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Choosing the better angels of our nature

In Singapore, identity has always been fragmented. As we did in the past, we must continue to see being Singaporean as a matter of extending, not narrowing, the overlapping circles of our identity.

By Janadas Devan

I WAS born a British subject, became a Malaysian briefly and then a Singaporean at the age of 10. I remember singing God Save The Queen in kindergarten, Majulah Singapura in Primary 1, Negara Ku from Primary 3 to 5, and then back to Majulah Singapura in Primary 5 when we were booted out of Malaysia.

My father was born in British Malaya, was subjected to Japanese rule for three years, became a Malaysian for six and then a Singaporean at the age of 46. He got his identity card late in life.

Every one of Singapore's founding fathers began their political careers believing there was no such thing as a Singaporean and that Singapore couldn't possibly be independent. They all believed Singapore was a part of Malaya. They stumbled, tripped into their identities as Singaporeans.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew became a Singaporean at the age of 42, Dr Goh Keng Swee 47, and Mr S. Rajaratnam 50.

To use a contemporary term, they were all "new citizens". They weren't born wanting to be Singaporean. Indeed, they didn't expect to be Singaporean till Aug 10, 1965. On Aug 9, they were still shedding tears, mourning the loss of a previous identity.

There will be no majority or minority race in Singapore, Mr Lee declared after Separation. Instead, we will have a "Singaporean Singapore", he promised. That was Mr Lee's and the Old Guard's finest hour.

The natural thing to do, having been booted out of Malaysia primarily because we were a Chinese-majority state in a Malay-majority Federation, would have been to base your political legitimacy on appeals to Chinese identity. Instead our founding fathers decided to base their legitimacy on an extraordinary dream: a Singaporean Singapore. To a remarkable degree, we have fulfilled their dream - not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially.

But there was nothing natural or inevitable or even expected in how we got from there to here. We willed our trajectory; we didn't let things take their "natural" or "inevitable" or "expected" course.

The natural, inevitable, expected course would have been to move towards a politics based on race, language and religion. Instead, at every step of the way, we deliberately chose the better angels of our nature. We cannot cease making such a choice.

We would be mistaken if we assumed we have arrived at some summit of perpetual harmony. We still have to - consciously and deliberately - choose the better angels of our nature. Let me explain why.

Multiple identities

CONSIDER the roots of modern Singapore in the first half of the 20th century.

The emergent Singapore nationalism was first mediated through the cultural nationalisms of the colony's various racial groups. There would have been no such thing as a Singaporean nationalism - or, more accurately, Malayan nationalism, which was the only thing we knew prior to 1965 - if there had been no Chinese revolutions (1911 and 1949), no Indonesian revolution and no Indian national movement.

What inspired Chinese Singaporeans in the 1950s, for instance, was the victory of the Chinese communists in 1949.

When Mao Zedong declared on the ramparts of Tiananmen that "China has stood up", that was taken not merely as an expression of national self-assertion applicable only to China, but also of cultural self-assertion

applicable to all ethnic Chinese.

The political consciousness of Malays and Indians in Singapore was also formed in strikingly intimate ways by events in Indonesia and India, respectively.

Singapore's nationalism existed in a tense relationship with the extra-national sources of that nationalism.

The problem of inter-racial relations in Singapore is rooted in the fact that Singapore nationalism - by definition, an assertion of a singular identity - has overlapped with but has never been completely coincident with our various cultural nationalisms - by definition, assertions of trans-national cultural identities.

Enlarging our circle

THE problem of multiple identities, often in conflict, will long be with us. For 47 years now, Singapore's political leadership has dealt with this problem by cordoning off, as best as possible, the cultural from the national.

Cultural identities, rooted in language or religion, belong in the private or familial sphere. They are given ample space as well as support.

The Government insists on bilingualism in education, for example, and assists in mosque-building, among other things.

But the cultural sphere has never been allowed to drive policy in the public sphere.

Indeed, the opposite has happened: Sometimes, the state has interfered in the cultural sphere, as when it discouraged the use of Chinese dialects in favour of Mandarin.

Singapore's politics has thus evolved differently from Malaysia's, which is still deeply inflected by race and religion. We at once allow separate cultural identities to flourish, but contain them within an over-arching national framework.

But a Singaporean Singapore has never meant a diminution of our different cultural, racial or religious identities. No matter what your race, you become a Singaporean by becoming larger than what you are, not less; by expanding, not contracting; by adding to, not subtracting from, your identity.

E pluribus unum - out of many, one - the Americans say. Their ideal is the melting pot: the dilution of different flavours in one overriding theme. Our ideal is rojak: the preservation of different flavours in a new concoction. We are one and many; many though one; one precisely because we accept our diversity.

Another image that comes to mind is of overlapping circles: Nobody in Singapore is required to abandon his or her identity or circle. When you choose to be Singaporean, what you are invited to do is enlarge your circle so as to include as much as possible other circles. Your sense of being a Singaporean intensifies as you occupy more of the common space formed by the overlapping circles.

Human-made miracle

WE HAVE made numerous pragmatic trade-offs between our national and cultural identities.

Sometimes, cultural identities are acknowledged, as in the formation of self-help groups; and sometimes they are not, as in the ruling that school uniforms should, indeed, remain uniform.

Sometimes policy is race-blind, as in the insistence on meritocracy; and sometimes it is not, as when the Constitution was amended to allow for Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) with mandated minority-candidate representation.

Sometimes we take care to preserve the many, as when we scrupulously maintain pre-determined ethnic quotas in housing estates; and sometimes we insist we are one, as when we "pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion".

So far, this juggling has worked. Each year that passes without cultural nationalisms coming into conflict with each other or challenging Singaporean nationalism is a plus. In time, perhaps, the necessity of juggling would cease.

But there is absolutely nothing natural or organic or inevitable about what we have. We made this; we engineered this; we fashioned this as a potter would clay.

Singapore is a human-made miracle. And like all human-made miracles, it can be shattered by human hands.

How might this miracle unravel? Well, I don't think it will, but let's consider the challenges.

The Institute of Policy Studies conducted a wide-ranging survey recently on the attitudes of Singaporeans on matters of race and religion. The sample size was 4,000. Here are some of its preliminary findings:

The state of our inter-racial, inter-religious relations is reasonably healthy. For example, an overwhelming 70 per cent of Singaporeans agree or agree strongly that a person's race or religion should have no bearing in hiring decisions.

A healthy majority - more than 50 per cent - either agree or agree strongly with statements such as "I feel comfortable being the only individual of my racial group mixing with people of other racial groups". A distinct minority - less than 20 per cent - either disagree or disagree strongly with the statement. And about a third are neutral - they are not exercised one way or another.

The findings indicate we haven't arrived at some multi-cultural nirvana.

On the one hand, the majority of Singaporeans do value our diversity. About 72 per cent, for example, either agree or strongly agree that "it is a good thing for Singapore to be made up of people from different racial groups".

On the other hand, most people do not have close friends of different races.

Singaporeans, it would seem, are ideologically committed to diversity. But they do not always live out that ideology in their everyday lives.

The elite opinion that Singaporeans have so overcome racial distinctions that we can safely abandon institutions such as self-help groups and GRCs, happens to be just that: an elite opinion quite unrepresentative of the entire population.

We still have to juggle pragmatically; we still need laws and institutions to ensure that we do indeed end up choosing the better angels of our nature. There is no reason to believe we will always, invariably, automatically, be angelic.

Differences within races

THE increasing number of foreigners in our midst poses another problem. As a result of immigration, especially among Chinese and Indians, the differences within each race may now be greater than the differences between the races.

The Princeton University expert on global cities Saskia Sassen was in Singapore recently. Asked what she looked for when she arrives in a new city, she said she would always wonder who in that city believes they belong to that city. Applying that question to ourselves, we might ask: Who is part of Club Singapore?

Without a doubt, we do now have a stronger sense of a Singaporean identity - a stronger sense of a "we". But a stronger sense of a "we" has also come to mean a stronger sense of a "them". And instinctively, many feel "they" are not "us".

We have a stronger sense of an inner identity. But that sense of inner membership among Singaporeans is not reflected on the outside - where we see many more whom we do not think belong to Club Singapore, in Dr Sassen's terms.

There is as it were a disjunction between the inside and the outside: the nagging sense that what we feel inside ("We" who belong to Club Singapore) is not reflected on the outside ("They" are not "us").

How do you solve this problem? Well it is a bit embarrassing but I have nothing more profound to utter than a few cliches: Let us try to be a little kinder to each other; let us give integration time to work.

Above all I think the integration of new citizens with old should take place along the same lines we created a Singaporean Singapore: Nobody should be asked to abandon his or her own identity. Becoming a Singaporean should be a matter of sharing an enlarged common space.

The Singaporean should forever be an identity that turns on becoming more, not less; expanding, not contracting; adding, not subtracting.

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