

Not the Singapore We Know: The Little India Riot 2013

Introduction

At about 10 p.m. on Sunday, 8 December 2013, Singaporeans watched in shock as the media reported on a violent riot occurring in a popular local ethnic neighbourhood known as “Little India.” It had been more than 40 years since there was a riot in Singapore – the very word conjuring images of violence between ethnic groups leading to deaths and injuries, destruction of property and civil unrest. The horrors of riots in the 1950s and 60s were a persistent warning that had shaped the worldviews and policies of subsequent generations of Singaporeans. And yet, that night, Singaporeans stared in astonishment at video clips and images showing police cars overturned, an ambulance burning, and hundreds of police and other defence personnel deployed in full riot gear being pelted with glass bottles and other objects by an unruly mob.



The Little India riot on 8 December 2012; image from Wikipedia

Social Psychology and Riots: “Criminality pure and simple” or Revolutions with a small ‘r’?

“The riot in Little India was a very serious incident. There is no excuse for such violent and criminal behaviour. We are investigating the incident thoroughly and will deal with the culprits with the full force of the law.”

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore
9 Dec 2013¹

¹ Prime Minister’s Office. “Press Statement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Little India Riot.” 9 December 2013.

This case was written by Sohni Kaur under the guidance of Adjunct Associate Professor Dr. Jonathan Marshall, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKY School), National University of Singapore and was funded by the LKY School. The case does not reflect the views of the sponsoring organization nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. This case is based on publicly available sources and is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.

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The statement by Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong the day after the Little India Riot resonated with one made by British Prime Minister David Cameron following the London Riots of 2011 when he referred to the actions of rioters as “*Criminality, pure and simple,*” adding that there “*was absolutely no excuse for it*”.²

Social psychology literature may provide some insight into the dynamics behind the “Little India Riot” in Singapore. Psychologists and politicians have sought to understand and explain riots and other forms of crowd action with often contradictory ideas. While crowd psychology is a deep and complex subject, explanations of what drives people to riot can broadly be explained in two ways.

The first perspective is, given the right conditions, any one of us may become “hooligans” ourselves.³ A paradigm that is often talked about in relation to this theory of crowd psychology is the deindividuation paradigm. The deindividuation paradigm suggests that anonymity, particularly anonymity within a group, enhances anti-social behaviour.⁴ Philip Zimbardo, one of the first psychologists to study this, lengthily developed a model where under conditions of deindividuation, people tend to act in “violent, vandalistic and destructive ways”.⁵ However, later studies by others in the field observed that while deindividuation does indeed cause behavioural change, it did not necessarily lead to anti-social behaviour. In fact, some experiments have shown the opposite – that some people become more generous and affectionate under conditions of deindividuation.⁶ Aligned with the de-individuation theory, it is also argued that when in a crowd, people can become swept up with emotion – similar to the intense belonging that spectators feel at a sports event, or concert. This can easily get out of hand, in what is described as “mass psychology.”

On the other end of the spectrum, it is posited that crowds which riot are often made up of individuals facing deep social issues linked to inequality and poverty. It is this belief that prompted Newsweek to refer to the London Riots of 2011, as “revolutions with a small ‘r.’”

To this point, and following the London Riots of 2011, professor of psychology at Columbia University, Tory Higgins, argued that riots generally happen when people feel “ineffective.” He ties this to an extended period in one’s life when they do not feel in control, do not feel respected or that they are making a difference.⁷ He argues against the deindividuation theory by explaining that violence is not the necessary outcome of every collective action. As suggested above, some people do indeed exhibit greater levels of generosity under these conditions.

An in-depth study into the demographic of the individuals involved in the London Riots of 2011 identified several characteristics that were consistent across the individuals who were charged. Typically, the rioter was young (18-24 years), male and unemployed. Further, it was

² House of Commons Hansard Debates, August 11, 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110811/debtext/110811-0001.htm> (December 23, 2013).

³ Eisold, K. (2011). "Understanding why people riot." from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hidden-motives/201108/understanding-why-people-riot>

⁴ Reicher, S. and C. Stott (2011). "Mad Mobs and Englishmen? Myths and Realities of the 2011 Riots." from <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/nov/18/mad-mobs-englishmen-2011-riots>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Reicher, S. and C. Stott (2011). "Mad Mobs and Englishmen? Myths and Realities of the 2011 Riots." from <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/nov/18/mad-mobs-englishmen-2011-riots>.

⁷ (2011). "The psychology of a rioter." from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/11/the-psychology-of-a-riot_n_924839.html.

found that the majority lived in poor areas – with over 40 percent living in the poorest 10 percent of neighbourhoods in England.⁸ Similar ideas have been expressed with regards to the Swedish Riots in early 2013. While some have blamed the Swedish Riots on immigration, others have argued that the root cause really was one of inequality.⁹ Dr Arnold Goldstein, author of the *Psychology of Group Aggression* writes that events like this happen when people feel “dispossession,” which is tied to feeling that others are benefitting economically while you are not, or that your own economic gains are being lost.¹⁰

Singapore’s Economic Development Story

Singapore is a highly affluent city-state located at the Southern tip of the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. It is a highly urbanised country that is one of the world’s leading commercial hubs, the fourth biggest financial centre, and one of the five busiest ports in the world.¹¹

Singapore attained independence from the British Empire in 1963 when it was combined with Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia. However, this merger was uneasy and short-lived due primarily to racial tensions around the affirmative action policies of the federal government in Kuala Lumpur, which granted special privileges to individuals belonging to the Malay ethnic group. The ethnic composition of Singapore at the time was predominantly Chinese, followed by Malays, Indians and Others (Caucasians, Eurasians). These tensions around race – primarily between the Chinese and Malay communities – culminated in 1964 when a series of riots resulted in 36 deaths, over 500 injured, and over 3000 people arrested.¹²

As tensions and unrest grew, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman made the decision to expel Singapore from the Federation. Thus, on 9 August 1965, Singapore became an independent country known as the Republic of Singapore.

1960s – Singapore faced significant economic and social challenges in the 1960s. The economy was almost entirely reliant on trade and low-end commerce; unemployment was high.¹³ The economic strategy of the newly independent government, led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (in office from 1965-1990), was characterised as “survival-driven economics.”¹⁴ In order to grow employment, the government embarked on an ambitious plan to transform the economy through export-led industrialisation. Singapore moved to attract labour-intensive industries in manufacturing through a focused effort to bring in foreign investments in this sector. At the same time, education policy was shaped to prioritise the development of human resources that would fulfil demand in this industry. A strong emphasis was placed on Mathematics, Science and technical subjects. Education was also seen as key part of building a national identity in what was at that time a largely plural and racially

⁸ Eisold, K. (2011). "Understanding why people riot." from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hidden-motives/201108/understanding-why-people-riot>.

⁹ McLaughlin, L. (2013). "The Swedish riots: What really happened? Inequality, not immigration, was what sparked the unrest." from [http://www.newstatesman.com/economics/2013/06/swedish-riots-what-really-happened.?](http://www.newstatesman.com/economics/2013/06/swedish-riots-what-really-happened.)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Singapore." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Last modified January 24 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore>

¹² "1964 Race Riots in Singapore." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Last modified 14 April 2014 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964_Race_Riots

¹³ "Our History," Singapore Economic Development Board, last modified 15 September 2012, <http://www.edb.gov.sg/content/edb/en/why-singapore/about-singapore/our-history/1960s.html>

¹⁴ Gopinath, S. and C. B. Goh, *The Development of Education in Singapore since 1965* (World Bank, 2006), 4.

fractured society.¹⁵ A key part of this was the position of English as the first language; this established a common language of communication across the various ethnic groups in Singapore. Apart from economic and industrial growth, Singapore also saw a large growth in the local population in 1966. Due to rapid population growth at the time, the Family Planning Act was passed to encourage Singaporeans to stop at having two children.¹⁶



Posters from the early 1970s encouraging Singaporeans to have at most two children

1970s – By the early-1970s, Singapore had achieved full employment as a result of its export-oriented industrialisation policies that were highly successful in attracting foreign direct investments in low-end manufacturing. Singapore was promoted internationally as an investment centre due to its good infrastructure and disciplined workforce. Over time, the manufacturing industry in Singapore became increasingly technologically sophisticated with goods such as computer peripherals and silicon wafers.¹⁷ However, these advances also highlighted an acute gap in the technological skills of the local population despite technical skills having been promoted in the education system. Skills development therefore became of paramount importance, and the government invested heavily in the creation of technological and vocational institutes.¹⁸ At the same time, by 1975, the fertility rate had reached below the replacement level of 2.1, which signalled the success of the anti-natalist policies started the decade before¹⁹.

1980s – The economic development policy of the 1980s was characterised as the “Second Industrial Revolution”.²⁰ The education system in Singapore received increased attention and became more structured and robust. The national curriculum at the time stressed bilingualism, science, mathematics and technical education.²¹ By 1986, less than 1 percent of the population left school without at least 10 years of education.²² A consequence of the education policy over this time was that attitudes towards technical training and “blue collar

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Teo, P. "Population Planning and Change in Singapore." *Population and Environment* 16, no. 3 (1995): 243

¹⁷ Sree Kumar and S. Siddique, *The Singapore success story: public-private alliance for investment attraction, innovation and export development* (United Nations Publications, 2010), 38.

¹⁸ Gopinath, S. and C. B. Goh, *The Development of Education in Singapore since 1965* (World Bank, 2006), 23

¹⁹ Teo, P. "Population Planning and Change in Singapore." *Population and Environment* 16, no. 3 (1995): 244.

²⁰ Sree Kumar and S. Siddique, *The Singapore success story: public-private alliance for investment attraction, innovation and export development* (United Nations Publications, 2010), 38

²¹ Gopinath, S. and C. B. Goh, *The Development of Education in Singapore since 1965* (World Bank, 2006), 27

²² Ibid., 28.

jobs” turned increasingly negative, and these jobs were seen as a vocation for “failures”.²³ Recognising the negative connotation, efforts were made to develop and enhance technical skill education and vocations so that students entering such industries would not be viewed poorly. However, the populace continued to adhere to a “white-collar” mentality where “blue collar” jobs were seen as undesirable.²⁴ The domestic labour shortage became even more acute. At this time, Singapore also began to face increasing competition from a number of other emerging economies in the Southeast Asia region. This had an impact on wages, as costs in Singapore were higher than in the surrounding Southeast Asian economies. These trends cumulatively prompted a shift in efforts away from manufacturing to the service industry,²⁵ which was less labour-intensive and benefited from the higher levels of literacy and education in the country. By 1987, the government also realised the population problems the nation would face due to the falling birth rates and replaced the “Stop at Two” scheme, with a “Have Three or More” scheme.

1990s – In 1990, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as Prime Minister after 31 years in power, and the leadership of Singapore was taken over by Mr. Goh Chok Tong. The strategic plan in the 1990s and 2000s was to transform Singapore into a developed country.²⁶ The trend in the 1990s continued to be one of shifting away from labour-intensive, low skilled sectors to creating jobs in high-technology industries that required skilled labour.²⁷ The service industry was now the engine for growth.²⁸ In the education sector, the benefit from the years of focus on technical education was beginning to show. Students from Singapore excelled in international mathematics and science tests. The population of Singapore in 1990 was 3.05 million; while the government projected that the island could comfortably house 4 million. This sparked considerable debate among the population in Singapore.²⁹

2000 onwards – Information, communication and Technology (ICT) was widely introduced and adopted in schools, and the tertiary-educated population now accounted for one third of the workforce.³⁰ By the first decade of the 21st century, Singapore was one of the world’s wealthiest nations measured in purchasing power parity.³¹ With its small population and big ambitions, Singapore had, by this time, become heavily reliant on a foreign workforce to fill the gaps in low wage, menial jobs such as domestic work (maids) and in the construction and other low-skilled industries. As of 2009, 40 percent of Singapore’s residents were foreigners. The government’s liberal immigration policy was thought to be one of the major contributing factors to the PAP’s poor performance in the national elections of 2011.³² Data as of 2012 also showed that 75 percent of the foreign workers in Singapore were employed in low or

²³ Ibid., 33.

²⁴ Ibid., 35

²⁵ Cahyadi, G., B. Kursten, et al. “Singapore’s Economic Transformation,” *Global Urban Development, Prague, Czech Republic* 29 (2004): 7.

²⁶ Vu, K. M. "Sources of Singapore's Economic Growth, 1965-2008: Trends, Patterns and Policy Implications." *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (2011): 317

²⁷ Cahyadi, G., B. Kursten, et al. “Singapore’s Economic Transformation,” *Global Urban Development, Prague, Czech Republic* 29 (2004): 8.

²⁸ Our History," Singapore Economic Development Board, last modified September 15 2012, <http://www.edb.gov.sg/content/edb/en/why-singapore/about-singapore/our-history/1990s.html>.

²⁹ "Singapore's Population Journey," *The Straits Times*, 2012, last retrieved January 22 2014, http://www.straitstimes.com/sites/straitstimes.com/files/ST_20121006_SAT2_3330225.pdf.

³⁰ "Sources of Singapore’s Economic Growth," MAS, last retrieved December 23, 2013, http://www.mas.gov.sg/annual_reports/annual20092010/work_02_01.html.

³¹ K.M. Vu, "Sources of Singapore's Economic Growth, 1965-2008: Trends, Patterns and Policy Implications," *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (2011): 318 .

³² K. P. Tan, "Singapore in 2011: A New Normal in Politics." *Asian Survey* 52, no 6 (2012).

semi-skilled manual jobs. In June 2012, there were close to 300,000 foreign workers in the construction industry.³³



The Singapore skyline, featuring Marina Bay Sands integrated resort on the left, and the currently being developed Marina Bay financial district in the middle of the picture.

In 2013, the government released a White Paper on the population strategy for Singapore in which the government said it was preparing for a total population of up to 6.9 million by 2030. Much of this increase in the total population would come from relatively low-skilled foreign workers. Their population was expected to increase from 1.5 million in 2013 to 2.5 million by 2030. The government justified this increase on the grounds that the continued socioeconomic development of the country – in light of the rapidly ageing population and the increasing ratio between elderly dependents and working Singaporeans – would require a larger foreign workforce, especially in the labour-intensive sectors of construction, healthcare, and other services. This White Paper was met with outrage from many Singaporeans concerned that foreigners – skilled immigrants as well as low-skilled foreign workers – would take over Singapore, and that the public infrastructure could not support such a large population.³⁴

Little India in Singapore

A cacophony of car horns, bicycle bells and vibrant chatter of its residents, Little India is one of the most vibrant and culturally authentic districts of Singapore.

³³ "Singapore's Population Journey," *The Straits Times*, 2012, http://www.straitstimes.com/sites/straitstimes.com/files/ST_20121006_SAT2_3330225.pdf. (January 22, 2014)

³⁴ J. Tan, "Population White Paper triggers Nation Wide debate" *Year in Review*, 2013, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/-yir2013--population-white-paper-triggers-nationwide-debate-101840966.html>. (22 January 2014)

Its charm lies in the fact that many of olden-day trades can still be found by its roadsides, alleys and back lanes. Fortune-tellers and their parrots, flower vendors selling garlands of jasmine, kacang puteh (roasted nuts) sellers on pushcarts and street-side newspaper vendors are just some of the interesting sights to be found.”³⁵

A description of the Little India Neighbourhood, from a tourist website in Singapore

Little India is one of a handful of distinct ethnic neighbourhoods in Singapore which feature strong cultural, religious and social influences related to a particular ethnic group. The Little India area in Singapore is located about a 10-minute drive from the Central Business District, yet it seems to transport the visitor onto the streets of South India. Historically, Tamil immigrants to Singapore settled in that area during the time of British rule,³⁶ and over time it developed into a Tamil cultural neighbourhood. The Little India neighbourhood is easily accessible by public buses and trains. Equivalent neighbourhoods for the Malay ethnic community exist in the Geylang Serai and Kampong Glam areas. Similarly, there is the sprawling Chinatown just at the periphery of the Central Business District, although it attracts much fewer migrant workers from China today.

The ethnic neighbourhoods in Singapore feature strong ethnic influences in terms of food, music, places of worship and often have a dominant resident population belonging to that particular ethnic group. Religious and cultural festivities associated with the ethnic group are often centred in these areas. For example, Deepavali and Thaipusam, which are two of the most important religious festivals in the Hindu calendar, are celebrated on a large scale in the Little India area every year.

For years, foreign workers from the Indian sub-continent have found comforting surroundings in the Little India neighbourhood as they get together with their fellow workers and friends over the weekend – particularly on Sundays. From chatting with friends, to playing cricket, to listening to music from the latest movies released in South Asia, Sundays in Little India were a chance for South Asian foreign workers in Singapore to relax in familiar surroundings. Similarly, Thai workers in Singapore congregated at the Golden Mile Complex area in Beach Road, a shopping, food and entertainment centre with a strong ethnic Thai influence.

However, the influx of tens of thousands of South Asian foreign workers into the Little India area every weekend has created some challenging issues to the authorities and residents alike. Recent estimates are that 20,000 - 23,000 South Asian workers come into the Little India neighbourhood every Sunday.³⁷ Complaints by residents in the area have included issues like noise, pollution and littering, rowdiness, and general dislike of loitering.

An article in *The Straits Times* – the national newspaper of Singapore reported on conversations with residents in the area as far back as 1991. “An Indian resident said that she kept her door and windows shut on Sunday evenings to block out the noise. Others said they

³⁵ "Little India," *Cultural Precincts*, <http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/browse/see-and-do/culture-and-heritage/cultural-precincts/little-india.html>. 4 January 2014

³⁶ The British had originally zoned Kampong Chulia as the Tamil neighbourhood, but it got overcrowded and spilled into the Serangoon Road area.

³⁷ R. Sim (2013). "Fewer buses ferrying workers to Little India," *Asia Report*, 19 December 2013, <http://www.stasiareport.com/the-big-story/little-india-riot/story/fewer-buses-ferrying-workers-little-india-20131219>. (22 January 2014)

made sure that their children remained indoors when the foreign workers gathered in the area.³⁸”

Conditions of Foreign Workers in Singapore

The Work Permit – “R-Pass” – under which low-skilled foreign workers are employed in Singapore, is described as being “for low-skilled or semi-skilled foreigners who earn a monthly salary of less than \$1800. These foreigners are typically employed in construction, manufacturing, shipbuilding and ship-repair industries and the service sector, which includes domestic work as well as the healthcare, retail and hotel industries. Companies employing work permit holders are subjected to sector specific requirements based on nationality. For example, the service sector can only recruit workers from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China³⁹.”

With the rapid and substantial influx of foreign workers in Singapore, there emerged a set of new challenges for society as well as policy makers in managing this significant yet transient population. On one hand, there was a realisation that foreign workers were an integral part of the labour force. On the other hand, the coming together of the two communities – local and foreign – created social frictions related to integration, language and cultural barriers as well as racial stereotypes, class, and the congestion of residential and social spaces in Singapore.

In reaction to negative perceptions of foreign workers as well as some observed negative behaviours and policies towards foreign workers by Singaporean citizens, a host of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have sprung up in Singapore to address these issues. One of the more prominent NGOs working on these issues is Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), established in 2004. TWC2 promotes fair treatment of migrant workers through its advocacy of a better policy framework for dealing with migrant workers. It extends assistance to workers for legal and medical issues, and engages in public education to mitigate exploitation, abuse and injustice.⁴⁰ Another prominent NGO, the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) was established in 2004 with its focus on providing social integration for emigrants and immigrants, and providing humanitarian assistance for the effects of crisis migration.⁴¹

Several areas of concern emerge in the landscape of issues relating to foreign worker rights. Challenges faced by foreign workers in Singapore can be categorised broadly into the areas of economic vulnerability, social issues and governance issues.

Economic Vulnerability Issues

Salary-related issues are a common grievance expressed by foreign workers in Singapore. These range from workers receiving a lower salary than what was initially promised to them, to the withholding of wages being used to threaten workers against lodging complaints with government bodies in Singapore.

³⁸ “Noise and Crowds,” *The Straits Times*, 15 September 1991, p. 22

³⁹ Justice Delayed, Justice Denied: The Experiences of a Migrant Worker,” *TWC2 Singapore*, 2010, p. 4, Table 1 <http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Justice-Delayed-Justice-Denied-ver2.pdf>. (December 23 2013)

⁴⁰ “Who we are,” *TWC2*, September 18, 2011, <http://twc2.org.sg/who-we-are/vision-mission/>. (December 23 2013).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The background of a typical foreign worker coming into employment in Singapore begins through the use of an employment agency in his home country.⁴² In doing so, the worker has to come up with placement fees in the range of S\$6,000 - 10,000 (US\$4,719 - \$7,865).⁴³ This is often achieved by them taking loans or through the selling or mortgaging of assets such as their home or land. Upon starting work in Singapore, it can take the worker 10 months⁴⁴ or more to pay back these loans, only at which time he can begin saving money for himself or sending it back home to family. Therefore, the consequences of losing one's job – especially before the debt is paid off – are extremely costly.

Given this vulnerable economic situation that most workers find themselves in, it is postulated that most workers in Singapore are not in a position to negotiate salaries or better working or living conditions, and are afraid of standing up for themselves when they are underpaid or exploited through long working hours. In addition, given the language and cultural barriers, they do not understand the legal system in Singapore and are intimidated by the idea of engaging a lawyer. Anecdotes by foreign workers in Singapore often tell of them being threatened with termination by their employers, and the withholding of salaries being used as a threat against them. Other tactics that have been reported by workers include being excessively charged for accommodation, laundry and food which is automatically deducted from their salaries.⁴⁵

This issue is particularly acute in the area of worker medical issues – such as when they fall sick or are injured on the job. A study by students from the Singapore Management University found that 65 percent of injured and salary-claim workers (workers who said they were owed money to by their employers) reported that they had been threatened by their employers with repatriation. Of currently working migrant workers, 12 percent have been so threatened. Intimidating behaviour by employers are reported as being relatively common.⁴⁶ At an extreme end of the spectrum, there have been a few particularly horrific cases of foreign workers being abandoned after having been severely injured, resulting in their deaths. Such an occurrence was reported on, October 2013, when a worker was dumped in an alleyway in Central Singapore, where he was left despite being severely injured.⁴⁷ The worker had fallen at a worksite and instead of calling for help, his supervisors dropped him off in an alley, where he was found slumped over and dead.

Finally, a particularly contentious issue around the way that foreign workers are treated or dealt with by their employers relates to the use of repatriation companies. Repatriation companies are companies that “aid” employers in ensuring that foreign workers whose employment has been terminated are sent back to their countries of origin. Stories told by workers who have had encounters with repatriation companies tell of “gangster-like” behaviour, violence and intimidation. The practices of repatriation companies include forcibly removing workers from their place of work or stay and confining them until such

⁴² <http://www.mom.gov.sg/Documents/statistics-publications/MOM-and-MWC-FW-survey.pdf> pg 8

⁴³ “Justice Delayed, Justice Denied: The Experiences of a Migrant Worker,” *TWC2 Singapore*, 2010, p. 7, <http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Justice-Delayed-Justice-Denied-ver2.pdf>. (23 December 2013).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁴⁶ “65 Percent of Injury Claim Workers Threatened with Premature Repatriation,” *TWC2 Singapore*, 9 October 2013, <http://twc2.org.sg/2013/10/09/65-percent-of-injured-and-salary-claim-workers-threatened-with-premature-repatriation/>. (23 December 2013)

⁴⁷ “Bosses Dump Worker’s Body At Upper Circular Road After He Fell At Worksite,” *This Urban Jungle*, October 17, 2013, <http://singaporeseen.stomp.com.sg/singaporeseen/this-urban-jungle/bosses-dump-workers-body-at-upper-circular-rd-after-he-fell-at-worksite>. (23 December 2013).

point that they are sent to the airport. Workers caught up in this are usually taken by surprise having no idea that their employment is being terminated and have little or no recourse to outside help once in the clutches of these repatriation companies. Some workers have come forward to NGOs and the media to claim that they were repatriated this way when sick or injured so that employers do not have to bear their medical costs. Others claim that such repatriation was done in order to prevent them from complaining to the Ministry of Manpower or other authorities about exploitative working conditions.

Social Discrimination Issues

In 2009, the government of Singapore developed a plan to convert an old school building in the Serangoon Gardens Estate area into a dormitory for approximately 1,000 foreign workers working in the manufacturing and service sectors in Singapore. The neighbourhood, Serangoon Gardens, is an upper middle class neighbourhood in Singapore popular because of the range of amenities available in it, and its proximity to a number of good schools. This plan received significant pushback from residents in the area. In the words of one social commentator, their objections were broadly that “low-skilled foreigners will soil their parks, clog up their streets as well as violate their children and womenfolk⁴⁸.” A petition by more than 1,400 residents was signed, and highly charged discussions went on with the government for a few months. The final compromise had the government build a \$2 million road to connect the dormitory to the next estate so that the foreign workers would not have to travel through Serangoon Gardens. The number of foreign workers housed in the dormitory was also lowered to 600.

Over in Little India in April 2012, residents living in public housing flats pushed for the constructions of permanent barriers to keep “loitering” foreign workers away from the void decks in their blocks of flats.⁴⁹ The issue of foreign workers loitering has been raised in parliament several times. Measures that have been taken to deal with this include hiring auxiliary police to patrol these areas and move foreign workers away from them, as well as putting up railings and “No Loitering” signs.

These two examples point toward a larger culture of racism and classism between some Singaporean residents and foreign workers. While there may be an acceptance of the inevitability of having large numbers of foreign workers in Singapore to meet the labour shortfall in the menial-work sector, it has not been accompanied by a willingness to share residential and other personal spaces with them.

Policy and Governance Issues

The work permit that is given out to this sector of low-skilled workers in Singapore – the R-Pass – has stringent restrictions attached to it. Work passes in Singapore are highly inflexible and are generally tied to specific employers. This situation has led to social workers and activists arguing that foreign workers are extremely vulnerable and that those exploited have very little opportunity to seek redress. For example, the Employment Act in Singapore allows

⁴⁸ Hui Yee Tan, “Friday Wake-up call from dorm issue; The recent ruckus over housing foreign workers in a private estate offers lessons on handling such sensitive issues” *The Straits Times: BYLINE*, 17 October 2008.

⁴⁹ Tessa Choo, “Contesting Public Space: Singapore’s Little India,” *Asian Urban Epicenters*, 22 April 2012, <http://www.asianurbanepicenters.com/?p=885>. (23 December 2013)

employers to terminate the employment contracts of workers at very short notice – as short as one day for workers who have been here for less than 6 months. This problem is exacerbated for foreign workers as they are not allowed to switch employers. Practically, this means that a foreign worker who quits or is dismissed has to first return to his country of origin in order to make a new application for employment in Singapore. This is extremely costly, and has a chilling effect on the workers' willingness to lodge claims with the Ministry of Manpower or the police. If his employer terminates his employment, he will have to return home, often with substantial debt.

Otherwise, in cases where a complaint is successfully lodged with the police, the worker is issued with a Special Pass to stay on in Singapore while his claim is being looked into. However, individuals on the Special Pass are *not* allowed to seek employment and therefore have to fend for themselves and usually end up doing illegal work. Often, workers in these situations are reliant on NGOs for food and shelter.⁵⁰ A study done in 2013, by the students from the Singapore Management University, found that only 7 percent of injured and salary-claim workers were housed in employer-provided accommodation.⁵¹ Taking a complaint case through the investigative and prosecutorial process can take up to a year, and the prospect of having to stay on in Singapore without employment is a huge deterrent against foreign workers pursuing this course of action in the first place.

Prominent social worker, Jolovan Wham, illustrated the point by highlighting, for example, that in 2009, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) had “received approximately 3,770 complaints about salary related issues from foreign workers”. However, “only 4 employers were prosecuted for failure to pay salaries in that year.”⁵²

These overarching challenges and issues faced by foreign workers in Singapore have boiled over several times in the past and have resulted in a few instances where they have escalated into organised protest.

“We face difficult choices: We need foreign workers to serve our economy and Singaporeans’ needs, and immigrants to make up for our shortfall of babies,” Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a televised speech on August 8, 2012, the eve of Singapore’s National Day. *“But we also worry about crowding and congestion, and maintaining our Singaporean identity.”*

Just about three months after this statement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 171 bus drivers from China employed by SMRT Corporation Ltd (SMRT) went on strike on 26 November 2012 claiming salary discrimination as compared to Singaporean and Malaysian bus drivers also hired by SMRT. The following day, 27 November 2012, 88 Chinese bus drivers went on strike. Another issue brought up by the drivers was being promised a higher salary by the employment agent in China who recruited them compared with what they eventually received in Singapore. They also complained about their poor living conditions, explaining that the dormitories were cramped and unhygienic. In addition, they complained that SMRT had switched them from a five-day roster to a six-day roster without consultation,

⁵¹ “65 Percent of Injury Claim Workers Threatened with Premature Repatriation,” *TWC2 Singapore*, 9 October 2013, <http://twc2.org.sg/2013/10/09/65-percent-of-injured-and-salary-claim-workers-threatened-with-premature-repatriation/>. (23 December 2013)

⁵² “Jolovan Wham Writes Open Letter To Minister,” *TWC2 Singapore*, 8 January 2013, <http://twc2.org.sg/2013/01/08/jolovan-wham-writes-open-letter-to-manpower-minister/>. (23 December 2013).

which impacted their work-shifts and pay. Significantly, they pointed out that a group of bus drivers had first written a petition to the Ministry of Manpower in 2010 to seek redress for their grievances. However, they felt that the Ministry had done little to assist them.

29 bus drivers were sternly warned, had their work permits revoked and were repatriated following the strike. Five drivers were charged with instigating or participating in the strike, and were imprisoned for up to seven weeks. While no infrastructural or other physical damage was inflicted by this strike, it was significant in being the first strike to take place in Singapore since 1986.

In a separate incident, a few days after the illegal strike by the Chinese bus drivers, two crane operators from China refused to descend from their cranes in protest over non-payment of their salaries. They were talked down from their positions by the Police Crisis Negotiation Unit, and were later charged with criminal trespass and subsequently jailed for four weeks each. And yet, barely two weeks after second strike on 18 December 2012, 25 Indian and Chinese workers went on strike at a construction site in Yishun on the basis that their salaries had not been paid for between one and four months.⁵³

The Little India Riot: Dec 8 2013

8 December 2013 began like any other Sunday at Little India. Buses, ferrying workers from their dormitories to the district, dropped South Asian migrant workers off. Some came by MRT or bus. They merged into the crowd of Singaporeans, tourists, and local business owners that were also teeming in the area – shopping, attending worship services and eating. There was no hint of the impending trouble.

At about 9:13 p.m., the police and Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) was notified that a fatal accident had occurred at the junction of Race Course Road and Hampshire Road in the “Little India” area of Singapore. The accident is reported to have involved a private bus and a pedestrian. Over the next 15 to 20 minutes, a crowd gathered at the scene of the accident, and progressively grew from an estimated initial 100 people to over 400 people. The crowd began to get unruly, as an ambulance and fire engine arrived on the scene.

Upon arriving on the scene, the Police and SCDF attempted to extricate the body of the victim, which was pinned under the rear left tyre of the bus. At the same time, the crowd grew increasingly unruly. They shouted vulgarities in Tamil, jeered at the police and threw objects both at the Police and SCDF personnel and at the bus. Witnesses recount seeing bricks, concrete blocks, glass bottles and rubbish being thrown.⁵⁴ Sticks and trashcans were also used to hit the windscreen and windows of the bus involved in the accident.

By about 10 p.m. that night, news of the riot broke on local news channels and online. Residents in the area uploaded startling videos and images of a rampaging mob hurling objects, breaking things and most shockingly, overturning police cars and setting them on

⁵³ Andrew Loh, “Construction Workers In Yishun Who Stopped Work Have Since Been Paid: MOM,” *Singapore Scene*, December 18, 2012, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/construction-workers-yishun-demand-pay-refuse-063411977.html>. (23 December 2013).

⁵⁴ “Little India Riot: A Reconstruction,” *The Independent*, December 9, 2013, <http://theindependent.sg/little-india-riot-a-reconstruction/>. (23 December 2013).

fire. An ambulance was also set on fire. In a country used to one of the world's highest levels of law and order, this was a shocking turn of events.

At 1 a.m. that same night, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Commissioner T Raja Kumar and Commissioner of Police, Ng Joo Hee held a press conference at the Police Headquarters. They identified the victim as a 33-year-old male Indian foreign worker, who had been run over by a private bus that was there to ferry foreign workers back from Little India to their dormitories. They also announced that 27 individuals had been arrested in connection with the riot and reiterated several times that they were treating the incident very seriously and that such behaviour would not be tolerated. Commissioner Ng stated during the press conference, that, "As far as we know now, there was no Singaporean involved in the riot. The unwanted violence, rioting, destruction of property, fighting the police, is not the Singapore way."⁵⁵

Making Sense of #LittleIndiaRiot

In the days and weeks following the riot, policy makers, social activists and the citizenry in general responded to the riot in various ways. From online forums, disbelieving phone conversations, to chatter in coffee shops across the island, concerned and wary Singaporeans tried to make sense of the shocking events of that night. Online, the hashtag #LittleIndiaRiot quickly went viral and garnered hundreds of comments.

Law and policy makers strongly urged calm and called on the population to avoid using racist or xenophobic language, particularly online. A statement on Facebook on 9 December 2013, by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, appealed for calm:

"This was an isolated incident caused by an unruly mob. The vast majority of foreign workers here obey our laws. We must not let this bad incident tarnish our views of foreigner workers here.

*Nor should we condone hateful or xenophobic comments, especially online. Let us remain calm and continue with our daily lives. Support our Home Team officers on the front line, and share with them any leads you may have."*⁵⁶

This sentiment was echoed by leaders of the opposition parties.

Despite this, a segment of the population in Singapore responded to the riot in vitriolic language that had explicit references to, or undertones of racism and xenophobia. To illustrate, comments taken from online news portals included:

- *"These bunch [sic] of ingrates must be repatriated. We had [sic] not had a riot since the early days n [sic] we r [sic] not going to have one due to foreign elements. I want*

⁵⁵ "Little India Riot: Transcript of Press Conference at Police HQ," *The New Paper*, 9 December 2013, <http://www.tnp.sg/content/little-india-riot-transcript-press-conference-police-hq>. (20 December 2013)

⁵⁶ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/leehsienloong?ref=ts&fref=ts>. (26 December 2013)

*my old country back. Someone up there must do something swift*⁵⁷.”

- *“Time to reduce the number of foreigner [sic] in Singapore. Cant [sic] imagine 6.9 million of them here. They are just treated too good here.”*
- *“This is how they expressed themselves in their own country. They bring their culture here.”*
- *“These people gathered at little India to drink, get drunk and cause trouble. If they can afford alcoholic drinks then it is not about pay.”*

Yet another segment of the population, including many prominent social activists, urged Singaporeans to view the riot in a broader, more empathic perspective. While urging restraint in the same way as the government was, they argued that this was not “an isolated incident.”

Instead, they argued that the riot was symptomatic of larger social inequality issues that need to be addressed. Several meetings, forums and symbolic events were planned to show solidarity and sympathy with foreign workers in Singapore. In addition, many of these meetings were convened to discuss how this incident needed to be dealt with through measures targeted at the reducing the injustices that they argued foreign workers in Singapore face.

Amidst the plethora of reactions to the events of 8 December 2013, a few key measures taken by segments of the population as well as some of the policies enacted are worthy highlighting when examining the riot in Little India.

Government Reactions and Actions

The next day, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that he had ordered a Committee of Inquiry (COI) to look into the causes of the riot, as well as recommend a strategy for managing areas where foreign workers congregate.⁵⁸ It was later announced that the committee would submit its report to the Home Affairs Ministry within six months, even if criminal investigations into the riot had not been completed. The COI was headed by former Supreme Court Judge G. Pannir Selvam. Other members of the COI include former police commissioner Tee Tua Ba, former president of the National Trades Union Congress John De Payva and chairman of West Coast Citizens' Consultative Committee Andrew Chua Thiam Chwee.⁵⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, it was also announced that a ban on the sale of alcohol would be imposed in Little India the following Saturday and Sunday. The ban extended to all establishments including restaurants, bars, stores and hotels/hostels. This ban was placed in

⁵⁷ “Riot In Little India: Angry Mob Overturns Police Cars, Bikes and Sets Them On Fire,” *This Urban Jungle*, 9 December 2013, <http://singaporeseen.stomp.com.sg/singaporeseen/this-urban-jungle/riot-at-little-india-angry-mob-overturns-police-cars-bikes-and-sets-them-on-fire>. (26 December 2013).

⁵⁸ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/leehsienloong?ref=ts&fref=ts>. (26 December 2013)

⁵⁹ “Four-member Committee of Inquiry on Little India Riot Appointed,” *Channel NewsAsia*, 13 December 2013, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/four-member-committee-of/921396.html>. (20 December 2013).

effect from 6:00 a.m. on Saturday to 5:59 a.m. on Monday. In addition, 26 additional CCTV cameras were installed in the vicinity. The following week, it was announced that the ban would continue for six months until the Committee of Inquiry had made their recommendations. However, the extended ban was now in effect only after 8.00 p.m. The police issued a statement indicating that there was “good reason” to believe that alcohol had fuelled the “Little India Riot.” At the same time, police presence was stepped up in the area.⁶⁰



A poster seen on the streets of Little India, following the riot⁶¹

On 11 December 2013, Minister of Law and Foreign Affairs K. Shanmugam visited a foreign worker dormitory where he held a dialogue session with about 450 foreign workers from India. During this session, he reiterated two messages: 1) The government is very strict and there would be no compromise when the law is broken and 2) law abiding migrant workers have nothing to be afraid of. Joining Minister Shanmugam for this 30-minute dialogue, were Member of Parliament Vikram Nair and Nominated Member of Parliament, R. Dhinakaran. All three are of ethnic Indian heritage. The media reported a statement by Minister Shanmugam where he said, “There was no evidence that foreign workers are unhappy with job conditions.”⁶²

While attending the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in Japan on 14 December, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed the issue of foreign worker housing in Singapore. He said that construction of dormitories will be sped up and a substantial number of dormitories will be built in the next few years to better house foreign workers in Singapore.⁶³ Punitive measures were quickly taken against those involved in the riot. On 10 December, 24 out of the 27 individuals arrested that night were charged in court. In conducting their

⁶⁰ “Police to Step Up Presence; MPs Consider Tightening Liquor Access In Little India,” *Channel NewsAsia*, 9 December 2013, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/police-to-step-up/916780.html>. (20 December 2013)

⁶¹ December 2013, “Little India Riot, Singapore,” *The Singapore Sling Blog*, <http://nihondiary.blogspot.sg/2013/12/little-india-riot-singapore.html>. December 2013.

⁶² “No evidence workers in riot unhappy with employers or govt: Shanmugam,” *Today Online*, 10 December 2013, <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/no-evidence-workers-riot-unhappy-employers-or-govt-shanmugam> (10 December 2013)

⁶³ “More Dormitories For Foreign Workers To Be Built Over The Next 2 - 3 Years: PM Lee,” *Channel NewsAsia*, December 14, 2013, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/more-dormitories-for/922638.html>. (20 December 2013).

investigations, the police interviewed over 3,000 individuals and following the interviews, an additional 8 were arrested.⁶⁴ Within a week, the police announced that 53 individuals would be repatriated due to involvement in the riot. This number was later raised to 57. Minister Shanmugam explained the “administrative” rather than “judicial” approach by saying, “*If every case has got to go to court, and the judge makes a decision, then repatriation decisions become judicial rather than administrative, then every foreigner is entitled to stay here at tax payers’ expense, housed at tax payers’ expense, it could stretch on a year more.*”

Civil Society Reactions

Early the next morning after the riot, a Facebook page was set up called SHUT Racism UP SG with the tagline “*Singapore has no place for Racism. Let’s stand together to stamp out racism. If you cut us, we all bleed the same colour, red.*” It urged Singaporeans to “Like” their Facebook page to show displeasure against hate speech online. It screen-grabbed hateful comments posted by other netizens and publicly shamed them. It continued to highlight events, stories, and individuals who were proactively trying to fight against racism. Very quickly by the next days, it gathered over 2000 “Likes.” It also constantly urged Singaporeans to question, “What really caused this?” hinting at issues such as marginalisation, unaddressed grievances and economic disadvantages.⁶⁵

Civil society groups in Singapore objected strongly to the repatriation of the 57 foreign workers asserting that those individuals who were being repatriated were being denied due process in the courts.⁶⁶ They also argued that the findings of the Committee of Inquiry were not yet out, and therefore workers should not be punished before that.



A comic by popular comic strip Demon-craic Singapore entitled “Helplessness in Paradise,” published on Facebook on 10 December 2013.

⁶⁴ “Big Trouble In Little India,” *The Economist: Banyan Asia*, 11 December 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/12/riot-singapore> (20 December 2013)

⁶⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/SRUSG?filter=3>

⁶⁶ “MARUAH reply to Ministry of Law on repatriations,” MARUAH, 23 December 2013, <http://maruah.org/2013/12/>. (30 December 2013)

In another event, a group of social workers and activists held an event on the 15 December where they walked through Little India and distributed flowers as a sign of goodwill and solidarity. In a statement issued by Workfair Singapore, which participated in the “Flowers in Little India,” event, the NGO urged the police not to penalise the majority of the foreign workers due to the actions of a few, through the imposition of curfews and suspension of private bus services in the Little India area. It also urged them to guard against feeding stereotypes of foreign workers and highlighted that increased surveillance in the area, if not handled sensitively, may lead to further tensions between the migrant worker community and the auxiliary police patrolling the area.⁶⁷

On 23 December, local human rights organisation MARUAH in partnership with TWC2 and Workfair Singapore organised a public forum entitled “Foreign Workers, Justice and Fairness.” This forum featured a panel of speakers consisting of five social workers and activists working in the field of migrant worker rights. The forum addressed issues such as the exploitation of foreign workers in Singapore as well as government policies that were perceived to be discriminatory towards foreign workers in Singapore.

⁶⁷ “Statement To Media On Little India Riot,” *WorkFairSG*, 16 December 2013, <http://workfairsingapore.wordpress.com/2013/12/16/statement-to-media-on-little-india-riot/>. (23 December 2013).

Questions

1. How should policy makers in Singapore balance between the welfare of foreign workers and the developmental needs of the country as its resident population ages?
2. Even as the Committee of Inquiry carries out its investigation, what policies and regulations should the government begin to review?
3. Do you think that a governmental response based only on the objective of maintaining law and order is adequate? Why or why not?
4. What (competing) explanatory narratives of the riot emerged from various groups and segments of society in the aftermath of the riot? How do you think the government should have responded to these? What key messages should the Singapore authorities have communicated?