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Roots of Racism

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What exactly is racism and what are its origins? And how is racism different from racialism or communalism?

Let's go back about 500 hundred years ago with the rise of European colonialism, the rivalry for control amongst these imperial powers and the conquest of Africa, Americas and Asia. The colonized places were plundered with the natural resources exploited to the fullest to meet the growing demands for raw materials to drive the emerging Industrial Revolution in the West.

With the demand for labour to work in the plantations in the Americas and the West Indies, the colonial powers also started the African slave trade during this period. The suffering and torture of these slaves were so brutal that many slaves preferred to die by refusing to be fed or by jumping overboard into the oceans. Entire communities and families in Africa were uprooted, separated and decimated.

True, slavery had existed thousands of years earlier since the emergence of classed society and the conquest for new land but this new slave trade was of a massive scale (more than 10 million Africans were taken by force), highly organized and exclusively targeted at using black Africans as slaves. Yet, Africa was the cradle of mankind where homo sapiens first evolved.

The white colonial powers needed an ideology to justify to their own people and to sooth their "new liberal conscience" that it was fine to treat black people as sub-humans and to plunder their land. And it was also their God given right to force black people to be slaves and serve the interests of the emerging white society.

The ideology of racism was developed to promote stereotype thinking that black people were soul-less, stupid, uncultured and genetically inferior. Politicians, pseudo-scientists and even religious leaders propagated such myths about black people.

Racism became a systematic oppression of black people by the whites and it was not simply a mere dislike of someone with a different skin colour and race.

Racism's most recent manifestation was apartheid in South Africa. And it was hardly forty years ago that the US society deliberately segregated black people and mistreated them as second-class citizens in many ways, for example, not allowing them to share public transportation used by the white people.

Yet the changes and transformation in the US have been so rapid that it has just elected a black person to be its president. Perhaps it says something about the socio-

political system in the US (which was originally developed for the benefit of the white society).

Having said this, racism is still deeply embedded in the white society. Its old school of thought is so powerful that it still exists, even today, in the sub-conscious minds of many white people, making them feel a sense of superiority over black people. Overt racism existed for more than 500 years and it was only in the last 50 years or so, especially after the 2nd World War, that decolonization took place and developing countries became more self-reliant and assertive.

But the conflicts, internal feuds and political instability in many developing countries tend to reinforce the old racist thinking that black and/or coloured people are stupid, uncultured and incapable of peace, civility and looking after themselves.

Based on the above definition of racism, black and coloured people cannot be racists even if they want to (but they can be chauvinists) as the privilege of such a tag belongs to white people. This is why it has been said many times that racism is essentially a “white man’s disease” although, of course, not all white people (especially the younger generations), are racists. It’s like saying why women cannot be “sexist” as our male dominated society has discriminated against women and not the other way round.

Racialism on the other hand, is more a dislike (or even hatred) and distrust between the races concerned but it can also lead to violent conflicts. When both race and religion are involved in strife, we have communalism. (The term communalism is used in a more positive context in Western society to mean the promotion of the community’s interests.) Racial chauvinism represents an emotional state of a person’s extreme pride in his/her race and can be attributed to either racism or racialism.

Racism still exists in many forms in the Western society and needs to be constantly opposed in every way possible including using philosophical arguments.

Looking from the perspective of anthropology, Man is the only creature in the animal kingdom which is capable of practising racism. (The other unique “trait” of Man compared to animals is its ability to inflict harm or kill for leisure.)

That is the irony of mankind as world renowned geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky once said: “among the two million or more species now living on Earth, man is the only one who experiences ‘the ultimate concern’. Man needs a faith, a hope and a purpose to live by and to give meaning and dignity to his existence.” This has led to the development of “culture” which clearly sets man apart from the other species. Yet the culture of racism makes a mockery of humanity.

Prehistorian David Pilbeam, explained; “whether we have one or two spouses, wear black or white to a funeral, live in societies that have kings or lack chiefs entirely is a function not of our genes but of learning.”

Clifford Geertz has also stated: “Without men, no culture, certainly but equally, and more significant, without culture, no men.”

Therefore, racism as a culture is not inherent in humankind but was learned from a society which has developed such an ideology to justify the injustices and oppression.

As rich as the biodiversity flourishing on this planet, the racial and cultural diversity of Man testifies to his extreme flexibility and his ability to adapt to all kinds of condition around him.

Anthropologist Richard Leakey best explained our common identity: “humans are all derived from a single stock and the physical differences between people in different parts of the world are simply the kind of geographical variation one would expect from a widely distributed species. The differences between people are, in effect skin deep and this is an apt metaphor when one considers the long history of social oppression based on skin colour...”

Beneath our skin, humans are all the same. We are the same biologically and genetically. We have common needs for food, shelter, clothing, education, enjoyment of life and the practice of culture and religious faith. Whatever our racial or cultural differences, they should be looked upon as strengths in our diversity rather than as liabilities to be “tolerated” or as an excuse for inciting hatred or starting a war.

For racial unity to be sustainable, it has to start with the principle that “we are human beings first and everything else next”.

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