

The Singapore Dream! Indian diasporic mobilities and changing imageries in the Lion-city

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From the 1990s, India and Singapore had embarked on a new phase of bilateral friendship that culminated in strategic agreements and movements of Indians to the city-state. Many other factors like global rise of Asian markets, significance of Singapore as financial centre in Asia, ideal platform of looking into the Asia-Pacific region and the inevitable push of the corporates to look for greener pastures beyond India also contributed simultaneously to the new migration trends, particularly for the upwardly mobile and ambitious middle class in India. The result has been huge flow in the wave of entrepreneurs, managerial talents, professionals and students into Singapore who have fit in ideally into the demand and supply requirements of this globalized economy. Thus, the presence of ethnic Indians in Singapore have gone much beyond the contours of traditionally perceived lived-space in Serangoon Road area, popularly known as ‘Little India,’ though this area remains a thronging centre for economic and cultural activities and tourist attraction in a multicultural landscape of Singapore.

This paper will focus on the contemporary Indian Diaspora, their economic trajectories, socio-cultural diversities and global mindset in Singapore. It will deliberate on the metaphors of mobility and identity for different generations in the lived-space of Singapore and compare the distinct layers in

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the Indian diasporic community. It will discuss the resonances, reflections and contestations in the sphere of intra-community perspectives in the interactive economic and socio-cultural space of Singapore.

Key Words: mobility, identity, Indian diaspora, community, globalization.

Introduction

The name of ‘Singapore’ has transcended from symbolizing a small city-state to the rhetoric of a much-desired destination in the popular imagination of the Indians and many others across the globe today. Whether it is in the context of a popular tourist destination, ideal hub for higher educational and professional degrees at competitive costs, a good platform for outward bound entrepreneurs, the cleanest and the smartest global city in Asia, or even shooting for and promoting Bollywood films, Singapore may be the ideal reference point for all these activities for Indians and many more. Gone are the days when it was either identified with the ‘Tiger economies’ of Asia or popularly identified with the popular electronic goods from ‘Mustafa¹.’ This had been a story more than three decades ago, when most of the Asian states were busy shedding off their garb of the Cold War associations and were on the threshold of reaching out to a new dawn in a ‘rising Asia’. The 1990s heralded that new dawn for both India and Singapore, though in quite different ways. While Singapore re-oriented its foreign and economic policies with greater focus on regional economic interdependency, India went through its market liberalization and reforms and embarked on a Look East Policy (LEP) to redirect its attention towards its east. At the same time,

¹ One of the largest retail outlets of consumer goods in Singapore, Mohamed Mustafa & Samsuddin Co. Pte. Ltd., or simply Mustafa, is a popular name with visitors as well as residents in Singapore. Popular since the 1980s with the Indians, anyone familiar with Singapore would surely be aware of Mustafa, or would have made a visit there for electronic and other consumer goods. This has become such a popular tourist destination in Singapore that it had earned the Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year award in Singapore in 2003.

outward flow of Indian migration increased significantly. Indians have become the largest global diaspora at present with 17.5 million people living outside India (*World Migration Report*, 2019). Migration flows of the Indians into Singapore have been on the rise as a result of bilateral agreements and cooperation resulting in entrepreneurs, managerial talents, professionals, students, or contractual unskilled labourers and tourists to comprise of the human capital movement to Singapore.

The year 2015 was remarkable in the bilateral relationship between the two states, when fifty years of diplomatic relationship overlapped with Singapore's golden jubilee celebrations of independence. The coincidence was significant from the point of view of India's political relations with the city state since its early years of independence after its unpleasant break-up with the Malaysian federation in 1965, a time when Singapore was in need of political recognition and friend quite urgently. This momentous bonding has been reiterated in public discourses and academic publications. The literature on policies and economic-strategic interactions of the bilateral relations, or historical mobilities of Indians in Southeast Asia has been published adequately. This paper will focus on the impact and consequences of Indian mobilities in Singapore in the larger context of global transnationalism. It will further explore the dichotomous effects of decades of positive political relations and migration policies, both in terms of enhanced visibility and the economic status of the minority Indian community in Singapore as well as the underlying tensions that exist between different layers of the Indian community at the same time.

Contextualizing the India diaspora in the lived-space of Singapore

Migration is a familiar term in the contemporary globalized world setting. Both internal (domestic) and external (international) migration has increasingly assumed significance in academic research as well as state policy initiatives and sometimes quite closely impacted by each other. Past migrations have had significant relevance in understanding the modern lived-spaces across the globe, but with increasing connectivity and communication technologies, there is need to examine whether contemporary migration trends have taken on different trajectories in defining connectivity and homeland linkages. If the modalities of migration have taken on different form and understanding, then how do different layers in the diaspora within the same lived-space engage with each other?

In spite of continuous attempts of adapting to the new place of location, there may be constant or interruptive, subdued or assertive attempt of migrants to keep the connections with the homeland alive through varied frequency of personal visits, marital connections, virtual bonding through internet and cultural nuances and manifestations. A distinct difference between the 'old' and the 'new' migrants may be observed in terms of their visibility and dominant presence in different lived-spaces in Singapore. By older migrants I mean to refer to migrants who have settled abroad for at least three to four generations. The new migrants, on the other hand are ones who are the first generation migrants/ sojourners, mostly undecided about locations to settle permanently. While the older migrants often maintained a subtle minority status as a community with a focused attention towards an orientation of a Singapore identity and maintaining religious and cultural

links with the homeland mainly, the new age travelers ride high on India's growth trajectory, entrepreneurial and technology skills and participation in 'the knowledge economy' trends. They belong to "the fleeting and the flexible diaspora" (Bhattacharya 2011:172), confident of their knowledge and skills, taking giant steps beyond the boundaries of homeland, but unsure of choosing a location of settling down permanently, preferring to globe-trot with every better opportunity, and also keeping the doors open for eventual return to homeland. The visibility of the Indian diaspora in entrepreneurial spirit, professional qualities and educational achievements has also motivated the older migrants to reconnect with their homeland. This attempt to renew and revive the connection is "often seen as romantic rendezvous with their historical past and their original roots" (Oonk: 2007: 9). There are also people of Indian origin who do not desire or attempt to seek an Indian identity in any way. All these distinct layers are quite visible in the Singaporean socio-cultural landscape, and also bring us to the complexities within ethnic Indians and problematize the perceived homogenized positing of the Indian diaspora. With increasing state-driven initiatives, facilitating of business interests and interactions between people, there is increasing need and opportunity of studying this diaspora space.

The study of Indian diaspora in Singapore has been predominantly framed under lenses of historical labour narratives across the Indian Ocean. Even if the problematic of inclusion and exclusion of different groups under the concept of 'diaspora' can be avoided by taking a more holistic approach as suggested by Khadria (Khadria: 2007), the different layers of the diaspora through different historical phases cannot be overlooked. This paper makes

an attempt to address some of the concerns and characteristics of the various layers positing them in the larger framework of the Singapore socio-cultural and politico-economic space.

The idea of ‘routes and roots’ has often been used in trying to unravel diasporic connections, stories of displacement and settlement, mobilities and alignments, connections and disconnections. While pre-colonial Indian trade and cultural links with Southeast Asia has been well recognized, the beginning of Indian migration to Singapore is usually studied from the coming of Stamford Raffles in 1819. Raffles effectively laid the foundations of an entrepot and a trading hub connecting Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea. The British administrative functions were initially carried out from the Bengal Presidency headquartered in Calcutta (Kolkata) (Yong & Bhanoji 1995; Carter 2008). Quite predictably, the outflow of administrative paraphernalia included all categories of service providers for smooth running of the colonial government machinery like security personnel, administrative clerks, army contingents, coolies, washermen (dhobies), khidmatgars etc. The traders and businessmen soon found the ‘routes’ of the colonial project lucrative providing them with gainful economic opportunities, plantation labourers found their way to the Malayan rubber plantations mostly through the colonial indentured labour system, and thus began the saga of circulatory movement (Bose 2006; Amrith 2013) of men and money across the Bay of Bengal, mostly from the southern part of the Indian sub-continent. This was an important period of formation of a predominant layer of the Indian diasporic connections in Singapore that have linked the past with the present.

Brown's model (Brown 2007) on the South Asian Diaspora defines the objectives quite broadly – to establish new homes, networks and communities based on economic imperatives, “relate to the public space... of their new homeland” directed towards social interactions and integration, and re-define their “connections” with the homeland which has political implications (Brown 2007: 173-74). On a similar framework, immigrant Indian communities present a picture of different layers of identity formation, mostly dependent on the periods of mobility. It also presents a story of transition from migration being directed by ‘economic compulsions’ to ‘economic benefits’. Arasaratnam saw this change of pre-colonial voluntary migration to largely involuntary trend in the colonial period as “response to demands caused by external factors” (Arasaratnam, 1970: 2). While the colonial period was characterized by forced labour migration and displacement mainly under the indentured and kangany systems, migrations in the post-1947 period was mostly voluntary (with the exceptions with what one may argue as political compulsions of displacement of immediate post-Partition years) and directed towards better opportunities and economic benefits. The labour migrants were in low economic and social status living barely a hand-to-mouth existence in many cases with little choices left to them even after they had completed their contract. Neither was the choice of return an easy decision due to frugal economic means and disillusionment of economic possibilities at home. However, the minority trade diaspora had been much more independent in their mobility and choice of period of residence in the host country and the homeland links. Rather, they progressed and prospered with established financial and manpower networks and their circulatory movements with the homeland (Bhattacharya 2011), which however, got

disrupted in the post-colonial order and the Cold War era, as also the diaspora policies of different nation states.

The ‘connections’ with the homeland, thus, had been very different for different layers of Indian diasporic communities in Singapore. For the contemporary phase, these connections are strong and circular, much facilitated, but also regulated under individual state policy directions. Thus, new homes, networks and communities, as Brown theorizes, is formed with substantial economic opportunities and has been consciously constructed with dense socio-cultural and religious elements of the homeland. The networks and communities thus formed, both physical and virtual, bear distinct cultural flavours of certain Indian regional pockets, distinctly visible as North or South Indian, East or West Indian, or even provincial/ state/linguistic flavours like Tamil, Gujarati, Bengali or Bihari identity. The circularity of this diasporic movement, choice of frequent back and forth travel options and economic affordability led to integration into host societies for this generation of Indian settlers at a very different level from a major disruption of homeland tied in the earlier generations. The process of adaptation and negotiation by the earlier group in the new location depended on negotiation of language, caste and religious issues in the local environments and the extent to which they adapted to the local societies (Oonk 2007:12).

Changing Government strategies and their effects

The changes that have been witnessed in the mobilities of Indians bear certain common characteristics across the globe that have been much dependent on the way the Indian government has responded to the diaspora at different

periods in the post-independence era. There has been a prominent discourse on diaspora nationalism that has been supportive of, and at different points, quite active in promoting the cause of anti-British protests (Singapore had been an important theatre of anti-British activities in the 1940s under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose). However, there has been a long period of disconnect with the Indians abroad since independence in 1947. Though the Indian National Congress was sympathetic towards the cause of the Indian indentured labour, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first PM of independent India, limited the interactions to cultural and humanitarian dimensions only (as manifested in his debates on foreign policy in Lok Sabha in 1957) and took a conscious policy decision that the diaspora should choose to be loyal to their country of residence (*Indian Foreign Policy*, 1961). For many Singapore residents who were ethnic Indians, this arguably brought about a redefining moment of their identity as a large number of Indians in Singapore never felt totally separated from India earlier. This was partly because travelling was much easier within the British colonial dominion, also because many of the voluntary migrants were short-term residents preferring to go back to their family or retire to India after a certain period. Others paid regular visits to their homeland either annually, or every two years. It has also been commonly believed that Indians in Singapore then lived with one foot in India.

Post-1965 structural policies of the Singapore government also directed Indians to decide on their citizenship choices as the compulsions of nation-state boundaries restricted frequent movement of the Indians to their homeland. The nation-building process led Singapore to embark on a free market economy, based on the colonial economic model, with influx of multinationals

and foreign capital investments. It also led to re-organization of the spatial architecture with rapid industrialization process, urban renewal, building Housing Board Estate residence complexes for its citizens, at the same time retaining some of the facades of the enclave of lived-spaces like Little India, Chinatown, etc. The social fabric was structured with the race based CMIO factor² and Singapore was declared as a multicultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation. Singapore soon became the busiest port of the Commonwealth by 1969, the largest container shipment centre in Southeast Asia by 1972 and the third most important port in the world by 1975 (Bhattacharya 2011: 92). This was a remarkably divergent growth trajectory from what had been initiated as an inward looking planning based state-led industrialization process in India. Since India could not promise much to the Indians abroad in the prevailing politico-economic circumstances, particularly with a growing apathy towards its diaspora, Indians in Singapore chose to integrate themselves into a Singaporean identity wholeheartedly turning their back to their homeland for good. Singapore, being a nation-state formed predominantly of migrant communities, perhaps provided a better space for them and new opportunities of recreating their identities distinct from being typically an 'Indian' in many respects, though larger regional, religious and cultural affiliations remained. The succeeding generations emerging from these groups of settlers thus identify very little in common with the Indians in the sub-continent. The disconnect is often expressed in forms of uninformed perceptions about a rapidly changing India and Indians. There is often an imagination of India that may be little or wrongly informed, and a certain bias in the new generation of Singaporean Indians who have had no

² The multicultural Singapore society was racially distributed under the CMIO actor—with the majority of Chinese (almost 75%) followed by the Malays, and then the Indians, who comprised of the minority amongst the three. The other races were clubbed under the 'Others.' For more details refer to Siddique and Purushotam, 1982

regular connections with their so-called ‘homeland’ anymore. This identity formation is thus a stark contrast to the ‘new’ Indian migrants into Singapore, particularly from the 1990s as they find themselves disconnected with younger generations of the earlier settlers.

From the perspectives of the Indian government, things took a different turn since the 1990s with large reversal of older policies and renewed bilateral engagements. The opening up of the economy with trade liberalization in the 1990s along with the reorganization of its foreign policies with a Look East Policy (LEP) [and later, Act East Policy (AEP)] ushered in a new era of friendship and political ties between India and Singapore. The new millennium arrived with a new set of policy changes for Singapore as well with a strategy of balancing and re-distribution of power and promoting economic interdependency in the region and beyond (Acharya 2008), thus opening up with possibilities of new collaborations with both China and India. Besides, there was an increasing emphasis by Singapore on the development of the ‘knowledge economy’ since the 1990s in rationalizing the next phase of the nation’s development. As Yew has aptly pointed out, “From the policy perspective, Singapore’s knowledge economy extended and adapted a pre-existing narrative of progressive developmentalism”. (Yew: 2011) This created a large demand for technology driven skilled labour, which India was in a good position to supply with the growing prosperity of the IT sector. Thus, with LEP facilitating closer approach towards Singapore and Southeast Asia, a landmark bilateral agreement was signed between India and Singapore in 2005 the CECA³. It ushered in a flow of Indian skilled la-

³ The Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement or CECA as it is popularly known as, ushered in a plethora of changes between the economic collaborations. It is usually regarded as an FTA plus agreement and was a first of its kind to be signed between states in South and Southeast Asia. It also proved to be a guiding example of many other such agreements between India and other states in Southeast Asia and East Asia.

bour into the city-state in different professions and entrepreneurial ventures. It is often regarded as a watershed agreement in the history of bilateral diplomatic relations.

The Government of India had also reversed its traditional approach towards its diaspora. Since 2003, India has been celebrating the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD or The Overseas Indian Day) annually in the month of January as an occasion to acknowledge, engage and mark the contribution of the Indian diaspora in the development of India. Several initiatives have been taken in the forthcoming years like Study India Programme, Tracing the Roots and Know India programme to engage and familiarize those generations in the diaspora who have been cut off from the reality for several decades. Recognition of the diaspora also came in the form of granting as “Overseas Citizenship of India” (OCI) status by making amendments and adding Section 7A in the Citizenship Act of 1955 (Jha 2015). This is often regarded as an upgraded version of the PIO (People of Indian Origin). The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) was set up in 2004 to act as an umbrella institution to facilitate the engagement of the Indians abroad. This was later merged with the Ministry of External Affairs to enhance the importance of diaspora issues.

The 10th PBD at Jaipur in 2012 was significant in many different ways. On the one hand, it provided and introduced the pension and life insurance funds for Indian migrant workers; on the other hand, it was a year that saw a number of Singaporean Indians being felicitated as well. Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award was given to the past President of Singapore, S.R. Nathan, and Padmashri Award to Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, the highest civil-

ian award in India, to bureaucrat, educationist and entrepreneur, also the Padmabhushan Award, the second highest civilian award, to the former Foreign Minister of Singapore, George Yeo⁴. Earlier, Prof. S. Jayakumar, the then Deputy PM of Singapore was honoured as the chief guest at the fifth PBD celebration at New Delhi in January 2007. He also spoke at the Singapore PBD conference in October 2008⁵. Recently, Singapore's Ambassador-at-large, Tommy Koh was conferred the Padma Shri Award in 2018 (*The Straits Times*, 26 January 2018). Besides other diplomatic interactions, Ambassador Koh had co-chaired India-Singapore Strategic Dialogue for a decade. These measures of soft diplomacy not only gave recognition to those who had been supportive of India's interests in diasporic interactions, but also encouraged more in the overseas community to participate actively in India's growth and renewed connectivities. The "new setubandhan" as L.M. Singhvi expressed while presenting the Parliamentary Standing Committee's Report in 2002, had gained in momentum and facilitated in building bridges of emotional bond and cultural linkages. Year long celebratory events throughout 2015 to commemorate fifty years of bilateral relations along with exchange of high-level dignitary visits cemented the political relations and a positive working environment between the two states further. Three years later, the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi was celebrated in Singapore with release of commemorative stamps by the High Commissioner Javed Ashraf and short video projection on the Indian leaders on the giant LED digital wall at Suntec Convention Centre (*The Straits Times*, 3 October 2018). The ASEAN-India PBD was also celebrated in Singapore on 6-7 January 2018 to commemorate 25 years of India-ASEAN

⁴ Padma Award," in India News, A monthly newsletter by the High Commission of India, Singapore, issue 158, February 2012, p.4.

⁵ The welcome speech by Prof. Jayakumar at the Singapore PBD conference in 2008 reveals the encouraging diplomatic bilateral exchanges. [http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/agencies/mica/speech/S-20081009-1.print.html?AuthKey=\[accessed 14.2.2016\]](http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/agencies/mica/speech/S-20081009-1.print.html?AuthKey=[accessed 14.2.2016])

relationship (*Indiplomacy News*, 10 November 2017).

Positing the transition of Indian communities in a contemporary Singapore

For Singaporean Indians, the new millennium brought about a plethora of changes. On the one hand there were diplomatic manoeuvres to enhance bilateral relations and feed into each other's domestic demands, on the other, the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong's vision and promotion of the Indian community made a lot of difference to the local Indians as well as Indian immigrants into the city-state. On the domestic front, Goh promoted specific policies that would promote and strengthen the Indian community like approving the Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) Act in parliament in 1988 to ensure minority political representation, and also establish the government linked self-help organization, SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Organisation) in 1991 primarily to improve and enhance the educational performances of the local Indian students (Mani 2009:376). He is also credited to have started the 'mild India fever' promoting relations with the Indian government, facilitating Indian professional and entrepreneurs in Singapore and encouraging them to become permanent residents and citizens. This was done with an aim to feed in the demand of professional and technology talent pool in order to strive for a knowledge economy, and also to address the rapidly falling fertility rates in Singapore. The 'fever' rapidly gained a higher pitch in the successive years creating a dynamic and a complex global Indian diaspora in the city-state. The figures below give an impression of the changes in numbers, though Indians continued to remain a minority in the demography.

Table: 1**Number of Indians in Singapore from 1965 to 2015 (End June)**

| Year | Total number of Indians in Singapore (Residents) | Percentage of total population (%) |
|------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1965 | 140,500 | 7.4 |
| 1975 | 150200 | 6.6 |
| 1985 | 167351 | 6.7 |
| 1995 | 220266 | 7.3 |
| 2005 | 291,131 | 8.4 |
| 2015 | 354,952 | 9.1 |

Source: Department of Statistics Singapore, generated by SingStat Table Builder on 12/12/2018

With the changes in market liberalization and foreign policy directions in the sub-continent, the private sector began to assume a more significant role both in the growth of the domestic economy and looking for greener pastures abroad. Ambitious, confident and assertive and mostly armed with professional degrees, the new wave of mostly professionals (and also professionals turned entrepreneurs/ or entrepreneurs) formed new category of migrant population. They were economically more stable and conscious of their capability and contribution to the host society. They reflected the qualities of the ‘new Indian avatar’ of the twenty-first century who had broken the fetters of a subjugated, docile and underdeveloped image of India, a narrative that they had to live with many decades even after the end

of colonial domination. The inward-looking economic structure and dismal domestic economic performance resulting in lack of employment, entrepreneurial opportunities and poor growth curve of the 1970s and 1980s did little to enhance the capabilities and skills of Indians at home and abroad. For those who were a part of the outward flow of the 'brain-drain' period, establishing new homes and communities in the different locations had not been easy. Most of them chose to integrate themselves in the host society and assumed citizenship status. In Singapore, this phase was marked by the inflow of professional Indians, doctors, lawyers and chartered accountants who settled in the city-state permanently and adopted a Singaporean identity. While they remained familiar and nostalgic about linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations with their homeland, their children became much less familiar to the Indian growth story as it unfolded having physically and psychologically distanced and dissociated themselves with so-called 'homeland connections' except through occasional religious and festive gatherings in the community.

Bringing the various migration waves under the same umbrella and to explore the homogenously categorized 'Indian diaspora' is a compelling task having to deal with large complexities that arise out of different characteristics of each wave of migration, and how the subsequent generations emerging from those migration patterns situate themselves in the larger framework of the host state. There might also be contradictions arising about who is the 'host' state with a globally mobile generation, and second and third generation settlers owing primary allegiance to the state of citizenship. The inter-marriages and cultural familiarity with local communities formed in

the location of their settlement also adds on to the complexities. However, there are visible changes noticeable in the Indian community in the twenty-first century that can be documented, analyzed and compared to those of earlier generations.

The pull factors in Singapore like safe, peaceful and clean environment, global infrastructural facilities had promoted Indian migration as it did for any other communities into the city-state. Indians have had an added advantage of a closer proximity to the sub-continent. While CECA created opportunities from smooth movement of certain categories of skilled labour in 2005, there were several others factors that made way for an outward flow of skilled Indian labour and enterprise. Besides the new intra-Asian wave of migration in the new century and emerging globalization trends, Indian migration was much facilitated by liberalization of the Indian market. While market reforms of the 1990s brought in new investments and opportunities to the domestic market, it also created tough competition for the existing players who had to compete with global products now. With increasing level of income and consumerism, entrepreneurs sought opportunities abroad, and Singapore provided the most appropriate platform to venture into Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. It has often been considered as the 'springboard' for India into the Asia-Pacific. With an active LEP-AEP as promoted by the Indian government since the 1990s, entrepreneurs and professionals utilized the opportunity to look for greener pastures within the Asian region apart from the horizons of the West. The 'Asia rising' factor also helped to alter the Western-centric vision of conventional perceptions of the people at large. With respective governments promoting this trend,

the number of Indian companies has been continuously increasing to around 9000 at present. There has been almost a double increase of 15% of Indian Permanent Residents in Singapore from 17% in 2000 to 32% in 2010 (SINDA, 2013). Unlike in the earlier generations, Indians were now relocating with their families in large numbers and visibly creating a presence in the socio-cultural landscape of Singapore as well. There has been a large inflow of students into the global universities situated in Singapore. In the statistical report on the Indian community in Singapore, as observed in Table: 2 below, the occupational composition for senior officials and managers increased from 12.5% in 2000 to 14.1% in 2010, and for the professionals, it rose from 12.7% 20.5% in the same decade. In absolute numbers, this change was markedly visible for a minority community in the city-state. In comparison, there was a decrease in the unskilled labour category as seen in Table: 2.

Table: 2

Occupational compositions of Indian residents

| Different occupational sectors | Labour composition in Indian communities | |
|------------------------------------|--|------------|
| | 2000 (in %) | 2010 (in%) |
| Senior Officials & Managers | 12.5 | 14.1 |
| Professionals | 12.7 | 20.5 |
| Assoc. Professionals & Technicians | 18.0 | 22.6 |

| | | |
|---------------------------|------|------|
| Clerical | 15.4 | 11.4 |
| Services & Sales | 13.7 | 12.6 |
| Craftsmen & Related | 4.4 | 4.3 |
| Plant & Machine Operators | 11.0 | 5.8 |
| Cleaners and labourers | 8.0 | 5.7 |
| Not classifiable | 4.2 | 2.9 |

Source: Report on the Progress of Indian Community in Singapore since 2000, SINDA, 2013.

Besides occupational structures, there have been noticeable changes in the language composition and average monthly income distribution among the Indians in Singapore. Whereas there has been a decrease in the use of Tamil language component in the demography of Singapore by 4% (though there was an increase in absolute numbers by 38,410), there was an increase in Hindi language component from 3.5% in 2000 to 5.1% in 2010 (SINDA, 2013:5). On the other hand, the mean household income of the Indian community has increased by 56% to \$5,370 in 2010 as compared to \$3,438 in 2000 making it the highest figure among the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. (SINDA, 2013:19). The figures can be held as good indicators of the impact of Indian mobility since the turn of the century. Two important assumptions can be made from the data first, the movement of Indians were led by higher income groups looking for economic benefits and opportunities, and second, the traditional perception of Tamil dominated immigrant community was changing, though Tamil still remained as the most important official language of the community. However, it is difficult to draw a

distinction between the new age migrant composition and the 'local' Indians as they are popularly known as, both in respect of language and monthly income. A clear distinction is difficult to obtain due to the unavailability of segregated data.

There has been witnessed a lot of intangible, yet prominently visible changes in the socio-cultural life of the city-state. A number of regional and linguistic institutions and alumni networks have come into existence along with increasing display of Indian culture in terms of fashion, food and films. There is a strong presence of alumni networks and platforms of interactions of the famous technological and management institutes in India like the IIT, IIM and IIFT to name a few. On many occasions, these networks convene annual meets and conventions bringing together others in the fraternity from around the world. The 'Singapore Chapter' is often a prominent and an active one in their respective networks. Bollywood plays an important conduit of reaching out not only to the community, but also to others beyond the community. With increasing popularity of Bollywood actors in the global arena, Singapore has becoming an ideal destination for launching, promoting and even shooting Bollywood films. The IIFA awards were held in 2012 in Singapore amidst much fanfare and following. Bollywood is also being taught as a course module in the National University of Singapore like in many other global universities. Besides, there are several cultural events organized throughout the year in Singapore promoted by many event management companies that sometimes solely deals with cultural events from India. 'Kala Utsavam' is a state-organized cultural week celebrated each year during the Diwali. The 'Dandiya Night' organized by the Gujarati

Society of Singapore is getting bigger each year with increasing participation of non-Indians. Similar trend may be witnessed with the celebration of Holi, the Indian festival of colours, one that was not traditionally celebrated festivals among the older diaspora. It is now (in the new millennium) celebrated with great enthusiasm, fanfare and active non-Indian participation in large numbers though numerous events planned across the city-state. Besides, numerous plays, theatres and cultural workshops are being organized and different institutions teaching performing arts have developed over the years. Property fairs are organized after almost every three or four months for the past few years to provide options of attractive real estate investments In India for the NRIs in the region. There are also several platforms and events created for regular business networking opportunities with different business and state organizations within the region and beyond.

The media has increasingly and consciously catered to the rising Indian population in the city-state. *India Se*, a monthly magazine for the global Indian diaspora, has been launched from and based in Singapore. *Tabla*, a weekly newspaper published by Mediacorp in Singapore, addresses issues of the local Indian community. The first ever Hindi radio channel, Masti 96.3 FM was launched in Singapore in 2009 and then converted itself into a digital radio station from 2016 as Radio Masti 24x7. Besides, there are numerous Indian television channels that have found their way to Singapore and have their advertisement and marketing offices in Singapore as well (Bhattacharya, 2011: 172-73). A number of Bollywood styled discotheques have also cropped up which are becoming popular even with non-Indian crowds. It is estimated by the Indian High Commission of Singapore that

among the 1.6 million foreigners in Singapore, 21% are Indian passport holders mostly working in “financial services, IT, students, and construction and marine sectors.” (Indian High Commission, March 2020). However, the visibility of the Indian community has extended beyond just mere numbers.

A different category of short-term contractual inflow of Indians that merits a separate discussion is that of migrant labourers who are an important part of the construction industry, running of the dockyards and ports, and work as domestic helpers. They come to Singapore under the Work Permit, residing for around two years, and then sometimes allowed to renew their contract for another couple of years. They are not allowed to bring families, nor permitted to marry residents or get any permanent residency status. The Indian High Commission records state that there are “about 1 lakh [0.1 million] Indian migrant workers in Singapore.” (Indian High Commission, March 2020). Thus they remain on the margins, almost invisible, yet serve as necessary service providers for the city-state.

What makes Singapore an attractive destination to Indians?

India and Singapore are no more visualized as two contradictory geopolitical spaces in terms of their size and population in popular imagination. Singapore has excelled in establishing itself as one of the most advanced and structurally efficient among the cities/city-states of Asia with effective, and progressive political and administrative machinery. It has earned the reputation of one of the most globally attractive and the most expensive city-states to live in (BBC News, 2 March 2015). A pro-business state with one of the lowest tax rates in the region, it is also a family-friendly safe space provid-

ing good healthcare system as well as numerous opportunities in tertiary education with commendable global rankings. Beside the positive G-to-G interactions and upbeat bilateral relations since the past two decades, the soft choices in favour of Indian mobility have been facilitated by the Indian diaspora themselves, who also form the largest foreign business community in the city-state. Thus, there has been a radical shift in perception and perspective in imagining Singapore that has assumed a much larger identity beyond the bounded entity of a defined space and location. Singapore remains a very attractive destination to primarily three groups in India:

- a) Entrepreneurs and professionals
- b) Students
- c) Tourists

Mobilized by the enhanced bilateral relations, the advantageous economic climate, and business networking opportunities and platform for venturing out into the Asia-Pacific region, the entrepreneurial community have been one of the most enthusiastic groups to have ventured in Singapore through different levels of joint collaborations, merger and acquisitions, or by representative and branch offices and headquarters in this economic space (Bhattacharya, 2011: 139-96). Singapore provided the ideal platform for providing business networking and opportunities with several states within the region and beyond. The professionals, on the other hand, were driven by ambitious career opportunities and economic benefits and also fed into the growing demand for highly skilled labour of Singapore and a progressive knowledge economy. They have mostly been prominent in the finance, IT,

academics, and research and development sectors, however, also subject to newer policy restrictions on inflow of foreign talent due to certain domestic compulsions (Shanker, 2014). This has generated some discontent from the Indians, but has not escalated to any major political dispute in bilateral relations.

Students form another category of Indians increasingly interested in locating themselves in Singapore in the tertiary education sector. Besides the globally acclaimed institutes like the INSEAD, numerous opportunities have been created in local institutions with global ranking and their respective collaborations (National University of Singapore, Duke-NUS Medical School, or NUS-Yale Liberal Arts College, Nanyang Technological University). Opportunities are also provided by the collaborations with Indian educational institutions and with a circulation of exchange students between the two states. For ambitious and career minded parents desiring to send their children abroad, Singapore becomes an ideal choice both in terms of financial competitiveness as compared to the Western institutions as well as proximity of home and familiarity of Indian culture and cuisine. From the point of view of the students, they are exposed to a global education environment in the same manner as they would have been in the West.

Singapore also serves as an attractive tourist destination for different groups of Indians, whether for a family vacation, honeymoon destination, holidaying in different parts of Southeast Asia, desirable corporate event venue, or visiting family and friends in the city-state. Indians form one of the highest numbers of tourists in Singapore, both business and leisure travellers, reaching almost to a million in 2015 and further increasing to 1.44 million

in 2018 (*The Hindu Business Line*, 12 March 2019). India continued to retain the third spot in tourist arrivals and contributed substantially to Singapore's GDP earnings. Indian cruise tourists have increased by 25 per cent between 2016 and 2018 as reported by Singapore-based cruise companies (Srivastava, 2 April 2018). Indian tourist numbers have increased dramatically in Singapore and India has remained among the top three markets in tourism for the city-state.

Singapore Tourism Board is not only aware of the revenue potential, but has designed special promotional campaign for the Indian tourists, 'the holiday you take home with you'. It also has regional offices in India in Mumbai and New Delhi (STB South Asia regional offices) to promote and facilitate inflow of Indian tourists. India is Singapore's third largest tourism receipts generating market (STB, 2014). It also yields beneficial returns to the aviation and hospitality industry and the retail shopping sectors of Singapore.

Conclusion

The architectural landscapes and interactions in lived-spaces of the colonial era have dug deep roots in creating an imagination of Indian immigrant communities in the minds of Singaporeans and people of Southeast Asia. It has been an integral part of the multiracial, multicultural Singaporean identity in lived-spaces, food and socio-cultural relations. The traditional impression of this very heterogeneous community has been that of an overwhelmingly South Indian culture in popular discourse dominated by the presence of Tamil language, customs, cuisines, religion, rituals and fashion which was regarded as almost synonymous to understanding of anything

‘Indian,’ a visual manifestation of which comes through quite clearly in the ‘Little India’ space which has also been promoted by the state in creating an Indian identity in an enclave promoting tourism interest (Chang, 2000; Henderson, 2008). This identity formation, based on earlier migration of Tamil majority population, has gone through enormous changes with the contemporary generation of migrants in terms of community spaces, religious celebrations, etc. Instead of representation of a static and bounded landscape, the Indian communities in Singapore are more demonstrative of a transnational community with several strands of economic and social networks that are both globally connected as well as with the homeland. The migration trends are more celebratory in nature unlike the memories of nostalgia regarding the homeland (Bhattacharya, 2019)

In studying the trajectory of development of the Indian diaspora in Singapore, it is interesting to reflect upon how and whether the popular imagination in India about Singapore has been catalyzed by political discourses or vice-versa. While the stage was perhaps set and accelerated by the bilateral agreement of CECA, however, the flows and networks have assumed a dynamic momentum of their own. Though there is almost a unanimous inclination for outward-bound Indians to live and work in Singapore, the ones who have had resided in the city-state for a decade or more, might have interesting insights from their lived experiences. The challenges may appear from both the ethnic Singaporean-Indians as well as from the larger body of non-Indian Singapore population. The new migrants, mostly categorized as affluent Indians (only certain skilled and highly skilled categories of people are given long-term residential status), have been criticized for taking away

the jobs of the locals, thus creating economic disruptions in the society rather than any value addition as has been promulgated by the state policies. Some recent voices have been quite loud and reproachful against the implementation of CECA in particular. The government made attempts to address this in press briefings by ministers (Channel News Asia, 9 November 2019), and also raising the eligibility conditions for employment seekers. From within the Indian community, the cultural disconnect between the 'old' and the 'new' are quite distinct. State migration policies had disrupted the mobility of earlier generation of settlers with the 'homeland', thus facilitating them to create an identity that was primarily 'Singaporean' but also allowing them to maintain the ethnic religious and cultural threads with India, mostly through memories and nostalgia and physically separating the future generations from identifying much with the Indian sub-continent. The 'new' migrants, on the other hand, had been a part of India's growth story in very different ways than the local Indians, thus there is inability to perceive complementarities in the imagination of India by the two groups. There is a visible disconnect between the accent, dialect, choice of food, religiosity, homeland links and many cultural practices.

The question of integration is indeed crucial in the whole debate on positing the diaspora in the framework of Singapore. Different ways of conceptualizing the idea of homeland for earlier generations in terms of memories, distance, separation, identity, nostalgia, longing and belonging and emphasizing on a new identity created in rooting one's self in the new location. This mind-set is quite distinct from the dynamics of the globe-trotting present generation of the Indian diaspora who may be more comfortable with the

identity of a community rather than what is driven by citizenship, state and location and thus approach differently to the ideas of ‘longing and belonging’ in the contemporary times of global inter-connectedness, both physically and virtually. It is also largely motivated by the policies of respective states. India, under the leadership of Modi has set to redefine engagements with the Indian diaspora globally, and considers diaspora as central to India’s journey (Raja Mohan and Chauhan, 2015). In a way, there may be an interesting divergence of political discourse and popular imagination though not essentially affecting the trend of human flows or in political interactions in any way.

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