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SINGAPORE

Films Show Other Side Of Migrant Workers

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SINGAPORE, Sep 16 (IPS) - Migrant workers may be what one filmmaker calls a "socio- political hot potato" in Singapore, but that is precisely why a film festival opted to showcase the plight of workers who often remain faceless although they are vital to the city- state's everyday life and economy.

Apart from challenges with assimilation, some 1.3 million migrant workers here are facing discrimination by Singaporeans who see the influx of foreigners as a threat to their own rice bowls.

More than one-third of Singapore's 5 million population comprise non-citizens, making it the Asian country with the highest proportion of migrant workers in varied sectors such as construction and domestic work.

With rising discontent among both locals and foreigners here, events like the Migration Film Festival, organised by Singapore-based community arts group Migrant Voices on Sep. 11, are geared at "building a bridge between the two communities".

"We don't want to speak for migrant workers," says Migrant Voices president Shaun Teo. "We want to provide the platform for migrant workers to speak for themselves and to encourage creative discourse."

Some 180 tickets were sold for the festival, featuring independent-made films by local filmmakers, which returned after a 3-year break. The inaugural event in 2007 saw less than 40 attendees.

In July 2010, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told reporters at the end of his six-day official visit to the United States that some 100,000 migrant workers would be added to Singapore's workforce this year. "If we don't allow the foreign workers in, you are going to have overheating (of the economy)," Lee said.

But just one month later, at the National Day rally on Aug. 29, Lee adjusted that number to "perhaps 80,000 workers", following concern among Singaporeans that foreigners are contributing to overcrowding in the island- state, intense competition for jobs, and skyrocketing costs in public housing.

A 2009 poll by the Institute of Policy Studies found close to two-thirds of Singaporeans surveyed believed the government's immigration policy was weakening national unity. Approximately the same number of respondents, however, said they supported bringing in more foreigners if it helped the economy.

"The influx of migrant workers has always been a socio- political hot potato in Singapore," says independent filmmaker Jenny Chan, 29. "The resultant social, cultural and economic impact is fascinating."

Films such as 'Durai & Saro', the fictional story of a platonic relationship between an Indian construction worker and a domestic helper from the Philippines, "aims to humanise the faceless mass that many Singaporeans have come to see as the 'others'," says director-producer Prema Menon. "I would like for the audience to change their perspective, and not sympathise, but empathise," says Menon. "Pity is no use, but respect and understanding can really start to turn things around."

Singapore's Ministry of Manpower has in place stringent rules that forbid foreign workers on work permit from marrying Singaporeans and Singapore permanent residents. Employers also stand to forfeit a 5,000 dollar (3,700 U.S. dollars) security bond if female domestic workers get pregnant.

For this reason, among others, many pragmatic Singaporeans employers are wary of allowing their employees out of their sight. Foreign domestic workers in Singapore are not given mandatory days off. Domestic helpers receive an option of one day off a month, which can be signed away in return for between 15 and 22 U.S. dollars more.

These rules only applies to low-waged, "unskilled" labour. Other Manpower Ministry laws governing this group of workers cautions against involvement "in any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities, including breaking up families in Singapore".

"We tend to typecast, generalise them in news stories," says independent filmmaker Chan Kah Mei, 33. "They are portrayed as the faceless foreign worker, often times the victim, but really they are individuals, each with a different character – some resilient, some funny and others whiny... Each with their own thoughts and aspirations."

"Migrant workers are just people driven by basic human needs, and they are sometimes exploited precisely because of that drive," says Jenny Chan, whose film, 'Confluence of Lands', revolves around a mini-mart in Singapore's Little India, where different faces come together in different spaces.

"Before I made the film I was oblivious to the workings of government policies and mercantile recruitment agents, and through the process I learnt so much more about the 'invisible population' in our country than before," she adds.

For some, like filmmaker Menon, the treatment of low-wage migrant workers here is unfathomable.

"During my time in South India, I had a handful of friends and colleagues who came from the same (social and educational) background as many of the men here," says Menon. "So getting to know them as peers, and then coming to Singapore and seeing many men who are exactly like them being treated as a different class (of low-wage manual labour) was quite a rude shock."

Jenny Chan recounts the story of one Bangladeshi worker, who told her: "Our families pawn land and jewellery to send us here. They have not seen the hard labour and suffering we undergo here, sometimes we work from 6 am till midnight."

The Migration Film Festival serves to "remind Singaporeans that we are not much different from these migrant workers," says Teo. "It is only 45 years of independence and education that makes us culturally different."

"At the end of the day, we are all the same. We aim to survive in this world, taking care of the people that we love," says Menon. (END/2010)

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