

# ‘Little India’: Diverging Destinies in Heritage Spaces<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

As a colonial legacy of the spatial and political management of immigrant groups, Little India has evolved during Singapore’s post-independence era to service the needs of a developing community. While closely identified as an ‘Indian’ space by Indian Singaporeans, it has developed significant appeal to other locals and foreign tourists, as well as migrant workers from South Asia. This area, showcasing one component of Singapore’s imagined CMIO community (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other), has since the tumultuous events of 8<sup>th</sup> December 2013, become the inadvertent focus of a much broader discussion on Singapore’s national multiracial resilience in an era of hyper-globalisation. This paper considers and questions the apparent destiny of Little India as one of Singapore’s most identifiable precincts in the context of post- 8<sup>th</sup> December policing responses, the introduction of the new “Public Order (Additional Temporary Measures) Bill” and the expected findings of the established Committee of Inquiry (COI). Overwhelmingly, the government’s inclination to segment identity spaces within the heritage precinct as a means of social control and public order, specifically through the restriction of alcohol sales and consumption, appears to be a case of managing the visibility of marginalised groups in order to contain evolving tensions. We argue that this path of action does not adequately address the complexity of underlying causes that

cannot be dismissed simply as alcohol related. A more nuanced analysis with more emphasis on the economic and social realities confronting the South Asian foreign worker in Singapore is required to understand the new multiculturalism now apparent in the city-state. Official bureaucratic demarcators of “foreign worker”, “foreign talent” or “permanent residents” (PR) mask an inequity of social, economic and personal dignities and destinies that further fragment Singapore’s carefully managed ethnic balance and social mosaic. We need to move beyond the managing and controlling of differences of 1965 to embrace the *Brave New World* of contemporary reality.

## Singapore: Destiny or Direction?

Destiny, the predetermined course of events, associated with the earliest of geographical thinkers and evident in the work of environmental determinists until the early twentieth century, still has a place within the karma of oriental theosophy. But while geography may have indeed been destiny underpinning the success of the British colonial trading port of Singapore and, more latterly, accelerating the rise of the modern development state since 1965, the future of Singapore after 50 years of independence will depend upon the state’s continued competitiveness in the face of heightened competition from Asia’s newly liberalising economies. As other centres, notably Dubai, Hong Kong and Shanghai, have taken on the mantle of global cities, questions have been raised

regarding the continued applicability of “Singapore Exceptionalism”. The city-state’s combination of astute economic management, ambitious infrastructure provision and bold attempt at social engineering being characterised as an older, inflexible, top-down structure deemed less applicable to the demands of an increasingly volatile and continually re-inventive group of “worlding” cities (Roy & Ong, 2011).

Tacit recognition of the need for change was characterised as the “new normal” by longstanding PAP (People’s Action Party) government member and now Singapore President, Dr Tony Tan, who envisaged that through a “process of debate, discussion and challenge, we will end up with better results and progress for Singapore” (*Asia One News* 15 July 2011). Subsequent commentators have been less sanguine about the city-state’s polity asserting that “Singapore is in the midst of a profound economic and sociopolitical transition (which) began around the turn of the century and accelerated after the 2011 General Election” (Low & Vadaketh, 2014, p. 1). While the PAP convincingly won the 2011 General Election with over 60% of the popular vote (a result that would be regarded as a landslide in any western democracy), the first time loss of a multiple member Group Representation Constituency (GRC) coupled with a second successive negative swing in the popular vote led to some soul searching within the government. The lukewarm support of the electorate was ascribed to heartfelt, genuine concerns within the ambit of the prosperity consensus pact, most particularly rising home prices, greater levels of congestion and issues relating to the city-state’s increasing economic reliance on foreign workers.

The nexus between the three aforementioned public concerns relates

back to recent shifts in Singapore’s demographic profile, an importance reflected in the prompt release of a Singapore Government *Population White Paper* (2013). This detailed document forecasts a substantial population increase from 5.31 million in 2012 to a predicted high-range estimate of 6.9 million by 2030, but there is no addendum explaining why the world’s second densest sovereign state after Monaco (population 37,000) needs to add to congestion levels. The notion that Singapore’s land area has grown by 23% 1965 is not countered by the reality that population growth over the same period increased by 265%. The *White Paper* does not fully engage with the fact that Singapore’s resident fertility rate (TFR) which has been below replacement level for some four decades now and currently sits at 1.2, possibly the lowest in the world, has been steadfastly unresponsive to successive enhancements of the government “Marriage and Parenthood Package”. New initiatives to link marriage and parenthood to HDB (Housing and Development Board) flat provision would seem to address some concerns relating to housing affordability but any positive fertility trends are unlikely to have significant demographic impact before 2030.

The *White Paper* champions the worth of a strong Singaporean core to pass on the nation’s values and sense of belonging but the estimated increase in citizen numbers (including newly granted citizenships) will be at best half a million, that is an increase of just 15% to 2030. With the recommendation that PRs be held at a steady 0.5/0.6 million through to 2030, the bulk of population increases will take place in the non-resident category which is predicted to increase by a much larger 67% to 2030. Whilst non-residents represent a flow rather than a fixed number, it is the dramatic increase in this category that has

seen the proportion of citizens to total population reduced from 86% in 1990, to 62% in 2012 and a forecast 55% by 2030. In this respect the *White Paper* which cites extensive public engagement through dialogue sessions, website and solicited feedback appears to recommend a “new normal” status quo ante rather than a sustainable vision for an optimum population. Public unease over the contents of the document, most specifically the perceived dilution of the Singapore core for relentless economic pursuit was widely voiced in Singapore’s online community and then physically marked by an organised rally of some 4,000 protestors at Speakers Corner, that was in itself a landmark moment in fostering notions of debate, discussion and challenge (*Yahoo* 16 Feb 2013).

### **Singapore: Reset or Repair?**

The *White Paper*, while recognising that too many foreign workers may depress wages, as well as weakening national identity and sense of belonging, holds firm to the notion of a complementary workforce of Singaporeans and foreigners. Citizens will be increasingly represented in Professional, Managerial, Executive and Technical (PMET) jobs while, as noted by *White Paper* Executive Summary,

Foreign workers help to create the right balance of skilled and less-skilled workers in the overall workforce. As Singaporeans upgrade themselves into higher-skilled jobs, more of the lower-skilled jobs will have to be done by foreigners.

This view is challenged by Low and Vadaketh (2014) who argue for economic restructuring to promote higher productivity and thus rising wages in those sectors of the economy which rely heavily on lower-skilled workers. Over time

Singaporeans would increasingly find careers in construction work, in the food and beverage industries and in domestic service, as they do in western economies (2014, p. 36). Social adjustment will take place gradually but as citizens are increasingly found in what were previously regarded as “low status” jobs the stigma attached to these occupations, and hence those foreign workers still employed in them, will lessen. Some things will change, maids will become increasingly expensive for middle class families, but professional cleaning services will be on hand. Singaporeans may start to wash their own cars.

By extending the mantra of a segmented workforce into the foreseeable future it would appear that the Singapore government has missed an opportunity to adjust some sensitive policy settings that have become a source of friction to HDB “heartlanders”. The steady annual increase in Singapore’s non-resident population spiked to 14.9% in 2007 and 19.0% in 2008, adding further to the day-to-day congestion on pavements and in malls, on crowded buses and trains, and in time spent in longer queues. Disturbing media reports of unacceptable behaviour at HDB void decks (*Sunday Times*, 25 November 2007) and revelations of overcrowded, squalid and unsafe workers’ accommodation (*Straits Times* August 2014) in violation of fire safety and land use laws (*Straits Times*, 18 May 2010), resulted in uncomfortable public debate with racist and classist undertones. In 2009 a burst of NIMBYism over the proposed housing of foreign workers within the privileged upper middle-class neighbourhood of Serangoon Gardens seized public attention until the offending premises were fenced off (*Straits Times*, 11 December 2009). However, such problems of behaviour, congestion and illegal dormitories were overshadowed by

the tumultuous events and aftermath of the Little India riot on 8 December 2013, an event that heralded a much broader discussion on Singapore's national multiracial resilience in an era of hyper-globalisation.

### **Little India: Riot and Reaction**

Compared to recent confrontations in London (August 2011) and Ferguson, Missouri (August 2014) the Little India riot which began in the late evening of Sunday 8 December 2013 was a short lived disturbance. But, for Singaporeans, shocking media footage of an unruly group confronting riot police amidst overturned police cars and a burning ambulance were disturbing reminders of earlier, more volatile times. While the Maria Hertogh riots (December 1950), Chinese Middle School riots (May 1956) and subsequent race riots of the mid- and late-1960s were much more destructive of both people and property, the Little India incident was a wounding assault on Singapore's self-assured national multiracial resilience. Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong immediately called for a full investigation into the incident promising that the culprits would feel the "full force of the law" and directing a Committee of Inquiry (COI) to "look into the factors that led to the incident and how the incident was handled on the ground". In the same statement PM Lee went on to pre-empt the findings of the COI by asserting that the "riot was an isolated incident arising from the unlawful actions of an unruly mob reacting to a fatal traffic accident" (PMO, 9 December 2013).

A further immediate response to perceived mob culpability can be seen in the prompt action by the Liquors Licensing Board (LLB) to suspend all liquor licences in the "Little India cluster and surrounding vicinity" from 6am on

Saturday 14 December until 5.59am on Monday 16 December, to "help to stabilise the situation and allow (the police) to assess the next steps in consultation with various stakeholders" (*Straits Times*, 11 December 2013). While the timing and conditions of the ban were subsequently eased, restrictions on public consumption of alcohol in Little India have been continued. On 15 February 2014, parliament passed the new "Public Order (Additional Temporary Measures) Bill" which granted police the power to exclude or ban people from entering the Little India area if their conduct was assessed to threaten public order; to search any vehicle, people or place reasonably suspected of being related to an offence; and enact a general prohibition on alcohol sale, supply and consumption in any public place within the special zone. By October 2014, Tekka market "retailers have been asked to stop selling bottled beer to prevent their use as weapons" (*Straits Times*, 7 October 2014). The Second Minister for Home Affairs, Mr S. Iswaran's clarifications (*Home Team News*, 19 February 2014):

The provisions in the Bill are targeted at behaviour that threatens public order, and not at specific individuals, communities or businesses... and apply equally to all persons, and business operators within the special zone without exception, whatever their ethnicity, whatever their nationality.

Yet, these measures were specifically directed to maintain public order in Little India, with no similar powers extended to the many other places that regularly experience large potentially volatile congregations. This particularised response to the Little India situation took on a controversial shape in a mock anti-riot exercise in November 2014 described as a

“meaningful collaboration” but heavily criticized by workers’ rights organisation as racist, demeaning, dehumanizing and offensive (*Straits Times*, 13 November 2014).

The comprehensive *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Little India Riot on 8 December 2013 (COI)* was submitted to the Minister on 27 June 2014. Its findings stressed that the event which sparked off the riot was the traffic accident which killed Mr Sakthivel Kumaravelu, a 33-year-old construction worker from Tamil Nadu. It concluded that alcohol was not a direct cause but a major contributory factor, among others, to the nature and escalation of a “purely criminal riot with no motivation which some might find legitimate. What the rioters did on the night of 8 December 2013 was clearly illegal and uncalled for, and abused the freedom that Singapore had afforded them as transient workers in the country” (point 146, p. 46). Furthermore, the *COI* was satisfied “that foreign workers’ employment and living conditions were not the cause of this riot” (point 147, p. 46). This verdict, brought down after some seven months of deliberations, appeared to add little substance to the immediate post-riot reaction of PM Lee on 9 December 2013 while at the same time vindicating the restrictive measures promptly put into place by the LLB. Singaporeans looking for the “new normal” in the principles of governance might have expected more nuanced insights into the economic and social realities confronting the South Asian foreign worker in Singapore. Instead the *COI* refused to countenance any notion that labour issues were involved “either proximately or remotely” (point 144, p. 45).

The *COI*’s Behavioural Analysis Group of experienced psychologists, commenting upon the incident in terms of

crowd psychology, stressed the likelihood of “misperceptions” on the part of foreign workers and a consequent desire for “street justice” (points 119 & 120, pp. 39-40). On the basis of such professional advice, the *COI* determined that the riot was neither an instrumental nor an expressive riot resulting from either discontent or dissatisfaction (points 134 & 135, pp. 43). This finding, however, fails to adequately explain the apparent escalation which led to the second phase of the riot “where rioters became bolder in their attacks” (point 97, p. 32). Such a phenomenon may be attributed to an “extended social identity” in which a group’s anger is fuelled by a web of pre-existing factors such as poverty and unemployment. Trigger events such as the beating of Rodney King (Los Angeles 1992) and the death of Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri 2014) led to wide scale rioting which reflected a history of racial tension in the United States. The instigating factor being a shared identity based upon perceived deprivation, disempowerment and diminished status (Jarvis, 2011; Scott, 2014). Shared identity among the elite or governing class calls for no such recourse, hence public outcry following the apparent leniency in the sentencing of Oscar Pistorius provoked no riot in Pretoria’s gated community of Silver Woods, or in the upmarket beachfront suburb of Summerstrand, Port Elizabeth where his victim had previously resided (Baker, 2014).

### **Destinies: Divergent or Shared?**

Robert D. Putnam’s work on ethnic diversity, honoured by the 2006 Skytte Prize committee, traces its substantial and continued increase across virtually all modern societies. Putnam sees increased immigration and diversity as inevitable and while initially testing of social solidarity, over the longer run it has

desirable outcomes in the construction of new, more encompassing identities. The challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of “we” (Putnam 2007, p. 139). In Singapore the colonial city was built up by immigrants who, following independence, were defined according to the carefully managed ethnic balance and social mosaic CMIO model which disciplined and managed differences in the pursuit of the common goals of economic growth, public education, healthcare, housing and national security. In Singapore the “we” was thus framed by the CMIO model and the official if understated policy of maintaining the ethnic Chinese proportion of the home population at a constant 75%; with “them” being the tightly regulated flow of foreign workers who were contracted to perform in a segmented labour market differentiated between an highly educated and highly skilled “expatriate talent” sector and a semi- or unskilled “foreign worker” group designated for the dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs (3‘Ds’). Such official bureaucratic demarcation thus contrived and effectively masked an inequity of economic, social and personal dignities and destinies that have distanced citizens from transients.

As Singapore has imported the global problem of inequity through its segmented labour market, the city-state has also become one of the most unequal of countries. Epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010) make the case that “more equal” members of the world’s richest group of countries perform much better than their “less equal” counterparts on a wide range of social and economic indicators. Within the “rich-group”, Singapore has a 2009 Gini coefficient score of 42.5, whereby the richest 20% of households command nine times the wealth of the poorest 20% (2010,

p. 15), more disturbingly this inequity is combined with the second highest levels of incarceration (after the USA) and the second lowest levels of ‘trust’ (after Portugal) (2010, p. 148). The palpable gap between “we” and “them” is one that needs to be addressed in the “new normal” era of low fertility, ageing population, rising inequality and an increasingly visible population of hitherto marginalised workers. Can the PAP government embrace the *Brave New World* of contemporary reality or will they revert back to the “old abnormal” (Low & Vadaketh 2014, p. 5)?

Some years ago, sociologist John Clammer wrote (in George 2000, p. 166) that

[T]he real fragility of this remarkable society that has been created in this tiny island state... is not its ethnic and cultural complexity per se. It is rather in the artificiality of the attempts to prune it into a precarious order... Singapore does indeed remind one of the bonsai: nature miniaturised and bent. ...the bonsai, when its cramps are removed and it is put in a bigger pot, grows with the natural exuberance of the rest of nature.

Singapore may need to give some release to its roots.

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