

Nusrat Ahmed
Migrant Day Space Renovation
1995 Summer Service Fund

Dear Class of 1995,

In the bustling streets of Little India there's a small day space called Dibashram tucked in the corner of Rowell Road. It is a small, rectangular room with white curtains blowing in the heat and smells of the street. The room is well lit, both from the sun and the array of light-bulbs lining the walls. Towards the back there is a bookshelf with poetry books and novels written in Bangla, the language of Bangladesh. The migrant workers come in one by one, leaving their shoes on a rack outside the room. They sit inside, chatting with each other, enjoying each other's company after a long week. Laughter beats ear drums and spaces become energized with bodies dancing to the rhythm of reunion. The familiarity is contagious. Some men bring in sweets, juicy gulab jamun, cut into small pieces to share with everyone. It is a tradition to start off a day or the beginning of something special with sweetness in your mouth.

It is obvious that there are some regulars as they tend to sit in the middle with everyone else around them. The men all dress differently. Most of the older men wear long-sleeve shirts and tuck it into khakis or jeans. The other men wear short-sleeve shirts or simple graphic t-shirts with jeans. They all use their phone to record the songs or put it on Facebook live. In the middle of the room, the instruments are all lined up next to each other. There is a guitar, a small drum set, flute, piano, and a traditional harmonium keyboard.

A group of men perform every Sunday evening from 5:30 - 7:00 pm. While the lead singer changes every song, the core group stays the same. I became a regular along with the men who crowd up the floor. Most of the time they sit rather quietly and record the performances. Other times they get up and dance to the song. It ends up being a call and response performance. The folk songs get the most positive responses as the migrant workers know the lyrics to those songs. Since 2011, Dibashram has provided a space for migrant workers to gather, rest, seek advice, play music, and get creative. They share the untold stories of the tough and lonely lives of migrant workers who leave their families behind to make a living in a foreign country. One of the men in the group has yet to see his newborn son because his permit has not expired yet and even then, it would be too expensive and risky for him to leave his job in fear that he will be not asked to return. Nearly all of them work 18 to 20 hours a day with meager pay and high susceptibility to workplace accidents. But every Sunday they meet, fathers, sons, friends from all over Singapore to play music, all of which they have learned by ear. And they play and play until midnight, until one of them loses it and enters a trance only a few can say they have been in. The songs they sing remind me of a Bangladesh I have yet to be in but so desperately want to be a part of. I was interested in how this all began and after some inquiry was directed to a man named Mr. Mohsin Malhar, editor of Banglar Kantha, the only Bengali newspaper in South East Asia. Mr. Malhar came to Singapore to continue his computer studies in 1991 as an educated man with years of journalism and printing experience. He ended up becoming one of the most well-known men of Singapore and a leader for the migrant community.

Mr. Malhar described Little India in the early 1990's as a recess for migrant workers. This is where they came every Sunday for community fun. It was chai, flutes, harmonium, politics, gossip, language, cards, sweat, volume, curry, writing, poets, actors, dreamers, and Mr. Malhar

smack in the middle, a long line formed in front of him of migrants waiting to get their envelope correctly addressed and their letters edited, letters to be sent home.

He said, "When I came in 1991, my school was near Little India. I came and it was very crowded and all the Bangladeshi gathered. I met some people here who were from my same district village area. They were not much educated and the mobile phone was not very available. People would write letters to communicate with their family. So, people understood how to write the letter in Bangla and they understood how to respond in Bangla but they did not know how to write the postal address in English on the envelope. Many of them came to me to read the letter from their family. Others came to ask me to write letters back. This became a volunteer job and I found that every time I went that 10-20 people would be waiting for me. They wanted me to help them with their letters. This is the way I grew close to migrant workers."

Soon he became a big brother, mentor, the one migrants came to get advice from on workplace violations and pay cuts and how to mobilize, clarification on what their rights were and how to ask for them, and to share with him their sorrows and joys. Mr. Malhar in an effort to organize created Banglar Kantha, a platform for migrant workers to share their experiences both good and bad via publication. As Mr. Malhar says, "It gives a voice to the voiceless." It has created a beautiful community of brothers who sing, write poetry, and perform drama. He has provided writing workshops, workplace advice, poetry competitions, and most importantly just a place to come together to be.

Mr. Malhar very passionately spoke about migrant right. He said, "Migrant workers are not machines. They need space to play, and exercise, write, and make music. They do so much for our country, but what do we do for them? Here they come to talk about their grievances and we try to help them. They are human. They are my brothers. If I don't help them, who will? Who will stand up for their rights?"

He took me to the day space and there I met many migrant workers who were involved in a program called Discover Singapore, a Singapore based non-profit organization that arranges outings once or twice a month for migrant workers and provides a community center. They have been able to take the men to the Zoo, Sentosa Sea Aquarium, Gardens by the Bay, etc. Often many of these workers are not paid their salary and/or sustain injuries in their workplace and are denied compensation by their employers. Without income, their leisure options are severely curtailed and their days pass slowly. The recovery from injury, or the wait for compensation and due salaries take months, even years, exacting a toll on their spirits and mental health. Discover Singapore aims to provide some moments of happiness for the workers. Unfortunately, their community center had been breaking down so I worked with the men to renovate the space. The health of this space was necessary for workshops and dialogues so the renovation definitely helped. We were able to get new instruments and host poetry sessions and music sessions in the renovate space. One of the migrant workers I met came to Singapore from Bangladesh in 2008 and has been writing poetry since he was 12 years old. He published a book of his poetry on a migrant's life, called "Me Migrant" - the first migrant worker to have a poetry collection brought out by a Singapore publisher. His poetry reads about his loneliness, of hope, of heart, and his mother and father - "I would be nothing without the support of my parents. My father has held my hand through my success. They have always encouraged my writing. They don't ask anything from me as long as I am happy. And today, in front of you, I look happy. I am well dressed and shaven but my heart is breaking for my papa. He is old and a day laborer. If you saw my condition at home, you would be in awe at my poverty. There were days I only ate a mix of

water and a few rice. I have a few dreams. One is to buy them a house. Another is to open a library in my home village and then bring some Singaporean doctors to treat the people there. And, to come to America. But first I need to buy a house for my parents. I do not even fall in love because that will distract me from my goal." There have been cameras following his home the last few months to document his life in Bangladesh. He is looking forward to people watching his documentary because people will see just what type of family and house he comes from. He says "My parents really love me from childhood. It took me 12,000 Singapore Dollars to come to Singapore in 2008. My father sold two pieces of land for me to come here. Finally, the third time my mom sold her necklace for me to come here. Praise God, I have everything I need but my financial situation is still troubling. I don't have my own house yet. All I have right now is a platform. And I am happy that my book 'Me Migrant' has already had 3,000 distributions." Together, we helped organize a "Migrant Tales" poetry session where migrants turned poets read poetry and the migrants band sang songs with their new instruments. This became a huge event. Here are two poems read during the event:

Exiled heart

"Who does care about the pain of migrants
Working under the soil of this city of forever spring?
Do you?
Do you know how many wails of life
can tremble this earth?
Let me tell my tale,
tale of the immigrants from the land of flames-
I am an immigrant lost
in the loneliness of hot and humid womb of soil.
The touch of solitude
makes my heart weep and howl,
and every moment like an accumulation of eternities.

Everyday when the dusk ceases, I get exiled.
As my existence gets blurred in the darkness of depth,
I can hardly remember that I belong to this earth.
I forget that once I had chores, had spring,
Had a childhood on the wings of dreams,
Had an urge to love and to be loved by someone,
Had a home of happiness, blessings of my mother.

Now, this exiled me
captivated under the earth of this city
by many layers of dust,
nourish the smell of grief in my breathes.
These loveless moments turn me silent,
pain clots in this fatigue-torn body,
but in the hope of light at the end of darkness
this exiled heart still

in bottomless tunnel of time.”

The lamenting refugee

“Had leaving been not so difficult,
would there be the urge to return
In every dream, at every night?
Had roots not been green enough,
how could have the tree of life survived?

At the sleepless nights,
when the floating memories anchor at heart
and the urban moon hides behind the lofty facade,
amidst the choking void
I look for HOME-
where the roots are not distant,
autumn arrives in cotton colored clouds,
love blooms draped in red and white,
winter comes like soft sun, with her smoky veil,
and heart does not crave for,
and is not allured by distant dream.
Only left are the traces of life,
and a pledge to live
wet in love and sweat.

Is it always feasible to return?
Which ship can sail across
every ocean of separation,
that sedimented dormant emotions
between us?

Every ruin escaped,
is pulling you back,
and the dead memories reincarnate
like Jesus under the easter sun.
Still I run faster to take refuge
in a far-away, fairyland,
oblivious to the truth
that creation is an impetus to destruction.”

A sincere thank you to the class of 1995 summer service fund for funding this project. The day space looks new and the migrants are excited to use the space as there are more instruments and materials to work with. There is a more steady utilization of the day space as a place for souls to gather and be creative through poetry and music. Thank you for your help in making this service project a reality. I hope to return in the future to help further and to reunite with the friends I made.

