

Living in Imagined Communities

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In one of our hour-long, transatlantic telephone conversations, my cousin Shanthi who lives in Britain now, reminded me of incidents and indignities I wish I'd forgotten. She was recounting an incident involving a French shopping clerk, a duty-free bottle of French perfume, and the difference between Eurodollars and British pounds. My cousin, who had been visiting her older sister in France in the summer of 2002, had wanted to do some "duty-free" shopping before her flight back home to London. She had paid for the perfume in pounds and expected the cashier to convert the pound value into Euro change. Instead, the French cashier had insisted on reading pounds and euros equally, expecting my cousin to give in and accept the substantially lower Eurodollars.

When Shanthi complained to the manager and found no help there, she returned the bottle of perfume and asked for her money back. The irate clerk flung Shanthi's money, all sixty pounds of it, on the floor, expecting her to get down on her hands and knees to pick it up. Her sister, who is a French citizen now and speaks the language fluently had tried to intervene, but Shanthi was so upset by then, that all she could do was use a few choice phrases in English, and hope the shopping clerk and her equally cold-eyed supervisor understood the universal finger.

“The days of gritting your teeth and putting up with whatever is done to you is over as far as I’m concerned,” my cousin explained, claiming a quasi-victory over the overtly racist actions of the store clerks, even if all she was able to accomplish was show them her anger in an open fashion. According to Shanthi—and I understood thoroughly—her ability to use, Caliban-like, a dominant language openly, was a way of surviving unequal encounters. Even if nothing was ultimately resolved in the clash of cultures (of class, along with race and gender too, for my cousin clearly belonged to the category of dark-skinned new immigrants with large disposable incomes), for Shanthi at least it proved that she had every right, as a passport holder of a Western industrialized nation, to protest against unacceptable behavior by those marked as white/majority and therefore according to traditional belief, superior.

The overtly racist behavior of the French woman reminded both of us of the times we had been forced to give in to public indignities growing up as minority ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka. My cousin understood her experience with the French store clerk within a framework provided by our early experiences in an ethnically divided Sri Lanka, where daily, we were reminded of our second-class status. Our parents—nice, educated people with thoroughly middle-class fears of attracting attention or worse, of having to go to the police station—taught their daughters early on that ethnic and sexual slurs were to be ignored. And as those who have lived under the behavioral edicts of the Jim Crow in the American South have also testified, racist behavior usually gets carried out in the language of the crudely sexual. For often times, the men who routinely harass the female of the other race/ethnicity, are usually able to present themselves as merely virile and thus escape the opprobrium of being thought of as racist.

I was about fourteen years old then, and it was a couple of years after the conflagration of 1977, when there had been large-scale, ethnically-motivated attacks against Tamil households by the majority Sinhala people, especially in urban areas. Since then, Tamils had been living under the shadow of a follow-up attack, and the terror of an imminent flare-up was always in the minds and conversations of the Tamils living outside the Tamil populated areas of the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. My family was living in the suburbs of Colombo then, and we were known as Tamils in that neighborhood. As is usual in such times of crisis, when being identified as belonging to a particular despised minority is dangerous, passing was a way of life for many Tamils. In the matter of physical identification, that is in terms of hair quality, facial structure, or skin tone, there is not much of a difference between the Tamils and the Sinhalese; but with certain cultural indicators—of clothing and accessories especially—these differences become essential markers of ethnic identity. In Sri Lanka, it is the *pottu*—the mark on the forehead that Indian women universally wear to indicate their marital status—that became the ultimate indicator of a gendered ethnic identity at that time (and still is, for that matter).

And so, even though many Tamils—both men and women, and it was easier for men than women—attempted to pass as Sinhalese during times of impending ethnic violence, I felt that somehow my identity was tied to claiming the very cultural markers that were used to differentiate and oppress Tamils. I was also at the age when proclaiming my identity as a Tamil seemed important to my sense of self. Accordingly, I would wear a large round black *pottu* on my forehead, declaring to all and sundry my Tamil cultural affiliation, and at a deeper level, my fearlessness in claiming it.

We were living in a rented house in an area just outside Colombo city limits called Ratmalana, in what was called a “Railway Colony,” a series of neatly arranged housing that had been built during the hey day of the British empire when the Railway was not simply a corporation one worked for but a whole way of life for the colonials. The houses were large with huge gardens, complete with what were called servant quarters, and categorized according to the various administrative levels within the railway system. The set of houses in our colony were of “clerk” grade, and were inhabited by solidly middleclass citizens. We rented from a railway employee because as Tamils we felt that the neighborhood, with its stable middle-class antecedents and a citizenry who all worked for the government in one capacity or other, was relatively safe. Our argument was that the buildings were Government property and therefore somewhat protected from the burning and looting that was otherwise the fate of Tamil-owned houses and enterprises. The spacious streets, shaded with gnarled trees, and the numerous park-like grassy areas scattered around the neighborhood also lulled us into feeling comparatively safe.

Our immediate neighbor was a large family of *Burghers* (or Anglo-Indians as they are commonly called in India). As a distinct social group separate from the ethnic groups of Tamils and the Sinhalese, the Burghers claim a European ancestry. Light-skinned and overtly Westernized, most Burghers in Sri Lanka try to maintain the boundaries between their identity of European origin (however watered down) and the powerful majority culture of the Sinhalese. They usually speak English at home, and under the British had prospered with descent-based jobs in many of the colonial institutions. This particular family next-door to us—at least the children, who were all in Sinhala medium schools—

was clearly more assimilated into the dominant Sinhala culture than the other Burghers we knew. The father, a skinny, dark-skinned, unsmiling store-clerk in the railway, had an explosive temper. Periodically he would erupt, and beat his sons with a tight-lipped ferocity that was usually reserved for the punching bag he'd hung on the mango tree in the backyard.

One of the sons was about eleven or twelve to my fourteen, and was friends with a Sinhala boy up the street, and would hang out at his house all the time. I would pass their house daily on my way home from school, and would see them most afternoons playing marbles in the front yard. The Sinhala boy was older, about my age I suppose, and I remember noticing how tiny my neighbor looked standing next to him. They would look up, as I passed, and I would keep my eyes carefully averted so that we didn't make eye contact. It was all very Victorian—those signs and codes of complicated gender behavior—nevertheless, the acceptable notions of propriety dictated that I sail on as if the boys were just mailboxes sitting on the side of the road.

Then suddenly, one day, apropos of nothing, both the boys began to comment loudly each time I passed their house. The Sinhala boy would begin with how at the next Sinhala/Tamil riots, “all the Tamils in this area would be cut into tiny pieces,” and my neighbor would snigger and repeat the statement. They loved to enunciate the Sinhala word for “tiny pieces” twice, and repeat the same statement until I'd walked out of earshot. The first few times, I ignored them. I would look through both the grinning boys as if I couldn't see their leering faces or hear their hateful words, and keep on walking at the same unhurried speed. Their gleeful words, “*pethy, pethy kappanava*” would follow me as I walked home in the sun-dappled afternoon.

One day, I simply snapped. I walked over to the weathered wooden gate set into the chain-link fence, and called out to my neighbor. I told him calmly in English that I was going to tell his father that he was harassing me sexually. He looked so shocked he could barely speak. As far as he was concerned, he was involved in an act that was, at least from the majority culture's point of view, a way of showing one's power against a hated minority. His own minority status as a non-Sinhalese had been momentarily forgotten as he joined in abusing one he saw as undeniably Tamil. After all, I was asking for it wasn't I, by being a Tamil, worse a Tamil female with a *pottu* on her forehead? As I spoke, I ignored the Sinhala boy completely, but finished the rest of what I had to say, not in English (I doubted the Sinhala boy knew English) but in Sinhalese: "I didn't say anything to your father so far because I kept hoping you'd stop. I hate to be the cause of a beating but what do you expect me to do? You don't say these things to my father or my mother, do you?" I paused. The Burgher boy looked ready to cry; I ignored the other completely.

That evening, his father intercepted my parents as they came home from work and apologized for his son. "I believe my son and his friend made some comments about your daughter," he said stiffly. My parents, who had no clue as to what had transpired, proceeded to put him at his ease, and after he left (very quickly, as if his apology was just for formality's sake), came into the house and only then asked me what that was all about.

Interestingly, there was no beating that evening at the Burgher house; nor did the father come out and work in his garden or punch the bag as he usually did.

My parents, predictably enough, were upset over my actions. You should have told us, we would have dealt with it, you shouldn't have taken it upon yourself to tell those boys anything, who knows how they may have reacted, good thing you confronted only the Burgher boy, thank god you left the Sinhala boy alone, what if he'd done something to you, he still can, they are all basically thugs, maybe we should move from here, go where, the scolding went. I kept quiet, feeling euphoric and at the same time faintly ashamed that in actual terms, I'd let the real culprit go. Though I hadn't planned on what I was going to say or even that I was going to say something when the final "*pethy, pethy*" got to me, even in that red hot haze of anger I'd had enough sense of self-preservation not to say anything to the Sinhala boy. I'd fingered the weak one, another pitiable minority, a boy I'd seen whipped with a brown leather belt about twice a month, begging and crying as his brothers and neighbors watched. When I threatened him with telling his father, he must have given his version first. In my confrontation, I'd picked on the sexual sub-text of his statement, ignoring the real physical violence expressed against my ethnically defined body.

For young Tamil women growing up in areas with a majority Sinhala population, the sexual innuendoes expressed in the guise of ethnic slurs are a common experience. Some of the Sinhala men, as we walk by, will call out in Tamil, sometimes the only Tamil word they know, "*thangatchi*" which means "sister." Usually, though, the word is "*demele*," comparable in intended use to the North American word "nigger," and is the colloquial Sinhala word for Tamil. Each time a person of Tamil origin is reduced to an essentialized, crudely defined representation of ethnicity, of being nothing but a "*demele*," one's powerlessness is magnified a thousand times. Young Tamil men, at least

the ones I grew up with in Colombo in the early '80s, compensated for the sense of loss they felt as second class citizens by an almost obsessive and focused sexual harassment (usually verbal) of those they identified as fellow Tamil women. "Sister, take your *coconuts* home carefully," high school boys would shout out in Tamil as my school bus stopped near Hindu College, an all-Tamil boys' school in the heart of Colombo. As the Sri Lankan Tamil culture also shares the same preoccupation with female chastity that the traditional Tamil culture promotes through its age-old literature of female passivity, young Tamil women are taught to ignore the sexually predatory behavior of young men.

When she was sixteen, my cousin Shanthi used to be chaperoned by their old cook Lakshmi, as she went for tuition in the evenings, in preparation for her A-Level exams. Lakshmi, a working class scrapper, would confront any and all, and as she was a Hindu widow forbidden to wear a *pottu*, could pass as a Sinhalese. I remember how exhilarated I felt as a child when Lakshmi, who had only a single front tooth, in an argument with a Sinhala man in a bus, pulled it off with a flourish, and yelled in faultless Sinhalese that she would do the same to him. Many years later, in graduate school in Nevada, I read Toni Morrison's *Sula*, where the poor black child Sula, when faced with a group of bullying Irish boys, calmly cuts a piece of her finger and asks them, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?"

My parents, afterwards, never referred to the incident with the Burgher boy. I couldn't forget because mixed with that sense of power that comes out of remembering those situations where moments of conflict are resolved satisfactorily in one's favor, was a niggling sense of unease. My threat to the boy to have him thrashed by his father still haunts me. What if he had been whipped that evening? No one who has ever watched a

child being beaten could come away from that experience unruffled. Would I have been able to tell myself, as I heard his muffled howls next door, that he deserved whatever befell him because he had spoken with barely concealed glee about harming the bodies of those identified as belonging to my ethnic group? Was I offended primarily because of the sexualized intentions of the speaker against my female self (I was angry too over the fact that he was much too young for me, and thus his overture was an indignity) or the ethnic-based violence of his language that was focused on bodies like mine?

During the ethnic violence in Colombo in 1983, we were living not in Ratmalana but in Piliyandala, a pastoral haven, a few miles outside the city. I am eternally thankful that the police, who transported us to the refugee camp, took us in a riot bus with all the windows boarded up with steel shutters. Thus I missed seeing the carnage on the streets of Colombo and have no visual memories or images to match the stories heard afterwards. What I remember the most during those weeks in the refugee camp (a make-shift warehouse at a local airport) are the hair-raising stories told by those who had escaped the rampaging mobs. Rather like the slave narratives of the ante-bellum, where the fact that the slave had outrun the dogs and the slave catchers into safer territory and had gained a modicum of literary skills in order to tell his tale meant that the text had a happy ending despite the horrors it detailed, I found these stories told by my fellow refugees exhilarating and meaningful in complex ways, though the stories themselves couldn't by any stretch of the imagination be classified as testimonies to human kindness.

In Dehiwela, a few miles from the main city of Colombo, a colony of Tamil houses built around a Hindu temple were smashed by a rampaging mob. One of the inhabitants, when he saw the rioters arriving in a truck onto the compound grounds,

simply ran out in panic through the backdoor forgetting to even shout out a warning to his pregnant daughter in the other room. (Fortunately, a Sinhala neighbor saved her life by pulling her to safety through a gap in the fence.) The man ran on and hid in some bushes next to a public thoroughfare for about three days, watching in helpless terror, the protracted torture and murder of a fellow Tamil, who happened to be a well-known local thug.

While the hidden Tamil watched in horror, the huge and muscular but now rather confused-looking former gang boss was dragged out of his house onto the streets to be beaten and stabbed by a whooping crowd while other ordinary Sinhalese men, women and children watched. This rather rough character had been a powerful, Godfather-like figure in the immediate community. Called a *rasthiathi karaya*, which is the title given to those street thugs who lead a professional life of graft and petty crime, he'd lived an assimilated life amidst the Sinhalese (helped by his marriage to a Sinhala woman), had children who were for the most part brought up as Sinhalese, become the chief of a Sinhala gang, and in a sense, was a particularly symbolic target when ethnic violence broke out in such a large scale. The fact that the man had chosen to "become" a Sinhalese for all intents and purposes did not seem to matter.

In fact, it only seemed to add to the ferocious hatred of his torturers who saw his acts of assimilation as an ambitious bid for power within the larger community. Finally, half-sliced, he was left to die but lived through the night moaning and bleeding just a stone's throw away from where my friend was hidden in the roadside bushes.

The next day, passersby gathered to look in disgust and awe at the body that still clung with such tenacity to life. There was something almost inhuman about the ability of

his body to take such an intense beating and keep on living, the crowd kept saying. Even to the reluctant witness in the bushes, the sight of the body trying to get up as the battering continued again the next day was abnormal to say the least. It was the repeated attempts of the almost dead man to get up off the street, rather like Rodney King chained and beaten who kept lumbering up in those tapes that we saw ad nauseam, that was particularly bothersome to all concerned. At last, they placed his lacerated, half-naked, bleeding body on a piece of tin roofing, poured some kerosene and burnt him alive.

By the time I was told this story, a month or so after the city of Colombo had returned to a state of comparative normalcy, it was just one among the many instances of mob violence I'd heard about. But this particular story made a deep impression on me because the victim was one who seemed to have been well and truly assimilated into the local culture. The almost obsessive fashion in which ethnicity and the body were seen as enmeshed during the riots seemed to refuse any kind of obvious explanation. The paramount feeling was one of confusion amongst both Tamils and Sinhalese who repeated such stories to each other, and in the process, tried to build and sustain a whole discourse on ethnic violence, where people could place themselves as subjects spatially (as in, "Where were you when the rioting broke out?") and actively. Many amongst the Sinhalese were horrified at the kind of animal-like brutality that came to be associated with their ethnic make-up, for after-all, an overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists who believe that even cracking eggs on their days of prayer is sinfully violent. There was a palpable need in us to speak about the horrors seen and experienced: a kind of Ancient Mariner-like compulsion in repeating to friends and strangers alike the events witnessed in order to make some kind of sense of what had taken place.

Sinhala neighbors who saved Tamil lives and fathers who abandoned daughters are just two examples of the unreliability of essentialized identity factors. The daughter of this story found her father's cowardice in forgetting her in his headlong flight to be far more terrible and unforgivable than the acts of the Sinhala mob who destroyed her home. After all, it was a person of Sinhala origin who saved her life when her own father forgot about her in his bid to escape. In her narrative, it is her father who stars as the betrayer, a man who forgot his duty not only to his daughter, but also to the unborn child within her. "I am pregnant; large as a house. How could he not see me as he ran out the back door?", she kept asking. To her father, nothing mattered but the almost obsessive repeating of that which he'd witnessed. To him, in the aftermath of the terrible events he'd seen, his actions or non-actions seemed puny and immaterial compared to the horror of what had been done to the body of another Tamil.