Increasing attention is being paid to the role that religion plays in shaping migrant experiences and creating transnational identities, particularly in relation to spatial and social processes. However, much of this discussion has been Euro-centric. As Wong and Rigg (2011) argue, although discussions of migration in urban cities have increasingly focused on Asia as a host region, there still exists a lacuna that examines how sacred spaces interact with migratory forces within and between Asia.

In the light of increasing rates of Indian migration into Singapore and a rising concern with issues of immigration and xenophobia, this paper considers the relationship between Hindu sacred spaces and community formation through an ethnographic study of a traditionally “South Indian” temple in Singapore, the Sri Siva Durga Temple, and the only designated “North Indian” temple in Singapore, the Shree Lakshminarayan Temple. A focus on changing social and ritual processes within the confines of these temples in a small island state with an Indian minority population will highlight how different waves of Indian Hindu migration have negotiated and carved out linguistic and ethnic boundaries within the space of religion, contesting the state-constructed view of a homogeneous Indian community.

In considering the space of the temple as a site of diasporic convergence where existing devotees are constantly redefining their identities vis a vis newer devotees, I examine worship as a redistributive process that highlights the politics of belonging. Through this, existing categories of the “old” and “new” diaspora, as well as conceptions of the “North” and “South” Indian divide in Singapore are questioned. I argue that the space of the Hindu temple facilitates different interaction flows on both levels of administration and worship, and that whilst the former reinforces a fragmentation along class, caste, linguistic, regional and citizenship lines, the latter allows for the performance and construction of a multicultural community identity that is more aligned with state ideology.

Abstract

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Event Details

Wednesday, 17 April 2013
1.30pm to 3pm
SASP Meeting Room
AS7 #04-11
Kent Ridge Campus
National University of Singapore

About the Speaker

Lee Wei Fen is a Masters student in South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include Indian diasporic communities and their literatures in English, as well as the interstices between religion and politics. Her current work focuses on social processes in Hindu temples in Singapore. She has written about her South Asian travels, Indian festivals, and diasporic South Asian communities for a variety of publications including Open Magazine, Tehelka (India), Tabla!, The Business Times, and Poskod (Singapore).