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Headline: Singapore has shone in more ways than one in fight against Covid-19

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As the world battles a dangerous virus that tests the fortitude of our values and institutions, individuals are discussing, in internet forums as well as serious journalistic endeavours, what the crisis reveals about their own country and communities.

A common criticism by many a pundit is that the situation has revealed underlying fault lines where the rich have easier access to preventative protection and medical treatment.

How does Singapore bear up under such introspections?

### **ONE CITY OR TWO?**

Singapore had good reason to celebrate when many lauded our handling of the pandemic with minimal disruption to economic, social and educational activity. We were a shining city on a hill.

But then, as numbers rose amongst migrant workers, those possessing only a passing acquaintance with Singapore interpreted this as a sinister development.

A recent New York Times article analysed the outbreak as highlighting a dichotomy in society.

Our success narrative was being read as a tale of two cities — a city of privileged, oblivious locals alongside a city of “poorly paid foreign workers” who are “perpetually marginalised” and live in “cramped dormitories”.

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But any conclusion about Covid-19 along rich-poor or local-migrant lines does not stand up to scrutiny.

In Singapore, everyone has access to the very same free medical treatment, regardless of one's state or estate.

Unlike in even many first world countries, there is no issue in Singapore of anyone being denied testing if they exhibit symptoms, or have been in a situation where they are likely to have become infected.

Another conclusion some might reach is that in the messaging to the local population, there was no customised communication to migrant workers.

But this assumption also lacks merit.

Our migrant workers are cognisant of the Covid-19 threat as they come from places where the outbreak is much worse.

I was personally touched when a foreign worker acquaintance offered me a spare mask that he had purchased on his last trip home, of better quality than the one I had.

The Government has also said that a day after the first confirmed case in Singapore, it had reached out to dormitory operators to be more vigilant and to step up hygiene. Materials in the worker's native languages were also produced to encourage them to protect themselves.

The asymmetrical spread of Covid-19 in Singapore is not because of differences in wealth or citizenship, but because of a specific housing arrangement where safe distancing is difficult, if not impossible.

To say that migrant workers were treated as invisible would be indiscriminate, though one can ask whether they have been adequately assessed for the explicit risk of Covid-19 infection.

In any case, the Government has said that when the crisis is over, it will do a thorough review into areas where it could have done better.

Of the diverse developments from the outbreak in the dormitories, some of the most significant have been the expressions of thanks and promises of care to the migrant workers by the highest echelons of government — promises that are being kept, not just for their immediate well-being but also for the future.

We all comprise one city, looking out for each other.

## **HAVE WE DISCOVERED NEW FAULT LINES?**

Given these bewildering times, quite naturally and predictably, on local informal Covid-19 internet forums, the stresses occasionally surface.

When the dormitory clusters began showing, some netizens misattributed this to the "unhygienic" practice of sitting on the floor and eating with one's fingers, although the virus had already revealed its disdain even for the finest diners!

More recently, a conjecture went round, purportedly initiated by a nurse, that foreign workers might be prolonging illness on purpose.

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It prompted a deconstruction of this improbable claim by Temasek Holdings' chief executive officer Ho Ching on Facebook.

On the internet, there are also a couple of vigilante groups that post comments about individuals who allegedly refused to wear a mask.

In the wake of a viral video clip of a woman who did not wear a mask and claimed to be a "sovereign", some people even doxxed (or rather mis-doxxed) a woman misidentified as her.

The wrongly accused lady was amazingly gracious in her response.

Meanwhile, this is a good reminder to all of us to exercise awareness of recent anti-doxxing legal requirements as well as standard communication requirements such as a thoughtful pause before hitting send.

On the plus side, those of us who follow social media conversations have noticed more true-blue keyboard warriors who join such chats to introduce a counter point to the discussion.

So, while it is true that some have allowed their anxieties about new norms to manifest online, others are trying to be the voice of empathy.

#### **DID WE DISCOVER ANYTHING NEW TO CELEBRATE?**

People in essential services and frontline medical staff are undeniably working harder than ever before, earning the public's unending gratitude.

Office workers, teachers and students, those in entertainment and the arts have all found that working from home requires more hours of intense work than usual.

Very importantly, while many businesses have suffered, we do not have demands or protests to open up the economy quickly as in some other countries because we understand we have to fight the pandemic together.

This spirit deserves to be honoured — although going the full distance of the call of duty, and beyond, seems a typically Singapore thing to do.

The really new thing that Covid-19 has shown us about ourselves is an indomitable drive to act with kindness, with no reason of duty, recompense or quid pro quo.

One institutional example is the sensitivity shown by official law enforcers about mental health issues rather than a uni-dimensional enforcing of fines when managing people refusing to wear a mask.

An example at the individual level is of people assiduously reminding their contacts to support Singapore's social enterprises so that those with special needs continue to have stability in their daily life.

The most obvious example of selfless concern has been the public's response to the dormitory dwellers' situation.

A variety and depth of thoughtfulness is being seen:

Employers worried for their migrant workers' health, with some employers even wanting to accompany their scared younger workers during the swab test;

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The many commercial and religious organisations as well as individual volunteers that navigated racial, religious, cultural and language differences in their efforts to ensure that the dormitory dwellers had healthy and palatable food when they were rapidly re-housed and

The WhatsApp messages that went out for clothes and care packs for those who had been discharged from hospital but could not retrieve their belongings from their dormitories.

The astounding, unprecedented outpouring of concentrated kindness does indeed show us something new about our city-state.

We can and will shine in ways unimagined.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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