

# S'pore badly needs 6th C — compassion



By Shashank Nigam

*The Singaporean*

ON one weekend last month, I was in a long queue outside a popular cafe at Plaza Singapura when something caught my attention.

A little girl, not more than 3 years old, ran up the escalator only to tumble and fall at the landing.

She quickly sat upright, clenched her knee and looked obviously traumatised.

Her mother was not in sight.

A couple who was behind the child, stepped off the escalator and simply walked past her without even giving her a glance.

According to a recent Straits Times survey of 2,071 teens from Singapore, China, Japan, Malaysia and India, 53 per cent of Singaporean teens expressed a desire to emigrate. In all likelihood, "coldness" among the locals here would be one of the push factors.

There are many cities that people would like to work and live in.

But what makes them inviting are not the opportunities but their "soft" aspects, like the warmth of the city folk.

Singapore is no slouch when compared to leading cities around the world in terms of facilities, but it sure has some distance to go when it comes to nurturing compassionate people.

I was at a shopping mall in Abu Dhabi last year, looking to make a phone call



home. To my pleasant surprise, the local security guard I approached for help not only helped me choose the right phonecard with the best rates to Singapore, but also showed me to a phone booth and dialled the number!

He waited patiently near the booth for me to finish the call before proceeding to teach me how to dial the number the next time I needed to call Singapore.

I was in complete awe of how much a stranger would do to help a tourist.

Middle Eastern hospitality is known worldwide but, apparently, so is German arrogance.

Yet, all preconceptions that I had about the Germans were laid to rest when I was in Heidelberg last August.

I was having difficulty buying a train ticket to a village nearby, and a gentleman stepped up to me and offered his help in perfect English.

He then recommended that I go to another village if I was interested in

vineyards. He was also heading in that direction.

We boarded the train together and started chatting.

He had been unemployed for two years and wrote English poems on a freelance basis.

When I requested that he recite one for me, the man snapped his fingers and clapped loudly to a rhythm, before singing out the poem he had written to propose to his girlfriend.

I was thrilled.

In Singapore, such behaviour would have drawn condescending glares from the other passengers and probably a derogatory comment with it.

But the crowd on the train appreciated it by swaying along.

I long to meet such a person in Singapore.

The Government launched a campaign to showcase four million smiles for the recently-held IMF and World Bank meetings. The efforts were all in good spirit, but it was not just smiles that would have made a difference.

We should have aimed to move hearts too. It is high time we add another "C" to our five existing (materialistic) ones — compassion.

The next time Singapore hosts a grand-scale international event, hopefully there may not be a need to do a "smiles" campaign.

The next time a child trips and falls at an escalator landing, I really wish there will be more than one helping hand for her.

*The writer, a final-year student at the School of Information Systems at SMU, is on an exchange programme with Carnegie Mellon University in the US. Feedback: email to [sp@sp.com.sg](mailto:sp@sp.com.sg)*