

‘Very high standards’: Singapore makes its stance against racism and fake news clear

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SINGAPORE: The police are investigating a case of a man who allegedly kicked a woman in her chest and shouted a racial slur at her for not wearing a mask properly while brisk walking.

“A small minority of Singapore’s residents is sowing racism against local and expatriate Indians in the same manner as the discrimination being imposed on Asian people in the United States,” warned the law and home affairs minister of Singapore, K. Shanmugam.

Indeed. Singapore sets very high standards when it comes to any forms of racism or bias. The country was formed on the very basis of multicultural ethnicism and it is this very essence that has fuelled the growth of this nation under the leadership of the late Lee Kuan Yew and now under Lee Hsien Loong.

The above comments were made in relation to an alleged racist attack against a local Indian last week. This statement by the minister follows similar condemnations by other politicians and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself.

Such acts of racism are very rare in a country like Singapore, owing to strong laws that were passed soon after the violent racial riots back in the 60s. But, like any society, there are spillovers and outliers that exist.

Over the past few years, especially after the outbreak of Covid-19 and the downturn of the economy, a small percentage of the local Singaporean population have expressed concerns over the influx of foreign Indian nationals into the country and the role of CECA (Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement between India and Singapore) in allegedly stealing their jobs. The negative impact of CECA has, however, been denied by the Singaporean government on numerous occasions.

Hindocha Nita Vishnubhai, a 55-year-old woman who works as a private tutor, was walking along the Choa Chu Kang Drive area at around 8.45 am on May 7 when she was confronted by a Chinese couple who told her to wear her mask properly as a safety measure. This then spilled over to an argument between the couple and the woman, with the man alleged to have

made offensive racial remarks against the Indian woman and assaulted her, causing her to fall on the ground.

Soon after this, the couple is said to have left the place. After some quick work by the police, the man was soon arrested for “public nuisance, including uttering words with intent to wound the racial feelings of others, and voluntarily causing hurt” as reported by the Singapore Police Force (SPF).

It is important to note that people can remove their mask when engaging in strenuous exercise such as running, jogging or brisk walking, etc, but must put it back on promptly upon finishing the exercise.

Investigations are on to find the levels of violation the Chinese man committed. If the man is guilty of public nuisance, he could be jailed up to three months and fined up to SGD 2000 (1.1 lakh INR). If he is found to have uttered racial slurs, he may be jailed up to three years along with a fine of around SGD 5000 (2.8 lakh INR).

The SPF spokesperson commented to the Channel News Asia (CNA) that “the police take a serious view of such acts that have the potential to damage racial harmony in Singapore. Any person who makes remarks or takes action that can cause ill will and hostility between the different races will be dealt with swiftly and in accordance with the law”.

There have been a couple of incidents, allegedly of similar nature, documented on social media by the affected parties or popular social media pages. The above incident itself was documented by the daughter of the woman who was at the receiving end. Her post on Instagram talked about the degree to which the incident affected her mother and how acts of racism had to be taken seriously.

There was also another incident involving a four-member Indian expat family racially abused by a Chinese man at Pasir Ris Beach park. This was reported by mothership.sg. an online news agency.

HOW HAVE THE LEADERS REACTED

“I am very disappointed and seriously concerned that this racist attack could happen in Singapore. I understand people being under stress because of Covid-19, and anxious about their jobs and families. But that does not justify racist attitudes and actions, much less physically abusing and assaulting someone because she belongs to a particular race, in this

case Indian. The victim happens to be a Singaporean, but even had she not been one the attack would still have been wrong and shameful.

“It goes against everything that our multiracial society stands for, and the mutual respect and racial harmony that we hold so dear. It harms our international reputation more than we realise. I am confident that the police will establish the facts and bring the perpetrator to justice. There is no place for such behaviour here. We must stand united against racism.” This was Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s comment on the incident. He was deeply disturbed by the turn of events and promised to bring the matter to the right conclusion.

Similar sentiments were expressed by law and home affairs minister K Shanmugam. Referring to websites that stoke racist and xenophobic sentiments as well as people making racist remarks in coffee-shop conversations, Shanmugam said in Parliament that such open expressions of racism should be condemned.

“There have been several canards about CECA (Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement), promoted by a whispering campaign... And what's happening on the ground several highly racist comments targeting Indians,” Shanmugam said.

“So, it’s getting into the ground and being repeated. This will become normalised if we are not careful.” He said people here, as in the United States, had been “stoking the fears, encouraging racism and xenophobia, and dog whistling. That is dangerous, and dangerous for Singapore.”

Shanmugam added, “Because, first it will be the expat Indians. Then, it will come to Singaporean Indians. And anyway, not everyone can distinguish between foreign-born Indians and Singapore-born Indians... If we go down this route, eventually all Indians can be a target of hate, the so-called ‘outgroup’.”

Alvin Tan, minister of state for culture, community and youth, said the pandemic has exacerbated feelings of distrust and insecurity among different groups all over the world and Singaporeans are not immune to such sentiments. However, Singapore must not allow such a mindset to take root.

“We denounce all forms of racism, irrespective of which ethnic community is being targeted and wherever in the world it may take place,” Tan said, adding that there are laws here that prohibit and punish hate speech.

The Opposition parties also joined hands against acts that border on racism or xenophobia.

WILL POLITICS AS USUAL STOKE THE FIRE?

It is important to note that certain sections, part of the anti-immigration or anti-CECA lobby in Singapore, have reacted very strongly to the comments of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.

Lim Tean is a Singaporean politician and lawyer, who is the founding leader of political party Peoples Voice. He reacted to Kejriwal's comments about a "Singaporean strain" by commenting that "When Someone You Invited into Your Home Does Not Reciprocate! The PAP 4G have humiliated Singapore!" referring to the ruling party of Singapore, People's Action Party, and its leaders.

Experts believe that at a time like this, Kejriwal's comment were highly irresponsible and uncalled for. The Singaporean government took a very strong stand against these comments and were quick to refute any possibility of existence of a Singaporean strain of Covid virus.

The Indian ministry of external affairs was quick to douse the fire, saying that the "Delhi CM does not speak for India".

The government of Singapore also takes fake news very seriously and ensures the same it stamped out as soon as it is created. That's why, Singaporean handles and users on Twitter were tagged (like a Bcc) and notified of the post by Kejriwal and how it was false and had no basis.

The notice to users read: "You may have seen allegations that a new, previously unknown Covid-19 variant risks spreading to India from Singapore. This is false. There is no 'Singapore' variant." Similar correction notices were also issued to Facebook to notify its users and directed media companies to carry a correction notice with all posts related to Kejriwal's remarks.

The Indian High Commissioner was also summoned to the Singapore foreign ministry this week.

The Singapore High Commissioner to India Simon Wong asserted that politicians and political officer holders must have a responsibility not to propagate falsehoods. He even confirmed that the Singapore government was seriously looking into bringing charges against Kejriwal under a domestic act targeting fake news.

"So, indeed in Singapore, there is an act called the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act known as POFMA. It is meant to mitigate the spread of misinformation, so

we reserve the right to invoke POFMA on some of the comments and assertions made by the honorable chief minister on this topic,” Wong said.

True, the POFMA does have an extra-territoriality clause that allows for action to be taken against a person outside Singapore in case of communication that is “prejudicial to public health, public safety, public tranquility or public finances” and “incite feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will between different groups of persons”, among others.

In the past, Singapore has used the POFMA to act against fake news and unverifiable slander against the government policies. It is also important to note that the Singaporean government is going the extra mile to ensure and safeguard racial harmony between its communities, given the highly sensitive and critical period the nation is going through with respect to Covid-19.

RISING COVID CASES ARE FUELLING RACIAL COMMENTS

Professor Mathew Mathews, the head of Social Lab, and Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS), wrote a commentary on the recent spate of incidents for Channel News Asia.

He said, “The pattern is clear: With a spike in Covid-19 cases, negative sentiments of the xenophobic and racist variety increase. Such sentiments were earlier directed at Chinese nationals in January 2020 after the virus spread from Wuhan, China. Similar sentiments were directed at Muslims in the region, after an outbreak occurred in Malaysia following large-scale religious gatherings there around that period. South Asian migrant workers living in dorms were also targeted. A forum letter implicated poor hygiene culture among such workers, completely ignoring the fact that the living conditions in migrant worker dormitories did not permit for much infection control.”

However, he backs his assertion that it is only a minority section that wants to stoke the racial fire. And he backs this with data.

“Singapore residents surely know this. More than 60 per cent of those polled in an Institute of Policy Studies study were concerned over increased suspicion between people of different social backgrounds because of Covid-19. This figure is based on 22 waves of online polls.”

“The good news is there is some self-awareness. About one in four respondents reported becoming more negative about immigrants, including those from India, because of the pandemic. The persistence of bigoted behaviour before and during this pandemic suggests such attitudes are deep-rooted. Inoculation attempts to reduce xenophobia through public

education have not been effective with some segments of the population. This scapegoating must end. It is counterproductive to efforts to build social cohesion in a society which cannot do without a healthy balance of immigrant workers to sustain economic and caregiving activities.”

Professor Mathews signed off by saying: “We have worked too hard and far too long to build this city, teeming with diversity, to allow Covid-19 to threaten our multicultural way of life. We might not see eye-to-eye on policies but let us persist to have a dialogue on these issues, without the hate. Together, we will rid ourselves of Covid-19 and the “other” virus.”

Indeed, there should be no place for racism come what may. Singapore, like India, knows this way too well and has flourished, owing to its multiculturalism and interracial harmony.