Singapore turns 50: local issues in a global city

Singapore turns fifty this year. After a brief merger with and eventually an unfortunate expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore became an independent nation on 9 August 1965. These fifty years, as an island-nation, city-state and ultimately one of the most ‘global’ cities in the world have been marked by exceptionally rapid change. The week of mourning that followed the recent passing of Singapore’s first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who was at the helm of the country’s spectacular transformation, once again brought to light the underlying narrative of survival in the Singapore story. The many reportages on TV and in newspapers that were united in their focus of ‘Remembering Lee Kuan Yew’ often revolved around how Singapore had faced its issues and challenges head-on from the start and how it had turned them into its advantage.

Four books on Singapore

While Singapore is widely recognized as an incredible success story, the question of survival continues to be relevant to the policies and strategies it adopts as a city-state. Can Singapore Survive? is the fitting question Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, also poses on the cover of his latest book. “Can we survive as an independent city-state?” he wonders on the first page. In this article I will explore the implications of this question, and how it continues to guide the way Singapore reflects on itself, by engaging in three other recent publications on Singapore. What do these books reveal about the ‘Singapore story’ in terms of the country’s history, present and future?

The first of these publication is Rajesh Rai’s historical study Indians in Singapore, which covers the period of 1819-1945. Typically a history of arrival, departure and settlement its focus is on a ‘diaspora’ in the making, which would eventually become one of the four pillars on which modern-day multi-cultural Singapore firmly rests. This multicultural reality, however, has become considerably more complex in recent years with the arrival of an ever-increasing number of migrants. The second book, Immigration in Singapore (edited by Norman Vau et al.), is particularly illuminating in this regard. It discusses the impact that waves of migrants have had on the socio-cultural landscape of Singapore and the growing sense of discontent. With respect to this, the third volume, Molokaiing Gay Singapore, not only provides a detailed account of how LGBT rights have been negotiated, contested and pushed forward over time in Singapore, but also how through this a broader narrative emerges of the complexities of population management, socio-cultural sensibilities and Singapore’s quest for survival. As such, in the final section I will come back to the possible answers to Mahbubani’s question – Yes, No, and Maybe – and how all three are part of the same ongoing story.

The arrival of (Indian) migrants

For most of the colonial period migrants saw their stay in Singapore as temporary, as Rajesh Rai explains in the introduction of his book. “Toiling for years, often under arduous conditions, they held on to the glimmer of hope for a return to the warmth of their kith and kin, one day” (p. xiv) It seems that many did eventually return but a minority didn’t and it was here that the first seeds were planted of what would eventually grow into a sizable and highly-visible Indian community. Rai’s study is basically the first to provide a comprehensive overview of Indian arrivals in Singapore and the subsequent formation of a local diaspora.

The first Indians to arrive on the island of Singapore were the lascars and sepoys of the 2nd Battalion 20th (Marine) Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry who accompanied Raffles himself in 1819 (p. 5). These ‘Bengalis’ generally hailed from what is now modern Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and comprised mainly upper caste Hindus. However, Tamil Muslims from the Coromandel Coast had been active and influential in the Malay region as early as the fifteenth century and even occupied prominent positions in the Malacca Sultanate. As such they were in the vanguard when Raffles set foot on Singaporean soil (p. 8). Paris, who had already begun to venture to the Chinese coast from the mid-18th century onwards, exporting cotton and opium (p. 10), started to arrive on the scene during this period as well. And so did Nattukettai Chettiar, a merchant class initially involved in the salt trade and later also in cotton, pear and rice. It was in particular through money lending schemes that the ‘Chettiar’ were able to amass considerable fortunes, something that also enabled them to make a more lasting imprint on Singapore’s cultural landscape through the building of temples such as the Thendayuthapani temple located on Tank Road. During the annually held festival of Thaipusam, the ‘Chettiar temple’, as it is locally also referred to, continues to mark the destination for devotees who have taken part in the long procession from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Little India. Piercing their bodies with spikes and carrying so-called kavadis adorned with images of Goddess Parvati and Lord Murugam, the devotees pay tribute to the spear (vel, also symbolic for ‘knowledge’) with which Goddess Parvati attributed her ‘son’ Lord Murugan and which allowed him to slay the demon Soorapadman, and as a result riding the world of evil.

Rajesh Rai’s well-researched study of how the idea of an ‘Indian community’ developed over time is not just revealing for the imprint it left on Singapore’s geographical set-up, but also how it impacted the country’s socio-cultural make-up. His narration takes us past such staging posts as Singapore’s history as a penal colony (Indian convicts rarely exercised the right to return to India after completing their sentences), the employment of Indians in labour-intensive jobs by the Singapore harbour and river; the (initially unregulated) arrival of indentured labourers on the scene; and also the shift in attitudes to and heightened suspicion of Indians in Singapore after India’s first war of independence in 1857 (and the growing preference for Sikhs men for the maintenance of law and order in the colony), the concerns over Indian involvement in various
Chinese secret societies (at war with each other); and the impact made by the establishment of the Straits Settlements as a crown colony (1826) in which moment Singapore starts to assume a commercial position of global significance). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian social formation undergoes large-scale changes in terms of socio-economic profiles. As Kawi explains, the port city became an important stopover for luminaries, preachers, and pilgrims, who brought with them new ideas, new culture, new power, but also ideas, cultural practices, sacred symbols and ways of life (p. 133). Although the period from the 1880s till WWI is often marked by economic growth, for instance, and various new organizations were founded which made visible the diversity among ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. The interwar period then sees the expansion and establishment of Indian ‘outposts’ that are directly influenced by political developments within the Subcontinent itself (p. 167). The influx of lower caste and Adi Dwivedi laborers further adds to this as they lay bare caste divisions. In the final section of Indians in Singapore Rajai Rutikranta explores the Japanese Occupation, a three-year period during which Singapore became the nerve centre for the Indian Independence Movement in East Asia. In those three years Singapore played host to the Indian Independence and the arm of the Movement, and the Indian National Army, its military wing. Mid-1943 this would also bring the renowned Indian nationalist leader, (Netaji) Subhas Chandra Bose, to Singapore. The end of the war in 1945 marked the start of a ten-year period during which Singapore moved to partial internal self-governance. Independent Malaya, the present-day Federation of Malaysia, the protectorate of the Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak, grudgingly also welcomed Singapore on-board when it was formed on 16 September 1963. However, an unstable arrangement from the start, Singapore was expelled less than two years later and had to face the reality of being an independent nation.

Migration society and national identity Immigration in Singapore, the edited volume by Norman Voo, Yap Su Yin and Chua Lynette, offers an impactful insight into how Singapore subsequently developed post-1965, particularly with respect to its population strategy. Initially faced with high unemployment and a lack of new arrivals, the People’s Action Party (PAP), under the leadership of its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, embarked on an ambitious program to address these issues. With demand for labour quickly growing, the initially strict immigration rules — implemented to reinforce the idea of an independent and sovereign state — were relaxed and in the subsequent decades the arrival of an ever-growing stream of newcomers became key to the country’s economic growth. Now firmly recognized as one of the greatest economic success stories, Singapore is also frequently highlighted as a global city, open and competitive economies, one of the world’s richest nations, and one that ranks in the top of various quality of living indices. What is often not realized is that approximately 4.5 million Singaporeans who joined a protest held at Hong Lim Park in 2013! The protests for the past, which various contributors in Immigration in Singapore also refer to, was the recently released ‘White Paper on Population’ in which the government proposed to increase the country’s population from 3.5 to 6.9 million by 2030.1 Citing concerns over an aging population and declining fertility rates, the paper was widely understood as a plan to further increase the inflow of new immigrants.

The Introduction to Immigration in Singapore opens with a quote from the former Minister for Trade and Industry, George Yeo (2000), who argues that Singapore has become a migration society. It is noted that the fact that not only one in four marriages in Singapore is to a foreigner, but also that for every two babies born one permanent resident is welcomed (p. 8). In discussion of Singapore’s ongoing history with immigration, a ‘global city’ narrative is never far away. Yet as the first contributions in the volume also make clear, Singapore’s ambitions of becoming and maintaining its position as a global labour force does not always agree with the country’s nation-state building efforts (p. 10). As such, the influx of new immigrants has considerably shaped Singapore’s social dynamics. Upper and middle-class Indians and Chinese (a carefully managed mix of four ethnically diverse groups — Chinese, Eurasian, Indian and Malay — each with their own ‘national’ language: Chinese, Tamil and Bahasa Malay). It seems that part of the opposition to increasing Singapore’s population further can be explained by, as Eugene K.B. Tan argues, a lack of an ‘affectional connection’ with the country’s immigration policies. While the focus is largely on ‘material and pragmatic’ explanations for the policies (aging population, low fertility rates, and appeal to foreign businesses), Tan argues that ‘there is limited appeal to the aesthetic dimension that a contested major public policy like immigration is so badly in need. (p. 90) Singapore’s national identity building efforts, which have fostered a growing sense of national identity and belonging, plays a part in this as well. Since Sings barings slots such as Singapore for ‘Singaporeans’ and ‘I Miss Singapore’ into the national relationship with the national identity, which newcomers may not necessarily share.

Pragmatic resilience in a ‘global city’ The site of the 2013 protests over the White Paper, Hong Lim Park, is also the location for the annually held Pink Dot, which raises awareness for LGBT-related issues in Singapore. Lynette J. Chua’s account of Mobilizing Gay Singapore not only provides a fascinating account of how LGBT-activism and politics have developed in Singapore over time, but in more general terms this account in terms of global political debates. As we have seen, opposition and dissent are mediated within the context of a nation that witnessed rapid social, political and economic transformation. In those three years Singapore played host to the Indian Independence and the arm of the Movement, and the Indian National Army, its military wing. Mid-1943 this would also bring the renowned Indian nationalist leader, (Netaji) Subhas Chandra Bose, to Singapore. The end of the war in 1945 marked the start of a ten-year period during which Singapore moved to partial internal self-governance. Independent Malaya, the present-day Federation of Malaysia, the protectorate of the Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak, grudgingly also welcomed Singapore on-board when it was formed on 16 September 1963. However, an unstable arrangement from the start, Singapore was expelled less than two years later and had to face the reality of being an independent nation. Initially faced with high unemployment and a lack of new arrivals, the People’s Action Party (PAP), under the leadership of its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, embarked on an ambitious program to address these issues. With demand for labour quickly growing, the initially strict immigration rules — implemented to reinforce the idea of an independent and sovereign state — were relaxed and in the subsequent decades the arrival of an ever-growing stream of newcomers became key to the country’s economic growth. Now firmly recognized as one of the greatest economic success stories, Singapore is also frequently highlighted as a global city, open and competitive economies, one of the world’s richest nations, and one that ranks in the top of various quality of living indices. What is often not realized is that approximately 4.5 million Singaporeans who joined a protest held at Hong Lim Park in 2013! The protests for the past, which various contributors in Immigration in Singapore also refer to, was the recently released ‘White Paper on Population’ in which the government proposed to increase the country’s population from 3.5 to 6.9 million by 2030.1 Citing concerns over an aging population and declining fertility rates, the paper was widely understood as a plan to further increase the inflow of new immigrants.

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