

The Problem of a Racialised Mind

By Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib

*N*ow that the dust is settling and the online anger has abated somewhat on the matter of Amy Cheong's Facebook rant, it is necessary to take a step back and ask: what went wrong?

For this was not an isolated incident — as has been observed, in recent years there have been other instances of online comments made of a racist nature.

Indeed, in September 2005, the situation was deemed serious enough that the Sedition Act was used for the first time in recent history to prosecute two men over online postings deemed insulting to the Malays and their religion.

These incidences might lead one to think that there is something wrong with our nation-building process. We could point a finger at the emergence of social media and sound a warning, but this does not address the root of the matter.

Social media is not the problem to be managed — signs point to a racialised thought process that is in need of urgent attention.

Much of the problem stems from our denial that racism exists in an everyday context. Thus, while xenophobia has gotten a lot of attention in public discourse lately, racism is still a taboo subject we avoid discussing openly. It is a very rare occasion when someone like K. Shanmugam, minister for foreign affairs and law, openly discusses, as he did in a Facebook post in August, an elderly resident's "disturbing" complaints against his Indian neighbours.

Perhaps this reluctance to talk about racism has got to do with a narrative we have been ingrained with: steer clear of contentious debate on race and religion, or risk a repeat of the racial riots of 1964. Inconveniently, racism challenges the core of the Singapore Story as a successful model for multiculturalism.

MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

But not wanting to discuss racism does not make the problem disappear. In fact, it generates two consequent effects.

First, it causes sentiments to simmer, only to emerge in an ugly form, given a trigger. Second, when it does emerge, we might not know how to deal with it in a rational and intelligent manner.

Perhaps it is necessary to ask why our racial identity has hardened over the years and why some of us come to view our surroundings through a racial lens.

For instance, Cheong may have a reasonable gripe over excessive noise from a wedding held in a void deck. The problem is not so much her intolerance of noise; it is about taking a racial perspective of the issue, which then manifested as vitriol against the Malays.

Why didn't she simply see it as a problem of space in a housing estate? Perhaps she could have made a constructive suggestion to the HDB to build more covered multi-purpose halls so that residents can hold weddings and funerals without causing too much inconvenience to others. She might even have found support from other Malays living on lower floors who face the same problem.

PRESENTING THE DATA

It is this racialised mind that ought to concern us. And many of us are equally guilty of this. No doubt, the "Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others" model on which our multicultural policies rest contributes to this. There is hardly a moment when we are not conscious of our race.

Being part of a minority, I constantly face this. If you are successful, it is in spite of your race and proof of the functioning meritocracy in Singapore. If you are a failure, most likely it will be accounted for in racial terms. Either way, to quote the postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, you are "trapped in your racial category".

Much of this also has got to do with how data is being presented along racial categories. Cheong's linking of a high divorce rate to the cultural elements within the Malay community is symptomatic of how racialised data on divorce leads to racial reasoning.

Such racial reasoning is surprisingly prevalent. In health issues, for instance, because data on illnesses is categorised by race, there is a tendency to correlate health conditions to culture. Thus, obesity is viewed as a "Malay problem" and the cause of it is to be sought in, for example, the high coconut-milk content in popular Malay dishes such as nasi lemak.

Therefore, the solution sought is always cultural, such as the need for the Malays to change their "mindset" on dietary practices. The significance of obesity as a reflection of a typical advanced economy rife with fast-food joints and sedentary lifestyles — not unlike the situation in America — does not feature in the imagination of a racialised mind.

RELOOK SOCIAL POLICIES

Interestingly, a Malay can be as susceptible to racialised thinking as a non-Malay. The irony is that the vitriol spewed by a Malay against his own community is seen as being “self-critical”, whereas the same remark by a non-Malay will invariably draw the charge of racism. Both, in fact, are equally racist — only that the former is an internalised form of racism.

How, then, do we undo this situation? Firstly, it would be necessary for us, as a society, to acknowledge that racism does exist as a result of the racialisation of the mind. Shanmugam, in a recent Facebook post, appealed for Singaporeans to “look deep into our hearts and ask what the attitude of non-Malays is towards our Malay brothers and sisters”.

But it is equally important to note that racism is not primordial to our nature, and to recognise that the “deep fault lines” are probably the result of historical circumstances and social policies — both of which can be recalibrated by questioning the basic assumptions in our nation-building process, and by reforming our social institutions to address issues not along racial lines but through the prism of equal citizenship, rights, opportunities and access to national resources.

The underachievement of the Malays in education, for example, is not a result of a deficit in the Malay culture or “mindset”, but is more likely a reflection of the socioeconomic status of Malay families in general. They may not have the same access to an early start in childhood education nor expensive tuition.

More importantly, the problems faced by Malay students are invariably the same as those faced by Chinese and Indian families with lower socioeconomic status.

In other words, let us view a problem through the lens of inequality and socioeconomic class, rather than race. This will mitigate the tendency to constantly racialise a social phenomenon.

AVOIDING CONFLICT VS BUILDING PEACE

Secondly, there is a need to constantly highlight positive accounts of spontaneous inter-ethnic co-operation. For example, the dominant narrative of the 1964 racial riots is always about the perpetrators, which then ends with a didactic preaching of the importance of racial and religious harmony.

What is absent are the stories of Malay families sheltering Chinese families, and vice versa, in times of crises. By highlighting the conflict and ignoring the altruistic components of inter-ethnic neighbourliness, the narration

of the 1964 riots has the opposite, unintended effect of generating more fear and suspicion.

Farid Hamid, founder of the Explorations in Ethnicity programme aimed at promoting inter-ethnic dialogue, once noted that upon seeing a video of the 1964 riot, a Primary 5 student commented that “we ought to be nice to others so that they don’t attack us”.

Perhaps our national education agenda has been predicated too much on the Hobbesian model that focuses on conflict-prevention, in contrast to the peace-building model. The former aims to minimise contact to avoid conflict; the latter promotes greater interactions and builds on positive resources that will have more lasting effects on inter-communal relations.

NEED TO CALIBRATE RESPONSE

Thirdly, there is a need to rethink the punitive approach to dealing with the issue of spontaneous everyday racism.

While laws such as the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act are in place to deal with serious cases of intentional and malicious attempts to sow discord, the judicious use of such legal instruments is necessary to allow the growth of a mature public capable of defeating bad ideas with good ideas — and the ability to tell the difference between the two.

NTUC may have its reasons for why it was necessary to terminate Cheong’s employment over her remarks. But consider the effect this would have on those who already harbour prejudicial views. For one, it would not persuade them to reconsider their views, but merely make them more “careful” in voicing their views publicly. Proper rational discussion that aims to educate, persuade and reform the mind cannot occur.

This is what is most unfortunate in Cheong’s dismissal. While there are some online who will claim a righteous victory over her sacking, one must remember that her kind of prejudicial viewpoint will survive long after people have forgotten who Amy Cheong is. This is the more arduous task before us: To live up to the pledge of “regardless of race, language or religion”. []

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