

Our racist sins

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The tragic murder of a student from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Masunda Kitada Oliver, on a street in Delhi by three Indian men is a reminder of a malaise in our national psyche — colour bias an

The tragic murder of a student from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Masunda Kitada Oliver, on a street in Delhi by three Indian men is a reminder of a malaise in our national psyche — colour bias and racism. Incidents of frequent violence and recurring discrimination against Africans throw up a challenge for Indians to rethink who they really are and how they are connected to the rest of the world.

Prejudice, insularity and ignorance about the greatness of Africa and India's umbilical ties with it are the evils which propel the menace of wanton attacks on African students in our country. While crimes do occur against a variety of people on a daily basis in a large nation like India, the disturbing pattern of targeting of Africans is specifically tied to hierarchical social mores in India which privilege fair skin.

African students across India complain of condescending attitudes. The most common one is the overt taunting of Africans as if they were inferior human beings and usage of pejorative terms like "Negro" and "nigger" that originated during the era of trans-Atlantic slavery and European colonisation of Africa. Despite the fact that Indians themselves were classified as sub-humans and unfit for self-rule by European colonial masters, many present-day Indians have internalised a conservative Western establishment narrative of Africans as the lowest category in the social totem pole.

Mahatma Gandhi, who rose to political adulthood in South Africa as a result of the inhuman treatment of both Indians and Africans by white minority rulers, understood that there existed a common cause among all the non-white people against racism and subjugation emanating from European imperialism. Likewise, the African-American civil rights leader Malcolm X stressed the interconnectedness of the struggles of coloured people worldwide for dignity and equality, and spoke of how "in a global context, black people were a majority, not a minority".

The Indian miscreants who are assaulting hapless African students have no inkling about this unity of the colonised people around the world. They may have received some formal education about India's freedom movement and could possibly consider themselves "nationalistic" Indians, but they have no vistas into appreciating how India and Africa together fought for independence. They have never heard of the terms "South-South cooperation" and "anti-imperialist solidarity" that bound Africans and Indians closely since the advent of racist Western colonialism in Africa and Asia over the last half millennium.

Mention the word "Gondwanaland" — a supercontinent combining the land masses of India and Africa 500 million years ago — and these Indian assailants would probably be shocked to hear that we "brown" Indians and "black" Africans were once a single people until we geologically drifted. The trade and civilisational links that brought African merchants to the coast of India and Indian sailors to Africa for centuries created a geopolitical and geo-economic construct of the Indian Ocean region, which is a common home for much of Africa and India. The Indian mobs that have been thrashing Africans are symbolically rupturing the human bond we have cultivated with their mighty continent and re-enacting in a minor way the European colonial project of dividing people of colour.

Arguably, caste-based concepts of the superiority of light-skinned people over darker ones in India predated Western colonial dehumanisation. India has its own vast internal social problem of people being rated and ranked as per their birth and looks. But when it comes to victimising innocent African students by casually labelling them as drug-dealers or prostitutes, the flaw lies in our educational curricula, which rarely cover the history and current affairs of Africa.

The classification by some misguided Indians of Africans as crooks and criminals who deserve a thrashing is the product of a servile acceptance of mainstream American and European stereotypes of the black man as a dangerous thug and the black woman as fair game with "loose morals". Likewise, the notion that Africa is "backward", poverty-stricken and unstable is a popular Western distortion that has percolated into average Indian minds who perceive Africans as needy and lacking in capabilities. The projection of Africans as belonging to a global underclass, which indulges in theft or barbaric practices is absolutely wrong, but there is sadly a constituency in India which has lapped up such clichés.

How can India overcome the stigma of being a hostile host to tens of thousands of African students who pour in to get a quality education at an affordable cost? A nationwide re-education campaign is essential to raise the salience of Africa's land and people in the imaginations of Indian youth. Our children should not be only taught about the American Revolution and the French Revolution, but also the Haitian Revolution when African slaves fought valiantly for freedom from Napoleon's racist dictatorship. Our young minds must not be confined to just knowing a bit about the ancient civilisation of Egypt, while remaining uninformed about the magnificent pre-colonial African kingdoms of the medieval era that interacted with India.

Our future generations must be made aware that Africa is the fastest growing continent with the youngest median age, a vast land that is expected to equal China and India in economic output in a few decades. Once Indians realise and respect the outstanding potential of Africa, hate crimes against its people will automatically decline.

Notwithstanding the conjoined history and contemporary convergence of national interests between India and African countries, there is a vast knowledge deficit in India about the different sub-regions and distinct features of Africa. Most lay Indians mistakenly view Africa as a single country or simplistically conflate it with the nation state of South Africa.

Our geography and history lessons have to be decolonised and reorganised before India as a society can come to terms with the horrors being inflicted on Africans who choose to come to our country to pick up skills and advance professionally. The future of India, as a leader among developing nations, hinges upon how attractive it appears to people from Africa, Latin America and the rest of Asia. But the racist bug is holding us back. It has to be defeated through civic education and raising the consciousness of Indians to the ancient and contemporary relevance of the non-Western world.

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