

India's Race Problem: Ignorance and Denial

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Racist attacks against Africans and the latter's measured reaction made headlines in the Indian media in March-April this year. Responding to the deplorable incidents of violence against African students, the African community in India called for an independent investigation, while envoys from African countries sought a UN-level investigation. African diplomats also urged India to join fight against racism. To his credit, Mali's Ambassador to India said the attacks should not "divide" Africa and India. Rather, he urged India to educate citizens about African culture and history (The Hindu, April 5). Racist incidents against Africans in India noted above are not isolated episodes. Africans visiting or living in India confront racism on daily basis. Right from when we land here, our colour becomes an excuse for Indians to display all their prejudices, wrote Samuel Jack, President of the Association of African Students in India (<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/is-india-a-racist-country/article17854153.ece>). It is a pattern manifested in different parts of India at different times. Racism embedded in the social institutions and cultural fabric of the nation is indeed indicative of a racist mind set (cf. EPW Editorial, June 4, 2017).

India has a race problem made of a combination of ignorance and denial. The BJP leader, former Rajya Sabha member, Tarun Vijay's statement to a television channel that Indians could not be racists as they lived with "black" South Indians (The Hindu, April 8) is symptomatic of ignorance of race, and he is not alone. The majority of Indians are ignorant of race (EPW Editorial, April 8, 2017 vol III no 14). In fact, ignorance is not the whole story of India's race consciousness. It is the duality marked by a reverential attitude towards the whites and its very opposite towards the blacks pervasive among Indians cutting across class, caste, regional, and religious lines that defines the commonsense of India's race consciousness, which is rather ironical considering that India was under white colonial rule for over two centuries everyday of which was marred by innumerable racial injuries. 'Colonialism as a form of violent foreign rule was legitimised by a racist ideology of European superiority,' says the board that greets the visitors at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin (Trilling 2017).

Gandhi and the Race Question in South Africa

Indians' ignorance of race in spite of prolonged colonial subjugation gets even more ironical if we are reminded that Mahatma Gandhi, who led

the anti-colonial struggle in India to its ultimate conclusion, was initially socialized in politics confronting race and racism as core issues in dealing with the Indian Question in South Africa. To his credit, Gandhi's challenge to racial inequality between white Europeans and Indians in South Africa was of historic importance, especially if we remember that it was essentially a confrontation between the mighty British Empire at its zenith and Gandhi as representative of indentured Indians – the coolie – the lowliest of the low in the existing social order of the day. In an age when European colonizers considered themselves the 'lords of human kind' (cf. Kiernan 1969/2015), claiming equality between white Europeans and Indians was a serious challenge to the imperialist ideology premised on racial superiority of the white. Populist critique of Gandhi's anti-racist fight in South Africa (e.g. Arundhati Roy 2014) ignores this critical historical context.

Critics of Gandhi in South Africa are right to point out his insensitivity to the South African blacks, their history and culture. The important question is how did the Africans respond to Gandhi? In May 1993, the veteran ANC leaders, who had staked their lives to fight the racism of apartheid, made a historic decision to install Gandhi's statue in Pietermaritzburg to commemorate the May 1893 incident when Gandhi was thrown out of the train en route to Pretoria. Very much like the populist critiques of Gandhi, the populist critiques of ANC memorializing Gandhi in South Africa ignore the fact that accepting Gandhi as one of them and honoring him by installing his statue, the first ever statue of a 'black' person in the history of South Africa, is an act of Africans' forgiveness and magnanimity towards India and the Indians. How do the latter reciprocate? Racialization and racial abuse of the Africans in India provide the stark contrast. That some Africans in India disrespect or even abuse ordinary Indians deserves to be noted. That does not, however, explain let alone justify India's racialization of Africa and the Africans.

Colonial Anthropology and Racialization of Africa

Colonial Anthropology is unarguably the single most important source of knowledge of African history and culture Indians have. The picture of Africa and Africans in colonial Anthropology is racialized. Anthropology is a child of Western imperialism, wrote Kathleen Gough. Though rooted in the humanist visions of the Enlightenment, Anthropology as university discipline developed in the last decades of the 19th and early twentieth centuries – a period in which the Western nations were making their final push to bring Africa (along with other parts of the world) under their economic-political domain through imperial conquest. **Anthropologists engaged in the study** conquered societies tended to uncritically accept the imperialist framework as given – even if they tried to protect their informants from the worst forms of imperialist exploitation, wrote Gough. As noted by Jacques Maquet, it was the basic framework of observation in which African traditions – material and non-material - much valorized in Anthropological/



ethnological studies - were not only different from those of the home country, but inferior, 'explainable only by a theory of racial inferiority' belonging to a people not yet civilized. While being participant observers of the peoples they studied, Anthropologists 'participated in the privileges of the dominant caste' of colonizers in the colony. These existential conditions affected their perceptions of Africa and Africans (Maquet, 47- 48). Not to mention that many of the Anthropologists were directly involved in colonizing and administering the very peoples whose anthropology they were writing as 'impartial', 'objective' social scientists.

It is understandable in the light of the above if in many African countries, the very term Anthropology (or its French version *ethnologie*) is suspected of being tinged with colonialism (Maquet) 1964. The single greatest failure of Indian Anthropology to date has been its inability or unwillingness (or both) to produce a convincing critique of the colonial framework of the Anthropology of Africa. To the contrary, almost all departments of Anthropology in India prescribed the monographs produced by the same very colonial Anthropology as authentic texts of African societies and cultures. Add to that Indians' homegrown sense of color prejudice and shadeism enshrined in our religious scriptures and folk tales (for 'shadeism' in Indian culture, visit <http://www.vimeo.com/16210769>), we have a recipe for a common sense of Africa and Africans that is racialized to the core.

Contrary to the conventional anthropological representations, Africa, a vast continent (rather than a country), has a wide variation of social-economic formations ranging from the hunters-gatherers, feudal, monarchical, to the capitalist systems. It has a rich and layered history of economics, politics, science, art, literature, poetry, music, dance, drumming, and cuisine. An objective account of African history and culture, as different from the colonial-imperial representations, will be a good starting point for Indians' education about Africa and the Africans.

Most importantly, Africa and the peoples of African origin have a rich history of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, and India has a lot to learn from them. Apart from Ethiopia's historic and victorious struggle and resistance against colonialism, the only example of its type in the entire global south, African peoples' struggle against race and racism on their own soil and in diaspora is unparalleled. One may count in this context the Haitian Revolution, the widespread slave revolts on the plantations in the far flung colonies of England, France, Portugal, and the Netherland, the Underground Railroad, the Civil Rights Movement in America, and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, to name a few. It is no exaggeration to say that the peoples of Africa and African origin have been the worst targets of race and racism since the dawn of modernity. But rather than claiming victimhood, they have turned it into a powerful tool of struggle to preserve their humanity. And all peoples of color comprising of the totality of non-whites, including Indians, have benefited from that – a benefit enjoyed but not acknowledged.

Race and Caste

Indian state's refusal to confront race was indicated, among other things, by its boycott of the United Nations Durban Conference on Colonialism, Racism, and Xenophobia in 2001, along with the former colonizing countries, on the ground that caste, a uniquely Indian cultural phenomenon, cannot and should not be compared to race. Indian sociologists' and social anthropologists' support of the Indian state's boycott was rather regrettable. Their resistance to compare race and caste in a serious and meaningful way, by overemphasizing the difference and ignoring the commonality between the two, has contributed to the perpetuation of Indians' ignorance of race.

Comparative study of race and caste will show that neither the distinction of race nor that of caste has any scientific basis or truth value. Both caste and race are social constructs justified by fictitious reasoning in the garb of science, nature, or Providence. Though not based on truth, the distinctions of race, like those of caste, have *real* consequences in terms of one's life chances from conception and birth through life to death and afterwards. How one is conceived, born, and brought up, where/whether one goes to school (or does not, or goes to jail), where/whether one gets a job (or does not), where and how one lives, dies, is buried or cremated, and what follows afterwards is determined by the race/caste one belongs to. It is because while ideological justifications of race and caste hierarchies have no basis in science or truth, race inequalities, like those of caste, rooted in social relations of property and production, protected by power relations, legitimized by legal-juridical structure and mystified by spiritual ideas, are consequential. Ignorance and denial of race and racism, like that of caste and casteism, is a dangerous mix.

Acknowledgement

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