

# From Race to Ethnic Group: A Historical perspective

**Golam Mostapha Mondal**

Assistant Professor, Basugaon College, Basugaon

## **Abstract:**

The “Era of Expolaration” i.e during the 15<sup>th</sup>,16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries marks the discoveries of many new lands and people .For example ,in the year 1492 ,Christoper Columbus discovered the New World and the American Indians of that place. Following these discoveries, people of America, Africa and Asia-Pacific regions became known to the world. These people were classified along with Europeans into broad racial categories on the basis of physical characteristic. From 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards Historians and Anthropologists became interested to study human physical variation and on the basis of that various attempts were made to classify the world population into different categories called ‘race’. The term ‘race’ was first used by Buffon, a French Naturalist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to World War II,most studies of human variation focused on racial differences or phenotypic variation that are readily observable such as skin color, hair form ,body build, and stature between large, geographically defined population. The criteria that were used to classify the world population are some observable metric (eg Stature) and other biological characters (eg Blood groups andenzymes). For example, Blumenback, a German scientist who first classified the world population into five varieties primarily on the basis of skin colour- F rom Human Race to ethnic group: A Historical Perspective

- 1.Caucasian or white (people of Europe, west Asia Central Asia and so on).
- 2.The Mongolian, or yellow race, occupying Tartary, China, Japan and so on,
- 3.The Ethiopian or black race, occupying most of Africa, Australia, New Guinea and other pacific Island,
- 4.The American or red race, comprising the Indians of North and South America and
- 5.The Malayan or brown race, which occupies the island of the Indian Archipelago

In course of time more and more characteristic and new methods were employed in classifying human races, as a result of which more number of races and subraces were distinguished. Thus, in 1889 Deniker proposed to divide the huminity into 29 races according to hair form nose form and skin colour as secondary traits.Later, scholars like Dixon ,Haddon and Hooton used metric traits like stature ,cephali index, and nasal index along with observable traits in classifying the world population into various groups .

Human history records many contacts between peoples from all areas of the world because of population migration or invasion This led to the interbreeding among different population groups. population model of race is based on the premise of evolutionary principles to the study of human variation The model conceives that people whose ancestors have more or less exclusively meted with each other over long periods of time will show great similarity with each other because the members of the breeding populations would be expected to share many genetically inherited traits and to have a similar appearance .The concept of ‘geographical race ‘and ‘local race’ emerged from this premise. Garn divided the world population into 9 geographical races. Later, Coon, Garn and Birdsell made a finer subdivision of 30 local races, which Garn modified to 32 and Dobzhansky into 43.A local race is a breeding population adapted to local selection pressures and maintained by either natural or social barriers to gene interchange.

Objectives: The main objectives of this paper is to highlight the different ethnic groups of the world which existed from human race.

**Introduction:**

Some definitions on races that came up in the mind of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were viewed from an evolutionary perspective and with an assumption about the role of geographic distribution in race formation and second on the importance of breeding populations in forming a collection of traits which sets the groups apart. Scholars such as Hooton, Dobzhansky and Garn in their definitions have explicitly mentioned that these breeding or Mendelian populations can change in time and are not like water tight compartments.

Hooton (1946) defined race “as a group whose members present individually identical combinations of specific physical characters that they owe to their common descent”.

Dobzhansky (1944) said-races are defined as populations differing in the incidence of certain genes, but actually exchanging or potentially able to exchange genes across whatever boundaries (usually geographic) separate them. He further added that differences are objectively ascertainable facts; the number of races we choose to recognize is a matter of convenience (1962).

Brues (1967) defined race as ‘a division of a species which differs from other divisions by the frequency with which certain hereditary traits appear among its members’.

Baker (1967) while speaking on race concluded ‘race may be defined operationally as a rough measure of genetic distance in human populations and as such may function as an informational construct in the multidisciplinary area of research in human biology.’

The above definitions may show subtle differences, but at the same time the definitions exhibit certain commonalities like the role of geographic distribution in race formation and sharing of genetic trait among people who are related to each other through common ancestry, i.e. breeding population.

**Clinal model-**

By the time of 1950s scholars were able to generate a large genetic data base of human groups distributed across the world. This made clear that a clinal model would more accurately reflect the true nature of human biological variation. This is the first model which did not attempt to compartmentalize human population into distinct groups. It says that closer the spatial distance between the human groups, the chance of mating with the neighbouring groups increases compared to the ones who are distantly placed. Thus, the people whose ancestors have lived close to ours for many generations are more likely to share genetically inherited traits with us than are people who lived further away. Further, the model states that genetically inherited traits most often gradually change in frequency from one geographical area to another. Thus one can find different frequency zones, or clines for a particular genetic trait.

**Molecular diversity-**

Richard Lewontin (1972) argued that the majority of human genetic variation (85%) occurred within a given population opposed to between populations. This means (1) between group genetic variations represents little of the total genetic variation between any two individuals and (2) racial categories correspond poorly to underlying patterns of human genetic diversity. The concept challenged the biological validity of racial categories. The observation made by Lewontin was later endorsed through the findings of Human Genome Project that revealed all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same. The sequencing of human genome (the full set of nuclear DNA), helped to estimate how often two individuals differ at a specific site in their DNA sequences that is, whether they have a different nucleotide base pair at a specific location in their DNA. Geographical location, linguistic affinity or social proximity, endogamy reveals how close we are with our neighbouring groups.

### **Race and ethnic group:-**

The term 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'ancestry' forms a network of biological and social connections that link individuals and groups to each other. This is to say that biological or genetic variation between human groups becomes meaningful if we have an understanding about the historical factors. But the race-based model that correlates some combination of alleles with behavioural traits is not acceptable. Montague (1964) said an ethnic group represents one of the number of populations, comprising the single species *Homo sapiens*, which individually maintain their differences, physical and cultural, by means of isolating mechanisms such as geographic and social barriers. These differences will vary as the power of the geographic and social barriers acting upon the original genetic differences vary.

There is a common thing between the concept of race and ethnicity, i.e. shared common ancestry. Despite this similarity, there are some differences. First of all, race is primarily unitary. You can only have one race, while you can claim multiple ethnic affiliations. You can identify ethnically as Oriya and Indian, but for racial identity - you have to be essentially either black or white. Compared to the concept of ethnic group, race is hierarchical and there is a built-in inequality in power. Some are of the opinion that both ethnicity and race are socially constructed, and both are illusory and imagined. But racial categories have had a much more concrete impact on people's lives, because they have been used to discriminate and to distribute resources unequally and set up different standards for protection under law ([http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_o4-experts-03-02.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_o4-experts-03-02.htm)).

### **Ethnic affinities:-**

How close we are with our neighbouring ethnic groups? When people move from one place to another, as per human tendency, they try to adapt themselves to the new place. Over time, some of the migrants adopt the local language for better communication and, in turn, for better living. Thus, language shift is a phenomenon where a new language is adopted by a population with virtually no influence on their genetic make-up (Tamang and Thangaraj 2012).

Several studies have shown that the ethnic groups of India show striking similarities at DNA level. This corroborates with the hypothesis that a small number of females entered India during the initial process of the peopling of India. Later, dispersal of humans took place from India to Southeast Asia. Molecular data also reveals that the ancestor of the present Austro-Asiatic tribal populations may have been the most ancient inhabitants of India and footprints of human movements from West and Central Asia into India have been traced (Majumder 2001).

Let us take an example from the Siddis community. It is believed that the Siddis were brought to India from Africa by the Portuguese affinity with African traders in India. These people were sold to the Nawabs and Sultans of India to serve as soldiers and slaves. The members possess typical African features like dark skin, curly hair, broad nose, and so on. At present the members of this community are found in the states of Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Molecular evidence confirmed the Siddis show 70% affinity with African and 30% with Indian and European. It has also been estimated that the Siddis have admixed with the neighbouring Indian populations for about 200 years ago which coincides with historical record (Tamang and Thangaraj 2012).

### **Analysis:**

**Racism:-** Racism is based on the false belief that such factors as intellect and various cultural attributes like values and morality are inherited along with one's physical characteristics like skin colour, nose form, hair colour and so on. Such beliefs are based on the assumption that one group is superior to the other. Eugenic movement, notions of purity of races and persecution of people are the outcome of racism - a racial misconception. In the past, leaders among European-Americans fabricated the cultural/behavioral

characteristics associated with each “race”, linking superior traits with Europeans and negative and inferior ones to blacks and Indians,(American Anthropological Association Statement on “race”May17th ,1998).As such ,anthropologists, from both the socio-cultural and biological/physical schools, have been instrumental in recasting those aspects of traditional Eurocentric ideology, which regarded racial groups as unalterable sub-species, in a new socio -political light

British- born anthropologist Ashley Montagu, a student of both Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, was among the first scientists to argue against the concept of race .He earned fame in the 1940s by arguing that race was a social construct, a product of perceptions, rather than a biological fact. Montague (1942) questioned the scientific validity of human races in his classic work, Man,s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race. Montagu also opposed anthropologist Carleton Coon,s notion that whites and blacks evolved along separate paths.

To go by the words of Jacques Barzun (1965,pp 201) on racial classification “No argument has ever been advanced by any reasonable man against the fact of differences among men.The whole argument is about what difference exists and how they are to be gauged”. Thus, the use of the word ,race ,has long been, and remains controversial and the anthropologists and historians never been comfortable with this topic.

### References

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