A clash of nations

The jokes about the France football World Cup team being mostly of African origin show that beneath the rhetoric of benign nationalism, a darker version of nationalism burbles.

Earlier this week, a senior retired diplomat tweeted a “joke” that France was the laughing stock of Europe. A French team “has become black, black, black” and “a certain positive shine to it (albeit the cosmopolitans may disagree), in ancient Rome the word ‘natio’ had a derogatory flavour. The natives of Rome used the term to describe outsiders who were united by their birth in a specific area.”

A marker of the elite

Around the late 13th century, when universities in Europe began to slowly acquire a patina of respectability, they sent out groups of theological scholars to deliberate on disputes inside church councils. A cluster of scholars who had similar opinions or followed the same schools of interpretation were often classified as belonging to a nation. As is to be expected, where an authority to adjudicate exists, the political power of the state or the monarch soon intercedes. Before long, these interpreters of the ecclesiastics ended up as representatives of their secular masters — the lords, lieges, and kings. Despite this, themselves ended up being deployed to include the elite and the demotic — participant and adherent to a particular mode of thinking, a world far removed from farmers, blacksmiths, labourers. A homogenous entity

By the early 15th century, however, this idea of a nation became synonymous with ‘the people’. Thus, a descriptor used by the elites to describe themselves ended up being deployed to include the lower classes across feudal societies of Europe, and more particularly in England. With this confluence of subjects — the elite and the demotic — under one category came a transformation of mentalities: people began to see themselves as an homogenous whole. The visible differences such as class and wealth were, under the gaze of the nation, universally less important. This privileging of one kind of social cohesion over all others began the age of nationalism.

At its heart, the nation demands a theory of homogeneity alongside with a belief in the distinctiveness, if not superiority, of the people. When the right wing mocks the African origins of many of the French players, to the question about what sort of homogeneity describes the French nation, their answer is: a biological homogeneity. Thus, according to this calculus, a non-white person could never be French. Elsewhere, when the RSS speaks about a Hindu nation — one predicated on race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. The result is that liberal democracies can only survive by supplanting the original value system. The wave of populist and nativist rhetoric that we see today, within and against liberal democracies, world over, is an effort to return to an older conception of nation — one predicated on race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. The seductiveness of an older vision coupled with the inefficiencies and corruptness of the liberal order should give any liberal democrat a pause. The responses and reactions to the football World Cup reveal us that liberal democracies are subject to the rhetoric of benign nationalism or post-nationalism, a deeper and darker version of nationalism burbles, awaiting an opportunity to pour through.