

THE ANATOMY OF ANTI-BLACK RACISM

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Racism has raised its ugly head in full public view once again. It was revolting to see an adult gasping for breath, writhing in pain as the knee of the white policeman crushed his neck, and, within minutes, dying — the umpteenth time that a black life has been barbarically taken away by police brutality in America. Despite the civil war over slavery, and the civil rights movement for dignity and equality, systemic discrimination and violence against blacks persists. Racism continues unabated.

My sole focus here is coming to grips with what racism is. In a nutshell, and with slight, only slight oversimplification, it is this: one can tell everything important about a person, his group, its past and future, by noting the colour of his skin.

Also read | [Endemic, structural racism that blights U.S. society need to be heard: UN rights chief](#)

Of course, noticing the physical characteristics of a person, say the colour of her skin, is not itself racist. Good writers are expected to provide a vivid description of a character's physical features, including skin-colour. This need not imply the idea of race, leave alone racism. For instance, Indian epics describe Krishna as having *shyam varna*, being the dark-skinned one. This description has no evaluative connotation. Being conscious of the colour of a person, your own or that of the other may be pretty innocent.

However, when specific bodily features (colour, shape of nose, eye, lips) are permanently clumped together and human beings are classified in terms of these distinct biological clusters, and if, further, it is believed that these shared features are inter-generationally transmitted, then we possess the idea of race, i.e. a group with a common biological descent. Every single human being is not only seen then to be assigned to separate biologically-determined groups but also as born with traits directly inherited from biological ancestors. Each race is then believed to be fundamentally, permanently different from others — differences that are innate and indelible, for one can neither cease to have what one has inherited nor acquire characteristics which one does not already have.

The idea of race is deeply problematic. Despite many attempts, particularly in the 1930s to demonstrate its scientific basis, race or racial classifications have virtually no scientific foundation. If anything, the only conclusion from available evidence is that the whole of humanity has the same lineage, that there are no races within humans but only one single human 'race'. Yet, while scientifically speaking, race is a fiction, a large number of people believe in the existence of races. Race is very much a cultural and social reality.

The classification of humans into different races is a necessary but far from sufficient ingredient of racism which depends on two additional, deeply troublesome features. First, a given set of biological characteristics is believed to be necessarily related to certain dispositions, traits of character and behaviour. Biological descent fixes a person's culture and ethics. Our capacity for reasoning, for 'civilization', our propensities towards sexual lasciviousness or ability to make money, can all be read off by examining our face and body. Second, these racial cultures and ethical systems are hierarchically arranged. Those on top are intrinsically superior to those at the bottom.

Also read | [Books about racial discrimination become best-sellers as U.S. protests grow](#)

Racism, then, is a systematic ideology, a complex set of beliefs and practices that, on the presumed basis of biology, divides humanity into the 'higher' us and a lower 'them'. It not only sustains a permanent group hierarchy but deeply stigmatises those designated as inferior. This sense of hierarchy provides a motive for say, whites to treat blacks in ways that would be viewed as cruel or unjust if applied to members of their own group. For instance, contact with them is often regarded as contaminating, polluting. It should therefore be avoided or kept to a minimum. To prevent sexual contamination through inter-marriage, the southern States of America had the severest laws sanctioning public lynching. How else could the 'colour line' be scrupulously maintained? This explains something important. Though colour-consciousness should not be problematic in theory, in reality, an acute awareness of colour is almost always a symptom of racism lurking somewhere unnoticed.

Racism distinguishes even inferior races into two kinds. One inferior race is considered so much beyond the pale that it cannot be lived with, and must be exterminated. This is infamously illustrated by the virulent anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany that led to the final solution, the Holocaust. The second type of race is fit only to be controlled, subordinated, enslaved. Anti-black racism, our main concern here, is an obvious example. Closer home, some Varna-related ideologies (in the Dharmashastras from 1st ACE onwards) that stigmatised the *pratiloma* castes, particularly the 'Chandalas', function as virtual equivalents of racism as do the now somewhat scarce Christian anti-Judaism or contemporary Islamophobia.

Racism naturalises a person's belief, character and culture. For example, being uneducated is seen not as socio-economic deprivation but a sign of inherited low IQ; blacks are predatory and are also seen to have an innate streak of savagery, which unless kept down by brute force from time to time, might explode and destroy civilisation. It is this ideology of anti-black racism that was brazenly on show in the 9- minute video clip of the merciless, life-extinguishing force used by the police on George Floyd.

Also read | [Searching 'racist' on Twitter brings up Trump as top result](#)

Some Americans notice and seem shell-shocked by racism only when such violence occurs. Hasn't the civil rights movement been successful in damaging racism, they ask? Is it not difficult now to justify any act by explicit reference to race? Is this not good reason to believe that racism will disappear from America by good laws, education and rational argument? Alas, the very success of the movement that helped develop a motivated blindness to how open discrimination of blacks has been displaced by another system of hidden discrimination. A systematic constraint on avenues for improving the quality of life forces their descent into pretty crime, incarceration, stigma attached to imprisonment and the severe discrimination and exclusion that follows the charge of felony. All these, as scholars such as Jane Hill have shown, have made the criminal system produce results as vicious as generated by colour-based slavery and racial segregation.

For example, in a number of southern States in America, once declared a felon, a person is disqualified from voting. So, once the criminal justice system labels people of colour as "criminals", whites have the sanction to engage in all the practices of subordination that they had apparently abandoned. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, surpassing those in highly repressive regimes such as China and Iran. The figures related to African-Americans are shocking. In several States, they are 10 times more likely to go to prison than whites. According to the Death Penalty information Center of the U.S., between 1976-2019, black defendants sentenced to death for killing whites numbered 291, while white defendants killing blacks were only 21, a staggering figure close to 14 times more! (For a quick overview, also see the Netflix film, "13th").

It is amply clear that the feel-good anti-racism of some Americans that views racism as an aggregate of mistaken beliefs held by individuals that can be dissipated by education and rational argument simply does not work. True, good education helps in dismantling racism but the fact remains that much of it lies hidden within the social structure, in habits, practices and institutions. Vulnerabilities amassed over centuries of anti-black racism leave African-Americans facing multiple, intersecting hurdles to a good life. As mentioned, the current criminal system that awards unfair advantage and privilege to whites, while inflicting unmerited and unjust disadvantages on blacks exemplifies this invisible monster. Only a peaceful movement to end institutionalised racism, with both blacks and white participants, quite like the recent protests after Floyd's murder, can break the back of this evil. But can such a movement be sustained? Will it be allowed to?

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