

**R!O!T**

**RECOLLECTIONS**

RIOT RECOLLECTIONS  
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# RIOT

## RECOLLECTIONS

ZAKARIA ZAINAL & PRABHU SILVAM

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Singapore

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# CONTENTS

**FOREWORD** 8

**30 STORIES** 10

**OUR MIGRANT  
WORKERS** 76  
*BY BRAEMA MATHI*

**THE LEGAL RESPONSE** 78  
*BY KEVIN YL TAN*

# FOREWORD

When news of that fateful Sunday night in Singapore's Little India spread, many of us were in disbelief.

It was the country's worst outbreak of violence in four decades. Hundreds of South Asian workers went on a rampage set off by one person's death, leaving thirty-nine others, including police officers, injured. An ambulance and two patrol cars were also set on fire.

The last time something like this happened was in 1969—the race riots that our generation could only read in history books but revisited and retold by our parents and grandparents.

Despite comprehensive coverage from both the mainstream and alternative media, our curiosity compelled us to walk along not just Race Course Road but also around Little India itself.

The result: first-person narratives from different locations like Chander Road, Belilios Lane and Kinta Road. Each backalley and street was a fragment of the mural that makes up Little India.

All portraits and interviews were completed within a month of the

riot. Also, it proved difficult finding individuals who witnessed the riot as the days and weeks progressed.

With pen and camera, that curiosity turned into an excuse to have conversations and to document what we could.

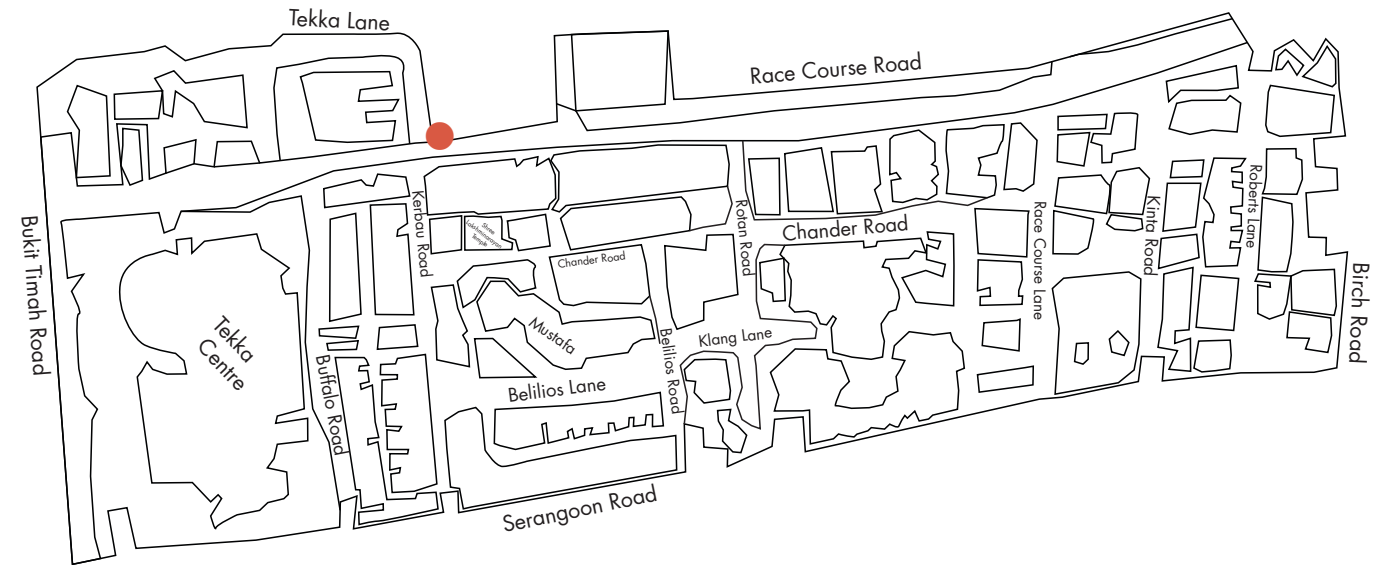
More importantly, we wanted to reveal the myriad of mini-narratives from the ground. A visual *vox populi*, if you like.

Stories from Chia Boon Juay, on his second day at work as a part-time valet but caught in a maelstrom of furious foreign workers. Alert enough to document the scene with just his mobile phone, his videos going viral for the world to see.

Stories of bravery, from Chef Ravindra Rawath, ensuring his customers' safety by accompanying them to the nearest taxi stand. He has seen worse.

Stories from the brave Home Team officers were also something we wanted to include.

However, we may have asked too much from the relevant authorities. They declined to comment.



Undeterred, we spent many a weekend approaching strangers, shopkeepers, residents and foreign workers—in the hope for a story. The hope that they were witness to events along that fateful road.

And these 30 did.

We believe that these stories and portraits provide alternative narratives to an important chapter in Singapore's history. Our hope is that with this book, more of you will step forward and reveal your version of the events that night.

Despite using stories collectively to make sense of what happened, we know that providing the full

picture will prove an impossible task. Whatever errors found in this book are ours, and ours alone.

Behind these stories, these individuals, too, reveal to us their hopes and aspirations for a better Singapore. So that such an incident may never happen again.

“Go ahead and make this book,” one of them said.

“These stories need to be told.”

ZAKARIA ZAINAL  
PRABHU SILVAM



“Most of the time, we don’t understand each other.”

Kallakurichi, a state in Tamil Nadu lies 4000 miles away from Singapore. Yet, Muthusamy feels like he’s never left home.

“Work is tough, but my younger brother is here with me so life is bearable,” the 27-year-old said. He makes a living as an onsite electrician at a local construction firm.

That Sunday was meant for grocery shopping. Having just finished buying toiletries for the month, a close friend suggested they head home early—to avoid the hassle of jostling through the evening crowd.

That is one suggestion that he remains grateful for till this very day.

Otherwise, Muthusamy would have played witness to the biggest riot Singapore has seen in over 40 years.

Startled and in disbelief, his first reaction was to thank his lucky stars for leaving Race Course Road early that night—a decision that he has never looked back upon.

“I couldn’t imagine someone had just lost his life at a place I was at a few hours ago.”

Shuttling workers to and from dormitories, chartered buses are part of the landscape every weekend at Race Course Road.

Muthusamy’s dormitory lies on the outskirts of heartland Yishun, a far cry from the vernacular district of Little India.

Scheduled to commute at half-hour intervals, bus conductors and drivers can be quite feisty and unforgiving at times, he adds. “They don’t speak our language so it is hard to communicate.”

“Most of the time, we don’t understand each other.”

## “Who will take care of them now?”

Front-row seats to a riot were the last thing on kitchen helper T. S. Mallika's mind that night.

But that's exactly what unfolded before her eyes from her temporary dorm, located atop her workplace along Race Course Road.

From the confines of her second storey vantage, a peep through the curtains revealed thick smoke and a bantering crowd that was now beginning to grow by the hour.

Almost maternally, the 55-year-old empathises with the affected migrant workers but yet, does not stop short of chiding them in the process.

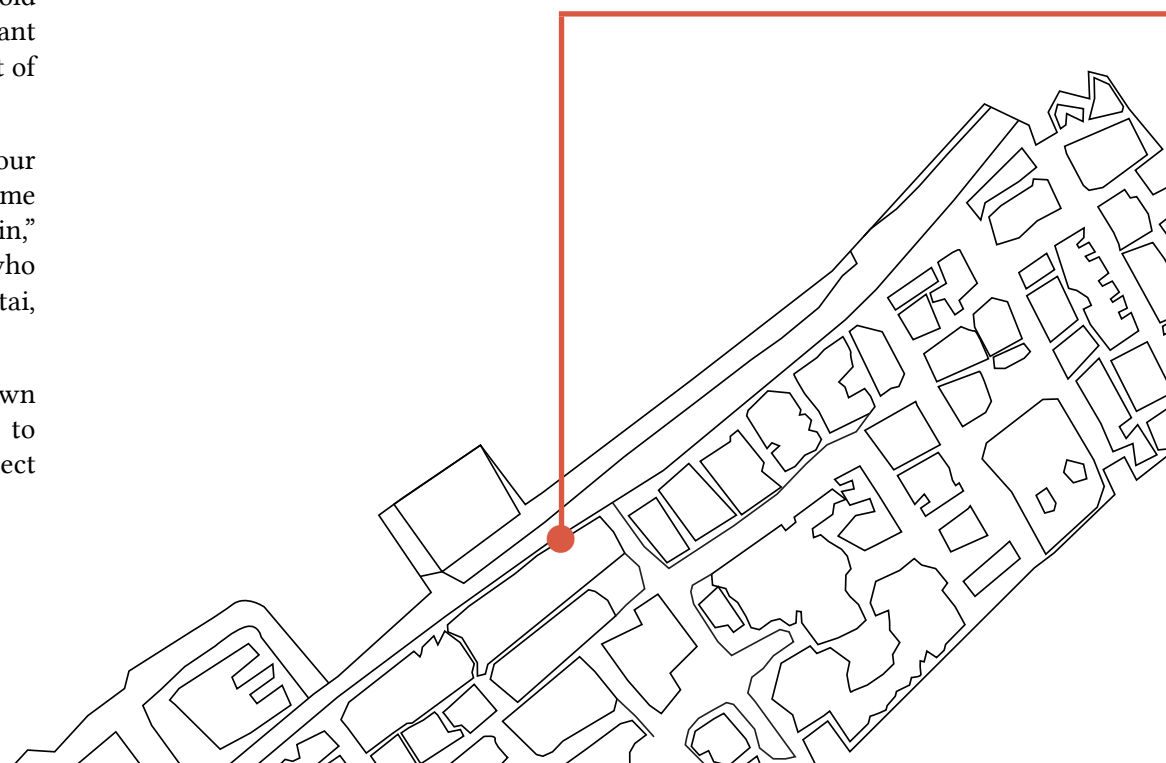
“It's tough being away from your family for so long. Having a good time with friends helps to numb the pain,” said the employment pass holder who hails from the village of Pudhupettai, Tamil Nadu.

“There is a saying in my hometown that drunkards are equivalent to wastrels,” she said. “There is no respect for anyone who is a drunkard.”

Those arrested have parents to take care of, sisters to marry away and young children to feed, she laments.

Her concern quickly shifts to the families who had sold everything to send their sons abroad.

“Who will take care of them now?”



T. S. MALLIKA

