Singapore’s Extreme Neoliberalism and the COVID Outbreak: Culturally Centering Voices of Low-Wage Migrant Workers

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Abstract
I draw on the key tenets of the culture-centered approach to co-construct the everyday negotiations of COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) among low-wage male Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. The culture-centered approach foregrounds voices infrastructures at the margins as the basis for theorizing health. Based on 87 hours of participant observations of digital spaces and 47 in-depth interviews, I attend to the exploitative conditions of migrant work that constitute the COVID-19 outbreak in the dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers. These exploitative conditions are intertwined with authoritarian techniques of repression deployed by the state that criminalize worker collectivization and erase worker voices. The principle of academic–worker–activist solidarity offers a register for alternative imaginaries of health that intervene directly in Singapore’s extreme neoliberalism.

Keywords
migrant workers, migration, COVID-19, pandemic, culture-centered approach

Global responses to COVID-19 (C19; coronavirus disease 2019) render visible the vast inequalities in organizing human health and well-being by five decades of relentless neoliberalism (Dutta, 2016). Migrants have borne the largest burdens of C19 infections as well as adverse health outcomes resulting from C19-related policies.

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The unequal burden of C19-related mortality and morbidity borne by migrant workers shows the deep fault lines of neoliberalism (Dutta, 2020a, Tan, 2020). C19-response frameworks by neoliberal states have further exacerbated these inequalities by strategically ignoring the structural challenges of income, housing, food, and health care negotiated by those at the margins of neoliberal economies. For low-wage migrant workers, constituted in global networks of expendability, the pandemic outbreaks as well as the accompanying policy responses expunge the deep inequalities seeded by neoliberalism from the spaces of invisibility into visible spaces in the public sphere. C19-related health inequities borne by low-wage migrant workers capture the human suffering that has been scripted into five decades of relentless neoliberal reforms. Migrant health is constituted amid the precarization of the migrant worker as cheap labor that fuels the accumulation of primitive capital in the networks of neoliberalism. In its pursuit for profit, neoliberalism has systematically attacked and destroyed unions and infrastructures of collective organizing, doing so through the rhetoric of mobility and poverty alleviation (Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018).

In Singapore, the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers exposes the unhygienic and health threatening conditions in these dormitories (Dutta, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In sharp contrast to the Singapore model of effective pandemic management pushed as a model by the World Health Organization in the early part of the C19 trajectory, the dormitory outbreak reflects the ineffectiveness and failure in Singapore’s public health infrastructure. How can a public health infrastructure that is projected by global organizations such as the World Health Organization as a model for pandemic response be riddled with a fundamental failure in anticipating and addressing the health needs of its migrant worker population that forms the backbone of the economy? This failure in addressing migrant health is a direct result of Singapore’s exploitative structure of labor management anchored in its authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Dutta, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Juego, 2018; Tansel, 2017). As a model for designing and implementing “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Tansel, 2017, p. 4), Singapore has perfected the techniques of labor repression while selling itself as a “labor destination.” Its “smart city” imaginary that works actively to project a futuristic imaginary of securing sustainable urbanization through digital technologies and participatory tools (see, e.g., Kong, 2018; Kong & Woods, 2018) is deeply imbricated in the exploitation of low-wage migrant workers whose exploited labor builds the necessary infrastructure of this imaginary.

In this article, drawing on in-depth interviews and a digital ethnography conducted amid low-wage migrant workers in Singapore (Dutta, 2018b), I will argue that the ongoing communicative erasure of hyperprecarious low-wage migrant workers from discursive spaces and policy registers interplays with structurally constituted labor exploitation to (re)produce the conditions leading to the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers. Disrupting the official state narrative that the outbreak could not have been foreseen, low-wage migrant workers who participated in this culture-centered intervention voice that they had “long seen” a crisis such as the C19 outbreak. They suggest that the poor infrastructures for migrant living are already
always in crisis because of their exploitative design that is fundamentally threatening to the health, well-being, and dignity of workers. Moreover, communicative inequality, inequality in the distribution of communicative resources (both information and voice), is intrinsically intertwined with the poor health outcomes experienced by low-wage migrant workers amid the C19 outbreak. These poor health outcomes are directly related to C19 as well as effects of the lockdown measures imposed on the dormitories by the state. The absence of communicative infrastructures is played out in the systematic erasure of migrant worker voices from the state’s C19 response. Drawing on Dutta’s (2020a) conceptualization of “extreme neoliberalism” (p. 2) as the ideology of the free market implemented by an authoritarian state through technologies of violence, I will argue that state repression and the erasure of discursive registers for worker voice and collectivization shape the context of the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers in Singapore.

Low-Wage Migrant Workers in Singapore

The exploitation of low-wage migrant workers in the construction, shipping, building, and cleaning industries forms the backbone of the “Singapore story” (Dutta, 2017a, 2017b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a). As the model for an Asian future, Singapore’s “smart city” technocracy epitomizes a future-looking infrastructure for disciplining labor in the service of neoliberal capital, packaging the techniques of disciplining labor as “Asian values” (Dutta, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a). The rhetorical assemblage of “Asian values” mobilizes various techniques of authoritarian management such as state surveillance, disciplining of democratic participation, silencing of voice, repression of justice-based conversations, and criminalizing of protest as necessary strategies to maintain social harmony, projected as Asian (Dutta, 2019b). It is worth noting in the communicative infrastructure of “Asian values” the selective framing of authoritarian repression as Asian, while simultaneously erasing the robust cultural traditions of resistance, protest, and argumentation across Asia as foreign/Western. Positioning itself strategically as the Asian gateway to the frontiers of primitive accumulation, Singapore has perfected a cluster of techniques of exploitation of low-wage migrant labor from the elsewhere of Asia that propel its financial success, building the “smart city” architecture that underlies its global rankings on “ease-of-business” and capital friendliness. The “Singapore miracle/model” is a template of “extreme neoliberalism” (Dutta, 2020a) that is founded on the principles of authoritarian labor management, ongoing cultivation of human capital in the service of the global free market, and accelerated propaganda to legitimize authoritarianism. Singapore’s extreme neoliberal governmentality sold incessantly by its ruling elite class as “smart city” planning (see, e.g., Kong, 2018; Kong & Woods, 2018) is materialized on the ongoing exploitation of migrant labor. Dutta (2020a) defines extreme neoliberalism as

the free market ideology pushed beyond its organizing limits, with the structuring of the state as an authoritarian instrument of control that silences and co-opts worker
collectivization, generating precarity while simultaneously deploying the logics of business-friendliness to enable the mobility of capital across spaces/borders. (p. 2)

State capitalism as the vehicle for accumulation works alongside the repression of labor to catalyze capitalist expansion (Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Dutta, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Rahim & Barr, 2019; Tansel, 2017). An entire industry of communicative capital, from academia to think tanks to research institutes to communication agencies to discursive platforms such as dialogues and symposia, is set up by the authoritarian state to communicatively invert, “turn materiality on its head” (Dutta, 2016), the labor repression. Singapore’s reputation economy thrives on these ongoing communicative inversions, projecting the narrative of a future-looking sustainable city state catalyzing Asian mobilities through access to the global free market (Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018; Kaur et al., 2016; Thompson, 2019). To perform this communicative inversion effectively, the voices of low-wage migrant workers are actively erased from discursive spaces (Dutta, 2019b, 2020a). This mix of communicative erasures and inversions forms the authoritarian state’s communication infrastructures that project and manage Singapore’s reputation as “labor destination.” Articulations of worker rights, the poor working conditions, the poor living conditions, the nonpayment and/or underpayment of wages, and the precarity attached to the work permits are strategically erased through the language of “Asian values” that brands Singapore as an exceptional model of city making (Dutta, 2019b). The state of exception, sold as model, offers legitimacy to the instruments of violence, disciplining, and erasure performed on the bodies of low-wage migrant workers by the authoritarian state (Springer, 2015). Positioning itself as a “custodian of capital accumulation” (Tansel, 2017, p. 4), Singapore’s “authoritarian neoliberalism” routinizes repressive tactics of labor management to attract transnational capital. The state disciplines labor through surveillance, policing, and expulsions (see Dutta, 2018a; Dutta et al., 2019; Wham, 2019) as methods for “neoliberalizing violence” (Springer, 2015).

Hyperprecarity of Low-Wage Labor

Singapore’s statecraft is organized to produce cheap labor supply that propels the unfettered flow of global capital in/to Asia. The health of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore is shaped by its extreme neoliberalism, marked by structural inaccessibility to fundamental labor rights and communicative erasures of claims to labor rights. Low-wage migrant workers often work in “dirty, dangerous, and difficult” jobs without labor protections, and they are supported on short-term work permits, the power over which are held by employers (Baey & Yeoh, 2015; Bal, 2015; Dutta, 2017a, 2017b; Yea, 2017; Yea & Chok, 2018). Singapore criminalizes migrant worker collectivization, with both incarceration and repatriation serving as key tools of control. Strict state controls on the participation of foreigners in critiquing the state translates into the erasure of worker accounts of their everyday experiences of marginalization. This strict control of worker collectivization and worker voice is situated alongside authoritarian strategies of controlling protest and organizing in solidarity with the labor rights of migrant workers. The ruling People’s Action Party
often arbitrarily and retroactively applies the “out-of-bounds” markers to silence critics of the state. Repressive controls over Left spaces in the form of state-led campaigns such as “Operation Cold Store” and the “Marxist Conspiracy” serve as cautionary tales for activists and civil society organizations, disciplining resistance to labor exploitation. More specifically in the context of migrant labor rights, the “Marxist Conspiracy” campaign launched by the state in 1987 targeted Catholic activists advocating for migrant workers, arresting and detaining them under the Internal Security Act (Ortmann, 2012).

Low-wage migrant work in Singapore is governed by restrictive migration laws that promote temporariness and preclude pathways of mobility into citizenship (Baey & Yeoh, 2015, 2018; Dutta, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Lindquist et al., 2012; Yea, 2017; Yea & Chok, 2018). This temporariness of low-wage migrant work is further rendered vulnerable by complex and interconnected webs of brokerage (Baey & Yeoh, 2015, 2018; Lindquist et al., 2012). These linkages of brokerage materialize in the form of interconnected recruitment, training, and travel agencies that impose significant front-end investments on low-wage contract-based migrant workers. The investments are often secured by going into debt, selling the limited ancestral land, or selling household possessions. Conceptualized as “hyperprecarious” labor, low-wage migrant work is marked by “deportability, risk of bodily injury coupled with restricted access to healthcare, and transactional relationships” (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 593). Migrant worker life is negotiated amid struggles with “limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill health” (Vosko, 2006, p. 4). Vast power inequalities make up the cartographies of migrant negotiations of structures, with the control over short-term work permits held by the employer (Yea & Chok, 2018). Health-related risks are individualized to the worker, without state-based infrastructures for health service workers; clear policy oversight that holds the employers, dormitories, and caterers accountable; and policy implementation and oversight.

**Singapore’s COVID-19 Response**

Country responses to the pandemic have largely used lockdown as a key strategy, accompanied by the promotion of specific behaviors. The dominant pandemic communication framework, deploying a top-down approach, has complemented lockdown strategies with direct, clearly communicated messages promoting behavior change (hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing). In this dominant public health approach to C19 communication, relevant behaviors are individualized, placing the responsibility on the recipient of the health message to adopt and practice the behavior. This top-down framework of pandemic communication reflects the linear ideology of behavior change communication, erasing the cultural and structural contexts within which health behaviors are constituted. A culture-centered approach (CCA) to pandemic communication critically interrogates the hegemonic top-down ideology of pandemic communication, suggesting that the erasure of cultural contexts, structural determinants, and agentic responses results in ineffective interventions.
Singapore’s C19 response epitomizes this individualizing ideology, combined with authoritarian techniques of top-down migrant worker management that fails to take context and structure into account (Dutta, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In its early response to C19, the state largely ignored the risk of infections in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers, in spite of civil society organizations serving the workers raising the issue (Han, 2020). When the infections started appearing in dormitories housing the workers, the state responded by separating the C19 statistics in the community from the C19 infections in the migrant worker dormitories (Han, 2020). In the midst of conducting this fieldwork, on April 17, of the 728 new cases, 654 cases were reported among work permit holders living in dormitories, 26 cases among work permit holders living outside dormitories, and 48 local cases in the community (Sturmer, 2020). A New York Times report noted that 88% of the 14,446 cases of C19 infections in Singapore were linked to migrant worker dormitories (Cai & Lai, 2020). The state limited the movements of workers outside the dormitories and outside their rooms (Dutta, 2020b, 2020c; Ratcliffe, 2020). Messages in the form of leaflets were placed in dormitories, instructing workers of recommended behaviors (wearing masks, washing hands with soap, maintaining social distance, not stepping outside their rooms, not hanging out in groups). Infected workers were quarantined, while workers who were not infected were kept in the dormitories. Workers were often moved from room to room as a response strategy, without adequate communication about why they were being moved and what were the steps being taken.

**Culture-Centered Approach**

The CCA theorizes that individuals, households, and communities construct and negotiate meanings of health, which, in turn, serve as the registers for everyday actions around health and well-being (Basu & Dutta, 2011; Dutta, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008). These meanings of health are constituted in the midst of the dynamic interactions among culture, structure, and agency (Dutta, 2008). Culture reflects the shifting web of values and meanings and is empirically borne out in the contexts within which individuals, households, and communities construct these meanings. Structures depict materiality, expressed in the forms of organizing of politics and economics that determine the distribution of resources in society. Contexts of everyday life at the margins are shaped by the interactions among culture and structure. Culturally embedded values legitimize and reproduce structures; simultaneously, structures shape cultural values and meanings. Agency is the individual and collective capacity to make sense of structures and to participate in actions in negotiating and transforming these structures. In offering a communicative explanation of the inequities in health outcomes that are empirically evidenced at the margins, the CCA theorizes that these inequities are produced through communicative inequalities, reflecting the inequalities in the distribution of communication resources in society (both information and voice resources; Dutta, 2008).

To intervene in health inequities then, the CCA cocreates communicative infrastructures for the voices of the margins through practices of solidarity, with an
advisory group from the margins identifying the research problem, constructing the research design, and participating in making sense of the data to guide intervention development (Dutta, 2007, 2008, 2018c; Dutta et al., 2019). These communicative infrastructures for the voices of the global margins create theoretical and practical registers for intervening in health inequities (Bates et al., 2019; Dutta, 2008, 2018c; Dutta et al., 2019). Theorizing as an expression of subaltern agency cocreates communicative registers for intervening in the unequal structures, building resources for negotiating structures as well as cocreating advocacy/activist/movement interventions seeking structural transformations (Dutta et al., 2019). In Singapore, amid the systemic erasure of the voices of low-wage migrant workers, cocreating theoretical frameworks for explaining health outcomes in solidarity with advisory groups of workers resists the dominant structures of theorizing. Extant culture-centered interventions with the workers document the everyday forms of material disenfranchisement experienced by migrant workers, reflected in everyday struggles with food, decent housing, and adequate sanitation (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=549454712442125). These daily struggles of health and well-being are intertwined with the precarity and communicative erasures experienced by migrant workers. Amid the C19 outbreak in the dormitories, the advisory group of low-wage migrant workers outlined the following question: “What are the meanings of health among low-wage migrant workers amid the C19 outbreak?”

Method

This article reports from a mixed-methods study, combing a digital ethnography with in-depth interviews, embedded in a culture-centered intervention on migrant health, with the framework of research designed by an advisory group of low-wage migrant workers (Dutta, 2018b; Dutta et al., 2019). Since 2012, this advisory group of low-wage migrant workers has identified the specific problems of health to be studied by drawing on their lived experiences, informed the research design, participated in gathering data, and coanalyzed the data (Dutta, 2017a, 2017b). The ongoing empirical work carried out by the Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) has included participant observations, in-depth interviews, and multipoint surveys, resulting in an advocacy intervention, “Respect our Food Rights,” mobilizing to secure infrastructures for the health and well-being of migrant workers (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=549454712442125).

When the C19 outbreaks emerged in the dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers, the existing advisory group of workers cocreated a research design to investigate the outbreak, with the objective of mapping C19-related health solutions. The advisory group designed the in-depth interview protocol, identified participants, and created a list of the digital spaces (Facebook pages created by workers) to be examined. The in-depth interviews reported here were deemed to be low-risk following university ethics procedures. I have taken the following steps to anonymize worker identity: (a) transcribed the interviews immediately, erasing the audio files immediately after transcription, and (b) removed any identifiers from the narrative
accounts. I kept detailed notes of interviews where participants felt uncomfortable being recorded.

The digital ethnography (87 hours of participant observation) was carried out in spaces where low-wage migrant workers participate online (Facebook pages), carried out over a period of the month of April (the basis for this analysis, although the larger digital ethnographic project is ongoing). I conducted participant observations of the digital spaces, participating in these spaces based on the relationships formed by the existing work of CARE. My role included interpreting and translating documents for the participants, translating participant articulations from Bengali into English for the digital sites, and lending my voice in solidarity through digital posts. I took detailed notes of online interactions, coding issue-specific articulations, negotiations of power, as well as the strategies for communicative negotiations of the C19 outbreak and the corresponding measures. Moreover, this article reports from 47 semistructured interviews with low-wage Bangladeshi migrant workers conducted in April 2020. The participants for the interviews were identified using snowball sampling, guided theoretically by the principle of cocreating the “margins of the margins” (Dutta, 2018b). I conducted the interviews in Bengali, mix of Bengali and English, or English, depending on the level of comfort and the preference of the participant. Data analysis was carried out through line-by-line coding of the 47 interviews, followed by the organizing of the codes into broader themes. The initial themes emergent from the analysis were shared with the advisory group, who made sense of the themes through their lived experiences amid C19. The advisory group determined the key findings to be reported based on the consideration of the immediate challenges they have been experiencing amid C19.2

Findings

The participant narratives foreground the structural context of the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers in Singapore. The structures of exploitation of migrant labor are situated in relationship to the everyday erasures of voices of low-wage migrant workers, narrating the outbreak in continuity with the existing forms of material exploitation of workers. This interplay between the structural context of C19 and the layers of communicative erasures shapes the everyday negotiations of health and well-being among low-wage migrant workers in the middle of the pandemic.

Structures of Exploitation

Participants share that their everyday lives are shaped by the structures of labor exploitation in Singapore, making sense of the outbreak as a reflection of entrenched structural exploitation. Shares Sajedul,

When a worker comes to Singapore, he does not know that he is going to live like this. Like rats. He does not know that he will be treated like this. He does not know that the contract he saw and signed in Bangladesh was a lie.
Note here the role of the information gap that shapes the exploitation of workers. The low-wage migrant worker steps onto the migration journey without the knowledge of the unhygienic living conditions he will be placed into. As the outbreak in the dormitories renders salient the poor living conditions, Jahan bhai (brother in Bengali) asks me to join him on a video walk of the dormitory. On the WhatsApp video call, he takes me to the toilet (that is unclean and overflowing) of the dormitory that is shared by the workers (often with almost 20 workers per toilet) and tells me, “Do you think I would have come here if I knew I would have to live like this? No worker makes the decision to come to live like this knowing it.”

The participants suggest that the contract that serves as a legal register for the workers is mostly unfulfilled, and they have limited to no protections in ensuring that the clauses spelt out in the contract are fulfilled. This is evident in the vast gap between the living conditions the workers find themselves in after arriving at Singapore and the perception that is crafted by the recruiting agent in Bangladesh. In the words of Shamik,

That first night in Singapore is when I realized the life I had signed myself up for. Going to the dorm room on the back of a lorry; that was the first time I realized what my life as a worker will be like.

The narratives of exploitation are tied to accounts of being deceived while migrating. This deception is tied to the sense of insecurity workers feel in the middle of the
pandemic. They express anxieties about whether they will receive their wages or be able to continue working in Singapore. Voices Rakawat,

I am worried about getting my salary. This employer has not paid me for many months last year. He has said, he doesn’t have the money. What will happen with the salary now? That’s what I am worried about. I have my aging parents, two younger brothers, two sisters that are not married, and I have my wife and four children. What will happen to them if I can’t send money home? They will die of hunger.

Rakawat further shares that he has been paying back the debt he took when he migrated to Singapore, and he is filled with worry that he will not be able to pay back the debt.

For most of the participants, the money paid to the agent is a binding force, holding its power over the life of the worker. Pointing this power inequality that is intertwined with the debt taken out by low-wage migrant workers, participants suggest that they bear the mistreatment at work silently. Notes Sajal,

The supervisor shouts at me and keeps screaming. He uses bad words at me. When I am tired, and I can’t take it any longer, I remind myself of the debt that the family has taken to send me here. So I keep quiet and don’t say anything.

For many participants, the feeling of precarity about the temporariness of their work permit with the power over the permit held by the employer is exacerbated by the anxiety about the debt taken to support the migration. This is shared by Bikash,

This C19 in the dormitory is because of how bad the dormitory is for our health. It has always been like this. But we don’t say anything. If a worker complains, boss will get him deported. What will happen then with the debt? Who will feed my family? So I haven’t said anything about the room. How can any human being live like that in a room, with so many other people?

The silence around the unhealthy living conditions emerges across the interviews, with participants voicing the fear of being deported.

The structures of exploitation that constitute low-wage migrant labor are voiced in relationship with the experiences of the lockdown protocols. This is shared by Ahmed:

The worker is put into the room with so many workers. Who will say anything? Here a worker is only exploited. How can a room be safe when there are so many workers? But the owner only wants to exploit workers and use us.

Similarly, shared Jamil,

I am worried. How can I be healthy when there is no way I can practice the 1 meter distance in the room? There are so many brothers all in the room. Some of the brothers are going out to work. I am worried that I will get the virus.
The workers theorize that the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers is a direct effect of the crowded conditions of the dormitories, the lack of adequate ventilation, and the absence of adequate infrastructures for the health and well-being of workers. Notes Neyaz, “No one, not even a worker can live like this. There is no window in the room. It is hot. I can’t breathe. Where will I practice the 1-meter distance in living situation like this?” This is voiced by Mokhtar: “What has happened with COVID? These dormitories. The virus has spread here. But worker brothers have been saying this for a long time, how can I live like this. No one listens to the worker here.” Sharing with me over a video conversation, Majhir says,

You can see the arrangement. Here we are living 12 persons in one room. And 1 meter social distancing required to follow as a preventive measure is not possible in my room. I complained about this . . . I think the authority or Singapore Govt. need to take immediate action regarding our living arrangement. Previously the process by which slaves are kept in a room, presently the migrant workers are kept by the same way. I think now is the time to improve this situation.

The structural condition of the dormitory, housing large numbers of workers within rooms with limited spaces is articulated by Sameer: “I have no space to move inside the room. Even if I move just this much, I will collide into a brother. There is a brother that sleeps on the bunk above.” The poor housing condition, the workers suggest, has been exacerbated by the Ministry guidelines. This is shared by Rasel:

The rooms are full of workers now. Because of the lockdown, the worker can’t move outside of the room. So everyone is in the room. We have 19 brothers in my room. The authorities tell us to practice 1 meter distance. But how to stay in the same room with so many workers? That is making it worse with COVID.

Similarly, Majhir suggests that the rooms have the capacity to house five workers at the most.

The small room, I think, can accommodate only 5-6 persons. The lesson given by COVID-19 is that . . . You see, yesterday, the highest no. of corona positive comes from the dormitory. Every day, the number of corona positive patient comes in, the highest number is from the dormitory. A fourth dormitory locked down yesterday. Till today total four dormitory has been locked down, and in spite of that, changes are not being made. The bathrooms are dirty. What I want to say that the Government or NGO or policy makers should take actions immediately. They should think that the design of dormitory of migrant workers is totally wrong. For a safe and sustainable housing and accommodation, this type of design must have to be changed now, immediately.

In the initial response to the C19 outbreak in the dormitories, the state directed the workers to stay inside their rooms. The movement of workers was surveilled. This is expressed by Najmul: “I can’t leave the room. It is like being in a prison. And the room is so crowded with everyone staying inside the room.” The room as the site of infection is the cause of anxiety for the participants. This is shared by Utpal:
From the beginning of March, I have only spent my time worrying. I worry about my family home. I worry about the room here. How can I avoid getting COVID with so many people in one room? Only staying in the room, and worrying about the infection.

**Communicative Erasure**

Communicative erasures are scripted into the digital infrastructures of “smart city” Singapore. The voice of Bashir reflects this:

> Where will a worker go? Actually all of these things I am saying, these are my rights. That these are my rights, I know it. I don’t need anyone to come and speak for me. But, who will hear the voice of the worker?

This narrative account offered by Bashir reflects the power of worker agency, the deep knowledge of one’s rights as a worker amid the structural exploitation, and the lack of access to the communication infrastructure for raising one’s voice. The violation of worker rights is situated amid the erasure of worker voice. In the account offered by Bashir, workers don’t have access to spaces where their voices can be heard. This is reiterated by Sabuj:

> In this city, there is no voice of the worker. The worker can’t talk here. The city doesn’t listen to the voice of the worker. You look at all these structures we build. But like the structures, the city can’t hear us. It can’t see the pain that we workers have to bear.

This erasure is constituted amid the everyday racisms experienced by the Bangladeshi workers, amid the accounts of being verbally abused at work. Notes Shahid, “Who will listen to the worker? The supervisor throws verbal abuses. Calls me names. This indignity, a worker has to live with.” Similarly, Badal points to the everyday verbal abuses that are hurled at him at work: “I am afraid to say anything to the supervisor. He calls me names. He makes insulting references to Bangla (the term Bangla is often used by mostly Chinese-speaking supervisors to insult Bangladeshi workers).”

Shares Babu, who, as a worker, does advocacy for migrant worker rights through his poetry:

> Generally, one cannot raise his voice. Certainly, a migrant worker cannot raise his voice. Here you know, there is censorship by the government. The censorship is not only for media, but also for all other activities. Government does not generally accept the critique. For example, when my article has been published in “__________ Journal” many Singaporeans gave me message through the Messenger that it is very risky for your future. They mentioned, you are a migrant worker and so you cannot write this type of article as the article’s main point is against the Singapore Government. If you read my article, you would find that I tried to show the present problematic scenario and at the same time I also propose the solutions that can be implemented. I tried to mention the problems and prospective solutions. I tried to write to give a little
bit pressure on the Government. So, if you want to change things, then a special strategy needs to be taken. The problem is that if Government understands that the writings or any action against the Government, then the authority will ban the migrant worker from working in Singapore. So I think this is the reason migrant workers do not want to raise their voice. They think that if they tried to go against the Government, then the Singapore authority will ban his work permit and send them back. But how many days we should stop? And so some people like me tried to raise our voices knowing the risk of banning.

It is worth attending to the interactions among culture, structure, and agency in constituting erasure. The authoritarian state structure works to silence the voices of low-wage migrant workers. The work permit is used as a tool for producing precarity and silencing the voices of the workers. Censorship is deployed as a tool for silencing the articulations of worker struggles. Workers negotiate the state’s dictate that bans any critique of the government. In negotiating this erasure, Babu and other workers create an alternative register in the spaces of culture. Poetry emerges as an infrastructure for raising voice, with workers sharing their everyday struggles with exploitation, challenges to health, and everyday hardships through poetry. Participating in the creation of poetry also builds a cultural register through which workers secure access to spaces such as journals, where the problems experienced by them are presented, pointing toward solutions as envisioned by the workers. This work of creating spaces draws on courage as well as creative strategizing. Babu’s sense that he can’t be silent about the injustices is an expression of worker agency, one that propels the platforms he creates along with other workers.

However, participants suggest that even when they speak, placing their bodies on the line, the structure doesn’t register this speech. They therefore note the gap between the articulations of challenges faced by workers and the responses from the state. This is reflected by Neyaz:

We will tell you everything that is going on here. All that the supplier companies do that is illegal. The government will say one thing on the contract and what is happening here is the opposite. You don’t think us workers don’t know this? We all know. But who will listen to the voices of the worker?

For instance, he notes the guarantee of decent housing and food in the contract. Pointing to the poor quality food that is delivered by catering companies, he notes, “The food is often stale. I have become sick eating the food. We have raised this issue. But who will listen to the voices of the worker?” Neyaz points to the “Respect our food rights” campaign that he worked on as part of an advisory group developing a culture-centered intervention to address the health of workers. Erasure is marked by the imperiousness of the authoritarian state structure to the voices of workers. Even when workers speak in spite of the various forces of silencing (the employer, restrictions on foreigner organizing imposed by the state), their voices remain unheard. In the account offered earlier, Babu shared that in spite of his writings on the issue of dormitory conditions, things haven’t changed.
This erasure of the voices of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore renders invisible the exploitative conditions of work and the inadequate structures of housing and food. The poor housing conditions have so far remained erased from discursive spaces. This erasure of the poor living conditions is intertwined with the erasure of the voices of low-wage migrant workers. When our academic–community–advocacy group team sought to build an advocacy campaign around the food challenges experienced by low-wage migrant workers, a prominent NGO (nongovernmental organization) working on migrant workers suggested to our team that the workers “don’t know” what they are talking about. The erasure performed by the authoritarian state on an ongoing basis is reproduced by hegemonic civil society actors that position themselves as the mediating voices of the workers. Mirroring the communicative inequality cultivated by the state, the civil society organizations perform their expertise as instruments of service delivery, acting as interlocutors for the workers. Even as they do so, they systematically undermine the voices of the workers, capturing the agency of workers as passive recipients to be saved by civil society.

Working with the workers amid the C19 outbreak, I recall receiving an email from a dean of a former institution where I worked, asking me to remove my digital affiliations with the institution and update the courses I am teaching after a new story drawing from my research with the low-wage migrant workers broke globally, representing the voices of the workers. This is what I entered in a journal note:

That I would receive a note from this Dean asking me to remove my affiliations with this institution on my websites is part of the apparatus of silencing. Of course, it is expected that one would update their affiliations when jobs are changed. I hadn’t gotten around to updating the details of my research site in the past two years. But what is it that prompted this Dean and the institution to surveil my website and send me an email after two years? Why now, right after the article on the migrant worker plight appeared? Is this institutional pettiness masquerading as diligence, or the workings of a larger structure threatened by the voices of low-wage migrant workers? Although this email now might be coincidental, it is also a reminder of how Singapore’s reputation economy works on the ongoing surveillance and silencing of what might appear as critique of the authoritarian state. This is reflective of how academia in Singapore consistently works to stay silent on public spaces on the plight of the workers. It is fine to publish academic pieces in journals on the plight of the worker and make a career as a migration academic. Placing your body alongside the workers in solidarity in public forms is an entirely different story. To be seen as critiquing the state is unsustainable to one’s livelihood in Singapore, this message is clear. If this is the chilling effect on academia, what is the extent of the erasure experienced by low-wage migrant workers?

Similarly, Facebook sites and spaces supposedly created to address migrant worker needs, often by Singaporean professionals or civil society actors, and presenting themselves as advocacy spaces for migrant workers, are quickly organized to silence the voices of workers when they document the unhealthy living conditions or the nonpayment of wages. This is pointed out by Ajmal: “These conditions the worker lives in, this is the true Singapore. But is anyone interested in what actually the conditions are?
Who will come and see what the truth is?” He shares that he had posted screenshots of images from the dormitory and has been attacked by Singaporeans, asked to go back to Bangladesh, and told that he is being ungrateful. Similarly, on a Facebook page (name of page removed to protect worker anonymity), when Kabir shared about the nonpayment of his wages, Singaporeans running the page accused him of making things up. Pointing to the government’s commitment to pay every worker, he was told that he is creating trouble. Then, reproducing the state’s strategy of surveillance and intimidation, he was threatened, with one Facebook participant stating that he is a member of the police-auxiliary security force and would report Kabir.

Amid the fear and the silencing, participants share the ways in which they voice their health concerns related to C19. Notes Rajul,

For the last two to three days, the toilets of the dormitory were not cleaned properly, and we told the dormitory managers about this, but received no response. We do understand that our voice does not reach the dormitory authority and does not make any difference. No change has been made to the dormitory arrangements. In this C19 situation, though we have been asking for the last few days, no cleaning was done in the shower or toilet areas. The dormitory where I live is a red zone dormitory where five persons have already been affected by COVID-19. Even then, the dormitory authority does not take care of the cleanliness or we can say no improvements are visible. Only at our entrance gate, signs with 1-meter marking were put up, but inside our room no improvement was done.

Worth noting here is the agentic capacity of the workers amid the erasure and censorship. Rajul speaks up and holds the dormitory authorities to account. He posts images of the unclean toilets on a WhatsApp group shared with other workers. Other workers share about their experiences with unclean toilets on Facebook pages. As the images of unclean toilets start circulating, a conversation is created in the public sphere. Singapore activists working on rights of low-wage migrant workers pick up the conversation. White papers published by our research team foreground the voices of the workers (Dutta, 2020b, 2020c). National and international media pick up the findings of the white paper and foreground the voices of the workers (Ratcliffe, 2020; Tan, 2020). Amid growing public opinion on the poor infrastructures housing low-wage migrant workers, the state responds by committing to build adequate infrastructures. Yet the workers are not convinced. They point out that many such promises have been made in the past and have not been fulfilled. They find the promises empty. This is shared by Mohor: “For change to happen, we workers will have to come together. Only then, we can make sure that these things will be implemented.”

Conclusion

Smart city Singapore’s inability to “see” the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers is a direct offshoot of its “smart city” model that works through the exploitation, repression, and silencing of low-wage migrant workers from the margins of Asia (Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018). Herein lies the paradox of the “smart city.” To be “smart,” the city has to erase. The “smart city” must carefully and strategically
un-see the very exploitative practices that are the necessary ingredients to its smartness. Its very projection as a model of governance based on intelligent technocratic decision making thrives on the erasure of the voices of the exploited workers who build its smart city infrastructure. (see Pow, 2014) The tools of silencing accounts of labor exploitation work alongside the celebratory PR (public relations)-speak that churns out the imagery of a technologically connected participatory city (see, e.g., Kong, 2018; Kong & Woods, 2018). The narrative accounts offered by low-wage migrant workers disrupt the elaborate contrivance of socialist Singapore as a contrast to Western liberal capitalism (see, e.g., Huat, 2017). In contrast to the claims made by Huat (1998, 2017), Asian values are assembled in Singapore to enable the exploitative excesses of “rapacious capitalism” (Huat, 1998, p. 215). The state-owned capitalist infrastructures put forth by Huat as markers of socialism are the sites of exploitation of low-wage migrant workers. That the official state narrative explaining the C19 outbreak draws on this inability to have predicted the outbreak is reflective of the extreme neoliberalism of the Singapore model, pointing to the inherent practices of exploitation that form the infrastructures of the smart imaginary. The C19 outbreak ruptures the carefully curated Singapore story, rendering visible the stories of labor exploitation that are carefully erased to prop up the seductions of futuristic technology and sustainable futures underlying Singapore’s global ascendance as the interlocutor of the Asian turn (Dutta, 2019a, 2019b).

Contrast the hegemonic state narrative with the lived experiences of the workers that situate the C19 outbreak amid structures of exploitation. The experience of the C19 outbreak is intricately tied to the experiences of worker exploitation and racism. The structural context of the exploitation of low-wage migrant workers is theorized as the cause of the outbreak in the dormitories. Moreover, the silencing of worker voice and repression of worker collectivization are seen as the factors leading to the outbreak; workers note that the dorm conditions had not changed over the years because they don’t have access to voice infrastructures. State authoritarianism renders impossible a framework for securing worker health (also see Wham, 2019). The narrative accounts attend to the ways in which communicative erasure works to perpetuate the unhealthy conditions of living. Participants share that their voices remain unheard even when they take embodied risks to narrate the poor living conditions. This further points to the limits of the mediation model of addressing migrant worker needs, where a civil society is placed as the mediator for addressing the health and well-being of workers (Koh et al., 2017). The structures of civil society, limited within the ambit of the authoritarian state, largely perform pragmatically to the diktats of the state through strategies of accommodation. The inequalities of power between low-wage migrant workers and civil society in Singapore, accompanied by the repression of worker collectivization, translate into a state-imposed top-down lockdown protocol without discursive openings for listening to worker voices or without the communicative infrastructures for worker participation in the design and implementation of the pandemic response (see also Lyons, 2005).

Singapore’s state capitalism translates into many migrant workers laboring in projects funded by state-run corporations. Simultaneously, state-run corporations invest
into the infrastructures of worker housing amid the C19 outbreaks. As was evident during the C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers, state capital plays a key role in building the infrastructures for migrant workers (Dutta, 2020a). The authoritarian state is an active participant in the model of “hybrid development” (Rahim & Barr, 2019), organizing to extract labor and catalyze primitive accumulation, and managed by a small group of interconnected elites. The participant narratives point to the communicative erasures that constitute Singapore’s management of migrant labor. Participants suggest that these erasures shape the context within which the poor worker housing conditions are perpetuated. Erasures are integral to the technologies of futuristic urban planning, paradoxically constituted into the claims of participatory smart design (see for instance Kong, 2018).

Singapore’s smart futures exist alongside the criminalization of migrant worker organizing, censorship of migrant worker protest, and the regulation of migrant worker presence in spaces of public participation through technologies of surveillance and police control to deliver profits for state capital. As a model city state and a pedagogue of “extreme neoliberalism” (Dutta, 2020a, p. 2), Singapore seeds, promotes, and circulates a hyperexploitative model of free market economics, packaging this as “smart governance” (Dutta, 2018a, 2019b). Notes Dutta (2020a),

It has invented the statecraft of disciplining labor and silencing dissent as model governmentality, while turning itself into the Asian gateway for transnational capital. The technologies and techniques of extreme neoliberalism are held up by a reputational economy that projects the account of a hyper-efficient state celebrated as the model of development, embodied in its “smart city” imaginary/propaganda leapfrogging from the “Third World to the first” at the frontiers of global capitalist expansion.

The C19 outbreak in dormitories housing low-wage migrant workers renders visible the violence on the health and well-being of precarious workers that is written into extreme neoliberalism (see Springer, 2012).

Interventions into migrant health therefore fundamentally ought to be anchored in building infrastructures for worker voice and collectivization. Organizing to transform the authoritarian structures of disciplining labor in extreme neoliberalism is foundational to securing worker health. In our culture-centered collaborations amid the pandemic, the advisory group of low-wage migrant workers directed the construction of white papers by CARE, participating in the design of the research and in making sense of the emergent narratives (see Dutta, 2020b, 2020c). The problem structure, key questions, and findings reported in the white papers were shaped by the advisory group of workers, serving as the basis for media advocacy. The advocacy work resulted in the reporting of the findings in local as well as international media, generated public dialogues in Singapore, and created pressure points on the state (Beaubien, 2020; Ratcliffe, 2020; Tan, 2020). White papers voicing just architectures for migrant worker housing pushed a worker-designed framework into the discursive space of Singapore (Dutta, 2020b, 2020c). For a surveillance state so deeply invested politically and economically in its reputation economy through the projection of its model of technocratic management, the co-constructed media advocacy offered alternative narrative
anchors for migrant infrastructure design. The academic–activist–worker solidarity that seeded this culture-centered intervention offers a template for resisting authoritarian neoliberalism through the cocreation of voice infrastructures. In the context of migration studies, such voice infrastructures owned by low-wage migrant workers in hyperprecarious conditions offer new registers for theorizing social change, opening up the discursive registers to alternative rationalities. The foregrounding of the health crisis created by exploitative conditions of migrant workers as the backdrop of the pandemic points toward the urgency of theorizing labor organizing as the basis for securing migrant health.

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The author declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Mohan J Dutta is a special issue editor of this collection as well. To handle this conflict, the other editor Satveer Kaur-Gill sent out Mohan Jyoti Dutta’s paper to two authors following the blind peer-review process. The paper was recommended for revisions before moving the paper to minor revisions and then acceptance.

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**Notes**

1. Consider the statement by Mr. Lawrence Wong, Chair of the C19 taskforce, that the outbreak could not have been foreseen (https://mothership.sg/2020/04/lawrence-wong-do-things-differently-foreign-workers/).
2. The findings reported in this article formed the basis of two policy briefs directed at addressing the structural contexts of the C19 outbreak in low-wage migrant worker dormitories.

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