

Episode 34 : Acha

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be Nepali and grow up in Saitama, a prefecture in Japan? In this episode, Acha shares his stories of living in Saitama as one of the only non-Japanese children, and his reflections on the intersection of race and socio-economic factors in specific Asian contexts. His story is about the concept of “outsider” in different countries, and how it harms people on a daily basis.

I’m Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Acha.

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Acha is Nepali. When he was just a child, his parents moved to a city in Saitama, a prefecture in the Greater Tokyo area. Acha recalls his memories when he first moved there.

A:

The interesting thing is, Japan is filled with tourists. I just looked at the news today from Japan, and they're so excited about the tourists inflow. And you know, you see tourists everywhere in Tokyo. But it wasn't like that in the mid 90s when we moved to Japan, because at the train station you would hardly see any English. So, usually, we used to look at the adboards to understand, okay, our station's coming next. So, you look outside the window and see, "Okay, this building is there, so that means we need to get off at the next train station." That's sort of like this trick my mom used. My dad knew a little bit [of Japanese] so he had a better method, but that was my mom's method.

And when we first moved to Japan, we went to this small city in Saitama called Misato, where – my dad went there as a PhD student – and a lot of international students used to house up there. So we went to a very un-Japanese-like district in Saitama, which is next to Tokyo. I say un-Japanese because you go to the city, it's filled with Japanese people, but in the pockets, you will see all these international students that are studying there. And it's not a university town because the university was at least 45 minutes away on a train. So the locals don't know what all these foreigners are doing in that city. And there is absolutely no interaction between these international students and the locals. So usually that's very different in a campus town because the locals know why the foreigners are there: they're the international students. And there is usually some kind of interactions happening between them. But in our case, it wasn't like that. It was almost like oil and water, like it's a separate group living in the same area.

But then I was sort of this first exception, because not a lot of international students brought their kids along. My parents were a rare case. They didn't want to leave their children behind in Nepal or their home country, so my parents took myself and my sister when we were very young. So when we got there [Misato], I sort of became one of the first students to go to the Japanese elementary school. So from there, we started having interaction with the local Japanese.

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Acha said that as a child, he had to navigate the advantages and challenges of living in two worlds simultaneously: the Japanese world, and the Nepali world.

A:

There were two worlds to me in that town, because one is this group of international students. So every evening I used to go out with my mom to some Nepali family's house or Indian family's house, so we had our own world, right, like every weekend we would have some kind of get together, we would go to like a sightseeing trip somewhere... So that was one world where we were a lot more comfortable because we spoke the language, we knew the culture. And typically, I didn't know a lot of Japanese customs. I didn't know... I mean, the language was an issue. But then like, during the weekdays, I had to go to school. And it was like, a completely new world to me.

And I recall, you know, Japanese public schools, at *that* time, was considered one of the best in the world. Unfortunately now, it's no longer the case, but at that time, Japanese public schools were kind of renown around the world. And I could see that because I went to a preschool in Nepal and I would compare with what I had in Nepal. And like, you get all these things *for free*? Like it was crazy. School lunch *for free*? And you know, I'm a Hindu, my family is Hindu... We don't eat beef. But then, in the Japanese school lunches, it's clearly written in the menu what's on for lunch, and you know, they write the ingredients as well. But it's in Japanese. So none of my family members or myself understand that there's beef in it. And I kept eating. So during elementary [school], I'm eating beef all the time. And it was completely okay with me.

And [so] the lunch was delicious. And then you hardly do anything at school. Like in Nepal, even from the preschool days, you study. Like, you go to classroom, you open the textbook, you study. For me, during the first grade or second grade [in Japanese school], there was a lot more playing around and doing nothing pretty much than studying. So there was hardly any homework as well. So you know, for me, it was like, "Yay!" But *then*, when I go back home, the other world kicks in. Because my mom is there with all these textbooks from Nepal. So while there's a Japanese curriculum going on in school, when I go back home, there's a Nepali curriculum kicking in so I had to study Nepali, I had to study English, I had to study, you know, math from a Nepali curriculum. So I could hardly go out. I would come back home and maybe go out play with my friends for an hour, and after an hour, I have to return [home]. So that way, you know, I was still in two different worlds while living in Japan.

F:

Acha says that for the first few years of his life in Saitama, his friends treated him like one of them. But that all changed after third grade due to a TV show that aired in Japan.

A:

Until third grade, it was pretty much fun for me. I didn't face any... It was very natural, like I naturally blended in to the group. But then, after third grade... and I still *hate* this show on NHK... I used to visit Nepal during summer break, so I knew what was going around in Nepal as well. And they had this show on NHK – which is like the BBC of Japan – and they had this show about Nepal. And at that time, Nepal was going through a civil war. So I thought they were gonna show about the civil war that was going on. But no, they decide to pick up the poorest area of Nepal and made a show out of it. Yeah, it [poverty] exists in Nepal, but it's literally the *poorest* part of Nepal. And they made the entire show about that part only. They briefly showed Kathmandu when they landed into the city, and then they straight went into that.

Now, it makes a good content for the TV shows, I'm sure. But for *me*, it was like, my friends started understanding, "Okay, Acha's hometown is like this." Right? "So Acha's family lives like this in Nepal." And when you are in first grade or second grade, you don't really understand that. But after third grade, you start understanding that, like you start seeing that difference, "Okay, he's maybe a little different. Oh, that's not how *we* look. Oh, is that how Acha lives?" Those questions start popping up in their minds and I still hate that show to this day for not showing the entire Nepal, right? Like, you could have shown the beautiful part of Nepal. But no, they decided to go to this particular area. And I'm not saying

it's wrong, because those parts do exist. I'm not saying we should like hide it. But for a third grade kid, it was not a good representation of his background to a classmate who probably has not even stepped out of the Kanto area, right, like the part of Japan [they were living in].

So after that, a few students started making some comments about my skin tone, they started making some comments about how I'm a foreigner. So there's this, you know, in Japan, the famous word "gaijin," right? So, for me, it was like, I didn't feel anything about it, "gaijin", because I knew I was a gaijin. But it started going beyond gaijin. It started becoming like, "Oh, you're *chairo*," and *chairo* is brown... nowadays, people pay a lot of money to get this *chairo*, right ? But at that time, they started associating me with this cartoon character called *Karepanman* (Curry Bread Man) from *Anpanman* (Bean Bun Man), this cartoon. And they... So a lot of these remarks were made after third grade and especially in the fourth grade. So there was this time when a lot of these students started making comments and I snapped out and I started having fights with a few of them. And thank God, I was pretty good at fighting so I could take on the school bullies. So that kind of helped me in a way because they were like, "Okay, don't mess around with that gaijin." So they wouldn't come to me and start beating me up in groups. So that didn't happen.

But those small remarks [came] from time to time, you know, like, "Oh gaijin", "*Chairo*", all sorts of names. And you know, even while I'm making a presentation in class, they would make some snarky remarks. And the worst, I think, was this concept of *shikato*. I think it only exists in the Japanese society because I never really found this concept elsewhere, but like just ignoring people, right? They really perfected the art of ignoring a particular person they don't like, and they do that in a group. And everybody understands that person is to be ignored. And so that was kind of playing a toll on me.

But I think the good thing that came out of it, is that for me, I had to kind of face that every day. I had to go to *that* school. I couldn't be all like, "Oh mom, dad, put me in a different school," because it's a public school, the government has appointed that [school], like that's the school that you need to go to. So I couldn't run away from it. And also, from my parents, they didn't know what was going on because of the language barrier as well, right? Because my parents couldn't be actively involved in what was going on with me in school. They wouldn't understand what goes around in the Japanese school. So it was also completely foreign to them. So they couldn't really do a lot for me in that particular scenario in that school because they also couldn't understand, like... they didn't like this feeling of not understanding what their kids are going through.

But at the same time, I started playing soccer with my friends, and sports really connected me with this group of friends. And there used to be inter-school competitions. And then, you know, I started being an integral part of the team, and these bullying and this ignoring went away, I think around... like, after fifth grade, I never really faced that bullying in Japanese school. So fifth grade, sixth grade, I was completely fine, I was one of them.

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Looking back, Acha reflects on why and how the kids bullied him at school.

A:

For them, you know, they're fourth graders, so they're like ten years old. For ten years, they haven't probably stepped out of that main island in Japan. Like, I'm pretty sure, at that time, a majority of my classmates have not even been to Kyushu or Hokkaido, the two other islands in Japan, so they really haven't interacted with any foreigners. So for them, the moment they start recognizing differences with a particular person, they try to alienate themselves from it. And I think, making these remarks is sort of their method of keeping that distance, and they want to show it to others that they're keeping their distance from that particular individual.

So I think, like, even the students that I was friends with, when they're one on one, they would *never* make such comments because you know, sometimes we would be grouped together in a project and it would be like, going to the library or to the city hall to get some material for schoolwork. And during that time, when I'm one on one with this particular Japanese individual, they would *never* make that comment. But when they're part of the group, they make that. So that was very common. And I don't blame them, you know, we do that even in other cultures, it's not just a Japanese... like, we're just using my example while I was growing up in Japan, but even in Nepal, that exists, and I saw that while studying there in college. And I think it's quite common, right, like, as an individual, you'd never make that comment, but when you're in group you want to show to others that, "Okay, I'm not associated with this guy."

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Acha would continue his studies in Japan, then move to different countries, primarily within Asia, to pursue his tertiary education and work. He says that wherever he went, he would see a similar form of discrimination which revolves around the concept of "foreigner", quote unquote. Acha first reflects on the term in Japanese, namely, "gaijin".

A:

So, *gaijin* comes from the word *gaikokujin*. In Japanese or Chinese, every character has a meaning. So *gai* (外) is written as a Chinese character for "outside". And *koku* (国), is "nation", "country". So, "outside country". And *jin* (人) means "people". So it literally means "outside country people". There's no deeper meaning than that. It just means *gaikokujin*. And over the years, they just shortened it, and they made it *gaijin*. Initially it was just a short and abbreviated form of *gaikokujin*, but then in the connotation, started becoming more derogatory over the years, because you started having a lot of hate against foreigners in Japan, so that's why we take *gaijin* as a rather negative word. So I think that's what really *gaijin* means.

And over the years, wherever, even in the pop culture whenever they're making like a derogative remark against a foreigner, they use this word. That's why, you know, we try not to use this. And I kind of experienced that when I was in elementary school. So I hated that word. But then I started again to kind of... I blended in, and I kind of started to embrace it. I had no other choice but to be a *gaikokujin* or *gaijin* in Japan. There was *no way* for me to be a Japanese living in Japan. There was *no way*. Like even to this day, I speak *fluent* Japanese, when I wake up in the morning, I read English news and Japanese news. But I cannot go to Japan and claim I'm a Japanese, it's never going to happen. It's always going to be a *gaikokujin*. Even if I get the Japanese passport, I'm going to be a *gaikokujin*. So that is the society that I have accepted, and you know, I decided to embrace it.

So for me, even if somebody calls me a *gaijin* now, I'm kind of immune to it. But obviously, there are a lot more foreigners in Japan that are moving into Japan or working in Japan, when they first hear it, they would absolutely hate it. Just the word itself mentions that you're an outsider, you're never going to be an insider. And that's sort of like the society I felt Japan was. And it's obviously changing now, but at that time, it was either you're an insider or outsider. At work, you're an outsider or an insider, right? Like you'd have this gathering at work, [or] you'd have a gathering in school where you may not get invited just because you're a foreigner, because they'll be all like, "Oh he doesn't speak Japanese. So you know, let's not call him..." So you know, those things exist.

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Acha says that in Nepali, there are two words for the term "foreigner". He shares their definitions and their connotations.

A:

"Foreigner" Nepali, it's *bidesi*. *Bi* means... I actually don't know what *bi* means, but *bi* means I think "outside" or like, "not". And *desi* is basically, "countrymen". So that's how they form that word for "foreigner" in Nepali. That's the official word. But they also say *quiray*, which is "White people", right? They have a specific word for White people. And it's a *good* thing. It's not a derogative word. Because Nepali economy is built upon tourism from the past. Like, it was the end of the hippie trail and everyone was like, "Oh, are the *quiray* coming this year?", because they were the cash cows, right? And believe it or not, you still see this Mercedes Benz bus with the entrance from the back in some parts of Nepal, not so much in Kathmandu nowadays, but in some parts of Nepal. And those buses used to be driven by hippies from Europe, all the way from Germany, and they would come to Nepal, they would sell it off, and then like, they would just smoke in the entire of Nepal. It's sort of how the hippie trail existed back in the day.

And to this day, when you say, "gaijin" in Nepal, or "foreigner" in Nepal, immediately, people think, "Okay, *quiray*." That sort of mental association exists. I work in the hospitality industry, so we interviewed a lot of hospitality folks back in Nepal, and they would be like, "Yeah, you know, we get a lot of foreigners," and they would be like, "Oh, we have foreigners coming in from Norway, we have foreigners coming in from like, you know, U.S., Switzerland..." They will *never* mention Thailand, Indonesia, who constitute the bulk of the tourist arrival in Nepal. They never mention that. They will never mention India... ah, India has a separate classification in Nepal, but you know, they will never mention like, you know, the Chinese that are coming in. So it's usually, whenever they say "foreigner", the first three examples they give are all, "Yeah, we have people coming in from the UK, Switzerland..." So that sort of mentality is still there in Nepal and I think it'll continue to be there for, you know, the foreseeable future.

F:

Acha says that when looking at discrimination within Nepal in particular, there's another socio-economic concept we must also take into consideration: the caste system.

A:

I think it's an interesting concept because it used to come out of your occupation, based on your occupation, and people needed to be part of the group before because, you know, if you lived alone, you would possibly die, right? So you needed to be part of this group of people to survive, whether it was to gain access to food or for marriage, or you know, any reason, like, we need to be part of a group. So that's where this caste system sort of originated because they wanted to, again, it's about insider outsider, you didn't want to marry an outsider because you didn't know what their customs were and you didn't want your daughter to suffer by giving them away to this group that you have no idea of, right. So that's sort of where this arranged marriage, the reason why people look for their own caste when marrying, these concepts started emerging.

But now it's interesting because we live in a globalized world, right? So, I always ask my parents, like, "Let's say, you..." – I'm a... I belong to a certain caste in Nepal – and let's say, I'm already married, but let's say my parents were looking for a bride for me and they want to arrange my marriage. They would probably look for a girl from the same caste in Nepal, right? That's the usual practice. Now, does that mean we're very compatible? Like... does that really mean we're from the same group? Because I'm from a particular caste just because of birth, but my upbringing, I ate beef. Right? I ate beef when I was in elementary. I think that's already frowned upon *big time* in my caste. And I drink. I *love* alcohol. And it really does not reflect my caste at all. And I grew up completely detached from the Nepali, you know, this caste system, while growing up, so I have no idea, like, what do you expect me to do? I don't know anything, right?

Now, would I be the right choice for this girl in Nepal that's looking for a groom from a particular caste, like mine, right? So it's such a misalignment. And the funniest thing is, to this day, no matter your... have you watched this show *Indian Matchmaking* on Netflix? Isn't that funny? They're Indian families that are successful second-generation successful people in New York or like, you know, parts of U.S. But when it comes to marriage, they want like, "Oh, this is a boy from this particular caste..." and it's like, they have zero compatibility, right? The guy is completely not living the life of that caste. Then why would he want a girl from that particular caste, right? It's... I would say it's a mis-signaling.

And in Nepal, I felt that, you know, it's now being used to kind of like... this caste system still exists, because that's *one* thing the people in a position of strength or privilege can hold onto. And they can always be like, "Okay, I'm from this particular caste. So, you know, we're better than you." It's a complete ego play. Because you could be from a higher caste, but you could still be poor. And you could be really rich but still be from a lower caste. And you'll see that in Nepal. But the poor people from a higher caste would always be like, "Oh, you know, so and so is richer than me, but I'm from a higher caste." It's a complete ego play. There is absolutely zero value in being poor, and [being] from a higher caste. Like, that higher caste is not going to pay your bills, right? And we live in a society where it's kind of materialistic, and it does require you money. And these people are still getting stuck with this concept of belonging to a higher caste, so like "I'm better off than others."

So that still exists in our society, not just in Nepal, in India as well. And that *Indian Matchmaking* is the absolute representation of what's going on. And that's a problem, right? People are more educated, they've seen the world, *but*, "Oh, you need to marry a Brahmin girl," or, "You need to marry a girl from this caste." That doesn't go away. And that hasn't gone away.

F:

Against this background, Acha shares an anecdote that underscores how the experiences associated with one's background can shape our reactions in certain situations.

A:

I was on a flight from Kathmandu to Sharjah, which is this city next to Dubai, last week. And on this flight – this is the first time I saw this – but on this flight, the cabin crew was a male African. So that flight is filled with people from Nepal, and for many of them, they probably have never interacted with an African person before. So for me, I was like, "Oh, there's this African male on that flight as a cabin crew." For me, it was new, because usually a lot of Middle Eastern Airlines, they try to... they hire people from all over the world. And usually in the Nepal route, you find a lot more Nepali nationalities because they speak the language, and a lot of Nepali who traveled to the Middle East, they may not speak English. That's why they try to put more Nepali crews in that particular flight. But let's say if I were to fly from Nepal to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, right, and I'm flying an Ethiopian airline, that sight would not have surprised me, or I would have been like, "Oh, okay," right? But this time, it was a Middle Eastern carrier and I saw this gentleman who was from Africa, and like, you know, that was a new sight. So I noticed that.

But did I feel anything, like, you know, did I stare at him the entire time during that flight? No. Did I normally talk to him? Yes. Did I do anything out of the ordinary with him? No. Like, you know, for me, it's like just, oh, this is the first time I saw somebody on this flight who was from Africa who was a cabin crew in this flight. Because I fly that route a lot. And it was the first time. So that difference I felt. But during the entire flight, I look at people, and they're staring at him. And it's not because they come from a position of privilege, but it's probably because it's the first time they're seeing someone from Africa, or, you know, they might have seen people from Africa, but they have never met in person or they have never interacted with them, right? So it was the first time. So they didn't recognize it. But when you try to make a conscious decision to be a dick to that person, then yes, you are a racist.

F:

Based on racism he experienced himself and seeing others experiencing it, Acha shares what racism is for him.

A:

I think the insider outsider [concept] is the basic fundamental thing that drives racism. And when you're making decisions based on that insider outsider [concept], and you're conscious of it, I think that's racism. If you're an HR staff and you are throwing away a CV of a certain individual just because that person went to a university somewhere or like that person's background is from a certain country, then you're kind of being racist. Because you're generalizing based on that insider outsider concept.

But also, you could be racist to your own people, right? That's the thing. And that is very prevalent in I think Asian societies because you kind of put people from certain backgrounds higher than your own people. And that is kind of visible in many Asian societies. And that's also racism. So I think just making that conscious decision of neglecting certain people or favoring certain people just because of their race, is racism for me. And it might be very broad, but that's why it's very difficult to get rid of racism around the world. And as long as those differences exist between people, I think...

Let's say there is absolutely zero difference from our perspective. Like, let's say *everyone* looks the same, same skin tone, same everything, I think there will be a different way, a different type of racism then, because by that time, it'll be like, "Okay, you have a certain shape of eyebrow," right or like certain, like... we always want to find... because we want to be better than others or we want to be different than others. There is that innate need in us to be kind of better than others and feel better or superior to others. And until that exists racism will continue.

So you could be a White person who is living in Asia, not noticing all this. You might say, "Oh, people are so nice to me." But then, there is racism in fact, because racism is working in your favor, right? They'd be like, "Oh, the people in Nepal are so nice. People in Thailand are so nice. They're, you know, they don't really treat me different. They welcome me." All these travel bloggers, they always write that. And yeah, it is true. But then, you know what? If I go there, I'm not getting the same treatment usually. So that's the racism, right? So racism could work in your favor or it could work against you. So it's always going to exist, and for me, that's what it means.

F:

Acha has the following to say on what he thinks it means to be antiracist.

A:

I think it's to accept that there are differences, and just... I think it really means just don't be a dick, I think. There is no mantra that is going to solve it. Just don't be an asshole to others, right? I think, whenever you find someone to be racist, they are consciously making that decision to be an asshole. I don't think anyone would like that in their heart. Like if I'm making a racist... sometimes it happens, right, like I see somebody, and then, immediately, inside, I'm feeling, "Okay, there's a difference," or I'm making certain decisions *consciously*. And then, you know, I *know* I'm being racist in that particular scenario. I don't feel good inside.

And it happens for any average person, right? Like, unless... even if you're an extremist... I don't know, if you're an extremist, let's kind of weed them out. But if you're a decent human being who knows what's right or wrong in the modern education system, like you came from the modern education system and kind of connected digitally, there are certain actions you take which is considered racist, then at that moment, in your heart, if you ask yourself, you don't feel that good. So if you're trying to be racist, you're *consciously* making that asshole decision to be racist. Yeah, there is no other way. It really has to be from an individual level. Like, you need to recognize the difference first. You need to

try to understand that difference, right? Just understanding the difference doesn't really help. You need to try to understand what background they come from. The more you do that, the better.

But then, just don't be an asshole when making a decision. When you throw away a CV or when you try to neglect certain people, you are making that conscious decision, right? When you are not inviting a certain team member because of their race, you *are* making that conscious decision not to invite someone because they're different, right? And if you feel good about it, like if you don't feel that inch of tingling sensation, you know, because you're making that dick move, then there's no way to make that person better or less racist. There is no solution to that.

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*You can find more information on the concepts of **gaijin** in Japan and **bidesi** in Nepal, as well as other articles, books and videos Acha recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.*

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

*If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in **#our_racism**.*

*This is Fumi, and **#OUR_racism**. See you next year, on January 4th!*

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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