Taking Sides

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I was overseas on the night of the Little India riot and did not know about the incident till my friend mentioned it in an email the next day. Besides being shocked, I also recalled a theory on ethnic conflict that I learned years ago in a social anthropology critical theory course: a psychological perspective posits that ethnic differences are deep seated, and that the anxiety and fear that arise from cultural differences cannot be easily eradicated with education or politically correct behaviour. On the other hand, sociologists consider primordial ethnic differences insufficient to explain ethnic conflicts, and argue that the manipulation of such fears and anxieties by politicians and stakeholders is the main impetus for ethnic violence.

So far, investigations have not indicated the involvement of any interest groups on the Little India riot. From news reports, most Singaporeans do not think that this incident points to ethnic conflict, with more seeing it as an issue regarding the foreign workers' situation. Because the incident took place at an area frequented by a particular racial group, most of the individuals implicated therefore belong to this group; the majority of Singaporeans do not seem to attribute it to ethnic culture or behaviour, and this is something to be thankful about. This article uses the riot as a starting point for discussion on the management of ethnic conflict in public spaces.

Back in the 1970s, racial identity was often taken as being equivalent to cultural identity; it was commonly believed that one will display the cultural traits and behaviours of the racial group to which one belongs. This association is no longer the case, what with the immigration trend brought about by globalisation. For example, an ethnic Chinese with yellow skin and black eyes may not necessarily display conventionally perceived traditional Chinese cultural values or behavioural characteristics. Because it takes a rather long period of time for trends to transform social ideology, it is unavoidable that some people still classify others according to their primordial racial characteristics like skin colour, and other cultural characteristics like behaviours and customs.

Going by the viewpoints of psychologists, regardless of how robust our policies or how socially accepted our behaviours are, we often harbour anxiety and uneasiness towards the cultural and behavioural differences of other racial groups. One may often feel pressured to take sides when an incident happens, from arguments among friends to ethnic confrontations — and the side we choose to take often sums up our cultural identity, status and feelings. Ethnic conflicts can happen easily once one has taken sides according to one's racial identity, and when other factors are deemphasised. Although race is prominent in the Little India riot, the majority of those implicated are foreign workers. Therefore, factors like occupation and the status of these workers became more salient. Moreover, most Singaporeans do not have many opportunities to interact with these foreign workers, hence emotional ties and cultural elements are relatively weaker factors here.

Anthropological contribution to ethnic management complements the focus on external factors preferred by political, economic and sociological disciplines, and emphasises lived experiences of individuals. While there are fair and just policies in place, equal emphases should be placed on the effects of policy implementations, as well as on whether the intended fairness and justice are experienced through daily interactions, negotiations and living by the ordinary citizens. And while racial harmony is a cornerstone of nation building, how can it translate to everyday living in its true sense?

Singapore has relied on the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) categories for racial classification to manage resource distributions and aid programmes (e.g., HDB flat allocation and ethnic self-help groups), to ensure equal economic distribution and equal respect for the races. These policies reinforce racial differentiation on the one hand but seek to veil cultural differences on the other. One result is that we are constantly reminded of racial differentiation, while cultural elements remain sensitive issues for open contestation. One of the most obvious policies that aims to prevent the over-representation of any racial group and its culture is by encouraging the use of a “non-ethnic” language, English, for inter-ethnic communication. This has resulted in non-English speakers being sidelined into a lower status of society. Individuals who openly promote their own language and culture are easily misunderstood as being purposefully insensitive towards the cultures of other groups. Each ethnic group tries hard to avoid crossing over to the other’s territory and manages these issues on one’s own as much as possible, resulting in a “hi-and-bye” kind of interaction. The opportunities for cultural interaction and understanding are there, but the avenues are not wide enough.

The public space is a good place for resilience-building. One way to reduce fear and anxiety about cultural differences is to encourage deep interaction and mutual understanding. While most people have some general knowledge of the festivals, habits and customs, and value systems of other races, very few can boast a deep enough understanding of them. At the same time, most still have biased notions of the other races, which come into play during incidents like the Little India riot.

Responses to the riot — that involved mostly people of South Asian origins — did spur some race-based comments in the online community. A lesson learned from this incident must surely include the understanding of these sentiments and the potential spread of them if similar incidents happen in the future.

It may be time for us to consider building a more resilient common space by allowing more constructive collisions of ideas and cultural elements in public that encourage problem solving and consensus building on the local level. In testing times accumulated positive cultural negotiations from daily living will prepare the society for mutual respect and understanding.

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