



## Multiculturalism

### Ideology VS Pragmatism

by Viswa Sadasivan

It was 1965. I was six years old. My mother had asked me to go to the provision shop a few doors away to get some groceries. The owner was a mild mannered, middle aged Indian Muslim man who I knew only as "uncle". As usual while he was gathering the groceries I was walking about the shop, restless. My eye caught a flag on a bamboo stick hanging outside the shop. From the colours I could tell it was the Pakistani flag. This intrigued me.

I asked "uncle" why he would put up the Pakistani flag when he was a citizen of India where his wife and children reside. He told me it was because he was Muslim.

This was my first big lesson in multiculturalism. It hit me that we can have many identities at the same time – based on race, religion, language and nationality – and that these can oftentimes

be in conflict, or at least not be in sync.

Yes, I experienced the race riots the previous year, but was perhaps too young to make sense of what I saw. It did not erode the joy I derived from growing up in what I remember to be a truly multicultural setting. While the kids interacted mainly in English, not many adults were educated and so market Malay was the common language for them. We were very conscious of our cultural differences – the Teochew Opera, Thaipusam, the Muslim weddings and the "Kenduri", and of course the revelling and carolling during Christmas! I have fond memories of how I used to go to non-Indian homes during Deepavali to deliver trays of Indian sweets and savouries. Likewise, how my friends would bring trays full of goodies during Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Christmas.

As kids we used to hang out in each other's homes and had a first hand taste of the cuisine of different cultures. I could confidently say there was a deep enough knowledge of and appreciation for each other's culture that gave us comfort and security. Yes there was ethnic and religious stereotyping but because we knew each other well, there was a tacit acceptance of the differences. Where we had to tolerate we did so because it was natural to do so and because we wanted to.

It was in this setting of trust that the race riots of 1964 happened – I don't recall it having an impact on the way we saw or related to each other. I remember my mother telling me that our Chinese neighbour "auntie" made it a point to accompany our Malay Muslim "auntie" to the wet market during the riots to give her "protection" since we lived in a

predominantly Chinese precinct.

These were vital experiential lessons that shaped my sense of multiculturalism, and my commitment to jealously guarding it. Lord Parekh, Professor of Political Philosophy and Chair of the 2000 Report, "The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain", said: "...no culture is perfect or represents the best life and it can therefore benefit from a critical dialogue with other cultures...multiculturalism requires that all cultures should be open, self-critical, and interactive in their relations with each other..."

In Singapore we decided against the US model of a "melting-pot" where people are 'encouraged' to shed their cultural identities in favour of a powerful national identity. Especially today, cracks are showing up. A key reason for this is that when we attempt to put down or even gloss

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over primordial instincts and allegiances, there will be a build up within. And at some point there will be an implosion.

Singapore chose an approach that is more multicultural. It is a challenging approach because of the inherent tension between an active cultural identity and a national identity. Over the years we have seen tension between the pursuit of multiculturalism as an ideal and the socio-economic and political realities of the day.

This is what Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew alluded to when he spoke in Parliament on August of 2009. He referred to the part of the National Pledge that talks about us being "one united people regardless of race, language or religion" in a "democratic society based on justice and equality". He highlighted what he saw as "realities" in the race, religion realm that would limit our ability to have equality or equal treatment in the strict sense of the word. He asserted that these tenets of the National Pledge are essentially "aspirations" that may take a long time for us to truly achieve. Mr Lee said that "our Constitution states expressly that it is a duty of the Government

not to treat everybody as equal. It's not reality, it's not practical, it will lead to grave and irreparable damage if we work on that principle".

True, these are realities we cannot ignore i.e. that the various ethnic communities are not at the same level of socio-economic development and so some would need that additional attention and help to achieve parity. Even so, I find it hard to accept that after 50 years of living and working together, it would still take "decades, if not centuries" (as MM Lee put it) for us to attain a truly level playing field for everybody in Singapore.

Surely, we can place enough faith in the efficacy of government policies and practices that are based on meritocracy and equal opportunities especially in critical areas such as education, housing and employment. Besides, ethnic based self-help groups have been working tirelessly for decades now to ensure educational and social levelling-up of their respective constituencies – Mendaki (for Malays), SINDA (for Indians), CDAC (for Chinese) and the Eurasian Association.

For me, there are three possible reasons why after all these years of concerted effort, attaining a level playing field could remain an elusive goal.

First, this could happen if our interventions are ill-planned and executed. Having had first hand experience as a member of the Executive Committee of SINDA for more than a decade, and having closely observed the work of the other self help organisations, I find this a highly unlikely scenario. The various programmes and initiatives have contributed to discernable improvements in the various communities, especially in the educational performance of those who have been under-achieving. Besides, the PAP government has been consistent in its assertion of the principle of meritocracy and equal opportunities over the decades, and one would be hard-pressed to find exceptions in execution.

Second, it could be possible that we have come up with key performance indicators (KPIs) where attainment of parity amongst the various ethnic communities may be unrealistic because of cultural

reasons. For example, perhaps not all ethnic communities may wish to place the same level of emphasis on educational or economic performance as a measure of success or happiness. For some communities, quality time with the family and cultural pursuits could be more important. If so, for ethnic communities that value the latter more, achieving parity with other communities in education or economic performance is likely to remain a challenge simply because of a lack of interest or motivation.

Third, perhaps there is indeed a qualitative difference among the various races. There could be genetic factors that limit the ability of some racial communities to perform as well in areas such as education or economic performance. This might be the basis for Mr Lee Kuan Yew's assertion that for Singapore to continue to succeed we need to maintain the current ethnic paradigm. I have yet to find compelling evidence that validates this theory.

If indeed these are key reasons why attaining a level playing field remains an elusive goal, then it is imperative that we address them. In fact, we may need to review what it means to have a level playing field.

For starters, we should be committed to broadening the definition of success – this would allow people greater latitude and incentive to pursue their dreams and aspirations without feeling that it would unduly disadvantage them. For example, people of some ethnic

communities may have a natural strength in or propensity for artistic or cultural pursuits instead of mathematics or economics. Not only should there be greater opportunity for them to pursue these, they should also have equal opportunity to gain recognition and have a rightful place on the same table with a doctor, lawyer or investment banker.

We have been talking for some years now about broadening the definition of success. In my view there has not been substantive change.

*There are cultural differences between ethnic communities and indeed between people who practice different religions and speak different languages. This in turn would translate into different preferences, strengths and priorities.*

Those who are academically brighter and are economically successful continue to be placed higher in Singapore's social strata.

There appears to be a hesitation in making that shift towards truly acknowledging and accepting that different people have different types of intelligence and indeed different cultural proclivities. This could be predicated on a fear that if we make this shift it could become a runaway situation where we end up having a critical shortage of people with skills necessary to keep our

economy going. This is a valid consideration at one level.

However, if we accept that change is not only inevitable but at times necessary and vital for progress, then perhaps we should be bold enough to accept that a change in our economic structure could be positive. After all, it is widely recognised that creativity and imagination are key success factors for knowledge driven economies – and the ballast for this could come from combusting artists, designers and engineers. Who knows, this

of a level playing field in attaining success and gaining recognition.

For this to happen, we need to move away from policies, practices and economic strategies that inadvertently favour the natural leanings or strengths of some ethnic cultures over others.

While we give acquiescence to the cultural differences, we should encourage, and certainly not artificially restrain, the natural momentum towards integration. This would mean having even more avenues for meaningful engagement and sharing between races. We should go beyond the superficial celebration of festivals, costumes and customs. There must be a deeper level of comfort and trust between the communities that allows for honest discussions on perceptions, sensitivities and stereotypes. Cultural blending, whether through intermarriages or learning or imbibing the language or religion of another, is likely to happen increasingly with greater exposure. This should not be stifled. Cultures are non-proprietary and not fixed or static realities!

At the same time, as we accept and even celebrate cultural differences, we need to be mindful of what Arthur J Schlesinger cautions against in his book *The Disuniting of America* – developing a "cult of ethnicity" and an "obsession with difference". What you

need is an emotional pull that has the power to transcend and supersede cultural affinity that is primal in nature. This could come in the form of national identity, culture and values. It has the potential to serve as a common thread, a binding force that counterbalances the dysfunctions of multiculturalism.

I believe this was the ideological impetus for "Malaysian Malaysia" – a clarion call in the early 1960s used by our founding leaders to forge a collective national identity overriding ethnic or communal affiliations. Likewise, today we are not living in a Malay Singapore, a Chinese Singapore, an Indian Singapore or a Eurasian Singapore. It is a Singaporean Singapore where a genuine acceptance of and respect for cultural differences are not incompatible with an allegiance to the principles of justice and equality, meritocracy and equal opportunities. This is multiculturalism at its best, and achievable.

For this, we must be prepared to suspend disbelief.

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