

Little India - Home Away From Home

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CHILDHOOD friends Karthick Muthuraman and Sundaraj Arumugam are leaning against two traffic bollards along Kerbau Street in Little India having a chat on Wednesday night.

It is three days after a riot broke out in the area, in which an estimated 400 people, most of them foreign workers from South Asia, threw stones, rubbish bins and beer bottles lit like fire bombs at police cars and ambulances. The mob left a trail of destruction in the largest display of civil unrest in Singapore since the 1960s.

The last known riot took place on New Year's Day in 1985. Drunken brawls broke out between South Korean and Thai construction workers at two worksites at Hougang Avenue 3 and Ubi Avenue 2. Seven workers were injured.

Arrests and investigations into the cause of the Little India riot continue, but the streets are clean, orderly and quiet now.

Life for these two workers - Indian nationals from the same sleepy village in the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu - appears unchanged in the immediate aftermath. Mr Sundaraj, 35, is a landscaper entering his 13th year in Singapore, and has worked his way up from being an electrical technician on \$400 a month to a landscaping supervisor on \$1,800.

He watches Vasantham Central on TV and reads the Tamil Murasu newspaper over kopi every morning, just as many local Indians do. He has even picked up Malay. His friend, Mr Karthick, 29, whom he calls "brother", came to Singapore just four months ago to work as a site engineer at a construction firm.

The two are among tens of thousands of South Asian workers who go to Little India each week.

On Sundays, that figure can swell to more than 30,000, based on figures from bus companies that ferry workers from their dormitories to the Serangoon Road

area. They go to catch up with friends, run errands and unwind, after a long week of labour.

A typical routine for many of them, especially the less-skilled, is to wake up at 5am and get on the bus to the worksite. They start at 7am and work till 7pm. They then buy or cook food, take a shower, eat, and go to bed by midnight at the latest, say dorm managers.

There is no curfew but still, house rules are strict, with alcohol and contraband cigarettes banned within the compound, and fines for breaking the rules.

With such a large group to manage, movement is tightly monitored, with security checkpoints and card access. Guests, even other workers, are not allowed.

This schedule is repeated six days a week until Sunday. That is when they get their day off.

A Slice Of Home

MR SUNDARAJ and Mr Karthick and other workers go to Little India often because it connects them to the homes they have left behind. They also feel that other places around the city are not for them but rather, for Singaporeans. Other workers who have ventured to Orchard Road, for example, say Singaporeans stare at them and that makes them feel uncomfortable.

"You see the name of this place - Little India. There is India here, there is home," says Mr Karthick.

Having worked in Dubai before coming to Singapore, he says it had no place like Singapore's Little India. The United Arab Emirates has about 1.1 million low-skilled migrant workers from India, who form about 19 per cent of its total population. This makes it one of the largest recipients of South Asian migrant workers in the world.

In Singapore, the South Asian blue-collar workforce numbers about 300,000, according to estimates by migrant worker groups.

Officially, there are about 760,000 foreign workers, excluding domestic workers, here on work permits. The Government does not release figures on the breakdown by nationality.

With its Indian eateries, remittance services and grocery stores selling popular Indian liquor and less starchy rice - like the kind found in India - Little India is a one-stop connection to home for these workers.

"They can get everything they want here. Shops here prepare Indian rice, the type they eat at home, according to their taste. They remove the starch and don't use a rice cooker. It reminds them of home," says Singaporean S. R. Gowri, 53, who has worked as an administrator at a herbal clinic in the area for the last five years.

Spending time in the Serangoon Road area is especially welcome after a long week of physical labour in the construction or marine and offshore industries where most are employed.

"Here, we can feel and taste India. Once a week we can see our relatives and friends. Then I feel like the next week goes by faster," says 33-year-old construction supervisor C. Chandara.

Over the years, the area has become known for its large congregation of workers who gather to eat, drink and unwind together on their days off.

Some of them get rowdy, and small-scale fights and scuffles are not uncommon affairs.

Says Madam Gowri: "On Sundays, I get at least one Indian worker walking in with a friend, blood on his head, saying he fell down and needs help. It's a scuffle and the one who hit him is the friend who brought him in - they're very protective of each other."

Salary days at the start of each month, in particular, see the men spending a little extra on larger bottles of the strong-tasting McDowell's Indian whisky, which can cost up to \$35 for a 750ml bottle. On other weekends, they mostly drink Indian beer such as Kingfisher or Knock Out, priced at \$3.50 a can, of which they may buy three or four cans.

The average worker makes about \$700 to \$800 a month. "When money comes in, it's a habit," says Indian national Poblareddy Pandarelapalli, 38. "Must drink."

Too Close For Comfort

THE focus on alcohol consumption as a possible factor in last Sunday night's riot has raised the ire of some social workers.

They point out it is only normal behaviour for people, and not just Indian migrant workers, to want to drink to unwind. But for some Singaporeans, especially those living in the neighbourhood, this weekend habit has a more insidious side. The large crowds, which spill onto the roads because the pavements are crammed with people, can sometimes cross the line between private socialising and public disturbance.

Residents in the part-HDB, part-condominium district have raised concerns as the number of workers has increased.

It has led the Members of Parliament in Moulmein-Kallang GRC, where Little India is located, to call for stricter restrictions on alcohol licences and more patrols by auxiliary police officers for the residential zones.

There is a complete ban on alcohol sales and consumption this weekend.

One of those MPs, Ms Denise Phua, says: "These big congregations of transient workers invariably have some members who have created problems such as littering, drunkards, public urination, and noise. These have evoked much resentment from the residents living in the area.

She adds: "Auxiliary police officers on patrol help but they are not there 24/7."

But social worker Jolovan Wham, a consultant to Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home), says there is a risk that this heightened surveillance can go overboard.

He has heard of cases where a foreign worker is merely talking loudly on the phone, and is told fiercely by the auxiliary police officer, "Hey, go away". "When you bring in law enforcers who treat them harshly simply because of where they are standing, when they are not breaking any law, it creates some mistrust," he says.

In a similar vein, socio-political commentator and media academic Cherian George has written that cultural impressions of authority mixed with a history of grievances against employers could also have been a factor in Sunday's riot.

Referring to the incident which preceded the riot, in which a foreign worker was hit by a bus and died, Dr George wrote: "We take for granted that we can count on those in authority to help us in a life-threatening emergency. But within our borders are separate Singapores for foreign workers.

"One of the documented dysfunctions of these other Singapores is the existence of rogue employers who do not treat injured workers in a particularly humane way. Might this warp the judgment of workers who see a comrade fatally injured?"

So far, the Government and the Indian High Commission insist this is an isolated incident and there is no indication of discontent among workers.

Integrate Or Control?

A BIGGER question is how the large numbers of foreign workers should be managed to prevent a riot from happening again.

After last year's illegal strike by mainland Chinese bus drivers was found to have stemmed from a genuine grievance over wages and living conditions, the Government moved swiftly to raise wages, step up dorm maintenance and unionise these workers.

As for Sunday's riot, with so many questions to be answered, the next steps to take are not so clear. Is the answer to better integrate the migrant worker community with the rest of mainstream Singapore society, or to separate them further and impose more controls?

Those for integration suggest it is only the right and proper thing to do. TWC2 social worker Kenneth Soh says: "It is quite difficult for them to adapt because they don't blend in with Singaporeans and Singaporeans don't want to be in contact with these migrant workers. Over a period of time it has become two separate communities in the same society."

So Singaporeans need to share their space and also take steps to accept them into society, he says.

On the other hand, Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew, who is an MP for Moulmein-Kallang GRC, wonders how meaningful "integration" can really be. "Most of these foreign workers are here on a transient basis. Our paths may cross once a week," he says.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow focusing on social cohesion at the Institute of Policy Studies, says that foreign workers may also not want to integrate.

"Foreign workers, especially those in the construction industry and who have been here for only a short period, may have limited contact with Singaporeans. They are unlikely therefore to feel much connection to this space or the need to integrate," he says.

One idea mooted by academics and migrant worker groups is to create more social and recreational spaces for these workers.

If the estimate of over 30,000 at Little India each weekend is accurate, this constitutes less than 10 per cent of the total blue-collar South Asian workforce. That means there are many others who need to go somewhere.

In recent years, more recreational facilities catering to migrant workers have been built near larger purpose-built dormitories in areas such as Woodlands and Pioneer.

At these centres, which are open to the public, workers play sports in halls and open fields. There are minimarts where they shop for groceries, beer and cigarettes. Some even have Wi-Fi rooms where they watch movies and use the Internet.

There are four such purpose-built recreation centres for migrant workers now. As many as 18,000 workers show up on weekends at one such facility in Penjuru Road near Jurong

East, which opened in December last year, says Migrant Workers' Centre executive director Bernard Menon.

Several private dormitories also have their own facilities, and some organise cricket and body-building competitions for workers. Yet, foreign workers still continue to head to Little India.

Comparing the recreational centres to heartland facilities for Singaporeans, TWC2 volunteer Debbie Fordyce says: "You might have a field and a minimart below your HDB flat and you might know your neighbours. But is that enough for a social life? For most people, it is not."

It is a point observed by Mr Lui too, who says that some years ago, his constituency worked with the Singapore Contractors Association to provide better facilities and free movies in the Weld Road area, thinking this would draw the crowd in Little India in that direction. Weld Road is just east of Little India, close to Arab Street.

"It didn't work," he says. "The amenities such as money changers, spices, food and phone cards you can replicate more easily but the foreign workers gather where they do because they can find friends from the same village to bond with and this fulfils an emotional need."

A better solution might be to help them better understand and observe Singapore's social and behavioural norms, he says.

Similarly, Mr Soh says Singaporeans can take more steps to gain a better understanding of foreign workers. "They are already part of our society," he says. In response to queries from The Straits Times, a Manpower Ministry spokesman says foreign workers are educated on Singapore's social norms and laws through guidebooks in their native languages, training courses and road shows, and that the ministry will also continue to "actively address their basic social and recreational needs".

He says while there are various measures to manage the foreign workers, including comprehensive employment protections, there will always be room for improvement. Policies are regularly reviewed to ensure their continued relevance, he adds.

He says: "We recognise that foreign workers make important contributions to our economy. We regularly monitor and manage the foreign workforce numbers in line with our larger population and economic restructuring objectives."

While investigations continue, and the debate goes on about how to balance social and recreation options for workers while addressing residents' concerns, what is clear is that all camps want to prevent another riot.

Indeed, as does Mr Karthick, who says: "There are good men and bad men everywhere." Referring to those who rioted last Sunday, he adds: "What they did doesn't mean all of us are like that."

Additional reporting by Kash Cheong and Lee Jian Xuan

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