

Harmony is never inevitable

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The tabla is one of the most recognisable instruments in Indian classical music. Yet, many do not realise that it consists of two separate drums. One is small, producing bright, crisp notes. The other is larger, creating deeper, resonant tones. They are entirely different in form, function, and sound. Neither tries to become the other. Instead, each listens intently to its partner. Together, they create a rhythm, balance, and beauty that neither could achieve alone.

There is perhaps no better metaphor for Singapore.

Every year on July 21, we observe Racial Harmony Day. But why do we need one?

Modern genetics has long shown that human beings are remarkably alike, proving that race is not a biological reality but a social construct – an idea created to classify people and, too often, determine who belongs.

Yet, ideas can be as powerful as facts. Throughout history, race has been invoked to justify slavery, apartheid and genocide. Even today, societies globally grapple with racism, xenophobia and identity politics. The global challenge remains unchanged: How do people who are different choose to live together?

Many nations have their own answers. The United States honours Dr Martin Luther King Jr, South Africa celebrates Freedom Day, marking the birth

of a multiracial democracy. The United Nations observes the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Singapore's approach is distinctive. Racial Harmony Day is not about celebrating one community or lamenting another. It is a reminder that harmony is never inevitable. It is built deliberately and continuously, and the peace we enjoy today is not an accident of history, but the result of conscious choices.

Yet, true harmony is more than an absence of conflict. A society can be peaceful yet socially distant. We can live in the same neighbourhoods, study in the same schools and work in the same offices, while knowing remarkably little about one another's histories, traditions or beliefs.

Nearly 75 years ago, the American social psychologist Gordon Allport articulated the "Contact Hypothesis". His insight was deceptively simple: Prejudice diminishes when people from different backgrounds meet as equals, work towards shared goals, and engage meaningfully. Understanding grows not through slogans, but through genuine human encounters.

Even before "social cohesion" became a buzzword, Singapore was already building these conditions. Our public housing estates, National Service, hawkers centres and shared public spaces were more than functional infrastructure. They were designed as places where Singaporeans could meet naturally, learn from one another and develop bonds of trust.

Heritage institutions play a vital role



Students from Westwood Primary School celebrating Racial Harmony Day.
PHOTO: GIN TAY

in this ongoing journey. Today's museums are no longer just repositories of static artefacts. Increasingly, they are contact zones where cultures meet, conversations begin and empathy is nurtured.

That aspiration lies at the heart of the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) too. Every year, we welcome visitors from every community in Singapore. Remarkably, around seven in 10 of our local visitors are not from the Indian community. This statistic gives us great hope. It tells us that heritage is not only about learning one's own story; it is about discovering someone else's story, and recognising that every community's narrative is an integral part of the Singapore story.

Some of our most memorable moments at IHC are the quietest. A child who is not Indian painstakingly creating a kolam (decorative rice-flour art) for the first time. A family lingering to understand the significance of Deepavali. Visitors captivated by the elegance of Bha-

ratanatyam. These add up to more than cultural experiences; they are moments of encounter. They replace unfamiliarity with curiosity, curiosity with understanding, and understanding with respect.

Social cohesion is not built through legislation. It grows through thousands of these small, everyday encounters — a conversation, a shared meal, a school project, a museum visit. These moments seldom make headlines, but collectively they shape the character of our nation.

As Singapore becomes increasingly connected to the world, new communities will join us, and our identities will become more layered. The challenge before us is not to preserve harmony as though it were a fragile relic, but to renew it continually as a living practice.

The tabla, ultimately, teaches us that harmony is not created by erasing differences, but by allowing distinct voices to contribute to a common rhythm. And like the tabla, Singapore's harmony depends not on uniformity, but on attentiveness, mutual respect, and a shared rhythm.

May we continue to cherish that rhythm, strengthen it, and pass it on.

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