

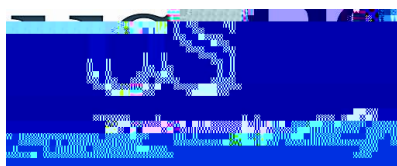
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Seen but Unheard A Case-Study of Low-Waged Tamil Migrant Workers in Singapore

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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

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 in 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) su

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

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

Figure 1 Map of Singapore

Source: Map accessed online at

http://www.lonelyplanet.com/singapore&ei=sza7upm9omj80qx_4idwcq&usg=afqjcnh9fpqtas5mtd8sqg-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

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 was a re0myet

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	Shipyard
Anjappan	Injured	Soup kitchen	43	16	Electrical
Siva	Injured	Soup kitchen	38	10	Construction
Manivannan	Employed				



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

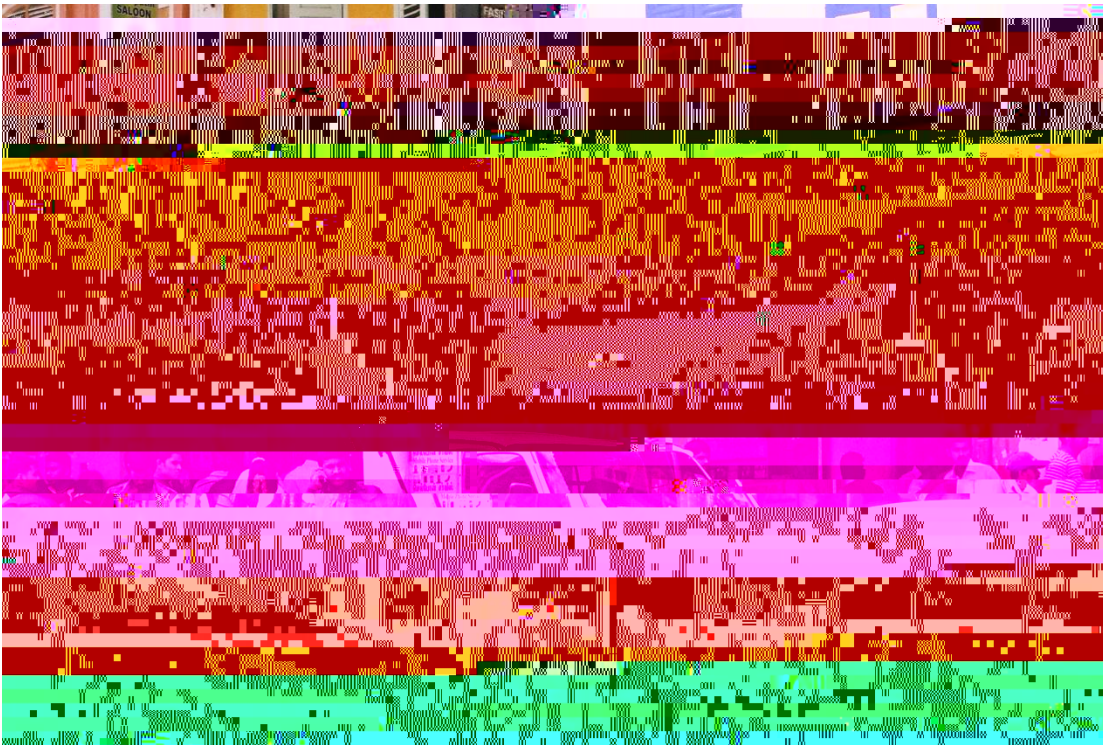


Figure 4. Tamil migrant workers outside a Western Union money transfer outlet on a last Sunday of the month, remitting just after payday. © Wajihah Hamid 2012

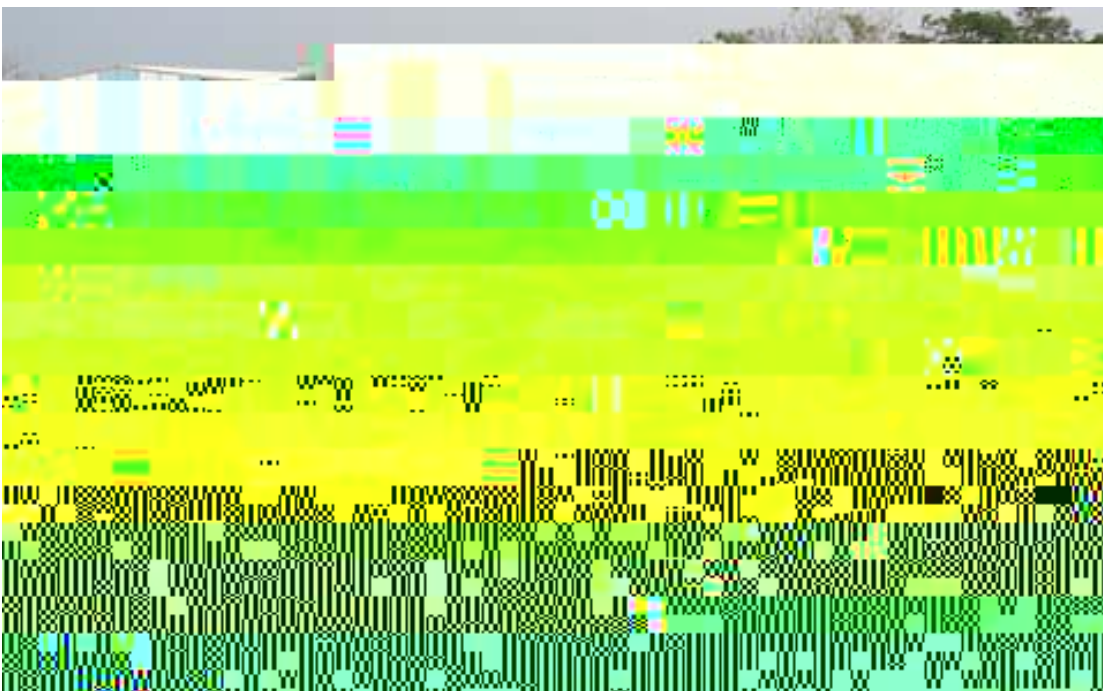


Figure 5. in Lim Chu Kang.

© 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 8.

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. *New Paper* entitled *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* , 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

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

Despite being

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.

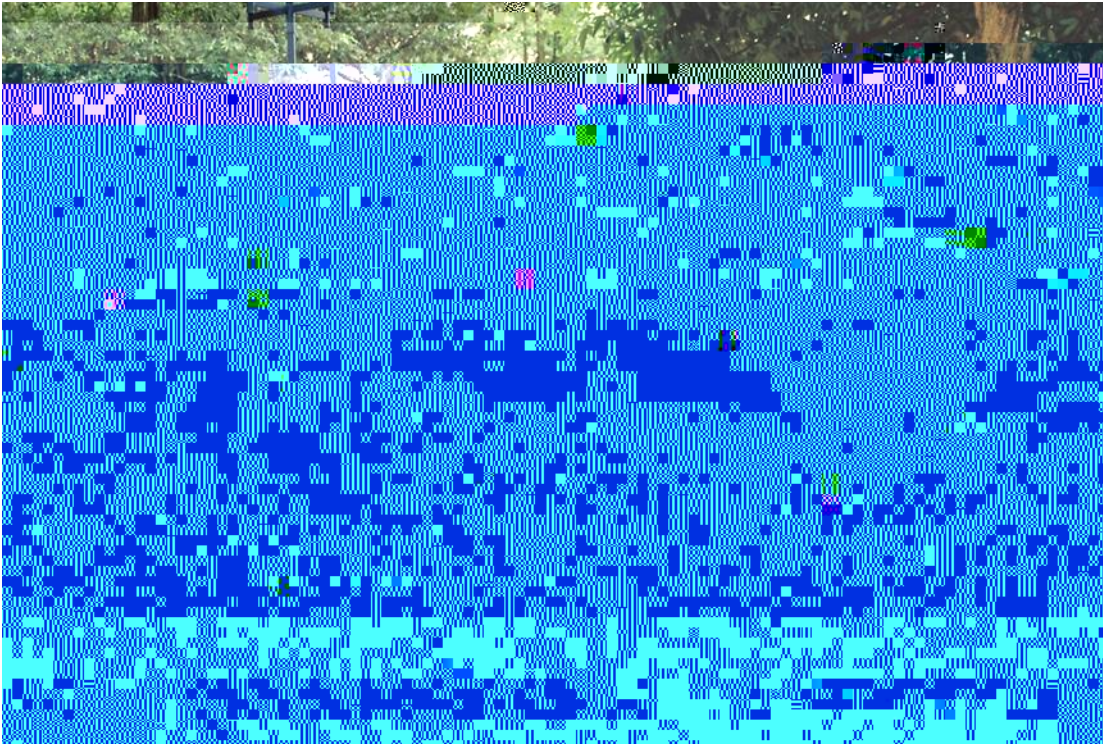


Figure 12. Tamil migrants working on underground cables in Ang Mo Kio. © Wajihah Hamid 2012



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

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