

Little India: One Year on, Riot-hit Area Sees Changes

On Dec 8, 2013, Little India was the scene of Singapore's first mass street violence in decades. The area now is a far cry from what it was a year ago.

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Singapore: Little India today is a far cry from what it was a year ago - when it was the scene of a riot.

On Dec 8, 2013, hundreds of foreign workers confronted anti-riot forces in the country's first mass street violence in decades, after an accident claimed the life of 33-year-old Sakthivel Kumaravelu, a construction worker from India. More than 50 responding officers were injured, and over 20 emergency vehicles damaged.

In the past year, measures have been put in place to make Little India safer - improving crowd control and traffic management, as well as controlling the consumption and sale of alcohol.

Martin Pereira, who has been living in Little India for the past 12 years, now enjoys most of his evenings visiting newly-opened food and beverage outlets in Little India. But this wasn't his routine about a year ago as the area was dominated by mostly liquor shops.

Mr Pereira recalled his outrage and disbelief when he witnessed the riot on his way to work. But one year on, like many other residents, Mr Pereira said he is thankful for the stricter measures that have been put in place which has spruced up the image of Little India.

"The residents feel safer and Little India is a lot more orderly now after that has been instituted in conjunction with the liquor ban," he said. "Right now, we have swanky new establishments and we hope more will come so that Little India will become more family-friendly and will not be known as a place where foreign workers gather but where families can come down and hang out and have a good time."

The police invoked the Public Order (Preservation) Act in a designated area in Little India which included a weekend ban on the sale and public consumption of alcohol. Police officers were also given more powers to take action against anyone who consumed alcohol in the affected areas.

It was replaced by the Public Order (Additional Temporary Measures) Act - which will last till the end of next March. It provides for a limited and focused set of powers to support the security, traffic management, and alcohol restriction measures in Little India.

Alcohol consumption in public places is prohibited during weekends, from 6am on Saturday to 6am on Monday. The ban also applies from 6am on the eve of public holidays to 6am on the day after the holiday.

So far, about 300 people have been caught flouting the law while four outlets were found breaching the liquor licence.

BUSINESSES TAKE A HIT

These restrictions posed a challenge for some businesses. More than 20 shops had to close down.

"If we can sell alcohol till midnight, at least at weekends, businesses would pick up," said a shop owner. "Everyone would then be happy. When a business suffers, a boss has trouble paying his employees, and they become unhappy. If businesses bounce back, such issues won't exist. In case of any violence, we can always alert the police."

Although many foreign workers are still staying away, more locals have been visiting Little India. Many residents also want these measures to stay as the area seems to have become safer and more orderly.

"Compared to last time, it's much better now," said Veera Kanthasamay, a Little India resident. "They would drink and sleep downstairs. I think now it's all ok and there's no problem actually."

"In terms of image, it is far better now. The number of locals coming in during the weekends is better. And in terms of liquor consumption, it has been drastically reduced," said Rajakumar Chandra, chairman of the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association.

But Mr Chandra admitted that businesses have been hit: "When you look at business, all the numbers are almost getting back but then businesses are still affected and it's not just for liquor-related businesses, but also for all other businesses which are related to foreign workers which includes the provision shops, the eateries, the salons and even the 4D shop."

However, there were shop owners who said business is up and running as usual.

"It's almost back to normal and we are doing good at the moment," said Vijay Kumar, manager of Banana Leaf Apolo Restaurant. "The restaurants have the licences so they can sell (alcohol). The restrictions only affect those who drink outside. We have seen a fairly good improvement compared to last year, especially in December."

'HOW CAN WE DRINK THAT EARLY?'

For some foreign workers, hanging out at their usual haunt on Sundays isn't as exciting anymore.

"We are allowed to drink at some places but not at others. When people ask why, we are just told the government has said so," said a foreign worker visiting Little India. "Also, many shops close at around 8.30pm. We finish work and come down here only at around that time. How can we drink that early? Sometimes we finish work at only 7pm and arrive at Tekka at 9pm."

But one expert said these measures are necessary.

"If you want to restore confidence in law and order, it's probably inevitable that your initial reaction will be seen as a little draconian and I guess you have to because you want to stabilise the environment and situation," said Dr Leong Chan-hoong, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

EASING CONGESTION

Following the riot, a committee held a public inquiry earlier this year. In its report, it recommended that police capabilities be enhanced, increasing the response time of Special Operations Command by adding 300 officers.

Other measures included trebling the number of cameras and improving traffic management in the area. Lighting has been enhanced at 42 sites and 43 cameras have been installed.

The riot also put traffic conditions in Little India in the spotlight. To help ease congestion, the Land Transport Authority will be installing two new pedestrian crossings in the area.

One of it will be located between Campbell Lane and Buffalo Road where there are usually many people jaywalking - the main reason for congestion. The other pedestrian crossing will be located between Baboo Lane and Race Course Lane. Most of the installation works have already been done, so the traffic lights will start functioning by the end of this year.

To ferry foreign workers to and from their dormitories, there are 200 buses operating dedicated services on Sundays. But the bus drivers no longer park their vehicles along Hampshire Road and Tekka Lane.

A stretch of Hampshire Road is closed from 2pm to 9.30pm on Sundays. Barriers have been set up along one lane of Hampshire Road to create a proper queuing area for foreign workers taking the buses back to their dormitories.

In addition, the right turn from Buffalo Road to Race Course Road is closed during the peak period from 4.00pm to 9.30pm to facilitate the movement of the buses leaving the Tekka Lane bus point.

There is also a sheltered waiting area with enhanced lighting and ventilation facilities.

Singapore will see new liquor laws enforced across the island next year. Some of the measures under consideration include restricting public consumption of liquor as well as its retail sales hours. The Home Affairs Ministry will also consider public and industry feedback, taking into account the experience from the alcohol restrictions imposed in Little India after the riot.