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Precarities of Migrant Work in Singapore: Migration, (Im)mobility, and Neoliberal Governmentality

MOHAN JYOTI DUTTA[1]
Massey University, New Zealand

SATVEER KAUR-GILL
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Building on this dialectical relationship between mobility and materiality, and drawing on our collaborations with foreign domestic workers (FDWs) and migrant constructions workers (MCWs) in Singapore in cocreating communication infrastructures, we theorize resistance as mobilities in Asia. Technologies of mediation, as markers of mobility in Asian neoliberal marketing campaigns and academic celebrations of the Asian century, strategically erase the possibilities for labor organizing and collective bargaining through which migrant workers in precarious jobs can secure access to fundamental economic rights and basic working conditions. Paradoxically, then, drawing upon our ethnographic collaborations with FDWs and MCWs in Singapore, we attend to the interplays of the symbolic and the material that are reproduced through artifacts of mobility or immobility, offering Asian resistance as a mobile trope.

Keywords: migration, construction work, domestic work, human rights, smart city, mobile media, mobility

When participating in developing a communication advocacy intervention in collaboration with foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore that sought to interrupt the ongoing everyday oppressions they experienced, Anna,[2] a 34-year-old Filipina mother of two children who had been working in Singapore for three years, narrated her story of being locked in by her employers whenever they left for work, punctuating a theoretical anchor for mapping communication and (im)mobility. This meant that Anna could not get out of the house when she wanted to and had to wait until her employers returned home to have the opportunity for human communication and interaction, which often was in the form of abuses hurled at her for tasks that were apparently not carried out to her employers' satisfaction. Her *mam* (referring to the

Mohan Dutta: mohanjdutt@gmail.com
Satveer Kaur-Gill: ksatveer@gmail.com
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[2] The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identities.

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woman in the employing household) had seized her mobile phone and had also taken away her passport and work permit on the day she arrived from the employment agency. Not being able to move out of the employers' house, not having the freedom to communicate, and not having access to the markers of identity that legitimized her presence in Singapore as an FDW, Anna increasingly felt isolated, and this took a toll on her health. Four years into the job, she ran away to a shelter run by our community partner, the Humanitarian Aid Organization.[3] Narrating these experiences of being locked in, Anna would often break into tears, shaking vigorously while voicing how she felt like a slave within those four walls, not knowing where to go and whom to talk to. Anna's struggles for mobility reflect the broader structures of migration management in and as Asian governmentality, within which migrant women and men[4] without access to rights (particularly labor rights) and to communicative infrastructures for making claims to rights are erased systematically from discursive sites of claim making.

Anna's immobility is set against the backdrop of the discourses of mobility circulated in neoliberal techniques of unskilled worker governmentality in Singapore (Paul, 2015). That Anna's body and her voice are constrained within the private walls of domestic work and therefore erased is "communicatively inverted" (Dutta, 2015) through the state's discourse of enabling economic mobility in sender states (such as Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia). The body as a material artifact constituted in an interlinked web with the mobile phone, the passport, and the work pass communicates the impossibilities of flow, disrupting the symbolic articulations of passports, mobile phones, and migrant workers as celebratory examples of mobilities that announce the Asian century, also described by statistics on mobile penetration and colorful charts documenting remittance flows.

Stories of resilience and well-being that celebrate the Singapore state's neoliberal model of migration management as an "Asian model" of development to be copied and exported elsewhere (Chua, 2011; Pow, 2014) render as immobile the voices of FDWs and MCWs articulating their rights and access to social justice as frameworks for organizing, precisely through the mobility of a parochial economic logic. In other words, the neoliberal framework of mobility governance in Singapore as a mobile Asian model of urban management renders as immobile the voices and bodies of migrant workers, projected into the global circuits of capital flow through an array of authoritarian policies legitimized through the hegemonic self-orientalizing discourse of "Asian values" (Pow, 2014). Amid authoritarian techniques of governmentality that mark as criminal the collective organizing of migrant workers, marked in their status as temporary foreigners without "the right to have rights" (Arendt, 1973, p. 298), the immobilities in the everyday material spaces of work, living, and earning experienced by migrant workers are constituted by the mobility of the "Singapore model."

Building on this dialectical relationship between mobility and materiality, we offer a theoretical intervention into the sites of knowledge production on mobilities in Asia, arguing that the celebration of

[3] The name of the partner organization has been changed to protect its identity.

[4] Migrant construction workers and foreign domestic workers constitute semi-skilled or unskilled migrants, working in Singapore under the work permit. The work permit holders make up more than 50% of the migrant workforce in Singapore, with 284,900 MCWs and 246,800 FDWs, as reported by the Ministry of Manpower in December 2017. Comparatively, professional foreign workers total 187,700.

technodeterministic narratives of mediated mobilities as sites of capital production in Asia strategically obfuscate the immobile conditions within which migrant work is produced and negotiated, subject to authoritarian regimes of labor control organized in neoliberal techniques, without access to statehood, the rights of labor, and the rights of citizenship. Technologies of media(tiza)tion, as markers of mobility in Asian neoliberal marketing campaigns and academic celebrations of the Asian century and packaged as the "smart city" (the Singapore model of Asian development) (see, for instance, Chua, 2011; Söderström, Paasche, & Klauser, 2014) strategically erase the possibilities for labor organizing and collective bargaining through which migrant workers in precarious jobs can secure access to fundamental economic rights and basic working conditions. We argue that the "Singapore model," projected on the Asian and global imaginaries as a technique of smart technological governance (Chua, 2011; Ong, 2011) erases the displacements and immobilities that are fundamental to the model.

Drawing upon our ethnographic collaborations with FDWs and MCWs in Singapore grounded in the culture-centered approach (CCA) (Dutta, 2008), we attend to the interplays of the symbolic and the material that are reproduced through artifacts of mobility and immobility. The CCA seeks to build communicative infrastructures through collaborations with the subaltern margins, drawing upon participant observations, in-depth interviews, cocreational sense making, and creative workshops for developing advocacy interventions, all guided by advisory groups of subaltern communities. Our collaborations with MCWs began in 2008 and involve participant observations and collaborations on advocacy interventions based on more than 200 in-depth interviews, 1,000 surveys, and 37 workshops. Our collaborations with FDWs began in 2012 and involve participant observations, 157 in-depth interviews, 500 surveys, and 43 workshops that resulted in three stages of advocacy interventions. Embracing the call issued by Leurs and Smets (2018) for "embracing non-digital-media-centric-ness" (p. 9) in digital migration studies through the foregrounding of "embodied experiences," we explore the ways in which the lived experiences of precarious migrant workers in Singapore are constituted by and constitutive of techniques of mobility, articulated with an explicit commitment to communicating for social justice.

Regimes of Mobility

Singapore serves as an anchor to and for the Asian mobility regime (Chua, 2011). Propped up as a model for governmentality in Asian values, as an Asian way of doing things, it is then positioned to be exported across Asia. The Chinese and Indian governments, for instance, regularly send bureaucrats and diplomats to Singapore to study the Singapore model, with specific training programs on governmentality created for them. Singapore is the model developmental state, the intellectual, material, and symbolic source of the neoliberal Asian imagination projected on the global imaginary as the crossroads of the "Asian turn." Conferences such as that on the Asian turn hosted by the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore draw on Singapore as the intellectual hub and the model of the Asian conversation. Positioned as a model mechanism of Asian governmentality that achieves prosperity without what is simplistically positioned as the Western liberal diktat of democratization, Singapore's mobility through Asian spaces hinges on its capacity for achieving neoliberal growth without fundamental democratic freedoms. Conceptual apparatuses such as communitarianism and developmentalism are propped up as the defining features of Singapore's mobility as a governance model (Ortmann & Thompson, 2016; Thompson, 2009).

The regimes of Asian mobility thus flow through nodes copying Singapore, aspiring toward it, constructing possibilities around it, and imagining it as a future.

Moreover, the regimes of mobility projected on the global landscape imagine technologies as the bases of movements, both in catalyzing movements of Singapore as model of neoliberal governmentality to be exported to other sites of state-managed control in Asia and in offering specific solutions to governmentality. Technology is also critical in underpinning movements of unskilled labor from underdeveloped "Asian ghettos" into markers of modernity, economic progress, and growth. The Singapore model offers the smart city that addresses social, political, economic, and cultural challenges through continually evolving futuristic technological innovations delivered through the market (Hollands, 2008; Söderström et al., 2014). The mobility of the smart city, and therefore Singapore, as a model for Asian capitalist growth into the future is, however, marked by multiple erasures. State-sanctioned narratives of economic movement, scripted in the metastructure of meritocracy, obfuscate the corporeal presence of migrant workers in shadow spaces of Singapore's development without access to structures of collectivization and formalized claims to labor rights. The regimes of mobility thus (re)produced by the Singapore model offer for the Asian imaginary an ideology of authoritarian neoliberalism that deploys the power of the state to systematically disenfranchise migrant workers.

For John Urry (2007), movements in multimodal forms—physical, imaginative, and communicative—have been catalyzed by the unprecedented scale and flows of global capital, technologies of travel, transnational migrations, and networked communications. The mobility of social worlds and experiences is grounded in the neoliberal transformation of global political economy, the mobility of the ideology of the free market and financial capitalism. This neoliberal ideology of movement as a sign of agency, empowerment, and emancipation from local restraints, however, obfuscates the structural disenfranchisements that constitute and necessitate movements of the poor among sites of precarity reproduced by neoliberal policies in the Global South (Dutta, 2015) and the structural constraints on movements of the poor across the globe. Indeed, certain forms of movement are privileged and catalyzed by the neoliberal technologies of mobility, but other forms of movement are both forced by the mobility of technofinancial capital and structurally impeded by the formations of capital through new communication technologies. Although the capacity for movement is afforded to some exceptional global subjects of capital with social and economic resources, these new communication technologies "foreclose full access to systems of movement for 'othered' bodies" (Kojima, p. 34). The marked, classed, gendered subject of neoliberal capitalism is both a site of accelerated exploitations and is rendered silent in the mobile economy. Arguing "against mobility as opportunity, focusing instead on displacement" (Silvery, 2007, p. 142), our article attends to the differences and sites of marginalization that are reproduced and recirculated through the symbolic and material resources of mobility.

Mobility of the Smart City

Jamil does the work of laying out data cables in Singapore. Having completed his Bachelor of Science in physics, he describes data cables as the basic structure of digital connectivity. He shares how he takes pride in contributing to the digital infrastructure. Juxtaposing his work as a manual cable worker, Jamil observes, "the benefits of all these new high-tech projects are not for people like me." The work that he

does with his hands, he shares, is incommensurate with the education he has secured. Yet, after having remained unemployed for almost seven months after graduation, he decided to seek out an agent to look for opportunities for work in Singapore. Sharing how his family of six, including parents and two unmarried sisters, struggle to make a living, he expresses the immobility of possibilities in his life circumstances. An education does not afford him mobility, as "there are many Bangladeshi workers like me here who have BSc, MSc degrees."

Imagining access to the smart infrastructures in Singapore, he shares that these are not meant for him. He laments how the data plan on his phone often eats into the $150 or so he keeps for his monthly expenses after rent deductions and money sent home to pay off the debt he took on while coming to Singapore. Although Jamil has a BSc in physics from Bangladesh, the data cables he works on are not going to improve his life, consumed by the everyday struggles for a livelihood. He shares how he has to be mindful of the data plan, especially because he is uncertain about his job and about whether he is going to get paid every day. The phone card bill can be high when he misses home, and this means he has less money for his everyday expenses on food in Singapore, as he has to send a fixed amount home to repay some of the $15,000 debt his family took on to pay the agency and immigration fees for his migration to Singapore as a laborer. On a similar note, Munir shares:

> I miss my wife. We married last year, and then I came here. When I miss her, I call her. We often talk for many hours at night after I return home from work. I spend $80 on my phone card and Internet charges in a month, I send $200 home for doctor's expenses for my family and for carrying out the household, and then I send $500 every month for paying the debt. The rent here is deducted, $150, and I keep $150 for food and everything else. So when I have spent $80 on the phone charges, there are days when I don't have money for the food. But I can't cut the phone bill because I miss my wife.

Several the participants in our collaborations reiterated the cost of the phone bill. For workers in precarious conditions with large debts to repay and commitments to send money home, the affordances of the mobile phone are constituted amid the struggles to make a living.

Similarly, Liton shares that he first learned about Singapore from his friend Amir, who had a cousin working in Singapore. He saw the images of the Singapore skyline and heard about the many opportunities available in Singapore. These images, many shared with him on mobile devices, planted in him the desire to migrate to Singapore. From the images and the talks, he saw Singapore as the "dream city," giving him an opportunity to make a living and support his family economically. He shares:

> When I now think about all those photographs of Singapore, they weave together an illusion of dreams, which is far from the reality of life in Singapore. First, when I started the process of migrating, and paid the initial money to the agent, I did not know all the additional money that will be required. My father ended up putting up for mortgage the little farmland we had. Now I am stuck in this work, although I am abused and mistreated with this subcontractor. I can't get out of it. Who will pay back the debt?

Note the juxtaposition of the mobility of the image of Singapore as the "dream city" (Hollands, 2008; Söderström et al., 2014) and the immobility of the migrant worker with his family's large debt. The unregulated nature of labor migration across borders generates opportunities for labor trafficking, with migrant workers often being offered incomplete or inaccurate information before migration by agents. The large sums of money, between S$12,000 and S$15,000, required for migration translate into large debts that migrant workers and their families take up. Several participants in our in-depth interviews share the feeling of "being stuck" in migrant work. Migration in these narratives anchors the inability to move across social classes, communicatively inverting the neoliberal image of migration as movement out of poverty. This immobility out of low-paying, unskilled work is projected on the backdrop of the images of mobility that flow through the circuits of social networks on WhatsApp and Facebook. The networks of flows of images of the smart city then are also the sites for the production of immobilities among low income families in sender countries.

Neoliberal discourses of migrant mobilities offer celebratory narratives of upward movement, movement out of poverty, and economic growth (Hollands, 2008), obfuscating the class immobilities that are intertwined with the lived experiences of migrant work. Once attending a workshop on migrant mobilities hosted by a migration working group here in Singapore, one of us, Mohan, remembers listening to celebratory discourses of migrant workers building two- and three-story homes in their home countries and thus moving out of poverty. Stories of remittance as indicators of movement out of poverty upheld the trickle-down neoliberal rationality. Although these stories of moving out of poverty through money saved indeed become realities for some migrant workers, for a much larger proportion of low-skilled migrant workers in Singapore, the struggles with migration and work are captured in experiences of the inability to move (up) and being caught in debt despite movement across spaces (Twigt, 2018). Neoliberal narratives of migrant resilience, the joys of migrant coping, and migrant strategies of creative adoption are interrupted by the everyday lived experiences of struggles amid limited or no structural protections.

Technologies, Spaces, and (Im)mobility

Mobile technologies are constructed in technodeterministic discourses of the smart city as technologies of mobility, foregrounding the affordances that are made possible by the technology. In hegemonic constructions of neoliberal growth that declare the smart revolution, various functions on the mobile phone are consolidated as enablers of mobility out of poverty and into the economic middle class. The stories of movement out of poverty that become the seductive appeals of neoliberal growth work through the systematic erasure of the structural contexts of mobile phone use. Even as phones as devices enter into monolithic narratives of mobility, they erase the narratives of displacements they constitute (see, for instance, the discussion by Duffield, 2016). For instance, in Bangladesh, the Grameen initiative develops and implements large-scale mobile infrastructure programs that create new market opportunities for private telecommunications providers. Development, displaced from its positioning as a public material resource to be negotiated through the role of the state, is turned into a privatized commodity, delivered through private networks of mobile phones. The displacement of development as fundamental infrastructure in the realm of citizenship rights by the formulation of privatized market-based commodities to be secured through individual participation in the market generates the overarching conditions of movement of low-skilled migrant labor.

Similar to Liton, other participants share the disjunctures between the images that flow through mobile media into the networks of potential young recruits in sender countries and the reality of lived experiences of migrant work in Singapore. Juvie, an FDW from the Philippines who has been in Singapore for two years, explains:

> So I used to talk to a number of my friends who are here in Singapore. They will even do video chat. In a video chat, I saw how my friend is having a very good life in Singapore. The shopping. The roads with all the lights and decorations. But you don't really know about the pay, the hours of work, or how your employer is going to treat you from any of that. I switched one job after paying for the deductions taken from my monthly salary, and then had my salary deducted again. So in these two years, I have only a few months of salary. And then my employer did not pay me the full salary. And then I was stuck.

Juvie's feeling of immobility is tied to a sense of communicative displacement. She does not know whom to go to for help, whom to talk to, and how to go about securing access to justice. This sense of communicative uncertainty and loss about the laws guiding unskilled migrant work and the processes to participate in to secure access to justice is reiterated by multiple participants.

In 2018, the Migrant Workers' Center[5] partnered with the POSB Bank to launch Jolly App to support migrant workers in Singapore. The app, positioned as a go-to resource for workers, pitches to migrant worker consumers a wide range of services including banking, remittances, mobile data plans, and bicycle sharing. The datafied worker is incorporated into the networks of global profits through the emancipatory possibilities introduced by new communication technologies. The displacements produced by the financial technologies (fintech) in the Global South are juxtaposed with the celebration of fintech as an elixir to migrant mobility in Singapore, the Asian hub of financial capitalism. Note here the mobility of fintech from Bangladesh to Singapore, formulated in the form of bundled services from banking to insurance to e-products delivered through mobile platforms (Karim, 2008).

In 2018, Bangladesh is preparing to launch its first smart city project, Purbachal. Purbachal is projected in Bangladeshi mediated discourses and digital spaces as Bangladesh's Singapore, compared to Singapore in many dimensions of smartness. The discourse of the smart city in digital sites targets an upwardly mobile, upper-middle-class consumer segment in Bangladesh and in the diaspora that is targeted through real estate advertisements and glossy brochures. The discourse of Singapore as a model smart city thus performs double displacement, displacing low-income families from their spaces of livelihood and casting them into the global circuits of immobile labor extraction, and simultaneously erasing them from the sites of participation in the model smart city. Workers such as Jamil migrate to Singapore in search of the "golden deer" (*sonar horin*, as he puts it, drawing from a Tagore song that Bengalis often sing) projected on everyday discourse of lower-middle-class life and shared through digital technologies. Scrolling through the Facebook page of the Purbachal project, Nihar shares the images of the Singapore skyline on the page, noting that his family and relatives would never live in the high rises projected on the page.

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[5] The Migrant Workers' Center is a bipartite initiative of the National Trades Union Congress and the Singapore National Employers' Federation.

Yet another narrative of displacement is one from the images, experiences of, and capacities to interact with the material artifacts of the city. Pointing to the boat that sits on top of Marina Bay Sands, marking the Singapore skyline in global celebrations of the city, Badal shares,

> I tell my friends, I worked on that project. Working high up on top, as if touching the sky. I pulled the beams together, connecting them up. When I look at the tourists point to the sky at the boat, I can't tell you how proud I am. I was part of building that boat. When other workers come to Singapore, I take them to the building and show them the boat.

Badal further shares how he does not even go close to the tower anymore because he does not like the "stares." For a significant proportion of the migrant construction workers, negotiating space in Singapore is tied to experiences of racism and threats to dignity. Mustafa shares the story of how he was walking down Little India,[6] was pulled up by the police, and felt mistreated. He points to the big lights that flood the field in Little India since the Little India Riots, describing the feeling of being under surveillance. Similarly, Marissa shares that although she is sometimes drawn to the glitter and dazzle of the shops on Orchard Road,[7] she usually doesn't enter them. She recounts her experiences of racism in the shops. Noting how often the sales team would follow her as soon as she entered the store, she shares that she became acutely aware of her FDW identity.

The immobility of lower-class, temporary migrant workers in Singapore's spaces is often marked by technologies and techniques of surveillance that place the worker under the scanner, embodied in the everyday sense of continually being watched. For Lata, the cameras all around the house made her feel uncomfortable, with the knowledge that her employers were always watching her. She noted that one time she had not rinsed the children's milk bottles before feeding, and her mam came back from work to ask her why she had not done so. She shared how this sense of constantly being under surveillance from the time she woke up until the time she went to bed took a toll on her health. In the next section, we will examine critically the technomobility discourse that is mobilized in the realm of migration.

Mobility as Technoseduction

Ideas constructed around mobility center on the ideology that technology can uplift communities in poverty from their disenfranchising conditions (Cheong & Mitchell, , 2016; Kim, 2016; Platt et al., 2016; Thompson, 2009). This technodeterministic ideology of technology as the harbinger of social change and mobility fails to consider the various sites of power that co-opt technologies for profiteering (Servaes & Hoyng, 2017) and the inequities produced in the social distribution and adoption of technologies. Aricat (2015) calls for a critical interrogation of the seductive ways in which we come to study technology,

[6] Little India is a space in Singapore where migrant workers congregate on Sundays, the day off. Little India emerged as a key site in public discourse amid a conflict that broke out between male migrant workers and the police, framed in public discourse as the "Little India Riots." Little India is also a site of ethnic city marketing through heritage promotion, branding cultural indicators for global capital.

[7] Orchard Road is the luxury shopping area of Singapore, with rows of high-end designer shops that decorate the road, targeting mostly affluent consumers.

specifically the mobile phone, in the context of disenfranchisement of migrant labor, where the "emancipatory metaphor" (p. 818) occupies the dominant discourse. He goes on to suggest that studies of the intercoordination of migrants' mobile phone use for labor problems (Chib & Aricat, 2017) do not read the more substantial structural challenges of migrant worker employment critically. Pointing "to temporary status of migrant workers, racial inferiority and work productivity," Aricat (2015) suggests that the conditions "surrounding mobile phone usage prohibitions have demonstrated that these discourses have put the migrant workers at disadvantage" (p. 818).

Although the language of technological domestication in studies looking at mobile communication among migrants in Asia discusses the contexts of mobile phone uses and thus positions such studies as moving beyond a technodeterministic perspective, nevertheless, these studies monolithically construct mobile phone technology as indeterminate in its use as an individualized activity (Lim, 2016). Seen as appropriating behaviors in cultural environments, studies (Lim, 2016) read technology as the center of performing, negotiating, and strategizing by less privileged members of society (Chib, Wilkin, & Hua, 2013; Dutta, Kaur-Gill, Tan, & Lam, 2018). Such studies uncritically position culture in migrants' experiences with communication technologies, erasing the political economy of space, social and political contexts, and neoliberal policies that constitute movements (Dutta, Kaur-Gill, Tan, & Lam, 2018). The logics of capital are held up through the incorporation of migrant bodies at the margins as sites of profiteering (Dutta, 2015).

Migrant Workers as Mobile Users

Migrant workers, specifically blue-collar male migrants and female migrant domestic workers, constitute the margins from the Global South performing what are known as 3D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs (Dutta, 2017 ; Dutta, Comer, Teo, Luk, Lee, Zapata . . . Kaur, 2018). The model for employment for both worker groups continues to be rooted in indenture, along with unfavorable and exploitative labor conditions, a lack of labor protections, the absence of opportunities for voice and collectivization, and the temporary nature of work (Dutta, 2017; Dutta, Comer et al., 2018; Kaur, Tan, & Dutta, 2016). The study of information and communications technologies (ICTs) among migrants systematically erases these structural contexts of migrant labor (e.g., Chib, Wilkin, & Hua, 2013; Lim, Pham, & Cheong, 2015). For instance, Thompson's (2009) ethnographic analysis of mobile phone use among low-skilled foreign workers in Singapore suggests symbolic references to social mobility through the consumption of mobile phones. The analysis focuses on how workers use mobile phones from a cost-effectiveness perspective, offering a gendered reading of mobile phone use among domestic workers (female) and construction workers (male), ignoring the labor conditions and structural constraints of low-skilled migrant work.

Similarly, Platt et al. (2016) examine ICTs and their uses by foreign domestic workers in Singapore, positioning the vast differences in experiences of ICTs despite residing in the world's most connected cities, with the "infrastructure, policies, ecosystem and capabilities to enable a Smart Nation" (p. 2208). Furthermore, these gaps are exacerbated by migrants' difference in purchasing ability and their disproportionate access to and literacy of mediated communication technologies. Chib and Aricat's (2017) reading of mobile phone uses through in-depth interviews with migrant workers of Bangladeshi and Indian origins suggests that access to a mobile phone was limited by workplace regulations, as workers were not

at liberty to use mobile phones during working hours. Chib, Wilkin, and Hua (2013), interested in the relational provisions of mobile phone use, discuss the context of "technology-mediated social support in alleviating migrant stress" (p. 19) amid poor work conditions. This body of scholarship suggests that mobile phones were not only a site of social support but also of stress, specifically for male migrants in the construction industry. This is articulated poignantly by Atikul, a 27-year-old Bangladeshi migrant worker with a large debt and responsibility toward familial care and three unmarried sisters:

> Every time I call home, I feel very ashamed and stressed. There are so many struggles at home. The fear of the debt sits on the whole family. My sisters are unmarried, and it is my responsibility to get them married. But how will I do that? The meager amount I am able to send home mostly goes toward medical expenses. My wife is also unhappy because she does not know why I am unable to send more money home.

This sense of responsibility and the accompanying stress among male migrant workers resonates throughout the interviews. The call on the mobile phone is a reminder of the sense of responsibility and the debt looming over the family.

In contrast, Lim et al. (2015) suggest that technologically mediated communication offers opportunities for migrants in executing their duties as family members while conducting migrant labor. Furthermore, Lim et al. (2015) inflate the role of mediated platforms as being able to assist in whistle-blowing and coordinating advocacy for poor employment practices. Similarly, Lim et al. (2015), and Lin and Sun (2010) provide readings of mobile phones as resources for enacting strategies of resistance by FDWs. Mobile phone use by workers is read as a means to take back control from employers and to remove themselves from social isolation. The affordable mobile phone is framed as emancipating workers from the grueling regiments of employer control through connection with social networks and social relationships. This framework for offering a reading of resistance is embedded in and mediatized through the technology, oblivious to the structural context in which migrant workers are employed. The very means in and through which migrant labor is produced and extracted is not the site of contestation.

The worker's agency is read in how the worker conducts social relations via the appropriation of technology, thus reproducing the ideology of technoseduction, albeit couched from an interpretive perspective. For Thomas and Lim (2010), the use of a mobile phone meant access to past employers and agents for information on a wide variety of issues that include job openings and remittances, without offering insight into the inability for many workers to make job switches because of labor laws that privilege employers and retain power in the hands of employers. The theorizing of mobile phone use centers the technology in the development of solutions to migrant work, leaving the overarching structures and their interplays of power and control intact. Other scholars have suggested that the acquiring of mobile phone technology is a marker of social mobility among migrants (Thompson, 2009), offering a symbolic reading of technology adoption as a reflection of upward mobility. Despite the suggestion that technological domestication shifts away from the seductive language of technology as change, Lim et al. (2015) and Thomas and Lim (2010) reinforce the ideology of the mobile phone as central to the pathway of mobility, upholding the dominance of the mobile technology as the solution while obfuscating the inequalities and differentials in power that constitute migrant work.

Cheong and Mitchell (2016), in an ethnographic study with FDWs in Singapore aimed at understanding storytelling practices, explain that "factors such as cost or limited access to technology resulted in fewer opportunities for family storytelling" (p. 51). Arguing for why storytelling is beneficial in everyday sense making and performance of identities, they suggest that the most substantial barrier to technology use was not cost but curtailment of use by employers, indicating a structural perspective required in understanding how technology comes to be negotiated. A structural reading points to the limits of technodeterministic understandings of technology, especially in arguing for technology use to inculcate social change processes in disenfranchised communities. When Maria discusses how her employers don't let her access the phone, she shares a sense of anxiety. She describes feeling imprisoned, as she has no one to talk to and only gets one off day a month. Similarly, Pepe shares*:*

> I am very scared of doing anything wrong. My mam, her mother, she shouts at me and is always watching me. The whole day, I don't even sit for a little bit to rest and then go to bed at night, sometimes at midnight. That one time, I didn't know my little son back home, the youngest one, was sick because I could not talk to the family.

Parrenas (2005) suggests that when studying the role of mobile communication technology, a critical reading begins by analyzing the crux of social relations among low-skilled transnational migrants as already embedded in structures that reproduce inequality. Her reading of technology is situated in an intersectional understanding of inequality in the transmigratory process that determines how migrant families defer in their transnational familial relations, depending on what types of material resources that are available in pursuing technologically mediated communication. The dialectics of mobile phone use in unequal labor conditions can often mean that a worker, despite having the social mobility to own a mobile phone, is now disabled from doing so when the employer refuses to allow her or him to do so. Jenny, a migrant domestic worker from India, was ushered from the Singapore airport to her employer's home without forming any weak ties in Singapore (usually domestic workers spend a few days at the agency, which are crucial to the formation of an initial network). She had a mobile phone on her, but her employers quickly confiscated it. As relations turned sour in her employer's home, she was locked up in the storeroom for hours on end. Finally, when the opportunity arose, she managed to retrieve her mobile phone:

> When my employers open the door to make me sweep the floor, I hide and take my phone. I message my brother and tell him . . . I am in trouble. My brothers send e-mail to the [agency office]. First, nothing happens, then he sends a message again. Police come to the house and rescue me. I jumped and hugged the police officer when he opened the door.

One may quickly identify the technology as the center of the narrative of rescue. However, the mobile phone in itself would have been insufficient without strong or weak ties to retrieve help. Jenny was unable to call the police even after retrieving her phone because of time pressures of the chores to be completed, and she also did not know how to. Without a network in Singapore and without access to information on critical resources, FDWs are rendered immobile despite access to the mobile device.

The mobile phone in other occasions emerges in the narrative accounts as an object of power and control. Preeti shares how her mam goes through her mobile phone to see whom she speaks with. She recounts the story of once being disciplined by her employers for having chatted with a Bangladeshi worker. The employers reminded her that if she got pregnant, she would be deported. Since that point, her mam has periodically asked to check her phone and gone through her calls, chats, and Facebook messages. The combination of the spaces of home and work in domestic work contributes to the infantilization of the FDW, with employers often taking up the role of disciplining the movements, interactions, and networks of FDWs. Similarly, if an employer provides a mobile phone to the worker, this continues to complexify mobilities for the worker, as now the employer can use the very technology to surveil the physical mobilities of the worker.

Technofixing acknowledges the disenfranchisement of a specific community and then proposes technology as the solution to the challenges experienced. For instance, Thomas and Lim (2010) propose policies for access to technologies such as mobile phones (cost and use), contracts that highlight explicit provisions on mobile communications, and the collaboration by state, nongovernmental organizations, and domestic worker recruitment agents to foster ways to bridge the technological divide for migrants in Singapore. Such policy recommendations that center the mobile phone as the site of change in poor employment conditions promote a technoseductive view of technology as mitigating poor labor conditions, obfuscating the inequalities in power that constitute the fundamental terrains and fabric of migrant life. That information inequalities are fundamental to the reproduction of exploitative conditions of low-skilled work remains uninterrogated in this line of scholarship. That structures that seek to discipline workers through disinformation generate profits through information inaccess is obfuscated in the technofix narrative, feeding the larger neoliberal agendas of the economy through the promotion of new technologies as solutions to these individualized challenges. Rather than articulating and working toward transforming current employment conditions for migrant work, a technofix narrative places the onus on individual workers, pushing more and new market-based technologies (e.g., apps) as solutions. The structure seeks to benefit from the disparity where employers benefit from their domestic workers' social isolation, especially during the process of mistreatments, and agents benefit financially from the indentured model, standing to gain from workers' immobility, to ensure debts are paid off.

Moreover, space (including the digital) continues to be exclusionary for specific types of migrants that are victims of xenophobia and online vitriol. Mobile phones offer little respite in a society that produces transnational migrant workers "via the production of difference" (Chib & Aricat, 2017, p. 492; Witteborn, 2011). Worker mobilities and immobilities are determined by the systematic inhibitions placed on workers through exploitative employment practices, highlighted through narratives pointing to the lack of fundamental labor rights as limiting workers' abilities to communicate via mediated technologies.

Communication Advocacy as Disrupting Immobilities

While doing our advisory board meeting at *Banglar Kantha*,[8] the topic of workplace deaths came up. Salim noted how there are no accounts of migrant worker deaths. He then quickly took out his mobile

[8] *Banglar Kantha* is a weekly newspaper for Bengali migrant workers, with stories often written by Bangladeshi migrant workers and edited by the migrant worker advocate Mr. Mohsin Malhar.

phone, asked me for my number, added me on WhatsApp, and sent me an image. I was shaken up when I saw the image. A worker wearing a work uniform, helmet on his head, is pinned between the large wheels of a crane and a truck, his body held upright. One glance at the image might tell you that he is simply standing upright, holding his head in a balanced position between the gargantuan wheels. A closer look would reveal his limp body, the life squeezed out by the pressure of the wheels, a stream of blood oozing down his head.

Our advisory group of migrant workers notes how these stories and accounts of migrant worker deaths often go unaccounted for in public registers. The lack of accounting for these deaths reproduces the silence around the precarities of migrant work, erasing the everyday risks, pain, and suffering borne by the body of the migrant worker. Against this backdrop, the advisory group proposes a digital project that takes into account workplace deaths, counting the bodies of dead migrant workers, visualizing these bodies and narrating their shared life stories. They ask our research team to collaborate with them on creating an app in which they can anonymously upload images and details of worker deaths at construction sites. This app then, they suggest, would feed the counts of migrant deaths onto a map that, they note, would mark these deaths in the city. The work of communication as advocacy mobilizes the technocentrism of the smart city and "communicatively inverts" (Dutta, 2015) it to create a communication infrastructure for articulation in resistance, congealed around a collective identity of migrant work. This effort uses the tools (digital mobile technologies of accounting) that resonate with the hegemonic imaginary of the smart city, but it simultaneously transforms structurally the site and process of account keeping grounding it in the embodied experiences of migrant construction workers.

The work of imagination is situated in the local experience and positions of migrant work (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002), articulating from the experiences of structural limitations to organizing the possibilities of resistance to the modes of neoliberal governmentality. The surveillance strategies deployed by the state to control and manage migrant workers is resisted through the imaginations of spontaneous organizing when the conditions become unbearable. Participants discuss the eruption of anger among migrant workers in the Little India area where migrant workers gather after a migrant worker was killed under a bus. They make sense of this event, framed in the dominant narrative as the Little India Riots (Kaur, Tan & Dutta, 2016), as an expression of anger in response to the exploitation and racism experienced by MCWs, especially in public spaces such as Little India in Singapore. In migrant worker narratives, resistance amid the authoritarian structures, with the fear of imprisonment and deportation as threats to everyday existence, works toward sustaining everyday work and living. Appadurai (1996) notes, "electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination" (p. 4). The imagination of Asian futures grounded in the voices of migrant workers in precarious jobs disrupts the neoliberal narrative of mobility with accounts of exploitation and death. Technology is actively imagined as a site of resistance, as a platform for storytelling.

The sites of immobility of migrant construction workers are resisted through articulations of discourses of marginalization and displacement, which in turn disrupt the hegemonic narrative of mobility. Amid the tightly controlled spaces of migrant work, where migrant workers as foreigners do not have the right to participate in public protests or any form of organizing, these discourses of marginalization imagine

structural transformations through reworking communication. Notes Sara in our domestic worker collaborative, "When we tell these stories, our stories of pain and humiliation, I hope the Singaporean audience can't turn away. You have to listen to our voices. You can't pretend we don't exist." This conviction that the stories of exploitation, racism, and mistreatment need to be told becomes the basis for the framing of advocacy in the language of the rights of FDWs within a tightly controlled space. The FDWs that participate in our advisory boards foreground the rights language as the appropriate tool for disrupting the mistreatment of FDWs in Singapore.

The structures of control are resisted through collective protests that emerge spasmodically across the spaces of the city. For instance, during our in-depth interviews with migrant construction workers in September 2012, they often discussed the story of the 200 or so workers who participated in a sit-in because of nonpayment of salary. Instead of starting work at 8:00 a.m., the workers from Sunway Concrete Pte. Ltd. and TechCom Construction, a contractor and subcontractor, respectively, hired by the Housing Development Board to fabricate building materials, gathered in an empty field at Tampines Industrial Street 62. The workers had not been paid for four consecutive months and were angry about the quality of the food served in the canteen. Narrative accounts of the sit-in continued to resonate in the interviews, suggesting that such sit-ins disrupt the discursive space, although the workers who participate in them have to pay a heavy price (including deportation and debarment from entering Singapore) because of the strict laws. The mobility of resistance narratives temporally serves as an anchor for class formation even as the absence of citizenship rights and tight control on labor organizing threatens the formulation of a collective identity.

Similarly, in our advocacy work drawing on the tenets of building "infrastructures of communication" grounded in the culture-centered approach (Dutta, 2008, 2017; Dutta, Comer et al., 2018), the advisory board members (FDWs and MCWs) put forth a framework of rights. Framing labor in the language of rights offers participants an opportunity to redefine the discursive spaces of low-skilled migrant work through a framework that is anchored in the claims made by low-skilled migrant workers to decent working conditions. Kaseem notes the unequal terrain on which migrant work is constructed, with migrant workers systematically erased from sites and spaces of claim making. He points out that many workers are unclear about the process, the requirements, and the rules of participation for claims to be made and settled in the labor courts. In most instances, then, he suggests that when a migrant worker goes to the labor court, she or he is grappling with the terms of participation. Echoing the same point, Mohseen shares that he mostly did not understand the intricacies of the exchanges when he took his case to the labor court. The information inequality in the nature of migrant work is resisted through the language of the right to information as integral to labor rights.

Participants in our advisory groups both with FDWs and MCWs foreground the right to information as a framework through which the challenges of labor exploitation can be addressed. Technological mediation as resistance to neoliberal mobility is articulated in the mobility of stories of "being stuck," "being caught in debt," "suffering in hunger," and "dying on the job." Nadira gives examples of FDWs organizing in Hong Kong, where the rights-based framework becomes the basis for creating information infrastructures for FDWs. Several FDWs refer to the activism in Hong Kong grounded in the organizing of FDWs and formulating a politics of rights. The advisory group of FDWs we collaborated with between 2012 and 2014 cocreated the "Respect Our Rights" campaign, coordinating the campaign with the StopTrafficking.sg advocacy work done against the backdrop of the introduction of the antitrafficking bill in the Singapore parliament (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pledging event from the "Respect Our Rights" campaign with FDWs.

Formulations such as "illiberal pragmatism" (Offord, 2014; Yue, 2012, p. 2), "cultural sensitization," "accommodative change," and "vernacularization" (Koh, Wee, Goh, & Yeoh, 2017, p. 90) work to uphold the authoritarian structures of state-driven neoliberal capitalist accumulation in Singapore, formulated within an elite academic structure and foreclosing the possibilities and actual practices of resistance grounded in everyday communicative practices. For instance, Koh et al. (2017) discuss the concept of "vernacularizing rights," making the rights of foreign domestic workers palatable to the local context by appealing to the morality and economic rationality of the mainstream, thus upholding the Singapore model of authoritarian neoliberalism. In doing so, the notion of making change is constituted within the exceptionalism of the Singapore model, intrinsically upholding the model and its power relations in principle, which then form the basis of authoritarian management elsewhere in Asia through references to Asian values. This hegemonic narrative of the Singapore model (Chua, 2011) is resisted by the mobility of the Asian labor rights model, grounded in the voices of the margins of low-skilled migrants moving across spaces in Asia. Civil-society organizations adopting advocacy strategies for migrant unskilled labor draw upon these rights-based articulations to strategically engage with universal rights frameworks. Both Transient Workers Count Too and the Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics, the two civil society organizations that directly address the working conditions of MCWs and FDWs, join other civil-society organizations to submit a joint shadow report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women for periodic reviews of Singapore. The joint report highlights key issues related to the rights of FDWs, including the coverage of FDWs under the Employment Act, assured regular rest days, assured access to proper salary records and related documents, and the right to seek employment transfers freely without the permission of employers. The shadow report also addresses appropriate mechanisms for filing complaints and regulating agency fees.

The migration of the rights language disrupts and renders impure the dominant categories of Asian mobility serving the neoliberal order. Anna shares how she learned the language of rights in her work in the

Philippines and sees articulations of rights in the discursive space as the only way for FDWs to secure access to just working conditions. The Singapore model is ruptured by Asian resistance models negotiated through struggles of precarious, unskilled, and working-class subjects in cities across Asia where their noncitizen status places them in ever-deportable working conditions. As unskilled workers migrate to Singapore for domestic and construction work, they also bring with them latent and ever-present experiences and narratives of resistance. A mobile imaginary of Asia is also an imagination of the flows of resistance, with resistance strategies grounded in the local and drawing strength from the translocal and the global, further informing the strategies of the global. These imaginations of resistance also fundamentally rework our roles as academics (Dutta, 2018), drawing from "critical legal and human rights perspectives to root more firmly the orientation toward social justice, and to create awareness of the dynamic interactions and tensions between human rights in practice, legal categories and social realities" (Leurs & Smets, 2018, p. 12). The Asian resistance models voiced by MCWs and FDWs saturate the ontology of social justice with an explicit commitment to rights-based articulations constituted in resistance to state-market power and control, simultaneously decentering the deployment of social justice, resilience, and social change as discursive-material tools for neoliberal management.

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