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Everyday Racism in Singapore

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In this paper, I outline some of the common forms of racism that Singaporean Indians experience in their daily lives. Though other racial minority groups such as the Malays and Eurasians also experience racism within the Chinese dominated Singaporean society, I am limiting my focus to the Indians as my research is based on this community. It should be pointed out that the experience of racism among the Malays has been well documented (see Tremewan 1996 & Rahim 1998). Moreover, because the Malays are often singled out as a “socially and economically underachieving” community in Singapore which in turn has generated critical response and resentment from countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, racism towards the Malays is also well publicised. However, racism towards the Indians has received little public attention. Even though Indians face racial discrimination in their everyday lives, their high socio-economic standing relative to their population size puts them as a prosperous and successful community in Singapore. As a result, racism has become a non-issue for the India community and effectively ruling out the possibility of articulating experiences of racism discrimination in any official capacity.

Although the term ‘everyday life’ is synonymous with the idea of being mundane or ordinary and according to Gouldner (1975) is the stable, recurrent and seemingly unchanging features of the social life of ordinary individuals, they are by no means insignificant. In particular, what Heller (1984) termed as the ‘modalities of everyday contact’ which range from the random to the organised are important sites for gaining an insight into everyday racism. It is often argued that in multicultural societies, the proximity and intimacy created by living and encountering racial and cultural diversity can encourage familiarity and awareness of cultural difference. But as scholars such as Ash Amin (2002), Amanda Wise (2005) and others have argued it can also create social tensions resulting in racial abuse, discrimination, and stereotyping. Multiracialism is a fundamental pillar of postcolonial Singaporean society. It is a political ideology that is actively promoted by the city-state to recognise/represent Singapore as a racially and culturally diverse society. By that token, the main racial groups in Singapore are accorded official status and are guaranteed equality. Singapore considers itself a racially tolerant and harmonious country and indeed, the four official groups – Chinese (77%), Malays (14%), Indians (8%) and Others - have co-existed peacefully since its independence in 1965. However, this does not mean that racial discrimination and intolerance are non-existent. Whilst there are many examples of peaceful cross-cultural intermingling between the races, everyday social tensions and discomforts arising from living with cultural difference are rarely officially acknowledged (see for instance Lai 1995). Indeed, the term racism is entirely absent from official discourse and public debate in Singapore. In this paper, I seek to document some of the everyday experiences and practices of racism in Singapore. Using empirical material and research field notes, I will outline a range of subtle to explicit forms of racism that manifest in different social spaces in Singapore (indeed, there are more research that needs to be done in studying structural and institutional racism). I argue that while the city-state actively engages in activities targeted at

'fostering social cohesion' and is ever vigilant at suppressing overt racist provocations, with few exceptions it has effectively silenced the voices of people who are at the receiving end of everyday racism.

The Maria Hertogh and Prophet Muhammad Birthday remain as the two significant events in Singapore history that exposed serious racial tensions on this island state. The Maria Hertogh riots started on 11 December 1950. It was led by outraged Muslims after the court's decision to award custody of Maria Hertogh - raised in a muslim family - to her biological Dutch Catholic parents. The riots lasted 3 days with 18 killed, 173 injured and many properties damaged. The second riots, took place during two separate periods in July and September 1964 between Chinese and Malays. Though no clear cause was identified, state officials blamed Indonesian and communist provocateurs for instigating racial violence. But as official history and discourse would have it these riots are regarded as the country's most bitter experience with racial conflict. Singaporeans are regularly reminded in official speeches not so much about the causes of the riots but the fact that they were serious and potentially disabling events in Singaporean history. The fragility of inter-racial relationship and disaffections that emerged as a result of living with cultural difference were never spoken.

In 1965, when Singapore gained full autonomy from the British, one of the foremost concerns of the People's Action Party (PAP) state was to ensure that such racial conflicts did not take root again. And so, the promotion and maintenance of racial harmony became a central pillar of nation-building. The new government was confronted with the realities of serious unemployment, immense poverty, low levels of education, acute housing shortages, strikes, and demonstrations, most of which were Communist-led, and it had to deal with a plethora of competing ethnic and national sentiments. The PAP addressed these challenges through what Chan (1975, p. 51) describes as "a steady and systematic de-politicisation of a politically active and aggressive citizenry" and mobilising the support of various organisations such as the trade union and grassroots' groups. Central to the PAP leaders' thinking on the role of the government was their view that the compulsion to achieve economic progress and ethnic harmony made it imperative that the government in Singapore controlled all instruments and centres of power and did not allow the growth of political pluralism (Vasil 2000).

Following independence, many policies and programs were put in place by the PAP government in an effort to build a nation-state. According to Quah (1990, p. 45):

[t]he rationale for the Singapore government's approach to nation building has always been and continues to be the nurturing of the growth of a Singaporean national identity among the population, which will surmount all the chauvinistic and particularistic pulls of the Chinese, Malay, or Indian identities of the various ethnic groups on the island. The objective of the political leaders is to build a nation of Singaporeans out of the disparate groups in the city-state. The government has relied on many instruments to promote national integration, including the promotion of economic development, public housing, national service, educational policies, the mass media, periodic national campaigns, and grassroots organization.

For instance by emphasising multiracialism and multilingualism as fundamental principles of the state, the Singapore leaders aimed to inculcate a sense of commitment in the various race groups to the state and to existence in racial harmony. In institutionalising multiracialism as a state ideology, the fragmented and divided notion of the nation no longer became an issue. Multiracial Singapore with a population of around 4 million people – consisting of 77 per cent Chinese, 14 per cent Malays, 7.6 per cent Indians and 1.4 per cent Other (CMIO) – was redefined as an essential feature of a Singaporean identity and culture. The concept of Singapore's multiracialism was fostered through every conceivable means – in all forms of official cultural representations, celebrations, schools, the media, national holidays and tourism.

Many scholars (Benjamin 1976; Clammer 1998) argue that the CMIO model accommodates and assures equality and rights for minorities and is a practical and viable ideology for maintaining racial harmony. One the most notable critical assessments on Singapore's multiracial policy was provided by Geoffrey Benjamin (1976, p. 115) who argued that although the multiracial policy "accords equal status to the cultures and ethnic identities of the various "races" that are regarded as comprising the population of a plural society, [it at the same time] serves to *define* such a population as divided into one particular array of "races"" (see also Chua 1998).

In addition, the government also actively championed the ideology of meritocracy so as to tackle the problem of persistent racial inequality. Its practical application can be observed in the government's promotion of multiracialism as a fundamental ideal where the four main races are said to be given fair and equal opportunity without privileging one or the other. According to Carl Trocki;

As an excuse for the paternalistic management of society, the multiracial agenda justified the government's structuring of education, housing and the new identity to which all Singaporeans were expected to subscribe. At the same time, any attempts by members of a specific cultural community to gain consideration for themselves have been treated as expressions of chauvinism by the government. The possibility of racial violence or outside intervention, should the government's brand of multiracialism fail, was presented as a constant threat to Singapore's "survival" and thus became an unchallengeable article of faith (Trocki, 2006: 140-141)

And this remains the case till today. To be sure, there have not been any racial conflicts since the 1950 & 1964 race riots. In fact, people generally do get along. Similarly, structural and institutional racism are not wide spread. Nonetheless the official rhetoric of racial violence or disorder has completely overshadowed critical debates and discussions on racism, inter-cultural tension and disaffection in Singapore. For a nation which prides itself as a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious and multi-cultural, there has been very little academic scholarship on racial relations, cross-cultural interaction and racism. Within this context, any attempt to engage in discussions about everyday experiences of racism is deemed as lacking in legitimacy and unconstructive. The spectre of racial violence has literally erased the notion of racism from public and official discourses. Instead the need to maintain racial harmony, social cohesion and tolerance is repeatedly voiced to render racists practices as non-occurrences. In fact, the only time it is ever discussed is when Chinese Singaporeans encounter racism while traveling or studying overseas and report such incidents in Singapore - Australia is frequently cited in these reports. And

so, other forms of racism that the minority racial groups such as the Malays, Indians and Eurasians experiences are silenced. The government's repression of discussions on racist experiences has meant that there are no avenues for expressing or speaking out about them.

The most common form of racism invariably experienced by Indians is 'name-calling' with specific reference to one's physical appearance. The body and colour of the skin becomes the point of reference for ridicule, insult and verbal abuse. As it is well argued by scholars like Audre Lorde (1984) and Frantz Fanon (1965, 1967) racism is an embodied experience. Repeated references to one's skin colour, appearance and body are not uncommon. Let me read to you a set of quotes from my interviews that relates to this point. As one informant, Shanti in her early 30s pointed out:

I first became aware of racism when a PE [physical education] teacher of mine, because I was not athletically inclined, called me "Black tofu" in front of everyone. He later said he was just joking when my father complained to the school.

Another interviewee, Gita in her 20s recalled:

I was about 14 and at the public swimming pool with my brother and cousin. I didn't know how to swim and was just getting interested in water, swimming etc and quite excited. A Chinese man walked past, looked at us and said, "Indian Olympics ah?" My whole body froze, felt strange, embarrassed, hurt. I lost interest in learning swimming and did not wear a swimsuit for 20 years. More importantly, it severely affected my body confidence.

In these two incidents the Indian body is discredited and made inferior because it is black and also lacking in athleticism. It is a tainted body and incapable of performing at a competitive level such the Olympics. While the first discriminatory remark is associated with 'old' racism, the second stems from a cultural stereotype that circulates in Singapore. Sports activities such as volleyball, basketball, and swimming are almost entirely associated with the Chinese in Singapore. All other ethnic groups do not have a high visible presence in these sports. As such, within this context, the remark at the swimming pool was rather insulting.

Another instance where racism is frequently experienced is during everyday encounters in closed spaces such as on public transport. The involuntary proximity created by a crowded bus or train and a vacant seat can potentially generate expressions of discomfort and subtle racism. As my informant Ravi in his 30s echoed:

On many occasions this incident has happened while I travelled in a bus. A co-Chinese passenger would rather stand than sit next to me if there are no other places in the bus. At other times, the passenger would pass by me and sit next to another Chinese ignoring to sit next to me. Am I smelly or what?

Bala, in his 20s:

My first direct encounter with racism was probably my first day in kindergarten (1978) when Chinese classmates will not sit next to me or cover their noses whenever I am near because they thought I smelt. They would tease or tell me that their parents told them that my skin is dark because my family and I bathed in mud or excrement or never

bathed at all. As a six year old, it was very troubling to be perceived in such a way and it certainly damaged self- confidence.

Vimala in her late 20s said:

Often the seat next to me is one of the last ones to be taken on the bus. Once a young girl boarded the bus and saw me and immediately told her mother loudly, eeee, mummy, Indian... smelly." (I did not smell or look shabby.).

It is fairly obvious that a general pattern of racially motivated discrimination emerges in everyday encounters and contacts between Chinese and Indians. Though they may not take place on a regular basis, it is hard to deny that they don't occur at all. Name calling, the use of expletives, and stereotyping are born out of an attempt to label Indian bodies as inferior, a threat and mark them out as different to Chinese bodies. The terms such as 'black', dirty and smelly are not just hurtful and distressing but can result in what Fanon (1967: 11) describes as "the internalisation or the epidermalisation of this inferiority". The respondents in my study were clearly affected by the disparaging remarks to the point that they felt that it has damaged their self-esteem and confidence. The lacking in athleticism or trying a sport which Indians don't excel well is seen as a point of mockery. Moreover, the subtle as well as overt responses to the Indian body such as the impulse to avoid sitting next to an Indian and holding of the nose as an expression of revulsion may not appear as acts of racism but are powerful means by which displeasure and fear is conveyed. The assertion of the superior status of the Chinese arguably comes about because of their position as the dominant majority in Singapore. Unlike in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, where Chinese exists in small numbers, the Singaporean Chinese population is a powerful force as they dominate the economic, social and cultural sectors

In addition, the arrival of large number of non-skilled workers from India since the late 1980s has further intensified ongoing racist practices. There are some 160, 000 non-skilled foreigners currently working in Singapore - a majority of them are from the Indian subcontinent. These workers congregate in the Indian historical and now tourist enclave called Little India. During Sundays and public holidays, the Indian workers gather here to do their shopping, meet friends, eat and so forth. However, these large gathering has not only created an uproar among non-Indian Singaporeans but also to the perpetuation of racists sentiments and stereotypes about Little India. As one informant noted:

"Friends (yes, people I actually know quite well) who avoid Little India like it's some Danger Zone. I can take it if they tell me they're not used to the food or the smell of spices and incense, but to make comments like, "eeee, all the Bangla and Indian workers hang out there" are uncalled for. It's not just about the workers (I mean if they were Chinese workers, these people won't kick up such a big fuss). I mean if you want to talk about a place being dangerous, Geylang [an area famous for late night food stalls, nightclubs and a red light district] can be said to be fraught with danger too right? but no one seems to make a big deal out of it -- most Singaporeans have no qualms about heading there for durians and supper" (Devi)

Another respondent, Thiru - reiterated:

I also have non-Indian friends who refuse to go to Little India on Sundays because they fear being harassed by the Indian foreign workers who hang out there. I have heard stories of cab drivers whizzing through Little India and only stopping for local Singaporean customers. I have also seen on public transport – especially when taking the train to Little India – how people will avoid sitting next to Indian men (in particular).

It has to be said that although Singaporean Indians (who are mostly 3rd or 4th generation) try to dissociate themselves from the temporary Indian workers, they are invariably implicated and are subjected similar racist overtones. In this instance, Little India with its large concentration of Indians (not frequented by many Chinese) is perceived as an alien space which is potentially threatening and even dangerous. Even though there are no crime statistics to show that it is an unsafe area – Little India is a place which you would want to avoid. Such derogatory remarks and stereotyping are becoming a common place in Singapore.

There are also many other instances of everyday racism relating to food, homes, neighbourhood, characterization of Indian behaviour and so forth that I am aiming to examine in the longer version of the paper. But in conclusion, I want reiterate that everyday racism in Singapore is fairly widespread especially within dominant and minority relationship and encounters. Unfortunately, such experiences are never articulated or openly discussed in the public arena. As a result, they continue to simmer beneath the warm and fuzzy image of a harmonious and tolerant image of multiracial Singapore.

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