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Ethnic Enclaves and Multi-Culturalism

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SYNOPSIS

Multi-culturalism has often led to the formation of ethnic enclaves in urban centres. This is paradoxical but a reality. It has happened in many western countries and is evident in Singapore. Three factors have contributed to this, namely, the colonial past; the blindside of policy formulation/implementation; and the overzealousness to preserve cultural heritage through segregation.

COMMENTARY

The notion that multi-culturalism can lead to the formation of enclaves in a society is paradoxical because multi-culturalism is an organising principle intended to bring culturally diverse communities together. It provides the social conditions for them to collaborate and to achieve and maintain the social peace needed for the well-being of society.

Unfortunately, policies pertaining to multi-culturalism are often not given the careful thought and close attention that they deserve. If this persists, multi-culturalism, however laudable as an organising principle, will entrench ethno-religious enclaves and further separate diverse communities as is evident in Europe.

European Experiences

Prevailing manifestations of multi-culturalism emerged in Europe in the 1960s. It soon became a trend as a quick and convenient response to: i) the new political outlook post-Second World War; ii) demographic changes; and iii) increased migration due to conflicts, economic coercion, and the rise of a new and more inclusive younger generation in European societies.

In fact, Europe's transformation into a multi-cultural society was not a matter of choice.

There were unstoppable waves of migrants arriving from former colonies and from countries that rendered support to the hosting nations during the Second World War. Immigration forever changed the monocultural nature of European societies.

Europe attempted in vain to assimilate immigrants into its dominant Christianity-based culture. In Germany, Turkish immigrants resisted assimilation. North African arrivals in France gravitated to certain localities where familiarity of home gave a sense of security. Migrants to Britain seemed to have a better deal as the state provided them with the space to preserve their cultures, albeit with the unintended side-effect of enclaves being formed.

In short, European nations took the line of least resistance by privileging immigrant communities with the freedom to preserve their unique cultures in lieu of assimilation. But this was done with insufficient strategic thought on the longer-term implications. The formation of enclaves accentuated the challenges of integrating the immigrants because they lived not as a part of their host societies but perpetually apart from them.

The halcyon years of European community development leading up to the formation of the European Union distracted policymakers and lulled them into contentment with having multiple cultures and traditions existing separately instead of a state made up of a mosaic of beliefs, customs and ethnicities.

Enclaves in Singapore?

Unlike Europe, Singapore has a much longer experience with communities of diverse cultures coming together. They began to establish themselves very early in Singapore's history and they co-existed peacefully. This positive experience is epitomised in the popular phrase "the kampong spirit", a way of life which is harmonious and where people readily offered their neighbours food and support.

The British colonial administration did not interfere drastically with local cultures in Singapore. Each ethnic community was free to preserve and to enrich its culture. However, the British accentuated the differences between the ethnic groups by its divide and rule policy of governing.

Settlements were established along ethnic lines resulting in the formation of racial enclaves. The occupational distribution of the population was also linked to race. Vernacular schools were set up which naturally separated people in Singapore along ethnic lines.

The geographic locations of these enclaves have remained largely intact up to the present day. They are part of the physical, social and cultural landscapes, and a legacy of Singapore's colonial past. In Geylang Serai, Chinatown and Little India – the ethnic quarters established by the British – the three major communities comprising the Malays, Chinese and South Asians continue in their social and economic interactions.

These enclaves continue to exist as the result of government policy to preserve the ethnic cultures and related heritage. Colloquially, locals regard them as the "Malay area", "Chinese area", and "Indian area", respectively. At the same time, government policies have made specific efforts to diversify the mono-ethnicity of these

neighbourhoods although there is a strong community interest to preserve the distinct characteristics of these areas.

Multi-culturalism has also resulted in the establishment of distinct organisations such as teachers' unions and chambers of commerce. Hence, the existence of the Malay Teachers' Union, Tamil Teachers' Union, and Chinese Teachers' Union, which function alongside the Singapore Teachers' Union. Likewise, the Malay Chamber of Commerce, Indian Chamber of Commerce, and Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which exist alongside the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce.

Impact of Policy

Government policies can sometimes lead unwittingly to congregating behaviours among the communities. A policy of multi-culturalism requires the state to be inclusive in the provision of space for all ethnic communities. It is therefore good policy to have this in food centres where all communities eat at. In doing so, we should disperse food vendors that serve ethnic minorities instead of clustering them in one designated section of the food centres. This will reduce obvious segregation. The same goes for shops that cater to the unique needs of the minorities in town centres and other commercial precincts in the housing estates.

Singapore's bilingual education policy has yielded good dividends for its multiracial and multilingual society. The compulsory learning of the mother-tongue language instils in students an understanding of the respective cultural roots, while the learning of English provides them with a common social glue. This can, however, lead to separation as students form circles of friends within their respective mother-tongue classes. Schools should be aware of this and should make conscious efforts to overcome this tendency in the way they organise school activities and class teaching.

These are some examples of how policies can, even if they were not intended to, dilute communal interactions and social cohesiveness. Additionally, official policy empowers the cultural, educational and social organisations of the various communities to operate in the self-help mode rather than rely on secular agencies with one uniform approach across all communities. Yet, there will be instances of countereffects when the respective communities become too immersed in their own activities and preoccupations.

Minimising Social Distances

The other factor that leads to or reinforces the enclave mentality is behaviour that increases the social distances between the different ethnic communities. This happens when people segregate themselves to avoid mixing with those whom they perceive as culturally inferior, especially where religious faith is involved.

For example, there are those who practice 'defensive dining' by deliberately over-reacting against close-quarter dining to avoid any contamination of their food. There are others who believe that visits to other cultural centres or participation in the cultural activities of other ethnic groups would weaken their own beliefs, customs, and traditions. This concern about preserving one's own culture could unintentionally lead to the formation of enclaves.

It is therefore prudent for a lot more thoughtful policy deliberations, feedback from citizens, and public discussions on the sensible implementation of relevant measures to consolidate the Singapore ethos of multi-culturalism. Otherwise, widening social distances and the spread of enclaves will complicate national cohesion and resilience. The value of embracing multi-culturalism as a unifying force for Singapore must not be marred by more mental and physical enclaves.

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