

The Controlled Transformation of Public Space by the Presence of Migrant Labour in Singapore

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Like some of the more developed countries in Asia such as Hong Kong and Malaysia, Singapore relies largely on foreign migrant labour for many of its industries. In fact, over half a million of Singapore's labour force currently consists of non-citizens, and according to the Ministry of Manpower, over 400,00 of these are work permit holders employed in the construction, lower-tier service and sanitary industries.

Many of these migrant workers originate in the Third World countries of Asia such as India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, as well as Myanmar. They come to Singapore in search of work which promises them a much higher wage rate than what they could ever dream of back home.

The large number of displaced human bodies in a foreign land creates an interesting, if not unique situation for the host country in terms of social accommodation and adjustment for both parties. The issue of public space and its use by migrant workers presents a highly visible and observable set of phenomena to be studied and scrutinised.

On any normal working day, migrant workers are largely invisible and "kept away" to their living quarters and work sites in the case of construction workers. Therefore, their presence is largely ignored. However, the situation changes drastically during the weekend days of Sunday, and to a smaller extent, Satur-

day. Because most migrant workers work round the clock on weekdays, having only Sunday evenings off, they seize the opportunity to congregate in a part of Singapore known as Little India. Little India occupies a stretch of *Serangoon* Road about 2 to 3 kilometres in length, and on weekends, tens or even hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, mostly Indian and Bangladeshi nationals, will congregate along the streets.

The workers' appropriation of this relatively small space is interesting because of the contrast they bring to the space when it is occupied as compared to the other days of the week. Before migrant workers came to appropriate Little India as their meeting place on Sunday evenings, Little India had already been known as a place where local Indians went to buy items such as gold and fabric.

With the advent of migrant workers congregating at Little India, many observable and highly visible phenomena started to manifest in the area. Firstly, new shops specially catering to the workers started to spring up. These took the form of mainly sundry and grocery shops, selling everyday use and food items at affordable prices to the lowly paid workers. Of late however, more and more "niche market" retailers have been springing up. These included a travel agency where arrangements to obtain budget air tickets could be made. Secondly, many instances of improvisation in space occupation could be observed, both on the authorities' and the workers' part. This is of interest here because the Singapore government has always been known to be particularly thorough in their control of large crowds



and any illegal or "inappropriate" usage of public space. In Little India however, the general observation is that the authorities are *facilitating* this once a week "inappropriate" usage of space rather than taking any action *against* it. The following examples are just some of the ways in which the above observation manifests itself.

Jay walking is an activity frowned upon by the authorities in most parts of Singapore. In fact, fines of up to five hundred Singapore dollars can be imposed on convicted jay walkers. However, the law against jay walking seems to be largely ignored in Little India on weekends as thousands of migrant workers openly flaunt traffic rules and jay walk *en masse* across *Serangoon* Road to get from one part of Little India to another. What is more interesting is the presence of police officers, highly visible in their blue uniforms that help facilitate this jay walking. The officers ensure that large groups of workers make it across the road safely, while trying to reach a compromise with vehicular traffic passing through at the same time. The policy that the authorities choose to adopt here seems to be one of "rule-bending" rather than enforcement, and this is interesting for it happens in no other part of Singapore.

Another aspect of Singapore law enforcement which the authorities are usually very concerned about is what is





commonly termed as “illegal gathering”. Large groups of people gathering in a public place for no official reason are normally open to suspicion by police officers as authorities seem to equate large groups (especially of men who seem to have no particular aim in mind) to rowdy illegal gatherings. While the words “rowdy” and “large” still describe the groups of migrant workers in Little India, the gathering no longer appears to be “illegal”. Because the workers have little to do with their free time on weekends except to interact with other countrymen whom they meet at Little India, they find any form of open space and promptly make themselves comfortable there, occupying open fields, public parks, even walkways. They do this to exchange letters from home with each other as well as swap stories about their working week’s happenings. From the police officers’ point of view, as long as the workers don’t obstruct human or

vehicular traffic and keep to themselves, they are largely left alone. The law enforcement mechanism only kicks in if crowds get unusually rowdy and cause trouble for other people. The highly visible presence of the police ensures that this almost never happens.

The development of space by the authorities in Little India is the last aspect which this paper will explore, and once again, these developments are unique only to Little India and seem to have been planned with the migrant workers in mind. In no other parts of Singapore are traffic or pedestrian signs erected in any language other than English, but here in Little India, signs in Bengali and Tamil can be found. Even commercial advertisements in these languages, usually for phone cards to make long distance overseas calls, are visible at bus stops. These signs seem to support the appropriation of space by the migrant workers and sets Little India apart from other parts

of Singapore. Also, nowhere else in Singapore can one find rows of public phone booths numbering up to ten individual phones in a group. All of these phone booths are long-distance capable, another effort by the authorities to provide the workers with telecommunications amenities while keeping them within their stipulated but unofficially allotted public space.

Thus, it is obvious that the use of public space in the place known as Little India at *Serangoon Road* in Singapore is unique to that small area. This is interesting taking into consideration that other parts of Singapore are largely homogenous in appearance. On one hand, this may be seen as an effort on the part of the authorities to facilitate the congregation of migrant workers in the area, but it can also be viewed as a strategy to keep the workers contained in the area rather than have them “spill over” to occupy other parts of the city state.