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## UNIT 18 RACE IN HISTORY

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### 18.1 INTRODUCTION

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One of the depressing predictions about the twentieth century was made by the black American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois back in 1903 when he asserted that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and in the islands of the sea'. It is perhaps with these words in mind that another black scholar Stuart Hall, this time British, asserted a few years ago that 'the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty first century'.

The abolition movement against slavery of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had provided a context for the emergent science of human races in the twentieth century. It is important to remember here that while for scholars of Du Bois's generation the 'colour line' was an everyday reality based on institutional patterns of *racial domination*, in recent times questions about race and racism have been refashioned in ways that emphasise *cultural difference*. The shifts in conceptual language that have become evident in the past three decades are symptomatic of wider debates about the analytical status of race and racism, as well as related shifts in political and policy agendas.

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### 18.1 RACE AS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

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Serious study of race and race relations as important social issues can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century. The expansion of research and scholarship in this area, however, happened around the 1960s, in the aftermath of the social transformations around questions of race that took place during that decade. This was a time when social reforms implemented in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, urban unrest, and the development of black power ideas and forms of cultural nationalism. These helped enormously to reshape the politics of race not just in America, but in other parts of the world, as well.

It was also during the 1960s that the ‘race relations problematic’ as Michael Banton put it, became the dominant approach in this field. Seeing race as a fact which transforms social relations also grappled with ideas on ‘ethnicity’ and social boundaries between different groups in a given society. The idea of race has been utilised to comprehend processes of migration and settlement as well. They are sometimes posed as a minority, ethnic or an immigrant problem.

John Rex’s analytical model in race relations asserts that reading social relations between persons as race relations is encouraged by the existence of certain structural conditions:

- 1) existence of unfree, indentured or slave labour
- 2) unusually harsh class exploitation
- 3) strict legal distinctions between groups and occupational segregation
- 4) differential access to power
- 5) migrant labour as an underclass fulfilling stigmatised roles in a metropolitan setting.

In this context, Rex, in studies conducted by him, explored the degree to which immigrant populations shared the class position of their white neighbours and white workers in general. His analysis outlined a class structure in which white workers won certain rights through the working class movement, through the trade unions and the Labour Party. The non-white workers, however, were found to be located outside the process of negotiation that has historically shaped the position of white workers. They experience discrimination in all the areas where the white workers had made significant gains, such as employment, education, and housing. Thus the position of migrant, non-white workers placed them outside the working class in the position of an ‘underclass’.

Robert Miles has also looked at the condition of migrant communities, but he has done so within the context of ‘real economic relationships’. Thus there is a contradiction between ‘on the one hand the need of the capitalist world economy for the mobility of human beings, and on the other, the drawing of territorial boundaries for human mobility.’

**His greatest contribution is the proposition that races are created within the context of political and social regulation, and thus race is above all is a ‘political’ construct.**

The first proposition for our purposes is that idea of race is a human construct, an ideology with regulatory power within society. The use of ‘race’ and race relations, as analytical concepts, disguise the *social* construction of difference, presenting it as somehow inherent in the empirical reality of observable or imagined biological difference. Racialised groups are produced as a result of specific social processes, or specific social actions such as the defense of domination, subordination and privilege.

The terrain of anti-racist struggle today is no longer that of social equality but of cultural diversity. Equality has come to be redefined from ‘the right to be equal’ to mean ‘the right to be different’. In the sixties and seventies, the struggle for equal rights meant campaigns against immigration laws or against segregation through which different races were treated differently. Today it means campaigns for separate schools, demands to use different languages, the insistence of maintaining particular cultural practices. The black rights activists have argued that in the past civil rights reforms reinforced the idea that black liberation should be defined by the degree to which black people gained equal access to material opportunities and privileges available to whites – jobs, housing, schooling etc. This strategy could never bring about liberation, because such ideas of equality were based on imitating the life styles, behavior are most importantly, the values and ethics of white colonizers.

To locate the concept of race, racism and racial relations in contemporary times, and be able to comprehend the twentieth century attempts to understand these terms, we will have to go back to the nineteenth century when Charles Darwin provided one of the first important frameworks for this task. His ideas are important as they immediately gave rise to self appointed Social Darwinists, who are largely responsible for both distorting the science component of Darwin's theory and for using it for justification of colonialism and imperialism.

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## 18.3 RACE AND SCIENCE

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As Nancy Stepan points out, it was the early travel literature on human groups by explorers which tended to get transformed into scientific texts on race. When it emerged on its own, racial science was 'scavenger science' which fed on whatever materials lay at hand. Such racial science had a national character as well (depending on the influence of religion, for instance.) To a large extent, history of racial sciences is a history of a series of accommodation of the sciences in general to the demands of deeply held convictions about 'naturalness' of the inequalities between human groups.

The racial science of the 1850s was less dependent on bible, more scientific, but also more racist. It drew upon physical types, on racial worth, permanence of racial types and the like. Skull became the arbiter of all things racial in most of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of alleged mental differences which different skull shapes or sizes supposedly indicated.

### 18.3.1 Concept of Evolution within Racial Science

Darwin was the originator of the evolutionary theory, and his main argument was for continuity between animals and humans, separated by not kind but degree. However, the distance between the technical, industrial, highly civilised Europeans and animals seemed too vast. So Darwin turned to 'lower' races or 'savages' to fill the gap between humans and animals. Later scientists used this argument to form an evolutionary scale of races. Racist science picked this point up and used it to show that racist hierarchy as well as other social hierarchies were real aspects of nature's order. In retrospect, Darwin did not conceive of races in new terms for his arguments on evolution of man, but old terms. In essence, thus, Darwin himself carried out the task of accommodating the new evolutionary science to the old racial science. Evolutionism was also compatible with the idea of fixity and antiquity of races.

However, it should be remembered that as far as a social position on slavery was concerned, Darwin was an abolitionist, not a racist. This ambivalence manifested itself with other thinkers as well. For instance, Prichard shared the racial prejudices of his time, but his ethnocentrism was also tempered by moral disgust for slavery, his belief in the essential humanity of the African, his Christian faith in the psychic unity of all the peoples of the world.

Evolutionary thought was compatible with the hierarchy of human races, and rather than dislodging old racial ideas actually strengthened them, and provided them with a new scientific vocabulary of struggle and survival ('struggle for existence', 'survival of the fittest', two of the most well known Darwinian tenets).

Darwin applied natural selection to cultural, intellectual and moral development. Natural selection had brought certain races like the European race to the highest point of moral and cultural life. He agreed with Wallace that after the appearance of intelligence, struggle between races became primarily a moral and intellectual one. Morally and intellectually less able of the races were extinguished and the reverse rose to spread themselves

across the globe. It was natural struggle that had produced the “wonderful intellect of the Germanic races”. Darwin took up the view that natural selection worked on individual and racial variations to select the fittest races and to raise them up in the scale of civilisation. To Darwin, then, it seemed reasonable to believe that just as natural selection produced *Homo Sapiens* from animal forbears, so natural selection was the primary agent for producing civilised races out of barbarity.

Incidentally, here it might be mentioned that the development of the field of medicine was seen as a great onslaught on natural selection, as it allowed the biologically unfit to survive and to pass on their unfitness to the next generations. At any rate, development of medicine made natural selection on physical bases redundant, and led to a situation where it was possible to propose natural selection on the basis of morality and intellect of human groups, instead.

The developing disciplines of comparative anatomy and animal biology gave validity to prevailing ideas about the hierarchy of human races. The challenge for an evolutionary anthropologist was to endorse a materialist, evolutionary view of man, based on continuity between man and animals, without relying on hierarchy of human races or retreating to theology. It was Wallace who first insisted on the gulf between animals and humans and was then able to see that human progress is not inevitable, but depended on favourable social and political conditions. He put forward the radical, original theory that the immense variety of racial civilizations were because of different experiences and history, not biological differences between different groups of people.

Darwin's ideas took root all over the world in some form or the other. The widely prevalent mid 19<sup>th</sup> century belief on the part of leading figures like Vogt in England and Topinard in France was also that racial traits emerged by selection in struggle for life. They further proposed that with time, traits became fixed by heredity, and became permanent. Thus the false idea of the fixity and unchangeability of races became a widespread belief. Even though no individual could be found who was not a mixture, faith in the ‘type’ remained. More and more precise instruments were invented to measure the differences between the ‘types’. It was forgotten that essentially, the human species being a migratory and conquering species is bound to be a mixed one, and hence has to be a constantly changing one.

In spite of Wallace's important intervention, races came increasingly to be seen as natural, but static chains of excellence, formed on the basis of nervous organisation, skull shape or brain size. Colour was a traditional and convenient criterion of race, not the least because it did not require the permission of the individual for it to be assessed by the anthropologist, which head measurement, for instance, did! The smallness of differences separating the presumed types (as far as the head size or shape of the nose were concerned) led to the use of more and more precise instruments, and to the subdivision of types. The results were never in doubt, and a vigorous analysis of the racial types which made up a family always followed after varied results in terms of the shape of the head were found, for instance, and it was assumed that different racial types had got mixed, instead of doubting the veracity of the measurements themselves.

The science which involved measuring human measurements was called Anthropometry, though it never did rise above ideological considerations to prove a hierarchy of races, and hence became a pseudoscience for all practical purposes.

### **18.3.2 Eugenics and Racial Science**

In order to be a purposeful discipline, science was expected to play a role in planning and managing human existence and human affairs, including cohabitation. The word eugenics

itself was introduced into science for the first time in 1883 by Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton. He defined eugenics as the 'study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally'.

In its essence, eugenics was a science and a social programme of racial improvement through selective breeding of the human species. Though slow to win approval in Britain, by the first years of the twentieth century, eugenics had established itself institutionally in England. By the 1920s, it had grown into a worldwide movement, with active eugenic or 'race hygiene' societies in Russia, Germany, Japan and the United States.

The initial German nazi plan was to improve the racial stock – weed out the mentally deficient, hereditary criminal, hereditary unfit. A new age of racial thinking, however, had come into being that was to last until the 1930s, when the horrors of compulsory sterilization and the mass murder of the Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Germany (at least partly in the name of eugenical science) caused worldwide revulsion.

Eugenics in Nazi Germany was uniquely barbaric. It is worth mentioning here that not just in Germany but all over the world, adherents to this repugnant social programme were drawn mainly from the progressive middle class: doctors, psychologists, biologists and social reformers, and *not* politicians or businessmen. In its heyday, eugenics succeeded in drawing into its fold directly or indirectly a surprising number of the leading scientists of the day, and provided one more channel for the transmission of the racist tradition. For the student of race science and racism, eugenics is important because it linked race with hereditarianism, and the new science of genetics.

Socially and politically, several factors favoured eugenics by the beginning of the twentieth century. The social optimism of the mid nineteenth century had given way by the end of the century to a pessimism which Galton's eugenics perfectly expressed. The 1880s had been a particularly hard period, with economic depression, unemployment, strikes, and growing political radicalism. It was clear from political events and sociological studies that poverty, alcoholism and ill health had not disappeared in Britain, despite what seemed to many to be decades of social legislation. The early military setbacks of the British in the Boer War in South Africa in 1899-1900 raised the spectre of a physically degenerating British people, and increased concern that the imperial mission of Britain would be harmed unless the population could be unified and made fitter. Most importantly, the declining birth rate, and especially the differential in the birth rate between the middle class and the working class, raised the possibility in some people's minds that Britain was about to be swamped by the biologically 'less fit'.

Eugenics rested on the belief that the differences in mental, moral and physical traits between individuals and races were hereditary. Such a belief had of course been implicit in race biology since the early nineteenth century. What gave eugenics its force in the modern period was its association with Darwinian evolution. Eugenics thus obtained its scientific credential from the new science of heredity. It obtained its support and its notoriety as a social and political movement from the many new and often explosive subjects it introduced into the biological and social debate, such as the biological roots of 'degeneracy' in human society, or the sterilization of the 'unfit'. At a time of heightened nationalism, imperialistic competition, and social Darwinism, such ideas for a while proved dangerously attractive to those looking for social change.

Under the banner of eugenics, the science of human heredity received a clear programme – the goal was to explore the hereditary nature of traits in human populations that seemed desirable or undesirable, and to establish their variability in individuals or classes



of individuals, or ‘races’. Mental ability, moral character, insanity, criminality and general physical degeneracy, were all studied diligently. On the social and political side, the task of the eugenists was to publicise the findings of science, to discuss schemes to encourage the fit, and to discourage the unfit, to breed, and to air generally the social and political significance of such a programme.

Eugenics was seen to be not merely a power that humans now had over future generations; it was seen to be a quasi-religious obligation because in the conditions of modern civilization, the biologically sick and unfit were not eliminated by natural selection but allowed to live and to breed. Man had, in consequence, to weed out where nature did not any more. The Eugenists’ first legislative success occurred in 1913, when the Houses of Parliament passed the Mental Deficiency Bill, which the Eugenics Education Society had urged as a means of segregating mentally backward individuals from the rest of society so as to prevent their breeding.

Recent studies of eugenics in Britain have identified it primarily as ‘class’ rather than a ‘race’ phenomenon. The chief preoccupation of the eugenists was with the biological fitness of the working class. Most eugenists assumed that social class was a function of hereditary worth, and the social policies they contemplated were often directed against the ‘unfit’ lower classes, especially the social residuum or social problem group – the permanent alcoholics, paupers and persistent criminal offenders.

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## 18.4 RACE IN RELATION TO COLONIALISM

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Once human behaviour was seen as an outcome of structure of the mind fixed by heredity, it was not difficult to stretch it and see human groups differently endowed and so destined for different roles in the history of human society. The hierarchy of races was believed to correspond to and indeed to be the cause of what most people took to be the natural scale of human achievement. The general public agreed because it coincided with the Europeans’ image of themselves in the world.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, in fact, there existed a number of schools of thought, occupying themselves with the fundamental question of proving the inherent superiority of one people over another. A possible reason for their coming into existence was search for some popular explanation to account for the fact of imperialism, and to rationalise it in the public mind.

The aptitude of a race to colonise and the tendency of another to be colonised was already reflected in a number of earlier philosophical thinkers’ categories, devised mostly on racial lines. Gustav Klemm and A. Wuttke had designated the so-called civilised races as active, and all others as passive in 1843. Carus divided mankind into “peoples of the day, night and dawn” in 1849, depending on their place in the scale of civilisation, and implicitly marking out the ones who needed help to be pulled out of the continuing ‘night’. Nott and Gliddon ascribed animal instincts only to the ‘lower’ races, and it was deduced from this by their supporters that conquest by the civilised races would slowly cure such instincts of the conquered. In all these categories, however, the supposed racial attributes, which made one race the perpetual conqueror and another doomed to conquest forever, had not been linked to any identifiable cause as yet.

Writings of the 1850s became more specific and pointed in their search. Why were a people ‘active’ (progressing, colonising) or ‘passive’ (stagnating, conquered)? Why would some *inevitably* belong to the day, others to the night? The first identifiable reasoning was in terms of alleged superior mental capacity of a people as compared to another: one would then naturally rule over another. These mental characteristics, moreover, seemed to clearly stem from some *fixed* attribute, which must be pinned down.

Climate was a part of the unchanging environment surrounding any given set of people, and provided, in a number of creative ways, a ready explanation for the lower races' possession of lower mental faculties. A.H.Keane, one of the vice presidents of the Anthropological Institute at Cambridge proposed that in excessively hot and moist intertropical regions, in the struggle for survival by the inhabitants, the animal side of a human being is improved at the expense of the mental side. (It was, predictably, the opposite in the temperate zones where the white population lived).

Another interesting point of view was that mental development suffered in regions where food was easily and abundantly available e.g. in the tropical regions. On the other hand, it was claimed that wherever men have been involved in a strenuous conflict with a cold climate, they have acquired heroic qualities of character: energy, courage, and integrity. It is important to note here that "struggle for existence" vis-à-vis the climate was held to have different consequences for the whites and the non-whites. In the former it developed virtues of character, in the latter animal like physical development at the cost of the mental.

A transition from 'mental qualities' to the category of 'racial qualities' was certainly an advance as far as popular rhetoric was concerned: new assertions could now be made without any reference to a constant factor like physical environment/climate as the earlier authors were impelled to do. One race, for instance, could be simply *asserted* to be more moral than another, a totally new input into the argument, requiring no evidence whatsoever. E.B.Tylor was the originator of this reasoning: "There is a plain difference between the low and high races of man, so that the dull minded barbarian has not the power of thought enough to come up to the civilised man's moral standard."

Soon the fact of colonisation will not need any explanation at all: "It is only necessary to look at the physique of the Hindoos in order to account for their subjection to alien races..." Weak physical bodily traits led to weak morality, and both the weaknesses (separately as well as together) adequately explained colonialism.

It is worth mentioning that E. B. Tylor, the supposed father of evolutionary anthropology, picked up for his academic researches the general trend of the above arguments. He could confidently assert that "it was reasonable to imagine as latest formed the white race of the temperate region, least able to bear extreme heat or live without the appliances of culture, but gifted with the powers of knowing and ruling". Clearly a particular race was constituted of mental qualities, via climate, which either condemned it to slavery, or the power of ruling. This strain of reasoning was sufficiently influential for Emerson to ask, "It is race, is it not, that puts the hundred millions of India under the dominion of a remote island in the north of Europe?"

At some point, however, the genetically determined physical traits (manifested in the physical appearance of the body) become more important than the physical environment/climate as the determinant of mental capacities of the colonised races. All along, there was a parallel school of research working on the physical person of the colonised, attempting to reach the same conclusion, viz. the colonised needed to be colonised.

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## 18.5 RACE AND THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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Much debate took place in the late nineteenth century, around the theory of social Darwinism. There were, in principle, two ways found of locating a particular race on the scale of social evolution :

- i) by examining the physical development of the race in question, and
- ii) by analysing the social component of the society which that particular race had built for itself.

The second was mostly ignored, and the first became the scientific problem of the day. As far as the scientific community was concerned, the physical development of a race was not to be judged in terms of physical beauty — that was for the layperson. The scientist was interested in proving evolution of the ‘internal’ parts - the skull, the brain, the nasal bone, and so on. This strain of research had its own trajectory. In the initial phases of social evolutionism, it was attempted to relate the mental capacity of the race in question (the direct determinant of social achievement) to some *measurable* physical attribute. The concept of ‘cranial capacity’ (related to the brain size) was an early and enduring one.

A clear formulation of the concept of cranial capacity is given by one of its proponents, Keane. This author asserted that ‘mental gradations’ – a scale of mental capacity — could be shown between various races, based on the principle of cranial capacity.

In fact, Darwin himself observed that there did exist a relation between the size of the brain and development of the intellectual faculties. It was with the intent of proving this point that he presented the following data: “The mean internal capacity of the skull in Europeans is 92.3 cubic inches, in Americans 87.5, and in Australians only 81.9 cubic inches”. The fact that Franz Boas challenged this, and pointed out as late as 1922 that both Europeans and Mongols have the largest brains, and not Europeans alone, shows the currency of these ideas well into the twentieth century.

Later in the nineteenth century, another popular notion which gained influence was that “the black is a child and will long remain so”. Investigations were done to show that this was because of the “sudden arrest of the intellectual faculties at the age of puberty (due) to premature closing of the (cranial) sutures”. It was claimed that studies showed that upto the age of puberty, a negro child learnt remarkably well, but after that became ‘incurably stupid’. Moreover, there was no religious, intellectual, moral or industrial advancement in the negro who was also a political idiot. It is significant how explicitly the supposed lack of political acumen or industrial development is being attributed to a fixed incurable cause, i.e. the so-called cranial sutures!

The above details have been given to show a particular trend in supposed scientific research as far as determining the potential of a race was concerned. These ‘researches’ continued in many more directions than just on the skull of individuals. It will suffice here to record that **slowly, but relentlessly, the parameters of civilisation changed from the size of the skull to size of the jaws, to size and shape of the nose, to the length of the arms etc. reflecting the then current concerns of the sciences of anthropometry and anthropology of the period in relation to racial differences.**

With work going on in the opposite direction, however, it soon became clear that there was *no* relationship between low mental development and the size and shape of any part of the body. Franz Boas cited research done by Karl Pearson, Manouvrier and so on to contradict views of older authors like Gobineau, Klemm, Carus, Nott and Gliddon who assumed characteristic mental differences between races of humans. More importantly, he identified the reason for revival of these older views (now in the garb of science) to the growth of modern nationalism.

The professed relationship between the physical type and mental capacity had run into dangerous ground by the end of the century. By 1896, while still insisting that whites did



represent the highest type of mental development, it was admitted that “mental differences are independent of the general body structure”. How else could one explain that intellects like Alexander Pope’s “dwelt in a feeble frame, while the stupid Negroes of Senegambia are endowed with Herculean bodies?” As a result of researches done by the likes of Franz Boas, it got established by the early decades of the twentieth century **that mental activity followed the same laws in each individual of whatever ‘race’, and its manifestations depended almost entirely upon the character of individual social experience.**

There was another direct offshoot of rhetoric which derived from evolutionary ideology: there was frequently an attempt to compare, albeit favourably, the ‘lower races’ with animals, and not always with apes: the distance between the representatives of the two races was so much that one race was closer to animals than to humans. An author wrote of the Australians that

“the difference between the brain of a Shakespeare and that of an Australian savage would doubtless be fifty times greater than the difference between the Australian’s brain and that of an orang-utan. In mathematical capacity the Australian who cannot tell the number of fingers on his two hands is much nearer to a lion or a wolf than to Sir Rowan Hamilton, who invented the method of quarter ions. In moral development, this same Australian whose language contains no words for justice and benevolence is less remote from dogs and baboons than from Howard ... The Australian is more teachable than the ape, but his limit is nevertheless very quickly reached. All the distinctive attributes of man, in short, have been developed to an enormous extent through long ages of social evolution”.

The imagery of animals to describe such people was a frequent occurrence in ethnology/ anthropology books. So, while in the Andaman Islander, the peculiar goat like exhalations of the Negro were absent, the Yahgan’s intelligence is inferior to that of a dog’s as “unlike a dog, they forget in which hole they hid their remaining food after a feast”. Just like the wild animals of Australia were peculiar and always of a low type, so were its dark coloured natives with their coarse and repulsive features. Francis Galton’s researches with South African communities became classics in anthropological literature and were universally quoted as exhibiting the great ‘mental intervals’ between the higher and the lower races. According to Galton, taking the dog and the Damara, the comparison reflected no great honour on the man.

By contrasting the most undeveloped individuals of one race with the most highly developed of another, and in fact, by relegating the former a category closer to animals, the (European) reader was made to identify with an idealised, unusual specimen of his/ her own race as the collective norm. Visually, too, the standards of European beauty were considered the norm, and to emphasise the difference, the most degraded specimens were chosen for taking photographs — “the ugliest and the weirdest looking” of an otherwise handsome race” for use in ethnology books.

This kind of research was supplemented if not started with accounts showing similarities between these communities and various species of animals, other than monkeys and apes: “among the rudest fragments of mankind are the isolated Andaman Islanders... the old Arab and European voyagers described them as dog-faced man-eaters. As mentioned earlier, Hunter described the “Non-aryans” of India as “the remains of extinct animals which palaeontologists find in hill caves...”

Something was being said, in the era of evolutionary anthropology, when the rung on the scale assigned to some communities was even lower than that of apes, which would evolve at some point of time into humans.

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## 18.6 RACIAL 'RESEARCH' AND THE POLITICS OF DOMINATION

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What was the impulse behind the researches that were done on certain groups of 'uncivilised' people? The ethnographic material of the period shows a marked tendency to represent the aborigines belonging to the lowest rung of the world evolutionary scale. There is a distinct tendency to overemphasise their barbaric practises. John Lubbock, an eminent anthropologist of his time, and one of the early Presidents of the Anthropological Institute published his popular "Prehistoric Times" in 1865. Here he studies 'modern savages' like the Andaman Islanders, Australians and Maoris with the message that they needed to be colonised. These statements were significant in a context where a section of European political and public opinion had begun to challenge the rightness of colonial presence all over the world. Racially motivated research provided ample data from this time onwards well into the twentieth century to show the barbarism of the subject races in general.

In retrospect, the people of the colonies were presented by the evolutionary theorists as curiosities and specimens of a bygone era. This emphasis on the Asians or Africans, Australians and Native Americans as relics of the *past* served an important purpose: to dull the reader's sensibilities as far as their *current* situation was concerned. Seeing them from the point of view of anthropological science detracted from the fact of them as politically active people. India, for instance, was posed as a great museum of races — this particular view denied the people concerned a legitimate place in the present. More important, it robbed them of any recognition as a society in a state of flux like any other by fixing them in a dead mould — the unchanging relics of the past. Remnants of earlier long dead generations, they were going to be studied, analysed, classified and exhibited.

It is not a coincidence that spectacles of these specimens were so popular in England and even in the colonies, in the form of great colonial exhibitions in the second half of the 19th century, with anthropological displays an important and popular part. What was propagated during such exhibitions was that "taking him all in all, the Australian aborigine represents better than any other living form the generalised features of primitive humanity".

While working on the issue of 'ancesthood' represented by the current aborigines, another possible link was explored: that between scale of civilisation and moral/ethical progress. It was asserted here that European morality was more perfect and "the ancestors" were immoral in their disposition. Thus not only earlier societies were deemed to be less ethical, but also those supposedly the relics of earlier ones, existing in the form of African or Australian societies. This sort of reasoning served to justify the immense scale of massacres of aborigines and native American populations in order to colonise their land. In fact, it was explicitly said of the black republic of Hyati that in the absence of the coloniser's civilising influence, the free people of Hyati had reversed back to pagan rites, snake worship, cannibalism.

Once Darwin's *Descent of Man* appeared in 1858, it was not long before social Darwinism became a fashionable and influential school of thought in British society and politics. There were commonsensical reasons for this from a practical view-point: the doctrine of survival of the fittest justified political conquest of weaker 'races' and their elimination if necessary; there was also affinity between this doctrine and the economic policy of *laissez faire* at home. In addition, by implication, this doctrine provided scientific reasons for denying protective legislation for factory workers, the poor, the elderly and the weak in society in general: if they could not struggle sufficiently to survive, they deserved to perish. Herbert Spencer and Henry Maine advocated this doctrine as a key to social problems of welfare

and state's role at home; the imperialists grasped it as a useful theoretical guideline **in defence of expansionism and colonialism**.

However, "survival of the fittest", the basic tenet of the theory of evolutionism, seemed to come under challenge with events like the Boer war at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This doctrine had not prepared the imperial powers to be resisted so tenaciously by the supposedly less fit races, and survive a war! There were also other challenges emerging to the definitions of civilisation, morality and ethics. The essence of morality was claimed by some contemporary European thinkers to exist not in the forms of European social organisations, but the ones which aborigine societies had evolved for themselves, ensuring protection for its young or the aged, or giving rights to its individual members. The third quarter of the 19th century was also the time to begin to speak in terms of protection to the weak as the hallmark of an ethical society. Thus the theory of 'survival of the fittest' while dominating European politics and public opinion was also beginning to increasingly come under attack. Progress was being defined in terms which were now not so smug, and increasingly controversial. A few like Huxley directly challenged social Darwinism and pointed out that the mark of a really civilised society is one in which competition to survive is cut down to the minimum and one which is premised on protection of the weak, *not* survival of the fittest.

It is also an interesting fact that in principle, there was contradiction between the evolutionist's view of colonial societies and the fast delivering reforms of the imperial rule. So while the evolutionary ethnographers focussed on the essential unchangeability of societies like India – except very gradually, almost imperceptibly, over a period of a few thousand years – the administrators continued to emphasise the changes that had been brought about by the British in a relatively short time.

There was one more area of conflict: between the theory of racial evolutionism and the immediate interests of the British traders, in fact, a crucial political reason for ultimate decline of the evolutionary theory. The nineteenth century saw an interest in the aborigines from a new section apart from the missionaries and the colonial administrator – the merchants. Competition from Germany over colonial markets in particular provided the impetus for 'study' of such races from a political and commercial, apart from a scientific point of view. The science of the earlier decades, in the shape of Darwin's guidelines, however, had to be abandoned. If the people at the bottom of the evolutionary scale needed a long span of time to civilise, how could they be expected to use these goods?

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## 18.7 POULARISING RACIAL CONCEPTS

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It became then the duty of authors of ethnology books to inform the general public of the commercial interests of the Europeans in 'lower races'. The editor of the *Native Races of the British Empire* Series wrote that since Anthropology textbooks were too technical and bulky, the series in question were an attempt to supply in a readable form information about the uncivilised races of the empire, and the peoples of the lower stages of culture. This genre of literature became the staple of popular reading material on the question of 'races', and served to a very large extent the political-economic purposes for which it was written.

Ethnology books of the period borrowed from fiction, and managed to project quite effectively the image of an animal, and sometimes even a criminal native. This theme had several variations. Kipling's fantasy tale of a wolf-reared child inspired an ethnographer to find evidence of a supposedly real case of the same kind, which is quoted in the above book. He even published the article in the *Journal of the*

Anthropological Institute in a paper with a generalised title “jungle life in India” giving the impression that such half humans were an integral part of Indian wild life. This contribution was quoted by the author of *Living Races*, complete with references and page number of the concerned journal, giving the impression of scientific analysis. Moreover, the author of the article was mentioned to be an official of the Indian Geographical Survey, again adding to the authenticity of the report. All this served to confound fantasy with research.

In any case, the axis between travel books, popular ethnology works, anthropologists and fiction writers had an interlocking, mutually reinforcing impact on the readers’ mind. One source made the other respectable and recycled the data in a selective and often exaggerated form. The scientific layout gave the impression of authenticity, validating the fiction of Kipling and others. While these fiction writers and cartoonists drew from anthropology, popular ethnology borrowed from fiction. The line between fact and fiction, as far as the ‘races’ of the world were concerned, gradually grew blurred by the circular nature of information.

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## 18.8 INDIA AND THE IDEA OF RACE

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During the last quarter of the 19th century, especially after the 1857 events, there was a great desire on the British administrator’s part to ‘understand India’. This was the era of classifications and categories like warrior or martial races; criminal tribes; cultivating or professional castes and so on. Thus while India found its due place in the scale of evolution in societal terms on a world basis, within India the evolutionary theory was applied to sort out the loyal from the disloyal, the respectable from the criminal, the malleable from the obstinate - the *dasyu* from the potential *dasa*.

W.W. Hunter seems to have contributed conceptually to the hierarchisation of the Indian people by proposing an evolutionary scale within India itself, which it was claimed was a “great museum of races in which we can study man from his lowest to his highest stages of culture....” The Aryans in India with whom the British felt political affinity by now were not only fair skinned, but of noble lineage, speaking a stately language, worshipping friendly and powerful gods. The others were the original inhabitants whom the lordly newcomers – the Aryans – had driven back into the mountains or reduced to servitude on the plains. “The victors called the non-Aryans, an obscure people, Dasyu (enemies) or Dasa (slaves)”. These creatures were the subject matter of Edgar Thurston’s studies twenty years later, with a similar evolutionary hierarchy in mind.

In the ethnographical writing of the period, there is a curious mix of the Hindu religious texts passing as history, and Darwin’s scientific terminology. The reinforcing of the arguments from the Vedas with evidence from Darwin was an ingenious way of reading of Indian history by the British anthropologists. Some particularly daring samples are quoted here:

“Speaking generally of the aborigines of India, we have sacred traditional accounts which represent them to have been savages allied to the apes. ...In the existing aborigines we find here and there marked peculiarities which point to a possible descent from some lower type of animal existence - the frequently recurring earpoint of Darwin, peculiar to certain apes, the opposable toe, characteristic of the same animal; the long stiff hair of bipeds or quadrupeds in unusual parts of the body; the keen sight, hearing and smell of some of the lower animals, coupled with mental qualities and habits...which can hardly be called human”.

Further, “A comparison of the accounts that are given of (dasyus) in the Vedas with the Indian aborigines of today shows conclusively that some of them must have been possessed of a very low bodily and mental organisation — indeed, that they were a more debased type of beings than what is now called mankind.



“The Aryans called them Dasyus, or enemies....in fact, their description is almost identical with that of some of the Andaman Islanders of the present day. They called them eaters of raw flesh, without gods, without faith, lawless, cowardly, perfidious and dishonest...The Brahmins described the Dasyus or aborigines as Bushmen or monkeys...in Ramayana, the monkey general Hanuman...plays a prominent part.” Hunter’s classification of the ‘non Aryans’ into potential criminals was something Thurston borrowed later. The aboriginal races of the plains, according to him, had “supplied the hereditary criminal classes, alike under the Hindus, Mohammedans and the British. The non-aryan hill races also appeared from vedic times downwards as marauders”.

There is a subtle shuttling between the past and the present by this writer, and the two merge imperceptibly fairly quickly: the aborigines of today are aborigines of yesterday; there seems to have been no evolution in this case. In fact, these who exist today have some of the characteristics of apes that Darwin described — not only the Brahmin would describe them as monkeys, Darwin would call them apes. Here it is interesting to find the convergence of the existing Andaman Islanders into monkey/ape/aborigine of yesterday at one level, and views of Aryans of yesterday (Brahmins)/Aryans of today (British) and Darwin on the other. It appeared that there had been identical reading of this section of the population all along from the time of the vedas upto Darwin. In other words, the theory of evolutionism was put to quite creative use by the British ethnographer/administrator in that he completely brahminised a Darwinian concept!

In this framework for analysis of the aborigines of the late 19th century, the scientific component was an important link of the past to the present. The vedas helped to justify conquest of the aborigines in an earlier era, and Darwin was used to support their subsequent subjugation through the concept of the ‘survival of the fittest’. This mode of analysis was given a coherent form for the first time by Hunter. He, through the indirect agency of Darwin, identified the convergence of the concepts of the Brahmin of the vedas and those of the British coloniser: both found the aborigines akin to either the Dasyu (enemy) or Dasa (slave).

Invocation of Darwin in description of an evolving section of mankind, thus invites the reader to consider the natural trajectory of the aborigines in general: like the Aryans did, they ought to be ‘conquered’ first. The British felt an affinity with the Aryan as both had a superior God, and a superior civilisation which could be rightfully imposed on the Godless inferior race of aborigines. Hunter could be writing of British imperialism in eulogistic terms when he wrote with admiration that “The stout Aryan spread...(They) had a great trust in themselves and their gods. Like other conquering races, they believed that both themselves and their deities were altogether superior to the people of the land and their poor, rude objects of worship. Indeed, this noble confidence is a great aid to the success of a nation.

The ‘history’ of the apish aborigines was, then, gleaned from the vedas and merged into the future that Darwin promised: they shall evolve into mankind at some point, albeit with help from the evolved.

There was a sound historical reason for the British regarding aborigines as Dasyus. Through the 19th century, expansionist desires now extended from the plains to the hills, as also need for land for plantations pressed on the administration. The hill tribes increasingly came to be seen as a political and administrative problem as they resisted the encroachment on their land by the planters, or recruitment as plantation workers, or interference by missionaries with their social institutions. There was trouble with the Nagas in 1878, the Santals in 1855 for several years. Earlier, in 1835, on the moral grounds of suppressing the custom of human sacrifice practised by the Kondhs, the



British army burned down their villages and had to remain deployed for long periods to check further resistance. A regular pacification programme to deal with the tribes had been launched by the British, and this made them see a parallel between their own situation and that faced by the Aryans centuries ago. Through these devices, the British hoped that incorrigible Dasyus could successfully be turned into the Dasa mould, either as workers or soldiers in British armies.

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## 18.9 SUMMARY

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Racism, then, is an ideological force which in conjunction with economic and political relations of domination locates certain populations in specific social/class positions and therefore structures the social relations in a particular ideological manner. As we did a historical survey of general ideas on race, it emerged that the word 'race' is used in a different way in different societies, and at different historical junctures. It is in this context important to remember that whatever the changing terms of language used to talk about race and ethnicity in the present day environment, we have in practice seen growing evidence of forms of racial and ethnic conflict in many parts of the globe.

The idea of race and racism today is alive and well in its myriad monstrous forms.

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## 18.10 EXERCISES

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- 1) What is the relationship between colonial domination and the idea of race?
- 2) Discuss the ways in which the sciences helped to promote the notion of racial difference.
- 3) How did the idea of race originate in India?
- 4) What is the role played by the discipline of anthropology in promoting racial theories?

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## 18.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Les Back and John Solomon (eds.), *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (London and New York, Routledge, 2000).

Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, (New York, The Macmillan C Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (London, John Murray, 1890, second edition published in 1874).

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Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (London, Macmillan, 1996).

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