

Violence against violence is not the Tamil way. (1993, June 23).
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Violence against violence is not the Tamil way

Twenty years ago, in what would be remembered as an ugly chapter in Toronto's convulsive evolution towards multiculturalism, this city witnessed an epidemic of so-called "Paki-bashing."

Individuals, designated as victims only because of their physical characteristics, were tormented, spit on, pummelled and pushed off subway platforms. As a community, most of us were appalled and bewildered by this sudden expression of violence that seemed so foreign to our civic character. This was not us. We were ashamed and anxious to dissociate ourselves from the malicious few.

In time, the incidents ceased. The influx of Pakistani immigrants became absorbed in the changing social fabric of the city. But those were boom times and there was a generosity of spirit in the land.

Racism didn't go away. In fact, it flourished, though probably in more insidious forms. The deranged hate-mongers still slithered into view, on occasion, but we became more concerned about the sly tactics adopted by another faction of dissemblers: the ones who tried to link race with crime statistics, so that we could blame an entire group for the actions of a few.

How then to explain what has been happening to Tamil refugees in recent weeks? When and why did they suddenly become the enemy of choice for what appears to be a newly invigorated subspecies of thugs?

Three Tamils have been attacked in Toronto this month. One, who may have been simply a victim of robbery, died as a result of his injuries. Another remains in hospital, still paralyzed from the beating he suffered. A third, assaulted on the weekend by two strangers wielding broken beer bottles, says passersby stood and merely watched as he was set upon.

It is difficult to gauge what the Tamil community in Metro — estimated at 75,000-strong, according to their own spokespeople — makes of all this. These are mostly immigrants who fled from brutality and persecution in Sri Lanka. Many are educated professionals who are plugging away at menial jobs, far below their skills, and glad for the employment. It is an exchange that they willingly made when they came to Canada.

It is also fair, I think, to characterize them as a community that does not want to make waves in their adopted city. They don't have the stomach for it, or the political will to separate themselves into a distinct group of victims. This would only further alienate them from the larger society they have sought to join.

It is why their spokespeople, at least, view the recent attacks as a "black thing" and not a "Tamil thing."

"These people who have attacked us, how would they know if we were Tamils or Pakistani or Indian or Bangladeshi?" wonders Sam Duraiswamy, president of the Tamil Ealam Society. "We all look the same and I don't think any of the attackers knew the victims. Certainly, it seems to be racially motivated but I think it has to do with the color of our skin and not because we're Tamils. It has just been an unfortunate coincidence that all the victims were Tamil."

In truth, there would be a sense of loneliness and alienation if Duraiswamy were to concede that Tamils have been specifically targeted. They cannot take on a subspecies of violent racists all by themselves. If anything, Duraiswamy and other Tamil leaders have been cautioning their own younger members not to seek retribution and definitely not to arm themselves as a precautionary measure.

"That is not the way to deal with our anger," he says. "That would just create a never-ending situation of violence. But we are a very disciplined community. The younger people will listen to their elders, if we explain to them the reasons why we have chosen to respond in a certain way."

What the Tamil leaders have done, besides organizing educational seminars on racism, is join with about a dozen other groups holding a demonstration this Monday. Duraiswamy expects to bring about 1,000 Tamils to the event.

Negru Guna, a spokesperson for the Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils, says participants in the demo have been warned not to react to possible provocation from white supremacists and other malcontents. "This will be a peaceful protest. All the participants in the coalition are responsible for their own members and marshals will be instructed, if there's any provocation, to just keep on marching."

Although representatives of Anti-Racism Action — the group behind a violent rally at a white supremacist's home last week — attended the planning session on Tuesday night, they have yet to formally endorse the coalition's guidelines for behavior.

"If they don't stick to our conditions, they can't be part of it," says Guna. "We cannot have any more violence. If something happens at the demonstration, then the message people will get is that that is the way to fight back. Violence against violence."

"That is not the way."



Rosie DiManno