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**SUBVERSE**

**SECOND OPINION**

## Our PC is showing

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A front-page headline last week in the TOI about 'blacks' being better runners than 'whites' caused a reader to comment that such 'black-and-white' terminology would not be PC (politically correct) in the US. The politically correct terms, respectively, are African-Americans' and 'Caucasians'. Like stock markets, which keep going up and down, PC is a highly changeable index: yesterday's totem could well be today's taboo.

Till the 1960s the PC term for an African-American was 'Negro' — which today in the US is considered a pejorative, but is blithely used by many in India (some use the far more offensive colloquialism, 'nigger') who have no idea just how grossly politically incorrect they're being. With the rise of 'Black Power' in America, it became PC to call erstwhile 'Negroes', blacks. Now 'blacks' in America have been transmogrified by the magical wand of PC into 'African-Americans', as the former 'Red Indians' have become 'Native Americans' (to distinguish them from Indian, or desis).

The idea seems to be to do away with racist colour-codification ('black', 'red', 'yellow', etc). Some PC purists have even suggested that language also be similarly de-pigmented of implicit racial taint by finding suitable, colour-neutral alternatives for words like 'blackmail', 'black market', and 'yellow-bellied' as a reference to cowardice. (The charge that language reflects and re-enforces racial prejudice is supported by the allegation that 'white' usually has positive connotations, as in the phrase 'That's white of you', meaning 'That's decent of you', However, a 'whited sepulchre' refers to a hypocrite, and a 'whitewash job' means a cover-up.) Fortunately for lovers of descriptive language, such sanitisation has yet to take place.

Political correctness, of course, is a reaction, and often a meritorious reaction, to years, sometimes centuries, of horrendous political incorrectness and brutal social exploitation, as in the case of African-Americans and Native Americans. As the mooted clean-up of language shows, however, PC can sometimes go too far and err on the side of priggishness. (Not to mention dubious logic: if we accept the scientific finding that the entire human race has descended from an African 'mitochondrial Eve', then not only are American 'Caucasians' also 'African-Americans', but all of us are 'Africans', though not African-Americans.)

PC is culture-specific. And while Indians can sometimes be insensitive in terms of American PC (with their references to 'blacks', and worse) we are acutely aware of our indigenous PC. For instance, not even the most rabid casteist would — at least in public print — dare to refer to a Dalit as a 'Harijan' (a quondam PC term coined by the Father of the Nation) let alone an 'untouchable', or a 'shudra' (both perfectly PC in the bad old days of Manu of Manusmriti).

Has the semantic evolution of this particular term — denoting a people who have been inhumanly oppressed for millennia, and all too many of whom are still subject to caste atrocities — reached its PC acme? Or, when Mayawati is anointed as PM — as surely she must, one of these days — will today's 'Dalit' become tomorrow's politically correct 'Mayawian', or perhaps 'Behenjian'?

In the meantime, our richly diverse society gives us much grist for the PC mill. Is it PC to refer to Gujaratis as 'Gujus', Punjabis as 'Panjus', Malayalis as 'Mallus', Bengalis as 'Bongs', Marwaris as 'Marrus', etc? One view is that while it is acceptable for a Punjabi, say, to refer to another Punjabi as a 'Panju', for anyone else to do so would be a transgression of the Lakshman rekha of PC. However, it could equally be argued that such PC distinctions serve only to ghettoise both language and polity, both of which are better served with a pinch of non-PC salt to give them savour.

So what's your view? Does PC stand for political correctness? Or is it prudish censorship?  
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