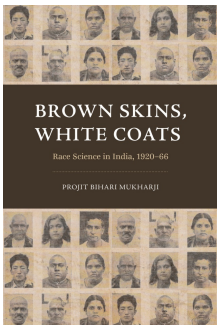


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Projit Bihari Mukharji

Brown Skins, White Coats

Review by: Francesco Cassata



Authors: Projit Bihari Mukharji

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As the Fanonian title suggests from the very beginning, this book analyses how postcolonial India appropriated, reformulated, and mobilized racial thought as part of a wider process of nation-building. Following in the footsteps of Alison Bashford, Thiago Barbosa, and other scholars of race and racism in post-independence Indian science, Mukharji rejects the hegemonic binaries white/black and colonizer/colonized, while focusing on the entanglement between anticolonialism and racialized anthropology. As the Indian case study makes clear, racial thought did not disappear at the end of World War II and after the collapse of colonial empires: on the contrary, race science mutated and flourished in the postwar period, being mobilized by Hindu postcolonial nationalism.

Instead of generic “race science”, the author insightfully chooses “seroanthropology”, that is the statistical analysis of serological factors as race markers, as a more specific research object. More a «loose formation of techniques, personnel, and objectives» (p. 9) than a clear-cut scientific discipline, seroanthropology illuminates the pervasiveness of the race discourse in Indian science – from anthropology to genetics and medicine – while showing with particular clarity the continuities between pre-World War II, imperial race science, and its postcolonial legacy.

The book comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1 shows how seroanthropological research was institutionalized in the context of the soon-to-be decolonized India. Starting from the 1940s, four different structures of patronage became particularly instrumental for the development of race science in the new nationalistic context: private think tanks, such as the Indian Council of World Affairs or the Gujarat Research Society; the Anthropological Survey of India, an impressive state-run institution founded in 1945, with a staff of 750 anthropologists by the end of the 1980s; a growing array of university departments of anthropology (in Calcutta, Delhi, Lucknow, Utkal);

and a small but influential number of medical research bodies, such as the Indian Cancer Research Center. Within this institutional framework, seroanthropology provided a new, dynamic, and populational notion of race. According to this vision, caste was a major evolutionary force that had led to reproductive isolation through endogamy and hence to a new process of race formation. But as the author clearly argues, these notions of caste and endogamy were not neutral, being rooted in the history of colonial knowledge, and particularly in the unequal collaboration between upper-caste Hindu elites and British Orientalists. In the context of decolonized India, the new seroanthropological conception of race served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it legitimized the Nehruvian rhetoric of “unity in diversity”, that is the purported existence of a uniform national body coming from a plurality of different “races”; on the other hand, it constructed the Indian case system as an excellent experimental model for the study of human biological variation, in collaboration with international networks of geneticists interested in notions of “genetic load” and atomic radiation.

Chapter 2 moves from caste to religious communities, but the seroanthropological approach remains similar. Also in this case, in fact, religious groups – such as Black Cochin Jews, Bengali Muslims, or the Nayta Muslims of Dewas – were constituted as reproductively isolated Mendelian populations, constructing “snapshot biohistories” and biologically reifying the social and historical complexity of these communities.

Chapter 3 explores how, in the 1950s and 1960s, Indian seroanthropologists framed taste as a racial trait by studying the differences among individuals’ taste sensation to phenylthiocarbamide (PTC). Connecting the history of race with sensory histories, the author convincingly demonstrates how the sense of taste was increasingly reified and geneticized, while its affective and sociocultural dimension was progressively marginalized as pathological or filtered out through statistical protocols or by carefully selecting the test subjects.

Chapter 4 follows a similar line by mapping the way the sickle cell trait was racialized in India. Whereas the American molecularization of sickle cell disease contributed to disaggregate the presence of the gene from racial identities, in India molecularization reinforced the process of racialization: hemoglobinopathies were linked to biologized caste and “tribal” identities, such as Saraswat Brahmins or Mahars, and the sickle cell disease was often invoked to promote family planning measures based on eugenic premarital counselling.

The following chapters of the book take a different path, progressively decentering the role of scientists and the analysis of their writings. Building upon anthropologist of science Annemarie Mol’s notion of “body multiple”, chapter 5 focuses on the practices and infrastructural networks of seroanthropological research. Dealing with issues of access, availability, and usage, the author distinguishes among three different types of blood: the “subject blood” of those categorized as “primitives”, whose extraction depended on institutions, practices and relations of power established by the colonial apparatus and remained unchanged by decolonization; the “known blood” of the researchers themselves, who used their blood to make their own grouping antisera; and, finally, the “non-human blood” of dysenteric goats in Calcutta, exploited as sources of heterogenetic sera.

Chapter 6 moves further away from seroanthropological scientists by analyzing the reactions of non-elite subjects to blood research investigations. By rejecting not only the category of “superstition” but also the paradigm of “resistance”, Mukharji adopts the theoretical frame of “refusal”, restoring the autonomy and the plurality of alternative worldviews behind the motivations and interests of those who opposed to be bled. The result is the emergence of a cultural and political polyphony of refusals: the Tibetans had distinctive views about the body and health; the Santals based their opposition on a complex ontology rooted in the color red; in case of levirate or fraternal polyandry, many subjects provided different conceptualizations of descent and kinship, opposed to a narrowly biologized notion of inheritance; and, finally, the Roman Catholic missionary Matthias Hermanns, in his book *The Evolution of Man* (1955), repudiated racialized genetics, while counterposing an evolutionary framework based on the vitalistic notion of entelechy.

The final chapter explores the political complexity of Indian futurisms, by delving into the distinctive futurities elaborated by four practitioners of race science: Brajendranath Seal’s biometric nationalism; Sasanka Sekhar Sarkar’s national eugenics, investigating marriage practices, congenital diseases, and the “pedigrees” of great men; Irawati Karve’s “mongrel” nationalism, combining mongrelness with the reinforcement of Hindu national body along racial “Europoid” lines; Labhshankar Dalichand Sanghvi’s human genetics, pitching Indian caste system as a valuable source of research possibilities for geneticists.

Theoretically dense, the conclusion situates Indian seroanthropology within the post-Fanonian and anti-essentialist critical writing on race, by combining Fanon’s reflection on racial alienation with Paul Gilroy’s description of “nano-politics”.

There are many commendable aspects of Mukharji’s study. First, the book provides a path-breaking contribution to the discussion of race in postcolonial societies. As the author eloquently and ironically put it, «race was more than just a bitter aftertaste of empire in postcolonial India» (p. 125). When viewed from India, race and whiteness become far more complex categories, ready to be reformulated by anticolonial elites to create racially homogeneous nation-states. In this anticolonial configuration, race empowered the elite Indian nationalists, while nourishing new hierarchies and discriminations.

Second, *Brown Skins, White Coats* enriches the vast comparative historiography on eugenics, showing not only the persistence of racial and eugenic paradigms in the post-World War II period but also the connection, through the racialization of caste and tribal identities, between the “vernacular” vocabularies of the late colonial India and the medical eugenics of the 1960s.

Finally, the book is methodologically innovative and inspiring. Besides the historical chapters, Mukharji includes fictive interchapters in

the form of eight epistolary exchanges between the Bengali author Hemendrakumar Ray (1888-1963) and the protagonist of his dystopian science fiction novel about race science, racial improvement, and dehumanization – *Amanushik Manush* [Inhuman Humans], published in 1935. While sharing the social milieu and the thematic concerns of the contemporaneous Indian seroanthropologists, Ray's novel provided a humanist description of socially marginalized populations in Calcutta, that Mukharji effectively recalls against the seroanthropological objectivation described in the factual chapters of his book. This is a fascinating exercise in "critical fabulation" which not only restores the plurigeneric character of the past but also experiments with different theoretical and narrative resources, counterposing Ray's anthropological humanism to the alienation (and self-alienation) of the "white coats" – the seroanthropologists – from the "brown skins".