

Demystifying Racism in India

It has been more than 67 years since we became independent and it is presumed that the state-nation called India should have by now become a nation-state. But the fact remains that things are far from encouraging. The fissiparous tendencies fanned by the revisionist forces a la extremists, Naxalites, separatists and terrorists continue to work at their prime agenda of balkanising our beloved country. And one such tendency is the alleged racial discrimination against the North-Eastern Indians or people from Africa.

But the fact remains that there have been similar incidents of alleged xenophobic attacks and discrimination against Indian citizens of other regions in North-East. It is a common knowledge that the migrant workers from Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha or Uttar Pradesh have been subject to a growing degree of xenophobia, racial discrimination, prejudices and violence in the North-East. In 2000 and 2003, anti-Bihari violence in North-East led to the deaths of up to 200 people and reportedly generated around 10,000 internally displaced refugees. There have been a number of racial attacks against the Bihari community in North-East states like Assam, Manipur and Nagaland including massacres as carried out by the militant groups.

On 18th Jan, 2014, five youths from Bihar were shot dead after being pulled out from a bus by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) militants in Assam's Kokrajhar district. Three others, also from Bihar, were injured in the same incident. In 2007, thousands of Hindi-speaking labourers fled from Assam after a series of massacres and bomb attacks. Overall, 98 non-locals were killed in Assam during 2007 disturbances. In March–April 2008, a banned Meitei outfit killed 16 non-locals in Manipur. Purbottar Hindustani Sammelan (PHS) has alleged that anti-social elements in Assam have been carrying out a continuous hate campaign against the Hindi speakers in the region. In 2009, altogether nine Hindi speakers were killed in Assam and Manipur, after the attackers set ablaze around 70 houses.

In 2010, Hindi, Bengali and Nepali speakers were killed by the NDFB militants in Assam. Maharashtra has similarly experienced hate campaigns from time to time against people from Hindi speaking states or from South India. But such alleged racial discrimination or

harassment is not confined to Indians in states outside their own, but also against people from other nationalities including those from Africa either because of their colour or their features. As a society, we still have not learnt to treat with dignity some of our fellow citizens from amongst us as usually done with the downtrodden Dalits and women.

India is one of the top ten linguistically and culturally diverse countries. We have proudly cherished and celebrated our 'unity in diversity'. Instead of the 'Melting Pot Model' which tries to forcibly amalgamate and assimilate all cultures and sub-cultures into one overarching identity, India has consciously opted for the 'Salad Bowl Model' to ensure that all cultures retain their distinct individuality while also being an inalienable part of the larger Indian civilisational entity. It is to this effect that the Constitution of India guarantees some basic fundamental rights to citizens including 'prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth' vide Article 15 or 'protection of certain rights including the right to move freely throughout the territory of India and to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India' vide Article 19.

But, as mentioned above, we are still to build a cohesive nation-state and our nation-building process is far from complete. Indian nationalism remains a building under construction. The so-called racial assaults on Indians in different parts of the country are more of a reflection of a sick mentality and criminal mindset than anything else. Don't we see such instances of xenophobic and racial offences even in the liberal Western countries including the countries of North America and Europe which include USA, UK, Canada, France and Germany?

One feels that these discriminatory instances and experiences are more of aberrations and exceptions than part of a generalised mindset on the part of the people of the regions under news. More or less Indians are quite liberal and devoid of any habitual racial behaviour. While the above mentioned offences and crimes against North-East people are a reality, it is also true that for every crime committed against the North-East people in Delhi, similar and more number of crimes were committed against the people from the so-called mainland India if the data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) are to be believed.

Delhi not only has reported the highest rate of violent crimes in the country, but has also been found to be more prone to violence than any other state. The NCRB statistics say that around 54.4 per cent (10,733 to be precise) cases registered in Delhi are violent crimes. In 2013, Delhi reported 1,441 rapes making it the city with the highest number of rapes. The burglary incidents rose from 449 in 2013 to 4,447 till March, 2014. The motor vehicle theft cases rose from 2,893 in 2013 to 4447 in March, 2014. Reports of crimes against women in India such as rape, dowry deaths, molestation, kidnapping, sexual harassment, trafficking and cruelty by relatives increased by 26.7 per cent in 2013 as per NCRB statistics. There were, in all, 309,546 crimes against women reported to the police in 2013 against 244,270 in 2012. Police attribute the astronomical rise in these crimes to greater public awareness and better reporting/registration of crimes.

Most of the offences and crimes, as mentioned above, were never part of an institutionalised cultural outlook but manifestation of criminal behaviour on the part of some deviant Indians including militants as also borne out through investigations. A good number of these offences

and crimes were later found to have been executed either with the criminal intention of looting or were instances of group clashes. As one can definitely not stigmatise the entire people of North-East for violent and murderous attacks by militants on people from outside the region, likewise the people of Delhi or Maharashtra in general can't be disgraced.

The alleged spurt in crimes against North-East Indians has simultaneously seen a secular rise in crimes against all classes of citizens. If there has been racial stereotyping of North-East Indians, there has been similar stereotyping for a person from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar, Punjab, Gujarat, West Bengal, Rajasthan or Haryana as also typified by the jokes in circulation. So, it can't be argued that only North-East Indians have been targeted. The criminals have secularly targeted all classes of citizens. The above incidents are deviant behaviour on part of a section of our society and should be dealt with strongly and swiftly. The various recommendations of the Bezbaruah Committee should also be given a serious thought for pre-empting recurrence of such episodes in future.

In fine, the racist behaviour as noticed recently among some Indians is nothing but a deviant behaviour and should be dealt accordingly in keeping with the law of the land. India as a country can definitely not be termed a racist country because of the deviant behaviour of some.

Salient Points

- Indian nationalism remains a building under construction.
- Recently, alleged racial attacks against North-Eastern Indians or Africans, Bihari community have risen.
- As a society, we still have not learnt to treat with dignity some of our fellow citizens from amongst us.
- Instead of the 'Melting Pot Model' which tries to forcibly amalgamate and assimilate all cultures and sub-cultures into one overarching identity, India has consciously opted for the 'Salad Bowl Model' to ensure that all cultures retain their distinct individuality while also being an inalienable part of the larger Indian civilisational entity.
- These discriminatory instances and experiences are more of aberrations and exceptions than part of a generalised mindset on the part of the people of the regions under news.
- Police attribute the astronomical rise in these crimes to greater public awareness and better reporting/registration of crimes.
- The criminals have secularly targeted all classes of citizens. India as a country can definitely not be termed a racist country because of the deviant behavior of some.
- Bezbaruah Committee recommendations should be implemented immediately.

Glossary

Xenophobic: unreasonably fearful

Demystifying: clarify