

Indian Migrant Workers Rioting in Singapore

Revisiting Acculturation Paradigms

RAJIV ARICAT

Vol. 48, Issue No. 51, 21 Dec, 2013

Rajiv Aricat (ARIC0001@e.ntu.edu.sg) is a PhD student at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

If the government of Singapore wants to prevent the occurrence of riots, similar to the one which took place recently in Little India involving Indian migrant workers, it must urgently address the concerns of the voiceless and low-skilled migrant community, which finds it difficult to assimilate culturally and otherwise in the host country.

A bus accident that killed an Indian migrant worker in Singapore triggered a riot in a busy region of the city-state recently, prodding authorities once again to immediately attend to the migrant problems here. The riot, the first the city-state has witnessed in more than four decades, was nevertheless contained within hours. The incident happened in Little India, a business area thronged by south Asian migrant workers, mainly Indians and Bangladeshis, who go there to unwind after a week of hard labour. Little India's Tekka Mall is popular among this group of migrants, as it caters to a wide variety of their needs, including Indian grocery and food and facilities to wire money back home. Hardly any worker from south Asia misses the camaraderie-filled Sunday evenings in Little India. The bonhomie helps workers to forget a week of hard work and reinvigorate themselves for the coming week. Alcohol, although expensive for those belonging to the lower strata, helps to unwind.

The Incident

There was nothing unusual about that Sunday (8 December) until an Indian worker who wanted to get into a private bus, headed in the direction of his dormitory, was denied boarding, as the bus was already carrying people above its capacity. The conductor allegedly pushed the victim out of the bus, and the latter fell down on the road more due to his inebriated state than the force of the former's push. The wheels of the moving bus crushed him, and he died on the spot.

Onlookers, who were present in large numbers as it was a Sunday evening, protested against the act of the bus staff. Commotion and exchange of words ensued. The ambulance and police made their way to the victim with great effort, as the accident scene was over crowded. A few projectiles landed on police officers while they were making their way to the scene and then violence erupted. Police vehicles were toppled and public property was

destroyed. It still remains a mystery whether the violent response of the workers was a spontaneous outburst of anger and grief, or whether the accident provoked them to vent their pent-up frustrations about their dismal working conditions. Authorities say that around 400 migrant workers, mostly Indians, were involved in the rioting, and 24 of them have been subsequently charged. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged the resident Singaporeans not to stereotype and retaliate against Indian workers after this incident. He assured his countrymen that most of these workers were law-abiding. It is a well-known fact that Indians have contributed substantially to the steady progress of Singapore in the last few decades.

Migrant Workers and the Discourse on Acculturation

Singapore has a reputation of promoting multicultural policies (Rahman and Kiong: 2012). While the state actively encourages its citizens to retain their cultural characteristics, a large segment of civil society is tolerant towards racial and ethnic diversity. However, the status of residents and non-residents contrasts starkly, causing the latter to feel disempowered. Guest workers constitute a large percentage of non-residents (1.55 million, which is 28.8% of the population ([Sing Stat: 2013](#))). It is estimated that of the 0.9 million low-skilled and semi-skilled workers, at least 50% are Indians. ([Ministry of Manpower: 2013](#)) Apparently, the government does not collect aggregate data on country-wise representation of migrant workers belonging to this strata.

Although one should not read too much into the recent incident, it nevertheless provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of Singapore's multicultural policies. While reviewing the literature on migrant acculturation for my doctoral thesis, an issue that struck me was that permanence of residency has been given a disproportionate emphasis in research studies in this area. One kind of exclusion that guest workers face in a host country is reflected in the narrow definition of the phrase "cultural adaptation". The underlying notion is that only those who have stayed in the host country for a protracted period, lasting for a few decades or even generations, can imbibe the cultural characteristics of the host country. This definition of culture and of cultural adaptation/acculturation systematically excludes guest workers from acculturation and communication studies. I have put forward the argument that guest workers do not need to acculturate to host societies, since they are motivated by economic benefits and, would thus, fit in to the host society in any manner. Yet political leaders responding to the riot emphasised that it was not a "Singaporean way" to riot, lending weight to the argument that be it guest workers or permanent residents, all who live in a country need to learn the "ways" of that country. Theoretically, this is an argument for effective integration.

In recent years, guest workers have been crossing borders in large numbers, and migration has become a potent topic of debate. In the wake of the incident where boats carrying immigrants capsized near Lampedusa, Italy, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, François Crépeau, observed:

“Politicians are still not up to the task of telling their populations that we need migrants — doctors and engineers, but we also need low-skilled or unskilled migrants. Germany and the UK have started to look at these issues. But it is not happening in France or Italy or other parts of Europe because then it becomes a quarrel over national identity. We should have a discussion on diversity policies — on who we are and how we see ourselves in 50 or a hundred years”. ([Naravane: 2013](#))

Guest workers are conveniently excluded from the discourse on acculturation, since they are an easily replaceable workforce and can be easily repatriated in times of economic downturn. This “perpetually temporary” (Thompson 2009) status of migrants is not a boon to the governments, but it portends social conflicts that are in the making.

Further, in the capitalist economies to which these workers migrate to, there exists another divide, which hinges on the level of access to communication technologies. Those who have inadequate technology skills, lack economic resources and are aged are unable to adapt to advanced communication technologies like the mobile telephone and internet. With limited options for political engagement and expression, non-residents are bound to their work and a mechanical life. Social media has emerged as a key tool for migrants to access information about their home country and to express their opinions on social and political issues. But this media is accessible only to a small section of skilled, educated and enthusiastic workers; the “aspirational migrant”, as Burrell and Anderson (Burrell and Anderson: 2013) call them. Those who are not conversant with social media still rely on print newspapers and low-end mobile phones (Malayali workers, who have still not taken to the mobile newspaper editions, buy print newspapers at three to five times its original cost in Indian rupees). On closer observation, one understands that these two divides – at the level of culture as well as of communication – are connected. Migrant workers’ non-residency in the host country is a corollary of their lack of financial resources, which estranges them from the dominant markers of culture – denoted by the phrases “to be cultured” and “to acculturate”, which can be interpreted to mean “to be a consumer in the ‘culture industry’” – and also from technologies that can help them plug into this “industry”.

Discontent Among Migrant Workers

It may be surmised here that some kind of brewing discontent among migrant workers belonging to the lower strata has played a substantial part in the recent riot. A few people I talked to expressed similar opinions on why migrant workers largely felt dejected and the possible causes which could have led to the riot. While some of their contentions were related to the existing situation on ground, some were based purely on perception. One of the reasons mentioned was that alcohol consumption is going unchecked among workers, which can at times trigger violent outbursts. The workers feel meek and submissive in a foreign society not only because of their low wages and lower status, but also because they

encounter condescension from resident Singaporeans. Their favorite place of gathering, Little India, has reached its capacity and cannot accommodate large groups of people any further. When compared to meeting places like Lucky Plaza for Filipino migrants, Little India is overcrowded and more prone to accidents and unrests. Certain perceptions harboured by the workers further fuels their discontent. For instance, whereas workers have to report to work by only 8:00 am, their transport vehicles pick them up at 6:00 am from their dormitories. Although they are picked up early to avoid the traffic rush, the workers feel shortchanged for they have to sleep on the roadside or verandah for an hour or two before they start work every day. The benefit of commuting early to work gets negated, and only the image that they have to sleep in open public spaces that stays with them adding to their discontent.

Some steps could be taken to mitigate the ongoing tension. Migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries should work jointly to help migrants air their views and opinions about their day to day life and ensure that they are heard. Social media platforms should be made accessible to workers in all categories, so that they do not feel marginalised in a fast-moving information society.

References:

Burrell, J., & Anderson, K. (2008): "I have great desires to look beyond my world: Trajectories of information and communication technology use among Ghanaians living abroad", *New Media & Society*, 10(2), pp 203-224.

Ministry of Manpower (2013): "Foreign workforce numbers", Singapore Government, available at <http://www.mom.gov.sg/statistics-publications/others/statistics/Pages/ForeignWorkforceNumbers.aspx>

Naravane, V (2013): "[The war on migration can't be won](#)", *The Hindu*, 24 October.

Rahman, M. M. and Kiong, T. C. (2012): "Integration policy in Singapore: A transnational inclusion approach", *Asian Ethnicity*, 14(1), pp 80-98.

Sing Stat (2013): "*Monthly digest of statistics Singapore*", Singapore Department of Statistics, Social Statistics Section. pp 2, available at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications_and_papers/reference/monthly_digest/mdsnov13.pdf

Thompson, E. C. (2009): "Mobile phones, communities and social networks among foreign workers in Singapore", *Global Networks*, 9(3), pp 359-380.