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Everyday Racism in Singapore

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In 1992, in a parliamentary speech, MP Choo Wee Khiang remarked 'one evening, I drove to Little India [an Indian shopping enclave and popular tourist destination in Singapore] and it was pitch dark but not because there was no light, but because there were too many Indians around'. Choo later apologised in Parliament, though his disparaging and racist remarks had earned him no censure there. There was no public outrage against Choo's comments either. His ability to get away with the audacious witticism that pitch-darkness around Little India was due to the high number of (dark skinned) Indians in the area seems to suggest that there was tacit approval of his comments by other members of parliament.

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One evening in Singapore in July 2007, my wife and I were travelling on a bus to Little India to have dinner. We were seated behind a young Singaporean Chinese and a Caucasian woman who were engaged in a conversation. The Caucasian was a tourist from Europe visiting Singapore for the first time. She told the Chinese woman that she was on her way to explore the popular Little India district. She wondered how long the bus trip would take and where she should get off. The Chinese woman in a fairly serious tone remarked: 'Little India is a dirty and dangerous place. You do not want to go there on your own, because there are many Indian men loitering around and it is not safe.' The tourist was puzzled by the response. We were equally startled when we overheard those comments. Soon after, we arrived at our destination. The Caucasian woman also alighted at the same

> *stop as us and as she disappeared into the bustling streets of Little India with a camera in her hand, we stood in shock wondering at what we had just heard . . .*[1]

Multiracialism is a fundamental pillar of postcolonial Singaporean society. It is a political ideology that is actively promoted by the city-state to 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 as a racially tolerant and harmonious country and indeed the four official groups – Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others – have co-existed peacefully since its independence in 1965.[2] In fact, political leaders of this Chinese-dominated city-state repeatedly make the point that racial and religious harmony must not be taken for granted and that building a harmonious Singaporean society is an unfinished project. However, this does not mean that racial discrimination and intolerance are nonexistent. 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

Figure 13.1 Singapore's Little India (photo by the author)

instance, Lai 1995). More to the point, the term racism is completely absent in official discourses and public debates in Singapore. As the above two incidents suggest, racism is not uncommon in Singapore and it is not limited to perceptions of Indians in Little India alone but extends to other areas of Singaporean life. The comments by the parliamentarian may be a rare slip-up but such racist views as evidenced in the second story are widespread.

In this paper, I seek to document some of the everyday experiences of racism among Indians in Singapore.[3] Using research field notes and interviews with Indians in Singapore, I will outline a range of subtle to explicit forms of racism that are manifest in different social spaces and in everyday encounters and situations. I argue that while the city-state actively engages in activities targeted at 'fostering social cohesion' and is 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. Encounters and experiences of racism are seldom reported in the media. The lack of acknowledgement and limited public discussion have meant racist acts are simply never addressed. In addition, Singapore does not have anti-racism strategies and policies to mitigate the effects of everyday racism.

Racial riots, multiracialism and racism

The 1950 Maria Hertogh riots and those in 1964, which are often referred to as the Prophet Muhammad Birthday race riots, remain the two foremost events in Singapore history to have exposed serious racial tensions on this island state. The Maria Hertogh riots started on 11 December 1950. They were led by outraged Muslims after a court decision to award custody of Maria Hertogh – raised in a Muslim family – to her biological Dutch Catholic parents. The riots lasted three days with 18 killed, 173 injured and significant property damage. The 1964 race riots took place during two separate periods in July and September between Chinese and Malays. Although no clear causes were identified, state officials blamed Indonesian and communist provocateurs for instigating racial violence. As official history and discourse would have it, these riots were the country's most bitter experiences of 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 relationships and the disaffections that arise in the daily experience of living with cultural difference, meanwhile,

remain strategically unspoken. As a consequence, the notion of interracial solidarity is unquestioned and assumed to simply exist (Yong 1992).

In 1965, when Singapore left the Malaysian federation to become an independent nation, one of the foremost concerns of the People's Action Party (PAP) government was to ensure that such racial conflicts did not flare up 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. Being a nation of immigrants it also had to deal with a plethora of competing ethnic and national sentiments. The PAP addressed these challenges through what Chan (1975: 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 unions 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 programmes were put in place by the PAP government in an effort to build a nation-state. According to Quah (1990: 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 the existence in racial harmony. In institutionalising multiracialism

as a state ideology, the fragmented and divided nature of the nation no longer became an issue. Multiracial Singapore, with a population of around four million people – consisting of 77 per cent Chinese, 14 per cent Malays, 7.6 per cent Indians and 1.4 per cent Other (the 'CMIO' ratio) – was defined as an essential feature of a Singaporean identity and culture (see Velayutham 2007). The concept of Singapore's multiracialism was fostered through every conceivable means – in all forms of official cultural representations, social programmes, celebrations, schools, the media, national holidays and tourism (see Lai 1995).

In addition, the government also actively championed the ideology of meritocracy in order 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 (2006: 140–1),

> 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.

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 of the most notable critical assessments of Singapore's multiracial policy was provided by Geoffrey Benjamin (1976: 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 Ang and Stratton 1995; Chua 1998). The high visibility of race and racial divisions enables 'the state to set itself structurally above race, as the neutral umpire that oversees and maintains racial peace and racial equality' (Chua 2003: 61). This emphasis on race, however, has not

troubled the government or the people in comparison to other multicultural nation-states such as Britain, Canada and Australia. As Chua argues, 'there is an *apparent absence of anxiety* about being multiracial, about differences and potential conflicts that are presumed to be well policed and kept in check by legislation and by government agencies' (Chua 2003: 61; emphasis added). Yet, a racialised economic hierarchy with the Chinese on the top, the Malays at the bottom and the Indians straddling the middle exists in Singapore, as evidenced in the population censuses. This hierarchy is also reflected in income, education, housing and virtually every other social and economic category (Moore 2000). And yet racial discrimination, inter-racial tensions/discomforts and social disaffection in Singapore are not publicly discussed. Instead the need to maintain racial harmony, social cohesion and tolerance are repeatedly voiced to render racist practices as 'non-occurrences', and thereby even negate them to some extent. In other words, racism remains an unspoken word for fear that it may again raise the spectre of racial disaffection that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and lead to conflict. Moreover, for a nation which prides itself as a multiracial, multilingual, multireligious and multicultural society, there has been very little academic scholarship on racial relations, cross-cultural interaction and racism in Singapore. In this context, there have been no efforts by the government to bring to light instances of institutional or everyday racism. A rare exception is the case of three bloggers who were charged under the Sedition Act for publishing inflammatory racist remarks on the Internet in 2005. While the bloggers were punished for posting racist comments on the Internet (deemed to be in the public domain), other everyday acts of racism escape official scrutiny.

While the focus of this paper is on Indians and their experiences of racism, it goes without saying that other minority communities such as the Malays and Eurasians also experience racism in Singapore's Chinese-dominated society. Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that racism also exists within and between the minority groups such as the Indians, Malays and Eurasians as well as against migrant workers in Singapore.[4] For that matter, Indians and Eurasians can be both complicit with the Chinese in their negative portrayal and treatment of the Malays, and also team up with the Malays to challenge racist practices. The forming of inter-racial group solidarities either to perpetrate or resist racism according to circumstances and context highlights the fact that everyday racism is a complex and strategic process. In other instances, English-educated Chinese Singaporeans berate local employers for often discriminating against them in favour of expatriates (mostly

Caucasians) in their hiring practices and in the workplace. Occasionally, the Singapore media will report Singaporeans (most often Chinese) encountering racism while travelling or studying overseas – usually in Australia. However, racism in Singapore is seldom a talking point.

Nevertheless, there has been some academic interest in exploring perceived official and institutional racism suffered by the Malay community. The Malays, who are indigenous to the region, migrated to Singapore from Indonesia and Malaysia. Their 'indigenity' unfortunately has earned them the unenviable historical and cultural tag of the 'lazy native' (Alatas 1977). The works of Rahim (1998) and Li (1989) have drawn attention to the marginalisation, stereotyping and socioeconomic discrimination faced by Singapore Malays, despite the so-called meritocratic policies of the Singapore state (see also Yong 1992; Tamney 1996; Tremewan 1996; Chua 2003). In essence, racism against the Malay population is handled delicately by the government, which is conscious of a potential outcry from its neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia.[5] 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 such as Indonesia and Malaysia, racism directed against the Malays is also well publicised. In comparison, racism towards the Indians has received little academic attention. Even though Indians face racial discrimination in their everyday lives, their high socioeconomic standing relative to their population size positions them as a prosperous and successful community in Singapore. As a result, the possibilities of speaking out openly about encountering racism are constrained.

Encountering everyday racism

Although the term 'everyday life' is synonymous with the mundane and ordinary – according to Gouldner (1975) it is the stable, recurrent and seemingly unchanging features of the social life of ordinary individuals – it and its features are by no means insignificant. In particular, what Heller (1984) termed 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. The

mechanisms involved have been examined by Philomena Essed; she points out that:

> everyday racism is the integration of racism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioural) that activate underlying power relations. This process must be seen as a continuum through which the integration of racism into everyday practices becomes part of the expected, of the unquestionable, and of what is seen as normal by the dominant group.
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> [It is a] process in which a) socialized racist notions are integrated into meanings that make practices immediately definable and manageable, b) practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and repetitive, and c) underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations (Essed 1991: 50).

In this sense, everyday racism is a normalised act that reinforces underlying relations of power between dominant and minority racial/ethnic groups. Importantly, the process itself, as Essed has argued, must be seen as cyclical in nature in that racist acts become naturalised, mutually reproduce particular responses, and reinforce unequal power relations between the groups. Everyday racism is intimately connected with broader structural and dominant racial order. As Essed (1991: 39) argues 'specific practices, whether their consequences are intentional or unintentional, can be evaluated in terms of racism only when they are consistent with (our knowledge of) existing macro structures of racial inequality in the system'. In Singapore, although the state promulgates the idea of a meritocracy that supposedly accords equal status to all races in Singaporean society, the flow-on effect between the systemic and everyday racism and vice versa remains unspoken. There are, for instance, no anti-discrimination laws in Singapore to deal especially with biased hiring practices in the workplace. Thus, frequently we can find job advertisements seeking applicants who are 'Mandarin speakers only' or indicating that the workplace is a 'Chinese-speaking environment'. Employers have been allowed to do so without penalty even though this clearly discriminates against non-Mandarin speakers such as Malays and Indians. Furthermore, structural and institutional racism also occurs in local neighbourhoods, shops and schools, where it generally favours and privileges the dominant racial group over minorities. However, these practices remain largely unstudied.

Name-calling and racist jokes

The use of derogatory names with reference to one's physical appearance, mocking the ways Indians speak and their 'cultural traits' are common forms of everyday racism experienced by Indians. Racialised descriptors such as *hitam* (black in Malay) and *orang minyak* (oily person in Malay) are often used as a point of reference for ridicule and insult. Other terms used by Chinese and Malays include *keling*, *appu-na-na*, *mama*, *thambi, mangali* and *babu-singh*. The word *keling* is said to originate from the term 'Kalinga' – an ancient Indian kingdom that had considerable influence over Southeast Asia – which led to it being used to refer to persons of Indian origin. However, another popular myth suggests that the term is an onomatopoeia originating from the sounds made by the chains on Indian convict labourers who were sent to work in Singapore at the time of its founding as a British colony. Given this association, *keling* and its derivations *keling-kia* and *keling kwai* (devil/ghost) have taken on negative connotations and Indians mostly find the label offensive. Words such as *mama* (uncle in Tamil), *thambi* (younger brother in Tamil), *mangali* (a mispronunciation of the word Bengali but in Singapore erroneously used to refer to Sikhs) and *babu-singh* (Sikh brother in Punjabi), although not offensive in themselves, are commonly used in everyday contexts by non-Indians to address Indians. However, depending on the spirit of the utterance (especially when articulated by a non-Indian with a raised inflection), it can convey disrespect or condescension towards the addressee. According to Essed (1991: 256) name-calling is a form of intimidation, and in the Singapore context it can be argued that it is used as symbolic weapon by non-Indians to reproduce racial and cultural discrimination. Many of the respondents in my study cringe when they hear or are called by such names. They point out that they have felt anger and sometimes humiliation due to racial name-calling. Their recourse in such encounters has been either to ignore them or return a barrage of racial abuse back at the addresser. However, depending on the context, reverse name-calling by Indians does not have the same power or effect, given their minority status.

Other names such as *appu-na-na* (*appu* meaning father in Malayalam) is a play on words that mocks the way Indians talk to one another. As Siva, one of my informants noted:

> *I guess the most common form of racism encountered countless times would have to be members of the non-Indian races making fun of the*

> *Tamil language whenever Indians spoke among themselves. It was not just the Chinese who made fun, Malays too. This I have experienced since kindergarten all the way to national service and in the work environment. I have never encountered the Malay language being made fun of, because I think Malay is accepted as the national language and everyone sings the national anthem, and somehow it is programmed in people's minds as not a funny language. In school, I have also witnessed Chinese and Malay [race] teachers making fun of Tamil.*

Even though Tamil is one of the official languages in Singapore and most Singaporeans would encounter the spoken and written form of the language in their daily lives, making fun of the ways Indians 'speak', supposedly intended as a funny gesture/comment, is a common occurrence. This is usually done by mimicking the way Tamil is spoken (with head wobbles) and spurting out unintelligible and supposedly 'Indian'-sounding words. One respondent recalled an incident that happened to his friend:

> *While on bus journey, two Indian boys in primary school uniforms boarded the bus. When the bus came to a stop and one of boys got off, the other boy went to the exit and shouted at his friend to remind him of something. The Chinese bus driver started making fun of their Tamil and then said, 'Thambi! Makan ['eat' in Malay] curry good! But sit down, lah!'*

In this instance it would appear that there was no malice intended, but the way the driver spoke to the boy sounds patronising. The bus driver made fun of the Tamil – possibly mimicking the way an Indian would speak to instruct the boy to resume his seat as the bus was about to move. In a patronising manner, he calls the boy *Thambi* and admonishes him for supposedly misbehaving on the bus. His comments about eating curry indeed carry a racial overtone. Essed (1991: 257) argues that racist jokes and forms of ridicule are often conveyed in the 'expectation or hope for consent from others by way of laughter' and more importantly are 'integrated into casual conversations or presented as casual comments'. Obviously, the driver was expecting that the other passengers on the bus would agree with his comments and find them amusing.

Thus name-calling, ridicule and racist jokes which are supposedly spoken in jest reinforce racial difference and relations of power. For instance, calling an Indian 'black' or a dark-skinned person is not only about differentiating who is fairer than the other but also is aimed at pointing out that she/he is somewhat inferior. Similarly, ridiculing

the way Indians speak, a form of cultural racism, highlights the fact that there is little awareness of and respect for the cultural practices of Indians among other Singaporeans. In sum, these racist practices are offensive, hurtful and can even be intimidating. Whether they take place in the classroom, workplace or in public places, they are often difficult to deal with given that Indians are a quite small minority.

Black, dirty and smelly

As scholars such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Frantz Fanon (1965, 1967) have well argued, racism is an embodied experience. That is to say, racism is marked through the body, which can also be the site of racism. This is clearly illustrated in the old form of racism which relied on innate physical difference and traits to establish a hierarchy between the races. Those with dark skin were considered inferior and deficient compared to someone with fair skin. Reference to skin colour and physical attributes is an inescapable reality in Singapore. 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' [bean curd] in front of everyone. He later said he was just joking when my father complained to the school.*

Another respondent, 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.*

Obviously, the teacher was trying to say to Shanti that she was 'dark' on the outside (skin complexion) and rather 'soft' on the inside like bean curd and heckling her for her lack of physical prowess. It begs the question as to why he would add the prefix 'black' and not simply call her 'tofu' in an inoffensive way. In the second incident, the Chinese man's remarks mocking the teenagers splashing about in the pool, though appearing inoffensive, affected Gita very much. In both instances, the

Indian body is discredited and made to feel inferior because of its inability to perform according to dominant expectations. Singling out one's race or racial identity is a common practice in Singapore. However, and quite frequently, the underlying tone of such articulations tends to be negative, as in the case of the above situations. As these were pointed and racialised remarks, they were inflammatory and indeed hurtful, as if to say that 'one is not good enough'. Both respondents were left distraught after hearing them. The fact that the teacher got away with it by claiming that he had meant it as a joke highlights the power of everyday racism. Such remarks are legitimised and accepted because they are, as Essed (1991) has argued, presented as casual comments and not to be taken seriously.

Another common theme to emerge from this study is experience of racism on public transport. The involuntary proximity created by a crowded bus or train can lead to expressions of discomfort and subtle racism. As my informant Vimala (in her 20s) recalled:

> *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).*

Vimala's story strikingly mirrors one of the most cited passages in Fanon's (1967) book *Black Skin, White Masks*. While walking along the streets of Paris, accompanied by her mother, a little girl, upon seeing Fanon, exclaims, '. . . look, a negro! Mum, look at the negro, I'm frightened!' (1967: 90). For Fanon, this incident was not only traumatic but profoundly impacted on his sense of self. Although Vimala did not scare the girl, the girl certainly made it clear that Vimala was somehow repulsive. Here too, the comments highlight an extremely powerful and yet subtle way in which racism operates in everyday situations. Vimala noted that she was horrified and felt embarrassed when she heard the remarks. However, rather than telling the girl or her mother off for passing such an insensitive comment, and feeling awkward, she actually 'checked' herself so as to assure herself and by implication those around her that she did not smell or appear scruffy. Ironically, her action reinforced the racial stereotype and her relatively disempowered position as an ethnic minority.

Similarly, Ravi (in his late 30s) said:

> *On many occasions this incident has happened while I travelled in a bus. A Chinese co-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?

Here Ravi's rationalising of the practices of his co-passengers who seem to avoid sitting next to him is insightful as it again becomes an issue over his appearance. Because such incidents occur regularly, Ravi seemed convinced that something must be wrong and to some extent he had developed a sense of self-doubt about his body. A much more sinister account of this practice was narrated by Bala (in his 20s):

My first direct encounter with racism was probably my first day in kindergarten when Chinese classmates did not sit next to me or covered their noses whenever I was 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.

All of the above encounters revolve around issues of body odour, hygiene and the possibility of physical contact. The space of a classroom or a bus presents the chance for involuntary proximity between people from different racial backgrounds and forces them to rub shoulders. Such occasions can also unleash racial prejudices and discomforts held by different groups. Clearly, whether it is vocalised or acted out (covering of the nose or refraining from sitting next to an Indian), these actions are a reaction to particular negative perceptions about Indians.[6] Terms such as dark, 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'. Building on this idea, Wise (*forthcoming*) in her study on cross-cultural interactions points out that 'conceptions of dirt, and particularly smelly dirt, are so deeply enculturated that our experience of such matter out of place becomes epidermalised, felt on the skin, and inside the body, able to evoke the most palpable emotions of revulsion from within'. The displeasure people tend to express seems to be deeply embodied. While some chose to display it openly, others avoided physical proximity (though always subtly) by refraining from sitting next to my Indian respondents. A fear of contamination (and possibly personal safety) and disgust were the obvious reasons. This form of racial discrimination is extremely confronting and humiliating, as evidenced in the responses.

Another of my interviewees, Velu, argued:

> *. . . these kinds of everyday racism, I must admit, made me a racist as well, particularly in terms of how I viewed the other races, in terms of the people I hung out with (mainly Indians) and in terms of my perceptions of the country.*

It is interesting to note the kinds of strategies that Velu adopted to counter racism. He admits that he began developing racist attitudes against people around him in retaliation and chose to interact less with people of other races. In a sense, then, without official avenues of redress against such racism, many Indians like Velu are deeply bitter about their experiences of racism. The respondents in my study were clearly affected by disparaging remarks directed at them to the point that they felt that it had damaged their self-esteem and confidence. 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 the nose in revulsion, may not appear as acts of racism but are powerful means by which displeasure and fear is conveyed.

Incivility, distrust and other forms of discrimination

English is the official language of business and instruction in Singapore, but it is used to a more limited extent in private and social settings; sometimes its non-use in those contexts can be selective. While it is not uncommon that the races speak their own mother tongue socially, this choice can be influenced by a tendency for dominant groups to exclude minorities from the conversation. As Mani noted, 'linguistic discrimination is most obvious as many Chinese speak Chinese in my presence'. Similarly, Gita pointed out that 'Chinese is more commonly spoken than English even if you are in the group. This can evoke strong feelings of isolation and feeling "left out"'. These experiences highlight a lack of consideration among dominant group members for those around them who can't speak their language. While strictly speaking it is not a racist act, in a social group situation it is both rude and shuts out non-speakers.

The dynamics of cross-cultural interaction and prosaic encounters also contribute to the generation of numerous racial stereotypes of the various races. For instance, Indians are generally regarded as 'good talkers' or 'debaters' because of their high level of English-language proficiency. Equally, there are many negative views about Indians, especially

in relation to their behaviour and attitude, that circulate widely in Singapore. As Siva, recalling his childhood experience, said:

> *My childhood friend was a Peranakan Chinese. We have been close friends since we were eight years old. His parents, however, in our pre-teen and teenage years, were wary of his friendship with me. He would share with me that his parents and brother often warned him that he can never trust an Indian and that Indians were conmen. And within his family they referred to me as the 'bum'. His father would often remark to him, 'So, you're hanging out with that bum again?'*

Being 'untrustworthy' and prone to 'cheating' are stereotypes that haunt most ethnic minorities. The boy's family obviously did not approve his association with an Indian because they regarded Indians as deceptive and lazy and therefore assumed Siva would be a bad influence on their son.

The notion that Indians cannot be trusted was echoed in another situation – once again during a bus journey. As Vijay recounted:

> *Some years back while on a bus, a Chinese bus inspector spoke to me in a very loud and rude manner when I had paid a lower fare for my journey. He said, 'Hello! You go where?! Your fare expire already!' I did not have a fare card and started looking for change in my pocket. During which time he barked, 'If you no money, you get down next stop!' I managed to find some change and got a new ticket. The experience was embarrassing as the bus was also crowded. Sitting opposite me was a Caucasian passenger whom the bus inspector also found to have paid a lower fare. Amazingly, he bends over and spoke to him respectfully in a polite and soft voice, 'Excuse me sir, may I know where you go?' And he proceeds to advise him the correct fare and did even not ask him to pay for another ticket! Incidentally that Caucasian was a friend whom I was travelling with. My friend later joked that as a white man he can get away with almost anything in Singapore and still be treated nicely.*

And on another occasion:

> *A few years back, my Chinese friend and I boarded a SBS bus in Orchard Road for a journey two stops away. The Chinese bus driver stopped and questioned (impolitely) where I was travelling to since I paid cash for the lowest fare. I cannot help but wonder why my Chinese friend was not*

stopped since he boarded the bus before me, and he also paid cash. So the driver was clearly aware of what both of us paid.

As in the previous examples of passengers who avoided sitting next to an Indian on public transport for whatever reason, querying whether someone has paid the correct bus fare or not are instances that are often difficult to identify conclusively as acts of racism. Nevertheless, looking at the way Vijay was spoken in comparison to his travelling companions, it does raise the possibility that he received differential treatment. The Caucasian passenger, on the other hand, was not publicly shamed for his incorrect fare nor was the Chinese passenger pulled up to verify his fare. Differential treatment is a subtle form of discrimination. Under the circumstances, one cannot help but wonder if Vijay was treated unfairly. It also certainly reinforces the proposition that a perception exists that Indian passengers are likely to be dishonest and cannot be trusted to pay the correct fare.

Conclusion

The term racism is almost a non-operative word in public Singapore as it is hardly ever discussed in official discourses. The lack of attention given to identifying and exposing everyday racism there leaves much to be desired. As a result, it continues to simmer beneath the warm and fuzzy image of a multiracial Singapore, harmonious and tolerant. While there are some studies looking at the marginalisation and socioeconomic discrimination faced by Malays, more research is needed to examine structural and everyday forms of racism as experienced by racial minority groups. The Indians are a racial minority in Singapore who are often over-represented in official statistics as high achievers in terms of education, employment and social status. Discrimination, intolerance and racism against Indians and in particular within dominant and minority relationships and encounters are common occurrences. This paper is therefore a first step towards highlighting some of the racial discrimination endured by Indians in everyday situations. Everyday racism involves racist practices that are integrated into everyday normal interactions and which in turn reinforce underlying racial and ethnic relations (Essed 1991). Based on my fieldwork and interviews with Indians in Singapore, I outlined a number of examples of everyday racism. The respondents reported having encountered discrimination in various situations and places. They included name-calling, racist jokes, use of expletives, covering of noses, avoidance of close contact and

differential treatment. This list is by no means exhaustive. The forms of racial discrimination that Indians experience in the everyday context shift between old and new forms of racism based around biological inferiority and cultural difference respectively. More importantly, as we gathered from the responses, racism and discriminatory practices also tended to vary from casual comments and mocking to subtle and concealed acts. Most respondents revealed that such experiences were deeply distressing and humiliating. Often they were not able to challenge or retaliate against racist practices given the situation and due to their relatively disempowered position. But it became clear that they developed negative attitudes and interacted less with other racial groups and in some cases simply had to put up with such practices.

The experience of Indians highlights the point that racial prejudices and stereotypes are reproduced in everyday situations to abuse, socially exclude and perpetuate racial hierarchies between the races. It is not surprising that, as demonstrated in the opening anecdotes, such practices have important implications for the position of Indians within Singaporean society. Given their minority status, experiences of everyday racism, if not addressed in political and policy debates, are likely to fuel more resentments and a sense of alienation among the Indians. Moreover, it goes without saying that everyday racism experienced by Indians is also indicative of potential structural racism that may exist in Singapore against minority groups.

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Notes

1. These are the author's own field notes.
2. Singapore was founded by the British in 1819. It later became a crown colony and flourished as an entrepôt attracting immigrants from China, India and neighbouring countries.
3. The Indians, along with the Chinese and Malay population, arrived as immigrants to Singapore after its founding in 1819. They are the third largest ethnic group in Singapore. In official policies, the category Indian is used to describe anyone who has ancestral links to India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh.
4. In 2007, according to Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, there were 577,000 foreign workers (excluding foreign female domestic workers) employed in low-skilled jobs in manufacturing and construction sectors. The foreign workers are mainly from China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Burma and the Philippines. Many of these workers congregate at a number of public spaces

such as shopping malls and parks and enclaves such as Little India and Chinatown on Sundays and public holidays that are also frequented by Singaporeans. Racism and class discrimination against these workers have intensified over the years. Their visible presence has generated anxieties, discomfort and racist sentiments among Singaporeans who claim that they feel unsafe as the workers litter, consume alcohol and misbehave in these places.

5. The issue of loyalty among the Malays to the Singapore nation and the broader Islamic community in the region in times of conflict is a constant worrying point for the Singapore government. It is a commonly held view that Malays have been denied key military appointments, including as pilots in the Singapore air force, because of the possibility of them shifting their allegiances.
6. It should be pointed out that discomforts and tensions arising out of unaccustomed sensory experiences in cross-cultural encounters – for instance cooking/food smells and ethnic music – frequently emerge in multicultural Singapore.

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