

Changing Perceptions With a Catchy Beat

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Two years ago, my sister and I were invited by her colleague, an Indian expatriate, to a Diwali celebration party at an open space two streets from our Housing Board flat in Tampines.

We arrived to find more than 100 Indian expatriates dancing to thumping Bollywood music. Initially taken aback that I was one of the few non-expats there, my initial discomfort faded quickly as I was ushered into a small circle and armed with a pair of wooden sticks. I realised, as my shyness faded slowly and my feet began to tap to the beat, that dancing was truly one of the best forms of interaction.

At the party, however, it also dawned on me that we were in two very distinct communities that seemed completely separate from each other.

And if someone had not reached out, our circles would have never overlapped in more personal settings.

I was reminded of this Diwali party last week when an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey on race, language and religion was released.

The survey revealed that while racial tensions in Singapore had smoothed, a growing divide between Singaporeans and foreigners had emerged.

Three in 10 felt prejudice based on nationality was more widespread now compared to five years ago and less than half of the more than 4,100 Singapore residents interviewed agreed that the Government had done enough to improve the integration of immigrants in Singapore.

The respondents were mostly citizens, and IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said these results showed a desire for the authorities to handle immigration issues using a "top-down approach" through which racial and religious relations had previously been managed.

The expectation that the Government bears the responsibility of integrating immigrants in Singapore reflects several decades of the use of policy to promote social cohesion.

Policies in housing and education, for example, including the housing ethnic integration policy and school-centred efforts such as Racial Harmony Day and compulsory national education, have had a significant impact in fostering tolerance and understanding among various groups.

But laws alone are insufficient, as they cannot force interaction between humans, which is the basis of integration.

Perhaps of equal importance now are ground-up initiatives from Singaporeans themselves, who can address head-on anti-foreigner sentiments in a manner that legislation cannot.

To give an example: the Government has already tightened immigration and employment frameworks to keep population ratios more tightly controlled and to emphasise the priority Singaporeans continue to have over foreigners. Recently announced quotas on subletting whole flats to non-Singaporeans in HDB estates will also ensure that no foreigner enclaves are formed, in a vein similar to the racial housing quotas.

Legislation to prevent the formation of these enclaves is crucial as the creation of independent communities that do not mix encourages further segregation and can breed deep-rooted distrust in society.

But it will work simply to spread out these individuals, who are an integral part of Singapore's workforce, across the country without addressing the levels of intolerance breeding against them.

And growing perceptions here of those who are foreign-born as "others" and an "us against them" mentality that has been greatly fuelled by the Internet as a platform to galvanise like-minded individuals are not likely to be lessened or diminished through policies like these alone.

These very online platforms are where the larger battle to foster better understanding and tolerance needs to be fought.

Following the Little India riot last December, for example, an initial wave of anti-foreigner sentiment quickly spread online, but this was combated strongly by a counter-wave that urged rationality and restraint.

A Facebook group, SHUT Racism Up SG, was created by a group of volunteers to encourage a stamping out of hate speech - calling out instances of prejudice against workers from South Asia that were being made online, for example.

Online initiatives are in no way a substitute for taking the time to get to know a stranger so he can be a friend, or sparing the effort and energy to overcome barriers of culture and language to find commonalities with others.

But they could be the starting point for engaging the minds of Singaporeans and pushing them to translate these virtual displays of understanding and effort into real-time interactions.

We can and should no longer depend on the Government alone to change perceptions and break down walls of prejudice through policies.

Coupled with legislation, perhaps these small and localised ground-up efforts will go a long way in strengthening our ties not just as Singaporeans or as a nation, but as humans living and interacting with other humans.

The Diwali party I attended two years ago lasted no more than two hours.

The invitation we got was a small gesture that has left a large imprint in my mind - all it took was a pair of sticks and a catchy beat to remind me that it really cannot be that difficult to reach out and connect, regardless of nationality or race.