The Big Read: High time to talk about racism, but Singapore society ill-equipped after decades of treating it as taboo

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SINGAPORE: When former national sprinter Canagasabai Kunalan and his wife, Madam Chong Yoong Yin, both 79, saw the viral video of a polytechnic lecturer making racist remarks to an interracial couple two weeks ago, they couldn't believe their eyes.

The video evoked memories of 1964, when the couple were given the ultimatum by their families to end their relationship or leave their homes — because one of them was Indian and the other was Chinese — amid the racial tensions that were gripping Singapore.

“Singaporeans now are so educated … how can we still think like this?” said Mr Kunalan.

The racial riots between the Malays and Chinese in Singapore following its merger with Malaysia in 1963 plunged the country into nationwide violence. Houses were burnt down, the police were deployed to enforce curfews and people were beaten and killed.

Yet, even in the most uncertain of times, there were also people of different ethnic groups standing together regardless of race.

Older generations of Singaporeans recounted how people stepped up in solidarity when emotive racial conflicts shattered the peace.

Mr Kunalan, who was then a 22-year-old sprinter preparing for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, said: “The riots were happening in different areas in Singapore. Surprisingly, in my kampung (village), it was peaceful. There were no tensions at all. Or maybe we just didn’t know what was happening on the other side.”

Mr Lionel de Souza, 78, a former police officer who worked as a community liaison officer in Geylang during the 1964 racial riots, recalled how Singaporeans volunteered in droves for “goodwill committees” as well as the Vigilante Corps to help keep the peace in volatile areas during curfew hours.

Comprising an equal number of Chinese and Malay volunteers, they and Mr de Souza would patrol their beat in Kampung Kim Hong and talk to residents in coffee shops and town halls to

help dispel suspicion between the different Chinese and Malay groups that were then segregated in different villages.

“There were allegations that people on one side were shooting fire arrows at the other, and rumours were flying everywhere,” said Mr de Souza of the situation then.

Singapore has since come a long way from those dark days of violent racial conflict, having taken early steps as a newly independent nation to abandon colonial-era race-based policies, and pledging to not let racial fault lines divide society.

Following its independence, the young Republic embarked on a unique path among nations of the time as a multiracial and multicultural country, one that affirms its ethnic diversity as a strength and recognises the rights of minorities Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, said in an interview with TODAY: “Many societies have had to wrestle with (race, racism and multiculturalism) around the world, but the place that multiculturalism has in our aspirations as a people is quite special. It is fundamentally why we became an independent country.”

Because of Singapore’s diverse society and the dynamics among the major cultural and ethnic groups, the topic of race is present in every discussion, every issue, and every policy.

“You need to then understand our social context, our historical context and our future in order to have a dialogue about race productively in Singapore,” said Dr Janil.

Yet, the topic of racism has returned to the fore once again following recent events, including the street confrontation between the Ngee Ann Polytechnic lecturer and an inter-ethnic couple as well as other viral videos of racially-charged encounters.

Commenting on the video, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam had said in a Facebook post: “I used to believe that Singapore was moving in the right direction on racial tolerance and harmony. Based on recent events, I am not so sure anymore.”

Activists, community organisers and academics spoken to agree that the conversations of race need to move forward productively in the age of social media where tensions are inflamed easily.

And when the heat surrounding the recent incidents fades away, some good may emerge from these episodes if Singaporeans can understand the experiences of others and engage with each other in good faith, several said.

Associate Professor Chong Ja Ian, a political scientist from the National University of Singapore (NUS), said: “It is important, in my opinion, to identify these biases and stereotypes and understand where they come from and how they link to the various fears, anxieties, suspicions, frustrations that people have.

“Some of this will look ugly, but if we can start addressing them bit by bit, with understanding, there is a good chance we can move forward.”

Pondering about what the recent racist incidents say about the state and direction of Singapore’s hard-won racial harmony, older Singaporeans such as Mr Kunalan and Mr de Souza know that the stakes are high.

“We never want that (racial riots) to happen again, which is why we should all feel strongly about protecting our racial harmony,” said Mr de Souza.

WHAT IS RACISM?

The Oxford English Dictionary today defines racism as acts of prejudice, discrimination and antagonism by a person, community or institution against a person or people based on their race and ethnic identity.

And by this definition, racism is usually experienced by people from minority racial groups that are subjected to such acts of discrimination.

But as contributing writer Ben Zimmer for The Atlantic magazine wrote, even dictionaries had to revise their definitions about racism.

Before 2020, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary primarily defined racism as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race”.

It was also defined as “a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles”. This secondary definition was refined to “the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another”, following the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States last year.

Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, founding board member of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding (CIFU) in Singapore, said that racism is essentially formed from two components — that a race has essential traits and characteristics, and whether these are behind the inequalities and disparities between the races in society.

“Therefore, racism is any act, system or policy that appeals to or reinforces ‘essentialised’ perceptions of racial groups that strengthens the political, economic or cultural inequalities between the races in society,” he said.

Regardless of which definition is best, the debate of what racism is, and what makes an action or speech racist, has also emerged in Singapore in recent days.

In May, an Indian woman was called racial slurs and kicked in the chest by a Chinese man while brisk-walking along Choa Chu Kang Drive. He had insisted she wear a mask even though she was exercising.

A month later, Ngee Ann Polytechnic lecturer Tan Boon Lee was seen in a viral video confronting and making racist remarks towards an inter-ethnic couple, while proclaiming to be a racist himself.

Allegations by a former student that he had made Islamophobic remarks in class surfaced a week later. The polytechnic has since said it would sack Mr Tan, after completing investigations into the two matters.

Another video was uploaded the same week of a Chinese woman hitting a small gong repeatedly while an Indian man was ringing a prayer bell outside his public housing flat as part of his daily prayers.

But the debate about what constitutes racism grew loudest online in the case of Ms Sarah Bagharib, who had called out the People’s Association for using a cutout of her wedding photo — sans the couple’s faces — as part of Hari Raya decorations without her permission.

Netizens were split on the issue. Some claimed that the matter is not a case of racism but one of cultural insensitivity. Others were wont to point out that racism does not exist in Singapore, which prides itself on its multiracial society.

Another viewpoint was that the blunder was made because of a lack of understanding of the Malay culture that had stemmed from ignorance that needed to be dismantled.

As Dr Nazry Bahrawi, a senior lecturer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, put it, two narratives have emerged about the state of race relations here — one says Singapore is racially harmonious, and another says that it is still not quite there.

“The first has been the official position reproduced on many occasions and in many spheres, while the latter is a position that has received less airing because it is perceived to be less valid, making those who raise it seem like they are troublemakers or have an agenda to divide society,” said Dr Nazry.

For race discourse to be productive, Singaporeans from all walks of life must first be able to establish that racist acts are not condoned by society.

“Because, if so, then it would be considered outlandish that people who call out racism are seen as playing the race card,” he said, adding that these people might be commenting from a position of privilege as they may not have experienced racism.

Asked about this, Dr Janil, who is also the chairperson of the non-profit OnePeople.sg (OPSG), said it is not a bad thing that there are people who state that they have never experienced racism or have never seen it happen.

The turning point is when they find out that because not everyone shares this view, they may be “energised” to improve the experiences of others, he said.

“The uncharitable view is to say ‘hello, wake up, you don’t know what’s going on and you don’t recognise (racism)... But the glass half-full version is, aren’t we lucky that there are some people who have actually had this experience in Singapore, it’s a sign ... that maybe we’ve made some progress.”

Such views are also heard among people who participate in OPSG’s initiatives on race as well, especially among younger participants who have been “blessed with a positive experience about race”, but also could learn about the negative experiences of others, Dr Janil added.

The Singapore Government has taken the approach that racism exists here, he emphasised.

“What we want to be sure of is that our policies, our systems, our approach, is to understand that there is racism, and we must always push against it,” said Dr Janil.

Comparing indicators of racial and religious harmony from 2013 and 2018, a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OPSG in 2019 found that while racism exists, it is not widespread in Singapore.

Lead researcher Dr Mathew Mathews said about 10 per cent of Chinese respondents in the study and around 20 per cent of minorities said that they had experienced racial tension in the 2018 study. There was little change from the results of the 2013 findings.

“When asked about specific incidents, most cited they had felt insulted at how perhaps social/mainstream media had portrayed their race or cultural practices – so there is certainly some racism here, but it is not rampant,” said Dr Mathews.

WHY SOME STILL CONSIDER IT TABOO

On the other hand, some people felt that the recent spate of racist incidents is an indication that racism in Singapore not only exists but has been gathering speed for some time, though hidden from view because of a lack of discourse and the difficulty in detecting unintentional and unconscious forms of racism.

Dr Peter Chew, a senior lecturer of psychology at the James Cook University, explained that overt racism tends to be low in Singapore due to the function of laws that protect racial harmony here, such as the Sedition Act.

The Act makes it illegal for anyone in Singapore to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population.

Laws like these do well to keep overt racism in check but also have an effect of quieting discourse about race, he said.

“This reluctance could be due to a misunderstanding of what constitutes racism.

Anecdotally, some individuals think that talking about race or pointing out racist incidents is, by their very nature, racist,” said Dr Chew.

A 2016 CNA and IPS study, which was also led by Dr Mathews, found that two-thirds of respondents felt that discussions of race could lead to tension.

Raising such issues may be deemed “too sensitive”, and so issues about race and culture tend to be thought of as private matters rather than meant for broader conversations, said the researcher.

Agreeing, Mr Gosteloa Spencer, founder of community group Not OK SG, said this could be due to generations of Singaporeans suppressing talk of racism, discrimination, and racial inequality for fear of creating rifts among the different ethnic communities.

He believes it is this inhibition that led to casual racism, where people make jokes, off-handed comments, or exclusionary body language based on race. These acts also often go unnoticed and unaddressed.

“Just because it’s casual, does it make it okay to pass a racist comment?” he added. “Racism is racism, no matter what form it takes.”

Mr Sharvesh Leatchmanan, co-founder and editor of Minority Voices, which serves as a platform for minorities who have faced discrimination to come forth and share their experiences, said the concept of racial tolerance that is entrenched in the Singapore identity has also been problematic.

“Over time, this tolerance runs out … as can be seen from the recent acts of racism on social media. We need to move away from tolerance to acceptance and celebration.”

But while Singaporeans may have held back on talking about race in the past, some said that this is rapidly changing in the age of social media, where racially charged incidents can be quickly shared online and go viral.

And these incidents also encourage others to speak up and to call out racist acts publicly.

Mr Sharvesh, 24, said he received more than a hundred submissions from people sharing their stories of discrimination over the past week.

Ms Priyahnisha, who goes by one name, is the founder of non-profit organisation Mental ACT, which champions mental health services in the Indian community.

She noted the overwhelming response recently to any content on racism that she or her organisation put up on social media.

The 29-year-old full-time professional counsellor at a social service agency added: “As soon as we post, the likes, comments and shares really escalate and it has actually been way off the charts as compared to any of the other content we have put up in the past couple of months”.

The problem is that when people talk about race, their past inexperience means they lack the language and protocols needed to discuss it in a constructive manner, said those interviewed.

NUS' Assoc Prof Chong said: "Singaporeans are not the best-equipped to handle such discussions because we have put them aside for so long."

"But there are opportunities to learn … What is important is to not hastily conclude that the other side has bad faith, especially if the other party is engaging from a position of relative weakness and vulnerability," he added. "It is through such engagement that we develop a vocabulary and approach suitable for our society."

'SAFE AND BRAVE' SPACES … NOT JUST BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Earlier this month, Mr Jose Raymond started the Call It Out SG movement with three others to raise awareness of issues pertaining to race following the slew of racist incidents here. "This is simply a case of minorities saying that enough is enough and that racism is inexcusable," he said.

"Perhaps in the past, when minorities faced racism, we didn't have the tools to articulate ourselves properly or the courage to call it out. Now we do," added the former Singapore People's Party chairman.

The movement urges people to call out instances of racism that they see, and has gained momentum in the light of the recent incidents.

On the flipside, while the process of publicly calling for accountability and boycotting if nothing else seems to work, has become an important tool of social justice, Mr Spencer said it is difficult to control the extent of it and make sure things do not go out of hand.

Associate Professor Daniel Goh, an NUS sociologist specialising in race relations, noted that it is people's "duty to call out racism when we see it".

"The question is how we do it," he said.

"We should do it in a respectful way that seeks to educate each other and deepen intercultural understanding, and the large part of the burden should not fall on the victims or members of ethnic minorities to do so, members of the ethnic majority should do so too."

For more severe forms of discrimination, such as getting fired from a job, physical violence, or the shaming of ethnic minorities in a classroom setting, for example, victims should call for institutional and legal redress, said the former Workers' Party (WP) Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP).

"The key calculus for me is how to balance education with redress, and my hope is that the victim is not alone in calculating this and can depend on witnesses and friends, especially those from the ethnic majority, for help and support," said Assoc Prof Goh, who had stepped down from WP's leadership due to health reasons but remains a party member.

Referring to the parliamentary replies to MP Faisal Manap (WP-Aljunied) earlier this year on the issue of the tudung, Assoc Prof Goh said the authorities rely on "back channels" for discussions and resolutions, and to manage racial relations in a pragmatic and careful way.

Mr Faisal had asked in Parliament whether the Government would relook allowing Muslim women in uniformed services to don the tudung. In response, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said the topics that involve racial and religious insensitivities have to be discussed away from the glare of the public.

Mr Masagos said this is because "public aggressive pressure" can only make compromise harder and any government concession to religious pressure would also cause other groups to adopt similarly aggressive postures.

Assoc Prof Goh highlighted examples of safe spaces where such issues could be discussed, such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles.

"A space is safe when all participants can come to speak confidently and freely of their experiences with the expectation that everyone will listen and seek deeper understanding as equals and peers, all in a respectful manner without fear of discrimination, harassment, criticism or emotional violence," said Assoc Prof Goh.

But the Government would have to adapt to changing trends in internet culture, social media and social justice. He noted that for younger generations of Singaporeans, the internet and social media make up "the natural space for their articulation (on issues of concern) … not back channels".

Mr Raymond agreed, stating that racism does not hide behind closed doors.

Responding, Dr Janil, who is from the ruling People's Action Party, said there will always be a need for both public discussions and private dialogues.

"It is not an either-or. Race is a multifaceted issue," he said.

OPSG, for example, has moved its activities online in the course of the pandemic. Despite the usual people-to-people nature of its engagements, it has been able to maintain participation rates and in some cases, reach out to new spaces for people to be involved in.

Outside of the non-profit, Dr Janil observed that in the last five years, there are already increasing numbers of Singaporeans engaging in the online space to push back against extreme views.

"(They are) basically saying, 'hey look, here's the middle ground, let's find a way to bring peace to this'. So in that sense I guess they are trying to create some safe space online and it's tough because the online space is often dominated by extreme views," said Dr Janil.

Aside from safe spaces, CIFU's Mr Imran also urged the creation of "brave spaces" for people to confront their own views while listening to the experience of those at the receiving ends of racism.

"A brave space involves the willingness to interrogate our own assumptions and take a stand to correct our inability to see privilege and other blindspots that we have. A safe space opens up the conversation. But a brave space ensures that the conversation becomes transformative and not a mere exchange of stories," he said.

POLICES WHICH SHAPES SOCIETY

In its history, Singapore has relied on a panoply of policies to maintain a harmonious state, and to ensure minority representation in the highest echelons of governance.

The Housing and Development Board's Ethnic Integration Policy, for example, helps to ensure a balanced mix of various ethnic communities in public housing estates and prevent the formation of racial enclaves.

The four self-help groups — the Chinese Development Assistance Council, Eurasian Association, Singapore Indian Development Association and Yayasan Mendaki — were also conceived to build resilient communities.

The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme, along with the reserved presidential election, was implemented to enshrine minority representation in leadership positions and Parliament.

These policies and laws are part of what builds a brand of “active and inclusive multiculturalism”, as described by then Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in 2017.

Such an approach is distinct from the “live and let live” mindset in many other countries, which has resulted in communities elsewhere that are living apart and also growing apart, he said.

The key is not to dilute or weaken the various cultures in the hope of developing a single, common culture, nor is it to strengthen each separate culture. The former will likely create a confused cultural identity, while the latter will not foster a strong national identity, Mr Tharman had said.

But following the recent spate of racist incidents, some people have also questioned whether it was still useful to retain the traditional Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) framework, the foundation on which many policies have been based upon.

Speaking in a webinar organised by Academia.sg website last week, Dr Lai Ah-Eng, an adjunct senior fellow associate at NUS’ University Scholars Programme, said the CMIO model imposes a racialised lens and tends to ignore “hybridities” such as mixed marriages.

“Do we throw out this CMIO framework as some people have argued for, or should we do a more reduced and careful referencing by ethnicity, bearing in mind that some groups at least still want their ethnic identities as part of a larger range of multiple identities,” said Dr Lai.

Associate Professor Anju Mary Paul, an international migration scholar from the Yale-NUS College, said in the webinar that the CMIO model serves as a neat and a simple model which helps people go about their daily lives.

“But as Singapore society becomes increasingly complex, this model is showing some strain,” she said.

As of 2018, more than one in five couples who tie the knot are in mixed marriages, according to official statistics.

Dr Nazry said it is important to understand that racism is not “natural” because race itself is a social construct, as many scholars have said.

“Now, this does not mean that the sense of belonging to an ethnic community is not real — this is influenced by our context, family, society and personal experiences.

“I think we can begin with the acknowledgement that diversity exists within our own ethnic community ... This sounds simple, but it is not as practised as it should be,” Dr Nazry said.

Dr Janil said that the CMIO framework is a policy tool and should not be conflated with the goals of multiculturalism in Singapore. Any social policy or social intervention that is based on a racial categorisation will need such a framework, he added.

“You can remove racial categorisation from your (NRIC), but that is not going to prevent someone knowing what you look like when you sit across from them at an interview table or pass them on the street,” he said.

Experts said what is needed is a keener interest in each other’s cultures, which is something that has to be established from young.

Mr Mohamed Irshad, former Nominated MP and founder of interfaith group Roses of Peace, highlighted the importance of cultural education as a possible way to move forward in the race discourse.

“We know about all the different public holidays of various races and religious groups … Beyond that do people know the various non-public holiday events and occasions that the different racial and religious groups observe?” said Mr Irshad, 31.

“As a country, we can do a lot more in educating people about the various cultural nuances across various ethnic groups.”

Such engagement must be a constant effort in schools and workplaces, and not just something done on Racial Harmony Day, he added.

ROLE MODEL SOCIETY NEEDS TO FIND ITS OWN WAY, AGAIN

Singapore may have come a long way from the 1964 riots to build a multiracial and multicultural society, but it is clear that this is always a work-in-progress for the country, said people interviewed.

Former national sprinter Mr Kunalan said he was thankful that even interracial marriages like his are celebrated now, despite the noise.

Though he believes this racial progress will continue, he is worried that recent cases of racism may fuel anger among Singaporeans.

“Because there was a lot of anger and when you have anger, there is always a danger that something might explode,” he added, speaking from his experiences back in the day.

CIFU’s Mr Imran reiterated that the stakes for Singapore are high: “We cannot allow racism to fester and divide society. Striving for racial equality even if it cannot be fully realised, is crucial. The national pledge that says ‘regardless of race, language or religion to build a democratic society’ should continue to be our guiding principle.”

With racial tensions flaring up in many countries today, there are also few positive examples of multiculturalism that Singapore can learn from.

Dr Janil said: “We took that unprecedented step in 1965 when we set out on this path … There is no one else with our unique history, and there's no one else that has gone down this road before. But we have been down this road for many decades and we should learn our own lessons first.”

In 2013, former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong gave a lecture to the Singapore Academy of Law on the growth of multiculturalism in Singapore. He said that if demography is destiny, then Singapore’s destiny is to be a multicultural state.

“If its citizens are unable to share a common space suffused with shared values, the people will forever be unable to forge a nation that can survive and prosper,” Mr Chan said then.

In an email to TODAY, Mr Chan, 83, agreed that the recent racist incidents have highlighted how racism is innate in Singapore’s society. Positive dialogue is sorely needed to move the topic forward constructively, he said.

After decades of being held up around the world as a role model society for multiculturalism and multiracialism, Singapore seems to be at a crossroads — and it now needs to find its own way again, having blazed the trail for others.

Surely though, it is doing so from a position of strength, said several academics interviewed.

While some believe that the recent incidents reveal deeper issues that need to be addressed, there is little doubt that inter-racial ties in Singapore are built on a solid foundation, and Singaporeans also need to be careful to ensure that societal fault lines are not exploited by nefarious forces within and outside the country.

Looking back, media consultant Ian de Cotta, 62, attributed this foundation to the kampung spirit which had its heyday in the aftermath of the 1964 racial riots.

“Our neighbours’ doors were always open, even at night, and people would just walk in to chit chat and have coffee,” he said. “This kampung spirit that was so deeply rooted in our people was something that worked in Singapore’s favour.”

Agreeing, Mr Kunalan added: “To live harmoniously like in the kampung ... there must be understanding and there must be forgiveness.”

With Singapore’s kampung days long gone, the younger generations would do well to remember the adage as they find their own way forward.