

Kinship, Cronyism & Others in Private and Public Spaces

[“If we only think about racism in cricket Azeem Rafiq’s tears will have been wasted” Hugh Muir \(18/11/21\)](#)

Although I have been challenging systemic racism in Higher Education for several years now, my attempts have been largely ineffective, which may explain why most would prefer to ignore insidious racism, pretending that they have not witnessed it. On a pragmatic level, raising concerns is time consuming and requires a great deal of effort. The process can be emotionally draining and takes resilient courage to face the backlash. Moreover, any implicit or explicit benefit is likely to come at a cost to our social popularity with colleagues, which can lead to a downward slippery slope in our career progression.

Inspired by Azeem Rafiq’s recent story and tears (see Hugh Muir’s article at the link above) I reflected on my own experience of systemic racism in Higher Education, noticing the ongoing discomfort I feel whenever I find myself metaphorically stumbling into spaces where I am regarded as the “Other” rather than a natural, established, and integral part of the team.

For example, I was invited as a passive participant to a Creativity & Innovation Conference organised by one of the Universities I work for. At the time, I had been researching Creativity for about a decade and was eager to learn more from the selected speakers and panellists. Having listened for a couple of hours, I was disappointed that the speakers and panellists were not experts in the subject of Creativity and I wondered why and how they had been chosen for the privilege of speaking at this whole day conference.

Then I noticed that they were all White.

Feeling increasingly alienated as the day went on, I found the suggestions of the all-White discussion panel (situated in a very cosmopolitan city) about the importance of diversity in cultivating innovation, to be both obvious and ironic. I wondered how they had the privilege of being selected to speak at a conference about creativity, without specialist knowledge on the subject.

When I expressed my concerns about systemic racism (based on numerous examples such as the one above, of colleagues learning on the job and occupying roles that they were not entirely qualified for) to a friend of mine, he responded with:

“They’re not being racist; they’re simply protecting their own!”

There are numerous layers to my friend’s all too familiar statement. At the surface level, I agreed there was an apparent protection of “their own” in all the patterns of systemic racism I had witnessed, over the period of several years in academia, but I disagreed that “They’re not being racist”.

“You will never be able to prove they are being racist” my friend warned, advising me not to waste precious time and energy in a losing battle against all-White Senior Management Boards reflected in their selection of all-White speakers and panellists at conferences and strategic decision-making committees.

Following my own independent pursuits in researching the subjects of Creativity and Leadership, within a context of Systemic Racism, I am intrigued that behaviours which are perfectly acceptable in personal and private spaces, for example those related to kinship, become unacceptable cronyism in shared public spaces. Those that do not fit the mould of the existing power holders, become Others and unfair treatment of them becomes justified with ambiguous appraisals denoting their deficiencies instead of celebrating their differences.

To explain this dynamic where kinship is appropriate in private spaces and cronyism is inappropriate in public spaces, I'll begin with my friend's dismissive remark:

“They're not being racist; they're simply protecting their own!”

What do we mean by “their own” in shared public spaces?

Even though I have always worked in cosmopolitan cities, being a Sikh, there have only ever been a few colleagues from my own ethnic background in the organisations I work for. Within these diverse cities, there have always been private spaces, such as the Gurdwaras, where I engage with those I call my “own” in a spirit of kinship, providing a sense of belonging, often in contrast to my continual struggle to fit-in within organisational cultures.

Kinship is a natural instinct which typically evokes trust, empathy and a deep sense of loyalty. In private spaces such as our homes, local communities and places of worship, kinship is normally nurtured and promoted. On the other hand, in shared public spaces, such as the organisations we work for, this admirable instinct of kinship can become notorious cronyism which breeds mistrust, betrayal and hostility towards those who are considered to be Others, not part of the kinship group because they dress, eat and smell differently, their accent marks them as foreign. Unable to engage effectively in banter based on a specific sense of fun and humour, they are deemed to be too serious; too unsociable and too different; lacking interpersonal skills.

Over the past two years, I have attempted to challenge this unfairness, often caused by those in privileged management positions when they use their natural instincts of kinship, inappropriately, in shared public spaces, where they create dysfunctional in-groups at the expense of marginalised Others. Whereas kinship is an honourable instinct in our own homes, in public work spaces, kinship needs to transcend what is familiar, to embrace all those who have a right to exist, thrive and flourish in the shared spaces.

One of the ways I have illustrated the process through which we end up with all-White panels on normally diverse subjects such as creativity is through the conferences I organise. Since 2017, I have organised Creativity Conferences which attract a typically diverse range of participants as shown in the images below:



The broad level of diversity depicted in the image above is perfectly normal in a cosmopolitan environment and this is why my experiences feel intensely uncomfortable at meetings such as the Creativity & Innovation Conference, where invariably, all-White panels are selected.

In response, to my friend's comment, "They're not being racist; they're simply protecting their own!", I decided to demonstrate how easy it is to organise a conference where everyone looks very similar to the conference organiser, in this case myself.

Until the deep frustration I experienced with systemic racism that was too smart and insidious for me to challenge, for example how conferences are designed without a lack of adequate community representation, I had never created work spaces designed with my own ethnic community (Sikhs) in mind.

To demonstrate the ease with which we can create conferences in our own image, I decided to work with around 550 Sikhs in my personal and professional network, to organise some Leadership conferences with a focus on values, symbology and principles.

Using exactly the same process that I have been using to attract a diverse, cosmopolitan level of participation, for the leadership conferences I attracted a diverse range of international Sikhs (see image below)

Image 2:

Range of participants in Leadership Conferences organised by Dr Jesvir Mahil in 2021



The simple paradigm shift from ethnically highly diverse Creativity Conference participants as depicted in image 1 above to a much narrower ethnic diversity (all Sikhs) as illustrated in image 2 above, followed an innocuous process in which I selected participants based on three factors:

1. **Proximity:** Participants are part of my own professional network
2. **Familiarity:** I like, trust and respect them
3. **Scope:** They have shared expertise in narrowly defined values and principles

Within private contexts, we can use our privilege of choice to decide who is allowed the opportunity to share our spaces and who is marginalised as the Other or a temporary guest. In shared public spaces, such as Universities, local councils and the NHS, this privilege needs critical reflection.

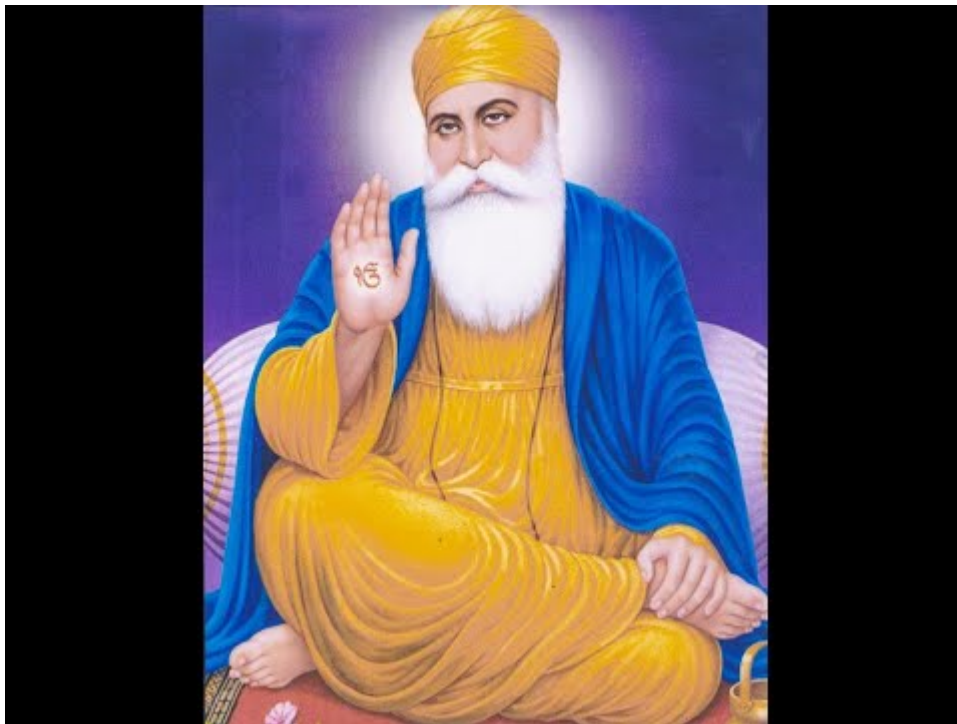
There are obvious ethical concerns when we offer opportunities (in public spaces) to those who are:

1. part of our professional network
2. because we like, trust and respect them
3. because they have skills and expertise in topics that we have narrowly defined

In our endeavours to create fairer, meritocratic work environments, we may find that the best people for a job may not emerge from our own professional networks; we may not like, trust and respect them initially and they may bring skills, expertise and knowledge that is not within our current domain or realm of experience.

In this recent discussion about Symbology & Leadership that I hosted as part of my Learn to Lead Conference on 20 November 2021, we touch on the importance of kinship and how we try to avoid kinship becoming a thorn in the side, by widening our embrace, to advocate ethical leadership which is benevolent for all.

<https://youtu.be/j8UVz5y3Zcs>



We also discuss the impact of colonisation and how we need to break our own bonds of oppression for emancipation and freedom.

It is quite a privilege to exert our own preferences in public spaces as we would in our own personal, private spaces. It is a privilege that those with power are unlikely to relinquish when it is not in their interests to do so. It is a privilege that most of us will accept as natural and instinctual until we recognise its corrosive impact.

Dr Jesvir Kaur Mahil, 21 November 2021