FOREIGN BODIES

One in three people living here today was born outside Singapore. These foreign-born folk include new citizens, permanent residents, foreign workers and students. With their numbers rising fast, Insight addresses some of your burning questions on the population shifts.

(Top row, from left) Permanent resident and assistant director of Nanyang Technological University's international relations office Anil Jain, originally from India, with son Zubin; Filipino domestic worker Agry Daraway; and welder Strastagali Chandrasekar, from Andhra Pradesh, India.

(Middle row) Foreign student Mohammad Shadman Ishaq, from Bangladesh, who scored 4A’s for the PSLE last year.

(Bottom row, from left) Study mama and author Dai Kai with son Diao Zheng, from China; Norwegian expatriate Lars Roming, his wife Pia and sons Trolle and Teobin; and Singaporean paddler and Olympic silver medallist Li Junwei, who hails from China.

PHOTOS: WANG HJ FEN, ALBERT SIM, DESMOND LIM, EDWIN KOO, THE NEW PAPER.
Who are they?

There are now a total of 4.84 million people living in Singapore. Of these, 35 per cent are foreign-born. They fall into three groups: new citizens, permanent residents (PRs) and non-residents.

In the first six months of this year, Singapore granted citizenship to 9,610 foreigners. The total number of new citizens since 2001 is 81,553.

There are 478,200 PRs here.

So, what are these new citizens and PRs like?

Figures just released by the National Population Secretariat (NPS) indicate that they tend to be better-educated than born-and-bred Singaporeans.

Take those granted PR and citizenship this year, for example: 77 per cent of the new PRs and 62 per cent of the new citizens aged 20 and above have post-secondary education. The corresponding figure for existing Singapore citizens is 35 per cent.

While declining to give a breakdown of where these new residents hail from, the NPS says most are from South-east, South and East Asia. A smaller number are from the Americas, Oceania and Europe.

Public data shows that the number of new immigrants from South Asia is so significant that it has caused a shift in the ethnic make-up of the population.

Ethnic Indians now comprise 8.9 per cent of the resident population, which is made up of both citizens and PRs, up from 7.1 per cent in 1990.

The bulk of foreigners here are non-residents. Their numbers have risen to 1.2 million – an all-time high.

Within this pool, there are two groups.

The first is here on a transient basis. This group is made up of work permit holders here to work as construction workers and maids. As of December last year, there were 757,000 work permit holders.

The second group of people are regarded as potential PRs and new citizens. There are 143,000 such foreigners here on employment passes and another 85,000 foreign students.

Has it become easier to obtain citizenship or permanent residency?

With the number of PRs and new citizens on the rise, the NPS says it is understandable that some people believe it has become easier to secure a red passport. But it stresses that the criteria are “no less stringent” than before.

New residents are admitted on the basis of educational qualifications, their immediate and potential economic contributions and how well they and their family are likely to integrate into Singapore society.

The last factor is assessed on the basis of the applicant’s length of stay here, the language he speaks, the culture he is from, whether or not he has family members here, and his contributions to society here.

That would include his participation in grassroots and community work.

As Singaporeans become better educated, the NPS said, via e-mail, “more will be expected of potential immigrants who wish to apply for PR and citizenship”.

It declined to give details on the number of applications and the success rate.

Mr Ragu Thanaivan, managing director of Rikvin Consultancy, which helps facilitate immigration here, observes that the time it takes to obtain permanent residency has fallen.

“In the past, employment pass holders would apply for permanent residency only after working here for two years. A year. Now, they can apply after just six months – and about 60 to 70 per cent will get it,” he says.

Do we really need immigrants?

What if we close the door on them?

If Singapore stopped accepting immigrants right now, deaths among citizens and PRs would outweigh births in 12 years, according to demographer Saw Swee Hock.

That is based on a projection of a total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.3. Demographers use TFR to project the average number of babies that will be born to a woman in a population.

Singapore’s TFR is now 1.29. That means Singapore’s population will start to shrink in 2020.

Even if the TFR goes up to 1.5, the population will still shrink – albeit later, in 2025.

Prof Saw, the author of a book entitled Population Of Singapore and a professorial fellow at the Institute of the South-east Asian Studies, Ilias states emphatically: “We need foreigners, forever and ever.”

The need to grow Singapore’s population is a function of the need to grow the economy, he notes.

Singapore Management University economist Ken Kim Teck says that with the growing prominence of the services sector, the shortfall in skilled labour has become more acute.

“In addition, the economy has undergone an important shift from being a technology follower to one that also creates new technologies, he adds.

That means placing a high value on skilled researchers, both local and foreign.

In an interview last year, National Population Committee chairman Wong Kian Seng calculated that for the economy to grow at 6 per cent annually, Singapore needs an extra 87,300 workers each year.

The NPS notes that Singapore is a country without natural resources, Singapore needs to depend on human capital for growth. And the global competition for talent is intense, it adds.

“If Singapore does not welcome them, they will simply look elsewhere and compete against us.”

Are there other ways to keep the economy growing?

Yes, say some experts.

One way is to increase labour productivity.

A country’s economic growth is the sum of two factors – the size of the labour force and its productivity. So higher productivity can compensate for a smaller labour force.

Labour economist Hui Weng Tat, of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, who has served as a consultant to the Manpower Ministry, believes that this is the most “desirable” strategy.

The share that labour productivity growth has contributed to Singapore’s total economic growth has declined steadily over the past two decades.

Prof Hui charted the decline in a paper he co-wrote with economist Aamir Rasbjorg Hasnini.

From 1995 to 2000, for instance, productivity growth averaged 2.5 per cent, and accounted for 36.7 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) growth. That was down from 51.6 per cent in the preceding five years.

The figure was also low compared with those in other developed economies.

For the same period from 1995 to 2000, productivity growth averaged 6.0 per cent of the United States’ GDP growth, and 10.2 per cent of Japan’s.

Prof Hui projects that if Singapore’s productivity growth can be increased to account for 60 per cent of GDP growth, the demand for foreign labour will steadily go down.

According to his projections, at current productivity growth rates, Singapore will need 2.78 million foreign workers by 2034.

But if productivity were one percentage point higher, then Singapore would need only 1.48 million foreign workers by 2034 – a difference of 1.3 million workers.

But such a productivity boost could prove “elusive”, he says, as it depends on many factors, from infrastructure to workforce quality and fiscal incentives.

The NPS says that productivity improvement re- mains a key focus of the Government.

The second way to grow the economy without increasing reliance on foreign labour is by encouraging older Singaporeans to work longer, and more women to return to the workforce, says Prof Saw.

The participation rate of Singaporean women remains low compared with those of other countries.

The government has been trying to do both, and has made some progress.

But some, such as MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC Inderjit Singh, question if it is necessary to push so hard for growth year after year.

Mr Singh, a businessman, says: “I personally feel that we have adopted a ‘grow at all costs’ economic policy.

“I would have preferred a more moderate growth and, therefore, a more moderate population growth.”

He believes that the decision to build two integrated resorts in one go and a new sports hub, and expand the transport infrastructure in a massive way, is a case of “trying to do too much too quickly”.

Prof Hui says that in an island-state with a very high population density of 6,000 per sq km, “it might be argued that the lower growth target path could in fact provide a higher standard of living in Singapore”. But lawyer and Hong Kah GRC MP Alvin Yeo is not so sure.

“There is the concern that with a small, open economy like ours, which is so susceptible to external influences which are hard to predict, planning for very modest growth could result in substantial under-shooting of our targets.”

“But this is perhaps an issue which we need to review from time to time, as our economy, and society, matures.”

What can be done about the stresses caused by a rising number of foreigners?

As far as the hardware goes, the NPS says the Government is “steadfastly pushing ahead”, adding that technology, Singapore can accommodate a larger population without compromising the quality of our living environment.

Already, steps have been taken to relieve the stresses due to a larger population.

The frequency of MRT trains at peak hours went up earlier this year, though commuters are still feeling the squeeze.

A new hospital in Yishun will open in 2010 and international schools have been expanding their intake.

Housing for the large number of foreign workers here has become an issue. Space for another 65,000 beds has been set aside at 11 sites around the island, but the dormitories will take some time to build.

But the NPS is clear on one point – the answer
lies in integration, not segregation.

“We must help encourage integration everywhere – in schools, at the workplace, in the neighbourhood and the larger community,” he says.

But Singaporeans such as Mr Mike Tay, 53, an entrepreneur, remain unhappy about competition from foreigners for jobs.

“Personally, I see that most do not add value to the economy, but are just a pool of cheaper labour,” he says.

Technical officer Lee Joo Meng, 55, also has doubts about the quality of immigrants allowed in.

“The first batches of immigrants need to be of a more competitive quality,” he says. “No more foreign project engineers who declare ‘I am learning through repeating mistakes!’”

Another area of concern is that the large numbers of foreigners here will affect the “Singaporean fabric” woven over the past 40 years, says Mr Tay.

“They will never have the same sense of belonging as those born here and who served national service,” he adds.

Mr Singh, the MP, says that if the number of foreigners were smaller, they would have felt a need to mix with the locals, and the locals would have felt a sense of responsibility in making the foreigners feel at home.

But that is not the case now because the influx of foreigners has grown so large so fast.

He adds: “Instead, Singaporeans see them as a group trying to impose different social practices within their neighbourhoods.”

Government leaders have sought to remind Singaporeans that Singapore has always been an immigrant society.

Prof Saw, however, draws a distinction between the first-generation immigrants and today’s.

“When our grandparents came here, they were pulled by poverty. Though some went back, many stayed on to make a living, and their children were brought up as locals,” he said.

“Today, we don’t know how many of those who come in will continue to stay,” he says, noting that many are highly mobile.

A crucial factor is how these immigrants raise their children.

With PRs making up an increasing share of the population, the government will need to relook various policies, he says.

For instance, PRs now do not need to send their children to local schools.

But encouraging them to do so will help the integration process.

“If 100 per cent are sent to local schools, there is nothing to worry about, he says.

“But if a high proportion of those who settle down here go to the international schools, they don’t grow up as true citizens.”

Prof Saw acknowledges that the matter is “a real headache”.

Ms Dhavantray presents a different perspective.

She thinks more can be done to help new immigrants settle in and feel at home.

“Once the immigrants are inside Singapore, they are left to themselves to face the challenges of adapting to the local culture and society,” she said.

“Immigrants with families have to tackle the emotional and cultural shocks of relocation and at the same time the process of familiarisation with the educational system. This is one of the biggest challenges.”

She suggests support groups to help immigrants cope with the changes, and the provision of basics such as a guidebook on the law, local neighbourhoods, schools and important addresses.

What will Singapore look like in the future?

WHAT is certain is that Singapore’s population will continue to grow in the near future.

The resident population – citizens and PRs – now stands at 3.84 million. That is projected to go up to 4.8 million by 2030.

The NPS says that is based on a TFR of 1.28, and an average net migration of 50,000 for the next 10 years, and 26,200 a year thereafter.

What is less clear is how many of the 4.8 million are likely to be born here, and how many born overseas.

In July, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew revealed his own comfort level.

He said: “You need 95 per cent of the population to be born-and-bred Singaporeans, steeped in the culture, with instincts of what a Singaporean is.

“They will slowly influence the migrants who join us to become like us.”

Back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that over 80 per cent of the current resident population of 3.65 million comprise born-and-bred Singaporeans.

The NPS’s assurance is that the Government fully intends for Singaporeans to “remain as the core of our population”.

“We do not want to be like some Middle Eastern countries, where non-resident foreigners far outnumber the indigenous population,” it says.

“For Singaporeans to remain as the core, we must have more babies and encourage more suitable immigrants to become Singapore citizens.”