

Migrant labour – “foreign lives”

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EATING chips in a Singapore McDonald’s with his press clippings proudly spread in front of him, Mohammed Mukul Hossine is revelling in his status as a published poet. The 25-year-old Bangladeshi’s day job is working on the piling for a new block of luxury flats. With a father back home undertaking the *haj* this year, and one of his eight siblings still in school, he needs the money. His book of poems, “Me Migrant”, which he paid to have translated from Bengali to English, and which were then “transcreated” by Cyril Wong, a Singaporean poet, will not be a bestseller. But it has drawn some attention to a large, often overlooked slice of Singapore’s population: its 1m “work permit” holders—migrant workers on two-year contracts. The poems suggest, unsurprisingly, that their lives are pretty miserable.

The International Labour Organisation estimates that the Asia-Pacific region was host in 2013 to 25.8m migrant workers. They have done wonders for both their home and destination countries. Rapidly ageing societies such as Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan are short of workers. Younger, poorer places such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal and the Philippines need the money their emigrants send home. So Cambodians work on South Korean farms; young Chinese men work in Tokyo’s convenience stores; and South Asians toil on Singapore’s building sites. The World Bank estimates that of the ten countries that receive the most in remittances from overseas workers, five are in Asia. In the Philippines, remittances are equal to 10% of GDP.

In Singapore 1.4m workers, or 38% of the workforce, are foreigners on time-limited passes. Most come without their families. Many of the 326,000 construction workers live in dormitories; the 232,000 domestic workers live in their employers’ homes. Many can repeatedly renew their two-year contracts. But they are given virtually no hope of becoming “permanent residents”—as other long-staying foreigners can—let alone Singaporean citizens. Women who become pregnant are sent home; workers who overstay are caned and deported (“law and order so accurate here,” notes one of Mr Mukul’s poems in praise of “beloved Singapore”). Some politicians say that, since their stays are limited and they impose little burden on local infrastructure, pass-holders should not really be counted as part of the population at all.

Some of course suffer exploitation and misfortune. Mr Mukul’s first visit to Singapore in 2008 came after his father had sold land to pay the S\$10,000 (\$7,400) fee demanded by job agents in Bangladesh. But his employer went bust and he had to return home penniless. It is a typical story, says Jolovan Wham of HOME, a charity that works with migrant workers. Singapore limits agents’ fees to two months’ wages, but cannot police what happens in the home countries. So many workers toil for months to repay their debts. If they fall ill, are injured or

find themselves in dispute with their employers, they have few resources, though local NGOs help—it was through one, HealthServe, that Mr Mukul found the cash to have his book published.

His book is not full of anger (despite one poem in which he declares “I want to announce war.”) Rather it is about homesickness, missing his family—especially his mother—and the isolation of the migrant’s life. His own favourite is called simply “Loneliness”, and finishes: “Stranded immigrant, unending solitude.” In this Mr Mukul is also typical: he is far from the only migrant worker-poet; and that loneliness reflects the preoccupations of many others: missing spouses, and children growing up not knowing one parent; thwarted romances; lost homes.

Though literature is particularly central to Bengali culture, workers from many nations have taken up writing. Shivaji Das, a Singapore-based writer and management consultant, helps organise poetry competitions in Singapore and Malaysia with entries in Chinese, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Tamil as well as Bengali. A winner from last year’s contest in Singapore was N. Rengarajan, a 29-year-old construction worker from southern India, whose poem on the pluses and minuses of migrant life sums up many of the recurring themes. Translated from the Tamil, it concludes: “Living in a foreign land/ we can buy everything that has a price/ but love and affection./ Ours is not a foreign life/ our lives are foreign to us.”

In Singapore, migrant workers rarely make the news. When they do, it is sometimes for a good deed noted by a politically correct pro-government organ. But many in Singapore were shaken when, in December 2013, a traffic accident in the part of town known as Little India degenerated into a riot, as South Asian migrants vented their frustrations. And in the past few months, another sort of story has appeared: of the pre-emptive arrests and sometimes deportation of a few “radicalised” Bangladeshis plotting terrorist attacks at home.

Twenty years of schoolin’, and they put you on the day shift

Mr Das notes that the reaction of many people to the poetry is surprise. Migrants can write! They even have emotions! So it not only gives those who are interested a platform and a chance to share their work and their feelings. It also helps to change public attitudes. Singapore is a sought-after and hence expensive destination for migrants, compared with, say, the Middle East. So some who come are well educated and even, at home, comfortably off. They are, through self-selection, adventurous and ambitious. Unenviable though their lives in Singapore seem, many are there through repeated choices, suggesting both the lack of opportunity they felt at home, and that Singapore’s treatment of migrants is seen as better than most.

Mr Mukul, a high-school graduate who has been writing songs and poetry since he was 12, found construction work hard, fainting on the fourth day of his first job, humping sacks of cement. Yet he keeps coming and keeps writing, and now dreams the impossible dream: of becoming Singaporean.