



## A Dish of our Own

Debbie Soon  
IPS Research Assistant

Dr Leong Chan Hoong  
IPS Research Fellow

Singaporeans recently displayed tremendous solidarity over the right to prepare a familiar dish. The revelation that a Singaporean Indian family consented through mediation to refrain from making curry whenever their Chinese national neighbours were at home upset many Singaporeans. The episode turned viral online and galvanised Singaporeans island-wide into cooking and eating of the dish on 21 August 2011, which they unofficially declared as “Cook a Pot of Curry Day” as a means of celebrating and sharing a national dish with those who may be unfamiliar with it. The Chinese family’s agreement to try the dish in return for the Indian family’s concession to them was scant consolation for many Singaporeans.

Singaporeans acted as they did for two fundamental reasons.

First, food and cultural diversity are integral parts of the Singaporean identity. Findings from the IPS Study on the Emigration Attitudes of Young Singaporeans suggest that solidarity arising from a chorus of voices asserting the right to prepare a local dish was not so surprising. This study was conducted from December 2009 to March 2010 on Singaporeans between the ages of 19 and 30 years.

Respondents wrote about their lives in Singapore in a hypothetical blog for foreigners living in other countries. Food and cultural diversity emerged as two of the top five areas of satisfaction and well-being with regard to their lives in Singapore.

The recent immigration trend has brought the Singaporean identity into sharper relief, with Singaporeans coming to realise what is important to them. In this case, the simple daily activity of cooking curry has emerged as an active symbol of the Singapore culture. The sense of identity amongst Singaporeans will continue to evolve with the norms and habits that immigrants bring with them. The scope of this essay is limited to include only longer-term migrants like new permanent residents and citizens.

Second, Singaporeans reacted to the dissonance between long-held social norms governing intergroup relations and the process of mediation that was reported to have taken place. While Singaporeans were outraged first of all to find that an immigrant had wanted a Singaporean family to stop preparing a staple food, they were even more incensed that a community mediation centre had facilitated this solution. Singaporeans had, for many years heard and accepted messages of the need to accept unfamiliar cultures, sights and smells. This contrasted with the mediation centre’s role in the episode, where it was seen to allow a

Singaporean Indian family to deny themselves of a staple practice – an instance of a perceived asymmetry in the balance of responsibility for integration. Even if the episode took place six years ago, it only came to light recently. Singaporeans signalled that this sort of asymmetry is unacceptable.

Singapore's approach to cultural relations has been grounded in keeping a delicate balance between the right to practice one's culture but only to the extent that it is acceptable to other communities. This is underpinned by a sense of respect for broader local social norms. Minister for Information and Communication and the Arts Yaacob Ibrahim's message at a national citizenship ceremony in early September to new citizens to live by the Singaporean values of multiracialism and meritocracy strikes a fairer balance than the one out of the mediation.

Even as the government has said it will recalibrate the rate at which Singapore accepts new immigrants, there is a need to address the social and cultural impact of the already substantial number of immigrants in the country, with the 102,600 new citizens and 341,200 new permanent residents since 2005 that have made Singapore home.

What then, is the way forward?

Singaporeans need to discover their own approach toward intergroup relations, while realising the greater impact of this choice. Will Singapore's multiracial fabric insist on assimilation, or adopt the multicultural framework that evolves to accommodate other cultures? In time, the former will translate to the retention of local identity whilst the latter will give rise to a more global cultural complexion.

The framework to intergroup relations should result from a process of public consultation and discussion, guided by a sense of recognition and respect on the part of the indigenous and those who consider Singapore their new home. It must also be guided by an informed discussion of the trade-offs we make as a society when we argue for different calibrations to the rate of immigration we are willing to admit.

Next, there should be greater coherence between public policy rhetoric and implementation. Organisations such as community mediation centres that are actively involved in managing foreign-local relations need to take an informed stand and implement what Singaporeans reach a consensus on. This episode suggests that the values-neutral setting typically adopted for mediation sessions is too blunt an instrument for managing intercultural relations. Mediation places no value judgment on the outcome to facilitate compromise between parties. The Singapore Identity is however, not devoid of its own values, principles, or ethos. A process of counselling where both sides can be gently reminded of local cultural and social norms and the agreed-upon integration framework will be more effective at promoting smoother foreign-local ties.

The Singapore story is a continuously evolving epic that will be defined by those who call this place home. This episode will be one of the many to come as Singapore feels its way forward on the foreign-local front. Singaporeans, immigrants and public policymakers all have a part to play in the future outcome of the integration and intergroup relations, as the issue of identity and space is negotiated. It is important that we do not lose sight of who we are and what we stand for in the quest for an open and inclusive society.

The words of poet T.S. Eliot encapsulate the sentiment of many Singaporeans on 21 August 2011:

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

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