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'Will I be able to see my family ever again?' Tales from the Indian diaspora in times of COVID-19 in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus began spreading worldwide since 2020 leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Indian Diaspora stranded. Indian diasporas are heterogeneous, diverse and are perceived as wealthy, dynamic and generally thriving, especially in highly developed countries. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light both strengths and weaknesses of these diasporas. Thus, this paper explores the various ways in which COVID-19 has impacted the lives of the high-skilled Indian diaspora in Singapore. In explaining their varied experiences, I used the concept of commonality. Through a qualitative study, collected data shows their struggles of commonalities embraced by COVID-19. In spite of living an affluent lifestyle in Singapore, they confront uncertainty, pain, fear of losing the loved ones back home. They are nevertheless happy and content, and are very grateful for the ways in which their Singapore have supported them during troubled times.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created misery for all segments of the population in terms of income loss, employment loss, and mental and physical agony. Specifically, migrants and their households which are dependent on them across the globe suffered disproportionately from both the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (Ullah, Chattoraj, and Ibrahim 2022; Ullah and Chattoraj 2022). Because destination countries that do not have universal healthcare can barely take care of their own citizens, let alone refugees and migrants, they are unable to accept these other populations. This study, therefore, aims to raise crucial issues that will aid in the development of a fuller understanding of the livelihoods of Indian Diaspora[1] in Singapore during the COVID-19 period. To do so, I rely on data from narrative interviews with the Indian diaspora who have lived in Singapore for more than 5 years. I intend to investigate the various ways in which COVID-19 affected their lives through empirical data analysis. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the commonality of experiences that they have in Singapore during this time of crisis. This research focuses mainly on high-skilled professionals from India, who are affected by COVID-19 in various ways.

To address the diverse experiences of the Indian diaspora, I discuss the concept of 'commonality,' which is one of the characteristics of 'belonging with.' According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), commonality refers to communal processes but also to how individuals perceive and embody 'belonging' in collective constellations (Chattoraj 2022a). It mostly refers to the sentiments, concerns, and experiences that we all share, such as language, culture, religion, lifestyle, customs, values, observations, and memories. On the one hand, it refers to a sense of self that can be felt alone, while on the other, it is shared and accomplished together (Chattoraj 2022b).

Data show that the Indian diaspora share a common destiny, mutuality, and purpose which reveals commonality. They are linked together by cultural, social, and religious ties. They share their daily challenges, pains and joys, and hope to return to their family in India once the pandemic ends. These accounts highlight the obstacles they endured since the commencement of COVID-19, living through the challenges of uncertainty and anguish in Singapore, and show how commonality is perceived and embodied individually as well as collectively negotiated and performed. Even though they lived in wealth and comfort in the city–state, they suffered from anxiety and trauma every day, due to travel restrictions and uncertainty as to when they would be able to see their families again in India. As a result of not being able to deal with this situation, some of my respondents, even, considered leaving everything and returning to India at times, but the uncertainty of job opportunities back home played a large role in their decision.

In spite of all these, they are content to remain in Singapore through this crisis because of the Government's incredible concern for them. Because of Singapore's political stability, good economic management, and democratic administration, it is considered considerably superior to their experiences compared to India (Chattoraj 2022b). Their confidence in the Singaporean government's capacity to handle the pandemic so well originates in part from admiration and appreciation.

Therefore, I discuss the various experiences that the Indian Diaspora have throughout COVID-19. Their mutual challenges with commonality, which they have been facing since January 2020, explained how commonality is personal and manifested while being negotiated and enacted collectively. Despite living under uncertainty and fear, they are content and happy in Singapore because the government, according to them, has taken good care of them.

Theoretical framework: commonality

This study draws upon the theory of commonality, one of the dimensions of belonging, as propounded by Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), to theorise the experiences of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore. As the characteristic of belonging, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) highlights the ability to create new connections with collective boundedness and converse it with collective boundary lines. She divides the notion into two: 'Belonging to,' which is experienced individually while affected by collective constellations, hence, socially negotiated, and 'belonging with,' which draws upon and results in both intersubjectivity in the sense of a person's feeling or enacting the sense of common belonging as well as in collective practices and collective representations. While she distinguishes these two, she also states that belonging has been constructed by individuals who seem to have explored their life experiences in different ways: commonality, reciprocity and more or less formalised

modalities of collective allegiance as well as the material and immaterial attachments that often result in the sense of entitlement.

As a result, in order to address the Indian Diaspora's diverse experiences in Singapore, this study discusses the theory of 'commonality,' which is one of the characteristics of 'belonging with.' According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), commonality refers to collaborative processes but also to how individuals perceive and embody 'belonging' in collective constellations. It mainly refers to the sentiments, concerns, and experiences that we all share, such as language, culture, religion, lifestyle, customs, values, observations, and memories. On the one hand, it refers to a sense of self that can be felt alone, while on the other, it is shared and accomplished together (Chattoraj 2022a; 2022b). For instance, Wilke (2014) shows that those who live in the mountain village of Camburnu shared an experience of commonality which occurs as a result of the kinship ties, the daily sorrows they share in their neighbourhood, the rural occupations they engage in, and the natural beauty around them, has been preserved over centuries. After the Turkish administration established a garbage dump immediately above Camburnu, their tacit understanding of commonality led to a sense of collective threat, resulting in collective action (Wilke 2014). They endured foul odours and poisonous substances leaching into the ground, causing them to feel alienated from their world.

A tacit property of being, i.e. a sense of commonality that does not need to be expressed, has given way to an increasingly politicised sense of belonging – as a commonality of suffering and commonality of purpose (Wilke 2014). Both the covert sense of being part in a communal setting as well as the process of drawing collective boundaries make for different forms of commonality in the contemporary world.

Brubaker (2005) explains that collective constellations emerge in the form of 'categorisation' (a marker-based abstract process), 'groupness' (an emotional sense of belonging), and 'self-understanding' (drawing upon joint cognitive assumptions). There is often a perception that collective constellations are a horizon that divides insiders from outsiders. Therefore, the constellations are often based on mental boundaries (Migdal 2004), everyday life distinctions, and public representations in order to bolster collective boundaries. A commonality at this point is likely to develop into a collective identity that requires the outside to foster a sense of sameness inside.

Data showed that images of the Indian Diaspora living in Singapore provided the perfect example of practicing and experiencing commonality. *Will I be able to see my family ever again* established the foundation for the existence of commonality among the diasporic population, which was the most significant narrative in its expression. In *Will I be able to see my family ever again …* , they expressed their feeling of uncertainty and fear of not being able to see their families back home again after being away for so long. Furthermore, sharing a common destiny, mutuality, and purpose revealed a commonality.

Objectives and methodology

This article aims to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian Diaspora in Singapore and provided insights into the various experiences of commonalities they shared in the city–state during the pandemic. Therefore, the following research questions which acted as the main guidance in this study were developed:

1. What kind of challenges did the Indian Diaspora face during COVID-19 in Singapore?
2. In what ways did the Indian Diaspora share common experiences among themselves?

This research is qualitative in nature and utilises primary and secondary data in analysis. Interviews and personal correspondence were the major sources of primary data. The respondents for this study were selected using the snowball technique. In-depth interviews were carried out using a well-developed checklist so that the responses achieve the objectives set out in the research. I adopted a purposive snowball technique to pick my samples for convenience. Through this technique, I found my research subjects by word of mouth. One respondent gave the name of another respondent, who in turn provided the name of a third, and so on (Ullah and Kumpoh 2018). Therefore, my sample sizes varied in the different phases of my fieldwork.

From April 2020 to December 2021, I conducted 120 informal and semi-structured interviews (via Zoom, Skype, and WhatsApp) with both males and females who have been living in Singapore for 5–10 years. The respondents, aged between 25 and 50 years old, were living (stuck) in Singapore when the interviews were conducted. All of them held Employment passes[2] while their families were on Dependent Pass. Among the 120 interviewees, 58 were tested positive for the COVID-19 virus in 2020, some with mild symptoms, and others were asymptomatic which allowed them to isolate themselves in their own homes.

Approximately an hour and a half were spent interviewing each of the interviewees. Among the 120 respondents, 45 were from Eastern India, 32 were from North, 20 were from Western India and 23 were from Southern India. English, Hindi, and Bengali were chosen for the interviews. Their identities were changed to protect their privacy and security.

The questions asked were about their experiences with regard to COVID-19 since January 2020. What was the impact of COVID-19 on their lives? What were they afraid of when they heard about lockdown for the very first time? What were the challenges they faced during the last two years (2020–2021)? Did the strict travel restrictions affect their mental peace? What was the impact of the virus on their families in India? When did they feel they could again reunite with their families back home? Did they like living and working in Singapore? Or were they willing to return home? Did Singapore provide a better level of safety and happiness than other countries?

As part of the researcher's Internet research (Chattoraj 2017), COVID-19 statistics from Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) website, as well as government advisories and information about COVID-19 from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) have been collected and evaluated (Chattoraj 2022b). The MOH website is the best source to get the daily case count of the number of COVID-19 cases in Singapore. In addition, documents and newspaper articles related to this issue were collected. Available newspaper articles helped to gather secondary data concerning high and low-skilled migrants in Singapore and the situation they have been in as a result of this pandemic. Thorough literature reviews on the epidemic and on Indian Diaspora across the globe were conducted.

In the following sections, the context and various experiences faced by the Diaspora during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021 are discussed. Their mutual challenges with commonality, faced in the destination country away from their families

since January 2020, explained how commonality was personal and manifested while being negotiated and enacted collectively. The government succeeded to contain the outbreak in 2020 with around 59,000 confirmed cases and deaths as low as 29 (Worldometer 2022). And, migrant workers accounted for well over 90 percent of these confirmed cases (Chattoraj 2022b). It was then when Singapore attracted attention, internationally, for ignoring the migrant workers who were housed in dormitories where facilities, hygiene, and social distancing were deemed inadequate (Chattoraj 2022b). Mid-2021 witnessed a sudden spike in infections due to the Delta variant which was first detected in India in late 2020 and then spread globally. Singapore, in April 2022, banned the entry of long-term visa holders and short-term visitors from India, which was then battling a second wave of COVID-19 infections due to the Delta variant (Reuters 2021a). In October 2021, a surge of more than 5000 new infections occurred in the city–state in a single day, which was the highest figure since the pandemic began (Chattoraj 2022b). As beds in intensive care units were rapidly filling up (Reuters 2021b), everyone residing in Singapore was subjected to further restrictions.

Indian diaspora: the age-old phenomena

Migration has played an important part in the history of India. Currently, with 18 million Indian-born people living abroad, India has the world's largest diaspora (ET 2023). The majority of them are located in Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania. Although there are regional variations in their adaptations, they nevertheless display a common 'Indian' identity in many ways. They want their children to develop and prosper in their adopted countries, but at the same time, they prefer them to embrace Indian family values, marry other Indians, and share their common culture (Oonk 2007). In other words, many overseas South Asians tend to reproduce Indian culture, values, language, and religion as much as possible. In addition, nowadays many South Asian migrants try to reconnect with their homeland, either through the modern mass media, internet, or through personal visits. These reconnections are often seen as a romantic 'rendezvous' with the historical past and their 'original roots.' (Oonk 2007).

As the world's largest origin for international migrants, India has a rich history of immigration and emigration. The massive India diaspora, which can be found across the globe, includes millions of descendants of migrants and has taken shape mostly since the start of the colonial era, when large numbers of Indians were forcibly relocated to work on plantations and construction projects. The 1833 abolition of slavery in most parts of the British Empire transformed the colonial system, replacing slavery with indentured servitude. In the eight decades that followed, the United Kingdom relocated millions of bonded Indian workers to colonies across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Later, India's 1947 partition with Pakistan prompted the movement of millions of migrants throughout South Asia, in a vast reshuffling carried out along religious, ethnic, and other lines. India's relationship with its neighbours has defined many aspects of its migration trends and foreign policy in the decades since.

More recently, the Middle East and Western countries have been top destinations for Indians abroad. Slightly more than half of India's 18 million emigrants in 2020 lived in Persian Gulf countries, with nearly 3.5 million in the United Arab Emirates alone (Singh 2022; ET 2023) and 0.35 million in Singapore (MEA 2021). Many have moved abroad for

employment purposes; India is a significant source for low- and semi-skilled workers, as well as professionals in the healthcare and science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) fields.

There are vast economic differences within India, which is the world's second most populous country with approximately 1.4 billion residents. Labourers who travel abroad can see their salaries increase by multiples, particularly since more than 90 percent of India's workforce is engaged in the informal market. The states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala are the major sources of Indian emigration. Migration from the northern and highly populated Uttar Pradesh and Bihar is largely made up of semi-skilled and unskilled labourers, whereas migrants from southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu tend to have higher levels of education. Work-related emigration is largely dominated by men, and approximately 90 percent of migrant workers as of 2018 headed to the Persian Gulf or Southeast Asia, mostly in low- or semi-skilled professions (Singh 2022). Furthermore, India was predicted to have an estimated 600 million migrant population (Rajan and Bhagat 2022). Over half of all migrant labour are believed to be temporary or seasonal (Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan 2020).

In 2022, India received a record amount of $100bn remittances from diaspora overseas which made it obvious that, despite their tense connection with their homelands, diasporas provide a key lifeline for their host countries (PTI 2023; Chattoraj and Ahsan Ullah 2023). The rise of diaspora networking has accelerated the dissemination of information and technology. Global development groups are experimenting with novel development instruments such as diaspora bonds and remittances are critical for rural communities, particularly in the developing world, to improve financial conditions and mitigate risk (Chattoraj and Ahsan Ullah 2023).

Indian diaspora in Singapore

The presence of Indians in Southeast Asia dates back to the period before the Christian era when merchants and traders, along with Indian labourers, and teachers and medical personnels started arriving. Since the late twentieth century, Indian professionals in the information technology (IT) and communications sector have added to this heterogeneity, particularly in Singapore (Rai 2008). While Indian communities can be found in all parts of Southeast Asia, their presence is especially important in Singapore where they form significant minorities, and have played a crucial role in the development of this region from the nineteenth century onwards. The vast majority of Indians arrived as labourers and auxiliaries linked to the colonial enterprise, which in turn constructed the framework upon which they functioned in these societies.

The constitution of Singapore enshrines the principle that there shall be no discrimination against any citizen of Singapore on the grounds of religion, race, descent, or place of birth. Since independence in 1965, Singapore has been governed by a single party, the People's Action Party (PAP) and Indians have been well represented in parliament and in the cabinet where they have held various portfolios (Rai 2008). They are to be found at all levels of the civil service. Singapore's desire to forge a sense of national identity among its ethnic groups led to policies to strengthen national loyalties while at the same time emphasising the need to retain one's cultural identity (Rai 2008). 'Ethnic' values and cultures have thus been allowed to flourish, although the heterogeneous populace has been

streamlined into four categories known commonly as 'CMIO' (Chinese, Malays, Indians, and 'Others'). As far as Indians are concerned, while there exists considerable diversity, in terms of origins, religion, and language, they have been projected in official discourse as a homogeneous group. Policies to retain cultural diversity have been institutionalised in education through 'multilingualism' where students can opt for either Chinese, Malay, Tamil, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu, and Bengali as their mother tongue language while keeping English as their first language.

Economically, the position of Indians in Singapore has been uplifted. At independence, the majority of Indians were 'blue-collar' workers although they did have a significant presence in the legal and medical professions. Since then, the state's commitment to meritocracy has allowed Indians to secure jobs in the government sector. From the 1990s, however, the focus on developing a 'knowledge-based economy,' alongside the need to counter a rapidly aging population, has ushered the advent of large numbers of migrant Indian professionals. The upshot has been a change in the occupational profile of Indians in the private sector.

The late 1990s onwards has also seen a growth in the number of Indian entrepreneurs setting up businesses in Singapore – a marked change from the period prior to the 1990s when educated Indians vied primarily for government jobs. The advent of a large number of Indian migrant professionals has had considerable bearing on the position of the Indian community in Singapore. Children of new migrant Indian professionals have done exceptionally well in public schools.

Indian Singaporeans make around 9 percent of the Singapore population as of 2021 and there are 0.7 millions of Indians in Singapore. Out of which around 300,000 (0.3 millions) are Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) and 350,000 (0.35 millions) are Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) or Diaspora. Indian Singaporeans have diverse backgrounds, with ethnic Tamils and Hindus forming majorities. Others are Malayalees, (tracing their heritage to Kerala & Punjabi, Gujarati, and Sindhi communities) constitute 7.67 percent of the Singaporean Indian populace (MEA 2021). The remaining 29.68 percent is composed of many smaller groups with ancestry from both southern India (such as the Telugus) and northern India (such as the Hindustanis, the Malay colloquial term for Hindi-speaking Indians), or ethnically mixed Singaporeans with paternal Indian ancestry (MEA 2021).

Population Profile of Singapore Indians (MEA 2021) :

■ Tamils – 54.18 percent; Malayali Kerala – 7.57 percent;
■ Punjabi – 5.35 percent; Gujarati – 1.18 percent;
■ Sindhi −1.14 percent; Others – 29.8 percent (Telugu, Bengali, and Goans).

COVID-19 and Singapore

COVID-19 has shaped the history of the twenty-first century and has forced us to adapt to the 'new normal' (Ullah, Nawaz, and Chattoraj 2021). Since the COVID-19 outbreak began in early 2020, millions of individuals have been infected and killed by the disease. To contain the spread of the virus, almost all countries introduced strict restrictions like border closures, quarantines, expulsions, and lockdowns of refugee camps and migrant worker communities (Ullah, Nawaz, and Chattoraj 2021).

Even though the world is being vaccinated at a very rapid pace, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), our only defence against COVID-19 is to wear a mask, keep our hands clean, maintain a distance of at least one metre from others; keep our windows open whenever possible; and sneeze/cough into our elbows (Ullah, Hossain, and Chattoraj 2020). In 2003, Singapore's experience with the SARS outbreak prompted the nation to strengthen its preparedness for any future outbreaks of infectious diseases (Wong, Leo, and Tan 2020).[3] Despite Singapore being one of the most prepared Asian countries, COVID-19 did not spare the city–state. Since February–March 2020, thousands of cases have been reported from foreign migrant dormitories. As of March 2023, Singapore has reported more than 2.2 million cases of COVID-19 infections with a death of 1722 (WHO, Singapore 2023) in a country of 5.45 million population (See 2021). In order to protect Singapore from the spread of COVID-19, a 'circuit breaker' (CB) phase (also known as a lockdown) was implemented for two months, from 7 April to 1 June 2020.

According to the ranking of the best places to live during the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore topped the list (Hong 2021). This is mostly because of bringing down the number of locally transmitted cases to near zero in late 2020; implementing border curbs and strict quarantine procedures, allowing citizens to go about their daily lives as usual, even attending concerts and going on cruises (Hong 2021). Also, as of February 2023, more than 15 million vaccine doses have been administered where more than 5.1 million population already got fully vaccinated (WHO, Singapore 2023).

Singapore began immunising children aged five and up against COVID-19 in late 2021, and children aged 6 months till 4 years from October 2022. Singapore, thus, became one among those select nations, such as Canada, the US, Israel, Australia, and Cambodia, that began vaccinating children aged five to 11 (Ullah and Chattoraj 2022).

The city–state, however, witnessed a spike in infections caused by the Delta variant since mid-2021 and Omicron started affecting 20,000 people on an average per day since early 2022. Due to this, the city–state was being subjected to further restrictions until early 2022. However, since April 2022, almost all the restrictions have been eased as number of daily infections started reducing and situation became stabilised (Han 2022).

COVID-19 and the Indian diaspora: experiences and their sense of commonality

Commonality in their daily livelihoods in Singapore

During the interviews, each one of my respondents stated that they feel comfortable staying in Singapore because they have faith in the government's ability to contain the virus. Even one of my respondents, Raya, a 26-years-old Civil Engineer, laughed and said, 'We are lucky to stay here (in 2021). Looking at the current situation in India now (May 2021), it is safer to stay in Singapore than to return home in India.'

For the Indian-Muslim respondents from South India, like Fardeen and Qiban, it has been 2 years that they were deprived of celebrating Eid (Hari Raya) because of the restrictions:

> In 2020, we were ok that Eid got cancelled because of the Circuit Breaker. All of us understood it. This year (in 2021), when cases were decreasing and restrictions were almost eased,

we thought we could go home and celebrate Eid with our families. We started to plan accordingly […]. Unfortunately, in April 2021, cases in India started to increase and travel got banned again. We were heartbroken, devastated. We were really looking forward to spend this year's (2021) Eid with our family back home. But here also cases started increasing since May 2021, everything was cancelled. It has been 2 years now; we have not celebrated Eid.

'Every-day is the same […].' Most of the working respondents, (who were interviewed in 2020) said they have been going through the same mundane routine of getting up in the morning and sitting in front of the laptops until evenings. 'The whole day passes by attending virtual meetings.' For most of the respondents, I interviewed, their typical workday starts at 9am and continues until 8–9pm. Furthermore, several of them stated that due to the scarcity of manpower, they have had to work overtime more frequently which leads them to finish their work at around 10pm. 'Though we are at home, but we do not get to spend time with our kids that much,' one of the common statements from the respondents.

> Life was really hectic during the CB, when we were stuck at home. My daughter's condition was the worst as she cannot go out to play and we, as parents cannot give her much time because of our work schedules. Luckily, in Singapore, we can afford helpers who took a great care of our daughter

stated by 37-years-old, Ritwika, who works as a Data Scientist in a Research centre in Singapore. Both Ritwika and her husband Sumit along with their daughter have been staying in Singapore since 2015.

The diasporas appreciate the endeavour of having permission to go out once the CB ended, but they believe that these visits cannot be a perfect alternative for being able to eat in large groups like before: 'We can go out only in groups of 5, however, when cases were rising the number was reduced to 2. We need to keep ourselves updated all the time about the rules and regulations.' stated Navin, a 39-years-old- software engineer in a MNC in Singapore.

Besides, there are many respondents, who have not seen their families for more than 2 years. They expressed their fear of not seeing them again due to COVID-19: Rajan, a 44 years-old-banker, has seen his family in 2019 December. His family includes his parents, wife, and two children who are still in India. He has spent long periods of time away from them, but when so many around him got sick, he was genuinely concerned that he might not see them again.

> My father is a heart patient. Mother cannot walk and is bed-ridden. In this COVID-19, situation has deteriorated. Several of my relatives have been badly affected and also 2 of them died during the second wave in May 2021. That is why, I am really scared. I fear that I will never see my parents again. I cannot leave this job and return as in India there is so much uncertainty and joblessness […].

Common experiences of split families and mental stress

'When can we travel to India?' – another most common question I came across when interviewed my respondents. Most of them were waiting for the borders to reopen so that they can travel to their homes to see their family and friends.

During the second wave of COVID-19 in April-May 2021, the Indian Diaspora in Singapore was grappling with a sense of anxiousness and helplessness as they watch the COVID-19 cases soar to record numbers in India: 'We are really worried about our parents back home. […] we have heard of several family and friends contracting the coronavirus and many of their conditions are critical too.'

When the total number of cases in India surpassed 18 million, setting another world record for new daily infections with close to 380,000 new cases on April 29, 2021, respondents became really impatient and worried. Sanjeeva, a 41-years-old-IT professional said,

> We are mostly worried because our hometown (Delhi) struggles with a shortage in hospital supplies and overwhelmed morgues. Due to this crisis, several countries, including Singapore, imposed travel restrictions on travelers from India. Now, if anything happens to our parents, we will not be able to see them again. We are stuck here.

The crisis has split families apart, with no light in sight of a reunion any time soon. For Mr. Shaibal Reddy, a 32-year-old software engineer from Mumbai, it has been more than a year since he saw his firstborn. Mr. Reddy, an employment pass holder, returned to his hometown in Bangalore with his wife in October 2019 for the delivery of his first child. He returned to Singapore alone in November 2019 and planned to go back in March 2020 for the delivery. Unfortunately, in July 2021 (at the time of the interview), he is still waiting to go back and meet his newborn. He hoped that his family could join him when the pandemic 'settled down' in 2021, yet entry approvals have been controlled for dependent pass holders such as his wife and daughter. The then latest restrictions on travellers from India have thrown another spanner in the works for Mr. Reddy, who said that it was 'mentally stressful' for him to be away from his family in India given the surging cases.

'Even if we are here and working, some part of our brain is constantly thinking about what's happening in my hometown, whether my parents are safe, and when I can go back,' Shirish, a 40-year-old accountant, from Indore, said who is stuck in Singapore. Likewise, Mr. Sumit Biswas, a 25-year-old doctoral student at one of the University in Singapore, said that it was mentally distressing to learn of friends and family contracting the virus and hear of negative news on social media such as insufficient medical supplies, hospitals overwhelmed in India. Even he lost two of his close family members due to COVID-19, the 25-year-old's worry is doubled because he is away from his ailing parents who are susceptible to the virus.

The travel restrictions prevented many families from attending the last rituals of their parents. As a result, they suffered a shock that took several months to recover from. When COVID-19-induced travel restrictions temporarily eased in early 2021, Ms. Shyamali, 42, who worked as a professor at one of the Universities in Singapore since 2014, decided to book a flight back to Chennai to see her ailing mother. But her plans for a reunion came crashing down when the Delta variant began to spread like wildfire in South Asia. 'I tried everything possible to go home … (but) on Apr 30 there was an announcement that they were banning all returnees from India (who are not Singapore citizens or permanent residents) during the Delta variant outbreak,' said Ms. Shyamali. 'During pre-Covid days, I used to fly every once a month to see my ailing mother. COVID changed everything.' As the Delta outbreak in Singapore worsened and the travel policy remained unchanged, Ms. Shyamali, who was staying alone here, became

increasingly anxious. 'If I flew to India, I couldn't come back to Singapore … it was crazy … I waited and waited … After a while, it was just too much, but I was not brave enough to leave my job and go back. So had to stay here counting my days to go back to India.'

Shyamali's experience reflects the problems that many Indians working in Singapore faced as border controls turned once-hassle-free entry and exit into a nightmare. Due to this, several also thought of leaving Singapore. Unfortunately, the uncertain job market in India prevented them from leaving Singapore.

Commonality in the feeling of helplessness

For some, being away from their family during this period has left them with a sense of helplessness.

Mr. Idrish, another EP holder from Delhi, one of the harder-hit states, said that his sister informed him that both his parents contracted COVID-19 and his mother is in the hospital because of lungs issue. It left him anxious and helpless knowing that he could not do anything about the situation. Even if he flies to Delhi in any way, there is no certainty as to when he can return again. He doesn't want to risk his life as well his two children's who are studying in Singapore. The 53-year-old, Naresh, who is the chief financial officer of a multinational company, has tried to provide psychological and mental support for his family in Karnataka by calling them daily and making them engage in activities to take their mind off the worsening situation in India. The 35-year-old investment banker, Divjyot, whose family is in Punjab, said that he has been sharing information on his social media accounts such as posts by friends who need oxygen supplies or beds. He said that by doing so, he hopes to link people who do not have the resources with those who do within his networks.

Commonality in keeping calm

At the same time, some among the Indian Diaspora said that they were not too worried yet because the situation in their hometowns has remained manageable. For example: Mr Saikat Pathak, a 28-year-old maintenance worker, said that the out-break in his hometown in Mysore, did not appear to be as bad as other big cities. He said that his parents were more concerned about his well-being here than their own situation given the COVID-19 outbreak in Singapore in mid-2021. Similarly, Mr. Atanu Samanta, a 32-years-old data-scientist in a renowned bank, said that COVID-19 has not spread much in his hometown yet, which is near the eastern Indian city of Kolkata. However, he believes that the 'worst is yet to come' given that elections involving big gatherings recently concluded. He has prepared infor-mation on medical resources in his locality in case of an emergency.

Commonality in standing united

In some ways, the crisis has rallied the Indian Diaspora in Singapore to offer support for each other, Mr. Reddy said that many chat groups on WhatsApp and Telegram have appeared. People in these groups, who are from different states, were responsive in

offering help to others, such as providing evacuation flight schedules or explaining documents required for travel. Those interviewed said that sooner or later, though, the pandemic will force some of them to make difficult decisions. For Mr. Reddy, who has had to watch his daughter grow up through a mobile phone screen, he will have to rethink his future plans if the pandemic does not improve soon: 'No one knows when the pandemic will end or how long the restrictions will be in place. If it goes on for the next six months, I can't be away from my family for so long. It'll be too much.'

Commonality in their aspirations to have a better future

Through my interviews, I found another point of commonality; Almost each and every one has the same motivations for coming to Singapore, their aspirations to have a better life:

> Singapore is a modern, rich and developed country […]. It is so near to our country, board a flight and in just 3–4 h, you will reach. Staying in Singapore, means enjoying all the facilities of a developed country and yet so near unlike Europe or USA.

The deep reverence for the country was also precipitated by the economic difficulties most of them had experienced in India. Migration is about people, their aspirations and fears, triumphs, and tragedies (Chattoraj 2020). While motivations for migrating to Singapore varied, they largely revolve around two factors: 'status claims' and 'economic deprivation' back home (Rahman 2017). In this context, status claims are made through statements, behaviours, or symbols which would indicate someone's position on the social hierarchy. Migration is regarded as a way through which one can increase their social standing through both economic and social terms (Rahman 2017).

Being grateful to the city–state: an experience of commonality

Sunny, a 36-years-old-software engineer, was truly surprised by Singapore's efforts to give him due attention: 'We are the ones with the least entitlements because we are foreigners. However, Singapore government's level of caring amidst of COVID-19, is a big surprise to me.' He further added that as 'second-class residents' in the country, he was quite certain that he would disproportionately be affected by the consequences of the pandemic and had to pay a huge lumpsum after being tested positive for COVID-19 in September 2020. Nonetheless, even in the middle of the pandemic, considering the way the Government handled the afflicted, it was more than sufficient. 'All the medical bills were taken care by the government. I am so very grateful.' In addition to massive mass testing efforts and quarantine orders, free masks, and sometimes free hand sanitisers were also distributed.

The gratitude felt by the diaspora during the pandemic is, therefore, largely subordinated to larger felt systemic flaws that originally made them susceptible, so the attention given to them was entirely different from their usual experience. Similarly, another respondent Deb, a 40-years-old software engineer, expressed his gratitude to the Singapore government and his employer in the following manner:

> I thank God for giving me this opportunity to stay and work here. I am here with my wife and a 7 years-old son (they are on DP). We received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine

free of cost along with the booster dose. Last week, my son also received his first dose. I would like to thank the Singapore Government for making sure I was taken care of.

Chinmaya, a 35-years-old, housewife, also appreciated Singapore's efforts in tackling the virus and thanked the government for providing the free doses of Pfizer (COVID-19 vaccines) which has to be bought by many in India as it was not in plenty:

> I feel so much thankful to Singapore government that even if we are the foreigners here, we did not have to think about the vaccines. We got it for free. But look at my hometown in Trichy, people have to buy it for more than 2000 INR[4], as it is not available that much. My parents had to buy it from the private hospitals.

Conclusions

This study shows that the Indian diaspora in Singapore shares a wide range of common experiences and aspirations about moving to Singapore and living and working in the city–state. They are bound together by cultural, social, and religious ties. They share their daily challenges, pains, and joys and hope to return to their family in India after the pandemic ends. The empirical data highlight the obstacles they have faced since the beginning of the pandemic (COVID-19), living through the challenges of uncertainty and fear in Singapore, and how commonalities are both individually perceived and embodied and collectively negotiated and exercised. Although they led affluent lifestyles, several of them suffered anxiety and trauma every day due to travel restrictions and the uncertainty of when they would see their families again in India. Unable to cope with this situation, some of them at times even considered dropping everything and returning to India, but uncertainty about job opportunities back home played a major role in their decision.

Despite all this, they are content to stay in Singapore during this crisis because the government is taking incredible care of them. Most of them are confident that the government will make the right decision at the right time. And, when Singapore began opening 'Vaccinated Travel Lanes' with several countries in late 2021 (Ullah and Chattoraj 2022), their confidence grew that they would be able to see their family again in a few months. As a result, their fears and anxieties began to subside. In early 2022, when all travel restrictions to India were lifted, people began to visit their families and friends. In Singapore, the Indian diaspora breathed a sigh of relief and happiness. This is also an experience of commonality. From this, I conclude that although the Indian diaspora faced a precarious situation in 2020–2021, they did not regret their decision to stay in Singapore. The way Singapore treated them during COVID-19 made them even more reliant on the city–state. As long as Singapore operates effectively and efficiently, the diaspora will continue to respect the good governance of the country.

Notes

1. The term 'diaspora' is defined as transnational groups of immigrants living abroad in host countries but maintaining economic, political, social, and emotional ties with their homeland and other diasporic communities of the same origin (Ullah and Kumpoh 2018). The Indians those who fall under this category are known as Indian diaspora.

2. Employment Pass (EP) is the pass for foreign professionals, managers, and executives. Candidates need to earn at least $4,500 a month and have acceptable qualifications.

   Dependent Pass (DP) is for the spouses and children of Eligible EP Holder.

   For details on Employment Pass and Dependent Pass, please see https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits).

3. These include, as emphasized by Wong (et al. 2020:1243), 'the construction of a new purpose-built National Centre for Infectious Diseases and National Public Health Laboratory; significant expansion in the number of negative-pressure isolation beds throughout the public hospital system; stockpiling of personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks; establishment of formal platforms for multi-Ministry and cross-agency coordination; development of a strong capability to perform contact tracing quickly and at scale; training of health professionals including in the correct use of PPE; and building more biosafety level 3 laboratories.'

4. 1 US$ = Rs. 83 (INR) (approximately)

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