

COMMENT

Pride in prejudice



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In this increasingly angry age, prejudice has become a matter of public

entertainment

There was a time in our country when prejudice was not allowed to blatantly declare itself. There was a time when there was something that was shameful about publicly stating one's prejudices. But in this increasingly angry age, prejudice has become a matter of public entertainment. Repeatedly, we hear statements about caste, religion, the poor and the marginalised, in public domains and in public conversations as if they are matters of fact and not fictions of prejudice.

We hear far more strident voices against reservation, against allowing communities to eat what they want, against norms of behaviour of women. Such voices are getting normalised and have become part of our public gossip.

One would have thought that with so many well-meaning and deeply committed individuals and groups who have consistently fought against social prejudice of various kinds, we would have found ways to counter prejudice. Instead, we seem to be moving in the other direction. Definitely, the growth of vocal hate groups, supported by political parties, is a reason but we also have to honestly acknowledge that a plethora of social causes participate in this legitimisation of prejudice.

We have not been able to change these prejudices because, most often, these prejudices against colour, religion, caste and gender manifest not always directly but through various other means.

The white obsession

Look at our TV and print media. Our world news is largely about white societies. It is ironic that CNN and BBC in India have so many programmes about Africa, West Asia, etc. Why don't our TV channels show more of Africa? Or more of other Asian countries? By repeatedly having a bias towards the white West, our news makers exemplify a principle of prejudice. The way the TV presenters look also supports the many prejudices about colour, class or gender.

The prejudices inherent in our media are compounded by those inherent in our education system. Our syllabus is dominated by the intellectual products of the white West. Prejudice in this sense has entered into our core ideas of education far more deeply than anything else and explains why these prejudices are so powerful and not easy to get rid of. Right from school, the examples of great minds are largely white and male. The list of

writers, scientists, artists and others is filled with these white males (and where Indians are found, they would be largely upper-caste males). The books that children mostly read are still dominated by a white world. Forget about the lack of great African, Persian, Chinese or Japanese literatures – we don't even read enough of other Indian language writing.

The prejudice against non-whites goes so deep in these educational practices that it is very difficult even for students who go on to advanced degrees like the Master's or PhD to deal with non-white intellectual traditions. I have found that it is most difficult to get students to take other intellectual traditions, including the Indian, seriously enough for their research work. The default mode is to search for a British, French, German or American scholar's writing in the student's field of work, whether he understands these writers or not. It is ironic that the theoretical ideas that we use to make sense of our social experiences have had to come from great white males outside the country and not from the writings of Asians and Africans. To do the latter needs more work as there are no sources that are ready-made for use. We are not even making serious attempts to do this and this is a reflection of prejudice.

Some Indian philanthropists endow Chairs and donate money to education in bastions of white intellectual power, while at the same time bemoaning the lack of quality in Indian universities. When they do this, it is a double whammy since it sustains the privilege of the white West while at the same time contributing to the degeneration of Indian institutions.

Prejudice continues to be manifested and sustained through the privilege given to English speakers and writers in India. Much of this bias has translated into a sharp rural-urban divide with the urban legitimising itself by a prejudicial view towards the rural 'other'. Some view English as a form of social mobility and a way out of historical oppression but the way in which this language stands as a symbol of power and knowledge makes it a classic trope of racism. As a consequence, our intellectual citadels cannot respect local language scholars and are more easily willing to accept mediocre English-speaking academicians.

We must remember that there are always good reasons to be a racist, colourist, communalist, casteist or misogynist. A decision not to give into these prejudices is not a judgment of reason and rationality alone; it is also an ethical judgement which depends on how we allocate value to anything. Ironically, reason and rationality have always played a central role in promoting prejudices against colour, caste, religion, sexuality, gender and other cultures.

In fact, one of the most dangerous inheritances we have had as part of these prejudicial ideologies is the belief that rationality and reason are unique products of the modern West. It is sad that we blindly buy into this story without first pausing to recognise that some of the most influential philosophers in Europe who promoted particular models of rationality held racist and misogynist views. The fact that our academic system is exclusively monopolised by the works of such men should at least make us think about the nature of our education system.

Prejudice is not manifested only when major events like the racist attacks on Africans or the attack on beef-eaters occur. Prejudice 'happens' continuously because of the established social structures, including the caste structure, which create and maintain the conditions for prejudice to flourish in India.

We can be politically correct and condemn these actions, but if we continue the same old practices of education, language domination, not engaging with the texts and traditions of a diverse India and Asia ranging from the Upanishadic to the Buddhist, Jain and the Islamic, as well as the contributions of a subaltern India that has actually created the world that we inhabit, and continue to ignore our cultural cousins in Africa, West Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, then we may as well accept the fact that our society will continue to be built on prejudices for a long time to come.

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