


How can we forget *Atitheo devo bhava* (the guest is god), that pillar of Indian culture? Such was the lament from some sections of the Indian media following the latest murderous attacks on Africans, this time in Noida and triggered by the death of a local teenager. Five Nigerian students in the neighbourhood were arrested after being accused by locals of everything from drugging the boy to eating him, following which mobs began to search for and beat up other Africans, grievously injuring four men who were cornered in a mall. Except for arresting the Nigerians on charges of murder (they were later released for lack of evidence), and thus adding credence to the wild rumours going around, the police did nothing.

These events are sickening but hardly surprising. Similar racist assaults on black people happened in Delhi and Bangalore last year and before, one even led by AAP minister Somnath Bharati. Goa is no better, with a black tourist dying in a northern village last year, apparently after being beaten by villagers in the presence of police; the victim was dismissed as a thief, as if it is fine to assault thieves. And who has forgotten the vicious mob attack in 2013 on a group of Nigerians who had blocked the Porvorim highway to protest the murder of a fellow-Nigerian? That attack found widespread support from the establishment, including then-MLAs-now-Ministers Vijai Sardesai and Rohan Khaunte.

As before, this time too the Indian government had denied that the violence was racist, resulting in strong criticism from the African diplomatic missions. Some worried murmurs have also come from India's liberal intelligentsia, apparently worried about the international image of India, and about a possible impact on Indian investments in Africa. Something, they say, needs to be done.

But it would be foolish to expect any action from the Indian government. Because deeply engrained in the savarna psyche is the idea that racism is what others do to Indians. The reason is that, in India, racism is a normal and everyday thing; it never gets singled out because it's simply part and parcel of our great Brahmanical culture and tradition. Here the preference for white skin is not something to be ashamed of, it is in fact celebrated in art,

films, songs, and, of course, commerce. If white skin is seen as beautiful, pure, high and  savarna (literally 'good colour'), black skin is considered polluted, low, avarna ('no colour'), and treated accordingly. No surprises that, even without the attacks, the experience of black people in India is terrible: verbal abuse on the street, mockery, discrimination, rejection, and stereotyping as drug-peddlers, criminals, prostitutes (when women), and even cannibals; the last being, as Jael Silliman (March 31, 2017) pointed out, the ultimate 'othering' and dehumanisation.

This is actually the same treatment meted out to bahujans, minorities, adivasis and North-easterners in India too. Aren't we used to the Goan Catholic woman being stereotyped as loose, and the Goan Catholic man as drunk, in Hindi cinema? Because caste requires public humiliation. For *atithee devo bhava* to work, the guests have to be savarna or white; others are not considered fit to be guests.

As for public lynchings, this is another old tradition of South Asia's caste society, for caste needs public violence too. The targeting of innocents for offences committed by their family- or caste-members is yet another tradition, because this culture sees people not as individuals but only as groups, backgrounds, caste identities, or, in this case, as blacks. And in all of this, the ones targeted are always the humble and powerless. Such is the way of the coward, the bully, and of caste society.

But there is a theory to this behaviour too. Indian liberals are quick to condemn the ugly images, like those from the Noida mall. They might even condemn the public rapes and murders of Dalits at Khairlanji and elsewhere, the public murders of inter-caste lovers, or the recent public stripping and assault on two Dalit women for taking water from a 'upper caste well' in Gujarat. What rarely gets mentioned though is how this violence stems from some of the foundational ideas of this nation.

Dorothy M. Figueira (*Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity*, 2015) speaks about the racist Aryan myth of the 18th-19th centuries, which portrayed the Aryans as a superior race, far better than the Judaeo-Christians, creators of an ideal civilisation, fonts of universal truths (the Vedas), ancestors of both Europeans and savarnas,

and native to India. Those involved in propagating this myth were Europeans (Enlightenment stalwarts, Romanticists, and Orientalists) (from Voltaire to Max Muller and Nietzsche), along with Brahmin reformers (like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dayanand Saraswati) and nationalists (like Tilak and Vivekananda). The reformers used it to create an Aryan Golden Age past which British India was supposed to return to, while the nationalists used it to justify the Brahmanical present. It was a myth that led Europe to the Nazis, and British India to Brahmanical nationalism.

Racism was thus a formative part of the nationalism of the Indian elites. Their unhappiness with British rule stemmed from this racist-casteist sense of superiority, when they found themselves not given a status equal to the British, while their caste position was increasingly challenged by the rising bahun communities. Before this they were only too happy to work with the white man, not just in British India, but in Africa too. This eagerness to exploit Africa continues even today, and was on display when the Portuguese Prime Minister visited Goa recently, with Goan elites speaking excitedly about possible 'collaboration in Africa'.

Collaboration over Africa between the Brahmin and the European, but not of course with the African! That would be the way championed by none other than the father of our nation. For, as he said, 'Ours is one continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw Kaffir...' (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, Page 410).

(With thanks to Arif Ayaz Parrey for his Facebook post on the Noida violence.)

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: April 6, 2017)



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