

## **Undergrads, academics engage Shanmugam on 'brownface' and controversial rap video**

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SINGAPORE — Questions about “brownface” and the recent controversial rap video by a pair of siblings came hard and fast for Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam at a dialogue with undergraduates and academics on Thursday (Aug 22). The forum saw many of the attendees asking whether it was the right call by the authorities to issue a takedown notice for the video.

Some also asked about whether Singapore’s society should be allowed to judge the video for themselves, while others questioned if the Government could do more to raise awareness about casual racism.

Mr Shanmugam took pains to explain to the audience of around 100 academics and undergraduates the Government’s approach to the video and the “brownface” advertisement that triggered it, and why the authorities had to step in.

By the time the session was over, most of the audience members were convinced that the Government was correct in asking for the video to be taken down: Fewer than five put up their hands when Mr Shanmugam asked the audience towards the end of the session whether the Government should still have allowed the rap video to be left up.

The controversy over the advertisement for electronic payment system Nets, which featured Mediacorp actor Dennis Chew sporting a “browned” skin to look like an Indian man, and the profanity-laden video that came out in response to it was revisited at a leaders summit organised by the National University of Singapore’s Department of Communications and New Media.

At the start of the two-hour session, Mr Shanmugam asked the audience how many people found the ad to be offensive, and around a third raised their hands.

Those who put up their hands said that the ad gave the impression that minority races are caricatures. Another said it depends on the context as well — brownface causes offence, and is hence offensive.

Mr Shanmugam answered, referring to sitcom character Phua Chu Kang: “Is it offensive when Gurmit Singh plays a Chinese man and a contractor, and pretends to be an ‘ah beng’ (Singlish for ‘hooligan’)? Should we also say no to this?”

No one raised their hands on this point, Mr Shanmugam noted.

He also questioned the context of brownface, as Singapore does not have a history of slavery or oppression along racial lines, which was why blackface is considered to be offensive by African-Americans in the United States.

Instead, he suggested that the offence to the ad could be caused by groupthink: “Is it because other people felt it is offensive and that’s why? Or is it because if a minority plays a majority, it is okay, but if a majority plays a minority, then it is offensive? As a policymaker, what do I do?”

### **Why government acted**

Mr Shanmugam then replayed the video by siblings Preeti and Subhas Nair to the audience, which featured four-letter words in the chorus. This crossed the line on criminality, he said, adding that allowing the video to remain up will mean that he would have to allow other videos of such a nature as well.

“Over time, these racial attacks will become normalised. Once it becomes normalised... to what extent do you think we will be able to have the kind of interactions today where, by and large, the races coexist and conduct relationships with respect and trust?”

A poll by government feedback unit Reach found that while awareness of the incident was high, only one in 10 had watched the video. A majority — 76 per cent — supported the Government in removing such videos, while seven in 10 supported its tough stance in the interest of racial harmony.

He noted how other countries that take different approaches have grappled with the issues of racial discourse in their own ways but have not led to a more harmonious society. In secular France, Mr Shanmugam said that issues along race still persist despite it allowing free speech on racial issues.

Such verbal attacks have become mainstream even in Germany, he added, with its politicians saying “now there is a lack of linguistic inhibitions”, an article in British newspaper Financial Times stated.

“I am not saying that just one video would lead us here. But you have to look at it step by step,” Mr Shanmugam said. He added that people often forgot that one of the first things Mr Lee Kuan Yew said as the prime minister was that Singapore was founded as a multiracial nation.

This is why since the 1960s, while Singapore’s approach on race has been a strict one, it has also given rise to positive results. “The fact that we can have little racism here, compared with others, is not accidental or that we are inherently a superior people.”

He quoted Mr Lee, who said in 1999: “It takes just one mishap and you will find segregation begins all over again.”

### **Let society decide?**

In a question-and-answer session that followed, around 20 people quizzed Mr Shanmugam on the episode, ranging from the government response to whether social values and mores have changed from the past.

One member in the audience asked if the public should be given the autonomy to make their own decisions about the video, rather than having the Government take it down.

Mr Shanmugam responded that as it had crossed the line of Section 298 of the Penal Code on wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person, it is up to the Government to judge.

“For example, when somebody commits a theft, we are not going to say that we leave it to society to judge whether there is an offence or not. It is an offence on the books.”

Nevertheless, he added that these laws “are not built in stone” and are shaped by society.

“If society feels that such a video in future should not be considered in breach, then the law will have to change and you are the people who are going to determine what the laws ought to be, because the laws reflect the social values and mores of society.”

But he added that his task, as well as that of other government leaders, is to “put across to people fairly” on the trade-offs when removing these laws, and persuade people about why they are important.

“Everybody says this in every society: ‘Let the society judge’. That is what they say in Germany, and look at what has happened. That is what they say in the United Kingdom and the US, too. Look at their trajectory. You will undoubtedly go down that trajectory.”

### **Casual racism in singapore**

The audience member then asked: “We are the product of 50 years of your multiracial policies, and your policies are working, so why would it happen in Singapore?”

Mr Shanmugam said that if government policies had the impact like she described, he would be “very happy”. **But the reality is that casual racism still exists, he stressed, pointing to a poll conducted in 2016 by news channel CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies on race relations, which showed how the different races still have prejudiced views against each other.**

He pointed to how, despite 400 years of peaceful coexistence between the different religions in the Baltic parts of the Ottoman Empire and later Yugoslavia, religious differences led to its break-up into multiple states with the groups committing “unspeakable cruelty” towards each other.

“Four hundred years. And you think in 50 years we have overcome this?” Mr Shanmugam asked.

Asked by former journalist and NUS Associate Professor Bertha Henson about whether the Government should do more in inculcating a sense of awareness of racial sensitivity among the Chinese majority, Mr Shanmugam agreed, adding that he is now hoping for a “bigger conversation in a few weeks’ time on race and religion” as it is a trending topic now.

He said that he has been watching people’s reactions and talking to young people about the incident: “I think we do need a conversation, since people are now more aware and, in many

ways, I felt heartened by the responses because the younger people's response, to me, showed that we are a less racist society today than we were 20, or 40 years ago."

Several non-governmental organisations, he added, have reached out to host these conversations on race and religion and to talk about how social values have transformed from the past.

Responding to another question from the audience on whether race consciousness has changed over the years, he said that the difference between today and the past was not that racism has increased or disappeared altogether, but that the social values and mores have shifted.

"Today, more people think that a Chinese playing another race in some way demeans another race. That young man in the audience made a point earlier (about the brownface ad), he did not articulate how, but it is a sense that this is not right. In that sense, that is what has changed."

He added: "But I don't think we are more race-conscious. We are less race-conscious and less racist, and therefore we are more quick to accept that others might take offence. In the past, if anyone had complained about it, they would have dismissed you."