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To fight racism, we need the CQ 'weapon'

Public's outburst against recent cases of bias a good sign

By LAI AH ENG

IN RECENT months, an ugly side of ethnic relations in Singapore appears to have reared its head.

Several incidents occurred: an expression of disapproval at cross-cultural unions by a student at a university seminar, a policy not to employ Indian security guards at a residential community, and derogatory remarks made about a particular ethnic group in a student's blog.

All these incidents and behaviour are outrageous and obviously unacceptable. What does one make of them? What do they say about the state of ethnic relations in Singapore?

It is easy to explain discrimination and prejudice and prejudice in terms of majority-minority relations.

In this view, the majority group is viewed as discriminating and insensitive because it is numerically larger and more powerful, while the minority populations are seen as being discriminated against and stereotyped negatively.

Such a view has elements of truth. But it also traps us all in exaggerated and rigidly stereotyped perceptions of each other, and locks us in a battle of group blame and bias that is difficult to escape.

It is harder and more complex, but more fruitful, to understand how multi-ethnic societies evolve and to appreciate that conflict, tension and prejudice can still surface even after years of community-bonding and nation-building.

In such a multi-faceted view, what matters is how others respond to "racial" incidents, and less that they occurred. For relations in multi-ethnic societies like Singapore are always evolving, and isolated "racial" incidents will always occur.

Taking such an approach gives us perspective and balance.

We need to be able to distinguish between broad generalizations and specific instances, to understand the shifts and nuances of cultures and contexts.

In a growing multicultural world, we need the skills, knowledge and "software" to be competent cultural negotiators and cross-culturalists. We need to have cultural quotient (CQ).

There is simply no short cut to acquiring that sensitivity.

It sounds clichéd but we need to have cross-cultural education, exposure and exchanges "everywhere" and all the time. It is a project always under construction.

We in Singapore are fortunate in having been a multi-ethnic society for a long time. Multiculturalism is embedded in our society: in our history, our culture and our everyday life.

A friend recently told me that the first time his father saw a Chinese was at the holding centre for immigrants at St John's Island sometime in the 1930s. His father was amazed at how a Chinese looked.

My father must have been equally amazed at how an Indian looked. He was there too.

The two men had crossed the Indian Ocean and South China Sea in a common search of a livelihood and arrived on the same shores.

My friend and I were amazed at our father's and our common history, and felt bonded by it.

In my childhood, many Chinese referred to others as "keling-kui", "huan kia kui" and "ang mo kui" (Hokkien derogatory slang referring to Indians, Malays and Caucasians respectively)

These various "kui" (ghosts) would retort with equivalent insults such as "cheena kui" or "cheena babi" (Chinese ghosts or Chinese pigs), while the angmohs (Caucasians) saw everyone else as needing civilizing.

Explosions of ethnic expletives were common in arguments then. The politics of race-referencing and ethnic and ethnic jokes are not likely to ever end. But today, most of us know that it is neither politically correct nor socially acceptable to subscribe to such views or use such language. Those who insist must remain behind closets.

We have also grown more mature and confident. Most of us know when and how far to joke, striking the right balance and finding the right context, when among friends of different ethnic backgrounds so that we pose no harm.

Official structures - the constitution, councils, Bills and the like are necessary and in place to guarantee equality and protect the minorities.

The state also comes down very hard on those who are perceived to create disharmony. But state structures and state-led initiatives can only do so much. It is up to individuals and groups to guarantee and protect.

There was media coverage and a barrage of objections to the racism and ethnocentrism of the students and employer in the recent incidents.

The student who made derogatory remarks was reprimanded and made a public apology. The discriminatory employer withdrew its race-biased stipulation. That is good.

It is a very good sign about the state of ethnic relations – that for every negative incident, there are many more outbursts against its occurrence.

We also need the positive incidents to balance the picture, to encourage us to seek equality and respect, and to inspire us about the fruitful evolution of our multi-ethnic society.

Here, I can think of two examples. In the 1960s, when ethnic riots broke out in Singapore, the Malay and Chinese village elders of Kampong Siglap and Kampong Chai Chee made their way to meet each other, both sides waving white flags.

They met halfway between both villages and made a pact to protect each other from outsiders who might attack them. That was how peace was maintained.

Recently, I attended my son's primary school sports meet. Amid the hundreds of little boys tumbling around the stadium, I saw a most beautiful sight – the school's 4x100m team that went up to the rostrum to collect the first prize.

The foursome consisted of a Eurasian, Indian, Malay and Chinese. This was politically correct representation. But it was no deliberate ritual. It was formed naturally out of the mixed population that work, play and live together.

In multi-ethnic living, we will always need to be on our guard against inequality and disrespect. And we should always have plenty of proud stories to tell about our diversity.

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