

## Some hard truths about race<sup>1</sup>

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*Singapore's race relations were put under the microscope in an exhaustive survey recently. The results showed that although Singaporeans are generally open to other races in the public sphere, they are not so in the private sphere. After half a century of enforcing and encouraging racial harmony, why this disharmony? Where did Singapore go wrong? Can race ever be wished away? Is race utopia ever possible? P N Balji talks to Viswa Sadasivan, former NMP and vice-president of SINDA's executive committee.*

**Q. Did the results surprise you? If yes, why; if no, why?**

A. Generally, the results didn't surprise me - they were what I would expect from a survey of this nature. That is, respondents tend to be conscious of the need to be politically correct. That aside, it should not surprise us that most respondents either accepted the concept of multiculturalism. In fact, it would be odd if they didn't.

After all, since 1965 we have been reciting the National Pledge which reminds us that, "We the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves to be one united people, regardless of race, language or religion..." However, as former Mr Lee Kuan Yew reminded me in Parliament three years ago, what we recite in the Pledge is an "aspiration" - something we desire but that is unlikely to become reality in the foreseeable future.

The hard truth is that while we may, instinctively or otherwise, be persuaded to accept certain ideals at a conceptual level, our willingness or ability to act on them may be a different thing altogether. I would imagine that if we were to ask a murderer if murder is wrong - there is a decent chance he would say that it is, at a conceptual level.

It is for this reason that I was disturbed by, and yes, surprised by the findings about Singaporeans (and PRs) having at least one close friend of another race. This set of findings appears to contradict what much of the rest of the survey conveyed. 55% of those polled did not have even one close friend of another race (close friend being defined as someone you feel comfortable enough to confide in)!

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If we are not at least disturbed by this, something is wrong. I found myself asking - it must take much effort for an individual who lives in a society that has embraced the ideals of multiculturalism for nearly 50 years, not to have even one close friend of another race. If indeed this is true, then instead of trying to soften the blow, we should ask inconvenient questions:

Were we always like this? Were there specific policies and structural issues that could have inadvertently contributed to this state of affairs? How could this have happened despite National Education and the multitude of PA- and CDC-driven community activities, all of which have been in existence for decades now? Or should we simply accept that this is the way things are, that is that while we may accept the concept of multiracialism we should not be expected to act on it.

**Q. Maybe we are all barking up the wrong tree. Race is built into our DNA and deep down we are not colour blind. Do you agree?**

A. I agree that we are not colour-blind in the sense that we can see and therefore are aware of the physical and cultural differences and that these attribute to a large extent to ethnic differences. This is where the lack of colour blindness ends. It is one thing to be cognizant of these differences and another thing altogether to impute differential values to them.

There is a distinct difference between ethnic pride and ethnocentrism. My life experience, starting in the 60s, has helped shape my faith in our capacity for not just tolerating but accepting (and in some instances even celebrating) ethnic and cultural differences. This, in turn, helps to bring down the barriers (built on ethnic stereotypes and ethnocentrism or even xenophobia) to building stronger ties across ethnic boundaries.

Unfortunately, there have been mixed signals in this space coming from the government. On the one hand, we are reminded of the virtues of multiracialism and tolerance, and at the same time we have heard senior leaders make statements that unfortunately served to legitimise stereotypes and highlight the inevitability of birds of a feather flocking together. The birth of GRCs and ethnic self help organisations such as Mendaki and Sinda are some of the products.

I am certain that these statements were made with good intentions, but the effect on the various audience groups have been inadvertently divisive. If we are indeed committed to Singapore being essentially a multicultural society, then we need to first acknowledge these mixed signals, and then rectify them.

In short, I don't think we are barking up the wrong tree. Ethnic harmony, in the truest sense of the word, is not an unworthy or elusive goal.

**Q. Do you think we have lulled ourselves into a deep sleep over race because we leave it to the government to handle this issue?**

A. I don't think it is fair to put the entire burden of responsibility for the state of things today on the government. In many ways, I do believe that we have the Singapore government to thank for for a society that is functioning, by and large, on the principles of justice and equality regardless of race or religion.

This is more than what our friends in some other countries in the region have. Also, the government, through educational means (such as National Education), policies and programmes (such as Community Engagement Programmes) and legislative means to protect the interests of minority communities (such as the Sedition Act and the Presidential Council for Minority Rights) continue to provide a measure of predictability that the principles of equal opportunities and meritocracy will not be suspended. This assurance is important and is something that the people - especially of the minority communities - look to the government to provide.

What is needed now, is for there to be more opportunities for open and candid discussion and debate on matters and issues pertaining to ethnicity and religion. The government needs to acknowledge that especially because of the many mixed messages one is exposed to today, especially through the Internet, there is an even more pressing need for honest and yet sensibly facilitated discussions, perhaps in closed-door settings.

**What do you tell your daughter about race?**

Maya is 14 and is fortunate to have parents who believe in and are committed to multiracialism. "Fortunate" because parents are a critical point of reference, especially in areas that are based on values and cultural norms. She is also fortunate that her primary school (Haig Girls) and now the School of the Arts (SOTA) provided an open and accepting atmosphere for mingling across ethnic and religious backgrounds.

As such, Maya's school and home environment were consistent in sending the core message that while we may look different and have diverse practices because of our ethnic or religious background, each one of us should be valued for who we are as individuals based on universally-accepted values that transcend ethnic and religious realms.

There have been times when an individual's negative actions seem to have a cultural or religious basis. In such cases, my wife and I make it a point to discuss the situation in detail with Maya, essentially to persuade her to avoid drawing conclusions that validate stereotypes that are pejorative. What helps is that my wife and I are seldom in disagreement when it comes to this subject.

**Q. How many of your closest friends are of another race?**

A. If we were to adopt the definition in the survey that a close friend is someone you are comfortable confiding in, I would say that out of a total of about 20 who qualify, about half are non-Indian.