

Crises brewing in Little India in Singapore

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Kanchan Srivastava

Tension between locals and migrants has forced Singapore to review its pro-immigration policies



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The flower stalls outside the temples, sari-clad women buying vegetables, MS Subbulakshmi's song emerging from a Tamilian eatery where office-goers are having dosa-sambar before leaving for work...Little India in Singapore is a replica of a small town in the southern Indian province of Tamil Nadu.

Hard to believe that this precinct of Indian-origin businesses, eateries and pubs, where thousands of South Asian workers take their Sunday break, had witnessed the worst outbreak of violence in four decades recently.

It all started on the night of December 8, 2013 when an Indian national, reportedly pushed outside the bus due to over-crowding, was crushed under the wheels. The angry workers, mostly Indians, went on a rampage torching emergency vehicles and pelting stones at rescue-officers.

The incident was a shocker, though it wasn't the first time there was a riot in the State — Singapore had witnessed worse racial riots in the Fifties and Sixties — but because for the first time the “silent” migrant workers resorted to violence, observes a professor at Management Development Institute, Singapore.

Till now 56 Indians and one Bangladeshi have been deported, 25 Indians face court charges and 200 South Asian workers were given a police warning. In a knee-jerk reaction, a ban on alcohol consumption in the open area of the Little India was imposed. The government also announced a curb on the influx of foreign workers and students.

The incident, which the government cited as a “law and order” case and Singaporeans see as “overabundance” of migrant workers, has brought several un-discussed issues to the forefront.

It's hardly surprising that every fourth person in Singapore is a non-Singaporean. Non-residents make up over 27 per cent of Singapore's 5.4-million population. The locals are alarmed to see so many outsiders on roads, in the transport services, in universities and in the workforce. The country's high reliance on foreign workers is being debated since early 2013 when a white paper revealed a top-end projection that by 2030, the city-state's population could increase from 5.4 million to 6.9 million, of which 2.5 million (36 per cent) would be foreign workers.

Though the government insists it would continue to accept more immigrants — but at a “slower pace” than before — to sustain economic growth and offset low fertility rate and an ageing population, the move prompted thousands of Singaporeans to come out in the open for a rare protest. Weeks after the protest, the ruling party lost a seat in a by-election.

Yet the prosperity of Singapore owes a lot to the hard labour of the migrant population. Little India was established in the early 1800s for the Indian prisoners during colonial rule. These convicts and some labourers stayed back even after their release. Ethnic Indians today constitute around 9 per cent of the population and their main language is Tamil. They have contributed greatly to the modernisation of Singapore whose name is also derived from Sanskrit: Singha Pura, the Lion City.

Over time, Little India emerged as a popular place among South Asian workers. More than 20,000 foreign workers — mainly South Asians — used to come to this suburb till recently to spend their Sundays. Over 400 liquor licenses have been granted within a 1.1 square km area of Little India where alcohol could be consumed openly until recently.

“It is a small miracle that Little India had coped with such acute congestion all these years until the unfortunate events of December 8,” says Eugene Tan Kheng Boon, Professor of Law at Singapore Management University. He adds, “Yet, the law and order narrative does not sit well with the long-standing issues in Little India, such as the easy availability of alcohol, littering, other public nuisances and overcrowding.”

Today, the only public place of South Asian workers has lost its charm as workers remain confined to their dormitories on weekends now. The dissent though increasing, is not visible yet.

The workers have other constraints as well. An average construction worker earns 500-600 Singapore Dollars a month and a supervisor gets 1,000 SGD. The wages are better when compared to what labourers and supervisors earn in India but far less than what Singapore locals get. Only a year ago, Chinese and Bangladeshi workers had protested against low wages.

Their living conditions are poor. Many spend nights in the same shop or hotel where they work due to a shortage of decent dormitories.

The People's Action Party (PAP) that has ruled Singapore for more than half a century was founded by Lee Kuan Yew, the father of the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The PAP is credited with transforming Singapore from a colonial outpost in the 1960s into a global financial hub. A significant part of its success is built on cheap foreign labour.

The pro-migration policy is also attributed to skewed fertility rate which was 1.29 last year which is well below the replacement level of 2.1. Of 1.46 million immigrants, more than 1,35,000 are non-resident Indians. Many of them are low-wage earners. Singapore also attracts 3,000 Indian students annually.

To address the concerns of both the locals and migrants, the government announced that would be reducing, but not cutting off, the inflow of foreign workers. It also plans to reduce the seats for international students — from 18 to 15 per cent.

The companies are being encouraged to use technology, nurture and develop the Singaporean workforce and adopt “fair” employment practices. All these measures will start showing results by next year — and apparently discourage immigrants including Indians.

However, the welfare policies for the existing migrant population are either obscure or implemented slowly. Prof Boon says, “A lot more needs to be done to enable immigrants to socialise on weekends. The ban on gatherings of the migrant workforce might lead to increased incidences of intolerance.”