

Episode 42: Pradeep

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be a Singaporean man of Tamil descent in Singapore and east Switzerland? In this episode, Pradeep shares his stories of growing up as a minority in Singapore, and his journey in not only making sense of the different ways in which racism manifests in different countries, but also in addressing them.

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

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P:

I come from Singapore, and I'm doing my Ph.D. in Switzerland currently. I'm of Indian, Tamil ethnic descent. And Singapore, many people have this misconception that it's part of China or it's related to China. It's not, but it is a Chinese-majority country, so I was already a minority back home. My family background is kind of lower middle income, I would say, with some financial struggles when I was younger. And also, in Singapore, just to give you more context, there are four official racial categories: Chinese, Malay, Indians, and others, which are usually Eurasians or people of mixed descent in some cases. And I would fall under the Indian category.

And even amongst the Indian category, most Indians – or at least this is how people, I think, think of Indians – they think that Indians tend to be dark-skinned. So I'm a light-skinned Indian. More right now than I was back in the days, but still, I think most people consider me a light-skinned Indian. And as a result of this, many people that I have encountered tend to have this misconception that I'm not from Singapore, that I'm an expat or I come from India because there's a huge expat population that comes from India to work and reside in Singapore. And as a result, sometimes they have this misconception that I'm more well off than I really was.

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Pradeep shares his experiences as a minority in Singapore in both preschool and primary school.

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So let me maybe begin by talking about my first, or my earliest memory of what I believe was a racist encounter. I think I must have been maybe four or five years old, in preschool essentially, and this was called "Kindergarten" back home. And in this particular school, there was only one language that was being taught, one more mother tongue that was being taught apart from English: and that was Mandarin. So I was also forced to learn Mandarin. But you know, I did a terrible job at it, apparently, and I wasn't learning anything, and I couldn't speak anything.

And then I quite distinctly remember one of the teachers basically having a go at me, like, "Why can't you learn properly?", like, you know, "It's not that difficult. Put your mind to it," or something like that. And that kind of always felt strange to me. It's probably one of my earliest memories, even. It was only years later that I looked back on it, and I was like, "This was probably racist," you know, because how can you really expect me to learn this completely foreign language at a similar pace to the other students, the majority of whom were of Chinese racial background? So that was kind of my first, I think, brush with it [racism].

Then we move on to primary school where another incident vividly sticks out to me. And that was when this didn't happen to me but [to] a friend of mine who was dark skinned Indian. And what was happening was that I think he was a rather playful kid, and like, always sweaty, full of energy, and stuff like that. And once, I think he was causing a bit of trouble in class or something like that, and the teacher kind of lashed out at him... I think he was trying to hand in an assignment or something like that, and she just kind of went, "Ew, I don't want to touch that. It's probably full of germs." And that felt kind of strange to me, like, "Why is she saying that?," you know, "I don't see her making similar comments to other students." So that's the kind of early childhood sort of experiences with racism that I can remember. I mean, there are many more, of course, and I have many more vague memories, but these ones really stand out to me.

And years later, [during] university, I was reading this article where this psychologist from the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore conducted an experiment with pre-schoolers in Singapore and found that pre-schoolers already have certain ideas about [how] Indians are better dancers, Chinese people are better at finance, stuff like that. So it [stereotypes] gets into you very, very early, and I must think that primary socialization has something to do with these attitudes.

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Pradeep would continue his studies in a high school that was considered so-called "elite", quote unquote. He shares the effects of this experience on his identity.

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In the high school that I was in, the minorities were even more a minority than in the general Singaporean population. And I think that's where most of my formative experiences which sort of shaped my relation to my ethnicity are from. And this is where, you know, there was really this culture of racialized or racial taunts, racist taunts, not just in terms of... not just taunts that were targeting our skin color, but also, just this general idea that Tamils are... the Tamil language is like a joke, or like the Indian culture, you know, of course, is filled with dancing and celebration, and they were targeting that as well. Also, things like the smell of Indians which was also a rather common form of insult. So that was ongoing and happened rather frequently and regularly, I would say, and that sort of shaped how I relate to my own culture. And I think that's where I really, on some conscious level, started shaping my identity to navigate these tensions.

And I would say that secondary school, high school, was when I really started to sort of anglicize myself a little bit more so that I wouldn't be perceived as this funny or sort of "other Indian" character that other people were so prone to viewing me as. So it essentially started this whole process of me distancing myself from my own ethnic background. It entailed a lot of things like immersing myself in Anglo-American pop culture, allowing my Singaporean-ess to inform my identity more than my Indian-ess by accentuating my accent, pretending to be worse at Tamil than I really was... Because in primary school, apparently I was pretty good at Tamil, and then in secondary school that just kind of shaved off of my identity, partly consciously, I would say. And of course, years later, right, I regret it. And I still kind of do, because I feel that there's this void in terms of my cultural sense of self. And so now I find myself watching Tamil films on the weekends and stuff like that, just trying to reconnect in some ways with my own culture.

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Pradeep says that questions around his identity didn't stop in high school. Instead, they would continue and manifest in other ways.

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I think when I was in high school, I was far more tanned than I am right now because I used to play a lot of sports and that would result in me having much darker skin than I have currently. But of course,

over the years, sort of my natural skin color returns, and then I noticed that people started asking me where I'm from a lot, ever since the age of like, 20, 21, I would say. And you know, initially, I didn't make much meaning of this. But over time, it dawns on me that I don't really fit people's stereotypical ideas of "a Singaporean Indian male" because they assume that Singaporean Indian males tend to be darker skinned from South India – which I am from, actually, my family is from – but don't really "look" it, I suppose.

So I'm not even kidding when I say that literally *every week* or *every other week*, I would have an encounter, whether it is with a cab driver or restaurant manager or just a stranger that I meet, who would ask me, "Hey, where are you from." And it's kind of like, yeah, I didn't think much of it. But dwelling on it further and further just causes this sense of a lack of belonging-kind of thing, almost. So that's kind of where I was and am with racism. I think, of course, a lot of these things have to do with the political context in Singapore, which maybe I should elaborate on...

So the Singaporean government's stance on racism, historically, and even currently, tends to be focused on this narrative of racial harmony. And most of the policies are geared around ensuring racial tolerance or preventing racial *intolerance* rather, so it's really premised upon this idea that the different races are sort of different and the goal of the government is to allow them to coexist rather than embrace one another, for lack of a better way of saying that. It has, very recently, been starting to acknowledge more that racism does indeed exist. Previously, it wasn't really talked about much. But still, it denies other things like the idea that...

I remember it's been quite a while now that this concept of privilege exists in people's vocabulary – I believe it was this American sociologist who came up with this concept, but over time, of course, it traveled to Singapore, and I guess a lot of people resonated with the idea and found that it allows them to express certain things they have experienced. So this concept of "Chinese privilege" exists in Singapore. But the government just flat-out denies it. So it's really the sort of culture that I grew up in, at least. I understand that things are changing a little bit now where racism and racist expressions are kind of the norm more than anything.

I remember a few years ago when a friend of mine who's also Indian was living in the United States. We grew up together in secondary school [in Singapore] but he moved to Canada, and then to the United States after that. He came back to visit me once [in Singapore] and we were talking about racism. And he was kind of telling me that to some extent, things are worse here because people don't talk about [racism] and it's not made taboo in any sense at all, like, racist expressions in daily life are almost the norm. Anytime a minority activist or anyone really tries to question it or race issue in public or political context, there's a huge backlash. The government even comes out and says now and then it's okay to have racial preferences, [that] we have to draw this distinction between racial preferences and racism per se.

So there are still these very old-fashioned, I would say "extreme"-sort of ideas about what racism is and a denial of it in public circles. There is a Singaporean rapper who's currently on trial in Singapore because he made a video a few years ago that basically criticized this actor painting his face brown to portray an Indian character. Many minorities found that offensive, and he made a song about it, and I think people launched a police complaint and [he] is now on trial. So this is the context that exists in Singapore. Racism is very much a normal. It has been for a very long time, a normal part of life. I think it's slowly changing. But very, very slowly.

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Pradeep says that similar dynamics are also present in state institutions, such as the Singaporean army, which drafts men after high school. He shares his reflections from his time at the army.

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There are racial dynamics in the military as well, but I hung out with a great group of friends when I was in the army, and [so] I think I never experienced any racism from them. But there are sort of racial dynamics involved in the military as well, in the sense that how the military in Singapore operates is heavily premised on one's educational sort of background and attainments. So you'll find that there are different intakes, like there are intakes for people with junior college education, and there are other intakes for those who have been in the technical institutes, or *polytechnics*, as they are called in Singapore. And more often than not, those who went to junior colleges will end up in commanding positions.

The military lasts two years. You have to serve, it's compulsory for everyone. And during this time, you sort of go through your basic trainings and then you come out with some kind of a rank essentially, after about six months to a year, I would say. And then the rest of your army life is either spent as a commander or, you know, someone who takes orders from these commanders. So, education kind of structures that experience. Most people that have this formal sort of junior college education end up becoming either sergeants or officers. I didn't, even though I went to the junior college. I have no idea why, but it's probably because I was terrible with everything to do with the army.

But more often than not, there is this kind of racial divide in who ends up in junior colleges itself, right? Most Chinese people, I would say, are maybe overrepresented, but minorities are definitely overrepresented in technical institutes. So what then happens is, the army sort of reinforces these structural divides in the sense of conferring more power onto those who had privilege or the fortune of receiving better education. I wouldn't say "better" education, just education that is seen as more valuable. So it's kind of this channel through which these other inequalities get reasserted. Yeah, that's the army in Singapore. But my experience I think, with racism, in the army, was definitely far more minimal than they were in school, I would say.

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After living his whole life in Singapore, Pradeep moved to a city in east Switzerland, St. Gallen, to pursue his tertiary studies.

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I must say that since coming here to Switzerland, I haven't experienced racism all that much in the day-to-day sense of the term. But there was this weird incident that happened when I went to the Swiss Political Science Conference in Basel. I was on the train, I was waiting to catch a train back from Bern with some other friends. And this guy just sort of approaches me and says, "Does this train go to Zurich?" And then I'm like, "What? What do you mean?" And he repeats himself, "Does this train go to Zurich?" And then he says, "Well, this is what Afghan refugees always ask me, 'Does this train go to Zurich?'" And then, I was just sort of stunned, and I didn't understand, and I was completely tuned out at that point and wasn't even paying attention. And he's like, "But it's just a joke. I don't mean it. Have a good day." And I was like, "Good day," and he left.

And, you know, it didn't occur to me in that moment that there was a racial sort of stereotype till a friend mentioned casually, "Hey, were you just weirdly racially profiled by this guy?" And then, yeah, it clicked in my head, "Ah, *that's* what happened." And I remember on the train ride back that I was a little bit mellow. I mean, I'm usually not the most talkative person, but I was a little bit more mellow than usual. And I think it was just this concerning feeling that something racist happened and I wasn't able to make sense of it immediately. So I think that was kind of a sobering reality check for me and teaching me that this is a completely new environment and I don't know all the ways in which racism is going to be expressed. So I think maybe that's something that we should also keep in mind, that

entering a new environment is always going to entail its own contradictions and challenges and tensions that you wouldn't necessarily be able to see [as a minority].

I'm very thankful for the friends that I was with that day because... I mean, it all happened so quickly. So I'm not going to hold against anyone for not saying anything because I myself didn't understand what was happening. But what happened was that on the train back, the three of us were sitting together and they were also minorities, and [so] we were just talking about our experiences with racism in our lives. So I think that allyship is definitely important, it's definitely part of being antiracist, just being there to support your friends, validate them when they tell you that they have been through something that they suspect or think was racist. So just, you know, support one another. Because it's going to be tough for minorities everywhere, right? So you just have to be there for one another, as cliché as that sounds.

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Against the background of this incident, Pradeep shares how important it is to know the context when facing such situations.

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Well, here it was definitely different because in Singapore, there's a part of me that's almost used to it [racism], you know, and so I'm just... I'm able to brush it off really easily. I know many others who can't. But I think me, personally, I have my own friends and family and it doesn't really matter to me what others make of me or treat me like, I think. So part of me has just grown, like acculturated to the Singaporean environment where I was in a situation, that, you know, essentially would be able to brush things off. But that's because I think of familiarity and that I have experienced these things before and they generally manifest in these ways. Sometimes even before they manifest themselves, you can anticipate them, you know.

And yeah, that's another thing: I think as minorities, certainly as a Singaporean Indian man, code-switching had become very normal to me in that like, I know that if I allow other people to determine their own ideas of me, it's not going to end well. So if I'm in a situation where I need things to go smoothly, or maybe I'm even a little anxious but they may not, I will sort of activate my academic voice or whatnot to try to appear more educated or whatever, so that the other person doesn't make assumptions [about me]. So I think I had a better sense of how to navigate these tensions in Singapore than I do right now, which is kind of a disconcerting feeling. But, you know, I think that's just part of being a minority. Obviously, it shouldn't be the case. But yeah, it's just a sad reality that you have to learn to cope with.

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Pradeep says the context also matters when evaluating whether a joke is "appropriate or not", quote unquote.

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I must admit that I haven't thought about these things fully just because of how complex they are to unravel. I've thought about this now and then, and I think amongst minorities, it's okay for us to bag on majorities and make jokes amongst ourselves because oftentimes, it's sort of a bonding experience and it's being done for an inclusionary purpose, and it's also rather reactionary and at times even therapeutic. So I think that's definitely one setting in which I will say racist jokes are more palatable than others. I would also say that your positionality in society matters a lot, and that, for me, I would think that a Malay and Indian person in Singapore probably... yeah, they probably would be able to trade jokes amongst themselves and banter amongst themselves without there being serious conflict between them... yeah, because they occupy similarly – obviously not the same but – like similarly marginal positions in society.

And I think it's always important to remember the political context in which everything is happening. So I think a lot of the resentment that minorities feel when, you know, someone from a majority race makes a joke about them, it essentially reflects the structural disparities in society. And I think that's where the antipathies are coming from. So if we did have a more equal society in which racial divides weren't as big a deal as they are, then I would think that context would allow jokes to be traded more easily.

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Against the background of his experiences and reflections, Pradeep shares his take on what it means to be anti-racist.

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For me, I mean, I don't think it requires you to be an activist to get involved, like politically in any way. But if things are happening in your midst, if the context allows for it, is to speak up and say, "I don't think that was okay," or do something that alludes to this situation being inappropriate. Maybe that's a low bar, but I'm thinking of many contexts in which minorities would feel discouraged from saying anything. So I think speaking up is important, definitely. And to me, an anti-racist, I think, should speak up, at the very least.

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Before wrapping up this episode, Pradeep wants all minorities everywhere to hear the following.

P:

I think maybe I'll end on a more positive note because I think a lot of the things that I talked about today can be kind of quite depressing. And I do believe the reality is depressing for minorities or People of Color anywhere. I do feel a tinge of sadness, for example, when I think about the fact that I probably never will have this normal life and that I'll be a minority pretty much wherever I go.

But I think we must sort of keep in mind that things can change slowly if each one of us sort of makes an effort and each one of us speaks out, you know, supports one another. And, more importantly, most places that you go to, or most places that you visit or frequent, more often than not, you'll see other minorities there. And I think that should be an important reminder to all of us that if others like you can make it, then so can you. You shouldn't let these sorts of experiences, or these depressive ideas get the better of you. I think it's important to always be an optimist in your heart.

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You can find more information about Singapore, as well as other articles, books and videos Pradeep 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 November 1st!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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A warm thank you to Pradeep for his invaluable time and energy in sharing with us important reflections on this issue.