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Ensuring minorities will always have stake in S'pore

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For The Straits Times

My nine-year- old son recently told me he liked living in Singapore because he could have friends of different races.

This was before the school's Racial Harmony Day celebration on July 21. When I probed further, he denied parroting anything he had recently been taught.

Neither of my other two sons had ever mentioned anything similar and I concluded that the issue of race might be more salient to my nine-year-old.

Though my wife is Chinese, our nine-year-old has more Indian features while our other two sons are often regarded as Chinese based on their appearance.

Issues relating to ethnicity matter more for minorities. They are more likely to be sensitive to the fact that they have physical attributes and cultural practices which differ from those of the majority.

Minorities often consider how those of the majority view them. In an attempt to be accepted, some strategically choose to suppress aspects of their minority identity – they take pains to associate less with minority culture, whether in terms of dress style, language, cuisine or celebrations.

But in some societies, markers of minority identity are forcibly suppressed.

I was recently at a symposium and a series of visits organised by the Japan Centre for International Exchange.

A Filipino activist highlighted the plight of Filipino marriage migrants in Japan. These Filipino women are often not allowed to transmit their own culture or language to their children. In fact, many of their children grow up feeling embarrassed at the foreign culture of their mothers.

A leader of a Korean immigrant NGO in Japan spoke of how Korean children in Japan had to carefully conceal their heritage. Sometimes this identity is exposed with much embarrassment when they go on school trips and the non-Japanese child has to use a separate immigration line at the airport.

He himself had used a Japanese name all through grade school to university, only recently switching back to his Korean name to demonstrate his solidarity with his community.

Japan is perhaps an extreme case where cultural homogeneity is stressed. But the reality for minorities is not too different in other developed societies in Asia and elsewhere.

Perhaps that is why a number of new Indian immigrants who the Institute of Policy Studies has engaged at various dialogues on immigrant integration matters were unreserved in praising Singapore for being some type of multicultural heaven.

They were impressed that they could retain their cultures in Singapore but, at the same time, experience harmonious relationships with those of other ethnicities.

For these South Asians, many of them non-Tamil speakers, it was also symbolically significant that an Indian language had official status in Singapore, where just over 7 per cent of the citizen population is Indian.

Public policy in Singapore has always been cognisant of accommodating minority needs and providing ample recognition to them. The Presidential Council for Minority Rights scrutinises national policies to ensure they do not discriminate against minorities.

Whether it is through the Group Representation Constituency system, provisions made for public holidays and celebrations or mother-tongue options offered in schools, minorities have had their interests represented.

Minorities have also ascended to top positions in the nation and this is certainly not due to tokenism.

The fact that less than 10 per cent of minorities in Singapore – based on findings from the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial Harmony publicised in 2013 – feel discriminated against when using public services is certainly testament to how public officers have been able to demonstrate that they are not prejudiced.

I am glad that the judicious use of social policy has allowed my son to enjoy friendships with children of other races. I also appreciate that on Racial Harmony Day, he can put on an ethnic costume and not feel that he has to suppress his minority heritage.

Similarly, the study showed that more than 90 per cent of the over 2,000 Chinese respondents were comfortable with Indians and Malays as neighbours and as employees and about 85 per cent as close friends.

While the study did not indicate that all racial prejudice has been eliminated, considering that less than half of the Chinese respondents were comfortable with an Indian or Malay marrying their son or daughter, it certainly showed that, in many aspects, minorities enjoyed high levels of acceptance in Singapore.

This acceptance is also evident from the fact that most young Indians and Malays surveyed in the study have at least one close friend who is Chinese.

Such acceptance of diversity and ease of interaction among different ethnic groups do not happen by chance or by a natural evolution of multiracial societies. Worldwide, the reverse is true: left to themselves, communities tend to segregate, fuelling mistrust.

In Singapore, it is the result of many intentional policies. From ethnic integration policies in public housing which mandate that a quota of minorities is always present in HDB estates, to policies which censure ethnic chauvinism and racial insults, it is clear that Singapore policymakers are paranoid – in a good way – about ensuring that minorities will always have a stake in Singapore.

I am glad that the judicious use of social policy has allowed my son to enjoy friendships with children of other races. I also appreciate that on Racial Harmony Day, he can put on an ethnic costume and not feel that he has to suppress his minority heritage. Yet I am aware of the small but sizeable number of minorities in Singapore who for some reason perceive their minority status to be a liability.

Sometimes this is due to the lack of cultural capital needed to navigate different cultural settings which those of better socio-economic levels have greater access to.

Successful minorities should perhaps be more forthcoming in imparting these skills and networks to those who are trying to negotiate their minority position.

Hopefully, as our society progresses and all vestiges of prejudice decline, Singapore will be able to give every minority person the pleasure of inclusion. Only then will every majority member of society also experience the pride of living in a truly multicultural Singapore.

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