UNIT 13  RACE AND RACISM*

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Learning Objectives
After going through this unit you will be able to:
- understand the concept of race and racism;
- comprehend the consequences and criticism of racism; and
- know about different statements on race stated by UNESCO and American Anthropological Association.

13.0 DEFINITION OF RACE

Some definitions on race that came up in the mid of the 20th century were viewed from two perspectives: first with an evolutionary perspective along with the assumption that geographic distribution plays an important role in race formation and second the importance of breeding populations in forming a collection of common 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. Now let us learn some of the important definitions of race given by scholars:

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

According to Dobzansky (1944) “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 race differences are objectively ascertainable facts; the number of races we choose to recognize is a matter of convenience.”

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As per Boyd (1950) race is “a population which differs significantly from other human populations in regard to the frequency of one or more of the genes it possesses. It is an arbitrary matter which, and how many, gene loci we choose to consider as a significant ‘constellation’.”

Mayr (1963) attempted to define races with reference to the subspecies as “a subspecies is an aggregate of phenotypically similar populations of a species inhabiting a geographic subdivision of the range of the species and differing taxonomically from other populations of the species.”

According to Baker (1967) “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 traits among people who are related to each other through common ancestry, i.e. breeding population.

Check Your Progress 1
1) Who defined race as a group whose members present individually identical combinations of specific physical characters?
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2) What commonalities are found in various definitions of race given by different scholars?
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13.1 CONCEPT OF RACE AND RACISM

13.1.1 Race

From 18th century onwards Anthropologists became interested to study human physical variations and on the basis of those studies, 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 18th century (Joshi, 2015). The criteria that were used to classify the world population were some observable (e.g. skin color, hair color, hair form and nose form), metric (e.g. stature), and other biological characters (e.g. blood groups and blood enzymes).

Apart from the physical variations, the world population is also diversified among various human groups on the basis of cultural practices such as language, food pattern, dressing style, behaviour and many more.

### 13.1.2 Race and Ethnicity

“An ethnic group represents one of a number of populations, which grade into one another and together comprise the species *Home sapiens*, but individually maintain their differences, physical and cultural, by means of isolating mechanisms such as geographic and social barriers” (Montagu, 1942). These differences will vary as the power of the geographic and social barriers acting upon the original genetic differences vary.

The work of Frederik Barth in the 1970, emphasized that members of one ethnic group distinguish themselves from the members of other ethnic groups on the basis of a presumed common ancestry and shared cultural traits. As a consequence, the member of a particular ethnic group prefers to choose mate from the same ethnic group (endogamy).

The continuous preference towards endogamy might offer a biological entity to a particular ethnic group. However, these ethnic boundaries are not that rigid: an increase in cross cultural marriages could be a good example. Ethnic boundaries may take in different forms- cultural, linguistic, religious, economic and so on (Heyer et al., 2009).

There is one 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 peoples’ lives, because they’ve been used to discriminate and to distribute resources unequally and set up different standards for protection under law (Race-The power of an illusion, n. d.).

### 13.1.3 Racism

The concept of race gave birth to racism. Racism is based on the false belief that factors such as intellect and various cultural attributes like values and morality are inherited along with one’s physical characteristics like skin color, nose form, hair color and so on. This produced misconception among people that intellect as well as cultural traits was inherited in the same way as the biological features. 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. According to American Anthropological Association Statement on Race (May 17, 1998), “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.”

Racial biasness can appear in many forms such as religion, language, food, dress pattern etc. There have also been instances when racial intolerance led to diplomatic crisis. For example, when Bollywood actor Shahrukh Khan was frisked by American immigration authorities at a US airport or students of Punjabi origin were harassed in Australia. People comment on these incidents as ‘racist remark’ or ‘racism’ and so on.

**Check Your Progress 2**

3) What criteria were used to classify the world population during 18th century?

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4) What are the differences between the concept of race and ethnicity?

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5) What is meant by Racism?

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**13.2 RACISM AS SOCIAL DISEASE**

Racism is prejudice or discrimination against other people because of their “race” or because of what is thought to be their race (their biology or ancestry or physical appearance). Racism involves the assumption that people’s birth or biology determines who they are: that behaviour is based on biology. Whether or not there is hatred, racism involves prejudice or discrimination. It may be personal or institutional, felt or unrecognized, but it is normally based on a stereotype that people of a particular genetic background all behave in some unappealing way; they all do, they have no choice, it is in the genes (Reilly et al., 2003).

**13.2.1 Consequences**

Racially based physical characteristics were erroneously thought to be tightly bound to mental, emotional, intellectual and cultural attributes as well. In this manner, some races were identified as clearly inferior to the others — primitive vs advanced— western civilized populations were held to be superior to the others. Modern European society tended to believe in the division of the world’s population into distinct biological groups, of ‘Black’, ‘White’, ‘Asian’ or other people that are permanently divided and arranged into a hierarchy of superior to inferior types.
Great Divisions of Humankind

For example, when the European explorers located Hottentot and Bushmen people of Africa they found the appearance, language and cultural practices of those people to be of a low and subhuman standard compared to their own characteristics. Similarly, in India, the colonial rulers used to call Indians ‘natives’. In a similar fashion inequalities based on sex and class dominated the western world; and in the Indian subcontinent these were ethnicity and castes. There has been a widespread belief in such categorization and this belief, in turn, has had enormous implications for the way in which ‘white’ Europeans have historically set out to dominate, exploit and kill ‘inferior’ peoples. The belief in such biological differences has had enormous impact on behavior and practice (Mac Master, 2001).

13.2.2 Voices against Racism (Race to Racism)

British-born anthropologist Ashley Montagu, a student of both Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, was the first scientist who criticized 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. Montagu vocally opposed anthropologist Carleton Coon’s notion that whites and blacks evolved along separate paths” (Critiquing Race, n. d.). Montague (1942) questioned the scientific validity of human races in his classic work, “Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race”.

“Likewise, when Frank B. Livingstone wrote his chapter on “The Nonexistence of Human Races” in 1964, he criticized the utility of the race concept for explaining genetic variability, arguing that ‘if a population is X per cent Negro in one characteristic it must be X per cent in all characteristics for this [racial explanation of difference] to be an adequate explanation’. In fact, as Livingstone explained, genetic traits can often be discordant and ‘if two genes vary discordantly, the races set up on the basis of one do not describe the variability in the other’ (Outram & Ellison, 2006).” He further suggested that instead of finding out differences between populations, more legitimate and fruitful approach is to understand patterns of biological variation across space. Such an approach would yield greater insight into the adaptive significance of human biological variation because environmental parameters that drive natural selection vary systematically across geographic space.

To go by the words of Jacques Barzun (1965) 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” (Molnar, 2015). Thus, the use of the word ‘race’ has long been, and remains controversial and the anthropologists have never been comfortable with this topic.

Check Your Progress 3

6) On what basis, some races were identified as superior and advanced than the others? Give one example.

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8) Name any three scholars who criticized the concept of racism? Write down the types of temperaments of man differentiated by Hippocrates.

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13.3 STATEMENTS ON RACE

13.3.1 UNESCO Statement (1951)

UNESCO statement on race was drafted at UNESCO house, on 8th June 1951. This statement was drafted by a group of scholars from various disciplines like, Anthropology, Zoology, Genetics, Biometry and so on; Ashley Montague (United States of America) was one of the scholars. Other notable scholars involved Ernest Beaglehole (New Zealand), Juan Comas (Mexico), L. A. Costa Pinto (Brazil), Franklin Frazier (United States of America), Morris Ginsberg (United Kingdom), Humayun Kabir (India) and Levi-Strauss (France). The major extracts of UNESCO statement are as follows:

1) Scientists are generally agreed that all men belong to a single species, *Homo sapiens*, and are derived from a common stock, even though there is some dispute as to when and how different human groups diverge from this common stock. Anthropologically, ‘race’ should be reserved only for groups of mankind possessing well-developed and primarily heritable physical differences from other groups.

2) Some of the physical differences between human groups are due to differences in hereditary constitution and some to differences in the environments in which they have been brought up. In many cases, both influences have been at work. The science of genetics suggests that the hereditary differences are the results of the action of two sets of processes. On the one hand, isolated populations are constantly being altered by natural selection and by occasional changes (mutations) in the material particles (genes) which control heredity. Populations are also affected by fortuitous changes in gene frequency and by marriage customs and breeding structure. On the other hand, crossing is constantly breaking down the differentiations so set up.

3) National, religious, geographical, linguistic and cultural groups do not necessarily coincide with racial groups; and the cultural traits of such groups have no demonstrated connexion with racial traits. Americans are not a race, nor are Englishmen, nor Frenchmen, nor any other national group. Serious errors of this kind are habitually committed when the term ‘race’ is used in popular parlance: the term should never be used when speaking of such human groups.

4) Human races can be, and have been, classified by different anthropologists in different ways. Most agree in classifying the greater part of existing mankind into at least three large units, which may be called major groups (in French, *grand-races*). Such a classification does not depend on any single physical character. From the morphological point of view, moreover, it is impossible to regard one particular race as superior or inferior to another.
Great Divisions of Humankind

5) Most anthropologists no longer try to include mental characteristics in their classification of human races. Studies within a single race have shown that both innate capacity and environmental opportunity determine the results of tests of intelligence and temperament, though their relative importance is disputed. In any case, it has never been possible to separate members of two groups on the basis of mental capacity, as they can often be separated on a basis of religion, skin colour, hair form or language.

6) The scientific material available to us at present does not justify the conclusion that inherited genetic differences are a major factor in producing the differences between the cultures and cultural achievements of different peoples or groups. It does indicate, on the contrary, that the major factor in explaining such differences is the history of the cultural experience which each group has undergone.

7) There is no evidence for the existence of so-called ‘pure’ races. We know the earlier races chiefly from skeletal remains and our knowledge is therefore limited. In regard to race mixture, the evidence points to the fact that human hybridisation has been going on for an indefinite but considerable time. Indeed, one of the processes of race formation and race extinction or absorption is by means of hybridisation between races. As there is no reliable evidence that disadvantageous effects are produced thereby, no biological justification exists for prohibiting inter-marriage between persons of different races.

8) We now have to consider the bearing of these statements on the problem of human equality. We wish to emphasise that equality of opportunity and equality in law in no way depend, as ethical principles, upon the assertion that human beings are in fact equal in endowment.

It is worthwhile to set out in a formal manner what is at present scientifically established concerning individual and group differences:

1) In matters of race, the only characteristics which anthropologists can effectively use as a basis for classification are physical (anatomical and physiological).

2) Available scientific knowledge provides no basis for believing that the groups of mankind differ in their innate capacity for intellectual and emotional development.

3) The biological differences between human beings within single races may be as great as the biological differences between races.

4) Vast social changes have occurred which are not in any way connected with changes in racial type. Historical and sociological studies thus support the view that genetic differences are of little significance in determining the social and cultural differences between different groups of men.

5) There is no evidence that race mixture as such produces disadvantageous results from a biological point of view. The social results of race mixture, whether for good or ill, can generally be traced to social factors (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Statement on Race, 1951)

The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association adopted the following statement on race on 17 May 1998:

“Physical variations in any given trait tend to occur gradually rather than abruptly over geographic areas. And because physical traits are inherited independently of one another, knowing the range of one trait does not predict the presence of others. For example, skin color varies largely from light in the temperate areas in the north to dark in the tropical areas in the south; its intensity is not related to nose shape or hair texture. Dark skin may be associated with frizzy or kinky hair or curly or wavy or straight hair, all of which are found among different indigenous peoples in tropical regions. These facts render any attempt to establish lines of division among biological populations both arbitrary and subjective.

Early in the 19th century the growing fields of science began to reflect the public consciousness about human differences. Differences among the “racial” categories were projected to their greatest extreme when the argument was posed that Africans, Indians, and Europeans were separate species, with Africans the least human and closer taxonomically to apes.

Ultimately “race” as an ideology about human differences was subsequently spread to other areas of the world. It became a strategy for dividing, ranking and controlling colonized people used by colonial powers everywhere. But it was not limited to the colonial situation. In the latter part of the 19th century it was employed by Europeans to rank one another and to justify social, economic and political inequalities among their peoples.

“Race” thus evolved as a worldview a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior. Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into “racial” categories. Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior.

At the end of the 20th century, we now understand that human cultural behavior is learned, conditioned into infants beginning at birth and always subject to modification. No human is born with a built-in culture or language. Our temperaments, dispositions and personalities, regardless of genetic propensities, are developed within sets of meanings and values that we call “culture.”

It is a basic tenet of anthropological knowledge that all normal human beings have the capacity to learn any cultural behavior. The American experience with immigrants from hundreds of different language and cultural backgrounds who have acquired some version of American culture traits and behavior is the clearest evidence of this fact. Moreover, people of all physical variations have learned different cultural behaviors and continue to do so as modern transportation moves millions of immigrants around the world.

How people have been accepted and treated within the context of a given society or culture has a direct impact on how they perform in that society. The “racial” worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power and wealth. Given what we know about the capacity of normal humans to achieve
and function within any culture, we conclude that present-day inequalities between so-called “racial” groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (American Anthropological Association Statement on Race, 1998).

**Check Your Progress 4**

8) When the UNESCO and American Anthropological Association statement on race was drafted?

9) Write down any two major points of UNESCO statement on race.

10) How did the American Anthropological Association describe the concept of race at the end of 20th century?

**13.4 SUMMARY**

The overall discussion in this unit has shown you that there are a number of diversities observed in mankind. The outward physical features led people to classify human beings into different groups and they called them as races. In course of time this division of mankind led to inequality and development of hatred among human population— a term known as ‘racism’. It is very unfortunate that though there has been a paradigm shift in the construct of race, the racist view of humanity has not changed. The outcome of this is ethnic violence, warfare, terrorism, and genocide which pose a threat to humanity. A number of scholars and international organization like UNESCO and American Anthropological Association became vocal against this social disease called racism. Thus, the use of the word ‘race’ has long been, and remains controversial and the anthropologists have never been comfortable with this topic.

**13.5 REFERENCES**


13.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1) Hooton in 1946 defined race ‘as a group whose members present individually identical combinations of specific physical characters that they owe to their common descent’

2) Various definitions of race given by different scholars exhibit following commonalities:
   a) The role of geographic distribution in race formation and
   b) Sharing of genetic trait among people who are related to each other through common ancestry, i.e. breeding population.

3) During 18th century, observable characteristics were mainly used to classify world population. These observable characteristics include somatoscopic (skin colour, hair colour, hair form and nose form), somatometric (stature) and other biological characters (blood groups and blood enzymes).
Great Divisions of Humankind

4) The major difference between the concept of race and ethnicity are as follows:

   a) First of all, race is primarily unitary. We can only have one race, while we can claim multiple ethnic affiliations. For e.g. one can identify ethnically as Oriya and Indian, but for racial identity- one has to be essentially either black or white.

   b) Secondly, compared to the concept of ethnic group, race is hierarchical and there is a built-in inequality in power. Racial categories have had a much more concrete impact on peoples’ lives, because they’ve been used to discriminate and to distribute resources unequally and set up different standards for protection under law (RACE-The Power of an Illusion, n.d.).

5) Racism is based on the false belief that factors such 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. This produced misconception among people that intellect as well as cultural traits was inherited in the same way as the biological features. Such beliefs give rise to racism.

6) Some races were identified as clearly superior and advanced than the others on the basis of physical and biological characteristics. These characteristics were erroneously thought to be tightly bound to mental, emotional, intellectual and cultural attributes as well. For example, when the European explorers located Hottentot and Bushmen people of Africa they found the appearance, language and cultural practices of those people to be of a low and subhuman standard compared to their own characteristics.

7) Three scholars who criticized the concept of racism were: (a) Ashley Montagu (b) Frank B. Livingstone (c) Jacques Barzun

8) UNESCO statement on race was drafted at UNESCO house, on 8th June 1951 while the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association adopted the statement on race on 17 May 1998

9) The two major points of UNESCO statement on race (1951) are:

   a) Physical variations in any given trait tend to occur gradually rather than abruptly over geographic areas. And because physical traits are inherited independently of one another, knowing the range of one trait does not predict the presence of others.

   b) “Race” evolved as a worldview, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior. Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into “racial” categories. Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behaviour according to.

10) According to AAA (1998) statement, “at the end of the 20th century, we now understand that human cultural behavior is learned, conditioned into infants beginning at birth, and always subject to modification. No human is born with a built-in culture or language. Our temperaments, dispositions, and personalities, regardless of genetic propensities, are developed within sets of meanings and values that we call ‘culture’.”