

Against the scourge of racism

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After more than a year long preparations and efforts by many countries, non-governmental organisations and the UN, the conference against racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination in Durban, South Africa should not be termed as a failure, even if it ends without a joint declaration. A final statement on which all the groupings of nations agree would be better in terms of creating consensus on what is racism, its past, present and many of its manifestations and what can the world community do together to eradicate this curse. We hope the efforts of South African leaders and the UN officials along with the delegates attending the conference would produce a compromise document from where we can begin the next task; how to fight against racism.

The differences among the delegates, about 6,000 of them from so many different races, religious backgrounds and regions, some with very conflicting claims over land, heritage, and others with tortured past and soul crushing exploitation, were natural. The very purpose of this conference was to offer a forum for dialogue, understanding and compromise.

Racism is not just an emotional issue; it is a harsh reality of daily life in almost every country with very few exceptions, and has a long history of one race dehumanising the other. At least there is an open recognition by all that racism is bad, inhuman and unacceptable in denying that they are racists. So strong is anti race sentiment today, that no state can defend or condone it publicly and still expect to stay within the fold of humanity. But, unfortunately, the phenomenon of racism in many forms is pervasive and state actions through law and other institutions have done very little to put an end to this.

Contrary to the claims of all countries, now attending the Durban conference, discrimination in wider social and economic sense prevails. Racism and its social and historical roots are well-studied subjects and there has also been rich debate and discussion on why does it persist even in the most advanced democracies. It is no longer a problem of ineffective institutions or absence of laws in many countries but that of social attitudes of one's race, caste and even ethnic groups against one another.

Bringing change at the social level has been the most difficult thing; peoples, groups, communities grown in an exalted sense of superiority for centuries and vested interest in the social hierarchy find it difficult to accept others as equal. Because that would mean some kind of personal loss of esteem, privilege, social position and perhaps material gain.

Against the enlightened concept of human equality, racism rests on the assump-



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tion that psycho-cultural characteristics and physical capacities are determined by the biological race of an individual. Many racial groups, like the Nazis in Hitler's Germany, used racial diversity for political ends. The most unscientific and morally odious formulation of the racists of different categories, including caste and tribe is that they are superior to others. Modern psychology or biology does not lend any support to any of such assumptions that are rooted in prejudice.

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In history or in the present societies, the question of caste or racial superiority cannot be separated from power. The more powerful in any sense of the word, but specifically in political, economic and coercive capacities have usually defined their relationship with others. Stratification of the society or social hierarchy has been with us since the society itself. But they took different form of expression of prejudice and discrimination against the weaker elements.

The three discourses that the Durban conference has introduced on racism, all relate to the question of power and prejudice. Slaving of the Africans and shipping an estimated 10 to 12 millions of them in most inhuman conditions across the Atlantic and making the work in the most inhospitable environment more than two centuries ago has never faded off the minds of Africans. The venue of the conference, in a country that has a deep imprint of apartheid racism, was the right place to start the journey of healing. What the African countries have been pressing through various rejected drafts of declaration of admission that slavery was wrong and there must be some counting and compensation of that loss. Perhaps symbolic apology and greater flow of aid for the development of the African con-

tinents might be the starting point. In our view, it would be equally unfair to burden the present generation in the United States and some European countries with guilt of what happened hundreds of years back on the hands of very different people.

The second important issue, and the most controversial has been whether to equate Zionism as racism and the Israeli state as a racist state. Some of the Arab states have pushed this point very hard to the point of breaking the conference. Israel and the United States have already walked out of the conference and the European Union has threatened to follow the lead if this language is not dropped. There is lot of disgust, anger and frustration of how the Israelis have been treating the Palestinians. They have forced them to leave their home to make place for Jews migrating from European countries, grabbed their lands for settling their own people and destroying their young lives economy and infrastructure on daily basis.

What deepens the anger more in Arab and Islamic countries is that there is studied silence in the US and the Western world over the routine killings of Palestinians. The Palestinians may be asked in the end to soften down their position, as Chairman Yasser Arafat has been urging behind the scenes, still hoping that the peace process can be salvaged from ruins of daily conflict.

The third set of issues debated on the sideline of the conference by the non-governmental organisation relate to caste discrimination. India has the largest population of socially disadvantaged group, the Dalits, about 260 millions of them. The caste hierarchy sanctified by old religious beliefs places them at the bottom of humanity, giving them little dignity or social space for upward mobility and acceptance. India is however not alone, other countries, including Pakistan also suffers from these social ills in varying degrees and in so many different forms. As indicated earlier, the laws and institutions to address these problems are inadequate by themselves. Social and economic change along with legal protection of rights of weak groups in the society may ensure better environment for the advancement.

The Durban conference has provided a rare opportunity to the international community to have a critical appraisal of racism and how badly it has hurt weaker communities and continues to do so. It should also provide a fresh start to combat racism and caste xenophobia by all means. The consensus among various countries on what it is and how best we can tackle this problem would promote a better climate for tolerance, mutual acceptance and freeing ourselves of the prejudices that burden our conscience.