

## The Great Indian Nation: Are We Racist?

**W**e, as a nation, have been very sensitive to 'racism' for a long time and continue to be so. The recent times have seen a lot many issues relating to race and racism hogging media attention. The recent attacks against Indians in Australia have also kept the racism debate alive in this country. It was our own Mahatma Gandhi who had taken up the cudgel against 'apartheid', the dreaded racist policies in South Africa of the yore. His first encounter with racial discrimination at the Pietermaritzburg railway station in South Africa towards the end of 19th century became the symbol of a fight against the colonial powers all over the world.

Be it the ESPN advertisement during the Cricket World Cup, the preference for fair complexioned cheer leaders over dark ones during the Indian Premier League cricket matches, the alleged comment made by a Radio Jockey against the Nepali Prashant Tamang, the Sony Indian Idol or the Andrew Symonds controversy surrounding Harbhajan Singh's alleged 'Monkey' remark against the former, the issue of racism seems to have become a regular part of our intellectual consciousness. Very recently, one very senior and respected politician from the North-East alleged that he has been butt of racist remarks in this country. Are we, as a nation, really racist?

Is the hoary caste system or the related obnoxious practice of untouchability (now banned vide Article 17 of the Indian Constitution) responsible for the same? Even though caste system and untouchability are still living realities (though with subdued rigour and vigour) in this country, is it that the same has also fashioned our likes or dislikes for a particular community, caste, race, religion or is it just our misplaced fascination with the fair complexion. After all, fair complexion has been associated with the high caste Aryans in this country even though that barrier has long been broken. We have dark complexioned members in any and every caste or community as a result of inter-caste and inter-racial matrimonies. Not only this, we also have differently complexioned members as part of the same family.

Still, the affection for fair complexion subsists and survives in our sub-consciousness and often comes forward to modulate our behaviour towards differently complexioned differently.

The Indian perception of beauty is often defined in terms of fair complexion. Aren't almost all our Gods fair complexioned and all the demons dark complexioned?

Since then, dark complexion is believed to be associated with sins and vices while fair complexion has been associated with piety, chastity, virtue and beauty. Indians' craze for the white/fair complexion is borne out by the huge market for the fairness cream and other such cosmetic products in this country. You can sell any 'damn' product here as long as you can promise that the same could enhance fairness of the skin. Our matrimonial advertisements also bear out the preference for a fair complexioned spouse. Many males in this country harbour the desire of having a fair complexioned wife, if, at least, to have fair complexioned children. If your kids are fair complexioned, you could be assured of finding a suitable match for them quite easily. This applies more to the daughters than to the sons.

Many African nationals have often alleged discriminatory/racist behaviour by Indians. Being fairer than the Africans, many Indians deem themselves racially superior. There was a time when there was an innate bias in favour of fair complexioned people while selecting air hostesses, TV newsreaders, actors and actresses or, at least, so was alleged. Still most of our successful actors and actresses are not shot with their true complexion. Most of the successful Bollywood actors and actresses, even though not-so-fair-complexioned, are all portrayed as fair complexioned persons. At least, that's how most of us know them.

Various colloquial appellations with racial overtones are also part of our day to day cant. Words such as Mallu, Chinky, Sardarji, Gujju, Punju, Bihari, and so on have become inalienable part of our day-to-day vocabulary. And so have become the jokes based on stereotypical behaviour relating to them. And we all love sharing or cracking jokes based on a Mallu, a Sardarji, a Bihari or a Gujju. But does that prove that we are racist?

One feels that such prejudices are not natural to India or Indians alone, but it is a global phenomenon. Racial, gender or regional typecasting or such prejudices are formed on the basis of our day to day interactions. Such typecasting also stems from some hoary folklore or history. All this slowly becomes ingrained in our sub-consciousness and forces us to form a particular opinion about a particular caste or community. We gradually start accepting the same as natural. At least, the hoi polloi does the same.

One feels that this is all very healthy as long as the same is done and accepted with a sense of humour without making much of it and as long as the same helps us in enjoying a hearty laughter at the expense of each other. This is how societal camaraderie grows and a civilisation evolves. Actually, it is our unwarranted and over the top reactions which is responsible for creation of a needless controversy. It is definitely not in the same genre as 'apartheid' or the abhorrent 'slavery' of the recent past. It is definitely not racism unless and until the same is not said or done with an intent to insult or humiliate someone.

When someone cracks a 'Sardarji' or a 'Mallu' joke, the idea is definitely not to inflict insult or humiliation on someone as both are supposed to be very successful members of the Indian society. But it becomes a problem once we take the same too seriously and start depriving each other of the deserved opportunities or social goodies or in allocation/distribution of societal values (à la David Easton) on the basis of such prejudiced opinions. The violence

stemming from such opinionated prejudices can actually turn out to be serious enough as to break a nation as happened to Pakistan during the 1970s. Thankfully, this is not true in case of Indian society. As we go along and the society experiences more inter-caste, inter-religious, inter-community and inter-regional marriages, such notions and prejudices shall slowly lose their sting. And then even if cracked or commented, such jokes or remarks shall probably not evoke the same reactions as they do now.

India traditionally has been a very open society, welcoming and accepting anyone reaching its shores. And that is why it has become what it is today, a 'salad bowl'. A plural, multi-racial and multi-ethnic society often experiences such behaviour by members of the society and it is not abnormal as long as the same is in a good spirit without malice to anyone. One also feels that such conduct or such reactions shall get tempered with time as we go along and become more mature as a society, when our nation building process is complete in all respects, when our society become more egalitarian and when almost all members of our society become relatively more educated and enlightened.

### Salient Points

- Mahatma Gandhi had taken up the cudgel against 'apartheid', a racist practice in South Africa.
- Racism has become a regular part of our intellectual consciousness.
- In India; dark complexion is believed to be associated with sins and vices while fair complexion has been associated with piousness, chastity, virtue and beauty.
- Being relatively fairer than the Africans, many Indians deem themselves racially superior.
- Words such as Mallu, Chinky, Sardarji, etc. have become inalienable part of our day-to-day vocabulary.
- Such typecasting also stems from some hoary folklore or history.
- It is definitely not racism unless the same is not said with an intent to insult someone
- As we go along and the society experiences more inter-caste and inter-community marriages, such notions and prejudices shall slowly lose their sting.
- A plural, multi-racial and multi-ethnic society often experiences such behaviour by its members.

### Glossary

**Cudgel:** a short, thick stick used as a weapon

**Obnoxious:** highly objectionable

**Abhorrent:** utterly opposed