Labour Migrants as an (Un)Controllable Virus in India and Singapore

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Abstract: The COVID-19 crisis has severely impacted migrant workers in Asia. This article compares the cases of India and Singapore to understand how these countries have dealt with their migrant populations in response to the crisis, as well as in relation to how they envision their place in society and regulates their rights. This is revealing for the deeply ingrained sense of socioeconomic inequality that informs how these countries narrate their own relatively recent economic success stories on the global stage. The idea of a 'new India' and 'global city Singapore' are both based on entrenched notions of inclusion and exclusion.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted migrant workers across Asia. Besides revealing entrenched socioeconomic inequalities, it has also put the spotlight on how these countries relate to their migrant workforces. This article compares the cases of India and Singapore to understand how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of migrant workers and the way they have been treated in response to the crisis. The goal here is not to offer a full-fledged comparative analysis, as this is not possible due both to the space available and the fact that the crisis is still very much ongoing. Instead, this paper is envisioned as a think-piece that can function as a tool for future research for when the dust has settled. In particular, it seeks to point out some questions that move away from the immediate consequences of the humanitarian crisis itself.

By situating the marginalized position of migrant workers within the context of a 'new India' or 'global city Singapore,' this paper particularly focuses on the long-term consequences of the pandemic on these workers' livelihood and wellbeing.

Once engaged with the symbolic layering of what 'new India' is purported to represent in terms of geopolitical might, or what global city Singapore aims to radiate with respects to cosmopolitanism and quality of life, one realizes that what emerges from the pandemic with respect to these groups of marginalized workers is, in itself, revealing for the foundations these ideal constructs are built on. As such, the current crisis is revealing for who is instrumental to the construction and maintenance of what both are held to represent, while at the same time they are inherently considered to exist separately from those it is intended for. In India, migrant workers are not imagined to be part of the burgeoning middle classes to which the idea of a new India principally caters. In Singapore, these same workers are increasingly physically segregated from mainstream society in order to obfuscate their existence when not at work. Yet, when the crisis hit, these migrant worker populations were suddenly highly visible, both through their sheer numbers and their potential to carry and spread the virus. The depiction of migrant workers as an (un)controllable virus – as the title of this paper also suggests – speaks to this and such a topic will need to be considered as something of high concern for future research agendas. What are the long-term impacts on the livelihoods, position, and rights of migrant workers once

the pandemic itself is behind us? This paper purposely dedicates most of its space to sketching out a number of ways of engaging with this topic as opposed to providing a detailed analysis of existing literature that might eventually help formulate answers once the pandemic is behind us, firmly grounded in extensive ethnographic research on variously skilled migrants in Singapore, the migration industry in Tamil Nadu, and new middle class professionals in urban India (e.g. Baas 2020; Baas 2020 ed; Liu-Farrer et al 2020).

New India: Who it is For, and Who it is About

The idea that India is undergoing rapid change has characterized reflections on the country for decades now. In the wake of this, a 'new India' seems to have emerged as an economic and geopolitical force to be reckoned with. There are two specific years that have given impetus to this idea: the first is 1991, when the country embarked on a path of economic liberalization, moving away from the planned economy models it had started employing post-Independence (1947). In response to a number of severe financial crises, domestic capital was freed from licensing constraints, import restrictions were reduced, the currency devalued, and opportunities for Foreign Direct Investment increased. It thus became much easier and appealing to invest in India, something which encouraged a rapidly growing number of multinationals to establish themselves in India. The city of Bangalore's transformation from a provincial backwater to global leader in information technology has been symbolic of this. Within the current discourse of this new India, characterized by significant albeit mercurial economic growth as well as a rapid ascent up the ladder of global economies, this post-1991 history also functions as a pivotal moment that can be pointed at in terms of when the new India took

off. However, there is an exuberance that clings to this celebratory discourse that is problematic, as it in turn raises questions about how many Indians have actually benefited from economic developments since.

The second notable year was 1997, which presents us with a slightly different understanding of what propelled the idea of a new India. That year, the country celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of Independence, something which led international media to reflect on the transformation the country had gone through since. Popular English-language magazines with an international readership such as Business Week, The Economist, Newsweek and Time all symbolically drew upon the dyad of the elephant and the tiger or some variation thereof for the occasion. The 'elephant', was held to reference an India of the past, shackled by its planned economy and complicated system of industrial licenses (the so-called license raj). Fifty years on, India appeared to have emerged victorious from this, ready to show the world its (tiger's) teeth and growl. Pictures in international reportage conveyed notions of change and transformation through the juxtaposition of old (black and white) images of the political leaders who had ushered in Independence – and the years of despair that followed – with new colorful ones of IT campuses, shopping malls filled with western consumer goods, and the flamboyance of India's movie industry. An emerging (new) middle-class with its command of the English language, transnationally marketable skills, and new consumer power appeared central to its success story. Gradually, this would come to dominate the depictions of India internationally. Leaving aside marketing considerations, it has become clear that much like with earlier pre-nineties depictions, which had equated India with poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, this new image in itself cannot capture the complicated socioeconomic diversity of the country.

Global City Singapore

As a city-state with a small landmass and population of some 5.6 million, Singapore contrasts in almost every way with India, which is now home to some 1.35 billion people. Even though India is considered one of the fastest growing economies, a significant part of its population continues to live in abject poverty. Singapore, on the other hand, ranks amongst the wealthiest nations in the world, with some of the highest standards of living. While there is considerable nuance inherent in the comparison, especially considering Singapore's high income inequality and oft-ignored issue with poverty, for the purposes of this paper, it is most important to note that the countries are linked at two levels: one highly concrete, the other of a more descriptive nature.

Singapore is historically connected to India through its Indian population who are among its founding population alongside Malays and Chinese. Together with the category of Other (or Eurasian), these categories form the pillar for what Singapore refers to as its CMIO-models, which it employs as an organizing framework to regulate various matters such as housing, schooling, and military service. A significant number of its migrant workers continue to hail from India, though the fact that they are Indian does not allow any special privileges, as opposed to other migrant groups. Besides this, the countries are linked – albeit discursively – through their like-minded narratives of 'becoming' and upward mobility. While India often captures this in terms of newness (e.g. new India, the new middle-class), the Singaporean story is generally narrated as one that has culminated in success, whereby the city-state has become a global power to be reckoned with.

The Singaporean success story is generally broadcasted at home and abroad as one that highlights its impressively short trajectory from being a former colonial backwater at the time it gained independence in 1965, to a global hub of economic importance. This idea is presented alongside that of its diverse population, which is said to be free of internal strife and dissent, all of which makes the city's cosmopolitanism and higher education something to aspire to. This alleged harmonious functioning of a multicultural Singapore is a cornerstone of the city-state's own image of itself, despite this being an inherent fallacy of sorts. Low or semi-skilled migrant workers, of which number over a million in Singapore, are not considered part of 'official' diversity definitions and thus play no role in the consideration on who Singapore caters to as 'home'.

The year 1972 marks an important departure for Singapore's global city ambitions. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam delivered a speech at the Singapore Press Club, during which he drew on Arnold Toynbee's book Cities on the Move (1970). In its conceptualization of a future global city, the speech furthermore drew upon the forced separation of Singapore from the Malay Federation in 1965 which had instilled the country with a distinct notion of survivalism. Two streams of thinking about what Singapore's global city ambitions actually entails need to be dissected here. Most importantly there is the central role it envisions itself playing in the global economy, which comes with ambitions of a high quality of life that attracts the best and brightest (Huang 2013). For this to succeed, it needs to outperform its competitors (e.g. Dubai, Hong Kong or Tokyo) as the most livable city. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong once formulated these directives in a speech, calling for it to become a world-class home and an oasis of talent (Goh 1999). Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 2000 would expand on this by suggesting that the city-state should transform itself into a Renaissance City, which should not just attract international financial but also creative talent.

This vision or ambition primarily caters to the idea of bringing in highly-skilled 'foreign talent'. The notion that low-skilled migrants reflect on their migration destination in any other terms than potential earnings is not considered, and rather it is thought of primarily in utilitarian terms that these migrants are expected to return home one day, which renders them permanently temporary in the eyes of the city-state. In order to alleviate the burden their sheer numbers could impose on infrastructure and public space in their days off, increasingly they are housed in fully-equipped dormitories located on the outskirts of the island that cater to their every practical need ranging from money-wire services to sports facilities and cheap beer bars. Singapore is certainly not alone in such segregation efforts; migrant worker destinations in the Middle East such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Qatar (Doha) have all adopted measures to segregate their migrant worker populations from mainstream society.

Global cities such as Singapore are thus inherently exclusionary in terms of those it concerns 'permanently' part of its urban fabric (Harvey 2000, Calhoun 2002), and who it regards as transient. Even though Singapore celebrates the co-existence of multiple ethnicities and races as the unquestionable hallmark of its diversity, conviviality, and cosmopolitanism (Yeoh and Huang 2015)), it does so on the basis of the exclusion of a significant part of its population. New Delhi's ambition to become a world-class city, or even more generally India's Smart Cities Mission, is similarly anchored in notions of transformation that are highly selective in its inclusion. Like Singapore, it is mainly concerned about portraying a certain image, one which is highly selective and exclusionary.

Indian Migrant Workers Return Home

On May 31st 2020, roughly three months into the COVID-19 pandemic, CNN published an essay by journalist Mohit Rao which focused on 26-year-old Indian migrant worker Rajesh Chouhan who had traversed some 1,000 kilometers over the course of five days. On March 24, India had announced its nationwide lockdown which caused some 100 million Indians to return to their native villages from the cities and industrial sites where they were employed. The images of these vast amounts of migrant workers huddled together without protection, hoping to make it on the final bus or train home before everything got shut down, would be shared the world over. Outrage over their treatment was swift, highlighting how these men and women had become unemployed overnight, without any sort of social security in place to make up for their loss of income.

Chouhan had not been able to return home earlier and chose to defy the lockdown laws on the 12th of May to make the long journey home. Starting from India's IT capital Bangalore (Bengaluru) where he had been employed in construction, he commenced on his journey of 1,000 kilometers to his native village in the state of Uttar Pradesh. His story, which journalist Mohit Rao reproduces in nauseating detail, tells of incredible economic hardship and precarity. Over the past couple of months, countless stories not unlike Chouhan's would be told, often accompanied by poignant pictures of distressed workers clearly at a loss how to get home or make up for the impact this would have on their families. In line with such concerns, the Indian newspaper Hindustan Times (19 April) reported on migrant laborer Mahesh Jena who had pedaled 1,700 kilometers in seven days to reach his home from his workplace, which took him from nearly ten kilometers from the industrial zone of Sangli in the state of Maharashtra, to a small village called Bhanra in the state of Odisha's Jajpur. A follow-up article in the same newspaper two days later (21 April) provides further detail to the tragedy that unfolded across India. It reports on a group of 27 migrant workers from

Andhra Pradesh and Odisha who had returned to their villages using the sea route from Chennai. While these migrants appeared to have succeeded in their endeavors, many others had failed. For instance, 191 migrant workers had been arrested when they were found to be travelling in a boat on the Krishna river to reach home from Guntur district in the state of Telangana. Elsewhere in Telangana and Maharashtra, students and workers had been found hiding in milk tankers or packed into trucks, all desperately trying to reach home, often having paid considerable money to local transporters, some of whom had – in effect – become 'human traffickers.' Allegedly, some 1.5 million workers were stopped and kept in shelter homes and camps set up by state regional governments across the country.

While this human tragedy unfolded, some more positive news was reported as well. On the 21st of April, Hindustan Times noted that the COVID-19 lockdown had significantly improved the air quality. Soon, these pictures would travel the world over as well. For the first time in thirty years, the Himalayan mountain range of Dhauladhar (Himachal Pradesh) could be seen from the city of Jalandhar in Punjab. Before and after pictures of New Delhi's government buildings depicting them first as if dissolving in a haze of smoke and pollution, followed by them emerging like a fata morgana amidst clear blue skies, were happily shared by Indian and international media alike. The spectacular improvement of the water quality of the rivers Yamuna and Ganges added to the impression that it was not only gloom that the crisis had to offer. Perhaps it was possible that India could learn a lesson from the tragedy in the end. The coronavirus could potentially mark a turn of events, especially in terms of the country's awareness of environmental concerns.

Singapore's Gold Standard

In mid-February 2020, the world was gradually coming to terms with the very real possibility of a pandemic and searched frantically for what to do. Briefly Singapore appeared to have all the answers. Having previously had to deal with the SARS outbreak (2002-2004), it was quickly celebrated for its efficient handling of this new crisis. In fact, Harvard University researchers went so far as to suggest the city-state had the "gold standard" in terms of its detection capability. In the report, the authors argued that they considered "the detection of 18 cases by Feb 4, 2020 in Singapore to be a gold standard of near-perfect detection." (Niehus et al 2020) Part of Singapore's success was its historically strong epidemiological surveillance and contact-tracing capacity. With other countries looking for guidance, the Singapore model appeared for a time as a possible way forward. Often employed as a shorthand for the authoritarianism and relative democracy that characterizes Singapore's functioning, the model suggested that these measures could go hand in hand with high living standards and maintenance of a global economic power. Being one of the first country to employ monitoring and surveillance technology via smart phones, could it be that Singapore had a point in subordinating privacy concerns for the government-determined greater good of its inhabitants?

By April 22, only around one month later, worldwide reflections on Singapore did a 180. That day, the country reported 1,016 new infections, bringing the total to well over ten thousand infected persons. Serious questions were asked as to what had happened. It appeared that more than 8,000 cases could be linked to migrant workers living in so-called dormitories. With between 250,000 to 300,000 migrant workers in similar housing situations, many more were at risk. Pictures emerged of these dormitories, not only illustrating the magnitude of the problem, but also effectively shining a spotlight on the often unsanitary and punitive conditions under which migrant

workers are housed. It was an image the city-state was not used to being associated with: migrant workers photographed naked from the waist-up, clad in sarong or dhoti, stretching their legs on a balcony or staring bleakly out of a window, waiting out the strict lockdown.

Migrant workers in Singapore being quarantined

Nanyang University of Technology scholar Laavanya Kathiravelu was one of the first to draw attention away from migrant workers as a hotbed of the outbreak and instead raising awareness of their precarious situation economically as well as physically. In fact, in her contribution to Academia – SG, she argues that the problems low-wage migrants experience which now had worldwide attention already existed prior to the spread of COVID-19. She notes that, while living in tight and crowded spaces, the problem is not only one of hygiene, but also the way that an entire portion of society has been pushed to the edges so that their presence is not 'felt' (experienced as nuisance) when they are not at work. Perhaps their segregation itself was a large part of the reason why infection numbers suddenly spiked. What did this mean for the way Singapore was handling the crisis in general? More than ever before, it became clear that the city-state was composed of various parallel worlds, each serving a clear

purpose. Segregation, which perhaps was initially used to avoid the possible burden of migrants' numbers and the harm they could cause a carefully crafted image of belonging and cosmopolitanism, was turning out to be the breeding ground for an uncontrollable virus.

(Un)Controllable Migrants

A recent development within migration studies argues that more attention should be paid to the space in-between categories of low or semi-skilled migrants and those considered highly-skilled or 'talented'. Migration systems like that of Singapore also acknowledge this space through their labeling of certain migrants as having mid-level skills. However, from that assertion also emerges a more fundamental question of where migrants belong in terms of the way countries receive them. In the case of India, it concerns internal migrants who 'move' from economically less-developed states to those that are at the center of India's ascendancy economically and geopolitically. This group overlaps with those who find their way abroad to countries such as Singapore where they are employed in construction, at the harbor or in ship building, or maintaining the city-state's ubiquitous parks' decorative greenery. In both cases, these migrants are considered problematic with respect to the space they take up in society. In the state of Maharashtra (in which Mumbai is located), this often revolves around local Marathi interests versus those of migrants with regards to employment and the transformation of localities. In Bangalore, the more recent exodus of migrants from the country's northeast put the spotlight on issues of racism and violence. In this, an important question arises which asks in what place and of what space these migrants are imagined to occupy within the context and narrative of a 'new India.' The pictures that were shared worldwide and discussed at length by global news providers such as Al Jazeera,

BBC, and CNN point to corrections of sorts, challenging the idea of a new and upwardly-mobile India. While in its eagerness to question what this new India stands for, it is revealing for the kind of ingrained orientalism that has often characterized depictions of contemporary India. The global narrative built on unequal wealth distribution is, in fact, laid bare.

The Singapore success story, which was later repudiated and almost uniformly denounced by global media, did something similar. The spotlight was originally and deliberately placed on the maddening gloss and glitz of its Marina Bay Sands high-rise, complete with the audacious swimming pool at the top. Yet not only was it this very high-rise that had given the city-state its iconic skyline built by lowly-paid semi-skilled migrant laborers, we now know these same workers are not and were not intended to be considered part of the way Singapore envisions itself. As a global city, Singapore is exclusive, and most of all selective towards those now concerned central to the second wave of the outbreak. The argument is not that Singapore handled these matters less effectively than others, but that there is now an opening to interrogate what precisely the city-state's relationship is with its massive migrant worker population.

If we think of India and Singapore seeking to portray a particular image of themselves that is not just oriented towards the future, but also builds on selective readings of the past, what space is made for their transient migrant worker populations in such a narrative? The clearest difference between the two is that Singapore can purport to think of its migrant population as foreign by definition, while India has no other choice but to regard them as their own. However, when it comes to the way these countries would like to imagine, advertise, and market themselves, differences might be less apparent. Both involve highly mobile populations primarily motivated by economic consideration who, through their sheer presence, can stake a claim to space and place in local terms. While both India and Singapore have made attempts to control and regulate the surging numbers of migrant workers, their ongoing dependency on them means that a continued engagement is unavoidable. The pandemic may have laid bare the conditions on which the inherent socioeconomic inequality is built, but the future will be all the more revealing of the position these workers will take vis-à-vis the ambitions of cosmopolitanism, economic development, and geopolitical might which these countries envision for themselves.

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