



Book Review

Tschacher, Torsten. (2018). *Race, Religion, and the 'Indian Muslim' predicament in Singapore*. New York: Routledge. +Pp. 242. ISBN 9780367273033. Price: Hard Back \$160.

The broad question that Tschacher seeks to explore in this book is how the Singapore state's construct of race as a primary marker of identity impacts religious formation across racial boundaries. Specifically, he explores the question of what it means to be an Indian Muslim in Singapore where 'Muslim' is synonymous with 'Malay' and clear racial boundaries are maintained for the purpose of managing social issues and distributing social welfare services. He approaches this question by examining structural pressures from state policies that affect political identity and community.

As Tschacher points out in the introduction, race in Singapore is a political category deployed by the state to manage the population. Indian Muslims have to deal with the challenge of being a minority within a minority and decide whether to associate themselves with Indians or with Malays. Tschacher argues that while 'Indian Muslim' is not a social community, it is a "publicly identified and politically formulated identity" (18). In the 1980s, the Singapore state developed the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others) paradigm for the purposes of taking census and managing the population according to racial terms. Official representation, access to social welfare services and entitlements were mediated through these categories, which had clear boundaries. Based on an assumption that different racial groups were associated with certain traits, Islam became associated with being Malay. Consequently, Indian Muslim identities were blurred and they became misfits within the CMIO paradigm.

In chapter 3, Tschacher discusses aspects of identity that challenge or aid the construction of the label 'Indian Muslims' as a homogenous entity. He examines the common stereotype that the caste system is still very much a part of Indian Muslim culture. Although hierarchies exist in all societies, notions of inequality amongst Indian Muslims are attributed to caste because of the assumption that Islam is an egalitarian religion. Therefore any notions of superiority or inferiority must have been inherited from their primordial Indian (Hindu) roots. This idea attributed to a sense of deviance or 'otherness' on the part of Indian Muslims.

More strikingly, it is part of a broader pattern of racializing social issues, which is rooted at the state level.

In chapter 4, Tschacher shows how racialization (or culturalisation) diffused potential conflicts with perceived religious deviance. If religious practices of Indian Muslims were perceived to be different from that of the majority Malay Muslims, they were 'culturalised' by both Indian and Malay Muslims, that is, attributed to cultural differences rather than religion. This was evident in the racializing of gendered behaviour and dressing.

However, racialisation is not necessarily true of every case. In 2007, Singapore's first 'self-radicalised' terrorist was arrested for attempting to join the Taliban in Afghanistan. He had gone to Pakistan and trained with a terrorist organization there. Although he is a Tamil Muslim, Tschacher did not bring up his case in his book. Interestingly, no connections were made about his Indian ethnicity in the official media. This could be because his 'deviance' was too directly related to Islam and there were already Malay Muslims who were arrested for connections to terrorist activities prior to him. Thus, distancing him from Islam and racializing him would be a pointless undertaking. It would be interesting to know how Indian Muslims and Malay Muslims engaged with his case in informal conversations.

In Chapter 5, Tschacher emphasizes that although there are not much differences in popular practices between Malay and Indian Muslims, there is a tendency to interpret differences among Indian Muslims as ethnic. For example, the veneration of saints, a common practice of Sufi Muslims that can be found in all the places from where Muslims in Singapore migrated was culturalised. Although saint veneration was practiced and opposed across racial boundaries, it was perceived to be a particular religious deviation of Indian Muslims and marked as a 'cultural practice' associated with Indianness.

In chapter 6, Tschacher shows that since Indian Muslims do not fit the standard image of a Singaporean Muslim (which is to be Malay), they faced pressures to be 'Malayised', which amongst other markers, involves substituting Tamil with Malay as their main household language. Ironically, even if a Malayised Indian were to identify as Malay, the official ascription of race to patrilineal lineage in Singapore, means that he/she is still considered to be Indian.

The effects of this policy was spectacularly brought to public attention after the publication of Tschacher's book. In 2017, Halimah Yacob, a politician from the ruling PAP party, who was popularly identified as a Malay Muslim was appointed as the president of Singapore in the first-ever 'reserved election'. In amendments to the constitution in 2017, a presidential election was to be 'reserved' for a community in Singapore if no one from that community has been president for any of the five most recent terms of office of the president. The result of this

amendment was that the 2017 election was reserved only for Malay candidates. A public uproar ensued when it was found out that Halimah Jacob was actually categorized as 'Indian' based on the state's method of determining race because her father was a Tamil Muslim and her mother was Malay Muslim. In response, state spokesmen claimed that she qualifies as 'Malay' based on a constitutional definition of community membership used in parliamentary elections under Singapore's Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme which requires that at least one candidate be from a group designated as a minority race to ensure political representation. Under these terms, in contradistinction to the definition of race ascribed to citizens, a person belonging to the Malay community is defined as "any person, whether of the Malay race *or otherwise*, who considers himself/herself to be a member of the Malay community and who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community". Amid accusations of manipulating the system for political reasons, this episode also brought to the fore the state's dissonance in the definition of race and racial community membership.

In chapter 7, he discusses the ways that the 'Indian Muslim community' in Singapore could make public demands and voice their concerns through public institutions. Public institutions, especially community self-help organizations are defined in terms of race and provide services like supporting the education of children. This policy paved the way for the racialization of demands in the public sphere. However, early on a problem arose when the oldest of these, Mendaki, founded in 1982, claimed to support 'Muslims' and not 'Malays' and subsequent ones like SINDA (for Indians) were based unambiguously on race. Indian Muslims were in a unique position because they were given a choice of aligning with either one or both institutions, thereby fragmenting a sense of common identity. Since demands for socio economic support could be made with either Mendaki or SINDA, Indian Muslims could focus on the domain in which they did not get much state support: religion. Under these circumstances, Indian Muslim associations took the initiative to offer religious education, including classes in Tamil.

In terms of Muslim leadership, Tschacher discloses that MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) had limited influence over the leadership of Indian Muslims and that Indian Muslim associations were the primary mediators between state organizations and Indian Muslim communities. In 1992, a Federation of Indian Muslims (FIM) was formed to bring together, coordinate and make demands for the disparate Indian Muslim associations. Soon it gained a prominent position in Indian Muslim civil society acting as the mediator between MUIS and the Indian Muslim community. However, as Tschacher discusses in chapter 8, since MUIS does not provide avenues for structured elections of individuals to represent Indian Muslims in leadership positions, there are no widely accepted leaders among the Indian Muslim community, resulting in a sense of disunity in Indian Muslim civil society.

As summarized by Tschacher in the concluding chapter, the increased public engagement of Indian Muslim associations from the 1990s was a reaction to the way that the state addressed specific 'racial' segments of the population. The official multiracialism of the state provided a means for Indian Muslims to contest structural handicaps brought about by the identification of Islam with Malay.

Tschacher's work is a response to scholars who have usually dealt with Indian Muslims in terms of hyphenated identities, that is, an identity process in a continuum between 'Indianness' and 'Muslimness.' These scholars have accepted as given the state-constructed categories of race and religion. He asks, "why would somebody speaking either Malay or Tamil and adopting either Malay or South Indian culture not simply be Malay or Indian?" This question has become all the more significant after the episode involving President Halimah Yacob.

Tschacher's work is important in that it argues against some charges levelled at Indian Muslims. One is that differences among Indian Muslims are attributed to the 'argumentativeness' of Indians. This charge downplays legitimate expressions of diversity amongst Indian Muslims. Another charge is that Indian Muslims identify too much with India. However, Tschacher points out that Indian Muslims have received very little resources from local public institutions. Mostly, they have had to depend on preachers and publications from India. Both of these charges put the blame on Indian Muslims while ignoring the structural constraints caused by state policies.

Tschacher ends his work with an interesting perspective on the formation and continuation of the category 'Indian Muslim'. Drawing from Ernesto Laclau's model that the emergence and existence of identities arise from unfulfilled demands, he suggests that paradoxically for 'Indian Muslim' to remain a viable categorization of identity, unfulfilled demands must continue to exist. When multiracialism is expected to produce equality based on race, demands arise when these expectations are not fulfilled. However, Tschacher's argument is only true if the identity 'Indian Muslim' does not take on new meanings not associated with demands in the future.

In a final note, Tschacher suggests that dividing Indian Muslims along racial lines could actually be advantageous to the state. Engaging with Indian Muslims differentially allows the state to discipline Indian Muslims, to shift blame from potential controversies to the 'fissiparousness' of Indian Muslims, to take credit for acting justly and in a neutral manner when it does intervene, and look like a magnanimous arbitrator of identity when individuals cross boundaries of race. This, he says is the insidious aspect of Singaporean multiracialism. Herein lies Tschacher's contribution to the critique of the state's approach to multiracialism. While his point is certainly noteworthy, I would suggest a less insidious plot that prompted the division in the first place. I suspect that state had overlooked the

situation of Indian Muslims because the state had handed over full control of Islam to Malay Muslims to compensate for Malays being marginalized in other sectors of society, such as key appointments in the state's political leadership, in the military, and in the financial sectors. It was a form of appeasement to the Malay Muslim community that they got to decide what normative Islam in Singapore should be like. Consequently, Indian Muslims emerged as pawns in the state's balancing act.

In sum, Tschacher's book is a foundational and significant addition to the scholarly work on Indian Muslims in Singapore, which thus far has received very little attention. His work is backed up by rich anecdotes, archival material, and extensive fieldwork. Overall, it is an excellent piece of scholarship and a great read for anyone interested in the formulation of racial identities, the crossing of racial boundaries within a religious framework, the heterogeneity of Islamic practices and the structural impact of state management of multiracialism.

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