muslim Law Act and the Hindu Endowments Act.[2] This con-
cluding chapter comes full circle to focus on the contemporary scene in order to ask
what it means for religions to function within secularist, bureaucratic, legal frame-
works constructed by the Singapore state. A response is possible through elaborating
Hindu domains in contemporary Singapore, with the persistence of the SHEB, with

---

[1]According to Bartholomew, several legal documents, including the Republic of Singapore
Independence Act of 1965, allowed for laws enacted for the Straits Settlements (SS), the Colony
of Singapore, the Federation of Malaya and Malaysia to apply to Singapore post-1965 as well
(Bartholomew 1972).

[2]It is further intriguing that we witness significantly different responses of local Hindu communi-
ties to the presence of these 'government' bodies in Singapore and Penang. In Penang, in the 1980s,
some sectors of the Hindu community called for the Penang Hindu Endowments Board (PHEB)
to be dissolved, and for the Hindu Endowments Act (HEA) to be repealed, given their colonial
origins. The assertion was that both the Board and the Act were not only redundant, but also
unconstitutional in violating the principle of non-interference by a secular state in matters of reli-
gion and, thus, the principle of religious freedom. It is indeed interesting that no such discussions
have occurred in Singapore, a difference that needs to be theorized.

an altered status and identity, despite important continuities with the SMHEB. My fieldwork in Singapore reveals that the Board currently performs a much wider range of functions, some prescribed in the original legislature and others the outcome of more recent developments.

Upon independence, the relevant parties accepted the need for an entity like the SMHEB but in a new form with separate bodies for the management of Islamic[3] affairs and for the administration of Hindu religious and charitable endowments. This was a consequential parting of ways for Muslim and Hindu communities on the island. For the Muslims, the AMLA enacted in 1968 retained some features of the MHEO, but with the introduction of new elements, such that there were significant departures from the original law.[4] For example, under this law, the role of the newly formed Council, MUIS, was defined thus:

> The role of MUIS is to see that the many and varied interests of Singapore's Muslim com-
> munity are looked after. In this regard MUIS is responsible for the promotion of religious,
> social, educational, economic and cultural activities in accordance with the principles and
> traditions of Islam as enshrined in the Holy Quran and Sunnah.[5]

It is evident from this self-description that the reach of the new statutory board was holistic and total and administered all affairs of the Muslim community. This was a centralized body whose role went beyond the administration of religious and charitable endowments, quite unlike the SMHEB. It carried no provisos about the function of the Board being confined to the administrative task of management or its non-engagement with issues of a 'religious' nature. In fact, MUIS defined its role quite explicitly as being concerned with all aspects of the Muslim community and Islam in Singapore.

---

[3]In the case of Islam, a new act of Parliament—the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA)—came into effect in 1968 and allowed for the establishment of a statutory body known as the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), also known as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.

[4]See Section (2) of AMLA of 1999, for the functions of MUIS:

It shall be the function and duty of the Majlis—

(a) to advise the President of Singapore in matters relating to the Muslim religion in Singapore;
(b) to administer matters relating to the Muslim religion and Muslims in Singapore including any matter relating to the Haj or *halal* certification;
(c) to administer all Muslim endowments and funds vested in it under any written law or trust;
(d) to administer the collection of *zakat* and *fitrah* and other charitable contributions for the support and promotion of the Muslim religion or for the benefit of Muslims in accordance with this Act;
(e) to administer all mosques and Muslim religious schools in Singapore; and
(f) to carry out such other functions and duties as are conferred upon the Majlis by or under this Act or any other written law.

[5]http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/aboutus/overview.aspx?id=442

That Government institutions like MUIS and SHEB should continue at all in a post-independence context was normalized to the extent that no questions were raised about their necessity. In the move to self-governance, no discussions, debates or controversies seem to have surfaced either in Penang or in Singapore about whether the MHEB should even persist by morphing into other models. Even in a climate dominated by the euphoria of political independence and decolonization, the incorporation of these bodies as statutory boards under a secular government was seen to be non-problematic. However, in the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, a segment of the Hindu community in Penang challenged the HEA and the PHEB on grounds that given their colonial origins, these were unconstitutional, invalid and out of place in a post-colonial, secular context. By contrast, no such articulations were heard in Singapore, where the Hindu scene was far more depoliticized, comparatively speaking.

The persistence of MUIS and SHEB and religion-specific legislation like AMLA and HEA further complicate matters. While the language and terminology of the HEA have been modernized to reflect altered political circumstances, in spirit, intent and tone it shares many similarities with its colonial predecessor and prototype, the 1905 MHEO. The HEA still allows for the possible 'take over'[6] of 'mismanaged' religious endowments, thus legitimizing Government intervention (for the sake of proper regulation) and legalizes the existence of the SHEB.

Once the HEB had been instituted in Singapore, the Hindu leadership attempted to unify and regulate Hindu affairs on the island. It called for the establishment of a centralized, statutory body, the Hindu Religious Council, and for it to be vested with the 'supreme authority to deal with all the official Hindu religious matters'.[7] Interestingly, using the MUIS blueprint as a point of explicit comparison, leaders of the Hindu community attempted to persuade the Singapore Government that a similar model should be formulated to manage the affairs of the local Hindu community. In this regard, some efforts were also made to have the SHEB and Singapore Hindu Advisory Board (SHAB) 'merged', but without success. In 1975, the Singapore SHAB had proposed to 'amalgamate the two Hindu boards' through 'the setting up of a Singapore Hindu Board'.[8] The matter was raised again by the SHEB and discussed in its meeting in 1978:

---

[6]It is interesting that in a recent case, the SHEB did not come forward to 'take over' the management of Sri Siva Krishna Temple in the face of concerns about its 'governance and administration' (25 February 2010, *The Straits Times*), something that is within its jurisdiction, legally speaking. Instead, the SHEB brought its concerns about the management of temple to the attention of the Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports (MCYS), which then instructed the Commissioner of Charities to carry out a formal enquiry under the Charities Act. Currently, the enquiry is underway and the temple continues to function. It has been noted that 'This is the first Hindu temple and the ninth case to be investigated by the Commissioner's office' (ibid.).

[7]Singapore Parliament Report, No. 4, Session No. 1, Volume No. 37, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date 22.3.1978. 'Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs'.

[8]Ibid.

Amendments to the Endowments Board Act: The Chairman proposed that the Hindu Endowments Act be amended to the Hindu Religious Council. He also said that with the amendment, the Hindu Endowments Board and the Hindu Advisory Board could become one and he directed that Secretary to write to the Ministry of Social Affairs seeking their views before he raise the matter in Parliament.[9]

The matter was raised in Parliament and a full discussion appears in a 1978 Ministry of Social Affairs debate on Budget in Singapore Parliament. Mr. P. Govindaswamy, the then-elected Member of Parliament (MP) for Anson and the Chairman of the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), appealed to the Acting Minister for Social Affairs thus:

Sir, religious matters come under the purview of the Minister of Social Affairs. In this connection, I would like the Minister to consider integrating the Hindu Advisory Board and the Hindu Endowments Board into a single body, possibly to be known as the Hindu Religious Council. This will result in better administration of Hindu religious matters. This Hindu Religious Council should be given the supreme authority to deal will all the official Hindu religious matters that are looked after the two Boards. Many Hindus and I also feel that it is timely to have a single authority to look after Hindu religious matters than to have two different bodies.[10]

The response of the Acting Minister, Dr. Ahmad Mattar, and the subsequent exchanges between him and the MP for Anson reveal the problems the Government perceived in acceding to this request:

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to deal with the queries raised by the Member for Anson. He has raised a total of five queries, the first being the proposal to form the Hindu Religious Council. The Member has proposed the integration of the Hindu Advisory Board and the Hindu Endowments Board to be called the Hindu Religious Council which is to be vested with the supreme authority to deal with all Hindu religious matters presently under the purview of the two boards [. . .] The proposal to amalgamate the two Hindu boards was first mooted, I think the Member for Anson can recall, by the Hindu Advisory Board on 21st March, 1975, when it proposed the setting up of a Singapore Hindu Board. My Ministry studied this proposal at great length and decided that the setting up of such a Board as a statutory body to look after Hindu affairs was not feasible.[11]

The Acting Minister clarified that it was not meaningful to adopt the MUIS model for Hindus in Singapore given the differences he perceived between the two religions:

Sir, unlike Islam, Hinduism is not homogenous in theology nor in the system of rituals of worship. I have been told by my Hindu friends, and these are very pious and holy friends, that there is no specific Hindu law which governs the conduct of its adherents so intimately in their everyday lives as Islamic law does in the conduct of Muslims.

---

[9]Minutes of SHEB meeting, 28 February 1978.

[10]Singapore Parliament Report, No. 4, Session No. 1, Volume No. 37, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date 22.3.1978. 'Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs'.

[11]Ibid.

Dr. Ahmad Mattar then highlighted the inherent diversity within Hinduism and the fact of Hindus as a 'fractious' group as factors that worked against the idea of instituting a single body for Hindus in Singapore:

> It has a plethora of various gods and accordingly a large number of different sects. Hence the proposal to set up a single Council for Hindus does not stand. In fact, the setting up of a special body for Hindus will, I think, create more problems than solve them. This is because, as mentioned previously, Hindus are divided into many sects. It is, therefore, inevitable that some sects will feel aggrieved if they are not represented on such a body. It is likely that as appointments will be made, not by election and at the most by nomination, there will again be dissatisfaction and agitation for an elected Council. The effectiveness of such a body in the administration of such a fractious group will be poor and this alone will be reason enough for advising against its formation.[12]

However, the Acting Minister informed Parliament that

> [. . .] as an alternative measure, my Ministry is proposing the setting up of a management committee comprising members of the two Hindu Boards to deal with the problem of clearance of Hindu temples and shrines and to plan and to coordinate the building of replacement temples in satellite towns. For the information of the House, such an administrative committee, known as the Joint Management Committee, comprising representations from the two Boards, was set up in April last year.[13]

The Member for Anson, Mr. P. Govindaswamy, was not satisfied that this joint committee, in fact under his leadership,[14] was up to the task and argued as follows:

> Sir, the Acting Minister informed the House that there is the Joint Management Committee. But this committee has no power because it must notify the Hindu Advisory Board and the Hindu Endowments Board of any decision it makes. Double work is involved. The Minister could form one council with 5 members. Five members could look after the temples, another five members could look after the advisory committee and the other five members could look after the Endowments Board. It is easier for us [. . .] If there is a complaint today it is referred to the Hindu Advisory Board. And if there is another complaint tomorrow, it is referred to the Hindu Endowments Board. What is all this? Is it reasonable and logical for the Hindus? Why does the Minister not consider setting up a Hindu Religious Council? What is the difficulty of that? He should not listen to what the Permanent Secretary says. The Minister must take his own initiative to set up this council to look after all religious affairs of the Hindus. Then there will be no trouble. The people want it. The Muslims have

---

[12] Singapore Parliament Report, No. 4, Session No. 1, Volume No. 37, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date 22.3.1978. 'Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs'.

[13] The minutes of the SHEB meeting held on 4 May 1977 report a joint meeting of the two Boards on 27 April 1977.

[14] The members who sat on this joint committee were, in fact, drawn from the existing constituency of the HEB. The minutes of the SHEB meeting held on 9 November 1978 convey the following information:

> The Board agreed that the Chairman, Secretary and three members of the Board should be appointed to the Joint Committee of the Hindu Endowments Board and the Hindu Advisory Board.

the Muslim Religious Council to look after their affairs. Therefore, I want the Minister to recommend the setting up of the Hindu Religious Council.[15]

One primary motivation for the SHEB and the SHAB to push the idea of the 'Hindu Religious Council' had to do with the proposal to institute the deduction of a compulsory monthly sum from the Central Provident Fund[16] (CPF) accounts of all Hindus towards a temple building fund. Again the mosque building fund scheme already operational then for Singapore Muslims was cited as precedent. The Acting Minister's response was that he was willing to move the proposal forward but that this was fraught with obstacles and required working with several Government Ministries:

> First of all, we must get the Ministry of Labour to agree to deduct from the CPF. Once the Minister for Labour has agreed, then we can start thinking about forming the religious council. At the moment, the Joint Management Committee under his able leadership is doing marvelously well. With his able guidance, he should be able to convince the members of the Hindu Advisory Board and also members of the Hindu Endowments Board, of which he is also the Chairman, to get things done. But, anyway, I will certainly convey his wishes and, as I was also made to understand, the wishes of the two Boards, to deduct the contributions through the CPF. After I have conveyed it to the Minister for Labour, he will then have to get the concurrence of the Minister of Finance, which is the most difficult stage. So we have a lot of obstacles in front of us.[17]

As it turns out the Acting Minister was proven right. The obstacles he noted were not only recognized by the involved parties, but must have been deemed to be insurmountable as the proposed Hindu Religious Council did not materialize. Neither were the two Hindu Boards integrated legally, nor the CPF deduction scheme launched for Hindus. There were attempts yet again in 1992 to enact legislative amendments to the HEA to enable the integration of the SHEB and the SHAB and to expand the role of the new board to include greater emphases on education[18] and social welfare activities, but these proposals were rejected by the Ministry of Community Development at the time. Neither the proposal to establish a 'Hindu Religious Council' nor the legal integration of the SHEB and SHAB has been revisited since then. In suggesting these moves and working towards their actualization,

---

[15]Singapore Parliament Report, No. 4, Session No. 1, Volume No. 37, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date 22.3.1978. 'Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs'.

[16]The CPF is a social security savings scheme for Singaporeans. Compulsory monthly deductions are made from citizens' salaries towards this to which the government also contributes a percentage. The actual contribution made by citizens and government varies over time. While the funds are primarily for use after retirement, some of it can also be deployed for mortgage payment on housing loans, education and medical care.

[17]Ibid.

[18]'The Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) is a self-help group (SHG), formed in August 1991 to address the pressing educational and socio-economic issues facing the Indian community in Singapore' (http://www.sinda.org.sg/about.htm). The view was that the duplication of roles should be avoided, something that could happen if the SHEB took on more activities in the realm of education and welfare, whereas the province of the HEB was defined to lie in Hindu religious and charitable activities.

there were no concerns amongst the Hindu leadership about the possibility of state interference in matters of religion or the violation of the principle of secularism. Instead, it was the Government representatives that seemed resistant to the idea of instituting a singular, centralized entity, on grounds of administrative inconvenience and practical difficulties. The desire of the Hindu leadership in these decades to institute a central co-ordinating body for institutionalizing all aspects of Hindu religion was reflective of an officious and bureaucratic tone in regulating religion.

Today, the SHEB exists under the purview of the MCYS but receives no funding from the government, although the 'Malay-Muslim community receives Government assistance in mosque-building efforts and tertiary education fees'.[19] The granting of such financial support to a religious group does complicate the state's claim of complete 'secularity' and equality of treatment of all religions. It is not without significance that even though the SHEB comes under the jurisdiction of a Government Ministry, it is autonomous to the extent that it is not supervised by a higher body, something that would lead to legal difficulties given its status and function as specified in the HEA. In theory, and as prescribed by the Act, the authority of the SHEB is confined to administering the endowments vested in four (out of a total of 24) Hindu temples on the island. The other private temples which are family- and community-based places of worship are self-governing and managed by a committee elected by the temple community. Interestingly, the Board has not assumed responsibility for managing any other religious endowments since the early days of its foundation. In this sense, it could be argued that the role and influence of the SHEB is rather restricted. However, I will demonstrate that it has taken on newer responsibilities in recent times.

An assessment of the current standing of the SHEB cannot be separated from the fate of another entity established in the colonial period, the SHAB. While the constitution and functioning of the SHEB are governed by an Act of Parliament, the SHAB has since its inception lacked legal grounding. Its work thus lacks any authority to enforce decisions. Despite their varied historical beginnings, the two bodies have been operating under a single framework and have been holding joint meetings since 1981. In theory, the two Boards may be separate but, in reality, they function as one entity and there is a good deal of co-operation between them.[20] The SHAB continues to play an advisory role (which remains rather ambivalent) to the government and also intercedes, for instance, with such agencies as the Immigration Department, facilitating work permit applications for non-Singaporean staff for employment in Hindu temples.

In mapping the interactions of the SMHEB with the broader community, I have noted that in the colonial context, the SHAB was viewed as an 'outsider' and treated as such. My data suggest that there were few, if any, interactions between

---

[19]Kenneth Tan (2010, 342).

[20]As far as I have been able to establish, the HAB does not seem to have been established for Malacca. Certainly, neither the HEB nor the HAB has a presence in Malacca today. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam has a branch in Malacca and is the body that co-ordinates the affairs of the Hindu community therein.

the SMHEB and the SHAB during this period. The latter had, on many occasions, approached the SMHEB, made suggestions and expressed opinions about Hindu affairs. It had also attempted to build institutional linkages with the SMHEB, a sentiment that was not reciprocated. At the time, the latter functioned independently of all other organizations that were concerned with Hinduism in Singapore, including the SHAB. This 'hands off' policy of the SMHEB changed after its transformation into the SHEB. From the outset, relations between the new Singapore HEB and the HAB were cordial and collaborative encounters have typified the relationship. Currently, membership of the SHEB and the SHAB is made up entirely of Singaporean Hindus, with male members as a dominant majority, who are professionals, civil servants and individuals from the private sector and other business domains. As stipulated by legislation, only the Secretary of the SHEB must be secured from the Singapore Civil Service. Today, members of the two Boards are appointed by the MCYS for a 3-year term that is renewable. The respective Boards share 28 members between them, 12 from the SHAB and the remaining 16 from the SHEB.

Although all members of the Boards are Hindus, the issue of 'representation' continues to haunt the two bodies in the present, but in a different mode. In the Select Committee hearings *vis-à-vis* the Hindu Endowments Bill, the idea that a Board member must be a Hindu was effectively an attempt to re-establish a link between piety and administration of religion, a connection that had been severed in transferring the task to a secular body. As I have demonstrated, the SMHEB was the outcome of a logic that saw a need for supervising and managing religious affairs of 'natives'. In their contemporary manifestations, the SHEB and MUIS continue to be perceived by lay citizens as 'government' organizations and part of the apparatus of a secular state. The very existence of the SHEB and MUIS can technically be interpreted as an infringement of the Constitutional guarantee of non-interference by the state in matters of religion.

The issue is further complicated given the mode in which these entities are organized and function. For example, in Singapore members of the SHEB are not only drawn from elite sectors of the Civil Service, as well as the private sector, but more importantly appointed by a Government Minister. In the presence of such overt links and engagements, it is difficult (if not impossible) for organizations like MUIS and SHEB to claim autonomy from state influence and assert their capacity to function independently. The SHEB faces what Presler (1987) calls the 'crisis of legitimacy', especially in terms of its claim to representing the Hindu community. The Singapore state's adopted ideology of secularism co-exists with the presence of personal family law for Muslims. The existence of religion-specific legislation (AMLA and HEA) and institutions like MUIS and the SHEB complicate the task of governance and attempts to theorize religion–state relations.

While the SHEB continues to discharge its duties as stipulated in the HEA, the actual 'work' of the SHEB has become far more enhanced and diverse, taking it beyond administrative functions specified in the Act. Over the years, the SHEB has established a number of sub-committees to facilitate its vastly expanded portfolio. It has formed sub-groups to oversee the following areas: medical and legal counselling, religious education, welfare services and publications just to mention

a few. Over the years, the work of these sub-committees has been visible through a variety of concrete projects that have been undertaken. Here are some examples: setting up of 'The Ashram', a half-way house, in 1999, 'to rehabilitate and reintegrate into society Indian substance abusers' with help from the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE); starting its first educational initiative, the 'Saraswathy Kindergarten', in 1990 and a second one in a recent collaboration with the Darma Muneeswaran Temple; establishing an outreach program named 'Project Bakthi', in 2003, meant to introduce children to Hinduism, via classes conducted at seven Hindu temples[21]; and offering free medical and legal counselling services since 1986. In recent years, the SHEB has extended this service to the public through its participation in annual health fairs and medical forums and launching the publication of the *Singapore Hindu*, the news magazine of the SHEB, in 1990.[22] It is important to highlight that other religious groups in Singapore are involved in these efforts, including those initiated by MUIS. The initiatives the SHEB had envisaged in the 1970s and 1980s ultimately saw fruition in the 1990s. That the HEB continues to organize two Hindu festivals, Tai Pūcam, and Timiti is hardly surprising given its long historical association with these events. In recent years, it has also been involved in inter-religious initiatives, for example, in organizing Vesak Day Celebrations (with the Singapore Buddhist Lodge). It also co-organizes with Little India Shopkeeper's Heritage Association (LISHA) and a host of other organizations the Deepavali Fair and Street Light Up and Pongal celebrations.

Even though some Hindus have observed that the Board has been doing 'work' outside the terms of the HEA, there is agreement that it is acting in good faith in order to serve the Hindu community. However, other Hindus familiar with the brief of the original law argue that the Board should undertake these new initiatives with proper legal authority. The 1905 Ordinance has travelled some distance from its original formulation. The HEA (Act 30 of 1968) provided for the SHEB to take over the role and functions of the SMHEB in May 1969. It was further amended in 1993 'to empower the Hindu Endowments Board to acquire property and to mortgage

---

[21]This reflects an instance of SHEB collaboration with non-SHEB temples. The seven temples are Murugan Hill Temple (Bukit Panjang), Sri Sivan Temple (Geylang East), Sri Siva Durga Temple (Potong Pasir), Sri Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple (Toa Payoh), Sri Muneeswaran Temple (Queenstown), Darma Muneeswaran Temple (Serangoon North) and Siva Krishna Temple (Woodlands).

[22]The significance of this publication is articulated thus on the SHEB's website: 'Through the publication, the Board was able to promote greater awareness of Hinduism, Hindu customs and practices. The magazine also served as a channel of communication between the Board and the community. Special emphasis was made to carry information on educational issues. In its 16 year history the publication has succinctly captured the many exciting happenings in the Hindu community and at the various Hindu temples in Singapore. Many interesting articles from previous issues have been archived at this website to help future generation of Hindus in Singapore to not only understand the history of the Board and local temples but the local Hindu culture too.' (http://www.heb.gov.sg/hindumagazine/shm-mainpage.html).

its property to raise funds to redevelop the property either jointly or in a joint venture'.[23] The next amendment came 17 years later, in June 2010. A series of changes were proposed in order to 'give the Board wider scope to be involved in activities that are non-temple-related, but nevertheless, of importance to the Hindu community at large'.[24] It was further argued that 'As a trusted and knowledgeable body within the community, the Hindu Endowments Board is well-placed to perform additional roles.'[25] Moving into these new territories has generally been viewed favourably by Board members. Yet, I did hear some concerns from some members that the board was 'getting into too many things' and perhaps 'losing focus' in the process.

Prior to these changes, the SHEB was already engaged in 'non temple-related activities' and had taken on 'additional roles'. As such, the recent amendments[26] to the HEA have the effect of retrospectively 'normalizing' the already expanded role of the SHEB. However, the administrative structure of the SHEB has not changed to keep pace with this increased workload. The SHEB members are effectively volunteers for whom this is not a full-time engagement. The day-to-day working of the Board is undertaken by a small group of administrative staff acting under the guidance of the SHEB Chairman and its committee members. Running a bureaucratic institution like the SHEB, coupled especially with the paperwork that is entailed in its enhanced job description, is clearly a challenge for the current fairly limited manpower set-up of the SHEB.[27] I understand that under the current dynamic leadership, efforts are underway to address these administrative and practical challenges.

Being in the public eye has meant that the SHEB has been subjected to considerable scrutiny. Lay Hindu narratives about the SHEB are defined by complexity and tension. The influence of the SHEB is perceived by lay Hindus to be pervasive and far-reaching. Concerns about standardizing practices in temple worship continue to surface in the present. A good recent example comes from the meeting of priests from the 24 registered Hindu temples on the island. They had assembled 'to discuss the content of a possible handbook on religious practices'.[28] The event was

---

[23] Second reading of the Hindu Endowments Act (Amendment) Bill, MCYS. (http://app1/mcys. gov.sg/MCYSNews/2ndReadingofHinduEndowmentsActs.aspx accessed on 14 June 2010).

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] The amendments include the following: (a) to repeal and re-enact Section 21 of the Act (to provide the Board with the broader mandate to also expend its income to conduct social, cultural and educational activities which are deemed by the Board to be for the public benefit); (b) to introduce a new Section 17A (to expand the powers of the Hindu Endowments Board to allow it to form companies directly and enter into joint ventures which are not confined to property development); (c) to amend the existing Section 24 (to revise the penalties and fines for non-compliance and non-co-operation with the Board); and (d) to introduce a new Section 34A (to remove personal liability for Board members except in cases of gross negligence) (ibid.)

[27] Some members of the PHEB recently visited the SHEB offices in Singapore. When I visited Penang in July 2007, members of the PHEB shared that they were extremely impressed with the SHEB and its style of management, a model that some said they would like to adopt for the Penang Board.

[28] 'Hindu priests to conduct similar rituals,' *The Straits Times*, 10 December 2009, B 8.

attended by priests who are employed in local temples, as well as religious scholars from India. The desired outcome of the dialogue was to eliminate 'confusion' amongst devotees about how rituals should be performed and to assist new priests to serve large crowds efficiently but effectively. The SHEB's role in this was merely to provide a platform for such a discussion, which I was told the priests had initiated. Nonetheless a spokesperson for the SHEB noted that 'the participation of all the temples in the dialogue was encouraging'.[29] He added, 'I am confident that with their positive support, practices at our temples will follow a general guideline.'[30] Attempts to re-think a ritual domain for the purpose of eliminating ambiguity reflect a desire for consistency and uniformity.[31] Changes like these, when suggested in the past, have been resisted by Hindus and the SHEB has been criticized for even contemplating them. Furthermore, this process can lead to a codification, homogenization and possibly simplification of the ritual domain in question. This provides support for my argument that the institutionalization of temple management and administration inevitably encroach upon substantive and ritualistic dimensions of the Hindu religion.

As a 'government' body, it is heavily criticized for its perceived lack of autonomy and agency. At the same time, Hindus have high hopes from the SHEB and expect it to address issues relating to their religion. On the one hand, I heard complaints that the SHEB was 'too authoritarian' in wanting to 'control everything'. On the other, I encountered the view that the SHEB does not do enough to empower the Hindu community[32] or act autonomously. Thus, while the Board is criticized at times for being 'omnipresent', the expectation is also that it should act with greater leadership and force.

On its part, the SHEB does not intend to, or aspire to, assume responsibility for the management of all Hindu temples on the island. A recent case involving the Sri Siva Krishna Temple illustrates this reticence. In 2008, this temple, which is also a registered charity, invited the SHEB to assist in the organization of its consecration ceremony and to manage its financial affairs, as it was facing administrative difficulties. The SHEB set up a Protem Committee to assist in these tasks and assisted in instituting 'internal controls and cash management procedures at the Temple'.[33] In July 2009, the SHEB brought its concerns about the management of temple to the attention of the MCYS, which then instructed the Commissioner of Charities (COC)[34] to carry out a formal enquiry under the *Charities Act*. The enquiry was

---

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Admittedly, the concern with regularizing performance of temple rituals has been expressed only recently and it would be premature to speculate on its outcome. However, the very possibility of such an articulation merits scrutiny and is worth mentioning.

[32]One persistent issue relates to the non-declaration of Tai Pūcam, as a public holiday.

[33]http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/MCYSNews/FinancialIrregularitiesSriSivaKrishnaTemple.aspx, accessed on 31 July 2010.

[34]The report notes that 'This is the first Hindu temple and the ninth case to be investigated by the commissioner's office' (25 February 2010, *The Straits Times*).

completed in July 2010 and the COC reported 'financial irregularities and serious lapses in the governance and management of the temple'.[35] The report highlights problems of management and administration, especially in the handling of money. As we have seen, in a colonial context these conditions would have been sufficient for the SMHEB to assume managerial responsibility of the endowment in question. However, the SHEB has not stepped in to 'take over' management of the temple's affairs, something well within its jurisdiction, legally speaking. Instead, it is the COC that has initiated action under Section 25 of the Charities Act to remove the President of the temple as a trustee of the endowment and charity and the temple has been advised 'to continue to let HEB manage its finance [sic] affairs, to ensure that these internal control measures can be sustained'.[36]

Neither has the Board stepped forward to assume the role of a central, co-ordinating body for Hindu affairs in the Republic. The SHEB also acts as a 'mouthpiece' of the Hindu community and is viewed by government agencies and departments as the official, legitimate organ that can represent Hindu views. In the absence of other Hindu organizations that could play this role, Board members describe this as a 'default position', rather than one that is overtly courted. The lack of spiritual Hindu leadership sees the SHEB as a secular body, assuming the responsibility, which has been imposed on it by the circumstances of existing in a context where national-level bodies are expected to represent racial and religious communities. No doubt, by virtue of its identity as a statutory board, the SHEB is notionally well positioned to play an enabling and facilitating role in various matters relating to Hinduism. One of its functions is to communicate with other administrative bodies and institutions and, if necessary, intercede with them on behalf of the community. But the SHEB is itself subject to the bureaucratic and administrative norms that frame the playing field for religious organizations in Singapore. For example, the Board as a 'Government body' is not exempted and has to apply for and secure permits from the Traffic Police to hold the annual processions of Tai Pūcam, and Timiti and agree to abide by the rules and regulations for the granting of the license. Theoretically, the Board is itself liable to disciplining procedures if it fails to observe the given rules. With this conclusion, the next segment offers a brief sketch of the contemporary Hindu scene.

7.1.1 Singapore Hindu Domains in the Present

Hinduism in Singapore is a minority religion,[37] numerically speaking. Yet, it is conspicuous in the public domain. Numerous markers of Hinduism dot the Singapore landscape, most prominently in the form of the 24 registered Hindu temples. It is

---

[35]http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/MCYSNews/FinancialIrregularitiesSriSivaKrishnaTemple.aspx, accessed on 31 July 2010.

[36]Ibid.

[37]According to the Singapore Census of 2000, the number of Hindus is 99,904.

striking that 23 of the temples visible today were registered before the Second World War. Only one temple was registered as a new temple society in the post-Second World War period.[38] There are no plans to build new Hindu temples on the island, given the sense amongst the Hindu leadership that the current number of Hindu temples is more than sufficient to meet devotees' needs.

While four[39] of these temples are managed by the SHEB, the rest are administered privately, either by members of the founding family or an ethno-linguistic group or a management committee elected from a community of devotees. The Agamic temples are defined by a level of bureaucratic organization through the work performed by the elected management committees, but they also rely on the voluntary contributions of devotees[40] who organize themselves into various groups and perform many of the essential non-ritual tasks in temples. Many places of worship began as informal shrines but evolved over time into 'proper' temples and persist as such. A large majority of these are built in the archetypical South Indian style with colourful, towering *gopura*s (gateways) and *vimana*s (domes) featuring figures, motifs and legends from Hindu mythology, with only one that can be classified as North Indian.[41] The South Indian style temples are constructed according to textual prescriptions and function ritually like their Tamil Nadu counterparts through the service of Brahmin priests. However, there is no regional divide at the level of patronage.[42]

Religious structures that once housed folk, non-Sanskritic deities in the past have gradually been 'Agamized'[43] and their ritual domain trimmed and sanitized accordingly. By now, practically all the Agamic temples in Singapore have performed a consecration ceremony, some more than once. The puja of deities can begin only after this ceremony and further requires the mandatory performance of specific rituals for them. The daily rituals are performed in Singapore temples, under the guidance of trained Brahmin priests, entirely for the benefit of the gods and on behalf of the community they represent. The temples are open to the public during prescribed times for daily worship. Both Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests are

---

[38]This is the Arulmigu Murugan Temple in Jurong East.

[39]These are the Srinivasa Perumal Temple, Sri Mariamman Temple, Sri Sivan Temple and Sri Vairavamida Kaliamman Temple.

[40]Two examples are the *thondarkal* (volunteer group) and the *bhajan* (devotional songs) groups.

[41]This is the Lakshminarayan Temple in Race Course Road, which caters primarily to the Bihari, Uttar Pradeshi and Hindu Punjabi communities.

[42]The following are good illustrations: The Sri Sivan Temple, the Srinivasa Perumal Temple and the Durga Temple in Potong Pasir—all of which are popular with Sindhi and Punjabi Hindus and Uttar Pradeshis and Biharis as well. Apart from this broad North–South difference, other regional temples also display communal variations. For example, the Krishnan Temple in Waterloo Street is patronized primarily by Malayalees and caters to the needs of the Malayalee community. The Thandayuthabani Temple has historically been associated with the Chettiar community, and the Senpaga Vinayagar Temple in Ceylon Road finds strong Ceylon Tamil Hindu participation.

[43]Sinha (2005).

employed in the Agamic temples where Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic deities co-exist. In theory, the two kinds of priests have a strict division of ritual labour, but in practice variations from the norm are not uncommon.

Festivals from across the Agamic and folk Hindu traditions continue to be customarily celebrated in Singapore. Some examples include the following: Tai Pūcam, Deepavali, Navaratri, Krishna Jayanti, Sivaratri, Thai Ponggal, Holi, Dussehra, Durga Puja, Ram Navmi and Vinayagar Chaturthi[44], together with rituals observed for such deities as Muneeswaran, Madurai Veeran, Mariamman, etc. All of the temples function effectively and draw crowds, operating quite effectively within the social networks that support their existence. The rising number of worshippers who attend temples is interesting in practical terms because this generates much-needed revenue and in the most pragmatic terms is tied to the temple economy. Temples derive their strength from donations of individual devotees, both Hindu and otherwise. This is in the form of cash donations made at the *hundial* (donation-box), or fees for *arcca̱nai* (individual worship upon payment of a fee) on a daily basis, as well as payments for a variety of services, including the marriage ceremony and other life-cycle rituals at the temple. This constitutes income for temples and allows them to reproduce the ritual complex within and to remain economically viable. The accounting practices of temples reveal a similar pattern, including that of the Board-administered temples. The religious specialists who perform prayers on behalf of the community do not handle any cash or money directly. Instead, devotees pay for temple services at a cashier's point in the temple 'office' in return for a receipt, which they hand over to the priest as evidence. Priests and other religious functionaries in the temples are employees and paid a monthly remuneration and other benefits from temple funds.

Presently, Hindu temples are sites where spiritual and secular activities occur routinely.[45] Increasingly, temples are popular as focal points for visiting gurus (spiritual masters) from India, Malaysia and elsewhere. These personalities offer spiritual discourses on various aspects of Hindu religion and Indian philosophy. Local Hindu temples resemble 'community centres' which perform a range of functions other than the purely 'religious', including social, cultural and educational. These religious institutions have thus been redefined as 'multi-purpose' sites and illustrate the

---

[44]This is only a select list of festivals observed in Hindu temples. 'Navaratri' is literally 'nine nights' and is dedicated to the mother goddess Durga; 'Krishna Jayanti' is the birthday of the Hindu god Krishna; 'Sivaratri' literally means 'the night of Siva' and is celebrated in honour of the Hindu god Siva; 'Thai Ponggal' is a harvest festival popular with the Tamil community; 'Holi' is a spring festival celebrated by Hindus; 'Dussehra' celebrates the victory of Rama over the demon-king Ravana; 'Ram Navmi' celebrates the birth of Rama and 'Vinayagar Chaturthi' marks the birthday of the elephant god Ganesha.

[45]For example, apart from organizing religious classes and bhajan sessions, many temples now provide instruction in Indian dance and music, offer free or highly subsidized tuition for children at various levels of study (including the very popular Tamil-language classes), organize art lessons, yoga and meditation classes, together with computer courses and aerobic lessons, blood donation drives, and render legal advice. All of these activities are conducted within the temple grounds.

prioritizing of rational and optimal use of physical spaces on the island, including those occupied by places of worship.

With this brief account of the contemporary Hindu scene in Singapore, the final section of the book moves towards a discussion of how religious organizations (and secular ones like the SHEB) and individuals negotiate a culture of bureaucracy in contemporary Singapore.

7.1.2 Negotiating a Culture of Bureaucracy

Emerging from the experience of colonialism, Singapore inherited various institutions and principles of governance from the British, together with the requisite administrative infrastructure. In constructing a new state, the leaders of independent Singapore registered firm continuities with their colonial past. In its attitude towards religions, the Colonial Government's stance of non-interference and commitment to freedom of religious expression was retained in the Singapore state's invocation and adoption of 'secularism' as a political ideology and governing stance. In the colonial period, certainly the British had favoured a hands-off approach, preferring to intervene as little as possible in religious matters, except in so far as it involved the maintenance of law and order in the public domain. That there was a considerable degree of freedom in expressing, especially private religiosity, during the colonial period is carried in a 1963 statement by the first prime minister of independent Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, just before its brief merger with Malaya:

> [. . .] it is not the intention of my Government to introduce legislation to control of restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief; and that the present position in all matters of religious liberty will continue.[46]

However, the 1950s and 1960s were challenging decades for Singapore's political leadership, especially with the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and the riots of 1964, leading it to read religious, racial and communal issues as highly sensitive and controversial. In the interest of preventing social unrest and communal strife, Singapore's leadership has since devised various strategies for managing an ethnically plural citizenry, often opting in favour of institutional and legislative measures.[47] Even in matters relating to religion,[48] the Singapore style of governance has travelled this route. The presence of an extensive body of legislation that can limit

---

[46] Kho (1980, 71–72).

[47] By and large, these safeguards have ensured that communal tensions have not been allowed free and irresponsible expression, even though they may be present. The measures, many of which are punitive (such as warnings, fines and imprisonment), have indeed served the function of deterrence as the island is marked by the absence of explicit racial and religious strife.

[48] Hill (2001).

both religious freedom and practice has been observed elsewhere.[49] While the survey[50] is worthwhile, evidence suggests that these Acts are invoked sporadically[51] and intermittently.[52] Enforcement has limited religious expression in some ways, but it is important to recognize a significant symbolic value in these laws. In fact, their very presence often leads to self-regulation of religious practices.

Religious communities in Singapore are aware that they are located within a multicultural context where religious harmony is promoted by the state. The possibility of religious tensions has meant that the task of managing religion has been assumed primarily by the state, rather than private or individual efforts. Private religiosity is constitutionally guaranteed and is largely unregulated. However, public religiosity is subject to a variety of regulations and constraints. Adopting 'secularism' as an ideology of governance leads to strong state input in the very definition of what constitutes 'religion'.[53] This is reflected in the meticulous demarcation of religion from the realm of 'formal politics'. Religious communities exist in this secular nation-state with the condition that their followers do not engage in matters that the state defines as 'political'. For example, religions have little legitimacy to comment on matters of law and policy, which are defined as 'political'. Stepping outside these limits is by definition illegal and would justify the state's interventionist response. In fact, given the scrupulous delimitation of the religious arena, a great deal of work is invested in guarding the constructed boundaries. The latter are monitored through institutional mechanisms, legislation and most critically, official ideological tropes. This strict demarcation has allowed a voice for officially sanctioned religious leaders in public. But the de-politicization and privatization of religion have led to its marginalization from the public sphere.[54] Consequently,

---

[49]Hill (2001), Shiau (2004), Tamney (1996), Eugene Tan (2004) and Kevin Tan (2004).

[50]Indeed on several occasions, some of these laws have been invoked and applied to religious groups and their practices. Some examples include the deregistration of the Jehovah's Witnesses under the Societies Act in 1972. Other religious groups that were served with deregistration notice include the Hare Krishna group, the Unification Church in 1982 and The Moral Home Society in 1990. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the various publications of the group were banned under the Undesirable Publications Act. These steps were undertaken as the activities of these groups were contrary to both national interests and 'public order, public health or morality'. Finally, the event that sparked great public interest and scrutiny was the detention of 22 individuals under the Internal Security Act in 1987. These individuals, some of whom were Catholic social workers, were allegedly involved in a 'Marxist Conspiracy' to overthrow the government and establish a Marxist state.

[51]In April 2008, a Singaporean couple, Ong Kian Cheong and Dorothy Chan Hien Leng, both Christians, were charged with sedition after they distributed pamphlets that portrayed Islam negatively. It is interesting that the couple was charged under the Sedition Act and not the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

[52]Additionally, to date no convictions have been reported under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which was enacted amidst much fanfare in 1990.

[53]Here Asad's discussion of the 'secular' as a relational concept is relevant.

[54]The 'take over' of Association for Women for Action and research (AWARE) in 2009 by a group of professional Christian women was an attempt to claim an existing secular space for voicing religious concerns about a sexuality education programme run by AWARE in local schools.

the latter has been 'emptied' of autonomous religious influences[55] and thus 'made secular'. This does make the Singapore context unique in comparison to other post-colonial states like India, where religions continue to have an activist presence in the public sphere. It would be appropriate to describe Singapore's secularity as a 'produced condition' and one that the state guards carefully to circumvent the politicization of religion. Dinham et al.'s position that 'arrangements of the state set the conditions for a curious sort of "playing out" of faith in the public realm . . .'[56] is an essential element in conceptualizing secularity.

The day-to-day functioning of Singapore is now recognizable in a pervasive bureaucracy that has a reputation for running efficiently, sometimes perhaps too efficiently. This is partly the outcome of an administrative infrastructure inherited from the British, but which has been meticulously reproduced by the Singapore leadership in a scrupulous adherence to rule-governed behaviour. The bureaucracy in Singapore is marked by the absence of corrupt and dishonest practices. Guiding principles of centralized governance, and close engagement with all societal domains, have led to a high degree of bureaucratization of everyday life in Singapore.[57] The task of managing a multi-religious polity poses challenges for any secular state. The supervision of the religious domain is typified by a style of governance that values planning, efficiency, control and regulation. This requires an expansive state-machinery, with a network of institutions and bureaucratic organizations, each with its own specific realm of jurisdiction. It is precisely through these mediating institutions that the state enforces various policies that impact day-to-day religious lives of its citizens. Lily Kong rightly observes the following for Singapore:

> From the broadest statutes to the detailed codes of conduct, and from the standing advisory committees to the ad hoc review committees, the issue of religion (and race) is subject to scrutiny and regulation, collectively designed to maintain the carefully tended secular yet multi-religious nation.[58]

It is clear that the spectrum of existing laws and 'codes of conduct' carefully manage public expressions of religiosity. The Singapore state relies on the legislative and bureaucratic apparatus to legitimize its intervention in the religious domain.

Even though the state is secular, it is nonetheless heavily invested in ensuring that Singapore society remains multi-religious. Eugene Tan's observation that 'Ethnicity is a Janus-faced creature in Singapore, simultaneously portrayed as a threat and a

---

The women from the Church of Saviour criticized the presentation of homosexuality as a normal, alternative sexuality option in neutral modes.

[55] In relation to the AWARE incident the Archbishop John Chew, who is also the President of the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS), reiterated the normative position in Singapore about keeping religion out of politics. He also reminded Christian pastors abut the proper use of the pulpit and remarked that religion should not be a part of these discussions about homosexuality.

[56] Dinham et al. (2009, 2).

[57] Chua (1985).

[58] Kong (2006, 909).

source of cultural ballast'[59] applies to religion too. The Singapore state values religion but is also wary of the potential for religious conflict it sees as being inherent in a multi-religious society. In a post-9/11 world, governments have been increasingly cautious about the threat of religious extremism. Government leaders in Singapore too have articulated this anxiety, publicly calling for greater tolerance and understanding amongst members of different religious communities. Indeed, the state has been exemplary in taking a lead by declaring that specific religious communities should not be targeted or held responsible for 'terrorist' acts. The Singapore state has communicated (both to the citizenry and the international community) its resolute stance towards the handling of religious extremism. Of course, this impulse is not new for Singapore. But its 'authoritarian' stance, in a post-9/11 context, in dealing swiftly and decisively with 'religious extremists' has won it admiration from the international community and from scores of Singaporeans too. This is interesting given that it is precisely this governance style that has often been criticized in the past. However, this is expected from a state that is discharging its duty of maintaining law and order and protecting its citizens.

Another occasion for regulation of religion can be seen in allegations of mismanagement of funds by religious organizations. A recent example involved the City Harvest Church, currently under investigation 'for alleged misuse of Church funds'[60] by the COC[61] under the *Charities Act*, with the assistance of the Commercial Affairs Department of the Singapore Police Force. Interestingly, bodies like the NCCS or the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) are not handling this matter.[62] Instead, legal and disciplinary agencies have been mobilized, with penalties and corrective measures as possible outcomes. Adopting such a course does not encourage a culture of self-regulation or self-determination.

Nevertheless, an account of Singapore's religious landscape would be incomplete without acknowledging a field of 'unofficial' and more amorphously organized religious groups. These are 'unregistered' (and, thus, not captured in official statistics) but are important parts of everyday religious life. They often operate out of non-conventional, non-mainstream locations in homes, theatres, shopping malls and industrial buildings.[63] A recent article in the local English daily reported that 'the Government has been in talks with religious and community leaders to find Singapore's little-known, unregistered faith groups. These tend to be groups that

---

[59] Eugene Tan (2004, 88).

[60] 1 June 2010, *The Straits Times*.

[61] Under the Charities Act, the Commissioner 'has the power to suspend, remove or appoint additional charity trustees to ensure proper governance and administration of the charity and to protect the charitable resources' (ibid. A 8). Recently, the COC has been involved in scrutinizing nine other charities, including the Sri Siva Krishna Temple, the Singapore Association for the Visually Handicapped, the Ren Ci Hospital and Medicare Centre and the Youth Challenge.

[62] In any case, groups like the NCCS and IRO lack the legal authority to regulate and discipline any financial misdemeanors or indiscretions, and their role is largely symbolic and ceremonial.

[63] Kong (2001) and Sinha (2005).

worship in homes, industrial buildings, hotels[64] and other such ad-hoc locations.'[65] The motivation for this drive to track 'religious groups that are informal and unlisted in public records'[66] is ostensibly 'to build a database of these groups for out-reach and record-keeping purposes'.[67] There is a concern that because these set-ups are unsupervised by local religious and secular authorities, they could be potentially threatening to a multi-religious environment. That the state has an interest in monitoring the religious landscape is not a secret. Nor does the state engage in surreptitious practices or keep tabs on religions. Official bodies like the 'National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony', government departments like the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and the URA, religious organizations and community leaders are all involved in these efforts to generate knowledge about unregistered religious groups. The article notes further that 'It is yet unclear what the collection of all this data will lead to, and what it will mean for religious groups that operate privately and prefer to be anonymous.'[68] This close survey and mapping of a thus far publicly undocumented field now legitimately extends the official gaze to all religious groups on the island, including private, informal and unregistered[69] varieties. Given the current anxieties about religious extremism, some members of the population may even feel that such state scrutiny is justified. However, this signals an overtly interventionist and regulatory posture and stands to transform the field of informal, amorphous religious activity.

My analysis of the religious landscape in the SS demonstrates that in many ways the colonial context *was* conducive for religious activity, facilitating public religious expression, albeit unwittingly. As management and administration were prime considerations in the colonial context, law and colonial policy were formulated to regulate and supervise a subject population. Yet, even here there is evidence of a capacity for religious communities to negotiate with political authorities, occasionally even challenge colonial policy on religious matters, although this should not suggest that there was absolute freedom.

---

[64]In a related development, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) and MCYS have recently issued 'a set of guidelines on the limited and non-exclusive use of commercial spaces for religious activities' (http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/MCYSNews/CommercialSpacesReligiousActivities.aspx, accessed on 31 August 2010). According to the existing guidelines, sites defined as 'commercial' are also seen as secular spaces for use by all, whereas religious activities are to be conducted only in dedicated spaces defined as 'places of worship'. The new stipulations make possible for religious groups to use commercial spaces in 'limited and non-exclusive' modes. These apply to the use of auditoriums, function halls, convention centres and cinemas (http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/MCYSNews/CommercialSpacesReligiousActivities.aspx, accessed on 31 August 2010).

[65]'Into the light', *The Sunday Times*, 29 August 2010, Prime p. 6.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid.

[69]In fact it can be argued that some of these groups exist today precisely because of state efforts (through the 1980s and 1990s) which eliminated options for religious practices (like séances and rituals associated with spirit mediums) to occur legitimately in places of worship. This ritual domain has not disappeared but has had to find alternative sites where it can be perpetuated.

By contrast, the post-colonial Singapore state demonstrates a firmer approach to managing ethnic and religious communities, with some issues being clearly non-negotiable.[70] Commentators like Carl Trocki speak of a 'culture of control' for Singapore, while Terence Chong has observed 'the ongoing expansion of state powers',[71] into civil society space as well.[72] Trocki has further remarked that the post-colonial state exercised greater levels of authority over Singapore society and indeed 'took responsibility for [. . .] complete management and surveillance of society'.[73] The colonial state was largely indifferent to the private (and by extension the religious) lives of the colonized population, except the maintenance of law and order and administrative expediency. However, the post-colonial Singapore state has been much more interested in carefully managing this sphere. Chua and Kwok rightly note that in post-independence Singapore, there has been an 'expansion in state intervention and [. . .] a concentration of power in the state machinery',[74] which has allowed for less autonomy in several areas of everyday life.

It is useful to note these critical continuities between the colonial and post-independence moments in Singapore's history, in the latter's inherited bureaucratic and legislative structures and principles of governance. However, in a post-colonial context the value accorded to a managerial and supervisory mentality has been reconfigured. It has transcended even the colonial state's desire for effective management and administration. A crucial departure from the colonial period is evident in a shift towards the post-colonial state's intervention in all societal domains, including the religious. This stance, not peculiar to Singapore, in fact typifies geo-political entities that emerge through the process of centralized, nation-state formation. The domination of all societal domains is a marked feature of nation-states, which rest on the logic of concentration of power, a point made elegantly by Talal Asad:

> . . .the nation-state requires clearly demarcated spaces that it can classify and regulate: religion, education, health, leisure, work, income, justice and war. The space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive character of space.[75]

Geoffrey Benjamin argues similarly that nation-states are defined by a 'transcendent' mode of orientation that is essentially interfering, with constant attention

---

[70]Some examples include the various restrictions on religious processions on foot, the relocation and removal of places of worship for urban renewal initiatives (Wee 1989), restrictions on publication and distribution of religious literature that could create disharmony, and restrictions on and regulation of religious broadcasting (Kong 2006) via the media.

[71]Chong (2010).

[72]See Rodan (2003) and Tanaka (2002).

[73]Trocki (2006, 137).

[74]Chua and Kwok (2001, 91).

[75]Asad (2003, 200).

to affairs of 'the other.'[76] His observations facilitate an understanding of the mechanisms through which state intervention is legitimized in modern states:

> A modern nation-state, however, can only attain full political penetration when the enveloping cultural framework has been so reshaped as to accord legitimacy to the interfering mode of interaction, for only then will the population be sufficiently dependent in their attitudes and buckle down to the job of 'nation-building.'[77]

For Singapore, this interference is fortified, legitimated and normalized via reference to the sovereignty of the nation-state, together with a reserve of legal pronouncements that declare the state to be a transcendent entity without self-interest. Additionally, the ideological work that the state undertakes is supported by a political discourse that privileges, above all else, the racial and religious stability of the island. The idea that religion is a sensitive and potentially dangerous field is a constant element of such a discourse. This trope has been invoked repeatedly by Singapore's political leadership as a powerful justification for continued state regulation of the religious domain.

Absolute religious freedom is not feasible in any geo-political arrangement including in a context where a religion is adopted as an official state religion. Especially in the latter, there are obvious limits on religious expression and individuals may feel even more restricted precisely because of state endorsement and scrutiny of religion. To a large extent, state regulation of the religious domain (via legislation and bureaucratic procedures) has been normalized, taken-for-granted and legitimized amongst lay Singaporeans. In such a context, discussions about state intervention in religion lead inevitably to concerns about possibilities for religious freedom and individual agency. Observers of Singapore's political landscape have long noted the general political apathy of Singapore's citizenry and the limits on various individual freedoms, including religious liberties. More recently, Terence Chong has revisited these ideas in a different vein suggesting that 'a majority of Singaporeans are comfortable with the state's ongoing consolidation of power',[78] while acknowledging that some citizens do disapprove of this trend. He adds that this

> ...disapproval is either not great enough to produce a sustained protest, or is grudgingly traded off for the efficiency in everyday Singapore life that have been produced by the symbiotic relationship between the government and these apparatuses.[79]

While I concur with Chong about the placating and mollifying effects of efficiency, this statement is also far too generalized. The ethnographic data I refer to suggest that in the religious sphere, bureaucratic competence and capability are valued *not as ends in themselves*, but because they ultimately facilitate religious expression. Not surprisingly, Singaporeans are strategic in these instances and use rules to

---

[76]Benjamin (1987).

[77]Benjamin (1988, 20).

[78]Chong (2010, 595).

[79]Ibid. 596.

achieve their ends. Max Weber's[80] positive appraisal of bureaucratic efficiency and rule-governed behaviour that are led by the logic of substantive rationality is relevant here. Legal and bureaucratic regulation does not necessarily curtail religious expression. Consider a final illustration from the realm of Singaporean Hinduism, the enactment of Hindu processions. A number of legislative[81] and bureaucratic measures have been instituted, making public religious processions a highly regulated field.[82] In order for processions to be held, a number of 'clearances' are required, the most important of which is the police permit obtained, now online, via the Police Licensing Computerized System. Next, a notification has to be made to the Singapore Police Force to obtain a public entertainment license if music is to be played along the procession routes. Applicants must supply specific details, such as the name and date of event, commencing and ending time, number of participants, total number of security guards and marshals to be deployed, the playing of musical instruments and display of banners, placards or insignias, the exact processional route (with names of roads along which the procession is to travel) and the specific stopping points. Specifically, the successful enactment of processions in the local context entails what Kong[83] has denoted the 'negotiation of sacred pathways, time and space'.

Through my research on religious processions and religious movements in contemporary Singapore, I became aware of the world of permits, licenses and approvals, which determine what is permissible. However, the organizers of Hindu processions I interacted with appear to have mastered the knowledge required for securing the relevant permits. In doing so, they negotiate the bureaucratic and logistical imperatives that are accepted as inevitable within the context of a multi-religious, secular and urban society. My respondents interpret their 'submission' to regulation as a necessary condition for the right to hold these processions. They are very aware that any infringement would not only be legally punitive, but more importantly lead to a warning from the police and a refusal of a permit, which would make it impossible to hold the procession at all. This group of Singaporean Hindus (as active agents) are prepared to master a body of technical and practical expertise, and tolerate the tedium of endless form-filling in order to steer their way towards a positive outcome. Despite the existence of standardized administrative configurations, expressions of religiosity are possible, albeit within clearly-stated limits.

The institutional history of the SHEB offers a nuanced account of how religious individuals and communities interface with the bureaucracy in Singapore. The pervasive bureaucratic mentality reflected in the various state apparatuses and their methods of operation has moulded common sensibilities in Singapore about the role, practice and the very nature of religion. However, I contend that it is possible

---

[80]Weber (1958).

[81]See Part II, Section 5 of the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act.

[82]Kong (2005).

[83]Ibid.

to negotiate this labyrinth of officialdom, constructed by a network of regulatory, interventionist mechanisms.

A strong desire for expression and experimentation marks the contemporary religious domain in Singapore. The island attracts and hosts a vast array of religions, making it possible for official, institutional versions and the innovative (even deviant) interpretations to co-exist. The 'religion–state' encounter is firmly mediated by a culture of bureaucracy. The idea that the state regulates and manages religious groups is no longer surprising for students of religion in Singapore, nor is it unique. I contend that analyses of Singapore's religious landscape now need to transcend this obvious conclusion. By demonstrating concretely how institutions of religion and state encounter each other, the effect of such interactions on religious practices has been suggested here. In making this argument I been led by the logic that sociological engagement with the complex landscape of Singapore demands a shift away from jaded, stereotypical characterizations of this island community, populated with passive, oppressed citizens, facing an authoritarian government. Although the state bureaucracy in Singapore allows room for religious expression, it curtails this in other crucial ways, which many have nonetheless been able to transcend through patience, resourcefulness and ingenuity.

Glossary

(I) Hindi Words

ashram: Religious hermitage.

Churrack puja: A festival that involves devotees 'swinging from hooks'.

ganja: The Hindi word for Cannabis or Marijuana.

gramadevata: Village gods.

gurdwara: Literally 'Gateway to the Guru'. A Place of worship for Sikhs.

Harijan: Literally 'Children of God'. Refers to the community of 'untouchables' or Dalits in the Indian subcontinent.

maulavi: Muslim religious expert.

Muharram: Annual Shia festival.

panchayat: A committee constituted by 'senior and influential overseers and the clerical staff of the plantation' (Ramanathan, 1995, 84).

pandit: Hindu Brahmin priest.

pranapratishta: Performance of any ceremony of solemn act, consecration or dedication of a monument or of an idol or of a temple. The word *pranapratistha*, comes from 'pran', which means 'the breath of life' or 'spirit', and the root 'stha', which means 'to establish in or bestow or confer upon'. Thus the word refers to a ceremony in which 'life-breath is established in an image or icon', rendering it worthy of worship.

sati: Refers to the Hindu custom of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

(II) Malay words

Da'Wah: Missionary work, proselytization. Also refers to Islamic revival movement in Malaysia.

datuk: Title of distinction conferred on men or women.

halal: Lawful, permissible according to divine law.

keramat: Shrine, often at burial ground of a saint or a ruler.

Koran: The holy book of the Muslims.

merdeka: Independence or freedom.

Syariah: Islamic law.

wakaf: Endowment, a donation of property, usually land, for religious purposes.

Yang di-Pertuan Agong: Literally 'He who is made Lord, Paramount ruler or Head of State'.

zakat: Tithe.

(III) Tamil words

abiṣēkam: Consecration by sprinkling water or ritual bathing; refers to the ceremonial lustration of sacred image using water, honey, milk, curds or saffron.

aiyar: Brahmin priest.

arccakarkaḷ: A religious guide or instructor.

arccaṉai: Worship. This is a specific mode of worship where the focus is on the arca (image or icon) and the deity it inhabits. The homage is addressed to the deity for a particular purpose via a priest within a temple.

akṉi kopparai: Literally 'pot of fire' which is carried by devotees in a ritual as a sign of devotion.

alaku kāvaṭi: The word *alaku* literally means 'beautiful' and refers to a type of kāvaṭi carried by devotees during festivals related to Murukan worship.

amman/āttā: A generic term for 'mother' that is also used to refer to the Mother goddess.

aṅka pirataṭcaṇan: A ritual that involves devotees rolling on the floor in a temple or behind a chariot procession as a mark of devotion and submission to divinity. It may be performed by both men and women although the practice varies contextually.

cāmi: A word for 'God/Lord'.

cāmi vīṭu: Literally 'God's house'.

cāṭṭai aṭi: A ritual where the devotee is whipped with a rope around clasped hands and the back.

Caivacittāntam/Saiva Siddhanta: Literally 'the doctrine of Siva'.

camayattār: Religious specialist or priest.

capati: Sculptors, temple artisans.

ceṭil kāvaṭi: A type of chariot kavati, denoted as a ter kavati in the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts.

cinna kōvil: Small temple, shrine.

kāḷāñci: This refers to the actual items given as honours to respected individuals on festivals.

kāval teyvam: Guardian deities.

kāvaṭi: According to the Tamil lexicon this is a 'decorated pole of wood with an arch over it' (Diehl 1956, 223). The physical structural form of the basic kāvaṭi takes many different forms, both in India and in the Hindu Diaspora. Devotees carry the kāvaṭi in procession during Murukan festivals.

kangani: Literally 'overseer' or 'foreman'. It refers to a system of labour recruitment where a senior labourer is mobilized to recruit labour from his home village.

karpūra tīpam: Camphor lamp.

karakam: Literally a 'pot' in which divinity resides. During a religious ritual, typically a trance, a dancer balances this pot on his/her head and performs a dance.

Karuppaṇacāmi: The name of a minor deity, who is widely popular, sometimes as an attendant to the village goddesses and often independently, in rural South India. Karuppaṇ is the Tamil word for 'black' or 'dark' and often the deity is depicted as such.

kōpuram: Gateway, the entrance to a South Indian style temple.

kovil: Literally 'king's house' and is the common Tamil word for temple.

kōvil illāta ūril kuṭi irukka vēṇṭām: Literally 'Do not settle in a place that has no temples.'

kumpāpiṣēkam: Dedication and installation of deities during a temple consecration ceremony.

mācimakam: An auspicious day in the Tamil month of Māci (February–March)

māviḷakku: Lamps fashioned out of flour dough, used especially in the veneration of mother goddesses.

Munīsvaraṉ: This deity originates from rural Tamil Nadu and is described as a guardian deit1y, and also popularly worshipped as a protector deity. Typically the deity is placed on the margins of living spaces and residences and rarely placed at the household prayer altar in Indian contexts. In Singapore and Malaysia, however, his status has been elevated and he is viewed here as an incarnation of Siva and also venerated as a household deity, who is increasingly present in devotees' homes.

Muṉiyāṇṭi: A minor deity who is firmly located in the 'little tradition' (Rajah 1975, 127). The deity is described as a 'non-vegetarian' deity with a fondness for meat. Muṉīsvaran is sometimes denoted by this name as well.

nāyaṉmār: This refers to the 63 teachers of Tamil Saivism who composed hymns from the seventh to the tenth centuries. These hymns form 11 sacred books, the Tirumuṟai.

nava kirakam/Navagraha: The nine planets which are worshipped as part of the Hindu mythology.

nittiya pūcai: Daily prayers which can be performed in homes or temples.

ōtuvārkal: A caste group responsible for chanting, reciting and singing devotional songs in praise of divinity, typically in Hindu temples.

pālkuṭam: Literally 'milk pot' and a type of kavati offering carried in honour of the deity Murukan.

Paṅkuṉi Uttiram: A festival dedicated to the Hindu deity Murukan.

paṇṭāram: According to the Tamil lexicon, multiple meanings include a religious mendicant, a Saivan monk or a sect of non-Brahmin Saivites who sell garlands of flowers. The word refers to a caste as well as a profession.

pañcalūkam: An alloy of five metals, considered auspicious for constructing statues of deities.

paṭṭāccāriyarkal: Brahmin priests of the Vaisnavite tradition.

piracātam (prasadam): Divine grace, symbolized by a small amount of conse-crated food given to the worshipper in return for the offering that has been made to the deity. Offerings, including food, are distributed to devotees as 'leftovers of the gods'.

poṅkal: Literally a mixture of rice, dhal, milk and sugar cooked together in a pot and symbolic of abundance and prosperity. Also refers to a harvest festival celebrated by Tamils.

pūcai/puja: A pūcai can take many forms according to the religious affiliation of the worshipper, her community and the occasion. It takes place in homes and tem-ples and may range from a simple offering of fruit, flowers, leaves and occasionally sweets, sugar or water, to an elaborate ceremony involving a number of participants and offerings of various sorts.

taṇṇīrppantalkal: Literally 'water stalls' (sponsored by volunteers) set up along a festival processional route.

Tīmiti: Fire-walking festival.

Thirukkural: A compilation of 1,330 rhyming couplets authored by Thiruvalluvar and regarded as one of the foundational texts of Saivism.

Tai Pūcam: A festival, dedicated to the Hindu god Murukan, which involves the carrying of kāvaṭi along a processional route.

Tīpāvaḷi/Deepavali/Diwali: Festival of lights.

tiruviḻā: Annual temple anniversary celebrations.

uṇṭiyal: Donation box.

upayam: Special prayers dedicated to a deity on a religious occasion but sponsored by groups, families or individuals.

upayakārarkal: Groups of volunteers who undertake to sponsor special prayers and rituals within a temple.

References

Primary Sources

Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855–1941, Volumes 1–12, edited by Robert L. Jarman.

(IOR – G 34/8, 1–8), 'The East India Company's petition for Letters Patent Patent establishing a Court of Judicature at Penang to the King's Most Excellent Majesty', 28 March 1805.

(IOR – G 34/10–ff127-131), 'TREATY of FRIENDSHIP and ALLIANCE concluded between the Honorable SIR THOMAS STAMFORD RAFFLES, Lieutenant- Governore of Fort Marlborough and its dependencies, Agent to the Most Noble FRANCIS, MARQUIS OF HASTINGS, Governore-General of India, etc., for the HONORABLE ENGLISH EAST INDIA COMPANY on the one part, and their HIGHNESSES SULTAN HUSSIN MUHAM-MED SHAH, Sultan of Johore, and DATOO TUMUNGONG SRI MAHARAJAH ABDUL RAHMAN, chief of Singapore and its dependencies, on the other part.'

'Minutes of Singapore Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board meeting.' (1905–1979).

'Report of the Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) Bill (Bill no. 18/98)'. Singapore: Government Printers, 1999.

'Report of the Select Committee on the Hindu Endowments Bill,' Parl. 4 of 1968, Presented to Parliament on 16 August 1968. Singapore: Government Printer.

'Report on the Committee for the better administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments.' This document is dated 26 September 1905 and was authored by the then-Attorney-General of the Straits Settlements, W. R. Collyer.

'Report of the Special committee appointed to consider the Bill 'For the Better administration of Mohammedan and Hindu religious and charitable endowments'' dated 11 July 1905.

'Report of the Select Committee appointed to consider Mr. Huttenbach's proposed amendments' in *The Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Bill.* The document is dated 5 September 1905 and signed by four members of the Select Committee consisting of W. R. Collyer, J. O. Anthonisz, Hugh Fort and John Anderson.

'Reports of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Boards, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, 1909–1929,' in *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements.* Singapore: Government Printing Office.

Singapore Parliament, No. 5, Session 1, Volume No. 40, Sitting Date 23.3.1981, Section Name: Oral Answers to Questions, Title: Thaipusam Kavadi Procession (Ban on Music).

Singapore Parliament Report, Parl. 8, Session 1, Vol. 60, 'Hindu Endowments (Amendment) Bill,' 18 January 1993.

Singapore Parliament Report, No. 4, Session No. 1, Volume No. 37, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date 22.3.1978. 'Budget, Ministry of Social Affairs.'

Straits Settlements Government Gazette (selected articles)

Legislation in Singapore and the Straits Settlements

Administration of Muslim Law Act, Singapore: Government Printer, 2009.
Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 1995 Reprint.
Charities Act. Singapore: Government Printer, 1985.
Hindu Endowments Act (Chapter 364). Singapore: Government Printer, 1969.
Internal Security Act (Chapter 143). Singapore: Government Printer, 1986.
Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (Chapter 167A). Singapore: Government Printer, 2001.
Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act: Part II, Section 5. Singapore: Government Printer, 1997.
Ordinance XVII, An Ordinance for the Better Administration of Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments, 8 September 1905.
Penal Code (Chapter 224). Singapore: Government Printer, 1986.
Sedition Act (Chapter 290). Singapore: Government Printer, 1985.
Societies Act (Chapter 311). Singapore: Government Printer, 1986.
Undesirable Publications Act (Chapter 338). Singapore: Government Printer, 1998.

Newspapers

Indian Daily Mail.
Singapore Free Press.
Singei Nesan (1887–1980, translated into English from Tamil original).
Tamil Murasu (selected articles translated into English from Tamil original).
The Indian.
Singapore Journal of Commerce.
The Straits Times.

Internet Sources

www.muis.gov.sg/cms/aboutus/overview
www.sinda.org.sg/about.htm
www.heb.gov.sg

Bibliography

Alatas, H. S. (1977) *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. London: F. Cass.
Albertini, R. V, A. Wirz and J. Williamson (1982) *European Colonial Rule, 1880–1940: The Impact of the West on India, Southeast Asia and Africa*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
Aljunied, S. M. K. (2005) *Rethinking Raffles: A Study of Stamford Raffles Discourse on Religions Amongst Malays*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic.
Ampalavanar, R. (1969) 'Social and Political Developments in the Indian Community of Malaya 1920–41.' Unpublished Academic Exercise, University of Malaya.
Ampalavanar, R. (1972) 'Class, Caste and Ethnicism Among Urban Indians in Malaya, 1920–1941.' *Nusantara, Bil*. 2, July 1972, pp. 209–36.
Andaya, B. and Y. Ishii (1992) 'Religious developments in Southeast Asia, c. 1500–1800.' In Nicholas Tarling (ed.) *A Cambridge History of Southeast Asia,* Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 508–67.

Anderson, J. (1840) 'On the Administration of Justice in the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca, and the Government of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca.' *Asiatic Journal*, 2: 132–9.

Appadurai, A. (1981) *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appadurai, A. (1983) *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arasaratnam, S. (1966) *Indian Festivals in Malaya*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Arasaratnam, S. (1967) 'Social Reform and Reformist Pressure Groups among the Indians of Malaya and Singapore 1930–1955.' *JMBRAS*, 40(2): 54–67.

Arasaratnam, S. (1970) *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Arasaratnam, S. (1979) *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore.* Revised Edition. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Arumugam, I. (2002) 'Sociology of the Indians.' In Tong Chee Kiong and Lian Kwen Fee (eds.) *The Making of Singapore Society*. Singapore: Times Academic Press, pp. 320–50.

Asad, T. (1999) 'Religion, Nation-state, Secularism.' In Peter Van der Veer and Hartmut Lehman (eds.) *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 178–203.

Asad, T. (2002) 'Ethnographic Representation, Statistics, and Modern Power.' In Brian Axel (ed.) *From the margins: Historical anthropology and its futures*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 66–94.

Asad, T. (2003) *Formations of the Secular; Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Axel, B. K. (ed.) (2002) *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Axtell, J. (1979) 'Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint.' *Ethnohistory*, 26(1): 1–13.

Babb, L. A. (1974a) 'Hindu mediumship in Singapore.' *Southeast Asian Journal of Science*, 2: 29–43.

Babb, L. A. (1974b) 'Walking on Flowers in Singapore: A Hindu Festival Cycle.' Sociology Working Paper No. 27. Singapore: University of Singapore.

Babb, L. A. (1976) 'Patterns of Hinduism.' In Riaz Hassan (ed.) *Singapore: Society in Transition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Babb, L. A. (1978) 'Thaipusam in Singapore: Religious Individualism in a Hierarchical Culture.' In Peter Chen and Hams-Dieter Evers (eds.) *Studies in ASEAN Sociology*. Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises.

Baker, C. (1975) 'Temples and Political Development.' In Christopher J. Baker and David Washbrook (eds.) *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880–1940*. Delhi: Macmillan, pp. 69–97.

Baker, C. J. and D. A. Washbrook (1975) *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880–1940*. Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India Limited.

Bartholomew, G. W. (1972) 'Introduction.' In *Tables of the Written Laws of the Republic of Singapore 1819–1971*, compiled by Elizabeth Srinivasagam, and the staff of the Law Library, University of Singapore. Singapore: Malaya Law Review, University of Singapore.

Bartley, W. (1933) 'Population of Singapore in 1819.' *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XI: 177.

Bastin, J. S. (1960) *The Changing Balance of the Early Southeast Asian Pepper Trade*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Bautista, J. and F. K. G. Lim (eds.) (2009) *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*. London: Routledge.

Benjamin, G. (1987) 'Notes on the Deep Sociology of Religion.' Working Paper Series, No. 85. Singapore: National University of Singapore, Department of Sociology.

Benjamin, G. (1988) 'The Unseen Presence: A Theory of the Nation-State and its Mystifications.' Working Paper Series, No. 91. Singapore: National University of Singapore, Department of Sociology.

Bhargava, R. (ed.) (1998) *Secularism and its Critics*. Delhi and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Braddell, R. St. J. (1931/1982) *The Law of the Straits Settlements: A Commentary*. 3rd edition. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Brown, J. (1991) 'Ethnohistorians: Strange Bedfellows, Kindred Spirits.' *Ethnohistory*, 38(2): 113–23.

Buckley, C. B. (1867/1965) *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore, from the Foundation of the Settlemnet Under the Honourable the East India Company on February 6th, 1819 to the Transfer of the Colonial Office as Part of the Colonial Possessions of the Crown on April 1st 1867*. Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Buckley, C. B. (1902/1969) *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*. Singapore: University of Malaya Press.

Carr, E. H. (1961) *What is history?* London: Macmillan.

Singapore *Census of Population, (2000)*. Department of Statistics National University of Singapore.

Census of Singapore 1849 (1950) *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, Number 4. Reprint n.p. Krauss.

Chai, H. C. (1967) *The Development of British Malaya 1896–1909*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Chiang, H. D. (1978) *A History of Straits Settlements Foreign Trade, 1870–1915*. Singapore: National Museum.

Chidester, D. (1996) *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.

Chua, B. H. (1985) 'Pragmatism of the People's Action Party Government in Singapore: A Critical Assessment.' *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 13(2): 29–46.

Chong, T. (ed.) (2010) *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Chua, B. H. (1994) 'Arrested Development: Democratisation in Singapore'. *Third World Quarterly*, 15(4): 655–68.

Chua, B. H. (1995) *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Chua, B. H. (1995) *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Chua, B. H. and K. W. Kwok, (2001) 'Social Pluralism in Singapore.' In Robert W. Hefner (ed.) *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 86–140.

Cohn, B. (1987) *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Cohn, B. (1996) *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, NJ: Pricneton University Press.

Clark, G. L. and M. Dear (1983) *State Apparatus: Structures of Language and Legitimacy*. Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, Inc.

Collingwood, R. G. (1993) *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Collins, E. F. (1997) *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption Among Malaysian Hindus*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.

Collyer, W. R. (1905) *Objects and Reasons*. Source: Straits Settlements Government Gazette.

Comaroff, J. and J. Comaroff (1992) *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Cowan, C. D. (1961) *Nineteenth Century Malaya: The Origins of British Political Control*. London: Oxford University Press.

Daughton, J. P. (2006) *An Empire Divided; Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davis, D. (1991) *Chief Justice Rehnquist & the Course of American Church-State Relations*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

DeBernardi, J. (2004) *Rites of Belonging; Memory, Modernity and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

DeBernardi, J. (2009) *Penang; Rites of Belonging in a Malaysian Chinese Community*. Singapore: NUS Press.

De Tassy, G. (1831/1997) *Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays.* Translated by M. Wassen. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

de vere Allen, J. (1970) 'Malayan Civil Service, 1874–1941: Colonial Bureaucracy/Malayan Elite.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 12(2): 149–78.

Demerath, N. J. III. (2003) 'Religious Capital and Capital Religious: Cross-cultural and non-legal factors in the separation of Church and State.' In John T. S. Madeley (ed.) *Religion and Politics*. Aldershot: Ashgate and Dartmouth, pp. 219–38.

Des Chene, M. (1997) 'Locating the Past.' In Akhil Gupta and James Fergusson (eds.) *Anthropological Locations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 66–85.

Dharmalingam, V. (1995) 'The British and the Muslim religious Endowments in Colonial Malaya.' Honours thesis, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Dinham, A., R. Furbey and V. Lowndes (eds.) (2009) *Faith in the Public Realm; Controversies, Policies and Practices.* Bristol: The Polity Press.

Dirks, N. B. (1987) *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Dirks, N. B. (2002) 'Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History.' In Brian Axel (ed.) *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 47–65.

Doraisamy, T. R. (2006) 'Patterns of Ministry and Methodism in Singapore and Malaysia.' In Tanya Storch (ed.) *Religion and Missionaries Around the Pacific, 1500–1900*. Hampshire: Ashgate, pp. 211–22.

Edge, P. (2006) *Religion and Law: An Introduction*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Elbourne, E. (2003) *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853.* Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Engineer, I. (1995) 'Religion, State and Secularism.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(43): 2726–8.

Etherington, N. (ed.) (2005) *Missions and Empire.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Farriss, N. M. (1983) 'Indians in Colonial Yucatan: Three Perspectives.' In M. J. MacLeod and R. Wasserstrom (eds.) *Spaniards and Indians in South-eastern Mesoamerica: Essays on the History of Ethnic Relations*. Lincoln: Univ. Nebraska Press, pp. 1–39.

Fong, L. Y. (1990) 'The Singapore Chinese Advisory Board 1889–1993.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Fox, J. (2008) *A World Survey of Religion and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Freedman, M. (1950) 'Colonial Law and Chinese Society.' *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 80(1/2): 97–126.

Freedman, M. (1960) 'The Growth of a Plural Society in Malaya.' *Pacific Affairs*, 33(2): 158–68.

Frost, M. R. (2002) 'Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918.' Asia Research Institute Working Paper No. 10, August 2003.

Frost, M. R. (2003) 'Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918.' *ARI Working Paper Series*, National University of Singapore.

Gille, Z. and S. O'Riain (1992) 'Global Ethnography.' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28: 271–95.

Gille, Z. and S. O'Riain (2002) 'Global Ethnography.' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28: 271–95.

Goh, D. (2007) 'States of Ethnography: Colonialism, resistance and Cultural Transcription in Malaya and the Philippines, 1890s–1930s.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49(1): 109–42.

Goh, D., et al. (2009) *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Goh, D. P. S. (2007) 'States of Ethnography: Colonialism, Resistance, and Cultural representation in Malaya and the Philippines.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49(1): 109–42.

Goh, D. P. S. (2008) 'From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial multiculturalism: race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore.' *Sociology Compass*, 2(1): 232–53.

Goh, D. P. S. (2010) 'Unofficial Contentions: The Postcoloniality of Straits Chinese Political Discourse in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council.' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 41(3): 483–507.

Goh, R. (2005) *Christianity in Southeast Asia*. Southeast Asia Background Series No. 7. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Habermas, J. (1987) *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 308.

Hall, D. G. E . (1968) *A history of South-East Asia*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Heng, S.-K. M. and T. C. Liew (eds.) (2010) *State and Secularism: Perspectives from Asia*. Singapore: World Scientific.

Hill, M. (2001) 'The Singapore State's Response to Religion: From Co-optation to Legislative Control.' *Religion-Staat-Gesellschaft*, 2(27): 271–88.

Hill, M. and K. F. Lian (eds.) (1995) *The Politics of Nation-Building in Singapore.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Hindu Endowments Board (2005) *Beyond Divine Doors*. Singapore: Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple.

Hindu Endowments Board (2009) 'Sacred Sanctuary; The Sri Mariamman Temple.' Singapore: The Sri Mariamman Temple.

Ho, E. (2002) 'Gangsters into Gentlemen: The Breakup of Multiethnic Conglomerates and The Rise of a Straits Chinese Identity in Penang.' Paper presented at The Penang Story International Conference 18–21 April 2002, Penang, Malaysia, organized by The Penang Heritage Trust & STAR Publications.

Howe, L. (2001) *Hinduism and Hierarchy in Bali*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.

Illeto, R. (1992) 'Religion and Anti-colonial Movements' In Nicholas Tarling (ed.). *A Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*,Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 197–248.

Jelen, T. J. (2000) *To Serve God and Mammon: Church-State Relations in American Politics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Kaur, A. (2002) 'The role of Sikhs in the policing of British Malaya and the Straits Settlements (1874–1957).' M.A. thesis, Department of Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore.

Keddie, N. (2003) 'Secularism and its Discontents.' *Daedalus*,132(3): 14–30.

Kesavapany, K. and T. Chong (eds.) (2010) *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Kho, E. M. (1980) 'Religion and state in Singapore, 1959–1978.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore, pp. 71–72.

King, P. (2007) 'Chinese Enterprise and Malay Power: Nineteenth-Century Central Malaya from a Regional Perspective.' *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 1: 97–105.

Kohl, D. G. (1984) *Chinese Architecture in the Straits Settlements and Western Malaysia Temples, Kongsis and Houses*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.

Kong, L. (1999) 'Globalisation and Singaporean Transmigration: Re-imagining and Negotiating National Identity.' *Political Geography*, 18(5): 563–89. Available at: http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/geokongl/natident.pdf.

Kong, L. (2001)'Mapping 'New' Geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity.' *Progress in Human Geography*, 25(2): 211–33.

Kong, L. (2005) 'Religious processions: Urban politics and poetics.' *Temenos: Finnish Journal of Religion*, 41(2): 225–49.

Kong, L. (2006) 'Religion and spaces of technology: Constructing and contesting national, transnation and place.' *Environment and Planning A*, 38: 903–918.

Kramnick, I. and R. L. Moore (1996) *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness*. New York, NY: W.W.Norton and Company Inc.

Kratoska, P. H. (1983) 'Ends that we Cannot Forsee: Malay Reservations in British Malaya.' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, XIV(1): 149–168.

Kratoska, P. H. (ed.) (2001) *South East Asia, Colonial History*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Krech III, S. (1991) 'The State of Ethnohistory.' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 20: 345–75.

Kuo, H. Y. (2003) 'Nationalism Against its People? Chinese Business and Nationalist Activities in Inter-War Singapore, 1919–1941.' Southeast Asia Research Centre Working Paper Series, No. 48. City University of Hong Kong.

Lach, D. (1965) *Asia in the Making of Europe*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lach, D. (1969) *Southeast Asia in the Eyes of Europe*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lach, D. F. (1968) *Southeast Asia in the Eyes of Europe: The Sixteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lambert, F. (2003) *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Lee, E. (1991) *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore.* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Lee, H. G. (2000) *Ethnic Relations in Peninsular Malaysia: The Cultural and Economic Dimensions*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Lee, H. H. (1990) 'Religion and Politics in a Secular State: A case study of Singapore.' Academic Exercise, Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore.

Lee, P. P. (1978) *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore*. Kuala Lumpur and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lee, R. L. M. (1982) 'Sai Baba, Salvation and Syncretism: Religious Change in a Hindu Movement in Urban Malaysia.' *Indian Sociology* (NS), 16(1): 125–40.

Lee, R. L. M. (1989) 'Taipucam in Malaysia: Ecstacy and identity in a Tamil Hindu Festival.' *Indian Sociology* (NS), 23(2): 317–40.

Lee, R. L. M. (1992) 'The Two Faces of Charisma: Structure, System, Praxis in Islam and Hinduism.' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 22(1): 41–62.

Lee, R. L. M. and R. Rajoo (1987) 'Sanskritization and Indian Ethnicity in Malaysia.' *Modern Asian Studies*, 21: 389–415.

Lee, R. and S. Ackerman (1997) *Scared Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press.

Lee, T. (2002) 'The Politics of Civil Society in Singapore.' *Asian Studies Review*, 26(1): 97–117.

Lim, P. H. (2000) 'Continuity and Connectedness: The Ngee Heng Kongsi of Johor, 1844–1916.' Visiting Researchers Series No. 2, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Lo, W. F. (1957) 'The Transfer of the Straits Settlements from the Indian Office to the Colonial Office in 1867.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Malaya.

Looi, W. K. (1995) 'The Straits Settlements Government: A Study of the Straits Settlements Executive Council (1867–1941).' Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Madan, T. N. (1987) 'Secularism in Its Place.' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46(4): 747–59.

Makepeace, W., G. Brooke and R. Braddell (eds.) (1921) 'Religious Singapore.' In *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to 6th Feb 1919*. London: J. Murray.

Mani, A. (1977) 'The Changing Caste-Structure amongst the Singapore Indians.' M.Soc.Sc thesis, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

Marriot, H. (1911) *Census Report of the Straits Settlements, 1911*. Singapore: Government Printing Press.

Mathur, S. (2000) 'History and Anthropology in South Asia: Rethinking the Archive.' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29: 89–106.

Means, G. P. (1978) 'Public Policy toward Religion in Malaysia.' *Pacific Affairs*, 51(3): 384–405.

Means, G. P. (1982) 'Malaysia: Islam in a plural society.' In Carlo Caldarola (ed.) *Religion and Societies; Asia and the Middle East*. New York, NY: Mouton, pp. 445–96.

Means, G. P. (2006) 'The role of Islam in the political development of Malaysia.' In Tanya Storch (ed.) *Religion and Missionaries Around the Pacific, 1500–1900*, Hampshire: Ashgate, pp. 11–32.

Mearns, D. (1987) 'Caste Overseas: Does it Matter? Urban Indians in Malaysia.' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 21(2): 285–306.

Mearns, D. (1995) *Shiva's Other Children: Religion and Social Identity Amongst Overseas Indians.* New Delhi: Thousand Oaks.

Mialaret, J. P. (1969) *Hinduism in Singapore: A guide to the temples in Singapore.* Singapore: Donald Moore.

Mohd. Ali, M. (1989) *Uniformity and Diversity Amongst Muslims in Singapore*. M.Soc. Sci thesis, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

Mohd. Ali, N. (1985) 'Hindu mother-goddess worship in modern Singapore: An ethnographic study.' Unpublished Academic Exercise, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

Montagu, E. S. and Chelmsford (1918) *Report on Indian Governmental Reforms.* Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing.

Mudaliar, C. (1976) *Law and Policy Regarding Religious and Charitable Endowments in India.* Madras: Rathnam Press, University of Madras.

Murdoch, J. (1991) *Hindu and Muhammadan Festivals*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.

Nair, V. (1972) 'Tamil Reform Association, Singapore (1932–1961).' Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Singapore.

Nandy, A. (1990) 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance.' In Veena Das (ed.) *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 69–93.

Narain, V. (2008) *Reclaiming the Nation: Muslim Women and the Law in India*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Nathan, J. E. (1921) *The Census of British Malaya, 1921*. London: Dunstable & Watford.

Needham, A. D. and R. S. Rajan (2007) *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Newbold, T. J. Esq. (1839) *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca viz Pinang, Malacca and Singapore with a History of the Malayan states on the Peninsula of Malacca,* Vol. 1. London: John Murray.

Nonini, D. (1992) *British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900–1957.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, pp. 17, 30, 45, 50, 68.

Northcott, M. S. (1992) 'Two hundred years of Anglican Mission.' In Robert Hunt et. al (eds.) *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk.

O'Malley, L. S. S. (1935) *Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oddie, G. A. (1992) 'Regional and Other Variations in Popular Religion in India: Hook-Swinging in Bengal and Madras in the Nineteenth Century.' *Taja*, 3(3): 191–200.

Oddie, G. A. (1995) *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-swinging and its Prohibition in Colonial India*, *1800–1894*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Oddie, G. A. (2003) 'Constructing Hinduism: The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-understanding.' In Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed.) *Christians and Missionaries in India*. London: Routledge Curzon, pp. 155–82.

Ong, Y. D. (2005) *Buddhism in Singapore: A Short Narrative History*. Singapore: Skylark Publications.

O'Sullivan, R. L. (1986) *A History of the London Missionary Society in the Straits Settlements*. Brisbane: The British Library.

Palanivel, K. G. (1971) 'A Study of the Background to Malayan Indian Politics, 1900–1941.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Malaya.

Porter, A. (2004) *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Presler, F. A. (1987) *Religion Under Bureaucracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Purcell, V. (1948) *The Chinese in Malaya*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 49.

Puru Shotam, N. (1998) *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Rahman, N. A. A. (2006) *Colonial Image of Malay Adat Laws; A Critical Appraisal of Studies on Adat Laws in the Malay Peninsula during the Colonial Era and Some Continuities.* Social Sciences in Asia, Monograph Series, Leiden: Brill.

Rajah, A. (1975) 'The Ecological Study of Shrines.' Unpublished Academic Exercise, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

Rajathurai, R. (ed.) (1971) *Singapore Hindus Religious and Cultural Seminar Report 1969–1971.* The Organizing Committee, Third Singapore Hindu Religious and Cultural Seminar.

Ramanathan, K. (1995) 'Hindu Religion in an Islamic State: The Case of Malaysia.' Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam.

Ramstedt, M. (ed.) (2004) *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia; A Minority Religion Between Local, National and Global Interests*. London: Routledge.

Raybeck, D. (1992) 'Getting Below the Surface.' In Philp R Devita (ed.) *The Naked Anthropologist: Tales from Around the World.* Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Pub Co, pp. 3–17.

Reid, A. (1988/1993) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680,* Vol. 1–3. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Reuter, T. (2008) 'Global Trends in Religion and the Reaffirmation of Hindu Identity in Bali.' Working Paper, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.

Richardson, J. T. (ed.) (2004) *Regulating Religion; Case Studies from Around the Globe.* New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Rodan, G. (2004) *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Rose, S. (1962) *Britain and South-East Asia.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

Salemink, O. (2007) '*Is Protestant Conversion a form of Protest? Urban and Upland Protestants in Southeast Asia*.' Unpublished Conference Paper Presented at 'Christianity and the State in Asia; Complicity and Conflict.' National University of Singapore.

Sandhu, K. S. (1969) *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement Patterns (1786–1957).* London: Cambridge University Press.

Sandhu, K. S. (1993) 'Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore.' In Kevnial Singh Sandu and A. Mani (eds.) *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Sandhu, K. S. and A. Mani (eds.) (1993) *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Sardesai, D. R. (1977) *British Trade and Expansion in Southeast Asia, 1830–1914*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

Shennan, M. (2000) *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880–1960*. London: John Murray.

Shennan, M. (2001) *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880–1960*. London: John Murray.

Shiau, D. V. H. (2004) 'Contrary to Public Order, Public Health or Morality: The Conditions of Religious Freedom in Singapore.' Assignment, Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore

Siddique, S. and N. P. Shotam (1982) *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present, and Future.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Singapore Hindus Religious and Cultural Seminar Report (1969–1971). The Organising Committee, Third in Singapore Hindus Religious and Cultural Seminar-1971, Singapore.

Sinha, V. (1987) *Hinduism in Singapore: A Sociological and Ethnographic Perspective*. M.Soc.Sci Thesis, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

Sinha, V. (1997) 'Unpacking the Labels "Hindu" & "Hinduism" in Singapore.' *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 25(2): 139–60.

Sinha, V. (1999) 'Constituting and Re-constituting the Religious Domain in the Modern Nation State of Singapore.' In Kwok Kian Woon, Lily Kong, Kwa Chong Guan and Brenda Yeoh (eds.) *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society.

Sinha, V. (2003) 'Merging "Different" Sacred Spaces: Enabling Religious Encounters Through Pragmatic Utilization of Space?' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 37(3): 459–94.

Sinha, V. (2003a.) 'Scrutinizing the Themes of "Sameness" and "Difference" in the Discourse on Multi-religiosity and Religious Encounters in Singapore.' In Syed Farid Alatas, Lim Teck Ghee and Kazuhide Kuroda (eds.) *Asian Inter-faith Dialogue: Perspectives on Religion, Education and Social Cohesion*. Singapore: World Bank and RIMA.

Sinha, V. (2005) *A New God in the Diaspora; Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore.* Singapore: SUP and NIAS.

Sinha, V. (2005a) 'Theorising "Talk" About Religious Harmony and Religious Pluralism in Singapore.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20(1): 25–40.

Sinha, V. (2005b) 'Theorising 'Talk' About Religious Harmony and Religious Pluralism in Singapore.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20(1): 25–40.

Sinha, V. (2008) '"Hinduism" and "Taoism" in Singapore: Seeing Points of Convergence.' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 39(1): 123–47.

Smith, D. E. (1965) *Religion and Politics in Burma*. Princeton. NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sng, B. E. K. and P. S. You (1982) *Religious Trends in Singapore with Special Reference to Christianity*. Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship and Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

Srinivasan, T. N. (2007) *The Future of Secularism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Stahl, K. M. (1951) *The Metropolitan Organization of British Colonial Trade: Four Regional Studies*. London: Faber.

Talib, N. S. (1981) 'British Policy Towards Islam in the Straits Settlements (1867–1941).' Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Tamney, J. (1996) 'The Religious Studies Experiment.' In J. Tamney (ed.) *The Struggle over Singapore's soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture.* New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 25–56.

Tan, E. K. B. (2002) '"We the Citizens of Singapore": Multiethnicity, its Evolution and its Aberrations.' In Lai Ah Eng (ed.) *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern University Press, pp. 65–97.

Tan, E. K. B. (2004) '"We, the citizens of Singapore...": Multiethnicity, Its Evolution and its Aberrations.' In Lai Ah Eng (ed.) *Beyond Rituals and Riots; Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, pp. 65–97.

Tan, E. K. B. (2008) 'Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore.' In Lai Ah Eng (ed.) *Religious Diversity in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 55–82.

Tan, K. (2004) 'The Legal and Institutional Framework and Issues of Multiculturalism in Singapore.' In Lai Ah Eng (ed.) *Beyond Rituals and Riots; Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, pp. 98–113.

Tan, K. F. (1957) 'The Development of the Straits Settlements Civil Service 1867–1896.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Malaya.

Tan, L. J. (2007) 'Saints and Martyrs in the Diaspora: Sikh Identities in Post-colonial Singapore and Malaysia.' Master's Thesis, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Tan, K. P. (2010) 'Pragmatic Secularism, Civil Religion and Political Legitimacy in Singapore.' In Michael Heng Siam-Keng and Ten Chin Liew (eds.) *State and Secularism: Perspectives from Asia,* Singapore: World Scientific, pp. 339–58.

Tan, K. Y. L. (2002) 'The Legal and Institutional Framework and Issues of Multiculturalism in Singapore.' In Lai Ah Eng (ed.) *Beyond Rituals and Riot; Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern University Press, pp. 98–113.

Tan, K. Y. L. and T. Li-Ann (1997) *Tan, Yeo & Lee's Constitutional Law in Malaysia & Singapore*, 2nd ed. Singapore: Butterworths Asia.

Tan, L. J. (2000) 'Cinematic Representations of Partition: The Meshing of Art, Memory and History.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Tan, R. (1961/1962) 'The Cultural Landscape of Singapore: A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Religious Institutions on the Island (1819–1961).' Academic Exercise, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore.

Tan, T. Y. (1985) 'A history of the Singapore Khalsa Association: 1927–1981.' Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Tanaka, Y. (2002) "Singapore: Subtle NGO Control by a Devlopmentalist Welfare State." In Shinichi Shigetomi (ed.) *The State and NGOs: Perspective from Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 200–21.

Tarling, N. (1962) *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry in the Malay World, 1780–1962*. St. Lucia: Queensland University Press.

Tarling, N. (1963) *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World: A Study of British Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century South-East Asia*. Singapore: D. Moore Press.

Tarling, N. (1969) *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago 1824–1871*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Tarling, N. (1975) *Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Tarling, N. (ed.) (1992) *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tarling, N. (1992) *A Cambridge History of Southeast Asia,* Vol. 1 and 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tarling, N. (1993) *The fall of Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Tarling, N. (2001) *Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tate, D. J. M. (1989) *Straits Affairs: The Malay World and Singapore*. Hong Kong: John Nicholson Ltd, pp. 24–27, 54–55.

Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press and Harvard University Press.

Teixeira, M. (1963) *The Portuguese Missions in Malacca and Singapore 1511–1958*, vols. 3. Lisboa: Agencia Geral do Ultra mar.

Tejani, S. (2008) *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890–1950*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Texeira, M. (1961) *The Portuguese Missions in Malacca and Singapore (1511–1958)*. Lisboa: Agencia Geral do Ultramar.

Thio, E. (1969) *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula 1880–1910, vol. I: The Southern and the Central States.* Singapore: University of Malaya Press.

Thio, L. A. (1995) 'The Secular Trumps the Sacred: Constitutional Issues Arising out of Colin Chan v Public Prosecutor.' *Singapore Law Review*, 16: 26–103.

Thio, L. - A. (2008) Religion in the Public Sphere of Singapore: Wall of Division or Public Square? In Bryan S. Turner (ed.) *Religious Diversity and Civil Society: A Comparative Analysis*. Oxford: The Bardwell Press, pp. 73–103.

Tiew, W. S. (2003) 'Malaysian Historical Journals (1847–1966): A Bibliometric Study.' *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 8(1): 19–43.

Tilly, C. (2007) *A Secular Age.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Tong, C. K. (2007) 'Rationalizing Religion; Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society.' Social Sciences in Asia No. 13, Monograph Series. Leiden: Brill.

Tregonning, K. C. (1965) *The British in Malaya: The First Forty Years 1786–1826.* Tuscon, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, Association for Asian Studies.

Trigger, B. C. (1986) 'Ethnohistory: The Unfinished Edifice.' *Ethnohistory*, 33(3): 253–267.

Trocki, C. (1990) *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800–1910*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Trocki, C. (1993) 'The Rise and Fall of the Ngee Heng Kongsi in Singapore.' In David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (eds.) *Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp.68–88

Trocki, C. (1999) *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade 1750–1950*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Trocki, C. (2006) *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control*. London: Routledge.

Tschacher, T. (2007) *The Impact of Being Tamil on Religious Life Among Tamil Muslims in Singapore*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore.

Turnbull, C. M. (1972) *The Straits Settlements 1826–67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony*. London: University of London.

Turnbull, C. M. (1974) 'British Planning for Post-war Malaya.' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, V(2): 239–54.

Turnbull, M. C. (1981) *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei*. Singapore: Graham Brash.

Turnbull, M. C. (1989) *A History of Singapore 1819–1988*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Van der Veer, P. (2001a) *Imperial Encounters: Religion, Nation, and Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Van der Veer, P. (2001b) *Religious Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Vaughan, J. D. (1879) *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Mission Press.

Warner, M., J. van Antwerpen and C. Calhoun (eds.) *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weber, M. (1958) 'Bureaucracy.' In Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (trans. and eds.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Webster, A. (1998) *Gentleman Capitalists; British Imperialism in South East-Asia 1770–1890*. London: Tauris Academic Studies.

Wee, V. (1989) 'Secular state, multi-religious society: The patterning of religion in Singapore.' Paper for presentation at Conference on Communities in Question: Religion and Authority in East and Southeast Asia, 2–10 May 1989, Hua Hin, Thailand.

Wheatley, P. (1961) *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula Before A. D. 1500*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Whitehead, H. (1921) *The Village Gods of South India*. Calcutta: Association Press.

Wilford, A. C. (1996) '"Weapons of the Meek": Ecstatic Ritualism and Strategic Ecumenism among Tamil Hindus in Malaysia.' *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 9(2): 247–80.

Wilford, A. C. (2007) *Cage of Freedom; Tamil Identity and the Ethic Fetish in Malaysia*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Winstedt, R. (1944) *Britain and Malaya. 1786–1941*. London: Longmans, Green.

Winstedt, R. (1961) *The Malays: A Cultural History*. London: Routledge & Paul.

Worsley, P. (1998) 'The Nation state, colonial expansion and the contemporary world order.' In Tim Ingold (ed.) *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 1040–67.

Wynne, M. L. (1941) '*Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohammedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula, A. D. 1800–1935*.' Singapore: Government Printing Office, pp. 190–1.

Yandell, K. E. and J. J. Paul (eds.) (2000) *Religion and Public Culture. Encounters and Identities in Modern South India*. Surrey: Curzon Press.

Yegar, M. (1979) *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya: Policies and Implementation*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press.

Yen, C. H. (1987) 'Class Structure and Social Mobility in the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaysia, 1800–1911.' *Modern Asian Studies*, 21(3): 417–45.

Yeo, C. S. (1984) 'A North Indian Community in Singapore: Continuity and Change among Bihari Dairymen.' Academic Exercise, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

Yeoh, K. W. and A. Lau (1991) 'From colonialism to independence, 1945–1965.' In Earnest Chew and Edwin Lee (eds.) *A History of Singapore*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Yeoh, S. G. (2001) 'Producing Locality: Space, Houses and Public Culture in a Hindu Festival in Malaysia.' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 35(1): 33–64.

Yong, C. F. (1997) 'Law and Order: British Management of Malayan Communism during the Interwar years, 1919–1942.' In Brook Barrington (ed.) *Empires, Imperialism and Southeast Asia; Essays in Honour of Nicholas Tarling*. Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, pp. 127–47.

Index