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'Scientific' Racism: A Tangled Skein

Ideas of race have insidiously entered the construction of communalism in our country, while ideas of eugenics, the 'science' of race, inform a number of policies related both to population programmes and reservations for the dalits and backward classes. How has this come about?

MOHAN RAO

Since September 11, 2001, a day that is considered in some fundamental manner to have shaken the world, we are all familiar with the phrase 'racial profiling'. Just as science proves to us finally that there is no such thing as race, we see around the globe a paradoxical congealing and hardening of racial attitudes. Germany for instance, has decided anyone is German whose paternal grandfather was provably German. So while thousands of Russians, wishing to escape mafia capitalism, are being given German citizenship and taught German, children of Turkish origin, born in Germany are denied German nationality and citizenship. While the west is supposed to have, in a postmodern fashion, discovered multiculturalism, country after country is, at the same time, building barricades against immigration. In our own country we have had frauds like Frawley and Rajaram inscribing racial theories into Harappa, doctoring data in order to do so. Ideas of race have also insidiously entered the construction of communalism in our country, while ideas of eugenics, the 'science' of race, inform a number of policies related both to population programmes and reservations for the dalits and backward classes.

This essay, exploratory in nature, attempts to answer the following questions: What is race? Is it connected with colonialism? Is it linked with communalism? What then is eugenics? How does it pervade discourse on immigration policies in the west, welfare programmes across the globe,

and result in virulent attacks on the lives and livelihoods of dalits?

As the ideas of race congealed in the late 19th century, we must note that there never was a scientific basis to it, if for no other reason than that the techniques and tools were unavailable at the time, nor till the structure of the double helix was discovered in the mid-20th century, did we know anything about the structures of inheritance. But what this also reveals is that it is possible, with no scientific basis, to successfully inscribe racial categories and theories into any atavistic discourse – witness the recent definitions of Muslims in Bosnia as a racial group. The social science disciplines that were framed in a racial discourse, justifying colonialism, were primarily anthropology and the short-lived science of phrenology. It nevertheless spilled into other disciplines such as psychology, even as it lies at the heart of socio-biology today.

Colonialism was a function of the formation of modern nation states, commencing in the 18th century and preceded ideas of race by more than a century. Thus while colonialism was not impelled by ideas of race, colonial consolidation was made possible by this ideological discourse emanating from both evangelical Christianity and the 'science' of eugenics. In Australia, for example, the decimation of the aborigines was seen as a duty to the Christian civilising mission and a natural outcome of the 'science' of natural selection and survival of the fittest. In India itself it was a combination of Victorian utilitarianism, eugenics and fears generated by the events of 1857 that led to the

hardening, indeed some have argued, the discovery of race. Thus we had categorisations of martial and non-martial races, of Muslims as a race and so on. At the same time, both the formation of ideas of nascent Hindu nationhood and the discovery of an ancient Aryan heritage, along with the work of Indologists like Max Mueller and others came together with ideas of a Hindu race harking back to a golden period. Its reverberations shake the world we live in today, threatening to tear apart the India we know.

Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* published in 1871, provided a significant measure of inspiration to the birth of the Eugenics Movement [Greer 1984]. The ideas of competitive struggle, natural selection and the survival of the fittest, when applied to the social arrangements of human societies had frightening consequences, not to mention deep ethical and moral implications. Racial purity and improvement of the racial stock were the prime concerns of the Eugenics Movement. The Eugenics Movement was named by one of its illustrious founders, a cousin of Darwin's, Francis Galton, who pioneered the use of statistics on human populations. AR Wallace, who co-discovered the process of evolution with Darwin, argued in an essay, 'The Action of Natural Selection on Man':

At the present day it does not seem possible for natural selection to act in any way so as to secure the permanent advancement of morality and intelligence for it is indisputably the mediocre, if not the low, both as regards morality and intelligence who succeed best in life and multiply fastest.

Here again we find a scientist asserting something utterly unproven and probably unprovable as something 'indisputably' true. He is obviously stating something merely as a matter of faith. He nonetheless inspired Jane Hume Clapperton who published the text of eugenics, *Scientific Meliorism* in 1885. "The racial blood", she wrote:

shall not be poisoned by moral disease. The guardians of social life in the present day dare not be careless of the happiness of coming generations, therefore the criminal is forcibly restrained from perpetuating

his vicious breed. The type will disappear whilst evenly balanced natures, the gentle, the noble, the intellectual, will become parents of future generations, and the purified blood and unmixed good in the veins of the British will enable the race to rise above its present level of natural morality. To promote the contentment of congenital criminals within their prison home, where they are detained for life, an alternative to celibacy might be offered, viz, a surgical operation rendering the male sex incapable of reproduction¹ [cited in Greer 1984].

Francis Galton inaugurated the Eugenics Education Society and brought out a journal called *Eugenics Review*. He was also responsible for the founding of the biometric laboratory at University College, London, and its journal *Biometrika*. Galton's passion was the collection of biostatistics and the collection of data on the lineage of the pedigree. He was firmly committed to the idea that only the brightest and best should be encouraged to breed. Eugenics therefore had two sets of action on its agenda: the positive eugenics of Galton and the negative eugenics of Clapperton. Those who received the attention of the latter at one time or the other were criminals, the mentally retarded, the insane, the tuberculous, lepers, alcoholics, epileptics, the 'feeble minded', the 'degenerate', immigrants and of course the poor, who apparently bred all these characteristics. For example, it is noted with alarm:

In Degeneracy healthy aspirations no longer exist, the struggle for survival the higher in the organism against the lower having ceased and the cells having conformed in a mass to a lower grade of being... There is no greater menace to a race than is furnished by such sturdy degenerates [cited in Greer 1984].

The IQ test was designed in part to select cases eligible for eugenic sterilisation.

Eugenics held great appeal for influential people on both sides of the Atlantic. A prominent eugenicist in Germany wrote: Because the inferior are always numerically superior to the better, the former would multiply so much faster – if they have the same possibility to survive and reproduce – that the better necessarily would be placed in the background. Therefore a correction has to be made to the advantage of the better. The nature (sic) offers such a correction by exposing the inferior to difficult living conditions which reduce their number. Concerning the rest the nature (sic) does not allow them to reproduce indiscriminately, but makes a

relentless selection according to their strength and health conditions (Hilter, cited in Bondestam 1980).²

The 'correction' he offered to nature's lethal ways was called the final solution. Adolf Hitler included among others, Jews, communists, homosexuals and gypsies in his grand design.

In the US the eugenics movement gained momentum early in the 20th century mainly at the instance of natural scientists convinced by Galton that 'genius' was a heritable characteristic. The rediscovery of Mendel's work in 1900 led to the formation of the American Breeders Association in 1903. In 1906, a Eugenics Section of the Association was established to "emphasise the value of superior blood and the menace to society of inferior blood" [Hodgson 1991]. The American eugenic movement involved itself with legislation to restrict immigration for 'unrestricted immigration', especially of those not Anglo-Saxon or Nordic, was described as the "annihilator of our native stock".³ The eugenists were also instrumental in initiating legislation and carrying out eugenic sterilisations on institutionalised mentally 'sub-normal', the epileptic and the psychotic⁴. Indeed, the eugenicist Leon F Whitney wrote, "We cannot but admire the foresight of the (German) plan (of sterilising 4,00,000 people) and realise by this action Germany is going to make herself a stronger nation". He also observed that, "the Negroes furnished six times as many sub-normals as did the native-born whites".

Echoing Leon Whitney, M S Golwalkar wrote:

To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic races, the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by [Golwalkar 1947].

Racial Purity and Nationalist Agendas

Thus it is not entirely surprising that all fundamentalist agendas include calls for national and racial purification by purging the nation of the other. Nor is it surprising that those inspired by such claims frequently resort to genocide, targeting in particular women and children.

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In its less virulent form, the victims of all this 'scientific' hysteria are the weak, the powerless and the helpless. That the eugenic utopia continues to exert a powerful attraction, despite being shorn of its scientific halo, is evident in even current legislation and practice; regarding, for example, the introduction of hormonal implant contraceptives in several states in the US. Women on welfare, with either a criminal record or a record of 'child neglect', must have Norplant implanted in order to be eligible for welfare. Thus the vast majority of women subjected to Norplant are blacks or Hispanics [Srinivas and Kanakamala 1992].

Meanwhile in London in 1930, the Eugenic Society, encouraged by the Report of the Joint Committee of the Board of Education – which found that “mentally deficient parents create centres of degeneracy and disease which welfare work can never reach” – began concerted lobbying and propaganda for a Eugenic Sterilisation Bill. Associated with this effort were a press baron, the noted author HG Wells, Darwin's son Major Darwin and Julian Huxley. The last, who later became a lion of the population control movement, wrote:

The principle of supplementing the segregation of defectives by sterilisation in certain cases is to my mind very important, and indeed very essential, if we are to prevent the gradual deterioration of our racial stock.

Eugenics was scientifically discredited by that famous biologist (and friend of India) JBS Haldane. But it was Herman Mueller's discovery of mutation in the early 1940s that denuded it of the very last vestiges of scientific respectability. The eugenic lobby now turned to what they called crypto-eugenics or population control. In 1956, the British Eugenics Society decided in a resolution:

That the Society should pursue eugenic ends by less obvious means, that is by a policy of crypto-eugenics. The Society's activities in crypto-eugenics should be pursued vigorously, and specifically that the Society should increase its monetary support of the Family Planning Association and the International Planned Parenthood Federation [Greer 1984]

Scientific, respectable, racism faded – but did not die out – not so much because it was proven to be scientifically bankrupt, as indeed it was, but for political reasons: it was considered embarrassing to hold

ideas so close to that architect of the holocaust. In the post-world war two years of hope and optimism, there was no space for such discredited ideas.

With the golden age of capitalism grinding to a crisis, ideas of race and IQ again found voice in the infamous Bell Curve debate of the late 1970s. Since then, more and more behavioural characteristics are claimed to have a genetic basis even as a new genetically modified Utopia is said to be around the corner. It is also related to attacks on the welfare state initiated by Margaret Thatcher by blaming the poor for their poverty [Rose 2001]. Rose notes, for instance, that neo-liberalism provides the perfect niche for biology-as-destiny arguments in garbled pseudo-sciences. As in Malthusian discourse, what Thatcher was doing was arguing that the poor had no moral right to claims on the state.

It is therefore not surprising that in India today Giriraj Kishore can proclaim that the life of a cow is worth that of five dalits. It is not surprising simply because deeply anti-democratic, anti-poor and anti-women views wrapped in pseudo-sciences can indeed be freely and shamelessly aired.

On what basis do these arguments, thinly racialised, rest? We know for instance that there are far more similarities in the genetic constitutions of groups than differences; indeed that intra-group differences are far more significant than inter-group differences. We know too that there are fundamental differences between biological inheritance and cultural inheritance. But a fraud is perpetuated in the name of science when Lamarckian inheritance is conflated with genetic evolution [Gould 1981], when a gene is considered a unit of evolution [Dover 2001], when an individual is considered the unit of adaptation, indeed when culture itself is somehow considered to be genetically determined. That genes are to be foregrounded over the environment, that there are essential biological differences between men and women, between black, white and others, indeed among religious groups, are matters not of science but of prejudice.

As far back as in 1950 the newly formed UNESCO published a statement by natural scientists, social scientists and philosophers emphasising the oneness of humankind, fundamentally rejecting ideas of race. Yet today biological determinism pervades discourse in a range of disciplines and influences policy. A peculiar alchemy of

the mind transmutes the social into the biological, appealing to ancient and imagined anxieties, atavistic grievances. Politics and economics create, contour, bind and present this as common sense in an increasingly senseless world. **EPW**

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Notes

- 1 Compulsory sterilisation of a range of people considered unfit to be parents is of immense appeal to eugenicists seeking an Utopia of the pure and meritorious. Tara Ali Baig, head of the Indian delegation to the 1974 UN Population Conference at Bucharest and the chairperson of the Indian Council of Child Welfare. "Sterilisation of one partner", she said, "has to be made imperative where a man or woman suffers from hereditary insanity, feeble-mindedness or congenital venereal disease: they must be barred by law from procreating children. This should have been done decades ago. If children's lives and future are to be protected, compulsory sterilisation is necessary for many reasons.... After all considering the crime against children committed by irresponsible parenthood, compulsory sterilisation is hardly punitive. Sterilisation of the unfit is long overdue" [cited in Greer 1984:360]. Indeed currently a number of private members bills in parliament also envisage compulsory sterilisation, albeit in the interests of the health of the nation.
- 2 Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, cited in Bondestam, Lars and Bergstrom, Staffan (Ed) (1980), *Poverty and Population Control*, Academic Press, London.
- 3 Had these immigration laws not been tightened for eugenic reasons, a large number of Jews in Germany and Poland might perhaps have escaped the death camps.
- 4 Such laws for eugenic sterilisations were enacted, other than in the US, in the USSR, in Canada and the Scandinavian countries.

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