

Are You Proud Being You?

A Discussion on Racism, Prejudice, Discrimination and Women

By Sunila Abeysekera

Opening up a discussion on the various aspects of racism and other forms of discrimination on ethnic, religious and linguistic grounds within any society poses several problems.

On the one hand, such a discussion challenges us to confront our own prejudices, and understand where they could be coming from. We also begin to see the connections between personal prejudices and social constructions of 'self' and the 'other' that generate aggression and hostility not only between individuals but also between communities.

On the other hand, this discussion pushes us to try and understand the consequences of racism and other forms of prejudice when they manifest themselves as ideologies (that in turn evolve into the basis of political formations). Our own feelings of attachment to country, language, religion and culture then come into conflict with the public, social and political expressions of this love; often, these are exclusionary and tainted by hatred of all those who do not 'belong' to our country, or speak our language, or worship our gods.

In May 2000, at the Isis office in Manila, we began a conversation about

ourselves and our feelings about all the different expressions of identity and identity-based political formations that we were experiencing throughout Asia.

We wanted to become more aware of the issues at stake as we moved into different forms of involvement and activism around the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) which is due to be held in South Africa in 2001. At the same time, it was clear that achieving a more sophisticated understanding of these complex issues would help us in the work we do around women in conflict situations, who are often caught between their identities as individuals and as members of tribes and communities.

A critical area of the discussion on racism, discrimination and prejudice is about the specific ways in which women are affected by racism and other forms of prejudice based on difference. Making the whole process of the WCAR more gender sensitive and expanding the definition and analysis of racism to include all other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, descent and tribal origin, for example, can be a critical contribution that we can make to the debates and discussions around the WCAR.

Our conversation started off as a discussion about power, and about which groups had power in society.

We took the Philippines as an example, because most of us were from the country. Several spoke about the power of the Catholic church and the homogenising role that it has played in Philippine history. Did being a Catholic then give you some degree of power over those of other religious groups, who were in a very tiny minority? The answer was 'Yes.' A second category of people who were described as being powerful were the landlords, who also had political power and were in controlling positions in the national legislative bodies.

This led to a discussion on the links between political power and economic power, as well as to a discussion on classical Marxist analysis which categorised people on the basis of 'class.'

We spoke about how classifying people according to their economic status and their access to the means of production could at times cloud issues of race and identity. Discussing 'class' as a social category, we focused on how commonality of economic interest was assumed to be the primary factor in constituting a 'class' community. The fact

that in many of our societies, it was people of one particular colour, one particular religion, language or ethnic group who had economic power was not considered an important feature in terms of a classical 'class' analysis. According to this framework, women were categorised according to the class to which their menfolk belonged and were

unpack the category of 'privilege,' and understand that it is not only capital that confers social, economic and political power. This leads us on to a discussion about the role played by 'difference' in privileging certain social groups and categories over others, sharpening our understanding of racism and all other forms of discrimination based

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not considered to have any independent political status. Thus, women who came from the bourgeoisie were considered to be a part of the bourgeoisie, whereas if they belonged to working class families, they were automatically assumed to be a part of the working class.

It has taken many years for traditional 'class' analysis to expand its understanding of the construction of social difference and of the processes of social stratification. Many feminists and other modern scholars must be credited with introducing the idea of cross-cutting factors such as race, ethnicity and gender into social analysis and developing the understanding that these factors play as critical a role in determining our positioning within society as our economic status.

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on difference. Questions of the social construction of difference and of the elimination of discrimination based on difference are also critical within the human rights framework, because 'equality' is a key principle in human rights.

Deepening our understanding of power and privilege in this way leads us to question 'democracy.'

The traditional model of democracy as most of us know it today is a 'majoritarian' one. According to this system, those who are more in number also wield more power, because every individual is entitled to one vote. Under this scheme, if you have 70 percent Catholics in the Philippines then automatically Catholics have more power. In Sri Lanka it is this system of governance that has led to the Sinhala majority dominating the political arena in the 50 years since the country became independent.

In the context of many uprisings by minority communities within majoritarian systems, it has become clear that this model of democracy, in which being more in number means having more access to political, economic and social power, has failed to create legislative structures that are appropriate to the societies they govern. A majoritarian system creates many institutions and structures that directly and indirectly discriminate against those who don't belong to the majority group.

Discrimination that is based on prejudice therefore creates a situation that confronts us with the challenge of accommodating diversities and differences in our structures of governance.

In the last years, throughout our region we have seen a whole range of experiments with forms of governance. Some countries have tried having two chambers in their legislative bodies; others speak of devolution, decentralisation of power, federalism. All kinds of solutions are being proposed to create a democratic system that is more representative and that does not privilege mere numbers.

Through this privileging of the majority, you see the emergence of the social and cultural basis of xenophobia, or mistrust and hatred of the 'other.' It also leads to an emphasis on assimilation and homogenisation, which could destroy many rich and diverse forms of tradition and cultural expression. The pressure to assimilate and to become like the majority so that you may reap

the benefits of that society can also in its turn lead to extreme forms of nationalism and chauvinism, with stress being placed on affirming that one's own language, or religion, for example, is superior to that of the 'other.'

This is an interesting and disturbing development because being different, or more numerous, need not

one mentioned the word racism, the immediate impression was of a black/white dichotomy. Xenophobia was equally easily defined as the fear of Europeans about 'slant-eyed' people.

World War II and the rise of Fascism in Europe saw the emergence of different myths of racial superiority and inferiority. The Nazi party propagated

attitudes to many different typologies. One of the most interesting is the racialist prejudice expressed by some 'White' Europeans against other 'White' Europeans which has come about as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the influx of many disadvantaged and poor persons from the former Soviet Union into Western Europe. The basis of discrimination has been transformed, from being one based on visible difference to one based on other differences. This has led to a serious rethinking of issues around racism and hatred of migrants because it is clearly no longer an issue of racial difference or visible difference, but a much more complex set of factors.

Throughout history, whether it is linked to prejudices against Jewish people in Germany, or against Tamils in Sri Lanka, or against Muslims in some parts of India, there is a certain way in which the economic status of a community becomes the basis for justifying their exclusion and marginalisation from mainstream society.

necessarily mean being superior. The question we should be asking then is HOW the articulation of difference is transformed from being a positive value-diversity to being a negative value-discrimination.

The history of racism and xenophobia in the modern period provides us with insights into how the concepts of discrimination and the right to equality were framed around the middle of the 20th century.

First, there were the issues of slavery and of discrimination against people from Africa, particularly in North America. Many international standards on human rights are based on the principles of anti-racism that were established during this time. Right up to the middle of the 20th century, when

the myth of Aryan superiority, and conducted terrible biological experiments with women and children in their search for the perfect 'Aryan' person. Theories of 'eugenics' or tampering with the gene pool in a very primitive way in order to 'breed' or reproduce the perfect person were among the most abhorrent to emerge from that period. And yet these ideas were accepted as rational and scientific and actually propagated throughout the Western world. Prohibitions placed on certain categories of people from procreating were very much a part of this ideology. That is why radical women's groups are so opposed to new processes of 'genetic engineering,' and 'genetic modification' that are going on right now.

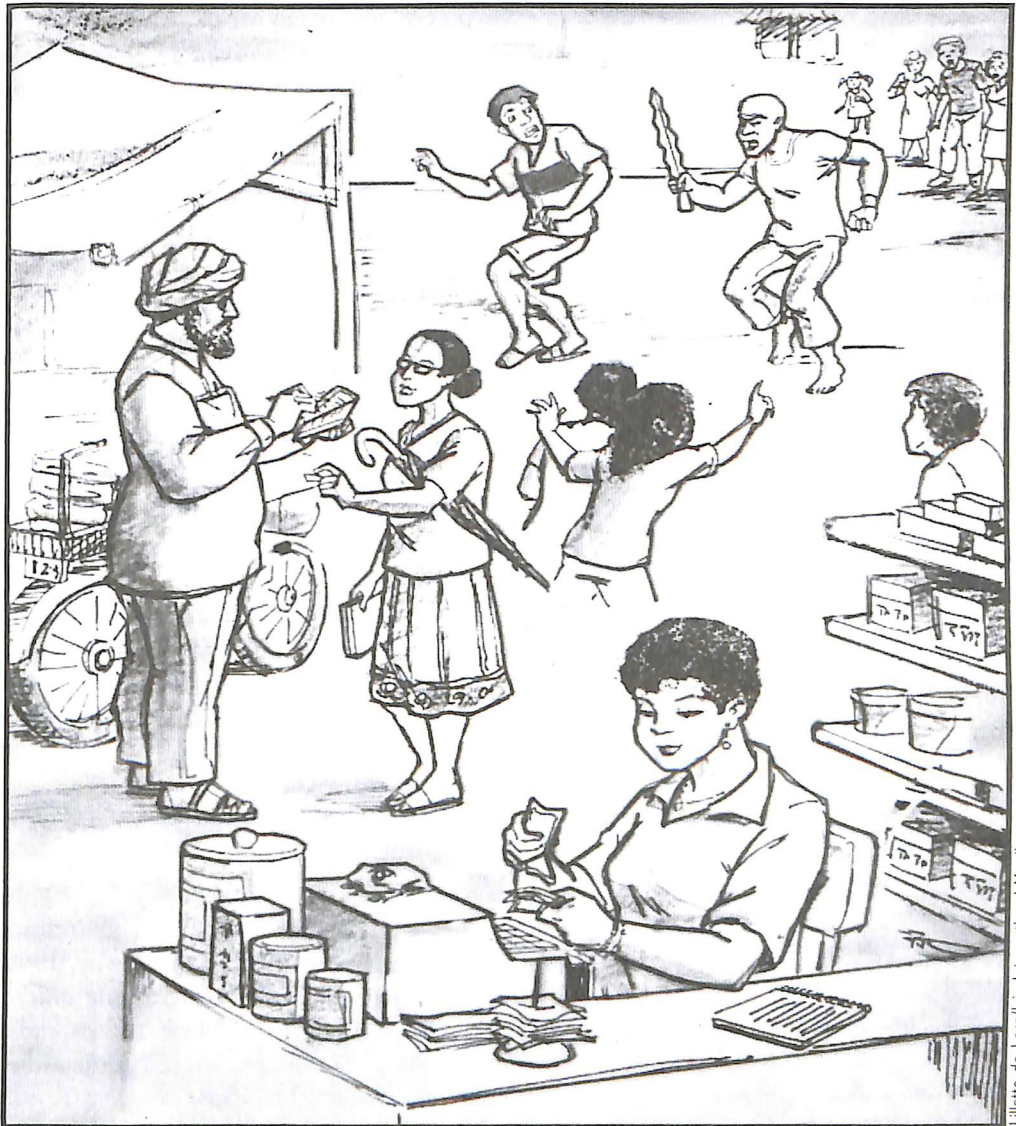
As we approach the 21st century, we can see the expansion of racialist

This idea of the 'other' as being rich, controlling the economy, controlling trade, is an age-old one when it comes to discrimination and prejudice. Throughout history, whether it is linked to prejudices against Jewish people in Germany, or against Tamils in Sri Lanka, or against Muslims in some parts of India, there is a certain way in which the economic status of a community becomes the basis for justifying their exclusion and marginalisation from mainstream society. And it is through a heightening of this process of exclusion and marginalisation that one can end up in a situation in which ethnic riots and 'cleansing' take place, in which the most brutal treatment is meted out in an indiscriminate manner to members of communities about whom prejudices have been built up. When there is prejudice and hatred then it sadly

extends to all the members of a particular community, not only to those of that community who are rich or powerful.

This process of exclusion and marginalisation also leads to a 'coming together' of these excluded and marginalised groups, and to an affirmation of their collective identity. As they perceive their construction as the 'other,' as they become aware of the impact of prejudice and discrimination on their day-to-day lives, the process of identification can move one step forward and become a political expression.

Malaysia is an interesting example, because it is a society that has understood this process of ethnic identity formation in a particular way. As a response, in Malaysia you see a sanctioning of ethnic political parties: The Malays, the Chinese, the Tamils, all



Stereotypes of certain sectors in Philippine society: a Muslim running amok, an Indian lending money and a Chinese keeping shop.

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have their own political parties. In some other countries in Asia, it is an offense to create political parties that have a particular ethnic or religious affiliation. In such situations, the religious or ethnic groups create powerful political lobbies, and play an influential role without having a political formation as such. For example, in the Philippines, the Catholic

church influences politics, so does the Muslim clergy, even though there are no ethnic or religion-based political parties as such. The emerging struggle for self-determination in the country's Muslim provinces is therefore posing a major challenge to existing structures of governance in the Philippines.

As some parts of the Muslim community in the south of the Philippines have taken up arms in support of their demand for a separate state, you can see the growth of prejudice and intolerance against that community. For example, in Manila, there are some slum areas like Quiapo where Muslims are

concentrated. Many Muslims from the south of the Philippines have migrated there to escape from the tension of their villages. In the eyes of the other inhabitants of Manila, there is a connection between this migration and the increase of drugs and crime. This kind of stereotyping, of identifying the minority or 'different' community with all the social evils, is a common feature of prejudice and we can see it in every country and society.

A critical way in which we can confront the prejudices that are based on stereotypes is to look at facts and figures. Then it will become clear that only some Chinese in the Philippines are shop-keepers and that there are many poor Chinese who work as labourers and have no capital, let alone a shop, to speak of. If you look at the national economy, at the national capital base, then you will see that it is controlled by the mainstream community. You realise how much of what you are seeing in the stereotypes is in fact not true. If you look at the stake that our states have in the economy, if you look at the stake that the World Bank and the IMF have in our economies, the share that members of the minority communities have is really minimal. But if you look into the social and political impact of a certain part of a minority community being wealthy and gaining social and political power through their wealth, then many other factors of competitiveness and inclusion/exclusion come into play.

One must also consider the role played by our own sense of powerlessness, and impotence in this situation.

My poverty, my inability to educate my children, to get a job, the inability of the system to deliver to me what should be my rights as a citizen, my powerlessness to influence the situation so that the state does deliver these benefits to me, lead to resentment which is fuelled by prejudice. In many of our societies, expressions of discrimination and hostility based on race, ethnicity, religion or any other 'difference' is a confusion of stereotypes, prejudice and resentment that has as much to do with our own underprivileged and powerless status as with the privileged status of the 'other.'

These factors play out even within the women's movement, even within groups that have a history of dealing with intolerance and discrimination. When it comes to the issue of power, and what constitutes the basis of power, then we 'slip' all the time. We ourselves are prejudiced, we use language that expresses prejudice, we use colours and symbols that typify prejudice, without sometimes even being aware of the fact that another person or group of persons may find it offensive. Franz Fanon, in his 'Black Face White Mask' for example, wrote about the ways in which this process of internalisation takes place. Although he wrote in a colonial situation, although his experience was in the French colonies of North Africa, much of what he was saying remains valid today.

In order to grapple with the issues of racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination, we need to take a closer and more intimate look at ourselves and our prejudices.

The process of internalisation is so insidious, and our prejudices are so much a part of who we are, that we have to make a conscious effort to insert ourselves into the discussion. A conversation about how racist and fundamentalist and prejudiced *other* people are can never lead to any fruitful discussion on the subject. What makes Fanon most interesting, and disturbing, is that he constantly challenges his readers about their prejudices and their sense of superiority. In all honesty, all of us know that we 'use' and manipulate features of ourselves that we know will bring us privileges: fair skin, belonging to a particular community or a group or religion, having a certain facility with language, or a certain level of education. We use it sometimes unconsciously, and sometimes consciously. It is only if we acknowledge that we do this, that we can discover how we may not do it.

At the moment, there is extensive research focused on understanding why, throughout human history, looking different, worshipping different gods, eating different foods, behaving differently, has led to some groups being treated badly.

This work is revealing that concepts of racism and xenophobia have changed through history, always with very specific historical, economic and political factors playing a role in initiating these changes. It is also looking not only at material factors such as the economy, political frameworks and social structures, but also at the ways in which the human mind constructs

identity and proceeds to include certain categories and exclude others.

Our own experiences as Asians should give us many examples of racism and prejudice, beginning from race to colour, ethnicity, religion, origin and caste. The exclusion and the marginalisation that many of us experience when we travel give us a sense of community as 'Southern' people being discriminated against. This sense of community at times is strong enough to overcome the cultural, linguistic and religious differences that separate us within our own region, and permits us to stand together against the intolerance and prejudice we encounter in the world outside our home countries.

These experiences should make us more sensitive to situations of intolerance and prejudice in our own countries and societies. Sadly, this sometimes is not the case. But unless we begin to ask ourselves questions such as why do we behave differently towards others in our own country and our own community who are not like us, who worship different gods, who have darker complexions or who eat differently, we run the risk of losing the legitimacy and the space in which we can talk about other people's levels of intolerance.

Within the women's movement this is a really critical discussion. For example, in South Asia, there are many conflicts based on religious, ethnic, tribal and caste differences. In those kinds of situations, the prominent chal-

lenge for the women and people who work for the women's movement is how to create a friendly and safe space in which it will be possible to talk about tolerance in situations where intolerance and hatred for the other is such a broad-based and mainstream attitude.

In situations of 'ethnic cleansing,' the rape of women becomes a critical tool of war. Because of the belief that women are 'bearers of the honour' of their community, raping the women of the enemy becomes a way of dishonoring the community.

Within this framework what is important to remember is that identities also have political agendas, just as much as nation states and nationalisms do.

Once we observe this, as women we become aware that almost all these political agenda are also built on an affirmation of a conservative position on women, a position that pushes them back into their homes, restricts their mobilities and places obstacles to their education and employment. The more militant an identity-based struggle is, the more conservative its position on women, and the more difficult the situation of women in those communities and societies.

On the one hand, in communities 'under siege,' women become symbolically valuable to the community. This is why in situations of 'ethnic cleansing,' the rape of women becomes a critical tool of war. Because of the belief that women are 'bearers of the honour' of their community, raping the women of the enemy becomes a way of

dishonoring the community. Thus, women's protection needs to be assured. This can extend into a philosophy that valorises the home and domesticity and seeks to keep women confined to their homes.

On the other hand, as identity assumes a political form, women become a part of militant struggles for liberation and self-determination, as in Sri Lanka. They take up arms and challenge the traditional perception of women in many ways. Yet, as history has shown us so clearly, whether these challenges make any lasting impact on the society and on the culture, or whether once the battle is won or lost these women will retreat to their traditional roles, remains a very crucial issue.

The area of custom, tradition and culture is one that brings to the forefront the tensions and conflicts that women experience when caught up in identity-based politics.

One issue in this arena that has so far played out with a negative impact on women is that of land and inheritance rights for women. Many indigenous communities are matrilineal. Up to today, there are vestiges of that matrilineal character visible in traditions and socio-cultural structures. Within these communities women had

a lot of power in the social and cultural arena; political and spiritual matters were regarded as the domain of the male. This led to women being excluded from owning land, which was a critical resource, and from decision-making power. Winning acceptance for the principle of equal rights of women to land and inheritance has been difficult because many indigenous groups feel it will create more splits and dissension within their communities. At moments when they feel vulnerable and under siege they feel it is better not to raise such issues which are potentially divisive.

In situations where a minority community is in some danger of being subsumed or discriminated against by the majority, then women are pushed to choose—and they often choose on the side of the community and decide not to raise ‘difficult’ issues about equality for women. In our attempts to work with women across cultures and communities, we face a big challenge of understanding these difficult choices and not becoming judgmental, not criticising the women for not being feminist enough.

As societies become more conservative, as communities become more inward-looking and intent on preserving their specific identity, as identity becomes the basis for political actions and formations, women become the symbols of the community, the bearers of its honour, the reproducers of the nation.

There are many visible manifestations of this. In the South Asian region, women are being pushed to wear clothes that affirm a specific ethnic or religious identity. Thus, more and more Muslim women are taking to the veil. Your whole body becomes a symbolic marker for your community; as people see you, they can slot you in, she is a Muslim, she is a Tamil, she comes from the highlands and so on. The need of communities under siege to propagate, to become numerically superior is a part of the political rhetoric of today that has an intense impact on the lives of women. In Israel, in India, and in many other places, women are exhorted not to use contraceptives, to have more babies, as a part of their duty to the community.

We should understand that the critical element is that of choices, whether women have the space and the environment in which they can exercise their right of choice. It is those moments and situations in which a woman tries to choose her dress, her career, her future, that the greatest conflicts with the family, community and society arise because she is claiming a space that they are unwilling to give her most of the time. All over the world, women get killed for such a simple thing: for saying I would like to do this. This is one of the most difficult issues in talking about communities under siege because you understand their need to affirm their identity as a community and yet you rebel against the injustices that women within that community suffer.

The reluctance to acknowledge women as equal, independent, autonomous and ‘thinking’ persons who can and should exercise choice regarding their lives is historical. It is linked to traditional beliefs that women are immature and incapable of rationality. The fear of female sexuality is a key element that underlies society’s desire to ‘control’ women. The idea that women, if granted sexual autonomy, would constitute a danger to society can be found in all our societies.

Because within the women’s movement and within women’s experiences the issue of discrimination is so strong, we have a particular responsibility to look at the issue of racism and fundamentalism and what happens to women in that context. Compared to many other organisations, we have a better chance and a better space to do that, because ten or twenty years of feminist practice has taught us many lessons about sensitivity and tolerance and fighting against discrimination. ♡

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