



There was a charge made recently by BJP's Swapan Dasgupta that the protest by people determinedly raising their voices under the banner of 'Not in My Name', against targeted lynching of Muslims was an extravagant display of rootless cosmopolitanism. The responses have been "we are not rootless cosmopolitans". We are often quick to jump into defensive mode in this fashion, and then try to prove how we are more rooted than Baba Ramdev or Sri Sri Ravi Shankar or Yogi Adityanath. In other words, we try to show how we are superior to these in being rooted. But we might need to ask whether rootless cosmopolitanism is necessarily the bad thing it is suggested to be. Does its problem depend on what lens one is looking at things from?

Who is considered a rootless cosmopolitan in the first place? Someone might use this label for the Prime Minister who trots to various countries, gives a bear hug to heads of state who are people he barely knows, and negotiates free trade agreements that literally barter away the rights of the people in the country, particularly the people from the margins, to suit the country's corporate-caste capitalists. Others refer to The Page 3 crowd or intellectuals anywhere in the country. Still others may refer to those who migrate, as, for instance, the Goans who obtain a Portuguese passport, as a route to jobs in the European Union. Yet others style those who eat beef or pork as rootless cosmopolitans. Those who oppose development projects harmful to the ecology including the people on the land are similarly branded. And so are the depressed castes and other marginalized sections of society who, for obvious reasons have no respect for a sexist casteist class society. Or the person identified by the fascist powers of the State as the 'other'.

And who is not considered a rootless cosmopolitan? Here, on the one hand are arrayed the intellectuals who justify excesses in the name of the greater good of the 'nation', such as those who justify the masquerading of a person tied to an Army vehicle as a human shield, the people that justify death penalty to those they despise and call for a protection from death penalty to the people that share their thinking, those who spout rhetoric in the name of patriotism and protecting the nation. On the other hand are those that are deemed by the ruling dispensation to be "us" such as the upper castes from the majority community or corporates, or those who passively accept the decisions of the ruling Governments and are

yes men or yes women.



What is Rootless Cosmopolitanism?

Rootless cosmopolitanism is in fact a term that gained currency in the Soviet Union post World War II to label critics of communism, particularly used against Jewish intellectuals, who articulated pro-West feelings, or any historian who neglected to sing the praises of those considered historic ethnic Russians. Such labeling was not without consequences, earning warnings, loss of bureaucratic posts, dismissal from professional organizations like the writers' union, being fired from work, or being expelled from the communist party, which left the person open for arrest.

It has since stuck and has been used to label people both positively and pejoratively. For instance, reminiscing about the Nehru-Gandhi family, subsequent to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, the New York Times said "they all shared a kind of cosmopolitan rootlessness, very rare among Indian politicians, that reinforced an ideological commitment to secularism and strong central government". The Gandhi's were ruling with an iron hand and that was perceived as strong government. Many already label strong governance from the Centre by the present Government as a good thing.

These days, there is another expression of rootedness, the identity marked by the Aadhaar Bar Code. Sometimes one wonders if these labels should matter at all. At other times one feels that labels are important for naming and shaming, or for naming and recognizing. If one is labeled a rootless cosmopolitan for standing up for rights, so be it. If one is labeled a rootless cosmopolitan for speaking out about the injustices within one's country, which has the effect of puncturing the image of the 'nation', so be it. If that is what rootless cosmopolitanism means, it is still fine.

For why should rootedness in something unjust have a value, or rootedness in something just have no value? Why do we need to uphold discrimination and inequality based on caste, religion, gender, tribe, sexual orientation, race, within the country, and treat those from the privileged from the majority community in society as rooted? On the other hand, surely we do need to uphold a rootedness that fosters values of collective work, substantive equality, respect for choice of work or any mobility in occupations or work?



As for cosmopolitanism which implies universal values, if we really uphold values that emanate from people's lived realities and practices and these attain universality, why should that be an issue? It certainly depends on the principles one is upholding. If there is universal value attached to discrimination or violence for the greater good of the 'nation', there is a certainly a problem.

If standing up for universal principles of justice, of solidarity are seen as rootlessness, then we should indeed be happy to be rootless cosmopolitans.

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