

Does white equal right?

A group of professionals who were denied entry to a leading Dubai nightclub did not think so. After over two months of seeking an answer, they finally filed a complaint with the Human Rights Department of the Dubai Police

By Veena Kuruvilla with inputs by Robin James

DUBAI Sixty four days after his first encounter with racism, Avinash Sampath, an award-winning creative writer at advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, lodged an official complaint at the Human Rights Section of the Dubai Police.

During the 64 days that passed, Sampath, a victim of discrimination, approached and corresponded with various authorities at one of Dubai's leading five star hotels to redress his complaint. But to no avail. Perseverance saw Sampath finally taking his unpleasant experience to the law enforcers earlier this week.

Legalising his grievance meant that Sampath would have to recount an unpleasant memory to the relevant authorities at the Dubai Police headquarters. It also meant reporting late for work. Sampath took on both inconveniences because he wants an answer. He says, "I need to know why this happened."

Racism for Sampath is as clear as black and white. And this is why he is unwilling to let his first experience of race-based discrimination get smothered by the system. Instead, he looks at bureaucracy in the eye and tells it that there is a problem.

This problem, "one of the most personal and pressing issues" that Sampath has had to deal with, occurred on the night of April 28.

It was a Friday and Sampath, his wife Mary Issacs and their friends, Vipul Salvi, Savia Mahajan, Rishi Saxena and Rakhi Sharma were looking forward to a "wonderful evening" in 360°, a club at the Jumeirah Beach Hotel. Unfortunately, they did not qualify for entry.

They were stopped at the entrance by Hussain Babar, the security on duty that night, and asked if they made reservations. "And we hadn't," says Sampath, "Rightly he then told us only people with reservations would be allowed inside." Not ones to disobey the protocol, the group stepped aside to ring in a reservation and gain "rightful entry".

Four Caucasians arrived at 360° around the same time. "This group hadn't made reservations either. This was clearly and distinctly overheard by six pairs of ears and

NO TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK



From left: Savia Mahajan and Vipul Salvi, Rishi Saxena and Rakhi Sharma, and Mary Issacs and Avinash Sampath. (Photos: K.N. Murali)

do remember we were less than three feet away from the scene," says Sampath. This time, however, Babar was prepared to overlook the absolute necessity for a reservation. When questioned, Babar justified his action with the words, "They are regulars."

Having witnessed the entire episode, Sampath and his friends had reasons to believe that skin colour was determining who made it past Babar. But, they decided to wait before confronting the security officer. "We waited on the side while another 'white' couple that had no reservations waltzed past," Sampath says.

Offended, Sampath, winner of Campaign Middle East's Young Creative of the Year 2005 award, did what came most naturally to him. He called Babar a racist. The security officer responded by "shining his flash light brightly" on their faces. Meanwhile, Salvi's call to the restaurant revealed that reservation was not required for entry. When the voice on the other end was informed that the group was being stopped from entering, they were told that Babar had the right to choose who entered.

Sampath says, "The lady on the phone was asked, 'If the man at the door doesn't like my face, does that mean we won't be allowed in?' She replied, 'Yes.'"

Having heard enough, the six of them went into the hotel and met the Duty Manager.

He in turn introduced the group to the Security Manager, Oliver Smolic. Sampath says, "He heard us out and offered us his round of compensation that included a night at The Apartment." They declined and instead arranged to meet him the following day "to discuss the events at length".

Though Babar gave the meeting a miss, he clarified his choice of guests for 360° the previous night through Smolic. "We apparently were an unruly bunch that was there to cause trouble," says

Sampath. The "unruly bunch" included freelance designer Issacs, Grey Worldwide's art director Salvi, artist Mahajan, AMRB's researcher Saxena and Sony's marketing and communication executive, Sharma.

Following this accusation, on May 1, the six fired six identical emails to the then General Manager of Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Robert Kunkler. In it, they made three demands after stating that they "are not looking for a free-anything".

The three Indian couples

wanted to know why the Caucasians were let in when they were not. In addition to this, they also asked for a verbal apology from Babar and a written apology from Kunkler.

After assuring them of an investigation and a reply within seven working days, Kunkler conveyed his "sincere apologies for the inconvenience caused". Another email followed six days later in which Kunkler clarified the reservations and entrance policy at 360° stating that residents from Jumeriah properties are given preferential access. The following is an excerpt from the said email.

"With reference to the particular persons in question, I would like to reassure you that these were indeed guests of our sister property, the Burj Al Arab. As the regular officer on duty did recognise these guests from previous visits earlier in the week and took a minute to verify that there was still space available."

Kunkler's detailed explanation, however, remains refuted by the six who witnessed the proceedings that night. Sampath says, "It is fantastic what the hotel has done. They have found the one single loophole which no one can refute."

Having come this far, Sampath decided to approach the right government authorities.

Unable to secure an appointment with officials in the Human Rights section of the Dubai Police, Sampath approached the Department of Tourism and Commerce

Marketing. The officials here accepted the letter of complaint. But, once again, the same explanation was served by the hotel.

The next door Sampath knocked on belonged to Major Arif Moh'd Abdulla Baqer, head of the Complaints Section within Human Rights. While Major Baqer has assured Sampath that he is going through the right channels, there is little assurance of action for the time being as Sampath's is the only officially registered complaint pertaining to racism with the Human Rights office. That one letter is simply not enough.

On his part, Sampath has sent out an account of his brush with racism to all those in his mailing list. A few have responded, confiding about similar encounters. But, unless these murmurs mount to an audible complaint, there is little the system can do.

For now, Sampath's positivity remains rooted. He says, "People will realise. When one more person questions and files a complaint, then some magic will happen. It's extremely simple."

(Have you undergone a similar experience? Do something about it. Contact the Complaints Department of the Human Rights section of Dubai Police on 2014122, because every letter helps.)

Turn to page 9 to find out how the other couples felt

what the hotel says

When contacted, Bill Walshe, chief marketing & business innovation officer of the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, said, "We would not like to debate this publicly through the pages of a newspaper."

racism at the workplace

Bayt.com, a Dubai based company, which offers recruiting, advertising and career planning solutions in the Middle East, recently announced the results of their Salary and Job Satisfaction Survey.

Of the 1,641 respondents who participated, 74 per cent felt that they were discriminated at the workplace based on their nationality.

revelations from previous polls

June 15, 2006

Out of 331 respondents, 138 felt that nationality plays a role in the advancement of employees.

June 8, 2006

When asked if nationality contributed directly for not being hired for a job, 54.7 per cent (289 respondents) agreed.

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