

## SONA'S DILEMMA: ENCOUNTERING RACISM



Sona is an exchange student from India studying for one semester at a private university in Australia. She has been assigned to work with a group of her classmates on a project with which she is not completely familiar. The group of students who are all from Australia have worked with each other before. They are also working with a person from India for the first time. Being in a new environment, Sona is a little shy in participating in the group and despite being a good student is usually quiet in group discussions. A few weeks later, when Sona shares her reflection in the group, her teammates make comments about how good her English is 'for an Indian'. This is not the first time that Sona has experienced passive racism. There has been more than one incident where Sona's teammates have made comments about her culture or have cast her in a stereotypical mould. Sona feels uncomfortable and hurt by these incidents.

Sona is a college student in India, studying Product Design at the country's leading design institute. She is an academically strong student who has always been recognized for the quality of her work. The institution where she studies is comprised mostly of Indian students and faculty members. Her interaction with people from other countries was limited to family members residing in other countries or friends and acquaintances on their visits to India. She has a few cousins residing in Australia that she is very close with and who have often invited her to visit them. At the time she enrolled in college, Sona was very keen on visiting Australia and often told people that it occupied the top spot on her travel bucket list.

Sona grew up in an upper-middle-class family. Like most children from her background, she studied in an English-medium private school. She has therefore been learning English since she can remember, both at her school and at her home. She considers herself to be equivalent to a native speaker of the language. She takes pride in her English proficiency. Sona also likes to keep up to date with pop culture, particularly Western pop culture.

As a junior in college, Sona got the opportunity to travel to Australia for a semester exchange program at a well-reputed private university in Brisbane to study Industrial Design.

Sona was excited to be in Australia but also anxious about the subjects that she would be studying, as they were very different from her field of study in India. Her first class in the university was a group project class. Sona felt anxious being in a class full of juniors who had known each other for at least a year and were mostly residents of Australia. The class was in its second week, when students had already self-selected their

teammates and formed groups that they would be working in during the semester. The professor assigned Sona to a group and quickly informed her group members that she would be joining their team. The group members looked a little confused, and Sona was not sure if they were happy to be working with her.

The project that she had to work on was an Industrial Design project, a subject with which she was not very familiar. Overwhelmed with the newness of the entire experience, and feeling like a "fish out of water" in terms of her expertise and skill sets, Sona felt very shy in engaging with her teammates. Her teammates acknowledged her but did not make any particular efforts to have her participate in the group discussion. This was also their first time working with someone from India.

Over the next 3 weeks, Sona was generally quiet in the group discussions, only responding to affirm someone's comment or to agree with the general direction that the group was taking. The professor walked around the class but didn't pick up on these group dynamics.

A few weeks later, when Sona shared her personal reflection with the group as part of the assignment prompt, her teammates, including a member named Tony in particular, remarked, "Your English is so good for an Indian! Do you learn English in India?" Sona was taken aback by this comment. Her relative silence in the team meetings had been misinterpreted by her teammates as indicating a lack of proficiency in English. Sona felt hurt by this passive form of racism that her White Australian teammate projected. But in response, Sona just smiled and told them that she studied English from the time she was in kindergarten. Feeling that she had to work with her teammates for five more months, she decided to "let it go" and not mention anything about how that comment had been hurtful to her.

In the coming weeks, she experienced more similar incidents of passive but hurtful comments. Working on the project in class one day, her teammate Dale suddenly turned to her and asked, "So Sona, I've heard there are some funny vegetarian options in McDonald's in India. Is it true?"

Sona felt frustrated hearing this comment. What was funny about vegetarian options, she wanted to ask? Instead, she laughed off the comment and just told Dale that McDonald's does indeed have vegetarian options in India.

Incidents like this continued to occur. These seemingly innocent but destructive comments made Sona feel frustrated, angry, and hurt.