

What's so funny about racial stereotypes?

Comedians like Kumar regularly use stereotypes, with many taking no offence. But for some, racism is no joke. Audrey Tan looks at what type of humour is acceptable, in light of an incident where an actor here was asked to put on a thicker Indian accent at an audition.

Audrey Tan

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Racism hit the headlines recently, with its role in showbiz humour prompting a wider look at what it says about Singapore society to play on racial stereotypes.

But at his regular Tuesday night show, stand-up comic Kumar is unfazed. He has the crowd of more than 100 - a cross-section of mostly Singaporeans of all races - laughing their heads off as he rolls out the stereotypes.

For more than two hours at the Canvas Club in Clarke Quay, drag queen Kumar, 48, makes fun of anything and everything - with stereotypes ranging from Chinese being calculative people and Malays often being late for work to Indians loving their drink.

Yet in May, raw nerves were touched when freelance actor Shrey Bhargava, 22, shared on Facebook about his discomfort at being asked by a casting director to put on a thicker Indian accent during an audition for a Jack Neo comedy, *Ah Boys to Men 4*, and to "make it funny".

His post went viral, sparking discussion on casual racism faced by people from minority groups in Singapore, and the prevalence of racial stereotypes in entertainment.

So how does Kumar, who has been telling such jokes for decades, avoid offending people?

The comedian, whose full name is Kumarason Chinnadurai, tells *The Sunday Times*: "I don't just make fun of one race. I make fun of all - of Indians, Chinese, Malay, ang moh (Caucasians), gays, lesbians, married couples, men, women - you must be fair across the board. If you make fun of everything, it's not racist."

Yet at least one person in the audience said there were aspects that were not a laughing matter.

"We laugh because we know it's part of comedy. But not everyone may know that. There may be people in the audience who are visiting Singapore for the first time, and they may leave with a negative impression of some of the races," says a teacher, who wished to be known only as Mrs Chandra, after the show.

Still, Kumar has honed the art of treading the fine line between racism and humour over many years, and Singaporeans in his audience know what to expect. But in light of the online debate that erupted over the incident concerning Mr Bhargava, is Singapore society reassessing whether jokes about racial stereotypes are really that funny now? Is yesterday's laughable, lovable stereotype, today's offensive slur against minorities?

ARE JOKES ABOUT RACE, RACIST?

Kumar is able to carry it off. But radio station Kiss92 has been fined \$7,000 by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) for making racially offensive remarks which offended some listeners.

On Jan 11 this year, deejays on its morning show discussed a study on the sleep patterns of Singaporeans and related this to stereotypes about Malays, Indians and Chinese. An IMDA spokesman says the need to exercise racial and religious sensitivity is enshrined in its content guidelines for all media platforms.

Local TV and radio broadcasters are guided by the Free-To-Air TV Programme Code and Free-To-Air Radio Programme Code respectively, which contain specific guidelines on how they should treat such topics, she says.

According to the codes, matters pertaining to race and religion are "sensitive and capable of evoking strong passions and emotions". As such, broadcasters need to exercise due caution when featuring the views, beliefs, practices or activities of racial and religious groups.

So what is the difference between Kumar telling a joke and the situation with SPH Radio's Kiss92?

Observers point to context.

Mr Baey Yam Keng, Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth, says free-to-air radio and television programmes reach a wider audience compared with stand-up comedy or theatre.

"I think the medium is quite important, and the performer should bear this in mind. The mass media reaches a wider audience, not all of whom may be prepared to hear such jokes," adds Mr Baey.

Actor Shrey Bhargava's post in May about being asked to put on a thicker accent at an audition sparked discussion on racism.

"In comparison, a much smaller group of people pay to attend comedies, and they do so with a better informed idea of what to expect, including context of the jokes, style and track record of the performer."

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser says racial jokes used in comedies or among friends which are directed more or less equally at all the races present may help to loosen people up, and strengthen social bonds.

But he notes that each individual or group has a threshold for tolerance to such jokes, beyond which they may appear offensive; hence, it is important to know how far one can go in making such jokes.

As for an industry take, those in comedy circles feel the use of stereotypes is important to help the audience identify with the subject matter. Actress Selena Tan, 45, who heads arts and theatre company Dream Academy, says: "If the character speaks in a certain way in real life, how can it be offensive to portray the truth? People only laugh when the character is truthful."

Even comedies abroad have stereotypical characters. Hit American musical Avenue Q, for example - which includes a song titled Everyone's A Little Bit Racist - features a Japanese character named Christmas Eve who speaks in heavily accented English. As Kumar puts it: "Comedy without stereotyping is like nasi lemak without coconut. It is what helps the audience catch on to jokes easily."

ISSUE MUST BE DISCUSSED

The issue is clearly a sensitive one, though: Of the 23 artistes and directors approached by The Sunday Times, only seven were willing to weigh in on the issue. The others declined to comment, with one saying he would rather speak on "more inspirational" issues.

But as Mr Alvin Tan, founder and artistic director of theatre company The Necessary Stage, points out, this is an issue that must be discussed, especially since Singapore prides itself on being made up of many cultures, races and ethnicities.

Comedians, theatre practitioners and film-makers here say that the use of racial stereotypes in comedy is par for the course, and has been used in theatre and film in Singapore for decades.

The difference between then and now is the emergence of cultural identities, whether these are racial, religious, political or sexual identities, that are making people more aware of differences and the need to assert them, observes Mr Lee Kim Siang, chairman of the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, which organises the annual Inter Racial Inter Religious Harmony Nite event, which promotes racial harmony.

"In the past, people used to call their friends names based on stereotypes not just along racial lines, but also based on different dialect groups. But people didn't think it was racist. Now, times have changed, and people have become more sensitive. So if people feel offended, the best is to be more mindful about what is being said," says Mr Lee.

Indeed, the audience reacted differently to Kumar's show.

Sales executive Hassan Faisal Yusuf, 25, says he was not offended, explaining: "Accents are funny, and it is part of comedy. And anyway, Kumar makes fun of everyone. As long as we don't take stereotypes as reality and let it affect the way we treat others, it is okay."

But Mrs Chandra, 43, notes: "Some stereotypes are outdated, like how Indians are alcoholic. Anyone can be alcoholic today."

Their reactions mirror the larger perspectives that have emerged from the debates spurred by Mr Bhargava's post.

Many of the actor's critics say he was overreacting to being asked to play a role for a comedy, pointing to his other performances in which he had put on an accent.

Others feel his experience highlighted the ways in which minority groups are portrayed in the media, which could reinforce negative stereotypes that result in encounters of "casual racism", or acts of exclusion by one race over the other, they say.

Education executive Sumita Thiagarajan, 23, for one, recounts an incident she encountered in May while trying to explain to a child at an exhibition that "sungei" meant river in Malay.

Ms Sumita says the girl used terms that are derogatory references to Indians and she could have picked up those terms from the people around her, or from popular culture.

SENSITIVITY COMES INTO PLAY

So how do those in show business know where to draw the line?

Comedian and director Pam Oei, 45, says that actors regularly have to put on accents when performing, but there has to be some sensitivity in the way they are asked to do so.

"As a Chinese, and as part of the majority race, I try to be sensitive when working with minority groups, especially during an audition session, where you are talking to a stranger," says Ms Oei.

This could include giving the actor more information about the character they are playing, so they understand the context of the performance, and not assume that a racial joke is being made at their expense, she says.

As a director, Ms Oei says, she sometimes has to ask actors to put on an accent, such as in a comedy she is directing, *Boeing Boeing*, which opened at Victoria Theatre on June 23. It is about a man and his three girlfriends who are flight attendants on airlines such as Air India and Air China.

"For example, for the Air India stewardess character, we work with the actor to provide context about which part of India the character is from," says Ms Oei.

The Necessary Stage's Mr Tan says an actor is often asked to put on accents during an audition to test versatility, but more information can be given about the character. He says: "The actor can then process this to play a convincing role."

Comedian and YouTube personality Hirzi Zulkiflie, 28, often puts on accents, but says: "I try to do it in a way that 'punches' these minority groups up, instead of putting them down."

In one video, he puts on a Filipino accent while playing the role of a service staff member. "I show how friendly Filipinos are, and how approachable they can be, compared with some of the local service staff."

But even though intentions may be kind, it is also important to consider whether people in the community are comfortable with the use of racial stereotypes, says poet Pooja Nansi, 34. "Ultimately, if the target of the joke feels offended, we shouldn't be making it," she says.

SPEAK FROM EXPERIENCE

Some say that a good gauge would be to make fun of only what you understand from experience.

"The difference between Kumar making a joke about his own community versus a Chinese comedian making that same joke is the difference between writing your own narrative and being a part of someone else's," says Ms Pooja.

"As a person from a racial minority, when my Indian friends joke about our collective 'Indianness', it rarely feels offensive because it always comes from a lived cultural understanding. This is not always the case with someone from outside the community," she says.

This would likely also be the case should a Singaporean Chinese mock a Chinese person from China, she adds.

Mr Tan says the discussions arising from Mr Bhargava's experience could help raise awareness about the need for popular culture to be more inclusive.

Mr Baey, meanwhile, says that in multiracial Singapore, it is important to bear in mind that the use of racial jokes and stereotypes could offend others, and people should be more sensitive about telling them.

"Singapore is multiracial. If jokes are made at the expense of people we see around us and interact with, and they are uncomfortable with it, it could affect social relationships."

Indeed, Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society's Mr Lee agrees that discussions that help raise awareness are good, but cautions people against being too sensitive, calling for constructive dialogue instead.

"Sometimes, it could just be a slip of the tongue and people may say things they don't mean. But if something offends you, tell the person that you are uncomfortable with it. It is a give-and-take situation."

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, says: "There is no point suppressing the fact that we are of different races - what is important is to remove the negative stereotypes we sometimes attach to people because of their backgrounds."

Part of the process also involves confronting "that bit of racism that all of us have", he says.

Mr Ramesh Ganeson, director of racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg, says that the exaggeration of racial stereotypes through entertainment or the arts may result in people laughing about it.

"But do we just stop at that, or do we walk away believing in this exaggeration? We perhaps need to reflect. The issue of race is such a personal matter that even when the intent is benign, the comment may still hurt another," he says.

"Engaging each other is the only way sometimes, as the recent incident involving an audition which included a racial stereotype has shown, where meaningful dialogue can occur and a deeper understanding can be reached as to what is or can be offensive."

NUS' Professor Tan, in suggesting how such racial prejudices can be reduced, says that collaborating on projects as equals and inculcating a common, national identity are useful strategies.

Ms Sumita agrees, noting: "The love of food, the kampung way of life of sharing and caring, our resilience and 'never say die' attitude, being kiasu, complaining - Singaporeans have so many similarities."