'Find woman of your race': Indian-origin man abused in Singapore over Chinese-origin girlfriend

Saikiran Kannan

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SINGAPORE: Only last month, Singapore witnessed an alleged racially motivated incident against an Indian woman. Rising suspicion due to the spread of Covid and fears of losing out jobs have started turning a small percentage of Singaporeans against other communities the sentiment often being aided by small-time politicians.

Around the time the Indian woman was heckled, the two countries were involved in a mini diplomatic fiasco sparked by Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's comments on the "dangerous Singapore strain" of coronavirus.

And now, yet another alleged incident of race-inspired faceoff has come to the fore in the multi-cultural country, evoking strong reactions from the Singaporean Home minister.

What actually happened

Around 8 pm on June 5, Dave Parkash, a Singaporean man of Indian origin, was verbally abused and humiliated by a Singaporean man of Chinese origin. The incident took place near the junction of Wheelock Place and Far East Shopping Centre. Dave and his girlfriend were confronted by the man who told them in no uncertain terms that they must be dating only people of their own race.

The man then questioned the girl if her parents would be proud of her dating an Indian man. He further accused Indian men of "preying" on Chinese girls. Parkash responded by saying that he had crossed the line.

Posting a 9-minute video of the confrontation shot by his girlfriend, Dave wrote on Facebook, "Just because my girlfriend and I are from different races, he humiliated us in public by shaming both her and I like as though we did something wrong."

Dave further adds, "I come from a mixed-race background and so is my girlfriend. We both are mixed race, but we are proud to be Singaporeans. I feel we shouldn't be publicly shamed just because of our skin colour. Love is love. Love has no race love has no religion. You and I should be able to love whoever we want to love. Let's not become like this man in the video."

How Singapore reacted

The incident has not gone down well with the government. Singapore Home minister K Shanmugam reacted by writing a post on Facebook, titled, "Racist to love someone of a different race?"

Shanmugam said though the video is yet to be verified, but if it was indeed as it looks, it's a "horrible" thing to have happened. "It seems like more people are finding it acceptable, to make 'in your face' racist statements openly. And some try to explain away, each time something like this happens."

Shanmugam added that this was "quite unacceptable, very worrying". "I used to believe that Singapore was moving in the right direction on racial tolerance and harmony. Based on recent events, I am not so sure anymore."

The incident evoked strong sentiments from the general population as well, who are not used to repeated events like these looking to disturb the secular and multicultural fabric of the nation. Ever since the start of the pandemic, Singapore has seen a spate of incidents of similar nature directed at different ethnicities.

Professor Mathew Mathews, the head of Social Lab and Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS), wrote a commentary on the recent spate of incidents for Channel News Asia.

He said, "The pattern is clear: With a spike in Covid-19 cases, negative sentiments of the xenophobic and racist variety increase. Such sentiments were earlier directed at Chinese nationals in January 2020 after the virus spread from Wuhan, China. Similar sentiments were directed at Muslims in the region after an outbreak occurred in Malaysia following large-scale religious gatherings there around that period. South Asian migrant workers living in dorms were also targeted. A forum letter implicated poor hygiene culture among such workers, completely ignoring the fact that the living conditions in migrant worker dormitories did not permit for much infection control."

Almost everyone who commented on Dave's post shared their support for him. Dipa Swaminathan, a Singaporean lawyer, was overwhelmed with emotions. "As it is, people who are of Indian race [whether Singaporean or otherwise] may be feeling persecuted here these days and succumbing to an appeasement culture. Such incidents could mean the final straw. Do we really want to raise our children in an intolerant, narrow-minded and xenophobic culture or teach them to be inclusive, broad-minded, and compassionate individuals? If so, we need

to lead by example. And everyone who encounters a racist must call them out to be so. It is not just Singaporeans [I am one myself] who should be spared racism: it's all residents and visitors. If we start cultivating a mindset that it's ok to trash foreigners while respect and tolerance is only reserved for Singaporeans, that's a slippery slope," she said.

Amrin Amin, a lawyer and community activist, also reacted to the incident. He said, "What a bigot! I hope there's a better explanation for his racist rant. I'm concerned by this and other recent incidents of racism. I'm very worried with what I see. Even more by what's not said and heard. Such racist outbursts are usually just a tip of the iceberg. I remember during dialogues on Elected Presidency a few had shared that Singapore is post-race and race does not matter as much it was a scare tactic that had no basis. I'm not so sure. Base instincts are hard to erase. There's more to do to combat racism. For a start, we should call out racists and reject the views they brazenly exhibit as a disgrace and affront to our values."

However, it is understood that the government will continue to react and act strongly on such alleged incidents of hate crimes.