

Let's not wait for another rap video to discuss racial issues



Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam at a discussion on race organised by the National University of Singapore's Department of Communications and New Media.
PHOTO: THE STRAITS TIMES



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I had the rare privilege of moderating a dialogue with Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam last week.

It was one of the most open discourses we have had on racial issues in Singapore in a very long time.

As they say, you have to take the bull by its horns and that's exactly what the minister did during the dialogue organised by the Communications and New Media Department of the National University of Singapore.

The dialogue began with a viewing of the controversial rap video by YouTube artiste Preeti Nair and her brother, produced in response to the recent "brownface" ad in Singapore which featured a Chinese actor playing an Indian man and a woman in a tudung.

The siblings were given a conditional warning by the police for using profanities and vulgar gestures against Chinese Singaporeans while the Infocomm Media Development Authority handed a stern reminder to those involved in the ad on the importance of paying attention to racial and religious sensitivities.

Minister Shanmugam took great pains to explain the actions of his ministry.

"If we allow the line to be crossed... then it is free for all, the Chinese can be equally offensive, and the minorities will be the losers in such a conversation," he said.

It is never easy to openly discuss racial issues. The tendency is to skirt around them, change the topic or just keep mum and sweep things under the carpet.

Why is this so?

In an article in *Trends and Issues in Higher Education* from the University of Washington, the writer notes: "Each of us identifies with multiple communities and different identities – racial and otherwise – and it can be uncomfortable to talk across differences."

"We may prefer to avoid sensitive topics or gravitate towards conversations with those we assume share our backgrounds and perspectives."

However, as the article cautions: "In not talking across differences, we deprive ourselves of opportunities to grow, be challenged and understand more fully the experience of others. While dialogue alone does not solve structural problems, it is a good place to start."

The frank and candid three-hour dialogue between Minister Shan-

mugam, the students and academics, was an extremely important start.

While the "brownface" incident was the catalyst that led to the discussion, there were many other "gems" that made me re-examine some of my own views and biases about race.

I asked Minister Shanmugam if people are now more race conscious in Singapore and why the "brownface" ad caused such a furore.

He felt that most people did not find the ad offensive except for a small group in the online space.

He also produced a slide with statistics that showed racism had come down.

The minister also shared other advertisements not just related to race, but to gender as well, which had not caused offence to anyone.

He told the audience that the siblings had every right to respond but not in an objectionable tone.

I did not agree with everything the minister said, but the point is that we can agree to disagree while still openly discussing racial issues in a respectful manner.

We are all human and harbour stereotypical views about other races. But if we can put aside our inhibitions and have more open dialogues, it will be a big step in the right direction for our young nation.

And as Minister Shanmugam

pointed out, it is only after such conversations that the government can also review its own policies and change them if necessary.

There was a "wow" feeling in the air as students and lecturers left the auditorium after the dialogue.

The minister had impressed with his honesty and crystal-clear presentation.

He was well prepared, armed as he was with his deck of slides.

Relaxed too, down to his casual dressing – no belt or socks as observed by a social psychology lecturer.

It would be a shame indeed if things came to a standstill after this dialogue, only to be re-ignited by another controversial rap video or something far worse.

Dialogues on racial issues need to be ongoing, even at coffee shops and other informal gatherings.

It is only when we are able to have these conversations openly, comfortably and respectfully at every level can we evolve into a matured, tolerant people and co-exist as a truly multi-racial society.

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