

Study on Racial Encounters and Discrimination Experienced by South Asians

Executive Summary

Background

1. A survey on “Study on Racial Encounters and Discrimination Experienced by South Asians” was commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) to the Centre for Civil Society and Governance, The University of Hong Kong, and the Policy 21 Limited. Interviews were undertaken from December 2010 to April 2011. A total of 19 focus groups comprising 107 Chinese and South Asian stakeholders were held. The participants were classified into 5 groups by their status, namely, home-makers, retirees, employees, students, and NGO representatives.

Key Findings

2. Many South Asians, especially those who were born or spent a substantial part of their lives in Hong Kong treated Hong Kong as home. At the same time, local Chinese generally accepted South Asians as part of Hong Kong society. South Asian youth would visit their countries of origin, and would be willing to stay there for a short period of time. However, they would want to return to Hong Kong because they were used to the living environment, life-style, and social circle they built up here. They were familiar with Hong Kong and its ways of life, and it was here they felt more at home. The local Chinese community was aware of the long history of South Asians living in Hong Kong. They regarded South Asians as part of the Hong Kong community and believed they were entitled to the same rights and benefits as every other Chinese citizens of Hong Kong.

3. Most South Asian students, housewives, and retirees were generally happy with their lives in Hong Kong. In contrast to their countries of origin, which might be rife with war, natural disasters and poverty, Hong Kong was a peaceful and safe haven. They felt secure because basic needs, such as housing, education, and health were taken care of. There was also a security net to fall back on when they were not able to earn enough to feed their families. They reckoned that there were discriminations against South Asians, but they also perceived that discrimination could not be completely annulled in every part of the world. Hong Kong was on the whole considered a civilized society, and therefore the level of discrimination they encountered day-to-day was generally tolerated.

4. The main problems facing South Asians were learning to read and write Chinese for students, and finding employment for adults. Many South Asian students found learning written Chinese too hard for them and were forced to give it up soon when they did not receive adequate help. Limited knowledge of spoken and written Chinese would turn out to be a major factor against them in job seeking and tertiary education, for the Chinese language was now a standard entrance requirement of both employment and further study.

5. The most common types of discriminatory behaviour against South Asians were related to finding employment and on-the-job treatment. South Asian employees who suspected that they were subject to unequal treatment seldom made official complaint for fear of losing their jobs because it was not easy to establish a clear proof of discrimination. Socially, South Asians were offended by manners such as covering one's nose in the proximity of a South Asian, and avoid sitting next to a South Asian in public transportation. Unfortunately, Chinese who exhibited these behaviours might not be entirely aware that most South Asians found them rude and insulting. Some South Asians also reported that opening bank accounts and renting flats were still difficult.

6. South Asians in general did not think discrimination was too serious in Hong Kong, and they admitted that the situation was actually improving in the last ten years. Nevertheless, there had been little social interaction between local Chinese society and the South Asian community. The two appeared to co-exist in parallel; each got on with its own life and had little to do with the other. South Asians rarely seemed to be participating in Hong Kong society, not socially, culturally, or politically. The local Chinese community was aware of the presence of South Asian Hongkongers, but they might not have noted the absence of South Asians in Hong Kong Chinese's social, cultural and political scene. Impressively, for those Chinese who worked with South Asian colleagues, inter-cultural interaction and experience was positive.

7. Two factors seemed to have prevented interaction between the two groups: the lack of a common language and scant understanding of the others' cultures. Lacking a common language was perceived to be the biggest barrier separating local Chinese from South Asians. This was the most common reason given by Chinese focus group participants, especially housewives and retirees. Many of them were not fluent in English and thus lacked the means of communication. Non-English speaking Chinese housewives and elderly were unable to communicate with their South Asian counterparts beyond a polite nod or a simple greeting. Non-Cantonese speaking South Asian youths and adults found that English as a medium of communication might not be as accessible to the local Chinese community as they would have liked it to be. The situation might only be a little better with regard to Chinese youngsters.

8. The language barrier not only hindered social integration, but it has created a few misunderstandings. For example, English speaking South Asians found Chinese unwilling to speak to them. They concluded that Chinese were unfriendly on the assumption that most Chinese were able to communicate in English, which was not entirely correct. By the same token, most Chinese inaccurately presumed that South Asians did not understand Cantonese, and refrained to speak with them.

9. Inadequate understanding of each others' culture was also a major factor preventing interaction. Some Chinese complained about the strong smell emitting from cooking South Asian dishes. South Asians, however, pointed out that Chinese were so used to their own cooking that they did not realize it could also produce a pungent scent. Some devoted South Asians would pray several times a day and fast during a certain period of the year. Chinese might find these religious practices mysterious and South Asian cultures unfathomable.

10. Although South Asians and local Chinese live peacefully alongside one another today, there still exists bitter resentment if the Hong Kong government continues to close its eyes to the needs of South Asians. The group of South Asian Hongkongers who went through their

education in English before the 1997 sovereignty handover found their employability worse than that of their fathers. To them, maintaining their living standards is already a challenge; upward social mobility is an unreachable dream. Their present impediment is partly a result of the change in political sovereignty and its corresponding changes in policy. This generation of South Asians had already been lost. It was not surprising to find them reproachful and indignant. If future generations of South Asians end up in the same hopeless predicament, they may need to, like some members of the lost generation have already had, resort to anti-social behaviours to let go their fury and to publicize their futile struggle.

Recommendations

11. South Asians in Hong Kong had been accepted as full members of Hong Kong society, thus entitled to the same rights and benefits as any local Chinese. In this sense, their social inclusion has been achieved. However, there has not been a high degree of integration, for local Chinese and South Asians live in two separate communities without much interaction. In view of the results of the focus group interviews and overseas experiences, we propose the following measures to boost mutual understanding and social integration.

Employment

(1) Enhance South Asians' employment opportunities

The Government should take the lead to employ ethnic minorities by relaxing the Chinese language requirement in certain disciplines in civil service recruitment to demonstrate its appreciation of ethnic diversity in employment.

(2) Bridging expectations between South Asians and employers

There might be some stereotypical image of South Asians being not as hardworking as Chinese and Chinese employers being mean and calculative. The Government or NGOs can organize interflow workshops with successful exemplars to relay the practices and routines of South Asians to Chinese employers and inform South Asians of the usual expectations of Chinese employers.

(3) Encourage employers to hire South Asians

Big multi-national corporations do employ ethnically diverse employees at the senior level. However, more should be done to enable local enterprises to tap on the talent pools from ethnic minorities, especially at the working and trainee levels. In this respect, it is disappointing to note that the Vocational Training Council (VTC) offers only a few placement-tied courses for ethnic minorities. The VTC should proactively formulate a larger variety of placement-tied courses, intensify the Work Trial Scheme and apprenticeship programme on occupation categories, and assess if a factual work-based requirement of proficiency in written Chinese language is needed for a specific post.

(4) Enhance employment resources for South Asians

To make it possible for South Asians to find jobs outside of their personal networks, it is necessary to improve employment resources. For example, the Labor Department may make it a rule for all job vacancy notices (particularly online information) to be written in both Chinese and English. A designated employment counter can be set in the Labor Department to provide employment services and resources for ethnic minority residents including South Asians. When the Labor Department plans various employment related activities, there should be sessions catering to local Hong Kong residents who do not speak and read Chinese.

Education

(5) Greater support on learning Chinese

Knowing to read and write Chinese is crucial to the future of South Asians who choose to stay in Hong Kong. It is of utmost importance to help them to acquire an appropriate level of the Chinese language proficiency. Developing an alternative set of curriculum and assessment suitable for learning Chinese as a second language, plus extra resources to be allocated to help South Asian school children in learning Chinese from pre-primary levels should make a huge impact.

(6) Strengthen cultural sensitivity of educators

Cultural sensitivity is essential to guide students properly. Frontline teachers are on the whole not sufficiently equipped to deal with South Asian students in class. Making things worse, school notices and other kinds of communication between the schools and parents are predominantly in Chinese. Training to step up teachers' skills and sensitivity in dealing with students with different ethnic backgrounds should be provided for professional development. Schools should also provide non-Chinese speaking parents with alternative means of communication.

(7) Incorporate ethnic and cross-cultural diversity in the curriculum

The Government strives to build Hong Kong to become a cosmopolitan city. South Asian Hongkongers are entitled to be viewed as part of this achievement. In our school curriculum, the cultures of different ethnic groups living in Hong Kong should be introduced. For example, images of people of different ethnicities and races making up the Hong Kong society ought to be represented in textbooks so as to fully embrace these groups as part of Hong Kong.

(8) Improve educational opportunities for South Asians

Improvement has already been implemented that ethnic minority students can apply for university programs under the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) route, based on the results of British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (Chinese) Examination. However, it seems that many faculties in

universities and colleges are still sticking to stringent Chinese admission requirement. As a lot of courses in various universities in Hong Kong are taught in English, the Chinese language requirement should flexibly be relaxed in the admission for South Asians. In addition, there should be more varieties in vocational and re-employment training courses for non-Chinese speaking groups.

Social interactions

- (9) Encourage ethnic minorities and Chinese to participate in cross-cultural activities

Programs offered by NGOs are generally culturally homogeneous – they are either targeted at Chinese or South Asian participants. Programs that are designed for both groups to jointly participate are still rare. NGOs should be encouraged to organize longer-duration programs for Chinese and South Asians to participate together. Furthermore, the vast majority of notices and publicity of events organized at the district or community levels are in Chinese. To encourage South Asian Hongkongers to take part in these events, publicity should also be given in English.

- (10) Promote the benefits of a culturally diverse society

The Government should exert greater efforts and take the lead in collaboration with ethnic groups, private sector and NGOs, in a bid to promote the benefits of a culturally diverse society through sustained public campaigns, in which South Asians and other ethnic minorities are represented.

- (11) Increase community resources to enhance social inclusion and understanding

South Asians, especially those educated here or have been living in Hong Kong for a long time, understand Chinese culture in various degrees. However, South Asian cultures are not known to most Chinese. Resources can be allocated to introduce South Asian cultures at a community level, particularly in areas and housing estates where South Asians reside in greater number or density. Furthermore, NGOs can, as a first step, promote cultural understanding by offering interest classes such as cooking ethnic food, making ethnic jewelry or other accessories, as well as cultural presentations such as music and dance. Such classes could also be used as a venue to promote inter-cultural interactions.

- (12) Increase public visibility of ethnic minorities

South Asians are not usually represented in the local mass media. Many South Asians who were born and educated in Hong Kong speak Cantonese like any other Chinese born and educated in local Chinese schools. Yet, they are disproportionately under-represented as public figures. It is only until very recently that we see more faces of South Asians on TV. Increasing the visibility of South Asians in the mass media could help instill the idea of South Asians as part of Hong Kong community.

Provision of goods, services and facilities

- (13) Educate providers of goods, services and facilities with cultural sensitivity to ethnic minorities

More publicity programmes should be formulated for providers of goods, services and facilities so as to elevate their sensitivity of cultural differences of South Asians and alleviate discrimination. For example, South Asians should not be denied of services in restaurants and shops. When opening a personal bank account and getting a credit card, South Asians should be treated the same as other ethnic groups. Real estate agents should not discriminate South Asians in the rental of a residential flat and commercial office.