

Who is Subhas Nair, rapper against racism jailed in Singapore?

Indian-origin rapper Subhash Nair started his six-week prison term on February 5. Nair was fighting the racial bias that Indians in Singapore face and the jail term is being seen as a result of this campaign. Here's more about Nair and his fight against racism in Singapore, where Indians are a sizeable minority community.

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Subhas Nair is a rapper against racism. And he's in jail now. The Indian-origin rapper in Singapore has been vocal about the privileges Chinese-origin citizens get and the racism against Indian- and Malay-origin people in Singapore. [Nair began his six-week prison sentence](#) on February 5 for allegedly inciting ill will on the basis of race and religion in Singapore. His supporters believe that his vehement criticism of the Singaporean system has led to him facing severe consequences.

Subhas Govin Prabhakar Nair, 32, is a rapper and a hip-hop singer who makes social commentary about the society he lives in. He has referred to himself as "a concerned citizen unsatisfied with (the) status quo".

He currently faces four charges. One of the charges is related to an Instagram post about Chan Jia Xing, a Chinese-origin man involved in the 2019 Orchard Towers murder of an Indian-origin person, Satheesh Noel Gobidass, according to a Straits Times report.

The 2019 Orchard Towers murder was a case where a group of men attacked the 31-year-old Gobidass, and stabbed him to death.

Initially, Chan was charged with murder, but later his charges were reduced to helping a person carrying a weapon in a public place, and he was given a conditional warning in October 2020.

It was like a light rap on the knuckles for a heinous crime. People alleged that Chan got off the hook lightly because he was of Chinese origin.

Nair was given a two-year conditional warning by the police for the Instagram video. However, he put out posts with racial commentary on social media.

Nair wrote that "calling out racism and Chinese privilege" equalled a two-year conditional warning and "smear campaign in the media", while "actually conspiring to murder an Indian man" equalled half the sentence and a question of "you're having a baby soon right? Boy or girl" from the media.

His responses must be seen in the light of rampant racism in Singapore. In the form of Chinese privilege and in the form of racism against ethnic minorities, including Indians.

Ethnic Indians form 8.8% of Singapore's population.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INDIANS A REALITY IN SINGAPORE

A survey in Singapore revealed that 23.4% of Indians and 23.7% of Malays, both sizeable minorities in the country, reported feeling racial discrimination at work. In comparison, just 6% of Chinese Singaporeans felt racial bias, according to the 2024 survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and NGO OnePeople.sg.

A 2022 survey by the IPS of 2,000 Singapore residents found that about one-fifth of minority-race people discussed experiencing racism at work.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam admitted in 2022 that there was racism in Singapore like in "every multiracial society around the world". He said "We discuss (racism in Singapore) openly. We study it, for example (through) the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) surveys."

Singapore lawmakers are aware of this and are trying to take corrective steps. However, the jailing of Nair is a stark reality too.

On February 4 this year, the Singapore Parliament passed a bill called the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act. This will include people involved in "content prejudicing", according to a report by CNA, a Singapore daily.

"You cannot, by law, force people of different races to get along with one another. Nor can you prevent insensitivity, or racist slights, from happening in everyday interactions, by passing a law," said Shanmugam in Parliament on February 4.

RACISM AGAINST INDIANS IN SINGAPORE AND CHINESE PRIVILEGE

Nair's work, such as his 2018 album, Not a Public Assembly, has discussed the issue of migrants and what it means to be a minority in Singapore.

The rapper had earlier criticised the disparity in the treatment of the case, comparing the leniency shown to Chan with the harsh consequences faced by those speaking out against racism.

He highlighted this disparity and stated, "Calling out racism and Chinese privilege = two-year conditional warning and media smear campaign. Conspiring to murder an Indian man = light sentence and media sympathy," he said.

As for Nair's charges, they include his performance at The Substation in 2021, where he displayed a hand-drawn replica of his Instagram post about the murder of Satheesh Noel Gobidass.

He also released a controversial rap video in 2019 which featured an advertisement featuring local actor Dennis Chew, who portrayed multiple ethnicities, including an Indian man, using "brownface." The rap contained lyrics deemed offensive to Chinese people, which authorities claimed promoted ill will.

"How can a man wear brown and wear a tudung? " they rapped. "Chinese people are always out here f**king it up," they said in the chorus.

Nair has also discussed Chinese privileges over Muslims and other sections of Singaporean society.

In a video by Jaime Wong, founder of the City Revival Church, and social media influencer Joanna Theng, they were seen linking the Pride movement to Satan.

"If two Malay Muslims made a video promoting Islam and saying the kinds of hateful things these Chinese Christians said, ISD (Internal Security Department) would have been at the door before they even hit 'upload'", he said. He removed the post later but was charged for it.

This is in line with the reports of racism which already exists in Singapore.

According to a survey by CNA on racial and religious harmony in Singapore, 62.8 percent of Chinese respondents said that they never felt discriminated against in the workplace or at work, but only 40.4% of Malay respondents stated that they never felt discriminated against.

EMOTIVE RESPONSES, TYPICAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSES, SAYS LAWYER

Nair's lawyer, Too Xing Ji, argued during the appeal that his actions were emotive responses to racism typical of social media discourse and were not intended to incite racial hostility.

The lawyer maintained that Nair's posts and the rap video sought to highlight systemic inequalities rather than promote discord. However, Justice Hoo Sheau Peng upheld the conviction, stating that the law did not require proof of malicious intent. She asserted that Nair had knowingly promoted ill will and displayed a disregard for the law, even after receiving a conditional warning in 2019.

Justice Hoo emphasised the harmful potential of social media in amplifying sensitive racial and religious issues. She dismissed Nair's argument that a fine of \$5,600 should replace imprisonment, ruling that deterrence was crucial given the magnitude of harm his actions could cause.

She also highlighted Nair's repeated offences despite prior warnings. Concluding that the six-week sentence was appropriate and not excessive, the judge stated that the punishment was necessary to reflect the seriousness of his actions.

Nair, an Indian-origin Singaporean, has spoken about his lived reality and highlighted the systemic inequalities. His case has sparked discussions on freedom of expression, racial harmony, and the limits of social justice advocacy in Singapore.