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Seeking Respect, Fairness, and Community

Low -Wage Migrants, Authoritarian Regimes, and the Everyday Urban

Laavanya Kathiravelu

In December 2013, a violent riot broke out in the Little India district of Singapore. Public vehicles such police cars and an ambulance were set on fire and dozens of law enforcement officers were called in to quell the situation. The level of destruction and chaos during the incident was unprecedented in a city-state that is known for its strong rule of law, and that hadn't seen similar public unrest of a similar scale in more than forty years. The violence was sparked off by the accidental running over of a low-wage Tamil migrant man by a bus chartered by a private transport agency. While the man lay dying amid the chaos caused by the accident, ambulances took more than thirty minutes to reach the scene – by which time the Indian migrant was dead.

According to narratives of low-wage Indian migrants interviewed after the incident, it was not the accident itself that incited the crowd of migrants to start a riot, but the fact that the ambulance did not arrive in time. In a state known for its rigid efficiency, the delay of an ambulance to the scene was interpreted as a clear indication of neglect of migrant workers' welfare. This man's life, it was collectively felt, was seen as unimportant because of his status

as a low-wage migrant worker, a category of labour that the state conceives of as easily replaceable and transient, and therefore of little political or social consequence (Yeoh 2006). The injustice that this unfortunate migrant was perceived to be a victim of became a shared and collective affect, that then took on a violent life of its own.

The gross injustice of perceived unequal and unjust treatment, here, was felt viscerally and piercingly by the surrounding crowd of co-ethnic Tamil migrants in Little India, who typically gather around the Race Course Road area of the neighbourhood every Sunday. This was not an organized or pre-planned attack on the state (represented by police officers and state vehicles like police cars and ambulances) for sustaining structural abuses through an unfair migration system. It was an immediate reaction to the apparent neglect and unfair treatment of a co-ethnic and fellow marginalized migrant. Drawing from this incident and the everyday lives of Indian low-wage migrants in Singapore, this chapter explores how the conditions of injustice engender an environment and latent circumstances for the emergence of a form of 'everyday justice'. While not necessarily overtly or consciously expressed in those terms, these notions of everyday justice permeate low-wage migrants' conceptions of what is fair and just in terms of their treatment as guest workers and urban residents. These ideas are inevitably shaped by state structures that regulate migrant bodies, but also run counter to more expansive discourses of 'human rights'. In doing so, this research aims to demonstrate the disjunctures between everyday understandings of justice (and injustice) that low-wage migrants in authoritarian city-states like Singapore develop, on the one hand, and that of

well-meaning state authorities, volunteers, welfare workers, and even (international) non-governmental organizations (NGOs), on the other. These misalignments will be discussed in relation to the embedded and contextual nature of the form of everyday justice that these migrant men seek. In this vein, this chapter offers insights to notions of justice and injustice that move beyond legalized conceptualizations, as well as how ontologically distinct notions of justice work in relational ways, particularly under urban circumstances which involve tight and dense city living.

The chapter first discusses the empirical context of the research project. After a discussion of the plural and competing definitions of justice that are at play in the site, the chapter discusses two key aspects of everyday justice that are central to low-wage migrant lives – respect, and freedom of mobility and association. The conclusion suggests that when conceptualizations of plural everyday forms of justice are considered within the context of soft authoritarian regimes rather than liberal democracies, the basis for political equality needs to be reconsidered.¹

Defining Justice

Justice is an extremely broad concept that can take on both legal and everyday forms that are not necessarily recognized through state mechanisms and laws (see Chapter 1). Here, I am suggesting that legally delineated and top-down forms of social justice, particularly within paternalistic and authoritarian regimes, may not be coherent with everyday notions of what is just. This disjuncture is the starting point for the explorations of this chapter. My concern

in this chapter is to delineate a conceptualization of justice that is drawn primarily from marginalized migrants' own understandings of what counts as just. In dealing here primarily with Tamil low-wage migrants' experiences of injustice and understandings of what is just, their linguistic and associated conceptual life worlds must be taken into account.² In doing so, it becomes apparent that justice is a notion that cannot be easily translated without losing the conceptual richness of the term. The word for justice in Tamil, *neethi*, primarily connotes a mode of law that is associated with and enforceable by the state or state actors. This can be seen as closer to conceptualizations of judicial process and the law. For the low-wage Tamil migrants who were the informants in this project, notions of fairness (*neirmai*) and what is right, appropriate, or respectful (*mariyaathai*) were more often invoked as ways of articulating non-legal and quotidian understandings of justice, as it affects the mundane and banal aspects of migrants' lives. Such articulations of respect and of what is fair are situated within everyday and regular relations with employers, state entities, and other urban dwellers.

In this chapter, I adopt Nina Glick-Schiller's (2012) notion of a scholarship of relationalities as way of understanding the unequal relations between low wage migrants, welfare workers, and agencies of the state that are all players within a discourse of social justice that is co-created. This articulation of relationalities is especially useful here as it brings in a notion of the political that does not centre on identity politics but is one that connects the personal to larger structures of dominance. This perspective foregrounds an analytical stance that acknowledges that power is embedded at every level of interaction, including the

everyday, while also allowing for the possibility of a truly plural conceptualization of justice. This politics of relationality understands subjectivities as shifting, dependent on the dynamism of changing contexts and culture, but also structurally determined by historical hierarchies and contemporary prejudices. Relationships of exploitation and those of equality and social justice can thus be differentiated through a scholarship of relationalities. This notion of relationality speaks to more 'practical and grounded notions of justice, that draw upon the importance of choice, human agency and diversity' in everyday lives of people, especially those who are poor and marginalized (Brunnegger and Faulk 2016: 2–3). I see these conceptualizations of justice as productive in conversation with a contemporary urban politics of 'right to the city' (Harvey 2003) in illuminating a relational mode of justice not always grounded in the provision of legal rights and entitlements. In particular, this chapter demonstrates how what is fair varies depending on the temporal surroundings of, for example, a time-space of post-riot Singapore, but is also specific to a highly urbanized context where high levels of urban density dictate metropolitan living conditions that are often tight and intimate, and relations within this space dictated by a politics of dependency.

Justice and the Everyday

There is a developed literature on the 'everyday' or quotidian particularly in studies of multicultural and diverse societies (for, e.g., Wessendorf 2014; Vertovec 2015). Here I draw from perspectives of the everyday as mundane, banal, and grounded in everyday practice to inform my analysis of migrant

workers and everyday justice. This approach is ethnographically driven and situated within scholarly perspectives of everyday life. What is key to understandings of the everyday is to see larger structural and macro factors as always intertwined and involved in the shaping of the quotidian, ordinary, and routine (Wise and Velayutham 2009). Clarke and Goodale (2010: 18) draw a similar conclusion, asserting that 'contemporary local justice making is always refracted – at least in part – through broader frames of meaning and praxis'.

In relational terms, everyday justice that low-wage migrants seek is divergent from the larger social justice agendas advocated by rights activists, which seek to eliminate institutionalized forms of discrimination and oppression such as debt bondage, unfree labour, and underpayment of wages. While these structural changes are acknowledged as important, for migrants who often fall in the gaps between how laws are conceptualized and implemented, such higher-level initiatives are viewed as far removed from their lives. However, this does not imply that these are opposing agendas. Labour justice issues championed by international organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) that champion decent work for all, and emphasize that migrant labour should be seen as more than just workers, are closer to the calls made by migrants themselves. In this Singaporean case, the notions of fairness and respect that low-wage migrants drew on were linked to the very mundane rights of being able to access city spaces easily and without restriction, in order to build community and social networks and to perform cultural identity. To enable and allow such mobilities was seen as fair – in terms of the rights and privileges that temporary non-citizens should have access to. Fairness here does not necessarily imply identical

conditions for all urban citizens or residents, but recognizes a diversity and plurality of lives and aspirations.

In adopting an inter-scalar and relational approach, the rioting incident in Little India described at the beginning of this chapter needs to be contextualized within larger structural circumstances and contextual detail in order to better understand the significance of such an episode within our discussions of justice and marginalized migrants. Indian migrant men, like the ones who started the riot, form the majority component of the more than 1 million low-wage migrants that live and work in Singapore. They labour on sites such as construction projects, shipyards, and in light industrial factories. These are jobs that local Singaporeans are reluctant to do. They pay poorly and hold very low social status and are thus seen as undesirable, especially in a nation that only relatively recently achieved 'developed' or 'first-world' status, where social mobility even for the working class is measured by the ability to land a white-collar 'desk' job. Singaporeans in such industries are typically supervisors, or in higher-level positions dealing with the management of low-wage labour, in itself constituting imbalanced and unequal relations between local and migrant.

The recent rise of precarious work in industrial societies (i.e., work that is insecure and uncertain, often low paying and dead-end, and in which the risks of work are shifted from employers and the government to workers) can also be seen in Singapore, where low-wage temporary migrants overwhelmingly take on these types of jobs. Low-wage migrants, defined by the state and civil society as those whose monthly salary is below a certain amount, are unable to legally bring their dependent spouses and children when they migrate. Instead, they live

as bachelors, often in dormitory-style accommodation at the edges of the city. This engenders socio-spatial disaffiliations (Kathiravelu 2015) that translate into larger dislocations between Singaporean middle classes and migrant working classes. This issue of everyday urban mobility will be further developed in this chapter.

In gathering data for this project, interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted with shopkeepers, with Singaporean and immigrant residents, and with low-wage South Asian migrants who frequented the area of Little India. While the majority of informants were of Tamil ethnicity and Indian nationality, Singaporean Chinese and Bangladeshi migrant men also formed important informant groups as co-users of the space. Participant observation across different sites was primarily undertaken on Sundays, the most common day off for migrant workers, and the busiest day in the Little India neighbourhood.

Statist Notions of Justice

When we look at the migrant workers' issue, we are not looking at it from the perspective of human rights. We are looking at it on a need basis.... Like it or not, we need to sustain and grow an economy that is able to generate an annual per capita [GDP] of US\$35,000. At the end of the day, whatever factors would be able to help us to sustain the growth of the economy for the benefit of our countrymen, for the benefit of our country; we will definitely go for it.

—Yeo Guat Kwang, Member of the Singaporean Parliament, National Trade Union Congress official, and Co-Chairman of the NTUC-SNEF Migrant Workers Centre (Chan 2011)

Structural forms of inequality such as limiting family reunification and spatial disaffiliation are indicative of the state's conceptualizations of justice – in terms, for example, of which category of classed and raced migrant is allowed more civil liberties and rights within the host country. The neoliberal state, in the Singaporean case, is a strong one, and as enactor and enabler of institutionalized forms of structural violence and injustice toward low-wage migrants, it engages in 'worlding' practices that rely on new assemblages of governance that bring all social life into the purview of the market (Roy and Ong 2011; Burte and Kamath 2017). These relations translate into ways in which low-wage migrants are treated by supervisors, employers, and fellow urban residents. Activists point out that these structural inequalities and abuses have now become normalized and are unquestioned by a majority of the public (Chok 2017). Most significantly, this is internalized by migrants and results in subjective shifts in terms of how they conceive self-worth, masculinity, and their identity as entrepreneurial selves, as a means of countering state and popular constructions of them as dirty, dangerous sexual predators and as only economic agents (Kathiravelu 2016). This chapter builds and extends from such understandings of low-wage South Asian migrants in the Global South, delving into how subjective and everyday constructions of justice are informed by marginalized and transient subjectivities.

Within the context of the riot that was mentioned at the opening of the chapter, justice, as decided and meted out by the state, took the form of deportations without proper trial of fifty-seven Indian men on work permits who had been at the scene of the riots.³ The law minister explained the decision as an

'administrative' rather than judicial one (Lim 2013), justifying the lack of transparency and due process as an unnecessary drain on the resources of the state. The implicit implication here is that these migrant workers needed to be deported, not as the outcome of judicial process, but to send a public message about how the Singaporean state deals with public disturbances caused by marginal populations. Legally enforced 'justice', in this sense, becomes a bureaucratic procedure, masking its role as a disciplinary tool of the state. It is a resource that is unequally accessible, especially within regimes where there is little discernible distinction between the government and the state (Rajah 2012). This can also be seen as an example of 'legalized pluralism', where 'multiple legal systems exist for people in the same social' world (Clarke and Goodale 2010: 9).

As a direct result of the riots, there was also a ban placed on public consumption of alcohol in the Little India district, as results of an inquiry determined that alcohol was the primary reason for the riots. The invocation of the alcohol-fuelled unskilled male migrant is one that caught the public imagination, as well as that of Singaporean employers. Indian migrants' informants reported the additional precautions that employers were taking, as Indian workers were replaced by Bangladeshi or Chinese nationals, particularly those from the villages surrounding Chattiram, the South Indian village where the migrant whose death sparked the riots was from. These punitive measures served to further engender discrimination and fear of members of a group who were already seen as dangerous, hyper-masculine, and threatening sexual predators.

In addition to the alcohol consumption ban, there was a rapid construction of bus shelters, designed such that they allowed for the containment and control of low-wage migrants within public space. These bus shelters were built specifically for private bus services catering only to low-wage migrants, transporting them to and from their dormitories at the edges of the island and often badly connected to the public transport system. Police presence in the area also became far more visible. This performance of policing serves to create a climate of fear that discourages Indian migrants from inhabiting and occupying public spaces that had previously been seen as acceptable zones where they could socialize and gather (Yeo et al. 2012). This reduces the already limited public space available to this group and pushes them further to the margins of the city where they are confined to the zones of dormitories, minimizing interactions with the rest of the urban population.

As one local resident commented, 'Yeah there's certainly greater police presence now.... Yes. They make more patrols but I think it's just them showing their presence, to let the workers know that you know the police are here, somebody is watching them? But the amount of the interaction between them and police I think is still somewhat the same.'

It is less the paternalism of the restriction of mobility that low-wage migrants react to; it is the brusque and rude manner with which law enforcement officers treat them that they express unhappiness about. It is the lack of respect that such actions convey that is seen as unjust and undeserving. In describing the injustice of banning alcohol in the area of Little India just because of one incident in the decades in which that space had been used as a meeting

place for the South Asian migrant worker population, a local resident says: 'All these years, how many thousand people have come, just because of one incident.... Let's say one incident happen. A fight happen in one coffeeshop. The guy runs into the chicken rice stall and takes the chopper and chop. So what? Chicken rice stall cannot use chopper ah?' The sentiment expressed here expresses sympathy for the disproportionate way in which the state meted out justice, reflecting shifting attitudes of the local population, a development taken up in the following section.

NGOs as Mediators between State and Migrants

Within more authoritarian and paternalistic regimes such as Singapore, the presence of NGOs is fraught. They function primarily in a space that is allowed to them by the state and are often restricted in their ability to affect large-scale or significant social change. However, Singaporean NGOs that cater to the welfare of low-wage migrants have been, in recent years, one of the most successful civil society entities within the city-state, raising awareness of the plight of this marginalized and often invisible community, as well as effecting incremental change. In recent years, there has been a large amount of attention and sympathy from the general public directed at the low-wage migrant worker, both the male migrant who takes on hard physical labour and the female domestic who does care work within the family.

In addition to soup kitchens and shelters, NGOs take on the work of advocating for low-wage migrant rights at the national level, but also on a case-

by-case basis at local courts, such as when migrants haven't been paid wages on time, or when employers refuse to foot medical expenses, as required by law.

Part of the work of the organizations and individuals has been to humanize these low-wage migrants and to counter notions engendered through state policies of demarcating such employment as disposable, refuting that low-wage migrants can be reduced to units of biological labour, a unit of 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). This is central to the claiming of respect and acknowledgement by migrants, a topic that will be further developed in the next section of the chapter.

Given the focus on everyday and relational notions of justice, legal or formal law-based notions of justice are less a concern of this chapter. However, we must acknowledge the complex relation between formal legal and everyday forms of justice (defined in terms of everyday banal practices). They inform one another through the uneven implementation of laws that protect the rights and interests of low-wage migrants in Singapore. In a recent report by the non-governmental migrant welfare organization HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics), it was found that only 50 per cent of companies that were demonstrated to have paid workers late or failed to have paid workers were persecuted (Chok and Ng 2017). Low-wage migrants who had failed to claim their due wages even after initiating procedures against these companies were asked to take the action to the public courts, an almost impossible undertaking for these migrants who have little economic and cultural capital. Many return to their home countries without obtaining many months' wages due for work done. Other examples of the uneven implementation of justice are to do with policy around working hours and overtime pay. Under Singapore's labour

laws, workers are mandated a minimum of one day off per week. However, many low-wage migrants in the construction sector, conforming to tight timelines, are often required to work every day of the week. These men typically get only two days off in the entire year, on the first of January and on the first day of the Lunar New Year. For domestic workers employed to live and work within employers' homes, there is no obligation on the part of employers to grant time off, as domestic workers, classified under the domestic sphere, are not covered under local labour laws. In 2014, however, after years of campaigning by Singaporean migrant welfare organizations, employers have now a contractual obligation to provide domestic workers a day off per week. This has not, however, been translated into legally binding legislation and is not enforced. Off days are also often seen by employers as an opportunity for foreign domestic workers (FDWs) to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Participating in 'productive' leisure activities such as taking hair-cutting classes and money management courses on their days off is seen as desirable and appropriate, and often a pre-condition for time off. This paternalism stems from a lack of being able to see the differently classed and migrant Other as having similar desires for leisure and consumption. Despite these shortcomings, the victories over the mandatory 'day off' in Singapore for foreign domestic workers is one that is celebrated as indicative of the shifts that the state is taking in terms of catering to the welfare of the temporary population.

Quality of food and nutrition of temporary low-wage migrants has been another topic that has come under scrutiny by Singaporean NGOs. Low-wage migrants who labour on construction sites are particularly vulnerable in this

instance as they often do not have the time or resources to cook their own food, and must rely on their employing companies to provide pre-packaged meals. Social workers have brought to the attention of labour ministry authorities that this food is often old, of poor quality, and lacking in protein and other elements necessary for a well-balanced diet. Everyday issues such as ensuring an adequate diet or clean and sanitary living conditions are the types of issues that NGOs also advocate for on behalf of marginalized migrants. These are other important aspects of the forms of everyday justice that improve the quality of migrant lives, and have direct and immediate consequences on health and ability to perform work. However, they are often not included in abstract and high-level discussions of rights or reforms.

There has also been a recent surge in the number of one-off activities that have sought to involve low-wage migrants, acknowledging their contributions to growing and building the city. These take the form of days out, where migrants and locals engage in photography tours of local neighbourhoods, church-led healings of injured migrant workers, or yoga sessions, that see this firmly middle-class activity as one that should be extended also to the less privileged among the urban population. Public holidays such as National Day or Labour Day then also become opportunities where the mainstream media celebrate the contributions of low-wage migrants, and the ways in which Singaporeans are being inclusive to this population. While well intentioned, they amount to little more than symbolic gestures, doing little to alter the structural position of the exploited and underpaid. However, these acts, seen in sum, are indicative of a shifting politics and ethics of seeing the Other as more than just a 'worker' and

worthy of individual respect, a key component of the kind of justice that low-wage migrants seek.

Freedom of Mobility and Association

Thus far, I have attempted to present various competing and intersecting notions of justice in relation to low-wage migrants in Singapore. The following section unpacks everyday notions of justice from low-wage migrants' perspectives. These narratives are situated within the socio-spatial changes that have marked a key South Asian migrant enclave – Singapore's Little India.

David Harvey's (2003) seminal work on urban social justice and the 'Right to the City' has led to multiple and myriad discussions of the claims of disenfranchised groups in large metropolitan areas. This section is situated within the context of such formulations, where quotidian rights to the city are dependent on the ability to access freely zones of the city, but also social, economic, and affective resources necessary for the reproduction of everyday life. Engaging in social relations and the ability to move freely without coercion and threat are important components of the basic functioning that makes up the tenets of what migrants themselves think is fair and just.

Notions of everyday justice for marginalized communities such as women in parts of rural and urban India have started taking into account the importance and significance of freedom of mobility (Phadke et al. 2011). For many of these women, being able to move without fear and coercion across public areas and between private spaces is an important aspect of negotiating daily routines such as performing ablutions, accessing water for household consumption, and caring

for children. For urban migrant and minority men, however, these issues of quotidian mobility can also be significant, as they are most often the target of violent crimes, suspicion, and have a higher propensity to be stopped and arrested by law enforcement officers. In relatively safe Singapore, however, the issues around mobility are primarily to do with the tight and tough controls imposed by the state. Because of the ever-present threat of deportation, migrant men conceive of their position in the city-state as extremely precarious. This is increasingly so in a climate where low-wage Indian migrants are looked upon with suspicion and as potential criminals. The presence of dark-skinned South Asian migrant men on sidewalks and streets during weekends is followed by a discourse of danger and (sexual) threat. The loitering and unproductive occupation of public spaces is seen as undesirable. Migrant workers articulate this latent climate of fear overtly; the lack of agency in their migrant status dependent on the largesse of the employer and the state is apparent.

Mechanisms of self-policing are now internalized: 'Because now everybody is scared. If happen anything then can catch police then can sent back. Then because we come in Singapore for earn money, want to work and earn money. So in Singapore have any problem, because it is not our country, we cannot solve. So everybody is very scared. They also don't want to make any problems.'⁴

The importance of being able to 'sit down', 'hang out', or loiter in public spaces such as parks, pavements, and squares is central to the social networks and socialities practised by low-wage migrant men in Singapore (cf. [Kathiravelu 2012](#)). In a city where much public space is consumption space such as shopping malls, these non-commercial zones act as spaces of exception where low-wage

marginalized migrants feel that they can participate in city life without having to be members of the consuming middle class.

Singaporeans who live and work in the area are also viscerally cognizant about the socio-spatial changes that mark the space since the riots of December 2013. These changes are generally welcome by middle- and working-class residents; however, there is also an acknowledgement that this outcome is not a completely fair or just one for low-wage South Asian migrants:

It feels somewhat safer but I wouldn't say to a very big extent. Because I lived here for such a long time and of course I have accustomed to living amongst them. But I think my girlfriend who comes here quite often, she would feel somewhat safer because of the greater police presence. And because of the less rowdy behaviour of the Indians around here. Because generally the crowd is better behaved and of course as a resident that makes me feel safer lah⁵. And they used to overflow onto the roads during the weekends but now it is more controlled, so it's somewhat a good thing for drivers around here as well.

A shopkeeper describes the importance of Little India as a social, emotional, and communal space for low-wage Indian migrants. He relates from his own experience as a low-wage migrant a few decades ago. The shared affinities of language and religion are highlighted here as important elements of social life for low-wage migrants within a multilingual and multicultural city.

Oh when I came in 1993, then I used to live in various places, but on the weekends, because in my construction site, the

engineer and I had around fifty to sixty construction workers, so I used to go with them and stay with them, and so, I personally felt how they feel, and yeah I have directly felt that pleasure of being in a crowd on a Sunday, who belongs to same community or same religion. You feel like, you see, you were three thousand miles away from home, and still, there is a society to talk, to share, you know, to vent your feelings. That part is really interesting and everybody in my opinion needs that.

Another key development in the area in addition to increased policing, surveillance, and the alcohol ban is the stoppage of private bus services to worker dormitories at 9 PM. (One of these types of buses was the one that caused the death of the Indian man and sparked off the riots.) This coincided with the building of the bus shelters mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, and can be seen as part of attempts by state authorities to control the mobility of migrants. The limiting of private bus routes to Little India on Sundays has meant that most migrant workers can no longer stay late in the neighbourhood on their day off, as they would not have a means of transport to reach their far-flung dormitories.

One migrant man describes how it no longer makes sense to come to Little India after a day's work, because of the ending of bus services at 9 PM. 'Yeah, this way you come in, five o'clock finish, you bathe already, you come in, is seven or eight o'clock already. Eight o'clock come in, that's why people don't want to come in. Last time, one o'clock, two o'clock bus have.'

The lack of transport options has greatly reduced the numbers of South Asian men who frequent Little India, reducing its centre as an ethnic enclave and migrant economy. This has been aided by the dispersion of services and specialist economies to other parts of the island, typically within worker dormitories or Housing Development Board estates, where the majority of Singaporeans live.⁶ Yet Little India continues to be an important symbolic space for social, cultural, and economic life for low-wage South Asian men.

Another shopkeeper, commenting on the large reduction in numbers, comments: 'If on a Sunday three years back, it'll be at least two hundred thousand people concentrating in an area of one-half-square kilometre, at least two hundred thousand in half-square kilometre. Now, it should be only, erm, twenty-five thousand.' Even if his estimates are wrong, the perception of decreased usage of the space is prevalent. Shopkeepers in the Little India shopkeepers' association (LISHA) have also made complaints to state authorities that their revenues have fallen drastically with the reduction of migrant patrons to the area. Accumulatively, the changes to zoning and alterations to connectivity emphasize that the importance of the space as a functioning migrant enclave is secondary to the maintenance of its image as a safe and attractive 'heritage district' for consumption by tourists.

The neoliberalization of public spaces in Little India has meant not only that there has been increasing gentrification encouraged, with the sprouting of boutique hotels and craft beer bars, but has also involved a greater presence of security personnel within the neighbourhood, and most visibly on weekends. These uniformed security personnel are composed of men and women who form

a private security force, representing an outsourcing of the surveillance and control of the space of Little India. Many of these private police are of Malaysian nationality, migrant workers themselves. Most are also of Indian or Tamil ethnicity, possibly chosen for that particular assignment because of the linguistic and cultural affinities they share with the migrants who congregate in Little India. This acknowledgement for the need of a police force that can communicate effectively with the migrant population is an important justice outcome, as these auxiliary police are the most visible and direct mediators of the state that low-wage migrants encounter. Their presence has now become a visible and largely accepted part of the landscape of the neighbourhood.

The people actually are now used to it. Sad to say, but they're actually used to it after the riot. But after this, there was nothing like this. There was no such thing as the police never come. They would not interfere, they would do their business and just move on. But now they are worried and the Singaporeans are really ... they are cautious people. They don't want to make the same mistake again. So once this has happened, they make sure it doesn't happen over again. This is when maybe the residents of the places they call up the police and ask for their help. They don't want to repeat the same mistake.

Reactions of Indian low-wage migrants to measures that clamp down on public drinking and association have been matter-of-fact and muted. We can read this within the context of their precarious positions within the Singaporean state, and their inability to contest these curbs on social and cultural needs. Many migrants

in fact interpreted these paternalistic discourses in positive terms, saying that the money they would have spent on alcohol they now save, and remit back to their home countries. Such calculations that do not take into account a need for leisure activities or space are indicative of how the caricature of the Indian migrant as only 'worker' has been internalized effectively, and how statist notions of the neoliberal self-governing subject have been, to a large extent, reified. Readings of migrant men as needing only to accumulate capital and not meet other social or emotional needs as residents of the city are thus reinforced through these clampdowns on physical mobility, and ability to maintain ethnic and cultural relations and networks.

The prevalence of cheap phone calls and social media access has, on the other hand, made the necessity of physical interactions less significant (Thompson 2009; Platt et al. 2016). Many networks both back home in India and with fellow migrants in Singapore are maintained through frequent phone calls and text messages.

One observer, a store owner in Little India, comments, 'Now there is a cell phone, email, Facebook communication right, so they don't need the support of fellow workers. Only they need, the, you know, emotional support, so when they want to talk something, somebody to hear. So that is all they want, and they will get in the dormitory.' Despite increased restrictions on movements within the city, low-wage migrant men continue to find ways to make and maintain networks and cultural life. However, beyond relations between migrants themselves, a key concern in issues of social justice for migrants is the need for respect from co-urban dwellers with whom they 'rub along' every day.

Respect

Grounded, embodied notions of everyday justice centred around movement and mobility are not the only ways in which low-wage South Asian migrants conceived of everyday justice. Abstract and highly intangible notions of respect were articulated as one of the most significant ways in which justice and fairness were perceived.

Although respect is an abstract notion – you can't eat respect, and respect does not provide shelter – it was repeatedly highlighted as one of the most important qualities to migrants who spoke about how they would like to be treated as guest workers. In addition to the routine forms of discrimination that they face due to their race, class, and immigration status, after the association of low-wage Indian workers with alcoholism and riots,⁷ these men also now are burdened with the additional label of being unruly, ill-disciplined, and disruptors of a social order that is so highly valued in Singapore. Respect meant even more within this context as migrants then could see themselves as being acknowledged as individuals rather than merely part of a disposable population. Respect was articulated as significant particularly in interpersonal interactions within the everyday city spaces that they inhabited. In traversing through urban public spaces, the lack of eye contact and not acknowledging their presence in shared spaces were seen as indicators of their lack of status and inherent undesirability.

First, you don't have the feeling of belongingness. Second, you live a subhuman life. Third, when it comes to your home away from home, then here you don't get treated like a person. You

are treated like an intruder. Then why should I be coming here? I want to be where I have my dignity and my peace but I cannot have this dignity because money is the triggering factor here. Only for money, people are still coming here. They [are] working.

Interactions with superiors such as employers or site supervisors were highlighted as a key dealing through which respect and acknowledgement were desired, as these were some of the primary relationships that low-wage migrants invested in on an everyday basis. Demeaning treatment included being treated rudely and discourteously as underlings or subordinates, and scolded or chastised publicly and aggressively for work not done to the satisfaction of superiors. The lack of professionalism in communications was underscored especially in relation to being humiliated in front of co-ethnics or co-workers of a different nationality: 'You feel ... the word should be "insulted". In front of your friends and peers, you are being interrogated like you have done a crime for mingling with your friends. You feel bad. You feel low.' In addition to the dehumanizing treatment by employers and immediate supervisors, low-wage migrants read the practice of late and non-payment of wages as unfair and unjust, a tangible relation to the more intangible ways in which they are shown a lack of respect. Constant reminders of their replicability and precarity through these delays also reinforce the lack of respect for their work.

Conclusion: Contextualizing Notions of Everyday Justice

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate competing and complementary notions of everyday justice that play out in relation to low-wage (South Asian, but predominantly Tamil) male migrants in Singapore. This final section of the chapter will draw on earlier discussions to extend ideas of everyday justice, arguing for a context-specific and ontologically grounded understanding of the idea, especially in relation to a normative and universalizing human rights or labour rights discourse and within non-Western authoritarian states.

The allure of a human rights discourse is its supposed internationalism. Presented as universal, it speaks to a mode of cosmopolitan ideal that is appealing as a kind of global standard to aspire and live up to. In states such as Singapore, which have faced harsh international criticism of their treatment of low-wage migrants, particularly from the West, coming from a 'human rights' perspective, such frameworks are viewed with reserve and suspicion. The Singaporean state, in turn, has previously used 'Asian values' (Birch 1998) as an appropriate discourse to engage with in order to counter such claims, critiquing human rights as a Eurocentric paradigm, unsuitable for understanding and governance in social democracies in Asia, which are based on more collective (as opposed to individualistic) notions of citizenship and the polity. These tussles over the definition and practice of social justice are important to consider within discussions of pluralization.

Here I am not advocating for a culturalist reading, where the low-wage migrants' cultural understandings of what is fair or just is different to what

natives or the middle class perceive. Rather than an issue of cultural difference, the issue here is more to do a lack of attention and neglect of the priorities and subjective experiences of low-wage migrant populations. This is where advocating for migrant rights within a larger human rights framework fails to achieve an equitable justice agenda. The perspective that conjoins and even equates to some extent a human rights discourse to justice is one that is critiqued by Clarke and Goodale (2010) for being blind to the abstract and de-contextualized nature in which justice is discussed by transnational entities such as international NGOs. Instead, they advocate for a more grounded perspective that sees human rights and justice as diametrically opposed to one another – the former as a universal ideal and the latter vernacularized through social and political struggle. In drawing from such perspectives in this chapter, I have attempted to extend understandings of justice to consider the vernacular element as also central to its quotidian definition, through foregrounding the mundane and banal aspects of migrants' lives, such as the access to freedom of mobility and association, the ability to recreate community and identity, and the right to be respected for the work they do. Linking plural and ground-up ideas of justice with notions of urban rights (Harvey 2003) brings us to conceptualizations of social justice that are embedded in the everyday metropolitan spaces of the urban. Everyday forms of justice must also incorporate an equal right to the city, regardless of citizenship status, and an ability to participate in the formal consumption economy, or phenotype.

The significance of a pluralization of justice perspective has been acknowledged by scholars such as Clarke and Goodale (2010). This chapter has

attempted to demonstrate, with ethnographic and interview evidence, that understandings of justice as essentially plural must also take into account different and relational ontological starting points that may also lead to disparate and unequal political outcomes. Plurality, in a non-Cartesian sense, must rely on an acknowledgement of ontological difference that is not based on a Self/Other distinction, but that acknowledges difference as multiple and diverse. Here is where the agenda of social justice must begin, and where existing schemas have failed to accommodate multiplicities of difference and combinations of relationalities (Glick Schiller 2012), where competing social justice agendas occupy the same national and discursive space. There is thus a need for a reconceptualization of social justice that does not see outcomes only as equality of opportunity or the ability to achieve social mobility (within the host country context, for instance, through achieving a higher socioeconomic status or legalized citizenship status). In an authoritarian space like Singapore where limits on inclusion into the polity and citizenry are imposed by law and accepted by the electorate, the claims of social justice must be different. Understanding economically and socially marginalized groups such as migrant workers as cultural minorities is one possible perspective. The notions of plural and differentiated citizenship – and rights – proposed by Iris Marion Young (1990) provide us tools with which to think about how the continually shifting and dynamic population of migrants can be understood within the larger city and polity.

The plurality of justice perspective then must also acknowledge the competing of justice agendas, priorities, and, ultimately, outcomes. One

problematic then can be seen as that of scale. Systematic and structural change can often be obscured by the inability to recognize the importance of smaller and more achievable agendas, and ones that migrants themselves may see as primary. This chapter has demonstrated that the everyday realm in which low-wage migrants themselves conceive of justice – in terms of the quotidian notions of fair pay, fair treatment, and respect – is not necessarily taken into account into larger definitions of justice by NGO discourse, law enforcement, and even the international activist community.

Theorists and activists working from a Eurocentric paradigm of assuming liberal democracies as the primary ontological and historical basis of social justice agendas neglect other forms of actually functioning democracies and governance models (Grewal 2016). Moving away from neocolonial to more pluralist modes of how justice is conceptualized (Clarke 2009), this chapter contributes to non-Western and 'Southern' (Connell 2007) notions of migrant rights, social justice, and rights to the city. Here is where methodological nationalism and context-specific analysis has its place in contesting non-endogenous conceptualizations of everyday justice. Within more controlled, authoritarian and post-developmental states, social justice agendas are best fought not at the level of formal political participation and party policy, or even civil society agitations, but in the everyday. This is the realm where most direct and tangible social change is possible, but also where migrants themselves seek recognition, inclusion, and respect. When the realm of formal party politics or policy is one that is inaccessible, the quotidian realm is where citizens and city

residents can enact social change and resistance to dominant moral, political, and economic orders most rapidly, visibly, and easily.

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Chapter 3

¹ This research draws on ongoing engagement with low-wage migrant communities in Singapore since 2011, but particularly draws on in-depth and spot interviews and ethnography conducted in late 2014 and early 2015 around the Little India neighbourhood in the city-state of Singapore.

² It is important here to take into account the significance of the Tamil language for aspects of culture, practices for regulating religious practice and social relations, as well as more generally for a way of 'being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

³ Twenty-eight of these fifty-seven were charged in court, and more than 200 additional men were given warnings by the Singaporean police.

⁴ Many of the interviews and conversations were conducted in English, not the first language of many low-wage migrants, nor one that they are particularly comfortable speaking. The interview transcripts have been left uncorrected in their original form.

⁵ Lah is a common suffix in Singlish, a Singaporean creole that low-wage migrants also use colloquially.

⁶ Eighty per cent of Singaporeans live in Housing Development Board estates. They comprised overwhelmingly of good quality high-rise apartments, built and leased by the state. There are also a significant proportion of these apartments surrounding the Little India area.

⁷ The association of Indian men with alcoholism (and spousal abuse) is one that is a recurrent trope in Singapore, and also extends to include Singaporean Indian men.