

Race, racism and racial privilege in Singapore

Along with society, the idea of what constitutes racial privilege has evolved over time

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There is no running away from the fact that racism exists in Singapore. Several recent events have exposed this fact of life which has long been papered over by assertions – from politicians, prominent thought leaders and ordinary citizens – that racial harmony is the local social order.

Regardless of the substantive shallowness or depth of racial harmony in society, racism should be recognised as no more than irrational prejudices against immediate differences in physical traits such as skin colour rather than negative attitudes based on knowledge of cultural differences.

Post-Independence, Singaporeans' knowledge of themselves and the world around them came via the English language, the medium of instruction. Most have limited knowledge of their own ethnic history and culture, beyond food and festivals, especially religious ones. In the case of Chinese

festivals, the names of some of them have been simple-mindedly rendered in English, such as the "Hungry Ghost Festival".

Felicitously, Islamic and Hindu festivals have retained their original names. Local research and surveys seldom study substantive cultural differences among the ethnic groups, choosing to stay at the superficial level of "difference" (for instance, questions such as how many friends do you have that are of a different ethnic group?)

It is the work of scholars to learn, understand and remember the putatively thousands of years of history and culture of Han China, of the multitude of religions and languages of South Asia and of the Austronesian origin and cultural infusion of Hinduism. Islam and the colonising West of South-east Asia's indigenous peoples. For all but a few individuals it would be too much to ask. However, this lack of deep knowledge is not a problem in inter-ethnic relations.

What we have are ethnic cultures by practice. Each ethnic group has retained certain defining cultural attitudes and behaviours that have been passed on, without necessarily the

cultural philosophical underpinning, within the familial and community settings.

Most of these defining practices are common knowledge among Singaporean adults. A minimum condition of decency and civility towards one another would be to honour these differences and act accordingly. This is the minimum condition for racial peace, which I believe is generally practised by most educated Singaporeans.

CHINESE PRIVILEGE

In the debate on racism, a related issue has stirred much discussion – "Chinese privilege". Generational differences towards the idea of "Chinese privilege" have been publicly noted.

For Singaporeans who were educated in Chinese schools, from the 1920s to the early 1970s, the idea of being "privileged" is ironic, if not insulting.

For them there had been nothing but degradation of the Chinese language and modernist Chinese culture, culminating in the closing of Nanyang University in 1980. The presence of the Special Assistance Plan schools is cold

compensation. At the personal level, it had been but economic marginalisation and psychological alienation. Their resistance to the idea of "Chinese privilege" is existential not racial.

Older Chinese may also have a different take on what racial privilege means. During the colonial days, low-end government service jobs, such as postmen, policemen, soldiers and office runners, went mainly to Malays (a racial association with occupation which is reflected in the colloquial Malay term of "mata mata" or "eyes" for cops).

At the higher end of the scale, English-educated South Asians were common in professions such as teachers, lawyers and family doctors. Communication between them and the Chinese was mostly in "pasar" or colloquial Malay.

Unable to gain a foothold in government employment, the Chinese – illiterate or educated in Chinese – filled the labouring ranks, while the more entrepreneurial among them became itinerant hawkers or owners of small businesses such as village provision shops. Some went into cottage manufacturing or

became contractors during the early years of the construction boom. Though much diminished, the legacy of this ethnic division of labour still lingers somewhat in the present structural distribution of labour.

What brought about a significant transformation of the colonial structure was the policy of meritocracy.

Meritocracy put into practice the idea of a "Singaporean Singapore", a localisation of the concept of a "Malaysian Malaysia" promoted by the first generation People's Action Party leaders who opposed the privileging of the Malay majority during our short-lived membership in Malaysia.

With the obvious advantages that accrue to an English-language education, Chinese children were enrolled en masse in government public schools. With increased proficiency in English and its statistical dominance, ethnic Chinese unavoidably ended up in every employment niche across the entire economic and class spectrum.

But meritocracy has three flaws. In emphasising effort, it individualises success/failure, creating a tendency towards elitism. In rewarding natural endowment it could, and had, lead to eugenicist thinking, as in the infamous Graduate Mothers Scheme in the 1980s, which gave children of graduate mothers priority admission to schools. Extending eugenicist thinking to ethnicity results in institutionalising racism.

Finally, meritocratic policies such as those mentioned can, over time, rigidify social stratification and impede an individual's upward mobility. Writ large, such social structural impediments can affect particular ethnic groups; for decades, Malays have been

identified as a structurally disadvantaged group.

WEIGHING THE SOLUTIONS

What is to be done? If Chinese demographic majority advantage has translated into structural advantage, a possible institutional correction is "affirmative action" for minorities. This is not without intrinsic systemic problems.

An unconscious advantage of the Chinese majority is the ability to assume and operate in an "unproblematic" social reality, which minority individuals cannot take for granted. This would take both parties to recognise and work out their differences in their definitions of the given situation.

Without meritocracy, allocation of resources and rewards would have to be executed by administrative fiat, which risks engendering and embedding corruption.

If elitism is a personal flaw, eugenicist thinking should never be condoned or institutionalised. What is needed is to ensure that as even a starting point as possible is built into the system for each cohort of young citizens.

As for the law, some would argue that in Singapore there are more than sufficient laws that can be invoked to punish racist acts.

Racist Singaporeans are individuals who neither represent their ethnic group, nor is their behaviour endemic in their group. Not all racist incidents need to be dealt with as criminal acts. While legal sanction is a possibility, far better that such cudgels be used very sparingly and attempts be made to first resolve matters between the individuals involved.

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