Episode 39: Maddy

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:
What does it mean to be an Indian woman living in New Zealand? In this episode, Maddy shares with us her experiences and reflections on racism and othering, as well as the power of history in shaping the present.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Maddy.

M:
My full name is Madhavi Manchi. My family's always called me Maddy since I've been eleven. That's the name I respond to the most. I'll come back to why I'm saying this. But otherwise, I'm an Indian woman, I identify as cisgender, and my pronouns are she/her. In India, I'm quite a "mixed bag". My parents both come from the same language community or state, but my parents and my grandparents, and on my maternal side, my great-grandparents, have migrated across the country. So I haven't actually grown up in the state that my ancestors come from in a way, my parents [also] haven't grown up really in the state that we come from. So that's what I mean by a mixed bag. We migrated quite a bit internally. So my maternal great-grandparents, for example, have ties to state called West Bengal, which is not in the west of the country, [but] it's tending northeast of the country.

Otherwise, we trace back to a region called Andhra Pradesh, which is in the southeast. My parents lived in a state called Tamilnadu. They grew up there mostly, which is, again, southeast. And then they moved, and I grew up in a city called Bangalore, which is again somewhere on the Deccan Plateau, so somewhere southwest. So that's kind of where my "mixed bagness" comes from, I guess. So I find it hard when even Indians ask me, "Where are you from, really?" I speak the language of my ancestors, I speak the language of this city I grew up in, I speak Hindi… I cannot speak Bengali at all. My family from that side can [speak Bengali]. My mom has strong ties to that place and it's always a special place, I guess, Kolkata the capital city there is quite a strong connection there, family-wise. And I keep saying *language community* because the states in India are organized by language post-independence.

In terms of othering, I don't know if I've always felt othered… not in a negative sense always, but you just know because you are in a state that doesn't speak that language you know, and because they're so strongly organized along language in India, it's very obvious [that] that's not your… the place I was growing up in wasn't the language that my family spoke. So for example, my parents made the strategic decision for my sister and me [during] my childhood to make sure we learned Hindi because that's available across. And my dad was traveling a lot with work, so I guess it would have been easy to know Hindi anywhere pretty much. So that's one of the ways it trickles down into my life, I guess.

And the fact that Hindi's the one Indian language I know to speak and read and I don't know the others very much… I can speak them to varying fluencies, but I don't know how to read and write. I'm a little bit ashamed to admit this. I don't know how to read and write [in] my mother tongue. So I can speak it. But yeah, I guess there's a slight loss of that form for various reasons. [But] I think I see mostly the positives. I see a huge amalgamation of a whole lot of things that come through. Like, there'll be something that I… for example, there's a dish or two that I love. And then I would have always assumed growing up that it's from our community. But then my mom will be like, "No, it's actually from West Bengali, it's actually an influence of living in the borders" sort of thing.

In terms of just not knowing how to answer the question, "Where I'm from," it's simply because of those linguistics sorts of differences that are very obvious on a daily level. And I guess the state I lived in also went through a bit of – and a lot of states in India have gone through this – they've gone through a bit of a regional identity sort of strengthening movement. So I guess when things like that come up, there are things where you will be questioned about, "But you're not *really* from here." So when I was young, and I didn't know better, my reaction instinctively would be, "But I've lived here nearly all my life!" So I guess you can see those connections to racism in the sense of being an immigrant in lands that are not necessarily where you were born.

So I guess there has been some of those experiences. They've been a bit subtle. It'll be things like picking up public transport. And by public transport I don't mean buses. I mean taxis, or we have something like the tuk-tuks, which are the auto rickshaws. So it's in those interactions, for example, they used to be quite organized, I remember the young person [tuk-tuk driver], and they were quite a big part of that movement [on] strengthening their regional identity sort of thing. So that's why you get a lot of people going, "But you're not from here." And I'm not the only one who has experienced this. And I'm someone who dares to claim some sort of a right to be there because I've grown up there. They do this with anyone who even recently migrated to that state. So they'll be like, "Oh, you don't speak the language. We're not going to give you a ride", sort of thing.

I've seen some of this [but] I think I moved away, or I saw glimpses of it. I don't know how I became insulated from it, at some point I did [get insulated from it], probably because I stopped taking the public transport for a bit. That probably explains it, but I think that's my strongest memory of othering. But otherwise, I think every time I've gone back to try and explore some of that, it's just been fascinating that they've become such an integral part of my life, all of these different places I identify with, that it just feels like one thing. And it surprises me every time I discovered that it's not actually from where I thought it was. And that's always wonderful. I think it leaves me in awe of the journeys my family's had, it leaves me in awe of everything that we've integrated into our lives, and I just simply like the joy it brings.

F:
Maddy's history is also shaped by something else: remnants of the British empire.

M:
The state that my parents grew up in was a presidency under the British. It was the Madras Presidency. And at some point, bits of my ancestral state, bits of the places I grew up in, they were all combined into one presidency. At some point when the states were being organized – and I could be telling the history completely wrong, I have to go back and check with my parents now – but I think at some point when the state lines were redrawn, my granddad actually, so my dad's dad, made a decision to stay back at whatever place because his job kept him there. But I also imagine that there was a lot of that stuff that might have influenced which side we ended up on. And that's something I hadn't thought of, or really introspected on, I guess, till I got here.

And I was having these amazing conversations on colonialism, and I'm like, "Hang on. The British drew a lot of our lines." They organized us very differently at some point and we went back and redrew them in 1956. And to date, I think there are two or three states that I strongly connect with that have their own state days, like the way we have… I guess there are a lot of countries where each province has its own formation day and things like that. So the state I live in, the state identify with, two or three of them have state formation days. So yeah, that's another sort of layer, I guess, that I started to think about when I got here, to try and understand that part of myself.

F:

After India, Maddy moved to New Zealand. She would live in Christchurch and Auckland, two cities in the south and north respectively. There, she would start seeing and experiencing things that would open her eyes to different aspects of her identity.

M:

I think the interesting thing about introducing myself as Maddy within New Zealand, is a lot of people will come back and say, "No, no, we want to learn how to say your full name right." And I'm always caught in this really weird awkward place because I'm going [in my head], "My friends call me Maddy. My mom calls me Maddy. My family, my extended family calls me Maddy. It's a name I prefer. You're not going to offend me, especially if the person is White. And like, you're not going to offend me by not saying my full name. It's fine. This is what I *prefer*." But I guess a lot of people… like, I've noticed in emails and things, they'll insist on using my full name. And I let it slide when it's professional contexts, I'm like, okay, maybe they have a specific etiquette they want to hang by and they want to retain that sense of formality which is fine. But I think that's always been an interesting and awkward kind of transition, which is not to say people haven't butchered my name, which is not to say that things haven't happened around it.

I remember clearly [when] my husband and I were going off on a tour bus to go look at some vineyards here. And the tour bus driver, I put in for whatever reason on the invoice my full name, and he looked at it and his first thought was, "Oh, this person, this person, this person and that…" and he was doing a headcount of the people in the bus, and he said… he'd started to say my name, and then he said, "Oh, the name that I can't pronounce." Or I think he said it was an "unpronounceable name". I'm like, "It's okay. You can call me Maddy. That's easier. I'm fine with that." And then he insisted on calling me "unpronounceable name" for the rest of the trip. And I of course was really hopping mad at that point. Because I'm like, I gave you an option to... Yeah, I made your life easier. I tried it [to make your life easier], and you still insist on not wanting to learn.

And I think the most interesting part was to sort of observe other… there was a group of White women at the back of a bus, and they actually came to apologize to me on behalf of the man they didn't know. And the first thing [they said] was, "Not everyone in New Zealand is like this." I'm like… that's a whole other debate in itself, whether New Zealand has racism or not. But I think that was really interesting. I don't know what to call it… a guilt? It's interesting that they felt guilt. It's interesting they felt like they had to defend someone they had no… or a whole country without them knowing what my experience of it in general was. And I think it's interesting they… they were trying to placate me and put me in a very specific position, almost like… I guess I find it interesting that they thought that I was new to the country. They assumed I was new to the country. And I think that's a very interesting assumption to make. I don't think anyone ever actually came around or assumed that I was born there or I've been here all my life. I think that was that's a very interesting assumption to make. And I think that's why their reaction's interesting just in terms of that incident.

And I think this is also sort of… this irritates me mildly as well, like a lot of people will just not make the effort of actually understanding how to say my name. And so many of us who have moved around the world come from language traditions that may be very orally based. They don't have written scripts, and so saying things the way they're meant to be pronounced is very important, because in oral cultures, the slightest vowel that's changed changes the meaning of a word. And I think a lot of people also forget that. There's also sort of a dominance of… I don't know the correct word… I guess I'll go with "dominance". There's a dominance of the written script, there's an assumption that everything is a written script. Whereas a lot of languages have had to acquire written scripts because of colonization, or were given or forced to have written scripts because of colonization.

So a lot of people forget that that's why pronunciation is important. A lot of us come from languages that didn't have them, and the way you say things are really, really important. They *do* change meaning. And I'm in New Zealand, so that point gets driven home for me every single time I try and learn to say a Māori language word, because Māori has a strong oral tradition in my understanding, and the scripts came later, which is why the pronunciation of those words are very important because that slight change of vowel would mean you're saying something very different. And that gets driven home for me every time. I think I've realize the importance of that for our names as well, you know. And so many people have had to change their names because of it.

F:
Next to her name, Maddy shares other aspects of her daily life where questions around her identity and feelings of belonging are being challenged.

M:
Rugby is a *huge* sport in New Zealand. We *love* rugby. It's how probably cricket is for India, or how football is to a lot of European nations and South American nations. My husband and I had gone out with another couple of our friends to go watch the rugby match, like you do, in a sports bar. And we sort of went on the streets late. And I think it was the All Blacks versus England. And we'd enjoyed it, we cheered for the All Blacks, we'd walked out onto the streets… All Blacks had won. And I think it was some busy intersection, where we'd all had a little bit to drink, and my husband basically saw an English fan walk by and all my husband said was, "Too bad, mate. Good luck next time." That's all he said. My husband had walked off. He hadn't even heard what the guy said next.

Unfortunately for him or whatever, I was right behind when he [the guy] turned around, and he said… what did he say? I can't remember the exact words, but he said something to the effect of… I can't remember the exact words I'm really sorry. And those were very powerful words, it's sad that I can't remember them. I think he said, "Do you even belong here," or almost as if he questioned our right to talk about rugby. And that's an assumption, right? It's like saying, "Someone who looks like you shouldn't be talking about rugby, leave it to the White Kiwis."

And I froze and I gave him a dead stare, basically, because I couldn't do much else because I was shocked with what he said. He's like, "Oh, do you even belong here," like, "How dare you [say something like that]," "You don't even belong here," almost as if… And I realized later, if it was a cricket match, that guy wouldn't have dared to turn around and say anything. And that was a thought that crossed my mind. I don't know if I'm right or wrong. But I think if it was an India playing England match, he wouldn't dare to turn around and say anything. He probably would have gotten ugly in other ways because everyone had alcohol in them. But then, you know, it's like someone like me or my husband had no right to talk about rugby.

I almost couldn't watch a rugby match for awhile after that because it left such a sour taste in my mouth. And I realized how strongly sort of national identities are tied to it. I didn't realize there was an element of race. I hear of incidents from France and football, for example, and all of the French footballers who are of African descent. You hear of all of that. But then I guess I'd seen it play out for the first time here, and when you experience something for yourself, it's always a shock, right? It's one thing to hear of things that happen, that don't happen to you, and it's another thing when it happens to you. And for the first time I was like, "But I *do* belong here." If I like that sport, I should be able to say something about it. It shouldn't matter to you how I look. I should be able to say something about rugby because I am from here. And I guess it was the first time I sort of went, "I want to enforce my belonging here."

And yeah, the sports stuff was always… I mean, India has a whole history with Pakistan if you're familiar with that in this cricket match, so there's a whole… that's a whole other conversation, probably three

conversations if you want to go to the history of cricket matches between India and Pakistan. But it just left me stunned, I guess. It left me in a place where I just didn't want to watch rugby. And I did a bit of an auto ethnography piece for a conference and that's what I used to process the whole thing. I couldn't process it till then. It just left me numb. It left me angry.

And this is an interesting… this is a thing that may interest you. So there are people, when there's a cricket match between New Zealand and India, the first question [you get asked] is, "Guys, who are you supporting?" From family in India or friends in India, "Who are you supporting?" So I started to take to: I'm going to win either ways. It doesn't matter. I'm just going to enjoy the game. First of all, cricket is not a game I really terribly enjoy. But I've really just taken to, "I'm going to win no matter what." And that's amazing. That's not a situation everyone gets to be in. So I'm like, you know, that's the only way to get out of a seeming catch 22. So that's a very interesting sort of, I guess questioning of our identities from the homeland.

And that's a whole other different thing you have to deal with in your head now, because your belonging's kind of… I guess, not questioned… oh, I suppose it's questioned in an indirect sort of way. I think that's also interesting. And if you look at the comedy scene in India, there's a whole running theme of non-resident Indians basically. So it's also that: It's when you live this long away, it's that then being questioned about that side of your identity. And there's a lot of Indians who have aspirations to have the citizenship and passport of the country they move to. So it's a very interesting sort of, I guess, thing to deal with from the other side, if you will, a fight that you wouldn't expect, where you then get questioned about forgetting stuff or, you are too "westernized", quote unquote, or you know, you've lost touch with practices there or whatever, or your loyalties have changed and stuff like that. And I think it comes out in sports very interestingly, because this is something we always get asked.

F:
Maddy has been living in New Zealand for almost ten years. She reflects upon the various experiences she went through thus far, and how they are affected by the histories we learn.

M:
I'm sure this is not unique to me. I'm sure anyone who speaks anything other than English, and looks a certain way, would have had this, but the number of times people have said to me, "Oh, but your English is really good." I'm like, "Do you really not know who colonized us?" And I think people come at that question from a lot of different assumptions. I probably don't sound like I have… *I* think I have a heavy Indian accent. And I've sort of managed my accent quite a bit, that I realized that I do. So the way I enunciate stuff will sometimes change with the crowd. It's just a basic need to get communication going, right. But I think some of the people come from the assumption that I don't have a very heavy Indian language sounding accent sometimes, or they can't place me. It doesn't sound… I don't know what the word is… it doesn't sound very "typically Indian", or like Apu from what is that, *The Simpsons*? It's kind of either maybe I don't always sound like that. But I think this is a thing that really speaks a lot to the bubbles that a lot of people live in.

And the other thing I was going to share with you is when Queen Elizabeth died, I was amazed at the number of people here, English people – when I say *English* people, people from the UK – who had zero idea about the Kohinoor, or the diamond within the queen's crown and the colonial history behind it. And the people's lack of understanding of why… maybe it was a lot of mixed emotions when she passed away, and I was astounded by the lack of knowledge. And then it struck me just what kind of histories are being taught in different places. So a whole 150, 200 years were erased in some other nation, or it was told differently. I mean, I couldn't make sense of it. And I was just angry for a long time till I realized: They were just getting a different version of history. And I'm like, okay, it's probably why questions like, "But your English is so good" or remarks like that come from.

And this is something I've [also] noticed and I've thought about this: When we talk about New Zealand, first of all in India, a lot of people can't differentiate between Australia and New Zealand. I guess that's a mistake a lot of people make. But even New Zealand's always sold as a White country, if you know what I mean. And I land on these shores and I go, "There's a whole culture and community of people here, or communities people here who are indigenous to this land and they're completely invisible to the rest of the world." And that's a very sad thing. I had no idea. I just knew that New Zealand was a territory, that it was a part of the British Empire. I had no clue.

My imagination of New Zealand was always… it's like the US, there's a lot of White people, except for San Jose I guess, where there is a lot of Indians now. Or, you know, whatever, I'm going into bad stereotypes, but that's the… that's the kind of, I guess the image that's sold, as this Western… is not really "Western", but you know, Western or global north, whatever you want to call it, it's a nation of White people. But it's not. And I felt like a deep sense of grief, I guess, to realize that there's a whole set of people who are made invisible in how New Zealand's projected around the world. Like that's not… that's not done, you know. And, yeah, I had to really sort of… really do a 180 on how I saw and understood [New Zealand]. And I think that's where it becomes very obvious the kind of issues that this country grapples with.

F:
Maddy shares how her understanding of racism has evolved over time.

M:
I think it's changed over time. And I think my understanding of racism… and I'm gonna also say the word "colorism" [because] that's the word that comes to mind right now. I guess in India, or while I lived in India, there's always this… people of fairer complexion are held to a different standard than people who are of a darker complexion within our own communities. And I guess I had a very abstract understanding of racism as someone discriminating against me or being mean to me just because I looked a certain color. It was a very abstract thing. But I think it's shifted a lot more since living here because I can see very definite ties to colonialism. And it still stays that way, but I guess I've had to force myself to step back and kind of go, "Yes, there is a template," or, there's the… I don't know what the words are. I guess there's the average White person who [says or does something racist and people] kind of go, "Oh, that White person said whatever."

But I guess now I've had to take a step back and also kind of go, "But this person's maybe Irish or maybe Scottish or maybe American," and I have to really try and understand where that stuff that's coming out their mouth is coming from. So if there's a very obvious form of racism where they're like basically, "Oh, where are you *really* from," or, "Go back to where you came from," or, "Do you even have the right to say these stuff", those are very obvious. But I think the more nuanced interactions around race, stuff like, I don't know, I guess some of the other examples that I've given, I've had to really take a step back. So if an American is asking me, "How come your English is so good?, I've realize I've started to hold them to a very different… I come at that from a very different place, as opposed to when someone from England asks me that question. I don't know if it's answering what racism means to me. I guess I'm trying to say that, I understand at some deep level, discrimination is [someone] treating me as less than human because I look a certain way. But I guess it's become more complex. And it's not become easy. If anything, it's become murky. I don't think that's a bad thing.

And I think this is the interesting thing about New Zealand being bicultural, and I've had this conversation with other Indians where they said, "We've had other…", for example, unfortunately, they might have experienced a Māori person say, "Oh, go back to where you came from," right. And I'm like, "Is that racism?" And for a while, I'm like, "Maybe no, that's not racism, that's xenophobia." And then I had to backtrack and kind of go, "But people of color can be racist as well." And I think a lot of that's lost because we don't know how to make sense of that experience. There are incidents coming

from India where we've mistreated African national students. And that's racism. You know, you can't call it anything else other than that. That is racism. Or perhaps there is an element of xenophobia there because… I don't know. But I think there's like a way that when people of color become racist, and we can be racist, I think we need to accept that.

F:
Against the background of her experiences, Maddy shares what she thinks it means to be antiracist.

M:
It's a bit tough, isn't it? Because when you look a certain way, you almost… it's sort of a default mode sometimes, because it's survival. But for me, it's this: Whether it's race, whether it's gender, whether it's caste which is a huge thing in India, or religion, we have our differences. And those differences don't give anyone a right to treat someone else as less than human. That's one basic thing that we all are. We're all human. And that means that that person needs to be afforded a certain dignity and a certain level of rights. Everything else can come later. Everything else that makes us different can come later. But when you meet someone, you have to engage with that person as a human being first, as a living breathing human being who's very much the same as you or the next person. They have a heart that beats, they have basic physical processes, they have very similar emotions. These are not different. Those are very basic things. You have to engage with that person on that level.

And for me, I guess my thing with antiracism is, whether it's antiracism, or, you know, any sort of form of discrimination, I will question any worldview that's telling me not to treat someone as human first. There's something that needs to be fundamentally introspected on if something or some worldview is saying, "No, they're not worthy of it just because of this," or you can go down to a very heinous kind of acts just on that… I think it's that. You can't… I can't… I've struggled with my religious beliefs. I struggled with a lot of my different kinds of beliefs about things. The second I sat down to think… and something like religion and stuff is very… it's like the fabric of your growing up, right? It's kind of breaking down the fundamental blocks of your social identity. I had to sit down and go, "But something in here, somewhere along the way said I shouldn't treat this person as a human being because of this, because of a factor that's not in their control one, and two, because it doesn't matter. Because underneath it, we're all the same." We need to introspect and break down and think about whether it's worthy holding on to those views. And I guess that's the basis of my antiracist kind of way of being in the world, if you will. You just need to treat someone as a human being first then we can talk about all the wonderful things that make us different. And that flip needs to happen.

F:
You can find more information about the history of New Zealand and India, as well as other articles, books and videos Maddy 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 month, on July 5th!

This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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