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Projit Bihari Mukharji, *Brown Skins, White Coats: Race Science in India, 1920–66* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. Pp. 360. ISBN 978-0-226-823301-0. $35.00 (paper).

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'How did race survive as a feral formation even after its old haunts had been bulldozed?', Mukharji asks (p. 11). Because, according to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, 'of the strength, flexibility, and subtlety of racial thought' (p. 2). Empires crumbled, postcolonial states arose, but 'racial science' lived on. For instance, the masks of racial science were used by Indian nationalists and scientists before and after Indian Independence in 1947. Mukharji writes that we need to resist homogenizing this 'race science' (p. 2): there are, indeed, many 'white coats' (p. 263). However, he says, we do not have a historical account of the many coats (of the 'feralness') of racial science in India. His *Brown Skins, White Coats* takes on this task.

Mukharji focuses on a specific 'race science': seroanthropology. Chapter 1 tells us of its beginnings in India. With the study of humans through blood groups popularized by Hannah and Ludwik Hirszfield in 1919, seroanthropology eventually came to be a part of the 'indianization' of the medical services in India. There, amongst others, Eirleen Macfarlane broke Ludwik and Hanka Hirszfield's homogeneous 'Indian' category along caste lines – the lower and the upper castes were serologically more different from one another than groups within them were (p. 44). When many came to envision an Indian nation along biological lines, these initial attempts ballooned into a 'smorgasbord of new institutional structures for patronising race science': 'private think tanks, the mammoth Anthropolotical Survery of India (ASI) … and finally, a small but influential number of medical research bodies interested in race' (p. 51). Of course, the lesson is that all these made for a 'mutation and intensification of race' rather than its 'displacement' (p. 64). Even if they moved away from

more essentialist definitions of race to populations, assumptions about genetic homogeneity remained, hinging on notions like ‘endogamy’ (pp. 61–63).

Chapter 2, accordingly, starts with the idea of a ‘religious isolate’. It relied on biological narratives of migration and separation that tended to give a limited story, which Mukharji calls ‘snapshot biohistories’ (p. 87). Relatedly, these could be used towards the ‘demonization of others’ (especially of other religions) by Hindu nationalists (pp. 90–94). Chapter 3 goes into specific seroanthropological attempts ‘tracking [how] tastes [were seen] as purely genetic traits that could be used as markers of racial identities’ (p. 123). The sensory perception of taste was geneticized, separated from the experiences of the subjects and mapped onto seroanthropological categories of race. Chapter 4 focuses on the medicalization of race by analyzing how tracking the sickle-cell trait was related, in the fledgling Indian state, to family planning and socio-economic inequalities. It shows ‘the convergence of scientific ideas about race as risk with planned parenthood activism and the state’s media apparatus’ (p. 151).

The next chapters follow Annemarie Mol’s ‘blood multiple’ framework to focus on the ways in which the very notion of ‘blood’ itself can be problematized. Similar to Jenny Bangham’s study of the British blood transfusion services, Mukharji explores fascinating ‘questions of access and mediation’ to remind us that different contingencies, and non-scientists no less, were at the heart of collecting the blood needed for seroanthropological research in India (p. 183). These were not only ‘contingent’ in the sense of being dependent on specific historical contexts, but also of influencing the data on which generalizations were made. Chapter 6 expands on the theme of non-scientists to discuss notions of ‘resistance’. Keeping in touch with a range of heterogeneities the book explores, the chapter argues that scholars have overly discussed notions of ‘resistance’, ignoring ‘specific rationales for’ why people refused to comply (p. 192). The term ‘resistance’ thus homogenizes the motivations of

those who disagreed with seroanthropological activities, whereas the term ‘refusals’, Mukharji contends, allows us to see the ‘polyphony’ of reasons behind their acts.

Chapter 7 then returns to seroanthropologists. Just as their narratives of the past, and their present circumstances, were more varied than we think, the seroanthropologists’ imagined visions for the future differed. Amongst these ‘distinctive futurities’ (p. 219), Brajendranath Seal, for instance, wrote about a teleological view in which all sub-groups in the Indian nation would fade away within the central authority of the state, which freed individuals to express their different abilities, achieving an ‘indefinite variability’ (p. 222). Departing from this nationalist vision, Sasanka Sekhar Sarkar advocated a caste-based ‘national eugenics’, musing, in 1951, that ‘[upper-caste] Bengal gave rise to a galaxy of distinguished men’, but that now, alas, this was in peril due to bad breeding (p. 228). The state should thus be a tool for the maintenance of castes.

The conclusion returns to an older Sarkar, immersed in folklore, who, Mukharji writes, ‘transcended the abstract seroanthropological identities he so assiduously created in his professional publications’ (p. 265). Mukharji calls this the ‘self-alienation’ of the researchers, and counters with an encouragement, he writes, for a ‘Brown planetary humanism’, one that ‘can elude capture by national encampments that biologize and nationalize’ identity (p. 264). This ‘critical utopianism’, that is, reading racial science against multiple grains, is accompanied by an exercise of ‘critical fabulation’. It involves reading multiple genres of writing side by side, which keeps the reader away from thinking ‘racial science’ had but one face, ‘forestalling identification’ between a reader and a narrative (p. 28). As a result, the chapters just delineated are interpolated by 8 ‘interchapters’ which give the fascinating correspondence between ‘Najrul Islam’ (an anonymous narrator Mukharji re-names) and Hemendrakumar Ray.

Mukharji ultimately argues against exaggerating change – focusing on seroanthropology makes it strange to think 'race science' ever fully died. The changes were complex, partial and slow, the disappearance of racial science being, we might say, an 'imagined past', as Adrian Wilson called it (*Isis* 108, no. 4 (2017): 814–26). But as Wilson reminded us, an 'imagined past' is also, following Thomas Kuhn, about the 'invisibility of revolutions' – about the ways in which a scientist creates a scientific tradition where the work of present individuals becomes lumped onto a continuous line of 'predecessors'. On the one hand, Mukharji does a good job in critiquing the supposed radical disappearance of 'race science' in India. On the other, one would have wanted to see, more concretely, how versions of racial science were constructed in the international networks in which they moved. What, if anything, was revised from the work of Western scientists onto a perceived continuous line towards Indian seroanthropologies?

Focusing on 'inheritance' is instructive. There were, we increasingly know, many 'inheritances' which 'genetics' was supposed to help render visible and measurable. Whatever 'inheritances' eventually made their way into the different seroanthropologies in India may add yet further to our garderobe of white coats and self-alienations. This is a scholarly challenge which Mukharji's beautiful book has set in motion. It asks us to forestall our historical identification with homogenising narratives and concepts – from which the reader will emerge none the poorer.

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