

## **ESSAY TITLE: Majulah Singapura, Let's Beat It! (Ng Yi Keong)**

"I trust that everything happens for a reason. That reason causes change. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it's hard. But in the end it's *all for the best*". Perhaps in life, the only continuity ever-present is the light after the dawn- akin to a rollercoaster; for any down, there would always be an up and the ride will end regardless.

Covid-19 has undoubtedly left a long-lasting memory on me that I doubt I will ever forget, even as the pandemic is far from over, for good or for bad. As a 20 years-old youth stepping into the foot of adulthood, I have experienced a fair share of major events that Singaporeans my generation would associate with such as SARS (When I was an infant) where i could still vaguely recall the public uproar and panic in fear of their friends and relatives contracting this deadly virus and the International Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 (When I was a Primary School Student) where Singaporeans are worried about their livelihoods and daily expenses etc cetera.

Though I may not fully comprehend the severity of these issues, these events are nevertheless memorable to me even at a young age as they confront significant changes to my life at that point of time. During SARS, as both of my parents are working adults, closure of kindergartens forced them to find alternative arrangements to take care of me. During the financial crisis, job security was a real issue and we are forced to cut back on spending on "impulse luxury items" such as travelling and buying takeaway foods. Fortunately, my parents are there to cushion and shelter the negative implications from me.

However, Covid-19 hits me differently and shatters me from the bubble I was living in. Having just graduated from Junior College in 2019, I have taken-up a contract job in the Customer Service Sector in hope to gain more working experience, particularly in a high-demanding environment so as to pick-up essential soft skills like communicating with clients before I serve National Service. However, this plan was disrupted during the peak of Covid-19 as firms were forced to retrenched redundant workers amidst the crisis. I was in shock, marred by disbelief as I didn't expect to be laid redundant at such a young age, armed with little to no skills at all.

Unfortunately, this sentiment is associated and deeply felt by all Singaporeans. Covid-19 induced slowdown has caused the unemployment rate to rise up to 3.6 per cent, surpassing the high recorded during the peak of the global financial crisis, bringing the total number of unemployed residents to 112,500, of which 97,700 are Singaporeans and expected number of layoffs so far last year to 20,450, of which 57 per cent are residents.

One noteworthy insight from these unemployment statistics highlights the susceptibility of certain industries, with an estimated 7,000 in services, 1,900 in manufacturing and 200 in construction likely to be retrenched in the third quarter of 2020. These industries are mostly associated with negative connotation terms like “cynical sunset industry” that are soon going to be phased out by digitalisation and automation “Industry 4.0”

While the Singapore Government has introduced series of measures such as Job Support Scheme (Accounting over \$27.4 Billion) and SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, placing nearly 76,000 jobseekers into job and skills opportunities in growth sectors, all these measures are only for the short-term if cyclical unemployment, where there is a mismatch between the demand of the workforce and skills of the employees are not eradicated. If there are another pandemic years to come, Singapore may not have that much reserves (As evident from \$93 Billion spent on Covid-19 relief grant). As such, in the long-run, the Government can tap on existing schemes out there such as SkillsFuture Credit to be more flexible and use on online avenues like MOOC Platform on-top of existing courses and to cover a larger age group such as lowering down the age limit from 25 to 15 years old, as only 49% of Singaporeans have ever utilized their credits and this could be partly tied to the regimental and demanding WSQ Courses that do not compliment their full-time work schedule. Furthermore, MOOC Platform covers a wide range of topics that could attract a wider range of audience at their own pace, so that when facing a new pandemic, Singaporeans will be better equipped with a wider range of skills to diversify and get their desired jobs, even in a period of transition.

Secondly, Covid-19 has undoubtedly severely disrupted our daily lives- for good or for bad. During the peak of Covid-19 (Circuit Breaker), activities once deemed to be normal such as gyms and cinemas are closed. Dine-in is restricted and gathering as a group is limited to a large extent. Stay-home has become the new normal and this has brought severe impact for all Singaporeans.

As shown in the survey, Singaporeans are not adapting as well to such a sedentary lifestyle, with over 7 in 10 employees reported that they felt stressed on some level, with more than 60 percent feeling stressed on some level over the impact of the pandemic. In comparison to other similar developed countries like Australia (57%), New Zealand (59%) and the United Kingdom (62%), we are faring a lot worse.

It is also worth noting that a greater proportion of women (61.3 per cent) reported feeling stressed at work, relative to men (49.7 per cent). It is the same case when it comes to perceived stress at home (50.2 percent for women versus 45.5 per cent for men). In a conservative asian society, women are often perceived to take charge of household chores and raising children etc cetera and this creates a contrast between what the society upholds and the current role of women, not only as a mother but

also as a breadwinner, as children and their in-laws are also staying at home for extended period of time.

Students and elderly are not faring much better either. In the UK, where schools were shut for the best part of half a year, a government report said one in six children aged 5 to 16 had a probable mental health disorder in 2020 - up from one in nine three years earlier. The situation is similar in the US, where hospitals saw a 31% rise in mental health emergency visits by 12- to 17-year-olds in April to October from a year earlier, according to the CDC.

In Singapore, mental health issues are mostly taboo topics that are avoided in daily conversations. In 2015, a study at the Singapore Institute of Health found that there is a "considerable" stigma towards people with a mental illness which could prevent individuals from seeking treatment. Half of people who took part in the survey said they saw poor mental health as a sign of personal weakness and 9 in 10 felt that people with mental illnesses could get better if they wanted to.

With elderlies mostly staying at home for the most part of Covid-19 as they are most susceptible to the severity of the virus, as day care centres like Fei Yue limits the number of elderly at any point, this could exacerbate issues faced in an aging population, especially some elders who do not live with their child and do not know where to seek help from as they are computer illiterate. Without support from relevant organisations, elders may face intense loneliness from lack of social support. For students, without CCA and friend-to-friend interaction, coupled with some who face abusive family backgrounds yet juggling hefty academic burden, mental health issues would undoubtedly deteriorate.

My vision for Singapore is in hope that all Singaporeans lead meaningful happy lives. All these social issues remain prevalent, with or without a pandemic but what is important is in solving it. For working adults, the Government could further enforce legislation for the welfare of the working class such as fixed working hours and reducing working days such as Iceland while increasing welfare benefits for mothers to attain work-life balance. For students, avenues can be made available for students to go back to school, especially those that are academically weak or facing family issues and reduce emphasis on academic grades during the pandemic, instead focusing on practical life skills. For elderly, more frequent home-to-home visits can be conducted by volunteers to accompany them and understand their needs and concerns and all these require the help of all Singaporeans.

Thirdly, nearly three-quarters of Singapore's organisations are accelerating their pace of digitalisation due to the pandemic. However, companies like SMEs are being left out in the technology race and some cannot catch-up with the advancement of technology and are made redundant, as they are unaware or unable to afford digitalisation, especially with the pandemic that hampers their capital profits.

Furthermore, with the rise of e-commerce especially in the pandemic, scams have risen to an all-time high over 80%, losing over \$254.3 million in just the first 11 months of 2020 alone as people switch to online retail stores from brick-and-mortar stores.

However, digitalisation is an inevitable phase and Covid-19 only accelerates its development. Through social media platforms, socially disadvantaged groups that are unable to digitalise can do so such as 'Hawkers United- Dabao 2020' that market hawkers that cannot afford online food delivery options. Through social media campaigns, Singaporeans can also be more aware of online scams and how to report it.

Being a Full-Time National Servicemen (NSF) under SCDF, I am fortunate and blessed to have the opportunity to serve as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) in a service-ambulance. Through the thick and thin of Covid-19 Crisis in Singapore, I have conveyed several positive and suspected covid cases from various locations such as Community Care Facilities (CCF) and ensured that relevant medical care is accorded to them. While donning full PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), especially in this "cruel" Singapore Climate, it may be uncomfortable and unpleasant for many. However, my colleagues and I have never hesitated in ensuring patient's well-being are taken care of adequately, even though we are well-aware of the risks involved. In fact, I am glad that I am able to contribute, on my own merit, to help and comfort patients who need assurance. One of my most memorable calls to date revolves around an Indian Migrant worker who was so stressed and anxious about his relatives back in India who contacted Covid that he hurt himself.

However, it hurts me to think that even after the contributions that frontline staff and migrant workers bring to Singapore's prosperity, a minority of Singaporeans have instead tried to discredit and shun us instead. During the peak of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, TTSH staff members reported that when they are in uniform on public transport, passengers would move away from them or wear their masks tighter against their faces, and some even face drastic measures such as being chased out by landlords amidst this pandemic and Private-Hire Car and taxis refusing colleagues working at TTSH to and from work.

Furthermore, nearly half of more than 320,000 foreign workers living in dormitories have tested positive for COVID-19 in polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or serology tests and are under quarantine for an extended period of time, without access to any form of social activities while being locked in their crowded dorms. Work permit holders all over the world are also forced to stay in Singapore, including our friends from neighbouring countries to strive for a livelihood, leaving their families behind.

To be honest, as an EMT, I am afraid to tell members of the public my profession in fear of being ostracised, as I have seen first-hand the rise of xenophobia against

certain ethnic groups and professions in Singapore, with comments flooding on social media labelling "Indian Virus" or "Wuhan Virus" with a rather derogatory purpose. It is indeed shocking as Singapore- being a multi-racial country proclaiming to welcome immigrants all over the world, contains hatred against people of other nationalities simply based on one pandemic although they contributed a lot for us.

We should show more compassion and should not discriminate against others. While organisations and group like Stuff'd (Offering TTSH Hospital free food and drink) and Project Sarana (seek awareness of the plight of migrant workers) are heartwarming, this deeply-entranced and controversial issues needs to be eradicated to avoid being a repeat of other countries such as the United States (Rampant racist attacks on Asians and Blacks). This could be done through National Education in educational institutions and workspace such as teaching them about the renaming of Covid-19 Originating Virus (Alpha/Bravo/Charlie/Delta) and offer deep engagement, even for controversial topics such as HDB Ethnic Quota Issue instead of superficial and "forced" engagement. Only then can our society progress by solving deep-rooted issues underpinning it.

Singapore's Government approach towards Covid-19 may be far from over, but its approach of contact tracing positive-covid patients such as scanning trace-together device at high-density area, regular swab test for high-risk personnel and isolating covid-positive patients have been highly effective in curbing social transmission to a large extent. However, controversies erupted over the usage of Singaporean's data that could be breached such as 2018 Singhealth data breach and vaccines misinformation. Covid-19 has also brought up the debate of the benefit of globalisation in terms of the Singapore narrative. While it is undeniable that Singapore, as a small nation, is susceptible to the global economy, are we too reliant on it such as the tourism industry and how do we move forward?

One example would be with Covid-19 pandemic disrupting global supply chains- shoppers rushing to supermarkets and emptied shelves, fearing a food shortage due to successive lockdowns globally.

This highlights the need to accelerate domestic strategies to minimise dependence on external forces. One example would be "30X30" - to produce 30 percent of its own food by 2030 from less than 10 percent today by leveraging technology, with efforts sped up to help local farms ramp up production over the next 6- 24 months like awarding \$40 million under its 30X30 express grant to accelerate local food production.

The main root issue hindering this would be to boost the confidence of Singaporeans in the government. Some segments of Singaporeans may be mistrustful regarding government policies in how it benefits them or the bureaucracy involved. Campaigns

like volunteers spreading information about the benefits of respective policy and clarifying their doubts works.

How would our future generation for years to come perceive us on how we handle this covid-19 pandemic and what can they learn from it? It all lies in our hands, you and me. Not only that, we have a lot on our plate with pressing issues covering everything from water supply to sea-level rise. Only by being united, together as one can we overcome all obstacles to be a better Singapore for our future generations.

**(2496 words)**

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