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BACK TO RACE

Riding on the rise of the Far-rightists across the world, race science is reviving debunked myths about race and spreading hatred



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RACE RESURGENCE

Race was ingrained in science from the very beginning, and it brought discretionary policies in an evolutionary world. But the rise of the Far-right parties worldwide today is not only promoting race science like never before, but has also made the racial battle even more deadly



BY ANGELA SAINI

WE HAVE known for many decades that race is not a biological reality. The racial categories we use today were invented quite arbitrarily many centuries ago, and they map very poorly into real human variation. There are no “black” genes or “white” genes! Almost all the genetic variation we see between humans is at the individual level, from person to person, but not at the population level. In fact, there is far more genetic diversity within populations than between them.

But Western science, for many centuries, has been dominated by elite white men for the simple reason that even at the time of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, there was a common assumption that women and other “races” were incapable of the same intellectual feats. This racism was baked into science from the very beginning, and formed the basis upon which Western scientists studied human difference for centuries. They invented “race science”, and this “science”, pseudoscientific though it was, was used to justify colonial occupation, slavery, genocide, and the mistreatment of millions, as we are now witnessing with black people in the US. Now, it has become so ingrained in our systems of thinking that we still live with its devastating effects each day. Though most scientists have, for the last 70 years, affirmed that there is only one human race—and that we are incredibly homogeneous as a species—there are



still some who bang that old drum and believe there is some meaning to our racial categories.

That's because scientists often struggle in dealing with legacies of great scientists—whose scientific, political and moral views—as we now know, were utterly objectionable. In the 19th century in Europe, it was quite common to believe that humans could be divided into subspecies, and many famous scientists were racists by modern standards. What is appalling is that racists have been tolerated even in the 21st century. It took decades for many respectable scientists to finally call out American biologist James Watson, the Nobel prizewinner, who was openly and unashamedly racist for many years. Great work can be done by many people—we don't have to accept racists into the scientific establishment just because they happen to have done great work.

MOMENT OF RECKONING?

Yet, it's hard to say if this moment—when anti-race protests have become widespread across the world—is a time for change? Because we've been here before and not witnessed the deep, long-lasting course corrections that society has needed. But it certainly feels different. For one thing, institutions and corporations are responding clearly and unequivocally. Governments, of course, are another kettle of fish, but hopefully here too, we will see a change in the ballot box in the coming elections worldwide.

That's because power imbalances that underlie racism in some parts of the world are also being seen in other parts of the world—where they play out in casteism, in classism, in sexism, and in countless ways. I looked at caste in my book, *Superior*, because, like race, and it is a deep-rooted basis for social prejudice, and I have no doubt this prejudice plays out in the way Indians are treated every day.

Black Americans, for instance, have a lower life expectancy than white

Americans because of their long histories of disadvantage and oppression, which deeply affects health. In the UK, where I live, Indian-origin doctors have been dying in disproportionately larger numbers than other doctors, not because they are genetically different, but because of the countless subtle ways in which racial disadvantages affect health. We are not born different. It is society that makes us different.

Some lives are seen as more dispensable than others. Here, the Far-right would like us to believe that the racial inequalities we see in society are natural, rather than the product of historical factors. That's why they continue to push the outdated 19th century line that races are biologically real, and that there are profound differences between them. Mainstream science is not on their side, but the Far-right is incredibly manipulative, as well as active online. My advice to those who encounter these people on the social media is to ignore them. One of their tactics is to stir up online conversations, to give the illusion that there is a scientific debate around these issues, when there is not.

The truth is science is affirming every day the basic fact that we are one single human species. We are more homogenous as a species than any other primates. Even some communities that were once thought to be genetically distinct, because of their geographical and cultural isolation, have been revealed to be not so different after all. But of course, these facts mean nothing if we can't move beyond the prejudices in our minds. Race and caste were social inventions, but they have enormous power on how we think about each other. This is the moment of truth to set right our preconceived notions about how we look at the "other"—each other.

(The author is a British science journalist and author of Superior: the Return of Race Science)

In black and white

Every myth propagated by race science has been debunked over decades. But today, the rise of the Far-right parties is giving race scientists a new tonic to fuel hatred, writes **SS Jeevan**

THE CHANGING colour of skin is part of an evolutionary process. But that's not the most important discovery a recent landmark study revealed on skin colour diversity. Tracing the evolution of genes and how they travelled around the world, a team of international scientists found that a large proportion of African origin people had gene mutations that are responsible for lighter skin. Two genes, *HERC2* and *OCA2*—associated with light skin, eyes and hair in Europeans—arose in Africa, says the study published in the *Science* journal. In fact, people in Africa have almost every skin colour on the planet—from deepest black in South Sudan to beige in South Africa. Developing skin colour is also a biological process. This evidence should have come as the last nail in the coffin, especially for those practising and propagating the science of race



and spreading race in the name of colour.

But it did not. The chain of brutal killings of black people by the white US police officers—including George Floyd who was choked under the knee of the white police officer—has shocked the world and ignited an unprecedented wave of anti-racist demonstrations. In the US, protesters clashed with the police in many states and the National Guard was called in; many states declared “police-free” zones in public areas; and, now police reform bills are being debated in the US Senate.

As he began his campaign for re-election this month, US President Donald Trump called the black protesters “anarchists, looters and other lowlifes” triggering racial tensions. Similar statements during his 2016 election campaign had set in motion an avalanche of racial conflicts that helped him to consolidate his core “white” vote-bank.

Not just USA, these incidents have triggered protests worldwide. In Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, people flouted lockdown rules and flooded the streets demanding justice for people of colour who died in police custody in their own countries. In Paris, police repeatedly clashed with angry anti-racism protesters. In the UK, activists pulled down the statue of a 17th century slave trader and this had a ripple-effect across nations of

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pulling down the statues of their own “luminaries” who defended slavery/racism. In Belgium, around 10,000 people shouted in one voice: “Black Lives Matter”. Importantly, in most places, protesters did not leave the streets for four weeks in a row.

At the same time, protests against anti-race demonstrations are also gaining ground, in the US and elsewhere. “I fear a racist backlash to the current anti-racism movements,” says Angela Saini, a British science journalist and author of *Superior: the Return of Race Science*. And this has always been a ticking bomb since time immemorial. But each time a turning point was

in the making—as it is this time—it was pushed back not just by policymakers, but also by the scientific establishment. That’s because the science of race is as old as slavery and colonialism.

Even today, news entirely based on false science is being spread in the name of truth. And this has become the hallmark of the growth of Far-rights across the world. The only difference is that the Far-rights are now more vocal—than they have been in the past—and taking decisions based on bogus science. In other words, race may be a social construct in the scientific world, but for the Far-right, it has become a political ideology, which is spreading fast and hedging its bets on hate politics.

Across Europe and in the US, anti-immigrant groups have become more visible and more powerful. Trump’s former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, addressing Far-right nationalists in 2018, said: “Let them call you racist, let them call you xenophobes, let them call you nativists. Wear it as a badge of honour.”

According to whistleblower, Chris Wylie, Bannon is closely linked to Cambridge Analytica, which used racial differences to target African-Americans and decipher how to stir up support among whites during the



2014 mid-term elections. He once even said that black people shot by the police “might have deserved it”.

FAR-RIGHT, FAR AND WIDE

It’s the Far-right season across Europe too. In Poland, nationalists are surging ahead with a slogan: Pure Poland, White Poland. Italian politicians are promising to deport “illegal” immigrants to win popularity ratings. Germany’s Far-right, Alternative für Deutschland, got more than 12 per cent of the vote in the federal elections in 2017. Little wonder then that black people and other disadvantaged communities are bearing the brunt of the Far-right majoritarian onslaught.

“We exist in parallel universes. As a black person, you internalise not making white people uncomfortable. But living in the white suburban bubble of San

Francisco made me realise how oblivious America is to the trauma of its black citizens. Or, to put it another way, how systemically racist it is. Monoculture in the US is suffocating; the social rejection painful; and, the isolation crushing,” says Mark Karake, head of Impact Africa Network, a non-profit.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, more people belonging to ethnic minorities in the US and Europe contracted the disease and died in larger numbers. “There are also structural issues around discrimination and racism,” says Devi Sridhar, a professor of Global Public Health at Edinburgh University, the UK. “In hospitals, ethnic health workers were put onto longer shifts, and in riskier positions. These positions don’t have much access to PPE (personal protective equipment),” she adds. Moreover, ethnic

COLOUR THE CONSERVATION OF RACE



Today's conservation is how tourists can come on holiday, local people forbidden from hunting for food in places where foreigners hunt for sport, and the original custodians not allowed to live on their ancestral lands

BY FIORE LONGO

YOU ARE walking through the rainforest with your best friend. Sunlight sparkles through the leaves and the two of you are chatting and laughing. Birds tweet, monkeys hoot, and perhaps that was the sound of a forest elephant you heard in the distance. Suddenly you hear the crack of a rifle: your best friend collapses, crumpled, and you fall to your knees to catch them as their blood pours over your hands and stains your clothes.

Your best friend has just been shot by an anti-poaching squad. Does that change how you feel about their murder? According to certain animal lovers, when a person is unlawfully killed “to protect an endangered species, “the appropriate response is to celebrate their death because it helps keep ‘our’ precious rhinos, tigers or elephants safe”. Apparently, “the preservation of these endangered species is more important than preservation of the lives of some worthless peasants”.

Armchair environmentalists proudly declare how readily they would sacrifice brown bodies halfway across the world to save an animal they may only ever have seen on TV or in a zoo. Extra-judicial killings of innocent people, including children, in Africa and Asia, are airily dismissed as merely collateral damage in a “battle for nature.” If a white American student on their gap

years was killed for picking plants in a conservation zone, there would be international outcry, yet when this exact thing happened to Mbone Christian, a 17-year-old-boy in Democratic Republic of Congo, it barely created a ripple.

For a lot of conservationists, it seems like black lives don't really matter. “They see Baka as animals, they don't see us as humans,” a man from the Baka people of Congo Basin told *Down To Earth*. In the name of “conservation”, agents supported by world-renowned international nature groups have tortured and murdered dozens of innocent people, including children, the elderly and people with disabilities. Eco-guards, park rangers, and even government officials have variously burned down villages, bulldozed houses, gang-raped women, stolen possessions, beaten people up and maimed them for life.

Indigenous and tribal people have been gaslighted for the past 30 years because people don't believe this is happening and because they cannot fathom how cuddly-panda conservationists could possibly be guilty of racism and violence. International environmental agencies are aware of these atrocities that they continue to fund, equip and train the perpetrators. When confronted with evidence, the conservation giants simply arrange cover-ups.

Conservation suffers from the racist delusion

that non-white people in Africa and Asia do not know how to look after their own lands and cannot be trusted with the animals that live there. My colleague, Mordecai Ogada, author of *The Big Conservation Lie*, says, “The message is that African wildlife is in danger, and the source of the danger is black people, and that people from the US have to come and save wildlife from these black people.” Vast areas of land have been stolen from tribal people and local communities under the false claims that it is necessary for conservation. The stolen land is then called a “Protected Area” or “National Park.”

First created in the US in the 19th century, they are predicated on the notion that nature is “untouched wilderness” until white people “discover” it. According to Luther, chief of the Sicangu and Oglala Lakota tribes: “Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was it ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame.” The superiority complex of the colonisers blinded them to the fact that thousands of native American people were not “just” living on the land, but actively using, shaping and nurturing it. They were playing a vital part in these ecosystems and possessed a deep understanding of them, yet were perceived, racistly, as no more than an “inconvenience” to be “dealt with” just like the inhabitants of African and Asian protected areas are today.

National Parks in the US today are still seen as places where white people go to “get back to nature”. Between 88 and 95 per cent of all visitors to public lands are non-Hispanic white people; they make up 63 per cent of US population. In her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*, cultural geographer Carolyn Finney says: “The narrative of the Great Outdoors in the United States is explicitly informed by a rhetoric of wilderness conquest...it is informed by a legacy of Eurocentricism and the linkage of wilderness to whiteness, wherein both become naturalized and universalized.”

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The legacy of colonialism not only means that many American people of colour don't feel comfortable exercising their right to enjoy nature in their own country, it also explains how their wealthy compatriots still feel entitled to do whatever they like in other people's lands. Mass tourism, trophy hunting and “sustainable” logging, mining or other resource extraction are often welcomed in areas where the original inhabitants have been evicted and forbidden from using the land themselves.

Today, in America and in much of Africa and Asia, “conservation” means that the original custodians cannot live on their ancestral lands, but tourists can come there on holiday. Local people are forbidden from hunting for food in

places where foreigners hunt for sport. Indigenous communities are banned from using resources they depend on to survive, but we'll find a way to justify cutting down trees because we could use some fancy new lounge furniture as the stuff we have looks a bit dated.

The idea that indigenous peoples don't understand how to care for their environment is simply cultural imperialism. Tribal communities, who live mostly without money and get all they need from the forests, rely on the expert knowledge of their environments to be able to

make a living as hunter-gatherers or subsistence farmers. The fact that 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity is today in tribal territory is a testimony to their ability to maintain ecological equilibrium and healthy wildlife populations. Anyone who truly cares about the planet must stop supporting any form of “white conservation” which wounds, alienates and destroys indigenous and tribal communities. It's time for conservations to recognise them as senior partners in the fight to protect their own lands—for tribes, for nature, and for all humanity. [DIT](#)

(The author works with Survival International, a global movement for tribal peoples' rights)

minorities generally live in housing conditions—which are in poor and more crowded areas—that expose them to more risks daily.

Racial discrimination, in fact, comes in various forms in different countries. On the one hand, there are reports how people from the Northeastern states are regularly targeted in northern Indian states, and on the other hand, we constantly hear news about how people belonging to lower caste communities suffer each day, and more so during a crisis. During the world's longest lockdown, the Far-right Indian government boasted of carrying out the largest-ever evacuation of Indians stuck abroad in the world—they were affluent and who could pay. Yet the government shamelessly watched millions of migrants from marginalised communities literally walk thousands of kilometers from cities—where they had lost their livelihoods—to their villages. Once back in their villages, they were put under quarantine for endless days and had to experience untouchability, caste and race bias, once again.

This social discrimination persists even though B R Ambedkar—who wrote the Constitution of India after Independence—rejected the idea that “untouchable’s place in society was determined by their supposed racial inferiority”. Instead, Ambedkar argued that untouchability was a cultural problem that could be fought and eradicated. “Race is a state of mind,” he said, adding that the people of the Indian subcontinent were “a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians”, and this made racial differences irrelevant as “ethnically all people are heterogeneous”. “Rather



than relying on language and customs, Ambedkar emphasised on the mental and psychological aspects in the construction of identities such as race and caste,” says a paper, *B R Ambedkar, Franz Boas and the rejection of racial theories of untouchability*, published in 2018.

Yet political analysts will tell you that those parties promoting the Far-right agenda will continue to rule the roost in times to come. This will once again resurrect the long history of battles between humanism and racism, backed by race science. Now, the Far-rightists are stalking people everywhere, including in the social media, with the conjectural question: “who’s superior?”

"WHO'S SUPERIOR?"

Science based on race was always scripted into public discourse and public policy by the class hierarchies, as it enabled them to discriminate against non-whites. As early as in the 1700s and early 1800s, European and US scientists had begun to study “race science” with a premise that humans can be divided into separate and unequal races. In the 18th century, Swedish naturalist Corolus Linnaeus categorised humans into four groups—European, American, Asiatic and African. In the mid-1800s, US anthropologist Samuel George Morton measured skulls from across the world and surmised that intelligence is linked to the size of the brain—whites have larger skulls than other races, and, therefore “superior”.

Scientists who disagreed were either ignored or marginalised, and this “popular” science became fashionable to the “whites” who had built their empires with the labour of slaves. Worse, race was even used to justify heinous crimes. For instance, in 1869, the Australian government enacted a law, wherein children born with a mixed heritage were forcibly taken away from their parents and raised in dormitories only to be used as cheap labour after the age of 14. Here, the story of Sarah Baartman is bone-chilling. She spent most of her life in “freak shows” because she had enormous buttocks and elongated genitals. Even when she died in 1815, her body parts were dissected and presented to the French Academy of Sciences. It was kept on display at the Museum of Man in Paris for another 150 years. Only after the intervention of Nelson Mandela, her remains were finally returned to South Africa for burial.

Astonishingly, renowned thinkers and writers over the ages have drawn conclusions between black African primates theorising that they are the “missing links” in the evolutionary chain. Charles Darwin, who gave us the concept of evolution, said that no one could agree on how many races there actually were—the range being between 1 and 63. Other major proponents of the ideology of race inequality were German philosopher Immanuel Kant, French philosopher Voltaire, Scottish philosopher, historian David Hume and the influential American political philosopher Thomas Jefferson.

The belief that differences between races are “genetic” began to decline, albeit very slowly, only after World War II, when the atrocities of the

EVEN TODAY, NEWS ENTIRELY BASED ON FALSE SCIENCE IS BEING SPREAD IN THE NAME OF TRUTH. RACE MAY BE A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT, BUT FOR THE FAR-RIGHTISTS, IT HAS BECOME A POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

holocaust united many. Moreover, the civil rights movement in the US in the 1950s and 1960s further enabled black Americans to get civil rights.

The findings of the Human Genome Project should have given a quiet burial for the proponents of race science. The DNA research study—conducted between 1990 and 2003—to decode human ancestry with genetics found how extraordinarily identical all human beings are: 99.9 per cent. Of course, there exists that 0.1 per cent, but then it only reflects the differences in our environments and other external factors, but not our core biology. Further research also proved that the Neanderthals were not necessarily more intelligent just because they had larger skulls, debunking myths that persisted.

SYSTEMATIC CAMPAIGN

The response was lukewarm among race scientists to these breakthrough findings. A new series of campaigns were launched to set parameters to propagate racial differences. One of them was that of intelligence—black people fare worse than white people because they are naturally less intelligent. But scientific excavations point to the contrary, and those studying this evidence, like South African archaeologist Christopher Henshilwood, say modern intelligence and creativity existed even in pre-historic sub-Saharan Africa. Around 70,000 and 100,000 years ago, biologically modern humans were blending paint by mixing ochre with bone-marrow fat and charcoal, fashioning beads for self-adornment and



making fish hooks, arrows and other sophisticated tools. “We’re pushing back the date of symbolic thinking in modern humans—far, far back,” says Henshilwood. It is important to understand that physical changes involve only a single gene mutation, but can spread throughout a populace within a brief evolutionary timeline. Intelligence, on the other hand, involves a complex interaction of thousands of genes, and which can take at least 100 millennia to evolve. Yet, there is little scientific research on the cognitive growth of humans even today, and importantly, on whether there is a specific gene for intelligence. There is also little evidence that there are genetic differences in intelligence among populations.

So the next strategy for Far-right scientists was to claim that different IQ levels in populations have a genetic link. This claim was riding on an essay written in 2005 by three anthropologists from the University of Utah, USA, who said high IQ scores among Ashkenazi Jews—including other groups of Jews—was because they evolved faster than any other community. The researchers were banking their theory on the perception that IQ tests are a measure for “unchanging” intelligence.

This theory too is embedded with flaws. IQ scores can increase with learning and by other forms of practice. For instance, a study by Swiss researchers in 2008 found students who practised a memory-based computer game increased their IQ levels than those who did not practice. New Zealand-based IQ researcher, Jim Flynn, says that different averages between populations are entirely to do with environmental factors, not genetic. Moreover, a study of Kenyan children between 1984 and 1998 found that increase in IQ levels was due to improved nutrition, health and parental literacy. So nurture, and not nature, holds the key to increasing IQ levels. “Intellectual qualities... cannot be measured as linear surfaces are measured... and giving IQ too much significance may give place to illusions,” said Alfred Binet, who invented IQ testing in 1904.

Yet our understanding of race science will always be trumped by vested interests. During the anti-race protests in the US, Tech giant IBM announced it would stop supplying facial recognition software “mass surveillance and racial profiling”. The software might have been used by the rich and powerful Far-right, whose useless banter today occupies every space of our lives, including our news and social space. For instance, *Fox News* aired a feature in June this year that compared the death of black men to gains made in the stock market. Subsequently after protests, it apologised and said the story “should not have been aired on television”. The *National Geographic* seemed more honest about how it has historically reported on race issues. “For decades, *National Geographic’s* coverage was racist. It’s time we acknowledged it,” says Susan Goldberg, the magazine’s editor-in-chief, who is planning a series of articles, including a special issue, to undo the damage. There is no scientific basis for race, it said. It’s largely a made-up label. **DTE**

FOX NEWS AIRED A STORY THIS JUNE THAT COMPARED THE DEATH OF BLACK MEN TO THE GAINS MADE IN THE STOCK MARKET. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE EDITOR OF THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, SUSAN GOLDBERG, APOLOGISED THAT THE MAGAZINE'S COVERAGE WAS RACIST FOR DECADES