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**Seen but Unheard – A Case-Study of Low-Waged Tamil Migrant
Workers in Singapore**

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Abstract

Low-waged Tamil migrant workers have long been contributing to Singapore. Despite labouring for three decades and being connected to the existing Tamil diasporic community there, they have been left out in both state rhetoric and society, often due to claims of transience. However, Tamil migrants face economic marginalisation and social exclusion. This paper presents findings from a case-study of the everyday experiences of eleven Tamil migrant workers, highlighting their socio-economic position in Singapore.

Keywords

Tamil, migrant workers, labour migration, Singapore, urban space, global city

Introduction

This working paper investigates the socio-economic position of low-waged Tamil migrant workers¹ in Singapore, offering a ‘face’ and ‘voice’ to their everyday experience. Tamil labour migration to Singapore is not a new phenomenon; while the global framing scenario has changed from colonisation to globalisation, the flow of Tamils remains. These workers have been left out in both state rhetoric and society, often due to their short stay. Despite the state’s claim of their ‘transient’ status, these migrant workers constitute a semi-permanent structural element of the Singapore labour market: they perform the essential ‘3D’ (dirty, difficult and dangerous – Hugo 2009: 29) jobs and contribute to the nation-state of Singapore in many ways.

In order to address the lack of contemporary empirical research on Tamil migrants, this study will provide an account of their everyday experience as opposed to their perception of being ‘faceless’ and ‘voiceless’ labourers (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011: 61). In particular, this paper seeks to examine the role of gender, ethnicity and nationality in the everyday experience of low-wage ‘transient’ migrant workers in Singapore. Whilst this research cannot be a basis for wide generalisation, it will illustrate how an ethnographic approach complemented by a visual research method (Rose 2012) facilitates a better understanding of the socio-economic status of low-waged Tamil labour migrants in Singapore, as race, nationality and gender impact fundamentally on their migratory experiences.

Exclusion of Tamil labour

While Singapore as a city may have been ‘over-examined’ (cf. Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011: 61), I would like to emphasise that there still remains distinct gaps in the study of this city and the relationship with its migrants such as low-waged Tamil labour migrants. A recent article by Tamil Nadu’s leading English daily *The Hindu* (Sharma 2012), entitled ‘Miseries migrate as well’, outlined the harsh realities faced by low-waged Tamil migrant workers in Singapore. Tamil men, estimated to be one of the largest groups of construction workers in Singapore, hailing from villages around Tamil Nadu, have formed the bulk of migrant workers from India (*The Straits Times* 1994) and continue to do so (*The Straits Times* 2008a). There is a rather sparse body of contemporary literature focusing on early Tamil migration to Singapore, mainly historical in nature (Satyanarayana 2002; Amrith 2010). Amrith (2010) examines the flow of Tamils in Singapore during the period 1920 to 1960. He reflects on Singapore being a ‘mobile’ city and identifies the

¹ Due to space constraints, the term Tamil migrants will be used henceforth: however it refers solely to low-waged Tamil male migrant workers unless specified otherwise. The word Indian worker will be used sometimes as referred by participants or state policies, as Tamils form the great majority of India’s low-waged migrant workers in Singapore.

complex history of circulation and diasporic connection of Tamil migrants there. He outlines that there has been a surge of migration from south India to Singapore and concludes by rightly pointing out that the current Tamil labourers seemingly have no place in this ‘cosmopolitan metropolis’, both metaphorically and socially (2010: 253).

Despite historical parallels and a continued presence in Singapore’s labour market, their experiences have been excluded from the study of contemporary labour migrants in Singapore (Thompson 2009). This distinct exclusion represents an example of Sibley’s (1995: xvi) ‘exclusion of knowledge’. While excluded by scholars, they have often been presented through the ‘lens of urban social problems’ (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2012: 2) in Singapore’s newspapers (*The Straits Times* 2007, 2010, 2012a). Sullivan *et al.* (1992: 70) have noted the existence of a distinct ‘hierarchy of foreign workers’ in Singapore. What position do Tamil labour migrants occupy? Does sharing a ‘common origin’ with the established community of diasporic Tamils in Singapore constitute a form of social capital (Massey *et al.* 1993: 448-449) which improves or makes a difference to the position of low-wage Tamil migrant workers? These are among the questions addressed in this paper.

The lacuna on the study of Tamil migrants from India resonates throughout wider migration scholarship, as most literature addressing Indian labour migrants has been centred around Malayali migrants from Kerala (Buckley 2012; Gallo 2006; Osella and Osella 2000; Rajan 2006; Rajan and Nair 2006), while some research on Tamil migrants and refugees from Sri Lanka (Bruland 2011; Fuglerud 2001; George 2011) also exists. It must also be highlighted here that recent research on Tamil migrants in the Middle East has included them under the broader term of South Asian labour migrants (Mohammed and Sidaway 2012; Kathiravelu 2012).

Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011) suggest that disproportionate research has been carried out on a select number of cities including London, New York and Singapore, to the extent that these cities may seem ‘synonymous with migration’ (2011: 61). I agree that Singapore as a (global) city has received considerable scholarly attention (Baum 1999; Beaverstock 2002, 2011; Yeoh 1999, 2005; Yeoh and Chang 2001). Research on labour migrants in the city has focused on topics such as the economic impact of labour migrants (Hui 1997; Hui and Hashmi 2004), state policy governing migrant workers (Low 2002; Pang 1992; Wong 1997; Yap 2008), the lack of human rights for migrant workers – which largely investigated the experiences of female migrant domestic workers (Bell 2006; Bell and Piper 2004; Elias 2010; Kaur 2010; Lyons 2005), and the feminisation of migrant labour in the city-state (Huang and Yeoh 1996, 2007; Yeoh and Huang 2010; Yeoh, Huang and Devasahayam 2004; Yeoh, Huang and Gonzalez III 1999). It must be noted that migration policies in Singapore are strongly politicised and the city’s administration is ‘highly selective in choosing its foreign workers’ (Low 2002: 95). Low (2002) pertinently observes that the employment of migrant labour in the construction industry began in the 1980s and labour policies remain unchanged since then. She notes that Singapore ‘silently’ maintains the ethnic quota to preserve Chinese dominance for socio-political reasons (2002: 101). Other scholars (Castles 2000: 107; Hui 1997: 116; Pang and Lim 1982: 549; Tan 2003) have attributed Singapore as having specific policies that encourage the entry of ethnic Chinese immigrants. Low (2002: 101) identifies this as the rationale of Singapore’s highly selective immigration policy. Economists Chew and Chew (1995: 196) indicated that Singapore’s government had publicly acknowledged that it was indeed their policy to maintain the dominance of the Chinese at 76 per cent of the population. The extent to which this rationale impacts the experiences of ‘other’ migrants such as Tamil migrant workers remains unexplored. Hence, though much may have been written about Singapore as a city of migrants, I contend that only a few specific angles have been examined, encompassing ‘a narrow range of migrants’ (Benton-Short and Price 2008: 2), and this paper contributes in expanding the exploration.

Although Castles (2000: 123) indicated the strong need for various aspects of international migration to be explored in the Asia-Pacific region more than a decade ago, I suggest that this urgency has increased, as Asia has now become the second largest recipient of migrant workers after Europe (Piper 2008: 183), with Singapore having the highest proportion of immigrants in Asia (Benhabib 2012; Oi 2010). Temporary labour is the most prevalent form of migration in Asia (UNESCAP 2012: 2). By observing the diverse experiences of this group of low-waged Tamil migrant workers with a sustained history of South-South labour migration in Asia, this paper will also contribute to broadening knowledge of a 'notable feature of international migration' in Asia – South-South labour migration (UNESCAP 2012: 2).

Research design and method

This study presents first-hand qualitative data on the everyday lives of Tamil migrant workers in Singapore, in order to explore my key research question about the socio-economic position and experiences of these workers. In this research, a mixed-method approach has been adopted, with in-depth interviews being the primary source of data, complemented by participant observation and participatory (action) research of the workers through photo diaries (Young and Barrett 2001). Photography was included as part of participant observation, where photographs of the migrant workers were taken at work and leisure as I observed them. This mixed method enabled me to corroborate and better understand the lived experiences of the migrant workers. Finally, newspaper reports and official documents have also been utilised as secondary sources for this dissertation.

In-depth interviews proved to be the best method for the purposes of this research, as this instrument allowed the voice of the migrant workers to emerge and gain prominence vis-à-vis competing voices and experiences. Interviews enabled the migrant workers to express their perspectives about their daily lives, in their nuances and subtleties, as opposed to a quantitative research approach, 'standardised and not tailored to individual circumstances' (Valentine 2005: 110). The complementary method of using photographs taken during participant observation (mostly by myself, unless stated otherwise), and by participants themselves as part of participatory research activity, was specifically chosen; photos are 'valuable in urban research' and best convey the 'feel of urban places' (Rose 2012: 298). Rose (2012: 307) has insightfully observed that marginalisation has an impact on the use of urban space by social groups, and photographs can be very effectively used to expose social positions and hierarchy.

Iris Marion Young's (1990) 'five faces of oppression' was chosen as the primary theoretical frame to reflect on Tamil migrants' experience. While Young does not offer a definition of oppression she explains that this takes a multiplicity of forms and it is a form of injustice in society (1990: 40). Young advocates that the exploration of the conditions which enable injustice will provide a deeper understanding of the constituents of injustice itself. Injustice has been defined as a form of domination and oppression of the 'other' (Young 1990: 390). As opposed to the historic usage of the term linked to 'conquest and colonial domination', Young highlights that injustice can be embedded in 'the everyday practices of a well-intentioned society' (1990: 41). It is in this light that the term 'oppression' has to be understood in my study.

The five elements of Young's conceptual framework are exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. As empirical data matched the presence of each of these, all five will be incorporated to explain the experience faced by Tamil migrants in Singapore. This framework was chosen due to its suitability of examining both the economic and the social positioning of the migrants.

Young defines exploitation as an economic concept: 'the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more' (1990: 53). She explains that the powerless are those who lack authority and status; and cultural imperialism occurs when a dominant

group's cultural expressions are used to define the norms of a society (1990: 57-59). Lastly, although Young's (1990: 61) definition of violence is broad, ranging from harassment to rape and physical violence, it is her inclusion of forms of intimidation, degradation and humiliation that is particularly relevant to this case-study.

Sibley's (1995) 'geographies of exclusion' will also be deployed in my conceptual toolbox, since this concept illuminates 'opaque' forms of exclusion such as those experienced by Tamil men in the Singapore area of Little India, 'taken for granted' by citizens as an occurrence of everyday life (Sibley 1995: xi). These less visible forms of exclusion are indeed important as such exclusion obscures how institutional control is exercised in a society (Sibley 1995: ix), especially against the 'other' who is different. The socio-spatial exclusion faced by Tamils is a type of social control. Similar to Sibley's (1995: 81) research focus, this study too is concerned with the control exercised by state agencies on migrant populations.

Lastly, Çağlar and Glick Schiller's 'scale-makers' concept will be used to analyse how Tamil migrants view themselves in Singapore. This concept is appropriate as it was developed to make 'sense of migrant relationships to cities' (2011: 9). By labouring and contributing in different ways to their new cities, migrants are defined as 'scale makers' who effect change (2011: 12). Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2011: 7) define 'scale' in terms of a 'city-scale' vis-à-vis the differential positioning of a city. This new lens enables migrants to be viewed as part of the labour force used by cities to 'build their competitiveness' (2011: 12) as these cities move up the city scale.

Generating the sample

In order to explore the relationship between the city of Singapore and its migrant labour force, I decided to approach and seek the participation of a particular community of labour migrants: Tamil male migrant workers from Tamil Nadu, India, who gained employment legally through the route of 'work permit'. Three key informants working with two non-governmental organisations that assisted migrant workers were interviewed to provide an initial triangulation of data and supplement the 'unsurprising lack' of official published data on migrant workers and migration in Singapore (Low 2002: 96).

Access to potential participants was gained through a gatekeeper who was also one of the key informants working for an NGO's soup kitchen programme for injured South Asian migrant workers. These men were awaiting financial compensation and/or medical treatment. Among the ten men I asked to participate in the study, six came forward and gave me their mobile numbers. To include diverse experiences and not just one of accident and misfortune, I limited the sampling size of this group to five men.

To diversify the sample, I also approached Tamil migrants at other locations. The first location was the Little India area – a popular space where Tamil migrant workers gather on Sundays (Figure 1). Some migrants declined to be interviewed, but I successfully recruited six men in Little India who agreed to be interviewed. The second location was accessible open work sites around some parts of Singapore (Ang Mo Kio, Clementi and Rochor). Men in open work sites were friendly when I approached them; they granted permission to be photographed but they gently declined an interview, citing 'busy at work' as their reason. The field research locations are schematically illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Map of Singapore

Source: Map accessed online at http://www.lonelyplanet.com%2fsingapore&ei=sza7upm9omj80qx_4idwcq&usg=afqjcnh9fpqtas5mtd8sqq-phjq-jpy1hw/ (accessed 26 August 2012). This map was specifically chosen as it demarcated Little India, Orchard Road and other popular tourist places as opposed to conventional atlases which did not.

The fieldwork was carried out over the months of June and July 2012. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Tamil language, digitally recorded with each participant's permission, and later translated and transcribed. Although an interview schedule was used, participants were encouraged to speak freely and openly about their experiences. Interviews were either conducted in coffee shops nearby the workers' dormitory or at places where some of them were seated waiting for their friends. Notes on interview dynamics and participant observations were collected in my research diary.

Finally, participant action research was incorporated through the use of photo diaries. This was given to participants with the purpose to involve them and portray *their* images as an alternative reading to media stereotypes. Pre-purchased and alphabetically labelled disposable cameras were given to participants. Instructions on camera usage were provided with encouragement to capture their favourite 'spots', moments, pastimes, activities and friends in Singapore and Little India. I offered to give them a print of their photographs, as an incentive to put thought and effort into their pictures. Cameras were collected from participants a week later and films were processed. Thereupon I met them and discussed with them issues and themes arising from their photographs. The supplementary interviews about their photo diaries were insightful as they produced informative accounts of participants' experiences. The photo-related second round of interviews also provided them with a role in the research process as the 'expert' (Rose 2012: 306) who explained their photographs to me. The photo diaries compiled by 'insiders' enabled me to view images that would otherwise have been inaccessible to me as a researcher.

Ethical considerations

One of the main ethical considerations in this research was to obtain informed consent for interviews and photographs. Participants' consent for interviews was verbally recorded, as most men were cautious and reluctant to sign documents. Silverman (2011: 105) warns against 'ethical universalism' where 'universal' moral principles that have been constructed in one cultural context could acquire another meaning when exported to another context. In this specific context of migrant workers, participants refused to sign documents as this act was construed to be something too formal and legally binding. While I assured all participants of anonymity and confidentiality, I also made a point to explain my independence from 'officialdom' (Herrera 2003: 14) and that I was a student.

Throughout my fieldwork, my safety as a researcher was also considered as I was a lone woman researching men in an all-male environment. Thus I informed my family of the locations that I was visiting. As a lone Tamil female loitering in an all-male space might be perceived as controversial or anti-conformist cultural behaviour, my brother accompanied me sometimes to locate some of the men on weekends; this also helped to break ice with them.

Positionality

Ganga and Scott (2006: 2) define 'insider' research as 'social interviews conducted between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage'. Being Tamil by descent, in this research I was an 'insider' sharing with participants the same cultural, ethnic and linguistic heritage. Though certain cultural practices differ from diasporic Tamils and Tamils from South India, I was able to understand the nuances of the 'spoken and unspoken "language" of the interview' (Ganga and Scott 2006: 6). Speaking Tamil when approaching prospective participants was vital as I managed to attract their attention as well as their respect (some diasporic Tamils are no longer able to speak the language and this complicates some participants' interactions with local Tamil Singaporeans). The Tamil language served to break down initial barriers between me and the participants, facilitating my access into the field. While being an 'insider' brought me closer to the participants, it also made me and my participants more aware of our different social positions (Ganga and Scott 2006: 6) – me being a citizen, coming from a middle-class background, which to them might be seen as a privileged position, vis-à-vis their transient status predicated on a temporary work permit. I was aware of the difference in power relations between myself and the participants; hence I tried my best to minimise it by dressing very plainly in an ethnic Indian top and emphasising that I was just a student. In an attempt to equalise the power balance (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995: 1668) between me and the participants, participatory action research through the use of the photo diary was very helpful. This method was adopted not only to prevent the appropriation of the 'voice of others and exoticising the marginal other' (Valentine 2005: 114), but rather to consider Tamil migrant workers as 'experts in their environments', particularly so as my objective was to obtain the perspective of migrant workers themselves and work *with* them rather than 'on' them (Kesby *et al.* 2005: 144).

While at times my gender and social position made me feel like an outsider, cultural sensitivity was handy in bridging this gap. I acknowledge that at times gender can intervene to block the process of knowledge construction (Chopra 2004: 37); but at other times being a woman facilitated my social research as the men were generally forthcoming in listening to me or allowing me to photograph them. In this respect, it was interesting to observe the different way in which the coffee shop owners treated the participants and me as they gossiped about some of the workers after they left the shop upon completion of interviews – as the coffee shop owners probably saw me as being 'insider' by way of a shared Singaporean nationality.

Characteristics of participants

In total, eleven male Tamil migrant workers were interviewed, of whom six were employed in Singapore; five were on special passes² awaiting medical treatment and compensation after work-site accidents. Two men from the soup kitchen participated in the photo action diary. Table 1 lists the eleven participants and their basic characteristics. For injured workers, the last occupation held before injury is given. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Characteristics of Tamil migrants in the sample

Name	Status	Mode of interview recruitment	Age	Duration in S'PORE (years)	Industry of occupation at time of interview
Saravanan	Injured	Soup kitchen	29	3	Electrical
Ramu	Injured	Soup kitchen	26	3 ½	Shipyards
Anjappan	Injured	Soup kitchen	43	16	Electrical
Siva	Injured	Soup kitchen	38	10	Construction
Manivannan	Employed	Direct street approach	19	1	Electrical
Vikram	Employed	Direct street approach	34	8	Construction
Elango	Employed	Direct street approach	26	8	Shipyards
Kumaran	Employed	Direct street approach	40	6	Construction
Murugan	Employed	Direct street approach	32	4	Construction
Velu	Employed	Direct street approach	32	6	Shipyards
Muthu	Injured	Soup kitchen	28	1	Construction

Due to time constraints, the sample size was limited to eleven men and three key informants. While I was able to observe the men working on some work sites and take photographs of them with their permission, I was unable to recruit them for interviews, with their supervisors peering over them. It would have been interesting to include these men for interviews and the photo diary project. Interviewing Tamil Singaporeans would have also given me better insight of their perceptions of Tamil migrants. These would have added variety to my data and would have allowed me to see if their views differed from the rest. Despite these shortcomings inevitable in a relatively small-scale research project, I feel that the sample as a whole is sufficient to exemplify some of the issues facing low-wage Tamil migrant workers in Singapore and their socio-economic position.

² Special passes are issued to workers on work permit who are awaiting salary, compensation claims, and/or medical treatment. According to the Ministry of Manpower's regulation, these workers are not allowed to work. There are some soup kitchens run by religious organisations and NGOs that provide food for these men.

Setting the context of migrant workers in Singapore

Singapore is highly reliant on migrant labour – both ‘unskilled’ ‘workers’ and ‘highly skilled’ ‘expatriates’. Its dependency on ‘unskilled’ foreign labour has seen a more than tenfold increase from 80,131 in 1978 (Wong 1997: 145) to 871,000 in 2012 (*The Straits Times* 2012b).³ Out of these 871,000 ‘low-skilled’ foreign workers on a work permit pass, 206,000 of them are female domestic workers (*The Straits Times* 2012c) and an estimated 394,000 (*The Straits Times* 2012b) males are hired in the construction industry, followed by the marine industry.⁴

It must be highlighted here that all ‘unskilled’ workers are addressed as ‘foreign workers’ in official rhetoric. I suggest that the use of the official term ‘foreign’ worker as opposed to ‘migrant’ worker is intentional to reflect and emphasise their transient nature.⁵ In this study I have intentionally chosen the term low-waged migrant workers to address these men. Here migrant workers are defined as per the UN’s definition as a person who is engaged in a salaried activity in a state that this individual is not a national of (GMG 2008: 6-7), while contract labour migration is defined as temporary movement of international workers regulated and organised by governments and employers (Castles 2000: 95).

Skilled vs. unskilled

As highlighted by Anderson and Ruhs (2010: 18-19), the definition of ‘unskilled’ is arbitrary and this fuzziness is very evident in Singapore. All eleven men interviewed informed me that they had undergone a skill-training course with an exam prior to their arrival in Singapore. This is in accordance with Singapore’s requirement that all foreign workers must have undergone training for specific skills, followed by a pre-departure theory and practical examination in their respective countries, before being eligible to apply for a job through an agent in their hometowns. There are four test centres in Tamil Nadu managed by Singapore contractors with Singaporean testers conducting the examinations (*The Straits Times* 1999, 2008a). Only upon passing these tests, can their work permits be arranged by the agents (MOM 2012c). This illustrates how low-waged migrant workers are intentionally placed in low statuses despite having met training requirements. Hence the term ‘unskilled’ is a label that stigmatises and serves to justify migrant workers’ low wages.

Hiring policy of migrant workers in Singapore

‘Unskilled’ male migrant workers are hired on a yearly renewable contract. Their employment is tightly regulated by the state with a system of financial levy and a security bond to be paid for every migrant worker. Unlike low-paid migrant workers in London who are allowed to bring their dependents along (Datta 2009), migrant workers in Singapore face many restrictions: they are unable to bring any dependent with them and are specifically prohibited from marrying Singaporeans (Wong 1997). Employers of all migrant workers (with the exception of Malaysian workers) are required to deposit a security bond of SGD \$5,000 for each worker employed (Ruhs 2006). The monthly levy charged for an ‘unskilled’ foreign worker in the construction industry currently amounts to \$350 SGD (MOM 2012a).⁶ Migrant workers are hired only from approved countries and are divided into four broad categories according to source countries (MOM 2012b). The first category, known as ‘traditional’ source, denotes Malaysia; followed by ‘non-traditional’ sources consisting of India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Philippines. Hong

³ 1978 marks the year foreign workers from non-traditional sources (i.e. excepting Malaysia) were hired in Singapore.

⁴ As Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower does not reveal figures or breakdowns according to industry and nationality, all figures are drawn from estimates of newspaper reports.

⁵ The term ‘foreign worker’ will also be used when citing official documents or newspaper reports, as that is the term used to describe low-waged migrant workers in Singapore.

⁶ One Singapore Dollar is equivalent to about 0.51 pence, so \$350 SGD is approximately £180 British Pounds.

Kong, Macau, South Korea and Taiwan make up the 'North Asian' source, though there are rarely migrant workers from these East Asian countries, as they have been priced out of the market (key informant 1 interview). The fourth category is simply called People's Republic of China (PRC), China being the only country in that category (MOM 2012b; see also UNHCR 2011). Occupational restrictions have been placed on most foreign nationals restricting them to one or two industries, with the exception of China, where males can be hired in all industries. Indians and Bangladeshis can be hired specifically only under construction and marine but not service or manufacturing industry. It must be noted here that such restrictions do not apply to migrant workers from the other three categories as they can be employed in all four industries – construction, marine, manufacturing and service (MOM 2012d). Levy concessions are also offered specifically for migrant workers from the three categories. They are granted the opportunity to use their academic qualification for levy concessions (MOM 2012e). Another concession would be the language of the skills test taken by migrant workers; key informant 1 stated that workers from China and Thailand could take their tests in their own languages, while workers from Bangladesh and India had to do it in the English language – an example of differential terms with certain privileges bestowed upon certain nationalities while restricted to others. Notwithstanding the fact that Tamil is one of the four official languages of Singapore, Tamil migrant workers do not have the option of taking the tests in Tamil.

Key informants 1 and 2 informed me that South Asian workers were among the lowest paid male migrant workers, receiving \$18 daily, or fractionally less than £9. Vikram, 34 years old, who has been working in Singapore's construction industry for eight years, stated that he was receiving a daily fixed rate of \$18 SGD for an average of 9-10 hours of work. He informed me that he has been employed directly by a construction company that is rated to be the second biggest construction company in Singapore.

When I asked for a raise of at least \$1, my manager, a Singaporean Chinese, came up to me and said 1 Singapore dollar is equivalent to 40 Indian rupees, how can I raise it? They have pegged our salary to India's economy. \$1 is 40 rupees, calculate how much \$18 will be. The same work that I do when done by a worker from China, he gets at least \$50 or more a day.

Another participant, Velu, 32, employed in the shipping industry echoed Vikram's experience:

Normally, if you look at Chinese workers, for one day they must be paid a minimum of \$40. An Indian worker, it is \$18... If you ask why, they say the money value is different in their country, that is why this difference.

As a social worker mainly assisting migrant workers from China, key informant 2 noted that migrant workers from China do indeed receive higher wages of about \$50 SGD a day, while South Asian workers have been receiving \$18 for more than a decade now. Unlike low-waged workers interviewed in London who displayed a sense of frustration (Wills *et al.* 2010), most participants in my study did not display any sense of frustration or see this as a form of injustice but have rather accepted it. They believed that it was due to the exchange rate.

There is no minimum wage legislation in Singapore and the authority regulating foreign manpower, MOM, has left it to market forces. The rate determined by the supposed 'market' differs according to nationality. While it differs by nationality for all other migrant workers from various countries such as China, Thailand and Myanmar, it must be noted here that workers from Bangladesh and India are categorised together and paid similar lower wages. This reveals hidden forms of racism and also perhaps cultural protectionism (Chia 2008: 110). Pay differentiation based

on nationality is discriminatory as well. It must be noted here that Singapore is not a signatory to either ICERD or ICRMW.⁷ Key informant 1 mentioned that a lot of this difference is based on 'prejudice rooted in stereotypes'. He added:

It is racialised, I mean I would say in general, as in most developed countries the attitude varies according to the darkness of the people...I mean these are not universal, but it's there. It's there, an attitude, because it's not really contested, it lingers on and then it becomes an excuse to be judging people not on what their skills are or their dedication but because you are from this place and you look this way and that's why you deserve to get \$10 less per day. You know, it's ridiculous but it's there.

Singapore is not alone in having such a hierarchy, other 'global' cities such as London (Wills *et al.* 2010: 106) and Dubai (Kathiravelu 2012: 106) have similar racialised hierarchies that *de facto* privilege those with fairer skin with better salaries and job prospects. Looking closer to Asia, Japan too has a very similar hierarchy where migrant workers are organised according to race or nationality and not skills or qualifications; here too, South Asians are at the 'low end', receive low wages, and are considered as 'inferior' workers (Shipper 2002: 41-42).

Historical background of Tamil migration to Singapore

Here I would like to highlight that Japan is a 'homogenous' country which historically has not had much immigration, while Singapore is a 'multi-racial' and 'multicultural' state (Chua 2003) with a long history of different streams of migration. According to the 2010 Census, the total resident population is made up of Chinese (74 per cent), Malays (14 per cent), Indians (9 per cent) followed by Others at 3 per cent. Migrant labour from India has been a notable early feature of colonial migration to Singapore since the founding of modern Singapore in 1819 (Rai 2006: 176). Labour migration formed the basis of Indian immigration to Singapore and Malaya during the British colonial era (Sandhu 1969: 75). It was essentially shaped by three types of migration; convict, assisted migration (indenture and *kangani*⁸), and free migration (Sandhu 1969). The majority of Indian migrants were South Indians with Tamils forming the bulk. Sandhu (1969: 82) attributes this to the colonial Indian government's sanction against indentured emigration from any part of India except Madras. This can be observed in the number of Tamils who still constitute by far the largest portion of the Indian community in Singapore – 54 per cent.⁹ Figures 2 and 3, taken from Anjappan's photo diary, are indicative of the strength of the historical connections and ties that Singapore once shared with India and the exemplification of this by the use of the Tamil language on the monument. Significantly, Anjappan had been working in Singapore for 16 years, the longest time of all my interviewees, so he was more conscious than most of the historical Tamil connection.

⁷ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

⁸ The system of recruiting labourers through a village headman. *Kangani* means overseer in Tamil. This system was introduced in the 1860s.

⁹ Other shares by dialect group are Malayalee 8 per cent, Hindi 4 per cent, Sikh 4 per cent, Punjabi 2 per cent, Urdu, Hinustani, Gujarati, Sindhi, Sinhalese 1 per cent each, and other Indians 23 per cent. Census data available at: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010sr1.html> (accessed on 20.07.2012).



Figure 2. Monument in memory of the Indian National Army in Singapore, built with the financial contribution from the Indian community of Singapore.

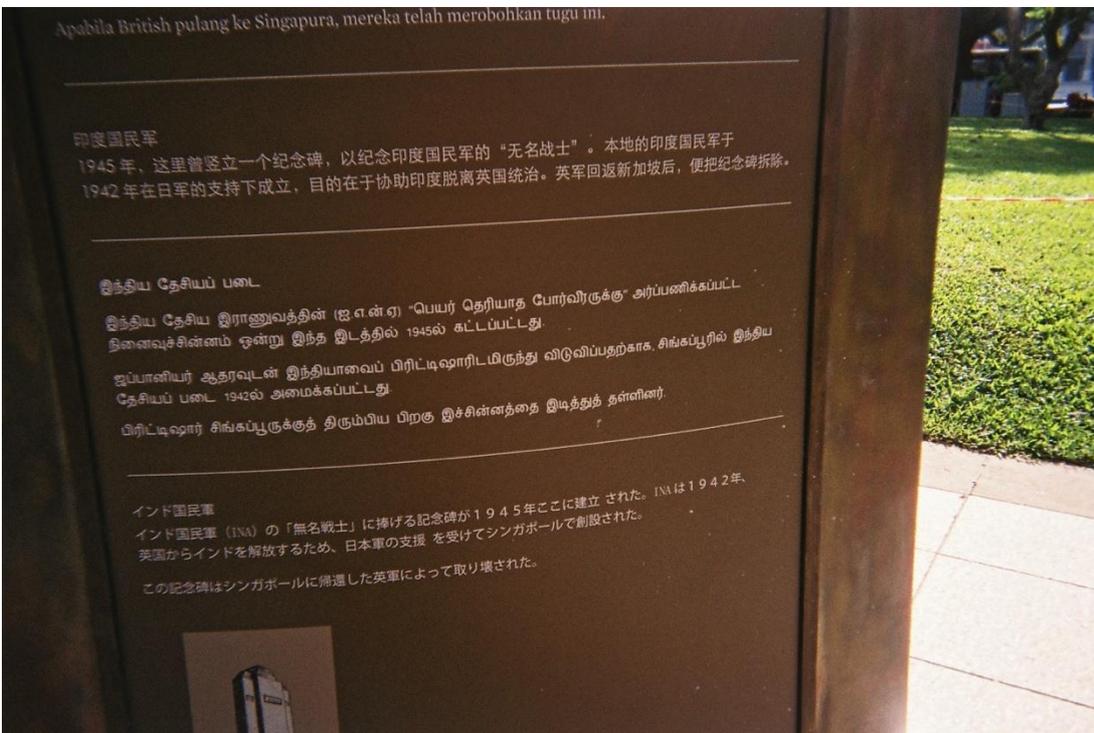


Figure 3. Close-up of the monument written in Tamil.

Both images were taken by Anjappan, photo diary project.

Social and spatial realities

This section examines the social position occupied by Tamil migrant workers and how they are perceived in Singaporean society. As the construction of difference operates across social and spatial scales (McDowell 2008: 52), their position in society can be understood through their multi-level spatial experiences. Interview participants were asked about places they visited in Singapore outside of work, and which was their favourite place followed by reasons behind this choice. Most participants nominated Little India as their favourite place and said they had not visited any other places apart from that. Velu informed me that he had heard about Singapore's Little India even before he actually came to Singapore. His classmate, who had previously worked in Singapore, had told him that it was a place where Indians gathered. Upon arriving Velu felt that Little India was a place that anyone could easily fit in:

Here [Little India] you can see everyone, from a normal person to a rich person shop here. If you go Orchard Road,¹⁰ normally we don't have a budget for that. Everything is catered for the rich person. But we cannot say the same about Little India. It's OK, everything is for the rich as well as the ordinary person who does normal work, they too can purchase things. If you look at Orchard Road, only the rich people can shop there and eat there. Secondly, all the Indian vegetables can only be found here in Little India, you can't find it in other places in Singapore.

The above quote shows that his relationship to Singapore is shaped by his feelings of inclusion in Little India, and exclusion from other places such as Orchard Road. Other participants too said that they have not been to other places in Singapore but saw Little India as a 'home away from home'. Muthu explained that he would rather remit home that few extra dollars than spend it on travelling and sightseeing (see Figure 4). And Siva described as follows his feelings on coming to Little India:

It's like India; feels like home. Can see Tamil people, can be happy. Feels like we have come to our country. We think that way and come here, only once a week on a Sunday. Other days, we are not able to come here. Not able to come other days as after work, I have to do my laundry, cooking... Salaries are paid differently in different companies, some are paid twice a month while some are paid once, at the end of the month. For those who come just once at the end of the month, we are not able to meet them. Coming to Little India gives us all an opportunity to meet each other, Little India is in a central location, so it is not a hassle, it is convenient.

Similar to Dubai's residential camps for workers (Mohammed and Sidaway 2012: 609), migrant workers are housed in dormitories around the periphery of Singapore, 'hidden away in industrial areas of the city' (Kendall 2012: 46). While the workers in the Gulf States are housed out in the desert, migrant workers in Singapore are housed next to the cemetery (Figure 5). Siva is among the 12,000 migrant workers (The Straits Times 2008b) living next to the cemetery in dormitories in Lim Chu Kang, where public transport is sporadic. Hence these migrant workers are effectively isolated from the city. Most dormitories are usually overcrowded with poor sanitation (Figure 6): a clear indication of the low social position occupied by migrant workers in Singapore.

¹⁰ Generally seen as the 'main' street of Singapore (Yeung and Savage 1996), Orchard Road is a popular shopping belt in the central area of the city, with many malls carrying luxury designer goods.



Figure 4. Tamil migrant workers outside a Western Union money transfer outlet on a last Sunday of the month, remitting just after payday. © Wajihah Hamid 2012



Figure 5. Migrant workers dormitories overlooking Singapore's largest cemetery in Lim Chu Kang. © Au Waipang

Source: Image accessed online from <http://yawningbread.wordpress.com/2012/08/27/beware-graveyards-of-public-service/#more-7910> (accessed on 27.08.2012).



Figure 6. Interior of a dormitory, housing 60 workers in a single room. Image taken by Ramu, photo diary project.

While Tamil workers are not meant to be seen and are uncomfortably dispersed around the edges of Singapore, the migrant workers visit Little India to remit, rest and rejuvenate before the beginning of yet another physically demanding week. This however has been a bone of contestation with the local residents who live in residential apartment blocks around Little India. These apartment blocks are public housing flats meant only for citizens and permanent residents (PRs) as a privilege (Chua 2000). These residents have been diligently writing to the press and complaining to their Member of Parliament since these ‘foreign workers’ began arriving in Singapore some twenty years ago (*The Straits Times* 1995). This illustrates that, while labouring in the ‘global’ city, the only place Tamil migrant workers have found comfort, and where they feel closest to home, is Little India; yet within this only place of inclusion, they still face exclusion.

A search of back issues of the state’s newspaper revealed that residents’ attempts to exclude the migrant workers remains very topical. Residents recently proposed to cordon off a residents’ corner¹¹ in Little India (*The Straits Times* 2012a), in addition to the introduction of police patrols four years ago. Most residential blocks have metal barriers fenced around (*The Straits Times* 1997), and the residents’ committee and the neighbourhood police put signs designed specifically in Tamil and Bengali cautioning workers not to ‘loiter’ (Figure 7). While these physical boundaries provide comfort and security to the residents, they push the workers out physically and metaphorically with mental boundaries, consequently excluding them. Such spatial boundaries also represent the moral boundaries imposed on the workers by the residents (Sibley 1995: 39). This illustrates that the established residents of Little India represent themselves as ‘insiders’ who are threatened by the presence of the marginal ‘other’ and they have expressed their anxieties in stereotypes (Sibley 1995: 14). By erecting metal barriers they have created clear physical demarcations as well as mental boundaries, keeping migrant workers apart. The gradual deployment of signs, followed by the barriers, then police patrols and now specific areas to be cordoned off, shows that residents have indeed repeatedly requested the state for stronger defences to counter the perceived dangers from

¹¹Residents’ corner is a built-up space with chairs below apartment blocks, meant for residents to sit.

the 'other'. This exemplifies a public space being made 'private' and used as a form of social control to regulate 'social interaction' and the 'use of space' by Tamil migrants (de Certeau 1984: 81). Such behaviour further illuminates 'one of the paradoxes of the nation-state' (Smith 1990: 7) as it has given Singaporeans rights while it indeed has legitimised unequal treatment against Tamil migrant workers.



Figure 7. Sign found around all residential blocks within Little India – aimed specifically at South Asian migrant workers, urging them not to gather at staircases and lift lobbies. © Wajihah Hamid 2012

Here I would like to highlight that, whilst I was conducting fieldwork in Little India, auxiliary policemen were seen on weekdays and weekends. While they were there to provide 'security' to local residents, it seemed to me that they were concerned with migrant workers only. On one of my fieldwork trips there I was with a female Singaporean friend of Tamil descent, it was a Wednesday evening and there were hardly any migrant workers around. While the sighting of three auxiliary policemen outside the food centre was being noted in my notebook, I accompanied her into the food centre to get dinner. There were shouts and verbal abuse hurled at both of us in Tamil. These insults came not from any Tamil migrant workers but rather from Tamil Singaporean men who were drunk. None of the auxiliary policemen stepped in to see what was going on. This episode clearly suggested to me that the presence of the auxiliary officers was not really to protect the 'local' residents but rather to control and curb the presence of migrant workers. This episode also confirmed the differential practice of policing that was articulated to me by some participants, which will be elaborated in the ensuing paragraph.



Figure 8. Auxiliary police officers donning 'security' vests and walking around where migrant workers gather in Little India. © Wajihah Hamid 2012



Figure 9. Policeman on motorcycle waiting in Little India on a Sunday. © Wajihah Hamid 2012

While the above is a demonstration of ‘power through spatiality’ (Massey 1997: 104), it is enlightening to note that the participants were not particularly perturbed by the presence of the policemen (Figures 8 and 9). Most had internalised and accepted this; they stated that they understood the police were just doing their job. Such an internalisation symbolises the powerlessness of the Tamil migrant workers as they ‘lack the authority, status and sense of self as opposed to the “professionals”’ (Young 1990: 57) such as the British expatriates who have a life of respectability and their own ‘transnational social spaces within the city’ (Beaverstock 2011: 724) in Singapore. Respect that is denied to Tamil migrants should be understood as a positive form of social validation and not a ‘moral good’ (Poynting *et al.* 2009: 150). It is however interesting that the majority of participants even welcomed this move, stating that it was a form of added security for them. This however was not the state’s intention, as the reality of the deployment of police patrols in Little India was to ‘manage the problem of foreign workers’ (*The Straits Times* 2012a). Participants were rather unhappy about the differential way policing was carried out. Migrant workers were singled out and monetary fines were imposed on them while Singaporean citizens were let off for the same ‘mistakes’ such as littering of cigarette butts. In the words of Velu, when asked about his thoughts on the presence of police in Little India:

From what I know, they mainly check the foreign workers. In the same place, if a Singaporean had done something wrong, they will see it but they will not go and approach them or confront them, they will just keep quiet. But if a foreign worker makes a slight noise, they immediately run to us and ask. They see that difference.

Siva shared a similar sentiment:

Sometimes when we are walking on the street, just minding our own business, the Singapore police will stop us and ask, why are you walking here and what are you doing here? There might be some problems around that area, even though we [Tamil migrant workers] have nothing to do with it. But when a worker from China walks past, the police do not stop and check them. Because they have been given a lot of rights. Even if they do something wrong, they are let off... I can’t meet my friends daily, I can only see them on Sundays in Little India. This place has a lot more business on Sundays and this benefits the Singapore government right? There are a lot of people, it is very crowded in Little India and this helps businesses as people spend their money... When our men accidentally throw the cigarette on the floor, they are issued with fines immediately, when the same offence is committed by a Singaporean the officer pretends not to see. I have seen this occurrence many times.

The above narratives of Velu and Siva illustrate that the surveillance of the ‘other’ is based on ethnicity, gender, and nationality. The arbitrary use of power by the auxiliary policemen renders the position of the low-waged Tamil migrant even lower and more powerless. One could also consider this as a form of systemic violence, taking the form of intimidation and degradation meant to humiliate or stigmatise group members (Young 1990: 61-62). Moreover, participants perceived this discriminatory treatment as backed up by law:

Vikram: Policing is OK. But [there is a] bi-furcated law system. One law for locals and another for Indian workers. I feel there is different treatment for local Singaporeans and overseas workers. Here we smoke and drop, fined immediately. The same cigarette, for example a local Chinese throws, he is

not fined. In Geylang, they [Singaporean Chinese] sell cigarettes and they have prostitution there, no one catches them.

Key informant 1's response, when asked about the issue of police presence in Little India:

Generally the police presence is a response to Singaporeans' perceptions of migrant workers and you do find that outside Little India, people do talk about Little India and how they went there on a Sunday and it was very crowded with workers. Actually they don't say that they suffered any harm but it's like the very fact that it's very crowded is a problem. It's very strange, even if you are not using the space yourself, somehow you don't want someone else to use it ... It comes down to colour. Singaporeans do complain about PRC workers, but they tend to complain more about South Asian workers...With South Asians they tend to complain about sexual assaults, this thing seems to be very pervasive. Molestation against women... the underlying current is one of sexual harm.

The above quote confirms Carling's (2005: 18) view that construction workers in Singapore are often stereotyped as sexually threatening where this representation combines ethnicity, gender and nationality. Though he identified this stereotype, it remains to be examined. Tamil men are feared because of their skin-colour, gender and their migrant worker status. While the Tamil workers have crossed many boundaries to work in Singapore, they have not been able to cross the mental boundary imposed on them for the past two or more decades. Young (1990: 123) maintains that oppression includes being defined as having ugly bodies, to be feared and avoided. Thus the residents' constant complaints and the media's negative portrayals have contributed to stereotypes of these workers as somehow deviant (Young 1990: 60). Verbal and visual images have 'defiled' (Sibley 1995: 19) and scaled the bodies (Young 1990: 124-130) of low-wage Tamil workers, making them be seen as threatening. These fears are largely unfounded (key informant 1; Rahman 2010), as crimes committed by migrant workers are indeed very low (*Today* 2008).

Here I would like to draw attention to a paradox, namely that while Singapore is dependent on Tamil migrant workers and their strength and masculinity specifically to labour in and construct the city, this masculinity is simultaneously under surveillance and controlled. City Hall, Beach Road and Geylang are spaces congregated by migrant workers from Burma, Thailand and China respectively (Thompson and Zhang 2009). To verify Tamil workers' claims of differential policing, I went to Geylang, City Hall and Beach Road over two Sunday mornings to observe. It emerged that there was no police presence in those areas. This demonstrates that policing is carried out to control South Asian migrant workers' masculinity specifically and not all forms of 'foreign worker' masculinity. Neither the fact that the area presently known as Little India has long been a community space for Tamil male migrants alongside other South Indians as early as the 1880s (Siddique and Shotam 1982: 13), nor the presence of a large diasporic Tamil community¹² has made a difference to the low social position faced by contemporary Tamil migrant men. This points to how stereotypes based on gender and ethnicity have led to the control of their bodies, and the low social position occupied by Tamil migrants.

¹² All participants stated that their interaction with Singaporean Tamils was limited only to asking of directions when lost, whereby they were helpful. They reflected that they had no real chances of interaction beyond that.

In their own words

Confronted by images on television, the immigrant worker does not have the same critical or creative elbow-room as the average citizen. On the same terrain, his inferior access to information, financial means, and compensations of all kinds elicits an increased deviousness, fantasy or laughter (de Certeau 1984: xvii).



Figure 10. Taken from Singapore's *New Paper* entitled 'Little India Residents' Woes', 20 June 2011.

Figure 10 was printed with the headlines: 'They get drunk, then some fight, defecate in car parks and sleep on the roads, causing traffic hazards. They leave behind their litter, which attracts rats and cockroaches' (*The New Paper* 2011.) This illustrates a form of cultural imperialism; Young (1990: 59) herself had identified a common stereotype that Indians are alcoholics. Here Tamil migrants are represented as being 'disorderly' (Sibley 1995: 5), needing to be policed and supervised. By photographing the worker sleeping next to garbage, the migrant is portrayed as an object of pollution (Sibley 1995: 62), and thus made abject.

While Tamil migrants are 'seen', they have been positioned and defined by a dominant discourse from the outside. They do experience the paradox of simultaneously being invisible yet are marked out as different (Young 1990: 60). There is no interaction with these 'othered' migrant workers; they do not read the state's English newspapers – which 'features' them. Hence the stereotyped views are not contested. Through this research project I attempted to get a counter-narrative of the image used by media, from the migrants themselves. All interview participants were shown the above image. They were then asked about their thoughts. While all of them agreed and acknowledged saying that they were aware that 'their' men drank, they were quick to add that it was a small number of them who got drunk, and on Sundays only. In Siva's words:

This is stereotyping of all men sleeping on pavements as drunks. Sometimes they miss the last train and do not have any other way of going home and men are not allowed to bring their friends into their dormitory. Hence sometimes some men sleep there without any choice. Sometimes it's an emergency and they do not have any other way... Cannot say all are drunks, that is wrong. Singapore government sells the drinks. It is their source of income too. If they do not make them available 24 hours, a lot of our men will be better.

Kumaran shared a similar sentiment about missing the last trains, and added:

The reason why there is rubbish is because all the bins get filled up by around 8 p.m., because there are a lot of people here. All the shops are selling and remain open here, because of us they always have good business here.

Participants from the soup kitchen informed me that some injured Tamil workers who have run out of money do sleep on the streets as they await compensation claims. They are no longer allowed to work and they are denied any form of public assistance from the state, denoting another form of exclusion. JoAnn Macgregor (2008: 472), in her study of Zimbabweans in Britain, found British legislation had allowed ‘the state to expose irregular migrants to bodily harm by denying rights to work and welfare’, while a similar strand of migration management can be observed in Singapore – I would argue it is harsher in Singapore as legal and documented workers there are exposed to such bodily harm and left to fend for themselves. Legal migrant workers who are injured are not allowed to work and do not have access to any form of financial assistance from the state (HOME and TWC2 2010: 2; Rahman 2010: 212), thus it is not surprising that they resort to sleeping on the streets.

Everyday scale-making and alternative representations of Tamil migrants in Little India

This section examines the question of how Tamil migrants view themselves within Singapore. When queried during interview, all participants stated that they saw themselves as being there only temporarily. Anjappan mentioned that, despite working there for 16 years and though he would like to continue to work and contribute, employers and the state still viewed him as transient. Typical of his aspiration to stay long-term was his photo-image taken of one of Singapore’s new, high-status waterside developments (see Figure 11). Muthu expressed that it was worst when one gets injured: ‘Singapore and the employers throw us away like how we throw away our banana leaf after we are done eating’. The above statement exemplifies the sentiment shared by most participants – regardless of their health conditions; all knew they were highly dispensable.



Figure 11. New Marina Bay Area completed in 2011. Image taken by Anjappan as part of the photo diary project.

Despite being aware of their transient and dispensable nature, they viewed their labouring as a collective contribution which Singapore has built on. As enunciated by Anjappan: ‘With our Indians’ hard work, Singapore has developed well’. Sharing similar sentiments, Velu verbalised:

The reason why Singapore has *developed* [emphatically] so much, one reason is because of foreign workers. I can say this without a doubt [adichu sol-luven], if there were no foreign workers, Singapore would be a place no one knows. It is the foreign workers who have come here and developed this country, leaving their own country, come here and toil for this country’s development. But yet this country does not bother about us.

Velu, by speaking with such conviction, illustrates that low-waged Tamil migrants are acutely aware of their important contribution to Singapore. They understand the value their active labouring has brought to Singapore. Such narratives are indicative of the resilience of low-waged migrant workers. The constant physical change that is evident in Singapore is another good reflection of their narrative. Constantly remaking and renewing itself is an obsession of Singapore’s – similar to New York inventing itself, ‘from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future’ (de Certeau 1984: 91). Employing Tamil migrants at extremely low wages has provided companies with the much-needed financial edge as Singapore strives to remain competitive. I would like to assert here that it is with the labouring of low-wage migrant workers such as the Tamil men that Singapore has ‘jumped scale’ (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2011: 5) and moved up the scale of ‘global’ city indexes. Indeed, recently it ranked first in Asia and third internationally as the most competitive ‘global’ city (next to New York and London) by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2012). Thus low-waged Tamil migrant labour has and continues to play a ‘crucial and varied role’ (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2011: 12) in making Singapore competitive within Asia as well as internationally (see Figure 12 for another image of this). And yet, this essential role played by Tamil migrant workers is contradicted by their spatial marginalisation at various levels. Figure 13 illustrates this: a snapshot of Tamil men having their lunch on a back-lane pavement in Little India. The makeshift use of this pavement, away from residential blocks, illustrates the notion of bricolage (de Certeau 1984: xvi), as the Tamil men seek out and temporarily occupy alternative spaces.

Conclusion

Though this case study is based on a small sample that offers limited basis for generalisation, the everyday experiences of the respondents do exemplify the socio-economic reality faced by low-waged Tamil migrant workers in Singapore. They are in a ‘double whammy’ situation as they receive the lowest wage economically, and at the same time are made abject, excluded and denied of dignity socially. This paper has revealed an incongruent reality faced by the low-waged Tamil migrant men who occupy the lowest socio-economic position themselves while they are raising the ‘global’ position of Singapore. By involving the migrants in this case study, it has repositioned their visibility. Despite facing various types of social injustice such as exploitation and marginalisation, these men are simply not victims but rather resilient ‘scale-makers’ who shape the physical fabric of Singapore and leave their imprint all over this ‘global’ city. Furthermore, through this case-study, it has emerged that the presence of a sizeable diasporic Tamil community in Singapore does not have a bearing on the situation of the workers nor has it improved their low socio-economic position; the ties are largely symbolic connected only through the use of a similar language. Despite the state’s view of them as a short-term transient form of labour, the majority of the participants have worked for more than two years, half of them have laboured for more than five years, and Anjappan for sixteen years. This paper has also revealed Singapore’s everyday dependence on these migrant workers and their unrecognised daily scale-making activities.

To gain a fuller understanding of a low-waged male migrant worker's migratory experience, there is a need to examine the role and impact of gender on his everyday experience. It is also imperative to examine how migration challenges or changes masculinities (Kimmel 2009: i). The current focus has been on the feminisation of labour – illustrating King's (2012: 147) cautionary remark that too often gender has come to equate women. Though Willis and Yeoh (2000: xx) called for 'greater recognition of men's migration experiences and the social constructions of masculinities', more than a decade ago – this void remains yet to be examined amongst low-waged male migrants in Singapore, and in most other male migratory contexts.



Figure 12. Tamil migrants working on underground cables in Ang Mo Kio. © Wajihah Hamid 2012



Figure 13. Tamil workers having lunch, Little India. Photo taken by Ramu as part of the photo diary project.

Finally, it would be fruitful to conduct a larger comparative ethnographic study of low-waged migrant workers from different nationalities to examine how their experiences diverge and meet, e.g. if solidarities do exist between them. Though this paper has focused on Tamil migrants, it acknowledges that there are other issues facing other migrants. A study examining networks of care (Kathiravelu 2012) or friendship patterns across nationality remains to be carried out in Singapore. Such a study could reflect a diverse and meaningful picture of migrant workers while revealing a clearer reality of the character that makes up this ‘global’ city.

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