

ARTICLE

Due to differences in geographical location, people from different countries of the world have different eating habits. Different cuisines and dishes may be different in different districts of the same country. Some people like to eat rice-fish. Someone likes bread. Again, some people like to eat half-cooked food.

People's taste in food depends on the eating habits of the regions and countries and cultures. After eating the same food for a long time, many people can no longer be able to adjust to different eating habits. Again, those who have to travel to different countries or come to different places for work can get used to many kinds of eating habits. But in this case, it requires time to adapt or adjust a food habit. So, no one can suddenly change their eating habits. Gradually one has to adapt to the new food from a new environment. Otherwise, it will have a physiological and psychological effect on human life.

It is not easy to change a habit like food that people's lives depend on. Following the outbreak of the coronavirus in Singapore, the government has announced a lockdown of the dormitories. At the same time, the government has announced that all workers will be paid during their stay in the dormitory and will be provided with food. It is natural that there will be some problems in providing food to this huge number of workers. Bangladeshis and Indians like to eat spicy curry with rice and pickle. But in their supply of food, they have not considered nationalities in some way. Many workers have been given half-cooked vegetables with little rice which they are not accustomed to eating. I am not questioning the quality or nutritional value of these foods and I have no doubt about it. But Bangladeshis and Indians are not accustomed to eating these foods and many have thrown them in the dustbin.

ARTICLE

More than 10 million meals have been served to foreign workers since some purpose-built dormitories went into lockdown, with food caterers seeking to address concerns raised about their quality and quantity. This is no mean feat, as noted by Minister of State for Manpower Zaqy Mohamad, who said in a Facebook post on Wednesday that the inter-agency task force set up to support the workers would have served over 10 million meals to those in the purpose-built dorms by this weekend.

He said there are 34 professional caterers providing meals to about 200,000 workers - akin to catering for the whole of Ang Mo Kio GRC. The Government is footing the bill for all meals in purpose-built dorms. It is not clear how much the caterers are charging but one of them, Neo Group, said it charges only for ingredients and labour costs.

Teething issues early on sparked criticism about the quality, quantity and the type of cuisine served up but this has improved, said Mr Zaqy. He told The Straits Times that these issues stemmed from logistics challenges generated by the sheer number of residents in the dorms. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) is now ensuring that meals are delivered to residents within 30 minutes of their arrival at the dorms.

Tests are also being done with workers from different countries to ensure that the food suits their tastes. The Covid-19 outbreak has resulted in about 300,000 workers having their movements restricted due to quarantine or stay-home notices, prompting the authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and employers to step in to ensure that daily needs are met.

ARTICLE

Similarly, caterers who have taken on the task of feeding the hundreds of thousands of workers have had to adapt to the diets of at least six different nationalities. Catering Solutions, which provides food for five purpose-built dorms, has ramped up its production from 20,000 meals a day to almost 70,000 in the past few weeks, said director Shanmugam Ganesan.

It had previously been catering for workers at Jurong Shipyard and Sembcorp Marine in Tuas, but providing for a bigger group has seen it tweaking its menus according to workers' feedback. It provides Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi and Punjabi dishes. "We adjusted the kinds of fish, vegetables and portioning of curries," said Mr Shanmugam, adding that extra portions of rice are also prepared just in case. Catering Solutions has hired 60 workers to add to its workforce of 100 and tapped technology - it has a number of chapati-making machines - to increase production. Its kitchens are working 24 hours a day, up from 18, to provide pre-dawn meals for Muslim workers in the dorms during Ramadan.

THOUGHTS:

ARTICLE

ALL was quiet along a new 200m road off Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 yesterday. Newly planted trees hid the trickle of pedestrians - the first residents of the newly opened foreign workers' dormitory there - from the view of residents in a nearby condominium. There was no hint of the controversy that had surrounded the setting up of the building, which opened its doors to the first batch of workers this month.

In 2008, more than 1,400 Serangoon Gardens residents, alarmed at the prospect of having foreign workers as neighbours, signed a petition against the dormitory, which they handed to National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan. They cited concerns of higher crime rates and lower property values, and sparked off a debate on the attitudes of Singaporeans towards foreign workers and the issue of integration.

The Government relented partially, making various changes to the development plan, including building a \$2 million access road so that buses transporting the workers to the dormitory could bypass the congested Serangoon Gardens. Run by dormitory operator Maxi Consultancy, the dormitory will run on a five-year lease and house about 600 male and female workers from the services and manufacturing sector. The Ministry of National Development will consider increasing this to up to 1,000 workers.

Dormitory residents were surprised to hear about the furore that had erupted previously. Factory worker Li Feng, 31, said: 'When people from different cultures first meet, there will naturally be wariness. But over time and interaction, I hope things will improve.'

ARTICLE

China national Lu Xian Ning, 20, who works in a hotel, said: 'Singaporeans whom we've met on the street and asked for directions have been friendly so far. 'Dormitory conditions are satisfactory, said the workers. About eight people are housed in a room, and food is available from a canteen. Security is tight. Residents have to use passes to access the only entrance.No drinking, smoking or fighting is tolerated, and visitors are allowed only in the canteen.

A 70m or so buffer zone - another measure to allay residents' fears - separates the back of the dormitory from the residents of Burghley Drive, a 10-minute walk away. The fence is covered with blue tarpaulin, which shields residents of the private housing estate and those of the dormitory from one another. Residents there said that they felt reassured now. Mrs Pauline Leong, a housewife, has had no1 complaints since the dormitory opened. She admitted: 'Initially, I was worried. Previously, all of us were quite biased, because we were a bit scared of foreign workers.'But now that they've come, I'm not scared any more. There is no reason for them to disturb us. As humans, we have to be compassionate and learn how to live together.

THOUGHTS:

ARTICLE

A DORMITORY for foreign workers may be half a kilometre away, but its problems could still end up on the doorsteps of its neighbours. In residential areas like Jalan Kayu and Jurong, where foreign-worker dorms have sprung up, littering, loitering and rowdy behaviour are some of the problems residents have had to put up with. Early this week, residents in Serangoon Gardens banded together to petition against housing workers in a former school in the neighbourhood.

Though complaints have subsided in Jalan Kayu, where two dorms housing 6,000 workers were built three years ago, some residents say that the problems never really go away. Neighbourhood committee chairman Terry Fong remembers how there was a barrage of complaints from residents when the dorms went up. Mostly, they were about Indian and Bangladeshi workers dirtying the neighbourhood by littering and spitting.

But there were also concerns about safety as workers had a tendency to loiter in big groups and become drunk and rowdy. Knowing that something had to be done, the committee roped in several foreign workers late last year to participate in regular patrols around the neighbourhood with the police and local residents. They were mentors to their peers, helping them understand the laws and social norms of where they lived, said Mr Fong. There are fewer complaints now, and it is partly a result of getting workers directly involved in security, he felt. 'The majority say it is good that we have this programme, but it is something we have to keep working at,' he said.

ARTICLE

The same problems may also plague Serangoon Gardens, if preliminary plans to convert a former school into a workers' dorm go through. Serangoon Gardens Technical School, a proposed site, is less than 10m away from the nearest house along Burghley Drive. It made headlines this week when residents rallied against the idea. About 1,400 signed a petition, which was handed to Aljunied GRC MPs George Yeo and Lim Hwee Hua on Wednesday. The Ministry of National Development (MND) confirmed yesterday that the school is just 'one among the sites being studied, and there is no decision to proceed yet'.

The Straits Times checked the location of 20 dorms and found that seven were less than 600m away from an apartment block. Dorm operators who spoke to The Straits Times felt that even this distance was too close. Mr Eric Yeoh, a director of the Ama Keng Hostel in Lim Chu Kang, said a dorm near residents would bring about 'a lot of complaints for sure'. Another dorm operator said the situation was 'asking for trouble'. The unnamed manager said workers often hung out in groups, and would spit and litter, which people here find unacceptable. 'The workers have had these habits for 20 to 30 years, so it's hard for them to change within a short time,

THOUGHTS:

ARTICLE

This reliance on foreign labour was a problem that was identified by a 2009 economic strategies committee chaired by then-Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, but “the needle hasn’t shifted” and productivity remains low, he added.

The reliance on foreign workers has also depressed the wages of low-income workers here, Prof Chua pointed out. He also felt that the Government had not been taking on the social responsibility that comes with the reliance and had instead delegated the foreign workers’ welfare to employers.

He added that the Government should have at least recognised that something needs to be done when a thousand violations are found each year in relation to foreign worker accommodation. Assoc Prof Tan believed that society has become immune to the foreign worker situation as there had been a fixation on assessing each person based on his economic worth.

My concern is that if we can treat a segment of our society like that, it could mean that that sort of discrimination can go easily to another segment of our society,” he said.

Related to this point, Prof Chua argued that it is time for Singapore to get rid of some myths about itself. “We really believe too much in what we constructed about our own success story,” he said. Mr Sadasivan added that as a society, “everything is predicated on dollars and cents”. “I am not a communist. I am not a socialist. I am saying that at the end of the day, we need to be able to say: ‘Enough is enough’,” he said. “It is something that we need to think hard about. How much money do we really need to be content? How much is necessary?”

ARTICLE

Contractor PQ Builders' Peh Ke-Pin has had little luck sourcing for Singaporean workers. About 90 per cent of the company's team that does ground construction work are made up of foreigners. The Singaporeans who are part of the team are in supervisory roles. Bringing in foreign workers is not as cheap as people think, he said.

A construction worker typically earns about S\$800 a month in basic pay, but each worker costs at least double that, if you count the levy, accommodation and food expenses, as well as overtime pay. "It's not that much more expensive to hire a local," Mr Peh said. He is willing to pay between S\$2,000 to S\$3,000 for a local, but there are still no takers when he puts out the job advertisements.

The cost of hiring a skilled foreigner worker, including the levy as well as accommodation, laundry and insurance is comparable to hiring a local tradesman, he said. "This means that the issue for some employers might not be budget constraints, but the lack of local applicants." Foreign workers fill the low-wage, manual labour jobs that Singaporeans are unwilling to do in areas like construction, security and cleaning, they said, while Singapore's small and shrinking domestic population means it is increasingly tougher to find the people who will take up these roles.

And unlike other countries that spend a longer time to finish a project due to manpower constraints, construction companies here cannot afford to take a similar route, Minister Chan Chun Sing argued. "For a small country without natural resources, we compete on the basis that we are a good place for people to do business. If we lose out in that relative game compared to other people, then, unfortunately, I think the future of Singapore will not be what we expect it to be," he had said.

