CHAPTER 2

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

By paying attention to the web of social relations and every-day practices, questions of human agency and cultural continuity/discontinuity come to the fore. (Guan 2001: 34). Arasaratnam observes that there was a gradual growth of Indian social life and religious institutions in Malaya. He states that they are the product of the labourers' attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to plant some roots in his new surroundings. The Census Report of Madras (1931) had said of the emigrating Indian labourer, 'He takes his own world with him and sets it down in his new surroundings.' In this he was helped by the plantation and governmental authorities, who desired to upset him as little as possible. (Arasaratnam 1970: 65)

The Chettiar maintains his home-dress even in Malaya. The dhoti with a cylindrical turning round his waste is there. His forehead, chest and arms are smeared with the holy ashes. The golden borders on his upper cloth make a glittering contrast to his swarthy complexion. (Sastry 1947: 49) Some young Indian girls occasionally wear western or Malay apparel. By and large, however, Indian women dress in Saris. Similarly, while most Indian men in Malaysia usually wear trousers and shirts, when they do wear more traditional costumes (in their homes, for weddings, etc.), like the males of other ethnic groups, they usually wear clothing specifically identifiable with their own ethnic group.

Arasaratnam in his study points out how caste taboos were observed in estate housing. Labourers of the untouchable castes, who formed over a third of the labour force, were housed in separate lines, away from those of the clean castes. Provisions of drinking water were also separate. The untouchables had their separate shrines, both in estate and towns, and were not allowed into the temples of the upper castes. Even in a cosmopolitan city such as Singapore, people of the paraiyan caste had to carry out their
customary obligations, such as carrying the corpses of deceased high caste men and beating the drum at their funerals. (Arasaratnam 1970: 65)

The persistence of caste consciousness led to the formation of caste associations, primarily in towns but extending to estates. The depressed castes were forced into a consciousness of their identity by the discrimination they encountered and were among the first to come together from Adi Dravida Sangams in cities and towns like Singapore, Ipoh, Penang, Malacca, and Klang. Other associations soon developed, uniting such castes as vellalar, ahampadaiar, yadhavar, kallar, and maruthuvar. (Arasaratnam 1970: 66)

The tendency for caste taboos to be followed as closely as possible resulted from the widespread feeling that the labourer would soon get back to his village in India, and reenter his niche in the social order. He could not do this if he was seen to have followed socially unconventional behaviour. The persistence of caste consciousness is also seen in reports of caste clashes that occasionally occurred. In fact caste was one of the prime causes of early disturbances among labour. Such clashes occurred between untouchables and upper caste men, and between various clean castes. (Arasaratnam 1970: 66)

Jain in his study of Pal Melayu brings to light how the occurrence of a few cases of the extended family among Tamil labourers may be attributed to the retention of the patrilineal norms of the traditional Tamil non-Brahman kinship system of South India. (Jain, 1970: 419)

Rajesh Rai states how Hindustanis have contributed to the production and reproduction of social and cultural phenomena is Singapore. The only (official) north Indian Hindu temple, the Laxmi Narayan Temple, has since its formation been dominated by migrants from Uttar Pradesh. Two other predominantly ‘north’ Indian Hindu organisations in Singapore, the North Indian Hindu Association (founded in 1921) and the Arya Samaj (founded in 1927), were formed through the initiative of the Hindustani community. In addition the migrants have been central in spearheading Hindi education
so that Hindi has since the early 1990's received official sanction in the national curriculum as a 'mother tongue'. This decision meant that ethnic Indian students could officially take Hindi as their mandatory second language in primary and secondary school; previously only Tamil among the Indian languages was in this category. (Rai 2004: 2)

Sandhu brings forth how among other things, the toddy drinking habit of Indians was carried to Malaya. The ordinary *kallukkatais* or toddy shops of Malaya have not had any unique architectural style, but they have had a distinctive general appearance, which has tended to set them apart from their surroundings. Some of the people who have had experience of seeing both the Madras and Malayan types think they exhibit some prominent features in common. This may well be the case for the following description of a toddy shop in Southern India in the early centuries AD, could well fit its Malayan counterpart of recent times, flags excepted:

The gates of toddy shops have flags  
As sign of sale, where drinkers come  
In numbers, and the noisy yard  
Where fish and meat are fried, is heaped  
With sand, and with flower gifts is strewn. (Sandhu 1969: 235)

This was corroborated further by Sastry when he stated for the Indian labour, ‘He has carried all the way to Malaya his toddy habits. This has greatly reduced his working capacity’. (Sastry 1947: 46)

Wiebe and Marriappen in their work on the Pudthukuchi Indians brought forth that the Indians are less interested in charms, spirits and magical powers than are their Malay fellows. However, they do seem to have fewer such orientations than do their lower caste fellows in certain South Indian villages. Very few of any age wear charms, most are afraid of dark now more for non-spiritual reasons and the symbols often placed
before South Indian homes to ward off the possible evil influences of man, animal and spirit are seldom found here. Obviously, these people like their counterparts in Indian villages, are involved in Hinduism more at 'little' (common, non-literate) than at 'great' tradition (abstract, literate) levels. But it seems some of the more magical-animistic perspectives these people might once have had, have been dropped. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 145)

Family relationships obviously remain important in defining both the life cycle ceremonies and their subsequent social-rights and responsibilities. Religious considerations permeate almost all of these observances. Most of the people do not feel it important to be able to or find it interesting to speculate about such things as the religious reasons for 'odd number' specifications in the performance of ceremonial duties. Such things are simply accepted at face value. Their everyday involvement in the performance of such ceremonies, furthermore, helps them to know some of the ways in which they and their people are different from others. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 134) There is nothing entirely standard about the ways in which life-cycle ceremonies are performed. Variables such as income, prestige, and household composition influence procedures. So do general caste differences.

**Life-cycle ceremonies**

**NAMING**

The ceremony is customarily observed during the fifteenth evening following the child's birth. A few relatives and close friends attend, paying due attention to new born and enjoying a meal together. The child's name is usually selected after at least some consultation with the horoscope. If a couple bears a child after approaching a particular deity for help, the child will almost certainly be named after the deity. As in India, the names used by Indian Malaysians have almost always had some specific religious reference. Though for many, this continues to be so, here, as in India, there is an increase in the use of names other than those of deities also. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 129)
**EAR-PIERCING**

Almost all Tamil girls have their ears pierced when they are young. At one time, this ceremony usually included a big feast. Now feasts are seldom involved and the ceremony includes only members of the family. A goldsmith is either invited to come to a family's home or families simply take their children along a trip and accomplish the job. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 129-130)

**PUBERTY**

Puberty ceremonies have not been observed on a grand scale among the Indians for at least a decade now. Some parents at one time marked this life-cycle event for their daughters by holding a marriage like celebration. Such attention would now embarrass most girls and parents no longer insist on public observances. Instead the occasion is now usually simply observed within the family. The girl attends this little ceremony in a new sari and blouse and usually wears garlands and flowers. For about the next two weeks she is given only vegetarian food to eat. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 130)

**MARRIAGE**

Number of social problems appeared, originating in the whole process and pattern of migration and settlement. An outstanding problem relating to Indian labour society in these years concerned the maintenance of a healthy family life as the basis of social life. The Indian Emigration Act of 1922 had this in mind when it legislated the well-known sex ratio rule among emigrants. This would offset the social evils resulting from a predominantly male migrant community in foreign lands. The Indian Government repeatedly exempted Malaya from the operation of this rule. So for a long time there was a heavy imbalance in the sex ratio of the Indian labour community in Malaya. It affected family life on the estates and the Labour Department was forced to take note of its unhealthy social effects. It was noted very early that a high proportion of crimes among Indian labourers were committed for reasons of sex. In a community where men greatly outnumbered women, marriage became a very flimsy institution. Martial infidelity, enticement of married women, and prostitution became frequent. (Arasaratnam 1970: 67)
Officers of the Labour Department were often upon to adjudicate in such family disputes. Delinquent European planters added to the problem by enticing young and attractive brides of labourers. When such disputes were taken to court, the courts had no firm guidelines to go on. Marriage among Hindus were difficult to prove in the absence of a system of registration of such marriages. The only evidence was the act of religious ceremony that had been performed, and whose evidence could not be secured from those married in India. In the case of those married in Malaya, the courts ruled that the only admissible evidence was that of a Brahmin priest officiating at a proper Hindu ceremony. As the Indian member of the Federal Council pointed out, most marriages on estates were performed by non-Brahmin priests, and hence could not be proven before a court of law. (Arasaratnam 1970: 68)

The officers of the Labour Department took up with the Government the possibility of a system of registration for Hindu marriages solemnized in Malaya. They were supported by the planters, whose General Labour Committee of 1920 had recommended such a scheme. So the Hindu Marriage Registration Act was passed in 1924, providing for voluntary registration of marriages among Hindus. All District Officers and the Collectors of Land Revenue of Kuala Lumpur and Seremban were appointed Registrars. After six months of the operation of the act, out of twenty eight Hindu marriages registered, at least seventeen were those of Ceylon Tamils and Indian educated classes. Thus the measure failed in its main object of encouraging labourers to register their marriages. It was thought that perhaps the provision of more easy facilities for registration might help. So estate managers of standing were empowered to act as Honorary Registrars. In 1928 the Federal Council appointed a Committee to go into the working of the Act. (Arasaratnam 1970: 68)

The labourer still considered registration a redundant act, the religious ceremony being in his eyes the crucial and all-important event. Hence he did not bother to take the initiative in going through the registration process, and was further discouraged by the feed of 2 Dollars. The Committee recommended some measures easing the process of registration, and wanted full information of this facility to be made known to labourers. It
must be noted that registration of Hindu marriages was not yet generally practiced in India. In the inter-war period, this was a major social problem that kept cropping up in the way of ugly incidents on estates and difficult cases before the courts. The Indian Agent referred to it frequently in his Annual Reports. Social reformers within the Indian community addressed their minds to it, and suggested various solutions. (Arasaratnam 1970: 69)

The imbalances of the sexes, and the consequent absence of proper family life, was reduced in the late 1930s. By this time the estate labour community had a fair proportion of females. It was among urban workers and the pedlar and shopkeeper groups that men continued to outnumber women. On the estates, improved housing, with the new semi-detached cottages for families, children’s crèches, nurseries and schools, maternity benefits, and hospital facilities, all helped in the direction of a healthier and more settled family life. (Arasaratnam 1970: 69)

The early immigrant labour, coming through the indenture system, was predominantly male in its composition. The kind of work available, the living conditions, and the attitudes of the time, were not conducive to the migration of females in any large numbers. (Arasaratnam 1970: 32) This reflected in the 1891 Census, when there were eighteen females per 1,000 Indian males. A more enlightened attitude towards this problem combined with economic factors to bring about a change in this position. Work in rubber plantations was such that it was advantageous to have a settled labour force: women and children could be given lighter forms of work. Then there was the attitude of Government of India, which from the 1920 gave serious attention to the sex imbalance among emigrants. (Arasaratnam 1970: 32)

Plantation labour society, and indeed Indian labour society else-where, was very much a male-dominated one. The very earliest migrations had been predominantly male, but the ratio of females to males started increasing gradually from the beginning of the twentieth century. Employers seeing the advantage of a settled labour force, with a proper family life, began to encourage and make facilities for such family settlements. The
Immigration Act of 1922 legislated towards this end but Malaya was exempted repeatedly from its operation. The absence of family life added to the restlessness of labour and sex-related crime was a persistent problem. Even with family migration, the proportion of women to men was low. In 1931 there were 482 women to 1,000 men among the Indian population the proportion among labour would have been even less. This and the nature of labour housing led to problems relating to marriage and family life. There was no provision for registration of Hindu marriages until 1924. Marriages among plantation labourers were generally performed by non-Brahmin priests and could not be proven before a court of law. Even after the passing of the Hindu Marriage Registration Act in 1924, very few labourers took advantage of its provision. (Arasaratnam 1993: 6) From the 1930s, the Indian population increased not only by immigration but also by reproduction. (Arasaratnam 1970: 32)

In the case of the Indian female workers alone, this concentration in the agricultural sector has been even more marked. Females have generally formed between 25 and 45 per cent of the total Indian labour force of the country and more than 80 per cent of them have been in agricultural pursuits since the early years of the present century. While still on the subject of Indian woman employment, it may be worthwhile to note that their rate of participation in economic activity has been proportionately higher than their numerically superior Malay and Chinese counterparts. In the Federation of Malaya in 1947, for example, about 41 per cent of the Indian females aged ten years and over were economically active compared with less than a quarter of the Malays and Chinese. The corresponding figures for 1957 were almost 52 and less than 25 per cent respectively. This high activity rate among the Indian females has been not so much a question of attitudes or inherent ethnic propensities but rather of features associated with the place and type of Indian female economic activity. About three-quarters of the Indian female workers have been on plantations where wages have been generally low and it has been normal for almost all working-age members, including females, of families to work, the main obstacles to this being removed by the provision of creches, ayahs and other child-minding facilities. Outside the plantation sector of the Malayan economy the activity rate of Indian females has been low—on the whole less than 20 per cent
compared with more than 80 per cent for the Chinese. In the larger urban centres the rate has been even lower. (Sandhu 1969: 245 & 247)

The reformers achieved a major success when the Civil Marriage Ordinance was passed in 1940. It provided for a purely civil marriage for Hindus. The Registrar of Marriages could solemnize and register such marriages which were monogamous and through which the wife’s legal status was ensured. The reformers propagated monogamous marriages among the working class and sought to bring about a healthy family life among them and to protect the rights of women and children. Their efforts to legalize Brahminic Tamil marriages were not successful till long after the end of World War Two. (Arasaratnam 1993: 18)

By far the majority of marriages are still partially arranged. At one time a middleman, regularly helped families find suitable partners for their children, receiving pay for their services. Now, increasingly, friends and relatives perform this function. Though marriages are generally arranged, the people to be married are almost always now given a voice in finally determining the suitability of the proposed match. Once okays are obtained- and sometimes even without- the horoscopes of the two are normally consulted. If they do not match and the problems implied are basic, the planning is stopped. If they do, a ‘contacting’ ceremony is planned for later. (Wiebe and Marriappan 1978: 130)

The contracting ceremony is held at the prospective bride’s home. The prospective bridegroom’s party brings along betel leaves, areca nuts, bananas, flowers, sandal wood dust, some kungkuman, turmeric and coconut. The exchange of these items between the bride and the groom’s parents (the exchange of the thambalam) signifies that the girl involved is contracted for marriage with the boy. In turn, the groom’s party is given food. Then the most significant event of the contracting ceremony, discussions about how many sovereigns of gold the groom’s people will give for the bride, take place. Conclusions here depend upon the status, abilities and incomes of the two families and the earning prospects of the people to be married. The bride’s people announce how
much they will give the couple only after the groom’s people have committed themselves. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 131) Discussions here are detailed and they sometimes involve hard bargaining. Families ‘invest’ in the matches and they become linked in the process. The discussions almost always involve gold, as it is a traditionally prestigious offering and also it is difficult to cheat with gold. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 131)

Next in line is the *parisam* or betrothal ceremony. Again horoscopes are consulted in the selection of a good day. Normally this ceremony is held in the evening at the bride’s house. The ceremony begins with the arrival of a number of women (five, seven, or nine, but never an even number), each bearing a tray. The trays themselves bear the items brought along by the groom’s people; white sugar in lumps; turmeric, betel leaves, areca nuts, coconuts; promised gold ornaments, a *sari* and a blouse; garlands and flowers; fruits; sandalwood dust; scented water and *kungkumam*. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 131)

After the trays and their offering are viewed by those who want to and if everything is as it should be, an elderly, highly respected man picks up the tray with the gold and gives it to the bride’s father, saying, ‘this now belongs to you, your daughter now belongs to the boy’. The bride’s father then acknowledges this three times and the most important part of the betrothal ceremony is over. The bride next tries on her new *sari* and gold ornaments, and sometimes now the couple exchanges rings. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 132)

The marriage ceremony takes place at the groom’s house. The bride normally arrives the day before though her arrival sometimes varies with the distance between the two homes. If it is easily covered, she may travel over on the wedding day. A superstition is that a bride should not travel to her groom’s place on a Tuesday or a Friday, both inauspicious days. By tradition, the bride’s parents should give the couple an oil lamp, a brass vessel, a tray and a brass water carrier, the carrier being offered filled with an odd number of sweet-cakes. The bride’s people can additionally give whatever else they wish;
from radio, electric fan, bed, mattress, etc. By tradition, the newlyweds should not be
given a broom or a winnowing basket. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 132)

Indians give their *moey* monies at times of marriage. According to this time-
honoured procedure, when a member of one family gets married, members of other
concerned families give gifts or money contributions to one or the other or both of the
sides involved in the match. The ‘gifts’ in general go towards the establishment of the
new couple but they are also carefully kept in mind. The giving families expect to receive
the equivalent of what they have give, plus a little in ‘interest’, at appropriate times. In a
sense, the *moey* procedure is hardly an investment or saving procedure. Such giving
simply links together sets of families, helping them provide occasionally for certain of
their members. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 122)

Children, girls especially, are subject to the authority of their parents until
marriage and ‘good’ marriages are most commonly joined with at least an active
participation in the decision making process by the parents. The considerations important
in the definitions involve personal, economic, family, religious and other factors. Most
marriages were within the caste, though this was difficult for minority castes and there
was a tendency for allied castes to coalesce, a trend not contrary to developments in
India. Niece and cross-cousin marriages, the most popular form in many Tamil castes,
were the first preference, but this was not possible in many castes. Thus the Annual
Labour Report of 1935 says that such marriages are not as common in Malaya as they are
in India. It also finds little evidence of child marriage, the general age of marriage for
girls being 16. (Arasaratnam 1970: 66)

For a number of non-Brahman castes in Tamil-speaking districts of Tanjore and
Madurai in Southern India, the smallest unit of endogamy is constituted by a man’s
matrilateral and patrilateral cross cousins (real or classificatory) and by the daughters of
his elder sister (real or classificatory). The widest unit of exogamy for the same peoples is
constituted by a man’s own patrilineage and agnatically related patrilineages. (Jain 1970:
269)
In actual practice, however, marriages do not always take place within the narrowest limits of endogamy and the widest limit of exogamy. Thus among non-Brahman castes throughout the Tamil country, persons may marry within the limits of caste or subcaste endogamy, among cognates who are real or classificatory affines, or even among unrelated families. In this basic feature there are very few differences between castes of the Vanniar category and the Adi Dravidian castes. Martial residence is patrivirilocal, and inter-marrying kin groups are usually scattered over a small area in one or more villages within the radius of twenty to twenty-five miles. Within the endogamous limits, widow and widower remarriage is permitted, and when a man can afford it he may take more than one wife. (Jain 1970: 270)

During the period under review it is valid to distinguish between primary, secondary, and irregular unions between men and women. In a primary union the traditional norms of endogamy and exogamy were complied with. A primary marriage took place either in the bridegroom’s house or in a temple. Usually a non-Brahman marriage priest officiated at the ceremony. The proof of marriage consisted in the testimony of witnesses, among whom were included prominent kanganies and close kinsmen of both bride and bridegroom. They were nominated to head the respective sides in marriage at the engagement ceremony (uppu-tampulam) at the bride’s place. For a man as well as a woman it was necessary to obtain the kangany’s consent before marriage could take place. When a person failed to do so, he was severely punished. (Jain 1970: 271)

A marriageable young girl had no alternative but to marry a person chosen for her by her parents and kangany. If after marriage she ran away from her husband’s house, her parents would not offer her a refuge. A girl’s parents kept a strict watch over their daughters morals. Since at that time girls were married before puberty, instances of premarital sex relations were rare. However, if a boy and girl were caught in such an act, the punishment could be very severe indeed. (Jain 1970: 271)
There was a simple procedure by which a man and a woman could obtain a divorce. The aggrieved party approached the manager for a hearing. The manager, aided by the kirani and the kangany, usually had a good knowledge of both parties. If granted a hearing, the husband and wife, accompanied by their respective marriage witnesses, appeared in the manager’s office for a judgment. If a divorce was granted, the woman returned the marriage badge (tali) to the man. It signaled the formal dissolution of marriage in the presence of the manager and at least some of the persons who had participated in the marriage ritual as representatives of either side. (Jain 1970: 272)

It is clear from the genealogies of the present inhabitants that second marriages of both men and women took place. Men entering into such unions were widowers, divorcees, or polgynists; women were frequently widows or divorcees, with or without children. A certain number of such persons of either sex had been deserted by the spouse of previous union. While in the majority of cases such a marriage was a secondary or tertiary union for both, in some cases one of the partners was an unmarried person. (Jain 1970: 272)

It was possible to distinguish between formalized and unformalized secondary marriages. In the former case, the ceremony of natu-vitu-tali was performed. This was a simple ceremony held in the house of the bridegroom. In the presence of witnesses from both sides and amid chants of sacred hymns by a priest, the groom put a tali around the neck of the bride. (Jain 1970: 272)

Unformalized secondary marriages ie. Certtu-k-kolu-tal unions formed in Malaya could always be adequately rationalized by the couples concerned in terms of situational factors. It is not possible to construct a full typology of such unions. The most common type seems to have been that of lovers who presented themselves as husband and wife at the emigration depot. It is fair to speculate that a good number of such couples would have consisted of unmarried persons, unable to marry each other under traditional rules. Still others were married persons escaping from unsatisfactory marriages. In all such escapades the kangany had to connive at the union. Officers at the emigration depot could
be easily fooled, as any couple was accepted if the woman had the tali around her neck. A tali could be bought cheaply at any local market. (Jain 1970: 273)

Needless to say Certtu-k-kolu-tal unions of emigrants were notably brittle. It mattered little whether such unions were formed solely to facilitate emigration or were, in addition, motivated by affection. The common underlying principle was the same – it was a joining and not a marriage; the couple could as easily separate as they had come together. The adult members of the community were impressed by the ease with which the woman in a Certtu-k-kolu-tal could obtain a separation. All she had to was to hand him back the marriage badge, after which she was free to join another man – and yet another if she wished, thus forming a chain of Certtu-k-kolu-tal throughout her life as a female estate worker. In this she was helped by her independent economic status, the overall scarcity of women, and the permissive attitude of the management. In native thinking great care was taken to distinguish unions based on Certtu-k-kolu-tal from regular marriage and formalized secondary unions (natu-vitu-tali) (Jain 1970: 274)

**BIRTH OF THE FIRST CHILD**

The parents of a daughter usually invite her to come home for the birth of her first child. Better – off parents may invite their daughters during the seventh month of pregnancy, others only during the last days. Ideally, the new mother’s parents are supposed to provide the newborn with a gold chain or gold bangles. They also provide the child with a cradle and some swaddling clothes. (Wiebe and S. Marriappen 1978: 133)

**DEATH**

People almost always bury rather than burn their dead. Among other things (relatively few people of Sudra and Harijan level castes in South India cremate their dead) this means of disposing of bodies is currently less than one-third the price of cremations. The bodies of young children are always buried. The barber is responsible for preparing the fire pot to be carried by the eldest son during the procession. Sixteen days
after the death of the husband, the widow is not permitted to wear jewellery and is supposed to wear only a white sari. (Wiebe and S. Marriappen 1978: 133)

Little as well as great traditional variations occur in the ways in which the adherents of different religious systems view their worlds. Within the multi-religious Malaysian context, sharp religious differences among the various groups remain. Religious systems provide the symbols according to which people can identify themselves. They define also the worlds of the people, identifying their backgrounds, the patterns according to which they should rear their children, live their lives and direct their energies. When they came, the Chinese and the Indians brought along their own religious patterns. In this they were allowed and even encouraged by colonial principals interested in contended workers, whether or not in 'saving souls'. (Wiebe and S. Marriappen 1978: 128)

Religion

Among the Indian communities overseas religious institutions were firmly established from the very first periods of settlements. About 80 per cent of Indian immigrants to Malaya were Hindus. Immigrant plantation labour had temples built for them in the estate, to establish for them a homely environment. An ancient Tamil adage said: Do not settle in a land where there is no temple. The isolation of Indians in the estates, and their concentration in small groups in their housing settlements, led to the practice of Hindu forms and ceremonies in a manner approximating as closely as possible to that in India. In urban areas, this was more difficult. But it speaks for the persistence of the religious element in the Indian tradition that cities and towns with some Indian concentrations soon had Hindu temples and shrines. The middle class was rather late in wanting to found religious institutions in Malaya. Those of the second generation positively shied away from open adherence to Hindu practices. The increasing migration of educated Indians in the first two decades of the twentieth century led to some determined attempts to found well-organised temples in urban areas. As was natural, new
immigrants were far more keen on preserving the Indian tradition, and many of the successful religious ventures are the result of their efforts. (Arasaratnam 1970: 162)

Arasaratnam establishes how the Indian labour would not have felt at home in Malaya if he had not successfully transplanted religious institutions that enabled him to practice and profess the beliefs he had brought with him. Among the amenities the estate management provided was a temple, a modest square shaped structure, in which was enshrined a concentrated image of a deity of the Hindu Pantheon. The religion of the estate and urban labourer was akin from the village of South India from where he came. The deities he worshipped were the village Gods and Goddesses. Thus most estate temples were dedicated to Kali, Mariamman, Aiyar and Vairavar. There were also some temples dedicated to universal Gods such as Siva, Ganesha, Subramanya, and Vishnu. Very few of the estate temples had Brahmin priests to officiate in them. This was done in haphazard fashion by a person selected from the highest non-Brahmin caste in the estate. He became the pusari or the non-Brahmin priest of the temple. The temple was run by the Indian power hierarchy of the estate, consisting of the Indian clerical officers and influential kangany. Contributions were received from the labourers for the upkeep of the temple and the performance of its various festivities. Latter on, part of the profits of the estate toddy shops were paid by the manager for temple expenses. All major Hindu festivals were celebrated, these being the labourers only occasion for diversions from chores of estate labour, and for the get-together of an estate community. (Arasaratnam 1970: 67)

Belle in his study brings forth how Hindus in Malaysia can trace their origins to various migratory streams, each of which has made an enduring contribution to the overall fabric of Malaysian Hinduism

Semi-skilled labourer- The bulk of modern Indian migration has comprised indenturued and assisted labourers, recruited to serve as an unskilled workforce either in the British plantation economy or within public utilities. These groups of Indians were responsible for transplanting Dravidian village Hinduism to Malaysia.
The Chettiar (a Tamil merchant) caste- Although only a small number of Chettiars migrated to Malaysia they exercised a disproportionate influence in the commercial development of Malaya, and in the establishment of Agamic Hinduism. Nattukottai Chettiar, who worship Murukan as a clan *ista deva*, built and maintained many Murukan temples in Malaysia and Singapore, imported Brahmin *kurrukals* and Brahmin orthodoxy, advised on the proper practices associated with Murukan worship and the conduct of Murukan festivals, and have underwritten many Malaysian religious activities.

North Indians- This has included a professional and merchant class, (mainly Gujerati and Bengali), but also Sikhs and Pathans, many of whom were recruited into the police and military forces.

Ceylonese "Jaffna" Tamils- These were recruited throughout the entire British period to fill administrative positions in British run enterprises. Until well after independence, Jaffna Tamils retained a strong sense of "apartness" refusing to identify themselves with the wider Indian community. The Ceylonese were drawn overwhelmingly from the dominant Vellalar caste and observed Agamic "great tradition" Hinduism. Their influence on the post-war emergence of Saiva Siddhanta in Malaysia and their input on the overall development of Agamic traditions has been considerable.

Professional and clerical migrants- These mainly consisted of well educated Dravidians, largely of Tamil origin, but included a large number of Malayalam (Arasaratnam 1970: 33-34). Most of this intake sought employment in Malaya throughout the 1920's and 1930's. Many of these became involved in the post war Tamil revival and have promoted the wider tenets of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. (Belle 2001: 4 – 5)

A large number of the *agamic* temples of Malaya are dedicated to Murugan or Subramanya and to Mariamman. These may be taken as the two most popular Hindu deities in this country, as they are in Tamil Nad. (Arasaratnam 1970: 168)
From the early years, taboos connected with religious ritual were followed closely. Persons belonging to the untouchable castes were not admitted into temples, in keeping with time-honoured practice in India. Some reform was brought about in 1935 when the Mahamariamman temple of Penang, an important agamic temple, opened its doors to these people. After the war all temples admitted ‘untouchables’, largely under the influence of the temple entry movements in India. But there was no resistance to this movement in Malaya as in India because of the absence of an entrenched orthodox Brahmin priesthood. (Arasaratnam 1970: 168)

All the village gods of South India are imported into Malaya. Mariamma temple is a common temple. Temples are erected in many of the way side estates. Annual village festivals are conducted. Offerings are made to Gods on occasions of epidemics. Chettiar have erected Subrahmanya temples wherever they went. Subrahmanya is the God of serpents. Chettiar seem to be having some special attachment to this God. (Sastry 1947: 49)

Broadly, two types of Hindu religious institutions were established in Malaya. There were the more numerous shrines of modest proportions devoted to the village deities of popular Hinduism. In this category came almost all temples in estates, and the shrines built near the vicinity of labour lines in cities and towns. (Arasaratnam 1970: 162) Worship and ceremony in such temples were in keeping with the diversified traditions of folk religion, lacking in scriptural uniformity or universality. Then there were the large temples dedicated to the universal Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. These were generally more elaborate structures, built with contributions from the professional and commercial classes, and managed by committees among them. Many of these temples were constructed through the munificence of the Chettiyar, a community deeply entrenched in Saivite Hindu religious tradition. In these temples, worship was carried out according to the scriptural texts by Brahmin priests well-versed in ritual, and brought from India specifically for this purpose by the managers of the temples. Ceylon Tamils also undertook the construction of temples and maintenance of Hindu institutions. They
were a community of piety and devotion, and their relative affluence and education enabled them to manage these institutions well. (Arasaratnam 1970: 163)

Temples were managed by *panchayats* appointed in various ways. In the estates, *panchayats* were formed out of Asian Hindu staff and kanganys, under the watchful eye of the management. Labourers had no participation in management, though they were by far the most numerous users of the estate temple. In urban temples there were many methods by which *panchayats* were constituted. Where a temple was built by a family or a caste group such as the Chettiyar, management was vested in members of that family and their descendants, or important members of that caste. In many other temples that were built by public contributions, *panchayats* were elected from the community of regular worshippers. Many irregularities arose from the absence of a controlled system of temple management. In Singapore, the Government sought to bring about some order. It vested the management of the four main temples – Mariamman Temple, Sivan Temple, Perumal Temple, Kaliamman Temple in the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Board, a semi-government body. The Board appointed *panchayats* to take charge of running the daily activities of the temple. (Arasaratnam 1970: 163)

All financial expenditure was under the Board, whose approval the *panchayats* had to seek for any activity involving finance. *Panchyats* managed the regular performance of temple ceremonial, and supervised duties of the temple staff. The management of Singapore’s major Hindu temples by the body of Europeans who constituted the Board roused some hostile feelings among Hindus there. A writer in *The Indian* in August 1925 gave expression to these feelings and asked for greater say by Hindus in the management of their temples. Besides the Endowment Board, there was a Hindu Advisory Board that was presumably consulted on matters affecting Hindus in the Straits Settlements. It consisted of nominated Hindus but does not appear to have had much power. (Arasaratnam 1970: 164)

In the 1920s Hindu Sabhas and Sangams cropped up all over the country. Like the Indian Association of this period, they suffered from factionalism and the dispersal of
energies through a multiplicity of societies. There was as yet no large united organization which the Government could recognize as representing Malayan Hindus and shift some of the responsibility for financial management. These bodies were unable to agree on nominations to the Advisory Board, and the Government was understandably cautious in handing over control of substantial funds to them. The increasing emphasis on Indian unity and identity after 1935 produced some effects on Hindu organizations also. There was a tendency towards fusion into more viable and stronger bodies. (Arasaratnam 1970: 165)

Lee and Rajoo further suggest that the Hindu organizations that were established prior to 1940 generally suffered from factionalism and administrative disputes. Although most of them were influenced by social and religious developments in South India, none came under the control of a local umbrella body. Thus, the activities of these organizations were highly dispersed and uncoordinated. However, the arrival of E V Ramasamy Naicker, the leader of the Dravidian movement in Madras, in Malaya in 1929 produced some integrative effects on these groups. The arousal of Tamil nationalist sentiments by Ramasamy Naicker's brief visit resulted in the formation of the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) in 1931. Although the TRA was not a religious movement, its anti-Brahminical and anti-Sanskritic stance provided an implicit model for the promotion of Saiva Siddhanta, the South Indian school of Hinduism. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 403)

In their efforts to project an image of modernity, the members of the TRA attempted to disseminate reformist ideas concerning the practice of Hinduism. One of their main targets for reform in 1938 was the baroque act of penance performed by kavadi bearers and fire walkers at certain Hindu festivals. Ironically, the TRA's advocacy for the removal of these ceremonial forms, considered backward and savage, did not conflict with the constraints in bloodletting in Sanskritic rituals. The crusade against animal sacrifices and human mutilations in Hindu rituals was renewed with increased vigor after the war. TRA members made strenuous efforts to influence the government to ban these practices but failed because popular Hindu opinion was against them. The impact of the TRA on Malayan Hinduism was not significant, but even as it faded into obscurity after
the war its numerous successors quickly established niches in the Indian community to maintain the momentum of Tamil revivalism. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 404)

The Malayan Tamil Pannai (MTP) was one of the more active literary and cultural bodies that sought to keep alive Tamil causes in the immediate post-war years. Founded in 1948 in Kuala Lumpur by a Tamil from Melaka and a Tamil lawyer from Madras, its major activities revolved around the organization of Tamil language and literary classes and the public exhibition of Tamil arts. Although the MTP was not explicitly religious in its orientation, it nevertheless promoted the devotional and mystical writings of South Indian poets such as Subrahmanya Bharti. By 1956 the MTP was a dying organization, like other Tamil cultural groups, as it was no longer sustained by the wanning nationalism in Tamilland. The gradual Malayanization of all sectors in the country after the war increased local Indian awareness that their future would not be determined by the politica of Tamilland. Despite the eventual demise of the MTP and similar groups, their impact on local Indian politics was more than symbolic, for the Tamil leadership of the MIC, consolidated after 1954, was somewhat influenced by the nationalistic fervor of these groups. On the religious front, these revivalist activities inspired a program of learning and worship based on Saiva Siddhanta that rivaled other schools of Hindu philosophy. Thus, in the period stretching from the 1930s to the early 1950s, the Sanskritic tradition in Malayan Hinduism was overshadowed by a religious trend that stressed the glories of the Dravidian South. (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 404)

Political and social developments within the Indian community after the war resulted in significant extensions of religious activity. The revival and revivification of Hinduism in India after independence also had its effects. Hindus Sabhas which had been dormant or had been adversely affected by the War, now sprang into activity. More intensive cultural and religious contact with India resulted in a steady stream of visitors pouring in at the invitation of Malayan societies. These were the religious and social leaders of the Indian renaissance, who were enthusiastically received and taken around the country, delivering speeches to vast audiences. One significant characteristic that emerges in the
1950s is the distinct commitment of the educated classes to their Hindu tradition. (Arasaratnam 1970: 165)

Meanwhile, limited as their religious understandings are, many can be tied in with more abstract level understandings. This is clear both in physical and interpretational reality. The symbolic representations of Lord Ganesha are situated in temples. Worshippers may not understand the higher standing of Ganesha in the Hindu pantheon, but they nod to his representations. With reference to interpretations, most people realize well that Hinduism’s teachings are far more elaborate than are their own understandings. There are no pilgrimage centres in the Malaysian context similar to the pilgrimage centres in the Indian contexts. But such things as trips to Thaipusam observances and the reports of travelers returning from India keep many aware of persons who know more than they of Hinduism. Some of the previous priests at times read a portion or two from the Bhagavad Gita or other sacred texts, interpreting in places. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 146) Traveling pilgrims as such are less popular now than they were before the days of the television. But whatever the understandings of the people, all of them certainly know they are acceptably Hindu.

Today, the professional and upper class Indians, though in a large measure ignorant of their vernacular language and even the tenets of their traditional faith, develop a serious interests in these aspects of Indian tradition and take steps to equip themselves with knowledge of them. This is perhaps related to a general movement of rejection of cultural westernization, and the emphasis on individual Asian traditions taking place in South and South-east Asia. Study groups and lectures are organised in cities such as Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, where, through the medium of English, people re-educate themselves in their tradition. Among those knowledgeable in Tamil, the religious movement is carried on through the Tamil language. They now contribute more lavishly towards religious institutions. The general prosperity of all classes of Indians after the war and this renewed interest made possible the strengthening of existing religious establishments, and the opening of new ones. (Arasaratnam 1970: 166)
The enthusiasm bore fruit in the 1950s with the formation of strong and well-organised movements looking after both regular temple worship as well as activities outside the temple. Every town with even sprinkling of Indians built a temple, and on estates larger and more attractive structures were built. In Singapore, the Hindu Advisory Board was reconstituted by the colonial Government in 1949 with more representative nominees from all groups of Hindus. Thereafter this Board was responsible for all matters connected with Hindu worship and practice in the colony. In the Federation, Hindu Youth Organisations sprang up all over with an active programme of work. In 1954 an all Malay Hindu Conference was called and, after some initial difficulty, a Hindu Council of Malaya was inaugurated. This body is composed of representatives from all Hindu organisations in the country. It came to be looked upon as responsible for all matters connected with the practice of Hinduism in the Federation. (Arasaratnam 1970: 166)

The Malayan Hindu revival of post-war years was closely allied to the revival of Tamil culture. One assisted and fostered the other. There was greater use of Tamil in temple ritual. Tamil devotional literature specially suited to temple worship was studied, and used widely in the temples. English-educated Tamils now began to take an interest in instructing their children in Tamil Hindu literature. Such classes were started all over by Hindu Sangams and temple authorities. Private study groups proliferated in the homes of wealthy patrons. An interest was shown in the study of the philosophical basis of Hinduism. The Saiva Siddhanta School of southern Hinduism was most popular because of its connexions with Tamil. Exponents of Saiva Siddhanta were invited from Madras to hold classes and deliver lectures. Soon there were Malayan exponents of this philosophy. In so far as Malayan Hinduism has a philosophic base, it may be said to be Saiva Siddhanta. (Arasaratnam 1970: 166 – 167)

As a combined result of all these factors, Hinduism is entrenched as one of the living religions of Malaya in contemporary times. Some, though not all, of the variety of Indian Hinduism is reflected here. The vast majority of people being Tamils, Malayalees, and Telgus, it is the custom and practices of Dravidian India that predominate. The main emphasis is towards Saivism, and the worship of the female deity in its various forms is
popular. Some Vaishnavities are to be found among Telgus and, more prominently, among North Indian groups. It is an interesting reflection of Hindu diversity that these groups have established separate temples for their own worship. Integrated worship is carried on in some of the larger temples, but these separate shrines continue to cater for individual groups. It is possible for these groups to follow their parochial forms of worship, use their own vernacular, and in every way satisfy their separate identity. In a similar way, the estate community has its own forms, which it has brought over from the South Indian village. The educated classes self-consciously stands aloof from this type of worship, favouring a religion more Sanskritized and scriptural. Both groups meet in the large urban temples dedicated to universal deities. In these places the unity of the Hindu congregation is brought about, and contributes to emphasizing emotionally the Indian identity and separateness. (Arasaratnam 1970: 167)

Typical of their lifestyle and exposure, the immigrant Hindu communities brought with them their own practices and forms of worship found in the villages of their origin. Hundreds of small temples exist for the various deities and ishta-deivam and kula-deivam still prevails. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that this scene of worship has changed drastically mainly through efforts of many Hindu institutions and organisations which have helped Hindus to understand their ancestral past. The Hindu temples continue to remain the main centres of Hindu religious activities, although recently many new religious and spiritual societies have been attracting Hindus. Only the major temples employ Brahman priests to perform the daily pujas, while the rest have pandarams. The difficulty faced by most temple management toady is the inability to engage qualified priests locally. The local youths are not willing to take on this vacation since they perceive it as not being lucrative and attractive, and not able to relate to their everyday life. Thus this shortage is very acute and nothing is currently being done about this, except o appeal to the Government to permit priests from India or Sri Lanka to work in the temples. (Govinda Raj 1993: 2)

The Hindu religion in Malaysia has remained mostly a disorganized religion without any royal patronage. The temples function independently and in splendid isolation. Their
incomes are derived mainly from their devotees and well wishers. There are no other sources of income and therefore the respective temple committees are often saddled with the problems of finding sufficient funds to manage the temple and their activities. (Govinda Raj 1993: 2)

We find temples not only in the urban centres and towns, but also in every village, estate, plantation, and across the length and breadth of the country. In fact one will notice more than one temple in each estate. This may perhaps account for some 17,000 temples in the country. For socio-economic reasons one would find the larger, better built and properly managed Hindu temples in the urban rather than the rural areas. (Govinda Raj 1993: 2)

There has been a plethora of Indian institutional buildings in Malaya, ranging from athletic associations and women’s sewing clubs to asramas and political sabhas or cankams; but the most common have been the religious buildings, and to a lesser extent, toddy shops. Although by no means as prominent as in India, nevertheless Indian temples, churches and mosques have been a significant feature of the Malayan landscape. The Indians in Malaya, like their fellow-countrymen in India, have professed a variety of faiths. In 1931, out of the 621,847 Indians in the country 81.5 per cent were Hindus, 9.0 per cent Muslims, 59 per cent Christians, 2.9 per cent Sikhs, while the remainder followed a variety of other faiths such as Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. The old Tamil saying, do not live in a town where there is no temple, appears to have been particularly observed by the Hindus, for not only have their temples been the most numerous amongst the Indian religious buildings in Malaya but also the most widely known and distributed; almost every urban centre and large estate has had at least one. These temples have been maintained principally by Indian public subscription and donations. The temples on the estates have been on the whole simple structures but those in the towns have usually been highly decorated and ornamented buildings. (Sandhu, 1969: 233)
The Indian *asramas*, in Malaya, such as those maintained by the world-wide humanitarian organization, the Ramakrishna Mission, have not only been sanctuaries for the poor and the weary but have also housed libraries and other facilities for study and meditation. With their banana plant-fringed and saffron-coloured walls and buildings with wide courtyards, reminiscent of the Indian homeland *asramas* and *kuttees*, these *asramas* have often stood out as uniquely Indian features of the Malayan landscape. The number of *asramas* in Malaya has, however, been limited and the few that have existed have almost all been located in the larger urban centres of the country. (Sandhu 1969: 233 ff)

The estate temples and shrines have primarily served the needs of the estate dwellers but the urban temples have drawn a variety of worshippers from far and wide. The Kaliamman temple in Serangoon road at Singapore, for instance, has drawn its congregation from as far afield as Bukit Panjang and Seletar, besides serving those Indians living and its immediate precincts in the city. Other Hindu places of worship such as the Batu Caves outside Kuala Lumpur, and the Sri Poyatha Vanayngar temple in Malacca (constructed in the early eighteenth century and the earliest extant Hindu temple of Malaya), have drawn worshippers and visitors from all over the country. (Sandhu 1969: 234)

The Sikhs have their own *gurdwara* in almost every substantial urban centre in Malaya. Some of the larger towns and cities, like Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, have a number of Sikh temples. These have been built and supported by public subscription and donations from the Sikh community. The *gurdwaras* have been for the most part simple utilitarian structures along modern architectural lines and have served not only the needs of the Sikh community but also those of the Sindhis, who have had no proper temple of their own in Malaya. The *gurdwaras* have been, and are, much more than temples to the Sikh community, for they have also served as *Gurmukhi* schools, centres of social gathering and places where general matters affecting the Sikh community and the country as a whole have been discussed and debated. Each of the temples has been administered
by a *gurdwara* committee, elected by the congregation. The priests in the Sikh temples have been appointed by the respective *gurdwara* committees. (Sandhu 1969: 234)

Sikhism and Sikh institutions were established in those areas where the Punjabis of Sikh faith were settled in numbers. In these temples Sikh gurus were brought from the Punjab to conduct worship and to instruct people in their faith. The major Sikh festivals, birth and death anniversaries of the chief Guru, Vaisakhi and the New Year were celebrated in the temples. In this way although they were a minority within a minority, the Sikhs succeeded a maintaining their traditional culture and to a large extent their traditional life-style in Malaya for many decades. (Arasaratnam 1993: 16)

In these temples Sikh worship is carried on with the help of *Gurus* who are generally brought over from the Punjab. The Sikh Missionary Society periodically sends lecturers and teachers to Malaya. (Arasaratnam 1970: 175) Sikhs have shown strong adherence to traditional customs such as growing their hair long and wearing the turban. (Arasaratnam 1970: 175) They celebrate Deepavali as a secular festival. In the temples there are schools where Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script is taught. (Arasaratnam 1970: 176)

The Indian Christians, who are virtually all South Indian Tamils, Mysoreans, Malayalis and Telugus, have been a small community and financially far poorer than either Hindus or Sikhs. Furthermore, the religious needs of many of them have been adequately met by the churches maintained by other Christian groups such as the Chinese, Eurasians and Europeans. In these circumstances there have been few Indian churches in the country, and when there have, there has been little to distinguish them from those maintained by the other communities. (Sandhu 1969: 234)

Indian Muslims, as well, have maintained few mosques of their own. As the Malays are Muslims and the Malay States constitutionally Islamic States, there has been little need for the Indian Muslims to have separate mosques. A mosque or *sarau* has existed in every kampong and urban centre since well before the influx of Indian
immigrants in modern times. The few Indian mosques that were established have mostly had a distinctive Indian quality about them, in that their architectural style has exhibited a closer affinity with South India than with Malaya, while their congregations have generally consisted almost completely of Indians. (Sandhu 1969: 235)

Few Indians professing other faiths (such as Buddhists, Jainists and Zoroastrans) either have had their own communal shrines or have had to make do with some other individual alternatives for their religious needs. Many of the Indian Buddhists, for example, appear to have gone to the temples maintained by the Chinese, Sinhalese, Thai and Burmese members of the sect. Some of the larger and more ornate Buddhist temples have formed striking features in the Malayan landscape. (Sandhu 1969: 235)

Religion, as an aspect of the Indian social organization in Malaya, has not been so significant as in India, but it has exerted a considerable influence in the everyday life of the immigrants. The frequent comings and goings between home and temple, shrine, mosque or church have formed an integral part of the Indian social scene in Malaya. On festive occasions the scenes enacted at some of these religious places, especially the Hindu temples and shrines, could well have come straight from India. (Sandhu 1969: 235)

One feature of cultural and emotional satisfaction to the settler Indian community was the implanting of religious institutions, as far as possible, after the image of what was left behind. The predominantly Hindu migrants soon established temples and shrines of the sects to which they belonged, reproducing the forms of worship to which they were accustomed as best as they could. The colonial government’s policy of non-intervention in religious practice and the active encouragement of plantation employers in establishing for their labourers a homely environment helped in this process. In urban centres voluntary efforts by the commercial groups and the middle class helped to establish Hindu institutions of worship in these places. The result was that by the first few decades of the twentieth century, every place where Hindu Indians were settled in some strength had its own temple or shrine, some having more than one. (Arasaratnam 1993: 14)
Thousands of smaller temples, often originating in the placement of a deity under a tree mushroomed across rubber plantations and rural countryside. As the Indian community grew, some were converted to larger structures; elsewhere, as Indians gravitated towards larger urban areas and acquired greater affluence, more formal temples came into shape. But the indubitable fact remains that many of the temples trace their history to a time when registration was not required, and Indians could not easily claim possession of land deeds. Temples were founded not only as abodes of worship but to cement ties of solidarity among a people torn from their roots and cast adrift from their ancestral lands. (Lal 2006: 3765).

Even in the implantation of Hindu institutions in Malaya, the social dichotomy between labour and the other classes had its effects. There were two types of worship centres established. In the plantations and in the vicinity of labour housing in cities and towns, shrines of modest proportions were established, devoted to the village deities of popular Hinduism. In these places the worship and ceremony followed the traditions of the Dravidian folk religion of South India. Ceremonies were generally performed here by non-Brahmin priests and the ritual was of a simple, non-Brahminic kind. Here blood sacrifice was offered by the ritual slaughter of animals and birds. The concept of pollution was little known or practised. In construction these temples tended to be simple structures with images of deities crudely executed in stone or wood in the centre and near the entrance. On the other hand, the temples in the urban areas were dedicated to the universal deities of the Hindu pantheon. They were built according to traditional architectural styles, generally by craftsmen imported from India and paid for by the sponsors. The worship and ceremonies were carried out according to scriptural injunction by Brahmin priests also brought from India and in the employ of the managers of the temples. These temples catered to the various Hindu sects followed by the wealthy Hindu patrons. Thus Chettiar merchants, being Saivite Hindus, built a number of Subramanya temples all over the country. North Indian communities tended to put up temples devoted to Rama or Vishnu and Sri Lankan Hindus to Pillayar. (Arasaratnam 1993: 14)
In the plantations, temples were managed by *panchayat* appointed from the Hindu clerical staff and the more influential kangany. The management of the estates kept a watchful eye on the activities of the *panchayat* and especially controlled their finances. In later years, as their consciousness grew, the workers wanted and were given a greater say in the running of their temples. Kangany and respected elders among the labourers took an active part in the affairs of the temples. Major festivals of the Hindu calendar were celebrated with enthusiasm in these temples. Thaipongal, Thaipusam and Deepavali were among the most popular festivals in the plantations, when a holiday was declared and entertainment of various types was organized. In the temple ceremonies during some of these festivals, traditional South Indian folk practices such as fire-walking, kavadi-bearing, and karagam dancing were carried out. With the labourers participating very enthusiastically, these occasions served to relieve the tedium of plantation labour. The management encouraged these indulgences as they were seen to be a safety valve for the pent-up feelings of the labourers which might otherwise have found expression in what they considered subversive activities. This was also the reason why they encouraged the consumption of liquor on the estates, especially on these festive occasions. (Arasaratnam 1993: 15)

The urban temples, attended by the upper classes, conducted some orthodox scriptural worship ceremonies. A resident priest performed daily *puja* at stipulated times which were attended by Hindus in the neighbourhood. On the major festive occasions there were more elaborate ceremonies which drew large crowds from a wider area. Certain temples achieved a national reputation and became places of pilgrimage for Hindus in the whole peninsula. The management of these temples depended on the nature of their origins. Temples built by a family or a caste group — such as the many Chettiar-built temples — were managed by members of that family and their heirs or by the headmen of that caste. In temples built by public contributions, the community of regular worshippers elected a *panchayat* and managed the temple affairs. Unlike in Singapore, where the government had stepped in early to regulate the management of temples through an Endowment Board, in the Federated States the lack of regulation of temple management gave rise to factionalism and sometimes abuse. The management of
temples, besides being lucrative, provided a lever of authority and status within the community and could be a stepping stone to leadership in the community and to government recognition. Factionalism broke out in some important temples, which detracted from the unity and effectiveness of the Malayan Hindus. (Arasaratnam 1993: 15)

Educated Hindus in urban areas formed themselves into Hindu Sabhas and Sangams to provide a forum for religious activities and the propagation of Hindu beliefs in the community. They were concerned that their children who were attending multiracial English schools were growing up without any knowledge of fundamental Hindu beliefs. These societies were to cater to this need. There was a multiplicity of such societies, which dispersed their energies. There was no united representative body to exert pressure on the government to recognize the needs of the Hindus in religious education and the maintenance of their faith. The most effective body in achieving some of these aims was the Ramakrishna Mission, established in Malaya in 1915, and allied to it the Vivekananda Society. Through both these missions, a body of well-educated monks, trained in missionary methods in India came to settle in different parts of Malaya. They opened schools and dispensaries, welfare homes and dormitories, ashram (religious hostels) and meditation centres; served as teachers, doctors, counsellors and leaders for the community and prodded the middle class towards the recognition of a heritage it was tending to ignore. They were articulate spokesmen of Hindu doctrine who established contacts with readers of other faiths, securing for Hinduism recognition as one of the major faiths' practiced in Malaya. (Arasaratnam 1993: 16). The work of these missions had impact on the religious and social planes.

Even among Indians who belong to faiths of a multinational character such as Christianity and Islam, there has been a tendency to retain their organization and identity as Indians through separate religious institutions. Thus Indian Muslims built mosques for their own worship and managed there community concerns.
Almost every Hindu household has a deity corner or puja aria. Several pictures of favoured deities usually hang there, sometimes also a picture or two of leaders, like C. N. Annadurai (leader of the DMK in Tamilnadu) or Mahatma Gandhi, and perhaps the picture of a deceased family member. During festivals occasions especially, an oil lamp and incense are often lighted in honouring preferred deities. Usually then too, prayers and some flowers, bananas, coconut, betel leaves and other items are offered. During the rest of the year, most people approach their household deities very irregularly. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 134-135)

There are several well-known temples to the Lords Siva and Vishnu in Malaysia. Some of the Telgus set up Rama temples when they came. By far the most popular deities among the Indians are the Murugan and Mariaman. The overwhelming majority of the Indians in Malaysia came originally from the lower and lowest levels of Indian caste society. Most of them came from South Indian backgrounds. Both of these factors help explain why some of the higher level deities of the Hindu pantheon, for example, Vishnu and Siva are of relatively little direct significance here. Lower level groups in Indian civilizations are far less Sanskritic in their beliefs and practices than are groups higher in the system. South Indians, since the early years of this century, have known leaders who have railed against Brahminic Hinduism marking it as an instrument of 'northern imperialism'. DMK teachings remain popular among Indian Malaysians. Mariaman is the goddess of small-pox, chicken-pox and other such diseases. As among the lower caste people in South India, however Mariaman remains very important among the people both for her traditional and other capacities. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 135)

All the larger towns have temples and many of these have Murugan as their centrally important deity. The people visit these from time to time, especially during festivals occasions. At times Hindu weddings are held under the temple shelter. And temple facilities are fully used during festival periods. There are very few Brahmins in Malaysia; in any case, relatively few Brahmans have ever served in a priestly capacity the personal requirements of people of the social levels. The local Kovil of the settlement is an autonomous site that embodies parochial histories and memories; it is also not an
entity that stands in isolation in the Hindu religious landscape. It is integrally linked to the social and self-representations of other Kovils in the immediate locality and beyond. The activities and discourses in each site or setting are structured so that they are to some degree affected by experiences at other religious sites. In short, they contribute to a public culture of Hinduism. (Guan 2001: 34)

Mariyamman is an important category of 'village goddesses' popularly worshipped in South India as well as diasporic Indian communities around the world. She is characterised as an exclusively jealous guardian of her domain, fiercely protective of her inhabitant's vis-à-vis the territorial jurisdiction of other gramadevatas. At the same time her motherly attributes allow her to be directly approached by ailing devotees. By accepting her prasadam, her worshippers express their equal subordination to the goddess, and receive the benefits of her equal protection over the territory they inhabit. But at the same time, these goddesses are translocal entities in so far as their names and characteristics are worshipped as tutelary deities in numerous other villages elsewhere. Thus, while there may be thousands of Mariyamman temples and shrines in the country, they can still be differentiated by locality and are consequently regarded as distinct entities in their own right. (Guan 2001: 39)

It is important to note that Hinduism in Malaysia has evolved in the absence of those traditional sources of authority - the religious centres of learning or monastic orders (math) which have provided a system of hermeneutics and scriptural exegesis, and an influential Brahmin or dominant orthodox caste - which have shaped Hindu structures, belief systems, mythology and patterns of worship in India. (Belle 2001: 6)

Malaysian Hinduism has historically been dominated by Dravidian folk religions, the so-called "little" traditions or village Hinduism. These have been characterized by the centrality of Mother (Amman) worship, the worship of "little" deities, (both guardian and caste), the construction of non-Agamic temples served by lower caste pucaris, spirit mediumship (often employing rituals based on "left handed" or debased Tantrism), folk beliefs and animal sacrifice. Village deities vary widely and in Malaysia a bewildering diversity are represented in non-Agamic temples, shrines and holy sites. With their
migration to Malaysia many guardian deities have undergone a process of cosmological elevation and are now perceived as major deities in their own right (Belle 2001: 6).

To a large extent, Malaysian Hinduism remains a loosely integrated system, free of a predominant authoritative tradition, and containing a bewildering diversity of religious forms. (Belle 2001: 6). However, this seemingly emphatic pluralism masks various unifying tendencies whose genesis can be traced to the post war Hindu reform movements (Arasaratnam 1970: 162-176). These groups, which included the influential Malayan Hindu Sangam, reflected a renewed interest in the Indian Hindu heritage, and were strongly steeped in Dravidian ideologies. They aimed at promoting an over-arching model of Agamic ("great tradition") Hinduism, a revival of Tamil arts and literature, and the discouragement of local beliefs and practices built on caste, class, sects, and regional loyalties. These centripetal impulses include the Tamilization of Malaysian Hinduism, syncretisation of village/Agamic Hinduism as well as Saivite/Vaishnavite motifs, a process of Sanskritization/Agamicization, and the popularisation of major Sanskritic festivals including Sivaratri and Navaratri (Belle 2001: 6).

These unificatory movements have been fuelled by an underlying need to reinterpret traditional forms of Hinduism to create a new Hindu social personality more appropriate to multi-ethnic Malaysia. The paradigmatic model has been Saiva Siddhanta, an orthodox Agamic philosophical system of Saivism practiced and propagated by upper class and educated Tamils (Arasaratnam 1970: 167).

The promotion of Saiva Siddhanta has been facilitated by the softening of caste boundaries which has rendered ineffective the hierarchical divisions of religious practice and belief. Reformulation of Hinduism has thus been impelled by issues of class and status. Agamicization is viewed by working and lower class Hindus as not only a method of seeking a common cultural alliance with upper class Hindus, and an affirmation of group cohesion, but also as a means of attaining identification by other ethnic groups as equal partners with higher status Indians within an ancient, rich and defining philosophical and religious tradition. Agamicization/Sanskritization generally follows a set pattern, and involves a given community making a series of conscious decisions over
an extended period to move toward set Agamic models of worship. Initially a village deity will be identified as a form of a deity within the Agamic tradition. Often this will require that the village deity be invested with new and more powerful attributes which raises his/her status to approximate to those which characterize the chosen Agamic deity with whom he/she has been identified. (Thus, for example, Kali Amman will become an aspect of Parvati, and Muniyanti may be apotheosised as an aspect of Murukan.) Having made this decision, the community will gradually eliminate folkish traditions, especially animal sacrifice and mediumship, and all non-Brahmin rituals. The temples dedicated to the deity will be reconstructed according to Agamic prescription and rededicated using Agamic ritual. The temple will then employ Brahmin Kurukkals to replace local lower caste pucaris. Often the temple committee will set up educational, cultural and outreach programs based on "great tradition" Hinduism. (Belle 2001: 6)

Automatically each month a stipulated amount of money is subtracted by the management from the pay cheque of each Hindu labourer. The resultant sum is accessible for expenditure by the temple committee. Out of these funds locally sponsored festivals are funded and also to assist persons with very special needs. Committee members are elected by adult Hindus. Though this process is often haphazardly carried out, these members hold relatively important positions within the local community. The temple and its concerns focus numerous of the most important activities in the religious and social life of the Indians. The temples are also supported through voluntary contributions. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 138)

The daily puja does not require the presence of a Brahman kurrukkal and temple musicians. A full time Pujari is deemed adequate to perform the bulk of the festivities. Daily attendances at the Kovil are small, and the Pujas conducted in a relaxed ambiance. On Friday evenings, a day considered particularly auspicious for Puja, the number of devotees in the Kovil increase significantly, averaging between twenty and thirty persons. An overwhelming majority are women, female teenagers and children. After the main Puja, children are frequently led in Bhajan signing by an elderly male resident for about
an hour, while adults and teenagers sit on the floor to listen and converse. (Guan 2001: 41)

As in India, patronising and publicly participating in calendrical religious festivals have long been culturally valued markers, and recognised means of stating and affirming social positions and relationships. Persons who occupy leadership positions in a Hindu temple or who take up prominent ritual roles during festivals are readily recognised as possessing emblems of prestige and honour. (Guan 2001: 42)

Rajoo has argued that urbanisation, modernization and the politics of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia have led to various modifications, including a reduction in Hindu domestic rites, a weakening of inter-caste non-commensality, and changes in temple rituals. Moreover he has suggested an increasing trend towards Agamic or Sanskritic versions of Hinduism. More orthodox Hindu festivals (Navaratri, Shivaratri, etc.), previously observed by the middle and upper ranking castes, are also being celebrated by smaller temples, and there is greater attention to the specifications of rituals as laid down in the Agamas. (Guan 2001: 54)

In the context of Malaysian public culture, temples, ritual practices and public festivities are arenas not only for communicating with divine agencies but also remaining social identities. This is discernible, in the historical evolution of one of the earliest temple in the country. The Sri Maha Maryamman Kovil Devastanam is located in the oldest section of Kuala Lumpur city, and was initially set up as a small shrine in 1873. Originally, it was patronised largely by the urban trading and artisan castes (particularly the Mukkulattor caste cluster), but its patronage has since widened considerably. Today the Devastanam is portrayed as the most prestigious and influential Agamic temple in the country, and is consulted on ritual matters and other auspicious events in the Hindu calendar. It is also the obvious gravitational centre for aspiring Indian politicians and community leaders seeking religious sanction. Within this cultural logic, the president of the MIC, besides holding similar positions for a host of other Indian organisations in the
country, is the undisputed official patron of the Devastanam. The Devastanam coordinates the mammoth annual Thaipusam celebrations. (Guan 2001: 55).

Other reform movements were aimed at changing the life-styles of the lower classes and giving them a sense of dignity and self-esteem that would enable them to earn the respect of their fellow Indians and of other races in Malaya. These reforms were approached from two directions: from that of upper caste Brahminic or Sanskritic Hindu values and from a secular Dravidian egalitarian radicalism. The reform movements spearheaded by English-educated Indians of the upper castes sought to bring the popular Hindu practices in the plantations and in urban working class centres in line with Brahminic norms of Sanskritic Hinduism. These reformers desired to discourage the practice of kavadi carrying, fire-walking, blood sacrifice, and other practices of popular Hinduism. Some among them sought to do this by legislation but there was a strong opinion against state interference in religious matters. These attempts to Sanskritize popular Hinduism were not successful. (Arasaratnam 1993: 17-18)

The movement to reform some of these practices and bring popular Hinduism in line with scriptural Hinduism has existed in India since the nineteenth century. Gradually, both by legislation and voluntary act, Hinduism has been cleansed of these archaic folk customs. The impact of these reforms on Malayan Hinduism was rather delayed, because of the lack of leadership by the educated classes which, before the war were unconcerned with, and ignorant of, developments in India. Some limited attempts to reform was made, however with the formation of the Tamil Reform Association in 1931, a body devoted to the reform of abuses in Tamil society and religion with a view to modernizing them. These reformers felt that reform was necessary not only to keep pace with the modernization movement in Hinduism in India, but also to bring Malayan Hindus onto a level with other communities in Malaya, not looked down by them as backward and archaic. Branches of the Association were formed in many parts of Malaya, but the Singapore body remained the most active innovator of change, and a persistent pressure group for reform. From 1936 it published a monthly journal, Reform, devoted 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 cause. The earliest activities of this body after its formation were to promote the temple entry movement, and the removal of disabilities against depressed castes. (Arasaratnam 1970: 172)

Reform of popular religion had the highest priority in the activities of the Association and those allied to it. Malayan reformers thought that the public performance of some of these practices was degrading, and contributed to lowering of esteem of the Indians in Malaya. A characteristic of reform movements among Indians in Malaya has been their constant concern with the image of the Indian in the eyes of other Malayan ethnic groups. How could Indian society and custom be improved to better this image? Besides the intrinsic merit of the reforms and the arguments for them on the Indian side, this was an additional factor. The progress of the reform movements of Madras was closely watched, their propaganda was reproduced in publications, and their success held up as an example. (Arasaratnam 1970: 173)

After the War, increasing knowledge of Hinduism and greater interest in it among the educated classes made them more receptive to socio-religious reform. They were more prepared now to come forward as leaders of opinion in these matters, and use their growing influence in the community towards these ends. Opinion was very much agreed on the need to abolish sacrificial slaughter as a part of Hindu worship. The movement in Madras was very successful in this, and soon after the war legislation towards this end was passed. In Malaya, by the education of public opinion and by the pressure brought to bear on many temples, blood sacrifice was gradually given up voluntarily. It is now a rare occurrence, taking place only on wayside shrines and as an isolated act. (Arasaratnam 1970: 173)

The two conspicuous practices of kavadi – bearing and fire walking were difficult to reform. They had penetrated deep into Malayan Indian popular religion. The Tamil Reform Association resumed its offensive from where it had left off before the war. It again proposed legislation banning these practices. But the body of Hindu opinion both in
Singapore and in the Federation was against legislation by a state that had no connexion with Hinduism. The position they took was similar to that of conservative Hindus in India, that a secular state should not be permitted to interfere in matters of religious worship and doctrine. A number of Hindu organisations in Malaya, though they agreed on the necessity to cleanse Hindu worship of these practices gradually, could not support legislation towards this end. It is significant that one of these associations, the Singapore Hindu Association, wrote to leading Hindu authorities in India asking for some guidance on this question. It was reported that they received a reply in June 1949 from a leading Hindu, holding a high position in Government of India, advising them not to agitate for legislation to reform Hindu religious and social practices on the grounds that this might eventually lead to the disappearance of piety and religion. This strengthened the hands of conservative elements in Malayan Hindu society. The reformers then sought to persuade temple authorities to take voluntary action. (Arasaratnam 1970: 174)

The practice of ritual slaughter of buffaloes, goats, and cockerel has been long ingrained in South Indian popular Hinduism, and immigrant labourers brought it along with them. In many estate temples, deities were offered blood sacrifice. Blood sacrifice could not be offered to the major deities of the pantheon which were Brahmanical, and therefore could not be polluted with such offerings. They were offered to the village deities, wayside shines, and other non-Brahmanical gods and goddeesses. This dichotomy, which exists even today between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical Hindu worship was reproduced in Malaya. Animal slaughter was a normal form of worship in the festivals in estate temples, as well as in the temples catering for labourers in urban areas. The slaughter was followed by a feast in which the flesh was cooked and distributed to participants. (Arasaratnam, 1970: 171)

The religiosity of social actors cannot be understood solely in terms of an impervious individualistic quest for spiritual edification and benefits. The phenomenon is necessarily much more diffused, and entails an overlapping of localised knowledge and individual, social, and political contexts. In particular, religious imageries, language and
imagination are significant resources in negotiating with the socially mediated processes of Malaysian modernity. (Guan 2001: 60)

In the act of ritualisation, there thus inhere both strategic and tactical possibilities, serving to accumulate, display and buttress vested interest. Ritualisation illustrates once again that human beings not only live in existing relationships but also produce new kinds of relationships in order to live. (Guan 2001: 62)

This is a keen, if sometimes tentatively articulated, recognition and awareness that Hindu devotees are living in difficult and rapidly changing times. On one hand, secularists modernisation and aggressive proselytisation by other religious groups combine to render Hindu beliefs and practices seemingly archaic and irrelevant to the young. In everyday life and experiences, ordinary Hindu devotees and leaders encounter a range of indicators that portray their faith as irrational, and as a religious system that is incommensurate with the truth claims of monotheistic and modernising Christian and Islamic groups. (Guan 2001: 62)

On the other hand, there is unease that, as a politically demarcated group, ethnic ‘Indians’ are being left behind in the country’s current phase of rapid development and economic buoyancy. Informed by contending forces, leaders and devotees alike endeavour to construct a meaningful and recognisable locality by re-creating Hinduism within the spaces where they live, work and play. (Guan 2001: 63)

**Festivals**

Temples are places of daily *pooja* and worship, as well as centres for the celebration of many festivals of the Hindu calendar. Because of obvious organizational difficulties, we find particular temples specializing in the celebration of particular festivals. In this way all Hindu festivals are celebrated in one or the other temple. Understandably, the celebrations are on a lesser key and might not conform to all the elaborateness of prescribed ritual. (Arasaratnam 1970: 168)
The organization of the annual religious festival provides an occasion for joint action by the community. The character of the political process on such occasions is brought out clearly. Notable in all these examples is the domineering and, to a certain extent, coercive role of the heed kanagany, especially at the junctures of decision-making. Speaking of an early period (the 1920s) Nadesan, the tapper said: On the Tipavali day, each tapper had to pay a sum of $5 to the head kangany. At the time of worship only he should get into a trance; if anyone else went into it, the kangany would beat him. The head kangany collected from the coolies a sum of $3,000 or $4,000 but he would buy a goat for $7 only. He would cut the goat into many parts and each coolie would be given one latex-cup full of meat as his share. Should a coolie ask for more, he would be beaten. (Jain 1970: 277)

Nadesan recalled that the head kangany not only distributed goat meat but also head cloths (tuntu) and wrap around skirts (vesti) to all his men. But why was Tipavali celebrated as an annual festival? Certainly not because of any village tradition but possibly 'because the manager got his bonus at that time'. And indeed in this festival the manager's participation was fairly stereo-typed. On Pal Melayu he paid 50 per cent of all costs incurred in celebrating Tipvali. The manager's financial contribution was always thought of as his own rather than the company's. Besides, there was an exchange of prestations between the labourers and the manager. From money contributed by all of them, the labourers bought a present (varicai) for the manager and handed it over to him collectively at his bungalow. The manager then asked women labourers to perform a folk dance (kummi-y-ati-tal) and offered sweets and money to labourers and children. (Jain 1970: 277)

Some time after all three divisions had come into being, Ati tiru-vila, the traditional village festival held annually in honour of the goddess Mariamman, was revived as the main celebration on Pal Melayu. It seems that at one time both Tipavali and Ati tiru-vila were celebrated as religious festivals, and then Tipavali was changed into the household festival that it is today. (Jain 1970: 277). The collective gift-giving to the manager on every Tipavali. The celebration was spread over two days. On the first day there was worship, sacrifice, and feasting in the temple, to which the manager was especially invited. He was garlanded with jasmine and marigold and sprayed with attar of
roses. Care was taken to see that the share of a labourer unable to attend the feast was sent to his line. The cost of the temple ceremony and feast was shared equally by the labourers and the manager. Other European bosses made monetary contributions to the ceremony, but the kirani paid nothing. All members of the staff, nevertheless, joined in the festivities. On the day after Tipavali, prestations were carried by all labourers in a procession to the manager's bungalow. On Pal Melayu the main gift was usually a gold ornament, such as an expensive ring. (Jain 1970: 291)

The organization of the prestation ceremony may be interpreted as an annual dramatization of the estate social system. In each division contributions were collected from gang members by the kanganies and were in turn deposited with the head kangan. The head kanganies jointly bought out the gift. If it included a gold ornament, the ornament was made by the community goldsmith. In the gift-bearing procession, the drummers were always men of the Paraiyan caste, who were paid for their services both in cash and in kind. Thus in a single ritual a variety of roles from the community and the industry were jointly played out. In some respects the roles of the community and those of the industry were clearly at odds with each other, but the contradictions were accommodated within the structure of the ceremony. While only the Paraiyan played the drums (a community role), labourers of all castes (Paraiyans and non-Brahmans) walked in the same procession to the manager's bungalow. The ceremony was a symbolic reaffirmation of the tie between the labourer and the European boss. In the exchange oriented Tamil society, this ritual of gift-giving to the manager was an apt means of expressing the labourers regard for the manager's benevolent paternalism. (Jain 1970: 292)

Tai Pucam

While Tai Pucam in Malaysia is consciously modelled upon the mythology, traditions and rituals celebrated at Palani, Tamil Nadu, the processes of relocation and adaptation have endowed it with a character which is uniquely Malaysian. Since World War II Tai Pucam has emerged as the largest and most uniformly celebrated Malaysian
Hindu festival, and its growing popularity, as expressed in continually increasing crowds and the swelling ranks of kavati bearers, attest to its perceived relevance to Malaysian Hindus. Tai Pucam provides a profound and religiously sanctioned identity within the received parameters of the Hindu bhakti tradition at a number of levels. At the individual level, kavati worship is an act of self definition, a public accomplishment which demonstrates both purification and spiritual worthiness. At the group level Tai Pucam forms and consolidates social and network loyalties within the framework of service, ritual and worship. At a community level, Tai Pucam celebrates the South Indian (and increasingly the entire Hindu) community within the context of a culturally plural society. It is a commemoration which simultaneously expresses uniqueness and pride, and speaks of solidarity and resistance to the plethora of forces which threaten cultural and religious integrity. And on every level Tai Pucam signals allegiance to a wider cultural and political world, to pan-Hindu notions of pilgrimage and worship, to specifically Tamil concepts of bhakti devotion. (Belle 2001: 12)

Tai Pucam is permeated with the mythology and symbology of Murugan. While Tai Pucam affords expression to the entire gamut of Malaysian Hinduism from village to Agamic, and reflects all the diverse permutations of the incomplete processes of reconfiguration and reform, all worship is saturated with the rituals and occurs within the framework of received Murukan paradigms. In sum, Tai Pucam both encapsulates and gives voice to unificatory syncretic tendencies, as well as creating a momentum of its own. In a society dominated by ethnicity, Murukan has become a potent and catalytic symbol of Tamil and Hindu identity. His wide and evolving appeal will continue to play an integral role in the formulation of a distinctive Malaysian Hindu tradition. (Belle 2001: 12 – 13)

Easily the most popular festival is Thai Poosam, occurring on the day in the Tamil month of Thai (January – February) when the asterism Poosam is on the ascendant. A popular festival in Tamil Nad, its celebration is recorded by immigrant labourers from the earliest dates. It is celebrated in grand style in the temples of Singapore, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur for three days. (Arasaratnam 1970: 168). It is a day of penance, on which all kinds of vows are fulfilled. Thus one can see various forms
of self-mortification that are common in India, and be surprised at the persistence of religious tradition. So marked has been the impact of this three day festival, held in full view of the inhabitants of the capital city, that now it draws substantial crowds, and even some participation, from non-Indians. Some Chinese, who are able to fit into the thought-world of Indian religious beliefs through Mahayana Buddhism, share in the observance of some of the forms of worship on this day. (Arasaratnam 1970: 169)

In some states, where the Hindu population is substantial, Thaipusam is marked with granting of public holidays. There is also a popular clamour for a national holiday for Thaipusam, in keeping with the national character of this festival. (Govinda Raj 1993: 4)

The Devstanam coordinates the mammoth annual Thaipusan celebrations. An integral part of the celebrations is an eight hour long chariot procession of Lord Subramaniam from the Devstanam to the Batu Caves shrine, with the designated stops at various temples along the way. The ‘orgiastic’ ritual practices of Thaipusan were originally a target of heavy criticism by leaders of the Tamil Reform Movement (TRA). They lobbied vigorously for Thaipusan to be banned but without much success. In the late 1940s, however, its leaders decided to abandon its strategy, explaining that banning such festivities might have the unintended and undesirable effect of causing the disappearance of piety and religion among the ‘simpler folk’. (Guan 2001: 56)

Since then and with each successive year, the celebration of Thaipusan in urban centres are reported to be drawing progressively larger crowds of pilgrims, devotees and spectators. Many pilgrims travel not only from rural plantations and smaller towns within the state, but also from other states. Vernacular newspapers invariably highlight the participation of a much smaller group of foreign pilgrims who carry kavadis in Batu Caves, leading further credence to the potency of the event. Additionally, Thaipusan is promoted by independent tour companies and the Tourism Board as a ‘colourful’ spectacle and another vivid illustration of the diversity of cultures in Malaysia.
Consequently, busloads of incongruent looking foreign tourists have become a regular feature of the Thaipusam landscape. (Guan 2001: 56)

The preoccupation with planning, regulation and the closer monitoring of activities around the Batu Caves temple grounds has also intensified with the progressive increase in crowd numbers. Weeks before the event, the route and the stops of the chariot procession, and special bus and train services, are announced in the newspapers. At the temple grounds, stalls set up for business require official permits from the organisers. Outside the site, unlicensed mobile food vendors hoping to generate extra earnings are stalked by city hall officials cruising around in a bright red lorry. The organisers routinely appeal to devotees and spectators alike (particularly Indian youths) to refrain from expressive actions that will turn the religious celebrations into a ‘carnival’, a ‘comic spectacle’ and a ‘mockery’ of Hinduism. Stipulations on the permissible length of skewers and spears, on the type of music and musical instruments that can be used, bans on certain ‘exhibitionist’ kavadis and so forth are disseminated and enforced. (Guan, 2001: 57)

Thaipusam is thus a highly visible and religiously charged event open to a heterogeneous audience, both Hindu ‘insiders’ and non-Hindu ‘outsiders’. It provides an arena for the expression of multiple meanings as well as varied agendas. Apart from the individual quest for ‘ritual self-creation’, other studies have analysed the event in terms of a muted corporate expression of a nascent working-class consciousness among the Tamils. (Guan, 2001: 57)

Thaipusam, a festival honouring Lord Subramaniam, is celebrated in Malaysia primarily in the city areas where there also are large concentrations of Indians – Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh and Sungei Patani. At all such places a general procession is involved in the three day festival. In Kuala Lumpur area, this proceeds from the Sri Maha Mariaman temple at Batu Caves to the temple inside the caves; in Penang it goes from the Dato Kramat Siva temple to the waterfall temple, then to the Lord Subramaniam hill temple.
Thaipusam is certainly a religious festival. The processions involved are primarily made up in all places by devotees carrying *kavadis*. These are sometimes nothing more than a container of water or milk. Sometimes, they are a simple decorated frame with a picture of Lord Subramaniam to be carried balanced on a shoulder. In addition to those who carry *kavadis*, Thaipusam processions also include many who demonstrate their faith in or allegiance to Lord Subramaniam in other ways. Many *kavadi* carriers and others walk along with limes hanging on the hooks stuck into their bodies. Others pull carts with strings attached to body hooks, etc. the reasons for doing so are numerous; to fulfill their vows. They participate in honouring the commitments made and fulfilled. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 139)

In preparing to carry the *kavadis* or march with hooks or spikes in the parts of their bodies, those who do so are supposed to think clean thoughts, socially participate accordingly, and eat only vegetarian foods for appropriate periods before the event. Throughout the *kavadis* find strong social encouragement. Thaipusam is a religious occasion. Obviously, it is more as well. Refreshments stalls are set up along the procession route. Women, children and men, dressed in their best, watch along the roads. Hawkers of trinkets, drinks and other refreshments do a brisk trade and many festival participants are fed at participating temples during the occasion. The social exuberance evident during a major Thaipusam festival in Malaysia is abundant. While very few Chinese carried the *kavadi* during the festival, some Malays watched, but as usual none of them participated. (Wiebe and S. Marriappen 1978: 140)

**Deepavali**

Deepavali serves as a day for the promotion of goodwill and harmony among the multiracial and multi-religious people of Malaya. (Govinda Raj 1993: 4). It is another very popular Indian festival. It has the advantage of being an all-India festival, and hence truly national to Indians in Malaya. In keeping with this, both in Malaysia and Singapore this day has been a public holiday for a long time. It is essentially a domestic festival, and the centre of activity is the Indian home. (Arasaratnam 1970: 169)
In the estates, too, Deepavali has been an occasion of merry making and fun from the very early times, in fact one of the few such occasions. The management sometimes subsidized these festivities out of the profits of toddy shops. Goats that had been reared for the occasion were slaughtered, and the meat distributed among neighbouring families. A lot of toddy was drunk on this day, and after the feasting there would generally be a variety of light entertainment. (Arasaratnam 1970: 169)

It was one of the rare occasions for pleasant and friendly contact between labourers and their superiors – the Asian staff and the European planters. Labourers took them presents, such as choice cuts of meat from the slaughtered goat, and vegetables and fruits from their gardens. In return they received cash presents. In the towns, cultural associations organised entertainment in the evening, and cinemas put on special Tamil films. (Arasaratnam 1970: 170)

Deepavali contrasts sharply with Thaipusam. Hindus go to temples to offer prayers or present offerings. Otherwise, this is a relatively quiet day of visitation. Malaysian newspapers make much of how members of different ethnic groups visit back and forth on occasions like Deepavali and Hari Raya, occasions when Hindus and Muslims, respectively, hold open their homes to all visitors. And indeed, there is a considerable amount of inter-ethnic visiting on such occasions among students, neighbours, political office holders and others, particularly in urban areas. This visitation that occurs is generally intra-ethnic in rural areas. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 140 - 141)

Homes are fixed up for this holiday occasion, special meals are served and most of the people dress in their best. At times some evening public entertainment is sponsored (a movie or a drama) but, most of all, at this time family members remember their own and visit among themselves and their friends. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 143)
Thiruvila

Yeoh Seng Guan has established through ethnographic description and analysis of a local annual Hindu festival organised by a temple (Kovil) situated within a settlement (Kampung Mariyamman) contributes towards the production of locality. A locality can be viewed as a ‘complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity and the relativity of contexts. (Appadurai 1995: 204) Making linkages not only involves an inscription of bodily knowledge and practices but also, as a social activity, entailing the gathering, use and distribution of knowledge. Local knowledge is substantially about producing reliably local subjects as well as about producing local neighbourhoods within which such subjects can be recognized and organised (Appadurai 1995: 206)

The manner in which these different trajectories intersect is elucidated through a discussion of the micropolitics of space as unfolded in the celebration of the annual goddess festival, the Thiruvila, although the Thiruvila should be regarded as a temporal maker is a thread of Hindu special moments – a series of tempocosms – commemorated throughout a year, its centrality and significance is particularly evident in the large crowd of participants and spectators that attend this event. (Guan 2001: 35)

The event allows for individual obligations, hopes and anxieties to be ritually addressed in the first instance, but also that its spatialised idioms are particularly apt for other signifying purposes as well, typifying the ambivalent position of working-class Indians in both the local and national ethnoscapes. (Guan 2001: 35)

For local residents, the Thiruvila is the most significant and anticipated festive event of the year. There is a conjunction of ritual obligations and personal and communal intentions. People speak variedly of a renewed commitment to Mariyamman, of making special requests, honouring answered prayers, and of fostering a sense of community. (Guan 2001: 43)
Certain modifications to ritual performances have nonetheless been adopted under the pressure of reformist movements in Malaysia. For instance, public animal blood sacrifices, traditionally viewed as essential for invigorating the goddess, have ceased. And so has the practice of a devotee being suspended by hooks embedded in his back as a part of heroic vows undertaken. For now, only the fire walking ceremony persists. In the plantation setting, the Thiruvila could continue for up to nine days, but in the towns and cities it has been reduced to three days, and conveniently celebrated over a weekend. Given the spatial compactness of Kampung Mariyamman, the drama of the Thiruvila also inevitably entered into the conscious spaces of Christian, Muslim and Sikh residents living cheek by jowl with their Hindu neighbours. While there were onlookers joining the crowd, some also took pains to avoid witnessing the events and fastidiously maintained a safe distance. An elderly as recalled that in the distant past it was not uncommon for Malay-Muslims to be present at the Thiruvila, but because of the reformist teachings of Islam as well as the surveillance of Muslim officials this was not apparent anymore. (Guan 2001: 45)

Given the historical particulars of Hinduism in Malaysia and the nature of routine interactions within the settlements, religious festivals like the Thiruvila engender various layers of mythical and social space for organisers and participants alike. In the first instance, these ritual events invariably allow personal needs and anxieties to be addressed, but the spatialised idioms and carnivalesque elements of this celebration are also particularly convenient for a number of other more corporate agendas. Anthony Cohen has argued that these kinds of symbolic activities are relatively fluid and expansive enough to allow participants to articulate a shared sense of belonging, of community identity, and of difference from non-participants. (Guan 2001: 60)

The Thiruvila is also important occasion to reconstitute community through an inscription of locality. Against the perceived cultural and spatial hegemony of Malay-Muslims, a semblance of power, authority and ownership over the locality is staked and paraded, and the Kampung residents momentarily revel in their mobility. The Thiruvila allows for a publicly ritualised distancing from non-participants as well as an
accentuation of symbolic boundaries, involving both externalised opposition and internalised levelling. (Guan 2001: 61) The chariot procession itself within the immediate locality fulfils the ritual function of ‘filling out’ mundane spaces through the idiom of mythical meanings. By doing so it transforms these places into a habitable place, and the local landscape is rendered religiously recognisable to its devotees. The affective bond between people and place, and between individuals, is once again symbolically reconstituted. Like a car battery that needs periodic charging to remain in effective working condition, these festivals were necessary calendrical events for the charging of the local landscape. (Guan 2001: 46)

The routes of temple processions are seldom straightforwardly decided on, and invariably involve negotiations with the local authorities, as well as a careful mapping of the spatial politics of the locale by the organising committee. (Guan 2001: 50). Mariyamman was eventually taken on an extended tour up to the other end of the main thoroughfare where a number of other Indian settlements were situated. This effectively meant that the glittering chariot and joyous entourage would be open en route to maximum public viewing by non-Indian residents. (Guan 2001: 51)

Other Festivals

Some of the Indians observe many of the occasions identified in the Hindi calendar. A few remember Lord Krishna’s birthday and some light a lamp or burn a little incense to mark the Navarathri festival. As a part of various festivals lamps are placed ‘...to drive away the darkness, and to let prosperity and awareness take its place’ or simply to curry favour where possible. (Wiebe and S. Marriappan 1978: 138) The MHS is best known for the annual Tirumurai festival, when selected hymns inspired by the Nayanmars (Shaivite saint) are recited by devotees. (Guan 2001: 56)

Fire-walking festivals are commonly held by particular temples during the course of a year in particular estate areas. The details of fire-walking festivals vary. But their general outlines are usually similar. A bed of red-hot coals is prepared, usually by lower
caste labourers. Devotees carrying kavaids of a variety similar to those involved in the Thaipusam procession again to Lord Subramaniam, approach the pit walking along a route marked with leaves, palm fronds and other decorations and pictures of various deities are hung. Devotees prepare themselves for their kavadi bearing and fire-walking in diet, thought and activity. Offerings are made before the first person crosses and usually the first person across is a priest invited for the occasion. Some devotees momentarily stop to dance while crossing the coals. Whatever the faith and desires of such crossers, ceremony assistants hurry them on, after the crossing holding them firmly as they plant their feet in a little ditch filled with a fresh milk solution. On the day of the fire walking ceremony, the temple concerned commonly provides vegetarian food for all those who wish to partake. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 141) After the walking, people may dance to drum and musical accompaniment, and a film or drama will usually be sponsored for later in the evening.

_Thai Ponggal_ is a festival more popular in the estates than in the towns. It is a festival of the Tamils occurring on the first day of the month of Thai. In India it was celebrated as a harvest festival when the first grains were gathered and brought in for the ceremony. The Tamil labourers on the plantations continued to celebrate it, though its harvest significance was no longer of relevance. Some connexion with tradition was continued through the ritual of cow worship carried on in the mattu (cow) ponggal associated with this festival in India. Many labourers reared their own cattle, and so the ritual of mattu ponggall was followed. With the Tamil cultural revival of the post-war period, many Tamils in Malaya took to celebrating _Thai Ponggal_ because it was a purely Tamil festival. Urban Indians showed interest, and organised festivities of a cultural nature. (Arasaratnam 1970: 170)

Innumerable other Hindu festivals are celebrated, some as temple festivals, others as domestic ones. Particular temples have achieved a reputation as venues for the special celebration of particular festivals. Some of these festivals and the places specializing in them are: Chittirai Paruvam (Thandayuthapani Temple, Telok Anson), Vinayaka Chathurthi (Selva Vinayakar Kovil, Seremban), Navaratthiri (Singapore and Kuala
Lumpur), Karthikai Theepam (Thandayuthapani Temple, Muar), Panguni Uttiram (Thandayuthapani Temple, Kuala Lumpur, as well as other temples in the estates), Mariamman Thiruvila (all estate temples), Masi Maham (Sannasimalai Andavar Kovil, Malacca) and the Hindu New Year. Navarathiri and the Hindu New Year are also celebrated as domestic festivals. All these are occasions for religious worship as well as merry making and entertainment when Hindus in a locality congregate and achieve a group identity. For many, these are the only visible symbols of attachment to Indian tradition, and they cling to them tenaciously. (Arasaratnam 1970: 170)

In most of these festivals, popular forms of devotion and display of religious emotion as practiced in South India have persisted in some ways. Among the most significant of these is the carrying of the kavadi, a large wooden decorated arch, as an act of penance. (Arasaratnam 1970: 171)

Large-scale ritual events like these are also strategic sites for remaining a collective sense of a global Hindu-Indian identity in the face of perceived cultural inundation by other religious and ethnic groups. This management of a public culture is engendered by the religious potency of the event and the sheer number of Indians (Tamils and non-Tamils) present there. Significantly, key national political leaders also participate conspicuously in the temple rituals during these special moments while making laudatory statements regarding the unique cultural pluralism in the country, and the need to keep intact the delicate balance between various ethnic and religious groups. Moderation in beliefs and practices is counseled. Much media attention is paid to the MIC’s appeals to the federal government to designate Thaipusam as a nation-wide public holiday (in addition to Deepavali). The appeal has been made annually for the last thirty years, though without success. (Guan 2001: 57)

Thaipusam is currently legislated as a regional holiday in states where there is a significant Indian population, namely, Johor, Negri Sembilan, Perak, Penang and Selangor. Deepavali was probably chosen as a national holiday as the MIC was initially
led by North Indians. From the mid 1950s, the MIC leadership has been increasingly ‘Tamilised’ (Arasaratnam 1970: 129 ff)

The massive chariot procession of Lord Murugan during the Thaipusam, a festival which has a wider spectrum of agendas, the local chariot procession meets parochial needs and has more manageable organisational parameters. While there may be a difference of scale between these practices, the experiences of social actors are nevertheless informed by the linkages and self-representations that interpenetrate them. (Guan 2001: 61)

The indeterminacy, multivocality and carnivalesque elements of these public ritual events also provide particularly useful opportunities for different individuals and groups to promote their non-religious agendas. In the ethnographic example of Kampung Mariyamman and the locality, it’s illustrated how new and more elaborate ritual practices were selectively conscripted to elevate and publicise the material status and moral standing of the residents (Guan 2001: 61)

Additionally, non-religious markers could be deployed for the same purpose. It can be seen by a way in which temple leaders incorporate modern public relations and marketing strategies in their Thiruvila and other celebrations, so as to reflect a veneer of professionalism. While the inaugural celebration of an expensive and highly elaborate divine marriage ceremony was expressly initiated to foster closer relations between Hindu residents in the locality, it would not be too far-fetched to read into an element of veiled rivalry as well. The *Homa* ceremony underscores the universality and appropriateness of Sanskritic-type Hinduism for modern urban living. (Guan 2001: 62)

**Important works refered**


