

USP 3506 (2012-13 Sem 2): Religious Issues in the Contemporary World:

Individual Reflections on Fieldwork

Little India is a fascinating place for religious fieldwork research. The close proximity of religious institutions, be it temples, churches or mosques – situated just within walking distances of each other – is testament to the multiracial and multi-religious social fabric of Singapore. My group visited Little India on two occasions over the Chinese New Year weekend and decided to focus on specific religions during each visit. The first visit focused on Hinduism and Christianity whilst the second tackled Islam, Buddhism and Taoism.

My first impression of Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple was that it felt like a commercialized tourist attraction. While there were many Indian devotees around the temple, I also noticed a sizeable number of tourists from South Korea, Japan, Germany, Australia and England. When I interviewed a family from New Zealand and asked them why they were visiting this particular religious institution, they sheepishly shrugged and took out the *Lonely Planet* and mentioned that this was a “highly-recommended” place of interest for Singapore. This candid remark led to a rather serious discourse amongst my teammates over lunch. How many of these tourists really knew the significance of this religious site? How many of them understood Hinduism in the first place? Were they here merely because *Lonely Planet* and other tourist guides told them to do so? We further wondered whether tourist visitations actually undermined or diluted the inherent sacredness of the religious places. How were devotees possibly able to pray in a plethora of noise and camera-flashes?

Heading towards the Fochow Methodist Church, we chanced upon a Presbyterian Church (Covenant) that was situated just right next to it. The pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church was very friendly. He was very open to our queries and gave us a tour around the church compounds. What struck me throughout the tour was his continued emphasis on the church’s desire to serve the migrant community in Little India. In particular, his church specially flew in a pastor from Colombo because there was a substantial amount of Sri Lankan worshippers in his

church. When asked whether his church had any experience with inter-faith activities, he proudly mentioned that his church often partakes in the *Ramadan* festival organized by the Residential Committee on a yearly basis. Interestingly though, he could not answer my question as to why there was a need for a separate space for worship for the Sri Lankan community (a small room beneath the grand sanctuary).

Juxtaposing the Presbyterian Church with the Methodist Church was very interesting. For one, I noticed that the sacred space set apart for worship was very different. While both churches had the archetypal Cross at the front of the sanctuary, the Presbyterian Church had warmer colors, cushioned seats and resembled an auditorium of sorts whilst the Methodist Church had darker colors, wooden pews and exuded an imposing atmosphere overall. It is possible that the congregation that worshipped at both these churches were different as well as I noticed that the Presbyterian Church had far more youth-oriented programmes around the notice-boards. The Methodist Church on the other hand had more practical, adult-oriented activities such as money and wealth management.

My most memorable experience of this fieldwork research has to be the visit to the Angullia Mosque. Upon entering the Mosque and explaining my intention to one of the volunteers at the Mosque, he sternly told Derrick who was next to me to cover the exposed area of his leg with a *sarong*. Derrick and I then sat and listened to a charismatic religious teacher at the men's section of the mosque. Halfway through the sermon, a young man came up to us and began to translate the Arabic sermon to English for us. Thereafter he began to chide us for not reading the Qur'an and fulfilling the ablution. The situation steadily tensed up but Derrick and I managed to leave the mosque hurriedly after that.

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