

Learn to be nice

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Article

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If racial harmony and ethnic relations could come from the introduction of an education module in a university, the world would have been at peace with itself a long time ago.

Sadly, in reality, this is not the case. This is why any such expectations arising from the recently approved module on ethnic relations for public universities should be treated with caution.

The module's chief editor remarked that the new module "won't provide quick solutions". This seems to be a realistic assessment.

The module, which has undergone redrafting six times before being given the seal of approval by the Cabinet, goes to show how gingerly racial and ethnic issues are handled.

Though racial sensitivities are not peculiar only to our country, Malaysians seems to be more pre-occupied by it, given its very diverse background and makeup.

Elsewhere, racism is also widespread, involving the state and including some of its proxy institutions.

Some say it is on the rise. If it does not seem so, it is because some are game to be discriminated by the more "superior" economies and are quite ready to be treated as such. But this is not always the case.

The recent popular British television reality show, *Celebrity Big Brother* on Channel 4, is a case in point. It also serves as an important reminder that the so-called matured and developed societies are not immune to racial slurs.

During the show, a group of people were locked in a purpose-built complex of rooms and a garden that served as a "house" equipped with hidden cameras.

They were isolated from the outside world with the exception of footage relayed on the Internet and some of the highlights broadcast over TV.

The show, as if by design, tends to bring out the worst in people, especially when they are pitted against each other as contestants who can be voted out by the viewers. Eventually, the last remaining contestant wins.

One such winner was Shilpa Shetty, a Bollywood star. But not before she became the centre of a controversy after being bullied by the non-Indian contestants.



Reportedly, venomous remarks touching on racial sensitivities were spat out by a fellow contestant, insulting Shilpa for her cooking and hygiene habits.

She was told "to f*** off home" to India. This was among the many bigoted innuendos cited, resulting in more than 40,000 complaints received by Channel 4.

Shilpa's supporters back home in India burned effigies and held protests, threatening to sour relations between

Britain and India.

Interestingly enough, this is only one side of the story as revealed by the *Hindustan Times* (Jan 19) of India in its editorial, "Colour of prejudice".

While acknowledging that racism appeared to be alive and well in Britain, the editorial admitted: "But we are no less racist within the country. Discrimination on the basis of colour is ingrained in the psyche of most Indians.

"What else explains the quest for the holy grail of fair brides across the country? Or the prevalent belief that people from the south of the Vindhya (a range of hills) are invariably dark?"

It went on to cite: "Most of our reference points in culture, education and economy are West-oriented.

"This, in itself, shows a subtle discrimination against other vibrant cultures, especially other Asian ones. In fact, we got one better.

"We exclude people not just on the basis of colour but even by their familial origins."

According to Reuters (Jan 19) the editorial in the Indian Express also echoed this: "If racism is a fact in many interactions in British society, prejudice is a quotidian reality of Indian social life."

The *Hindustan Times* summed the controversy up very well: "So by all means we must condemn the appalling behaviour of the *Big Brother* participants. But, at the same time, let's also take a cold, critical look at how coloured our attitudes are."

Left to its own devices, our raw and tribal instinct will take over the best of us, sometimes in the most subtle ways.

The fact remains that the majority of university students, when stepping foot in the campus, already carry with them views and behavioural tendencies tainted with prejudices and bigotry.

It is even worse if they hail from a monocultural environment.

To be sure, it takes years to un-learn these tendencies unless the goals of education are properly understood.

It is here that we seem to have missed the point of what education is all about. It is instructive to refer to the four pillars of education of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation.

Two of them encompass "learning to know" and "learning to do" — something that we are very familiar with and even good at. Unfortunately, this is only half of the story. The other two pillars, namely, "learning to live together" and "learning to be", are poorly articulated.

Yet, it is the interplay of all the four pillars that ensures a truly educated society capable of harmonious and peaceful living.

So, while education modules can be useful, they are only as good as the strength of the pillars of education that we care to build.

Otherwise, we may be short-changing ourselves by merely focusing on the externalities, whereas the mind remains captive, to borrow an idea from the late Syed Hussein Alatas.

What with the dearth of credible role models, despite the rhetoric, it may be a while longer before we can truly "learn to live together" and "learn to be" in our attempts to dismantle some of the deep-seated chauvinism across the board.

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