

Benevolence across races: Very Singaporean?

While a few racist incidents have captured attention, let's not forget the very Singaporean practice of reaching out to help each other across races

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The ghost of racism has long haunted Singapore. This is not surprising. It's normal in multiracial societies, although it spikes from time to time, as it has recently with the episodes of the Indian woman being kicked by a Chinese man for not wearing her mask, and of Dave Parkash, a Singaporean who is half-Indian and half-Filipino, being harassed for having a half-Thai, half-Chinese-Singaporean partner.

It's right for us to get outraged and make it clear that we as individuals and as a society do not condone these attitudes. Yet, even as we demand this, we should also be aware that there may be another equally vibrant spirit that haunts Singapore.

I would have liked to call it "reverse racism". Unfortunately, this term has been hijacked by the ferocious race debate in the US. Wikipedia reports that it's a term used by whites to describe racial discrimination they feel from affirmative action programmes.

Hence, I will have to create another term, say, "benevolence across races", while emphasising that I am trying to find a term to describe what I believe is a Singapore phenomenon that might be under-appreciated.

What is this phenomenon?

Let me try to describe it by creating a hierarchy of non-antagonistic relationships that can develop between members of different races. Let's put them in four levels.

At the fourth level, the lowest, is "tolerance". At the third level is "harmony" (while recognising differences). At the second level is "indifference to racial differences" (or lack of awareness of differences), which actually leads to individuals being as benevolent (if not more benevolent) to people of other races as they are to people who look just like them.

At the highest level is the



Racism is normal in multiracial societies like Singapore's, the writer says, although it spikes from time to time. He adds that even while we fight it, we should also celebrate the spirit of "benevolence across races". ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

wholehearted embracing of differences and integration into one's own family as seen in inter-racial marriages or adoption (when one pledges one's life to a member of another race).

I would note here that, relatively speaking, Singapore may have one of the highest percentages of inter-racial marriages, including at the elite level. A brief glance at the Singapore Cabinet, past and present, will confirm this.

Today, I am going to limit my discussion to level two: the spirit of "benevolence across races", where a member of one racial group receives as much or even more friendship and support from members of another racial group than from his own group. I can speak about this with great personal conviction since I have experienced this all through my life, starting in my childhood.

INTER-RACIAL KINDNESS: MY SINGAPORE STORY

Singaporean readers of my previous columns in *The Straits Times* may recall that I come from

a relatively humble background.

My Hindu family lived at 179 Onan Road, a one-room house, for a monthly rental of \$17.60 (which enabled me to remember that there are 1,760 yards in a mile). At numbers 177 and 181 there lived two Malay Muslim families. At number 175, there was a Peranakan Chinese family.

In each family, there were many children. Through the back alley (which allowed the night soil workers to change the bin in our outhouse daily) we would venture into each other's kitchens and play and eat in each other's homes. The three different racial groups in four houses not only lived in harmony, they also helped each other regularly. This strong tendency to help members of other races may be a quintessential under-studied Singapore phenomenon.

And I continued to experience it as I grew older. My best friend from childhood, a Chinese, became a lifelong friend after we discovered a common love for books. We eventually co-authored a book, *The Asean Miracle*. A state

gymnast, Jeffery Sng also protected me from the bullies in our neighbourhood.

The best man at my wedding was also Chinese. And a politically astute Chinese lady has acted as my "guardian angel" and adviser throughout my varied careers.

But I also experienced acts of generosity from Chinese who were not such close friends.

One day, early in my career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was standing in a bus travelling from the East Coast to City Hall. Next to me was a colleague. I described to him the financial problems my then wife and I had right after marriage. Since most of my salary was going to support my mother and sisters, my wife and I had difficulty paying our bills. Soon after I arrived at the office, he walked over to my desk and gave me a cheque for \$2,000, a lot of money in those days. I could repay him, he said, whenever I could. I did within a few months, with deep gratitude.

A possible cynical response to these acts of generosity I have experienced from Chinese and

Malay friends is that people could tell that I was going to be successful. After obtaining the President's Scholarship in 1967 and a first class honours degree in philosophy from the National University of Singapore in 1971, people might have believed that they were betting on a winning horse if they were to reach out to help me. It's easier to help a rising star, rather than a falling star or someone who has little hope. This is human nature.

MY FATHER'S STORY

This is also why I want to tell the story of a falling star who received generous help from members of another racial group. This falling star was my father. By any standards he had a difficult life.

To explain how tough his life was, I have to provide some painful details. In many ways, life was rigged against him almost from the very beginning. His parents died within the first year of his birth in Hyderabad in Sindh, in British India. Fortunately, he had several older siblings who brought him up.

Still, in 1933, at the age of 13, he was sent from Sindh to work as a peon in a textile shop in Singapore, which was a relatively rough place then. Even though his elder sister, who had married here, was supposed to keep in touch with him, this lonely teenager, who lived with the other peons above the shop, and had little education, developed bad habits of smoking, drinking and gambling, which continued most of his life.

Somehow he was able to return to Sindh before the Japanese occupied Singapore in 1942. A marriage was arranged with my mother, who had no idea of the bad habits my father had acquired. A rough life followed for the young couple in Singapore.

As a result of his gambling debts, my father constantly stole funds from the companies he worked for. He lost several jobs. All his Asian bosses only sacked him when they discovered missing funds. Unfortunately for my father, he ended up working with a British firm, China Engineers. When they discovered missing funds, they reported him to the police. My father ended up in jail.

Two things that happened after he went to jail remain etched in my memory. Firstly, as soon as *The Straits Times* reported that my father had gone to jail, another member of the Indian community visited my mother, not to offer sympathy but to ask for the repayment of a \$100 loan my father had taken from him. And he drove to our house in a Mercedes Benz.

When my father came out of jail, his chances of getting a job were zero (and my mother had also separated from him while he was in jail). That could have been the end of my father's life. Fortunately, in his many years of being a salesman, he had developed friendships with a group of Chinese traders selling small electrical items in Jalan Besar.

Here is the second thing that I'll always remember – these traders rallied round to support "Mohan", their friend. My father imported electrical parts and had a dedicated group of Chinese buyers for his products. They were his steadfast friends. I accompanied my father one year to visit them on Chinese New Year.

Without the help of these Chinese friends, my father's life would have been far worse (and I wish today that I could find these Jalan Besar friends of his to thank them for their exceptional generosity to my father).

I am confident that my father's story (and my story) of experiencing the benevolence of other races are not isolated cases. There might be many such stories. Why not try to compile and document such stories?

In so doing, even while we fight the ghost of racism in Singapore (which exists), we should also celebrate the spirit of "benevolence across races" (which also exists).

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