<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Hindu worship in contemporary Singapore.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Sangeetha Madasamy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/7787">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/7787</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hindu Worship in Contemporary Singapore

Submitted by: Sangeetha D/O Madasamy (074891B12)

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Teo You Yenn

A Final Year Project submitted to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

Year of Publication: 2011
ABSTRACT

This research aims to study how certain folk Hindu practices have persisted even though religion in Singapore has been hyper-rationalized. The state although secular, has been active in managing religion and it has done so through various legislations and the different statutory boards. Religion is seen to play a specific role in society, where practices that are relevant and complimentary to nation-building are encouraged to be cultivated, while traditional and outdated practices are advised to be discarded. Amidst such an environment, I find that Singaporean Hindus have managed to persist in practicing folk Hinduism even when there are limited opportunities for such a form of worship in Singapore. I use animal sacrifice as a point of study to showcase how such folk practices have persisted even though they have been banned in Singapore and how Singaporean Hindus still manage to perform their preferred mode of religious worship by patronizing temples in Malaysia.

Key Words: Singapore Hindus, Folk Hinduism, Rationalization, the State, Rituals and Practices, and Animal Sacrifice.

Word Count: 10,682
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Teo You Yenn for being an excellent supervisor. Thank you for always guiding me, listening to my ideas and just prodding me in the right direction, especially when you had such a busy schedule. I truly appreciate all the help you have provided.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Geoffrey Benjamin for always answering my queries and suggesting appropriate reading materials throughout the course of my thesis. His expertise has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Professor Vineeta Sinha for giving me direction when I first conceptualized my idea.

I would like to thank my friends, who are the pillars in my life. Their constant words of encouragement and motivation even when they were so busy with their own work truly made everything manageable.

A big thank you to all my respondents for setting aside time from their busy schedules and participating in the interviews.

A special shout-out to my sister for putting up with all my stress! Thank you for being so understanding.

Last but most definitely not the least, I would like to thank my parents. I truly appreciate your care, concern and love for me all these years. Thank you for believing in me and always wanting the best for me. I dedicate this to you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Chapter 1**  
**Introduction**.................................................................................................................................................4

**Chapter 2**  
**Literature Review**..........................................................................................................................................8  
I. The State’s Management of Religion in Singapore............................................................8  
II. Hinduism in Singapore.........................................................................................................................9  
III. The Gap in the Literature..................................................................................................................11

**Chapter 3**  
**Research Methodology**............................................................................................................................12  
I. The Maha Kali Amman Alaiyam Temple.......................................................................................12  
II. The Sample and Interviews................................................................................................................13

**Chapter 4**  
**Findings and Analysis**..............................................................................................................................14  
1. No Rationalization of Hinduism in Singapore?...........................................................................14  
   I. Hyper-rationalization of Religion...............................................................................................14  
   II. Rationalization of Hinduism in Singapore...............................................................................16  
   I. The Practice of Animal Sacrifice...............................................................................................19  
   II. Animal Sacrifice in Singapore..................................................................................................21  
   III. Why Are Hindus Still Sacrificing Animals?...........................................................................22

**Chapter 5**  
**Conclusion**..................................................................................................................................................25  
I. Summary of Findings.............................................................................................................................25  
II. Limitations and Further Research......................................................................................................26  
III. Policy Implications...............................................................................................................................26

**References**..................................................................................................................................................27
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Religion is often considered to be a private matter by individuals but nothing could be further from the truth as religion in Singapore is actively managed by the state. Superficially, it may seem that the state is laissez-faire when it comes to religion as citizens are allowed to profess the religion of their choice, or if they wish no religion at all. In the case of Singapore although the state is secular, it still plays a very active role with regards to religion. Legislations such as The Maintenance of the Religious Harmony Act in 1990, Article 15 of the Constitution of Singapore\(^1\), the White Paper on Singapore’s Shared Values presented to parliament in 1991 (E. Tan, 2001) and the Internal Security Act, show how importance religion is to the state and the active role the state plays in shaping the discourse on religion and religious beliefs. Such legislation was brought about due to fears of possible racial and religious conflict that could result because of Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious demographic. Often the 1964 race riots, Maria Hertogh riots and now September 11, are used to justify the current legislation and the state’s intervention and active involvement with regards to religion. Most importantly the state firmly believes that for the successful preservation of religious harmony, religion should never interfere with politics.

Furthermore, the establishment of statutory boards such as the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), also known as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB) and the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) show that religion is not something that the state wishes to leave in private hands. In fact all members of the council of MUIS are appointed by the President of Singapore, and the Chairperson of the HEB is appointed by the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). The establishment of the IRO also shows how fragile religious harmony is to the state. Religions such as Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, the Baha’i faith and Judaism, which comprise of a smaller following, are recognized together

---


Article 15 Freedom of Religion
(1) Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it.
(2) No person shall be compelled to pay any tax the proceeds of which are specially allocated in whole or in part for the purposes of a religion other than his own.
(3) Every religious group has the right—
(a) to manage its own religious affairs;
(b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and
(c) to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law.
(4) This article does not authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality.
with religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism which have of a larger following in Singapore.

The Singapore state has an ideal vision of the role religion should play in society for its citizens, as it sees religion as something that should aid and be complementary to nation-building. It sees religion as a moral beacon of society and as a tool to instil moral values in its citizens. Citizens are encouraged to make their religious beliefs and ideologies socially and politically relevant where they must be prepared to change and adjust accordingly; discard outdated religious attitudes that might hinder national development; keep religion separate from politics; and religion together with other social institutions, had to perform certain functions for the good of all, and particularly for the good of the nation (Sinha, 1999).

Therefore, from the state’s vision of the function of religion and from the legislations it has come to pass, it can be seen that religion has been administered through the rule of ‘formal rationality’. Religion just like the economy has been hyper-rationalized in the Weberian sense, where calculated decisions are made with a sense of detachment and much emphasis is placed on rules, guidelines and authority. The rationalization of religion however, is not evolutionary and it does not mean an increased knowledge of the condition under which one lives, but rather it means that one could learn knowledge and belief at any time if one wishes it and all things can be mastered by calculation, which results in a disenchanted world (Weber, 1958 [1918]; Benjamin, 1996).

The state’s hyper-rationalization of religion can be seen in several instances. For example, permits are required for religious occasions and festivals if they are to be carried out in public places; the day and time for religious occasions is determined by statutory boards; there are specific sites that are set aside for temples, mosques, churches and other sacred buildings; religious organizations have been set up to play an advisory role to the government; and religious conferences and seminars are conducted to address contentious issues and above all, to keep religion relevant to the present.

The state’s hyper-rationalization of religion has also seeped into religious practices and rituals. For instance there has been a movement towards Reformist Buddhism, as Shenist rituals (part of Chinese culture) are being deemed irrelevant and it is being replaced by scripture knowledge to suit the modern religious needs of the younger Chinese (Kuah-Pearce,
Hindu festivals such as Thaipusam and Timiti, come with many rules, regulations and guidelines which determine what devotees can or cannot do. In the case of Thaipusam, any violation of the rules and regulations would mean a financial penalty. For instance, certain musical instruments are banned during the procession and if anyone was to be found playing these instruments, it would mean an immediate confiscation and a possible fine. These regulations and rules are put in place so as to maintain a sombre atmosphere during the festival, as deemed so by the HEB.

The state has a clear idea of the practices Hinduism should encompass as practices such as animal sacrifice have been banned since the early 1970s. All the temples in Singapore are agamic temples, which consequently mean a prohibition in the offering of non-vegetarian items, alcohol and cigarettes even though non-agamic deities may be included in such temples. There were many Hindu temples that existed before the 1980s but the number was deemed disproportional to the size of the Hindu population. Much of the land that these temples occupied was needed for urban development, so the temples that were dedicated to one deity were merged with larger temples, provided that it was theologically and mythologically compatible (Sinha, 1999).

With such hyper-rationalization by the state and by the relevant statutory boards, one would expect a Hindu population that has adopted a more rational, de-ritualized and de-traditionalized form of religious worship. However, how some Hindus practice the religion is very different from the state’s view of how religion should be and the practices it should encompass. In Singapore, some practices of folk Hinduism have persisted since the time of the first Hindu settlers. Folk Hinduism gives importance to a non-Sanskritic pantheon of deities; places much emphasis on devotion and religious experience; offers non-vegetarian items, alcohol and cigarettes; practices rituals of self-mortification; relies on the protection of kaaval deivam for day to day problems; there is an absence of formalized, standardized and

---

2 A festival that is dedicated to the god Murugan, where devotees carry milk pots and spikes called Kavadi.
3 Fire-walking festival.
4 The agamic temples tend to follow closely the beliefs and practices recognised by the Sanskritic agama. These temples are dedicated to gods like Shiva, Vishnu, Sakti, Ganesha and Murugan. The temple priests in most cases are properly trained or are of Brahmin descent. Only vegetarian offerings are given.
5 A Sanskritic pantheon of deities would consist of gods such as Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha and Murugan and Sakti
6 Kaaval deivam are considered to be the guardian deities of Tamilnadu and they are seen as protectors of village boundaries.
textually derived ritual procedures for the deity (Sinha, 2006); and worshippers go for temple *thiruvilazhs*³ (festivals).

It is puzzling to see that practices such as animal sacrifice and other aspects of folk Hinduism have managed to survive even though the landscape of Singapore has been urbanised and the Hindu population is more educated as compared to colonial times. Most Hindus now are better educated and young Hindus have been exposed to ideas of de-ritualization and de-traditionalization. Furthermore, there are no temples in Singapore for just a single deity. Therefore it is puzzling too see young Hindus also subscribing to folk Hinduism, as opportunities for such worship is truly limited in Singapore. However, I find that there are gaps and spaces within this hyper-rationalized religious environment, where folk practices have managed to survive. Although animal sacrifice is been banned in Singapore, it has survived amongst Singaporean Hindus as they visit temples in Malaysia where such practices can still be carried out. Singaporean Hindus have managed to negotiate their religious worship such that they abide by the state’s vision of Hinduism in Singapore, but at the same time they have not given up their own religious preferences. Many Singaporeans go across to the border to fulfil whatever religious experience they may not be able to get in Singapore and this is not just confined to animal sacrifice.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate how such practices of folk Hinduism have managed to remain intact and persist through the decades, when religion has been hyper-rationalized by the state and a more intellectual thread of Hinduism is being put forth by a certain demographic of the Hindu population. I have chosen animal sacrifice as a point of study as it is a topic that has hardly been paid attention to in terms of research in Singapore. Also, animal sacrifice is a practice that has been officially banned by the state since the early 1970s. Therefore, the continual practice of animal sacrifice itself shows that there seems to be some contention between the state and citizens’ view of Hinduism and the practices it should encompass.

---

³ Festivals that occur in a certain part of the year that is special to the temple or a particular god in that temple. There are many special prayers as it is an occasion that only happens annually and the mood is rather celebratory as there are many other activities such as classical and folk dances and singing of devotional hymns.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

I. The State’s Management of Religion in Singapore

The current literature shows that the state’s management and rationalization of religion has caught the attention of many scholars. Religion is seen as a way to meet the spiritual, moral, ethical needs of Singaporeans and engage in educational, social and charitable work, where it is be a ‘spiritual ballast’ and a ‘moral anchor’ to counter forces of communism, materialism and Westernization due to rapid economic change (Sinha, 1999). Religious groups have taken this into account and shaped their religion such that it complements nation-building. Many rituals have undergone a process of simplification and adaptation to make them more applicable to life in modern society as there is generally a reduction in the length of time required for the performance of traditional rituals (Sinha, 1993; Tong, 2007).

The state’s management of religion is seen in several instances. Many temples have been merged to make way for urban development and this can be seen across the various religious traditions. Places of worship for the Sikh, Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu communities have been merged together due to land scarcity (Sinha, 2003). Permission is needed by the relevant authorities (Singapore Land Authority) for development and purchase of land sites for places of worship. If worshippers wish to carry out any kind of religious or festival procession, a police permit is required from the Singapore Police Force under the Public Order Act\(^8\). The state has also attempted to teach religious beliefs and practices in Singapore schools to inculcate moral values and promote citizenship education (C. Tan, 2008). Also, each religion is represented by the IRO where local events and interests include religious education in schools, morality issues, life issues, proselytization, promotion of inter-religious harmony, and public performance of joint religious prayers (Lai, 2008).


1. Under the Public Order Act 2009, a permit is required for any assembly or procession of 1 or more persons in any public place or to which members of the public in general are invited, induced or permitted to attend, intended: (a) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person; (b) to publicise a cause or campaign; or (c) to mark or commemorate any event.

2. The following is a list of commonly held activities that require a permit:(a) religious assembly; (b) festival procession (e.g., lantern festival foot procession); (c) religious procession (e.g., chariot procession, foot procession, foot and vehicular procession or vehicular procession); (d) sports related procession (e.g., walkathon, walk-a-jog, family run, jogathon or road run); (e) vehicular rally; (f) treasure hunt; and (g) public talks.
The state’s management of religion and its consequent hyper-rationalization has also influenced how religions have come to manage themselves. Rationalization can be seen in the manner in which representatives of these religions have brought about a process of intellectualization. The Taoist Federation, which is a new institutional structure in itself, has tried to systemize the religion and explain its philosophy to Singaporeans by publishing tracts and giving talks to educate Singaporeans regarding the rationality and logic of Taoist beliefs (Tong, 2007). Rationalization can also be seen in the ways in which religions respond to threats of Christian proselytization. An example would be the Reformist Buddhist movement which started having socio-religious activities, an organisational structure, fellowship schemes and economic activities (Kuah-Pearce, 2003). Such rationalized mode of operating is also seen amongst individuals. Singaporeans use the internet to engage in activities related to their own religion such as downloading or listening to religious music online, or recommending religious sites to friends and relatives (Kluver et. al 2008).

However, even though there has been much focus on hyper-rationalization, this remains to be just one view of religion in Singapore. There are many gaps and spaces within this hyper-rationalized framework that are filled by folk practices. It is important not to neglect such practices and see how they co-exist with rationalized religious practices so as to have a better understanding of how religion operates in Singapore.

II. Hinduism in Singapore

The current literature concerning Hinduism in Singapore has reached some breadth and depth since the 1930s where first ethnographic details of festivals and temples were documented. Themes that are now found in the literature would include works documenting popular festivals and temples, together with research on identity, labels, religious worship and the state’s management of Hinduism. However, one issue that seems to have been dealt with in passing would be animal sacrifice. Although researchers have mentioned the practice of animal sacrifice, no one has looked into how such a practice has managed to persist amidst such hyper-rationalization from the state.

Most of the earlier works done in the 1970s which documented rituals were ethnographic and there have been various sociological analyses on festivals such as Thaipusam, Timiti and Navarathiri. For example, Ananda (1976) focused on the ecology of shrines; Manokara (1979) on growth and decay in two Hindu temples in Singapore, and PuruShotam (1985) on
the celebration of Navarathiri (Tong, 2007). Babb (1976) focused on Hindu rituals, and examined the evolving features of Hinduism in Singapore and how basically an agrarian religion adapted to a highly urbanized, rapidly changing social environment. Babb also wrote an important paper on the festival of Timiti titled *Walking on Flowers* (1974) which provided an ethnographic account of the fire-walking ceremony and also examined the implications of the festival on the Hindu population.

Studies on Hinduism have also focused on other areas such as, what the label “Hindu” denotes in Singapore and the religious identity of being a Hindu (Arasaratnam, 1979; Sinha, 1997). Another issue that has been researched on would be how Hinduism has its different labels and how each label has some sort of a moral value imposed upon it (Sinha, 2006). Here, Sinha specifically looks at ‘Folk Hinduism’ vis a vis ‘Sanskritization’ where members who participate in ‘Folk’ practices are assigned particular sociological identities, and presumed to be carriers of specific values and mores. This is because Sanskritization is seen as a way for a ‘low’ Hindu caste to change its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high caste and it is generally also accompanied by, and often results in, upward mobility for the caste in question (Srinivas, 1967). As opposed to ‘Folk’ Hinduism, Hindus who subscribe to ‘Sanskritic’ Hinduism are awarded a higher status in society as it is seen as more intellectual and philosophical than ‘Folk’ Hinduism. However, researchers argue that such labels do not capture the complex relations within Hinduism itself and there needs to be a fresh analytical framework (Lee and Rajoo 1987; Sinha, 2006). Lee and Rajoo (1987) have also written about how labels such as ‘Sanskritization’ fail to capture the relationship that Hinduism has with society. They say the main criticism towards Sanskritization is due to the ambiguity and looseness of the term, suggesting that it can lead an investigator into studying false problems especially if one uses the concept as the essential key to understand various aspects of change in Indian society. As such I do not use the term folk practices with any moral implications, but rather aim to study the mechanisms that Hindus have come up with to ensure the survival of such practices.

New frameworks have been introduced to better understand the contrasts within Hinduism itself. A new argument has been put forth which suggests that Hinduism in Singapore amounts to more of a “mixing-matching” sort, as the practices of Hindus are not fixed and pre-determined but rather, Hindus in Singapore choose different practices, rituals and forms of worship that suit their needs (Sinha, 2009). Basically, this means that there are no fixed
rules as to how Hinduism should be practiced although there are general guidelines that the Hindu population adheres to.

III. The Gap in the Literature

Although the studies mentioned so far have addressed key issues with regards to Hinduism in Singapore, there has been insufficient attention paid to the study of rituals and practices and their implication on society. Many studies have been specifically done on festivals, however, there are hardly any studies on the patterns of religious worship of Hindus in Singapore. So far, one of the few attempts made in this area can be seen in Sinha’s (2005) *A New God in the Diaspora? Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore*. In this book, Sinha investigates how a village deity came to be worshipped as a god by Singaporean Hindus and how this deity was accepted as a god in agamic temples in Singapore. She also addresses the issue of how certain rituals and practices that have been banned by the state are still being practiced by Muneeswaran’s devotees in what she calls ‘jungle temples’ or in the homes of the devotees.

What has not been documented is, Hindus in Singapore still continuing the practice of animal sacrifice although it has been effectively banned by the government since the early 1970s. Not only did the practice persist, but the younger generation seems to be actively taking part in it too. The practice has largely been able to continue as people either visit certain temples in Malaysia where such practices are allowed, or they perform the rituals in their own homes. This phenomenon is sociologically interesting as the state has an ideal vision of how Hinduism should be and the practices it should encompass. The state has specifically emphasized to keep only practices and traditions that are relevant and discard those which are outdated. It is interesting that Hindus have managed to find a way to continue this practice that is clearly seen as traditional and further investigations have to be made to learn the reasons and motivations behind the persistence of such a practice.

---

9 A male guardian deity often believed to be a manifestation of Shiva.

10 Shrines that are located in remote parts of the island, away from urban and residential areas that are somewhat inaccessible and surrounded by greenery (Sinha, 2005).
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I. The Maha Kaliyamman Alaiyam Temple

This research aims to investigate how Singaporean Hindus have managed to persist in practising folk Hinduism when there are limited opportunities for such a form of worship in Singapore. Practices such as animal sacrifice, and other aspects of folk Hinduism such as patronizing a temple that is dedicated to one god, and going for temple festivals, seem to still hold a great amount of importance amongst Singaporean Hindus. Busloads of Singaporean Hindus visit temples all over Malaysia so that they can carry out their preferred mode of religious worship and perform practices and rituals that they may not be able to do so in Singapore. These temples in Malaysia seem to offer a religious experience that appears to be unavailable in Singapore.

Although Singaporeans visit many temples across Malaysia, the Maha Kaliyamman Alaiyam Temple in Muar in the state of Johor particularly stands out. In recent years, this temple has become infamous for its animal sacrifices as photographs depicting a young girl, being possessed by the goddess Kali and drinking the blood of the sacrificed goats have been circulating in the internet. At this point, it has to be mentioned that although the pictures caused much furor, the drinking of the sacrificial animal’s blood is a common theme when it comes to such rituals. Not infrequently, a pujari, possessed by the goddess actually does the drinking (Bolle, 1983) or sometimes, the blood of the sacrificed animal is splashed on the person who is possessed by the goddess.

I have chosen this temple as it is most relevant and appropriate for my thesis because it is well-known amongst Singaporeans for its ‘power’ and it has a large Singaporean Hindu following. I visited and conducted my field research in this temple and I also managed to interview the person who is in-charge of the temple. The temple is located near Muar town, where it is about a ten-minute car ride from the bus station, and it is right next to a plantation with some housing estates nearby. The temple consists of three main sanctuaries, the main sanctuary housing Kali and the other two sanctuaries housing other deities. However, there are only two statues in the temple, one a larger than life statue which is about 8 feet in height and a smaller statue which is about 4 feet tall. Both these statues capture different images of Kali, the taller one portrays her in a fiercer image where she seems to be in a dancing pose

_A non-Brahmin, Tamil priest._
while the smaller statue is a regular, upright pose. It should be noted that although there were images of other deities in the temple, they were all pictures and none of them had a statue except for Kali. What is most ‘special’ about this temple is the *thiruvilazh* which is frequented by many Singaporeans. This takes place in July as it is considered to be the most auspicious month for Kali, and during the festival many goats are sacrificed for the goddess. However, it should be noted that worshippers are allowed to sacrifice animals anytime of the year, and not just in July.

II. The Sample and Interviews

I started out by interviewing one of my extended family members who had visited this temple with her own family and through her, I managed to do snowball and purposive sampling and get the contacts of other Singaporean Hindus who have visited this temple too. I only interviewed people who have visited the temple during the time of the festival or people who have sacrificed animals in other parts of the year. This was pertinent as the work for my thesis only begun in August 2010 and as such, I missed out on the festival. Thus, although I visited the temple, I did not witness the act of animals being sacrificed. Therefore for this research, I relied on in-depth interviews from my respondents. Interviewing this group of people has helped me to answer the questions I have raised for this research as my respondents have witnessed the rituals in person and they were able to narrate the entire process to me in detail. Through snowball sampling, I managed to get a sample that was representative of the current Hindu population in Singapore and most of my respondents can be considered to be from the middle class income group.

Face to face in-depth interviews with respondents were conducted from January 2011 to March 2011. The interview was semi-structured, with an interview schedule that provided a general guideline for the conversation. However at the same time, I followed up with issues that were raised by my respondents that was not part of the schedule and probed further if I was not getting sufficient information. Most of the interviews were between 40 minutes to an hour and they were all recorded with the permission of my respondents and transcribed. The major themes that were discussed in my interviews were the ritual of animal sacrifice, religious worship in Malaysia as opposed to Singapore, and practices and rituals in folk Hinduism. I also asked my respondents specific questions which addressed the motivations behind practising folk Hinduism. Such questions enabled me to analyse how people talked about animal sacrifice and the patronizing of these temples, which invariably added much value to my research. In addition, a few of my respondents were hesitant about commenting
on the state, especially since their views were being recorded. However, much reassurance was given on my part that all information and opinions disclosed were strictly confidential.

Some parts of the interview transcripts will be quoted as evidence to the findings, and the names of respondents have not been disclosed for reasons of confidentiality. Words that are not part of the English language such as ‘lah’ and ‘da’ have not been omitted in order to maintain the authenticity of the interviewee’s response.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. No Rationalization of Hinduism in Singapore?

I. Hyper-rationalization of Religion

Since independence, Singapore has modernized rapidly where its society has come to be ruled by “formal rationality”, where actions are always calculable, systematic, efficient, deliberate, impersonal, methodical, intelligible and rule-governed (Swedberg and Agevall, 2005). Although the Singapore state is secular, religion is subjected to authority and is managed actively by the state. Only relevant practices and rituals which are complimentary to nation-building are encouraged to be kept.

Government leaders in Singapore have emphasized that religious practices and views must be dynamic, progressive and modern in order to keep up with rapidly changing times (Sinha, 1997). The state has an ideal vision of religion and the role it should play in society and this can be seen in the boundaries it has set. Although it is not said explicitly, such idealistic views of religion can be seen in bureaucratic and administrative terms, delivered in various public speeches made by members of the government (Sinha, 1993). From the state’s point of view, elements such as religious fervour, missionary zeal and religious assertiveness are seen as undesirable (Sinha, 1999). Religion is always told to be kept aside from politics by the state and much emphasis is placed on religious harmony. For instance, the government regards wearing the tudung\(^{12}\) in national schools primarily as a symbol of exclusiveness that prevents students from integrating and, consequently, a threat to national integration (E. Tan, 2008). Also in 1987, 16 church workers and social activists were arrested under the ISA for using the

\(^{12}\) A head-scarf adorned by Muslim women.
Catholic Church and other religious organizations in a “Marxist conspiracy” to subvert the state (Goh, 2010). Such hyper-rationalization has limited the role of religion in Singapore. Religion is primarily seen as an avenue to instil moral values in the people by being more active in charity, education and welfare services and not politics.

The hyper-rationalization of religion can also be seen in the religious conferences and seminars that have been held with the support of the state since the time of Singapore’s independence. Interestingly, these seminars do not deal with religious beliefs explicitly, but rather reinforce moral and secular values that an individual or a society should possess. For instance, the speeches delivered during a seminar held at the Ghandi Memorial Hall in 1980 focused on “Dharma” and justice. In the seminar, the concept of “Dharma” was said to be commonly understood as a man’s faith or religion when in actuality it means a code of righteous conduct and obligations according to the law. Another example would be the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace in 1976, where the objective was to achieve peace through religion. Therefore with the state’s support, secular values such as peace, security and human dignity were hoped to be achieved through inter-religious cooperation.

An entity that has been active in promoting such conferences and seminars would be the IRO, a statutory board that was established in 1949. It has published small booklets and papers from the seminar and conferences it has held. The IRO’s invocation is a prime example of how religion has been rationalized:

O Lord, increase us in understanding and knowledge and set us free from the bondage of greed, hatred and ignorance...giving our bodies to work and our minds to the Lord. May we work vigorously keeping within spiritual discipline to bring peace in our hearts, peace in our families, peace in our cities, peace in our planetary home, the world...

The invocation is a reflection of how the state sees religion. Devotion and religious experience which worshippers give importance to has been de-emphasized, and the focus instead is on using religion to develop oneself morally and to avoid social problems. What has consequently resulted is that, the state’s management of religion has re-defined the sacred nature of religion to something that has become more profane.

With such active management by the state and its statutory boards, it is interesting to see that popular Hinduism in Singapore has managed to retain its rituals and practices, and much
importance is still given to devotion and religious experience. Hindus who adhere to folk Hinduism have not favoured a more intellectualized and rationalized form of worship. These Hindus have not turned to the sacred texts in Hinduism such as the *Bhagavad Gita* for answers, and the *Upanishads* are hardly heard of. It is even more interesting to see Hindus living in such close proximity and contact with rationalized religions such as Christianity and Islam, and not adopt a more canonical form of worship. Instead folk practices such as animal sacrifices which are rife with magic, theatre and mysticism are still thriving among the Hindu population in Singapore.

II. Rationalization of Hinduism in Singapore

Attempts at rationalization of the religion have been made through the process of intellectualization, but such a strand of Hinduism is not being practiced by most of the Hindus in Singapore. I would argue that the need for rationalization and intellectualization is only felt by a certain demographic of the population. As said by Sinha (1993), the literate, middle- or upper-class Hindus with a largely English-medium education who were mostly born and bred in Singapore felt that Hinduism was being “too ritualistic” and that the existing but latent intellectual dimension has to be brought out. Intellectualization would mean a shift from an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion to one where there is a tendency to search for a religion which can be regarded as systematic, logical and relevant (Tong, 2007). This intellectualization in Hinduism has been carried out in a ‘rational’ and systematic manner. Temples have been conducting religious classes almost akin to the Christian and Muslim faith to bring about greater awareness of the Hindu faith and to show that it is not just a jumble of rituals performed in an ancient language. As mentioned by Sinha (1993), it was suggested by organizations and individuals who have an interest in guiding the behavioural dimension of Hinduism in Singapore, that temples should organize more lectures on Hinduism, hold regular religious classes, invite relevant personalities from overseas to give talks on Hinduism, and hold music and singing classes, in addition to regular *bhajan* (hymns) sessions. In fact, many temples have already started to provide such services.

However, even though such services are being provided in temples, they do not seem to be adopted by the majority of the Hindu population. In fact, there only seems to be a large following for what would be considered cultural activities such as music, singing and dance classes. Religious classes are not very popular amongst the Hindu population and most of my respondents have almost never attended such classes organized by temples. Through my
interviews, I have come to realise that rituals are very much a stronghold in Hinduism in Singapore and their importance is not going to wane anytime in the near future.

Therefore, if we look at the current phenomenon of Hindus taking part in practices such as animal sacrifice, one could possibly say that for these Hindus this form of intellectualization is not favoured and does not take precedence. Rather the emphasis is on performing the rituals themselves. However, from my interviews I have gathered that a different form of intellectualization is taking place in Singapore now. Hindus are no longer ‘mindlessly’ performing rituals and practices and this especially applies to young Singaporean Hindus. Many of them know the significance behind the rituals and practices they take part in and in this way, a process of intellectualization is taking place.

Rationalization in Hinduism can also be seen through the process of ‘Sanskritization’ in Singapore. The main proponent behind this process would be the HEB. The HEB has advocated a particular form of Hinduism that is in line with the state’s discourse on religion.

The HEB has emphasized a move away from rituals and practices that it has deemed unnecessary and this can be seen in its enforcement of regulations, rules and guidelines when it comes to festivals such as Thaipusam and Timiti. Since 1979, the HEB has officially banned the playing of accompanying musical instruments for kavadis during Thaipusam (Sinha, 1993). The reason being Thaipusam is supposed to be a sombre festival of penance and by playing such musical instruments the seriousness of the festival is compromised. As said by the HEB, many young men used non-Indian instruments and created an atmosphere of hooliganism (Sinha, 1999).

However, it should be noted that there is a reason for the playing of musical instruments for the kavadis. The distance between Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road and Sri Thendayuthapani Temple at Tank Road comes up to about four kilometres and this would make the kavadi-bearer exhausted. So to give some encouragement and to take the kavadi-bearer’s mind off his13 tiredness, musical instruments accompany kavadis. Also, such hooliganism is not as prevalent as it was in the 1970s. In fact, there are many urumi melam14

13 Only males are allowed to carry kavadi, as the spikes are pierced on the devotee’s bare chest.
14 Urumi melam groups started becoming popular amongst young men about four years ago. Usually friends come together to play devotional songs during prayers. These groups have their own uniforms and instruments, and charge a small fee for the playing of songs. The devotional songs are non-Sanskritic and are sung in Tamil and they have a folk feeling attached to them.
groups comprising of young men, who only play traditional Indian instruments and sing devotional songs. Many of my respondents and people whom I have spoken casually to were very unhappy with the HEB’s rules and regulations pertaining to Thaipusam. Many of them felt that Thaipusam was not like Thaipusam and in fact was rather ‘quiet’. My respondents felt that the state was being racially discriminatory towards Hindus by having such regulations for Thaipusam.

Even though the ban has a secular basis, Singaporean Hindus have come to view this problem through a racial lens as Hindus do live in close proximity with people of other religions and religion is also invariably tied with ethnicity in the case of Singapore. However, Hindus’ sentiment that the races are being treated differently is just the tip of the iceberg. When I probed my respondents further, the real problem appears to be the change in religious experience. The strict guidelines, has directly affected the religious experience of Singaporean Hindus, especially when such an experience is given precedence above all other things.

The HEB has also changed the face of Hinduism by altering the religious landscape of Singapore. Small shrines and make-shift temples have either been done away with, or the deities in those temples have been included in the agamic temples. The reason behind this was the scarcity of land due to Singapore’s geographical size. The HEB proposed that instead of constructing single temples dedicated to individual deities, there should be a merger of smaller temples, provided the deities are theologically and mythologically compatible (Sinha 2003). Although the conversion of shrines and small temples to agamic temples seems to be popular and has its supporters, it is not welcomed by the entire Hindu population. Ironically, many of my respondents voiced out their sentiments that there is no temple in Singapore that is just dedicated to one god, and this is something that appeals to their senses. In my interviews, I gathered that temples dedicated to an individual god or deity is something that is only available in Malaysia. Singapore’s urban landscape makes such a feat rather impossible due to land scarcity and the guidelines imposed by the HEB. Therefore many Singaporeans visit such temples in Malaysia as they offer a type of religious worship and experience that is unavailable in Singapore.

I. The Practice of Animal Sacrifice

The theme of sacrifice is one that is very prominent in the Hindu religion. Sacrifices do not just appear in the form of animals, they also take the form of fruits, vegetables and cooked food. Some common vegetables and fruits that are used would be coconuts, banana trees, ash gourds and green lemons. In most cases, the object that is sacrificed serves as a proxy sacrifice for the person who is offering the sacrifice. Coconuts are akin to human skulls (Bolle 1983) and the rubbing of vermillion\(^\text{15}\) on the flesh of green lemons and ash gourds symbolizes blood, although these symbolisms have been lost with time. The type of sacrifice depends on which god the sacrifice is being given to and the occasion that requires the sacrifice. It should be noted that animal sacrifices are not offered to agamic gods (Shiva, Vishnu, Murugan, Ganesha and Sakti) and they are not performed in agamic temples. Therefore, there are different forms of sacrifices, for different occasions that are offered to different gods. However what is sacrifice and what does such an act denote?

As defined by Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1898]):

Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned. (p. 13)

Therefore, through the act of offering an animal as a sacrifice, the person who offers the sacrifice undergoes some sort of a religious transformation. As said by Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1898]), the person who offers an animal as a sacrifice has acquired a religious character which he or she did not have before, or has rid himself or herself of an unfavourable character with which he or she was affected. Also the person has raised themselves to a state of grace or has emerged from a state of sin; in either case, he or she has been religiously transformed. However, seeking such religious transformation may not be the primary motivation for worshippers to offer animals as sacrifice as there may be other reasons and religious transformation may just be a consequent result.

\(^{15}\) Vermillion is a type of red ash that is used in religious rituals.
There are several reasons for offering animals as sacrifice. Firstly it may be a form of thanks for a prayer answered. Secondly, a worshipper might be facing some obstacles, and to receive some blessing or favour from the god, animal sacrifice might be performed. Thirdly, the worshipper might resort to animal sacrifice to get rid of any ‘charm’ done upon him or her. There may be other reasons but usually these three reasons are rather common and they were also cited by my respondents when asked why they offered an animal as a sacrifice. In fact, animal sacrifice was not differentiated from other rituals except that it was seen as more ‘powerful’.

However, through my interviews I came across another reason as to why worshippers give animals as sacrifice. Interestingly, the sacrificial animal is literally seen as food for the deity. Kali and guardian deities such as Muneeswaran are seen as protectors of their worshippers. Humanistic characteristics are attributed to these deities by their worshippers and they come to be treated like human beings. Most of my respondents when asked why offer an animal as a sacrifice to the goddess Kali, often simply said it was because she likes meat. When I posed this question to the in-charge of the Maha Kali Amman Alaiyam Temple in Muar, he had this to say:

Imagine you are a warrior and you have to fight, if I give you vegetarian food everyday do you think you will be able to fight? Will you have the energy and the tenacity to fight? This is for an ordinary man. Same thing goes with god. We have to give the god some power. To defeat the enemy you need strength.

Likening the goddess to a human being could also be seen by another respondent who is male in his 20s:

In front of her (Kali) and in front of him (Muneeswaran) we will show the camphor flame first...they will just hold out the head (the chicken’s), just use the knife and cut...After they cut already, there is this tub lah, just put it inside and put in front of her for a while... So she will come, she will take, she will eat, not in trance ah, nobody is in trance. In spiritual form, she will come, she will take, she will eat and she will go...you will know lah the person is here already. I got

---

16 The word ‘charm’ here refers to the use of black magic. It is popular among some Hindus to give an animal as a sacrifice to the goddess Kali to get rid of any evil magic that might have been performed on them.
one friend who can see. He will just say, _dey_ the old lady is just standing there, she want to come inside _da_. So we just say, come in a calm manner and go in a calm manner. Don’t come in a violent form, because if people get trance it will be very haywire already, some more it’s raw (the chicken).

It is interesting where usually gods, goddesses and deities are reified for the precise reason that they are considered higher beings with supernatural powers, the goddess here is treated as a person. In my interviews it was mentioned by my respondents that these deities represent a parental figure for themselves and other worshippers especially since they are seen as protectors. Thus, this could possibly explain why such deities are attributed with human characteristics and why there is an appeal to worship this non-Sanskritic pantheon of deities.

II. Animal sacrifice in Singapore

Animal sacrifice has survived since the time of the first Indian settlers together with festivals such as Thaipusam and Timiti. In terms of research, both festivals have been covered rather extensively but animal sacrifice in Singapore has hardly been paid attention to. As such, there is not much historical data available with regards to this matter in the context of Singapore. Through my interviews, I have gathered that animal sacrifices were performed in temples until it was officially banned in the early 1970s. These temples were not agamic temples, instead they were usually small shrines and makeshift temples that were looked after by either an individual or a family. Usually animals such as goats and chickens were sacrificed for the goddess Kali or for other guardian deities.

Although animal sacrifices have been banned in Hindu temples, Hindus in Singapore are still very aware that such practices are still being performed. Hindus who have not encountered animal sacrifice in Singapore have heard about it through their family, friends and relatives. Also, the photos of goats being sacrificed at the Maha Kali Amman Alaiyam Temple in Muar have raised awareness for some people. Interestingly, most of my respondents have encountered animal sacrifice right here in Singapore. What I mean is that they have either been part of the ritual or they have witnessed it. From my interviews, I found out that some people still sacrifice animals in their homes, either to Kali or to other guardian deities such as Munee swaran. However, unlike in the past where goats were usually the sacrificial animal, chickens tend to be the norm simply because it is a more practical choice. It is easier to obtain live chickens than goats in Singapore and the size of the animal is a concern if one is
performing the sacrifice in a person’s home\textsuperscript{17}. Even then one of my respondent who has performed the ritual in Singapore said that, sometimes obtaining a live animal may prove to be a very difficult task especially in Singapore as it is not easily available and one needs to know the right sources to obtain the animals.

My respondents also mentioned that some individuals come together as a group usually in their guru’s\textsuperscript{18} home where they perform these rituals and prayers together. These groups tend to be male oriented and the age of the individuals range from young men in their late teens to men in their forties and fifties. Although there are families who participate, these groups tend to be more male-oriented because of the ritual of animal sacrifice. Almost all of my respondents said that women and children are not encouraged to watch the sacrifice. Many of my respondents felt that animal sacrifice was not for the faint-hearted and that sometimes, even some men do not witness the ritual.

III. Why Are Hindus Still Sacrificing Animals?

It is interesting to see how animal sacrifice has not only survived, but is popular amongst some Hindus in Singapore when it has been banned and the landscape has been largely urbanized. Many Singaporean Hindus visit temples in Malaysia to perform this ritual, other than illegally performing it in people’s homes. One such temple that is popular among many others would be the Maha Kaliamman Alaiyam Temple in Muar, which is well-known for its ‘power’. Just like Singapore, animal sacrifices are only performed in the non-agamic temples in Malaysia that are dedicated to Kali, Muneeswaran or Sangli Karuppan\textsuperscript{19}. Even then, it is up to the individual whether to sacrifice an animal or not.

However, the popularity of these temples suggests that Singaporean Hindus are indulging in a religious experience that seems to be unavailable in Singapore. My respondents seemed disenchanted with the style of religious worship in Singapore as they said these Malaysian temples offer them more religious freedom to perform rituals in their own space and time without strict rules and guidelines. In addition, these Malaysian temples are geographically close to Singapore as they are only a few hours away by bus. Therefore the accessibility and

\textsuperscript{17} Majority of Singaporeans live in flats where sacrificing a large animal like a goat would be an impractical idea as the flats are small and are built for city living.
\textsuperscript{18} A spiritual leader whose guidance worshippers seek for rituals and prayers.
\textsuperscript{19} A male guardian deity who is similar to Muneeswaran.
convenience has also contributed to the continuation of this practice. Also, it is relatively easy to conduct the ritual of animal sacrifice. As long as there is an auspicious date available, it can be performed all-year round. Direct arrangements can be made between the temple management in Malaysia and worshippers. Such ease and availability of the ritual has in fact made it popular amongst Singaporean Hindus as they find they have to deal with much red tape to perform rituals in Singapore temples.

Furthermore, the act itself is rather impressive compared to other rituals and practices in Hinduism. Strangely, the act of sacrifice does not take place in front of the goddess but behind the sanctuary and there is in fact much theatre and mysticism to it. One of my respondents narrated the events that took place during her visit to the temple where her family sacrificed chickens\textsuperscript{20} for the goddess Kali:

We reached, then we did the abishegam\textsuperscript{21} for Kali everything...Instead of goat ah we give chicken. So they cut the neck lah. They drain the blood...but we didn’t see everything lah because it was a bit scary. They did it within the temple but behind the sanctuary for the goddess...Then they did the normal prayers and everything...they immediately cook the chicken that we sacrificed. The cooked chicken was put as a padayal\textsuperscript{22} in front of Kali. Then they will off all the lights for a few minutes lah so that she will come, which was a bit eerie. There are not many houses there and behind the temple is a swamp...So we just sat down and the whole environment was a bit quiet for a while. A while later, they on the lights and asked us to eat the padayal rice lah.

Such mysticism seems to attract my respondents especially when religion in Singapore has been hyper-rationalized. Most of my respondents feel that animal sacrifice should not be frowned upon as it is just another way of expressing one’s religiosity and this could possibly explain why the practice has persisted through the decades. However, at the same time animal sacrifice is no ordinary ritual. There is much theatre and mysticism involved and worshippers seem to be attracted to this as the drama and frenzy of the sacrifice transforms all the lines marking ordinary life (Bolle 1983). Such dram and frenzy is not only seen in animal sacrifices

\textsuperscript{20} Either chickens or goats are sacrificed, depending on the availability of animals.
\textsuperscript{21} Libation is poured on the goddess Kali while mantras are chanted.
\textsuperscript{22} The cooked meat of the sacrificial animal is placed before the statue of Kali as an offering.
but other activities in folk Hinduism. An example would be the festival in July at the Maha Kaliamman Alaiyam Temple where the devotee who has been possessed by the goddess can be seen taking the *vadai*\(^{23}\) with her bare hands from the hot oil. One does not see such feats in Singapore temples ever. My respondents seemed awed by this act and it no doubt a pulling factor for such a form of worship. Weber (2007 [1970]: 334) says, “Mystic, orgiastic, and ecstatic experiences are extraordinary psychic states; they lead away from everyday life and from all expedient conduct. Such experiences are, therefore deemed ‘holy’.” Such sentiments could be seen in my respondents as almost all of them believe that such acts exude much power. In essence, rituals which offer such a religious experience seem to give most satisfaction for Hindus who practise folk Hinduism.

Most of the temples that these Singaporeans visit seem to be estate temples and the events that take place during these *thiruvilazhs* (festivals) are quite different from how it is conducted in Singapore. There is almost a ‘kampong’ feel in such festivals and this seems to be popular among Singaporeans as the landscape of Singapore is very urban. An interesting finding is that many of my interviewees also go to these temples in Malaysia because they are usually dedicated to one god and this is something that is unavailable in Singapore. Singaporean Hindus therefore are still practising folk Hinduism as such a form of religious worship is easily available. They have maintained their preferred mode of religious worship by frequenting temples in Malaysia. This could explain why the religious patterns of Hindus have not been affected much by the rhetoric of the state.

\(^{23}\) An Indian snack that is deep fried.
CONCLUSION

I. Summary of Findings

Although the state may be a secular entity, through the legislations it has come to pass and the ideology it has imposed, religion in Singapore has become hyper-rationalized. The state’s management of religion has been systematic, logical, and authoritative where calculated decisions have been made with a sense of detachment. Religion is seen as the moral beacon of society where only relevant practices and rituals are encouraged to be kept and traditional and outdated practices are advised to be discarded.

However, even with such active management by the state, the beliefs and mode of worship of Hindus who partake in folk Hinduism have not been largely affected. Singaporean Hindus seem to have found a way to carry out their preferred mode of worship and still adhere to Hinduism as imposed by the state. Many Hindus visit temples in Malaysia where they feel they have a greater amount of freedom in terms of religious practice. As such, folk practices such as animal sacrifice, worshipping a non-Sanskritic pantheon of deities, and patronizing temples dedicated to one deity have managed to persist through the decades. These folk practices have managed to survive and even gain popularity amongst the younger population although practices such as animal sacrifice have been banned since the early 1970s and the landscape has been urbanised.

This research shows that no matter how much religion has been hyper-rationalized by the state, there are gaps and spaces within this framework where folk practices have managed to live on. The survival of these folk practices show that Singaporean Hindus still place great importance on religious experience, as much emphasis is placed on doing the rituals themselves and visiting temples. As said by my respondents, the lack of a fulfilling religious experience seems to be largely attributed to the state. Many of my respondents felt that the ‘government’ was being too restrictive in the type of rituals that can be performed in Singapore. The easy access to Malaysian temples seems to be a big motivation for Singaporean Hindus to visit such temples. Therefore, what can be concluded is that the state’s management of religion has not changed the thinking of Hindus who practise folk Hinduism but instead it has made them disenchanted and look for alternative options to fulfil their religious needs.
II. Limitations and Further Research

However, it is dangerous to conclude that the state’s management of religion is the direct cause for Hindus to visit these temples in Malaysia and participate in rituals that are banned in Singapore. One has to acknowledge that there may be other reasons for Singaporeans to visit these temples. Many Singaporeans do have relatives in Malaysia and visiting certain temples could be tied to family relations or it could just be a form of religious tourism. However, a correlation nonetheless exists between the state’s management and Singaporeans visiting these temples in Malaysia.

Also, Hinduism as a religion encompasses many different traditions within itself that is demarcated by language and ancestry. As such, this research focuses on a specific group of individuals in Singapore, the Tamil Hindus. Within this group itself, there are many differences and as such, this research studied people who practise folk Hinduism and therefore, the findings of this research may not be applicable to other strands in Hinduism.

Lastly, animal sacrifice in Singapore is a topic that has been under-researched. More investigations have to be made in this area not just with respect to Hinduism but other religions in Singapore as well.

III. Policy Implications

The function of statutory boards such as the HEB and the HAB is to advise the government in religious matters so that appropriate action for the nation and its people can be carried out. However, there clearly seems to be a contention between the state and the people’s view of Hinduism in Singapore. As such, perhaps the HEB should include more members of the public who would reflect the current demographic of the Hindu population. Perhaps, with a more representative body, this contention can be resolved.
REFERENCES


27


**Websites**

(http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-CONST&date=latest&method=part).
