

‘To be race-blind, we have to be race-conscious’

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SINGAPORE — When freelance actor Shrey Bhargava took to Facebook in May to talk about his encounter with racial stereotyping while auditioning for a part in local film *Ah Boys To Men 4*, his post sparked a maelstrom of responses. While some saluted him for raising the issue of racism, there were also those who slammed him for using the race card.

In another incident last year, Facebook user Sarah Carmariah wrote about her interview experience at a bakery where the head of its baking department made racist remarks to her. The bakery turned out to be PrimaDeli, which sacked the staff member in question and apologised to Ms Carmariah and the “wider community”.

As incidents like these show, Singapore is by no means immune from ugly racism, and racial issues remain a tinderbox here, even though the Republic has made significant progress in fostering harmonious relations among its diverse population over the last 52 years.

A poll of 2,000 Singaporeans last year by Channel NewsAsia (CNA) and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that almost half felt the low hum of racism still persists here. Six in 10 also said they had heard racist comments, mostly from colleagues in the workplace and friends.

Nevertheless, Singapore has often been held up as a model for racial and religious harmony — and rightly so, given how racial tensions continue to flare up elsewhere around the world with more dire consequences.

In the United States, for instance, public debate around racism had intensified following a series of high-profile killings of young black men by the police in the last few years.

In March, Ireland also reported a surge in race hate crimes, including violence and threats targeted at black-African and South Asian people.

As Singapore continues to mature as a country, observers and community leaders believe there is much room for Singaporeans to strengthen the social fabric further.

“Tolerance is an important trait which many Singaporeans have grown up with. It certainly has merits, but hopefully we can strive higher,” said Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the IPS.

ASKING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser reiterated that race is a salient trait of an individual’s identity. In a diverse society like Singapore, it can ignite “potential flashpoints”, he said. This is why a “race-blind state” is an ideal goal, but not a realistic one for the Republic. Instead, Singapore must embrace racial diversity as a critical feature of its national identity, he added.

OnePeople.sg chairman Janil Puthucheary, who is also a Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, hopes to see more Singaporeans asking “difficult questions” about other ethnicities and religions.

“There is some anxiety about asking difficult questions, because they worry about how it will be received or if it demonstrates their own ignorance ... We need to find ways to let people feel more comfortable about asking and answering these questions,” said the Senior Minister of State, whose organisation works to promote interracial and inter-religious harmony here.

Dr Mathews urged Singaporeans to strive beyond tolerance and “truly help people from different backgrounds feel accepted”.

“We should strive towards greater appreciation of people from diverse backgrounds. For that to happen, we need to understand what is important to them.”

He sees a state where “we don’t disadvantage anybody based on race” as something for Singapore society to aim for. “But to believe that we can completely remove race as a marker of our identity is probably naive. Race, religion and language often intersect, and this makes for groups which clearly will identify themselves differently from others,” he added.

Dr Alexius Pereira, first vice-president of the Eurasian Association, argued that the “basic tenet” of multiculturalism is that people cannot be race-blind. “Race-blindness is a false expectation. Look at our housing policy and the racial quota it stipulates ... People are expecting equal representation for each other’s race, that no group is privileged over the other, not race-blindness,” he said.

Agreeing, Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan added: “To be race-blind, paradoxically, requires us to be race-conscious. This means recognising how race can be divisive if not handled with care.”

GOALPOST HAS SHIFTED

Over the decades, Singaporeans have been “socialised” to consider issues of race, language and religion as “outside the out-of-bound markers”, said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan.

For some Singaporeans, race remains a taboo topic in conversations. In the CNA-IPS poll, about two-thirds of the respondents said discussions of race could lead to tension.

“But without healthy dialogue and debate, we are not going to get a better understanding and appreciation of the differences and similarities among us. Of course, (such conversations must) be treated with great care, but explicit avoidance reduces our ability to accommodate differences,” he said.

Still, Dr Tan Ern Ser said compared to the past, there is greater public discourse on racial and religious issues, as people become less sensitive about these topics. However, he stressed that “anything, including jokes, that can be construed even as mildly racist is not acceptable” in society.

Mr Bhargava's post, for instance, was shared about 4,500 times and attracted some 1,500 comments in less than a week. In it, he expressed his disappointment at being asked by the casting director to "be a more full-blown Indian man".

The post led Singaporeans from various quarters, including fellow artistes, to weigh in on the discussion about racial stereotypes. Some criticised Mr Bhargava for taking the remark too seriously while others supported him for calling out the racism.

Referring to the spirited public discussion, Dr Puthucheary said: "(It shows that) the young have an aspiration for even more social harmony. The fact that we are now arguing about whether a joke is acceptable, actually is a marker of how far we have come. It doesn't mean that we don't have more work to do, but the goal post has shifted."

Urging Singaporeans to be "comfortable" with talking about ethnic issues, he said: "When we get the conversation going, what people discover is what they worry about (causing offence) is common to a large number of people ... But the (other) person is usually quite comfortable answering those questions."

START FROM THE GROUND UP

NUS sociologist Daniel Goh noted that the younger generation is more inclined to call out discriminatory practices, especially in the workplace. More can be done in the grassroots to integrate various ethnic groups and nationalities, said Assoc Prof Goh, who is also a Workers' Party Non-Constituency Member of Parliament.

Noting the influx of new immigrants and subcultures here, he stressed that Singapore needs a "new vision beyond the rhetoric that 'multiculturalism is important'".

Khalid Mosque chairman Alla'udin Mohamed, who is also vice-chairman of the Geylang Serai Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle, reiterated that community leaders play an important role in engaging different ethnic groups. For example, the mosque along Joo Chiat Road works with other places of worship in its vicinity in planning community activities and conveying key messages to bolster the fight against terrorism.

"The mosque is surrounded by non-Malays and non-Muslim neighbours but some form of integration has been achieved, although it took effort and time ... Everyone has their own culture. We need to be able to accept, understand (other cultures), and practise our own culture," he said.

Mr Alla'udin, who speaks eight languages, added: "Sometimes, when you learn their language, you appreciate their culture better."

While most observers and community leaders agreed that the Republic has come a long way in managing inter-ethnic relations, it is still far from "having arrived". Singaporeans understand the need for racial integration and harmony, but this is in part due to the laws in place, said Dr Tan Ern Ser.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan cautioned that it would be “all too easy to sleepwalk to a misplaced sense that all is well and that conflict has been consigned to the dustbin of history”. “Truth be told, we have not been severely tested in our inter-ethnic relations since independence,” he said. Noting that the general population “still hover on tolerance”, he added: “We urgently need to go beyond that to embrace understanding and appreciating the differences.”