



# Somewhere over the ivory tower

Text by Cecilia Chan, Tanna Chong and Amelia Loi  
Photos by Cecilia Chan



**1** Manisha Devi La enjoys reading her Chinese textbook aloud.

**2** Principal of Delia Memorial School (Broadway), Chan Kui-pui is optimistic that the racial discrimination problem could be improved in Hong Kong.

Sitting in the stuffy living room of an attic, seven-year-old Manisha Devi La, a native of India, read a Chinese poem aloud from her Delia-Man Kiu English Primary School text book.

Her nine-year-old sister, Simran Devi La, sitting beside her, showed *Varsity* reporters her exercise book with drawings and said: “I like to go to school and I like Chinese more than English.” She is the monitress of her class.

Their cousin, Hareesh Kunar, 11, who also studies in the same school, is the eldest child in the family. “I want to be a pilot in the future,” he said. Hareesh added that he wants to go to a “good” school.

Concerned about Hareesh’s dream, Fermie Wong Wai-fun, a social worker who has been taking care of their family for the past few years, said: “It is difficult for him to go to a reputable school.”

“Some schools only accept them (ethnic minorities) to prevent from ‘being killed’ (meaning a school forced to close down due to insufficient student enrolment),” she said. Also the founder of Hong Kong Unison, Ms Wong added that some schools may not be willing to allocate

more resources to ethnic minorities who have language problems.

While worrying about the children’s future, she was disappointed about the exemption of educational institutions in the Race Discrimination Ordinance which was passed in July this year. “We have fought (for fair rights of ethnic minorities in schooling) for 10 years but the Ordinance really disappoints us. It does not make things better for them,” said Ms Wong.

Founded in 2001, Hong Kong Unison is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) advocating ethnic minorities’ rights. Ms Wong said the passage of the Race Discrimination Bill is an important step towards racial equality, though it does not go far enough.

Ms Wong told *Varsity* that most ethnic minorities were not treated fairly because they are not well-educated. According to her, most schools in Hong Kong do not want to accept such students, especially those from poor families.

Talking about the three children of Devi La’s family, Ms Wong said: “I am afraid that they will become ‘happy fools’, staying in their own community and ignoring what is going on in the world.”

Meanwhile, Delia Memorial School (Broadway), a secondary school in Mei Foo, shows how students of different origins enjoy their school life.

Out of its approximately 900 students, 80 per cent of them are of different origins, such as Pakistan, the Philippines, Nepal, India, Japan and Korea.

Tanushree Chakravarty, a Form Three student of the school, said she was once upset by gestures of a woman in a bus, showing her disgust towards Chakravarty's appearance. Other than that, she said she had not faced any problems.

Born in India, Chakravarty, who came to Hong Kong five years ago, is impressed by her friendly classmates. "My classmates are very nice and they help me in my studies," she said. She

school arranges senior students as mentors to assist them.

"We understand that there are differences in students' abilities and we are trying to help them (in learning) as much as we can," Dr Chan said.

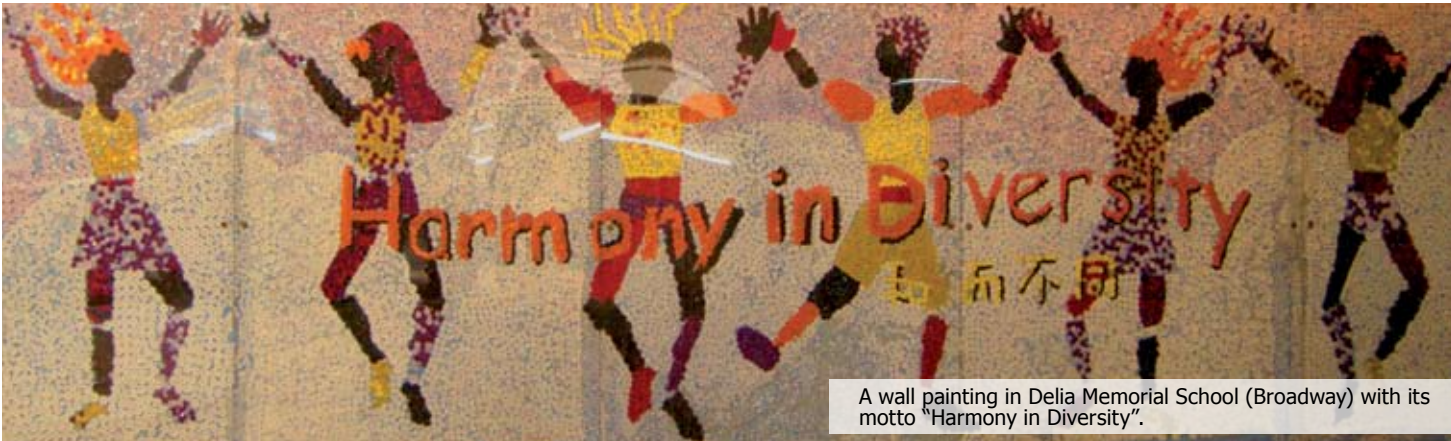
On top of facilitating the students in learning, the school also tries its best to promote tolerance and respects towards all ethnicities to its fellow students.

"I thought that it was strange when I first saw them," said Madoka Yamamoto, a student who is half Chinese and half Japanese, referring to her schoolmates wearing hijabs (headscarf worn by muslim female) and long trousers beneath their school uniforms and some boys with turbans (bun-shaped head-dress of male Sikhs) on their heads.

Dr Chan is also a co-opted member of the Equal Opportunities Commission, the statutory body which is drafting codes for employment-related matters under the new law. He said that Hong Kong people may not necessarily be prejudiced against minority groups. Rather, lack of racial awareness constitutes to stereotypes.

"The best result would be having a Race Discrimination Ordinance without exceptions, covering every sectors of the society," he said. However, he said that this could only be done step by step.

Although educational institutions are exempted from the ordinance, he said it is understandable. "Many lawsuits could result if educational institutions are not exempted and this could lead to radical acts that could



A wall painting in Delia Memorial School (Broadway) with its motto "Harmony in Diversity".

added that she was especially weak in Chinese.

In return, she also offers her helping hand to her classmate, Jenu Rai who just came from Nepal not long ago.

According to the school's principal, Chan Kui-pui, the school uses English as the major medium of instruction while Chinese is taught under the Chinese as Second Language (CSL) curriculum.

The school has also prepared its own Chinese textbooks for the students to help them using English to learn Chinese. For students who have greater language problem, the

Yamamoto plays with students of different origins and learns different languages from them. She has not found any racial discrimination there. "People treat you the same at school," she said. This has echoed the motto of Delia Memorial School (Broadway), "Harmony in Diversity".

Dr Chan said 30 to 40 per cent of the students come from families which rely on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme, but he does not think they are burdens of the city. "They are not only resources of our school, but of the whole city," he said.

create conflicts between schools and racial minorities.

"Discrimination is yet to be eliminated as long as schools like ours exist in Hong Kong," he said. "Why would ethnic minorities group in this school? There is nowhere minorities can go. It's indeed an indictment of the society."

"It's ironic, but I am looking forward to the day when our school closes down," he said. "Then our children can truly integrate into the society." ▼