

Indian government proposal to study “racial purity” draws widespread attack from scientists

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On May 28, *The New Indian Express*, a major Indian daily, citing “highly placed government sources,” reported that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s Ministry of Culture has plans to fund a project designed to “trace the purity of races in India.” The study, it said, would be undertaken by the Anthropological Survey of India, some scientists at the Lucknow-based Birbal Sahani Institute of Pale Sciences (BSIP), and prominent archaeologist, Vasant Shinde.

The *Express* quoted Professor Shinde, currently adjunct professor at the Bangalore-based National Institute of Advanced Study and director of the Rakhigarhi Research Project, as stating during a phone interview, “We want to see how mutation and mixing of genes in the Indian population has happened in the last 10,000 years. Genetic mutation depends on the intensity of contact among populations and the time that this process takes. We will then have a clear-cut idea of the genetic history. You may even say that this will be an effort to trace the purity of races in India.” The article adds that the project was originally conceived in 2019.

It should be noted that the statement by Professor Shinde, who is an archaeologist, not a geneticist or a biological anthropologist, that “genetic mutation depends on the intensity of contact among populations” is inaccurate. Mutations occur independently, not from contact between populations. Contact results in gene flow, not mutation. Furthermore, it is well established that genetic diversity creates what is termed “hybrid vigor,” which tends to inhibit the expression of genetic diseases, thus improving the health of a population. Inbreeding, on the contrary, tends to expose genetic

diseases, rendering a population less healthy.

In response to the article, on May 31 the ministry tweeted that the report is “misleading, mischievous and contrary to facts.” It further stated, “The proposal is not related to establishing genetic history and [to] ‘trace the purity of races in India’ as alluded in article.” It did not, however, specifically disavow the statement by Professor Shinde. Shinde himself has subsequently complained that his statements were twisted and fabricated and criticized the article’s use of the term “racial purity.” He further stated that “It is a known fact that no race on the earth is pure due to people’s movements and mingling.” It is notable that in his statement Shinde still employs the concept of race, implying that such groups had “purity” at some time in the past, which has subsequently been diluted.

To add further confusion, the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI), the presumed principal authority in such matters, has reportedly declined to participate in the proposed study. However, the government has responded that a genetic study will be conducted by AnSI but will not be aimed at assessing “racial purity.” Its purported goal is not made clear.

Not satisfied with these ambiguous denials, over a hundred Indian scholars wrote an open letter to the ministry sharply criticizing the project. It stated, “[T]he notion of tracing the ‘purity of races,’ whether in India or elsewhere, is extremely worrisome. A plan to do so would be both absurd and dangerous.” The group urged the ministry to “issue public disavowals of any present or future project related to race, especially one for studying racial purity.”

Among other points made in the letter, the signatories reject the idea of racial purity, since it implies that

some groups are less or more pure than others. Furthermore, “Racial stereotyping of humans has been discarded, and there should be no attempt to revive the concept in India.”

The signatories warn that “one guaranteed outcome [of such a project] will be the exacerbation of disharmony among Indians.”

As of this writing, the Indian government has not responded to the scholars’ letter.

Human populations have been moving and mingling from time immemorial. Any genetic configuration of a particular population at a given time and place is merely a momentary snapshot of this ever-changing mosaic. Genetic studies in conjunction with archaeological and linguistic data can be used to trace the ebb and flow of populations through time and space. However, no particular genetic configuration of a population has any historical permanence. Furthermore, genetic studies have repeatedly shown that genetic diversity within groups is greater than that between groups, rendering the concept of “racial purity” meaningless.

The very concept of “race” is a social construct which has no scientific validity. Attempts to define racial purity harken back to the concepts of racial superiority and inferiority promoted by the Nazis and to the totally discredited “science” of eugenics.

Any proposed attempt to define rigid racial distinctions among India’s population of over a billion people, even if honestly undertaken, would quickly run counter to well-established scientific research that has demonstrated the immense diversity of India’s current inhabitants with respect to genetics, language, and culture. In reality, any such attempt should be viewed with extreme skepticism, likely having as its true purpose the serving of political rather than scientific goals.

The current Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which came to power in India in 2014, has demonstrated time and again that it uses racial, cultural and religious distinctions to divide the working class in order to defend capitalist rule, especially now under conditions of a rapidly deepening world crisis. This includes continual efforts to incite communal tensions and scapegoat, humiliate and terrorize Muslims, as in the recent state violence visited on

Muslims who protested against statements by two top party officials denigrating the Prophet Mohammad.

The BJP and their far-right Hindu allies depict Muslims—who comprise almost 15 percent of India’s population and have been living in South Asia for more than 1,300 years—as “outsiders” and “invaders” who must acknowledge that India is a “Hindu nation.” Towards this end, they have mounted multiple campaigns to “purify” India of Muslim influence. This includes everything from purging Hindi of Persian-derived words and renaming cities like Allahabad, to the building of a temple to the mythical Hindu god Lord Ram at the former site of the Babri Masjid—a historic mosque razed by Hindu fanatics in 1992 at the instigation of top BJP leaders.

It also should be noted that a BJP government study into “racial purity” in India would be very much in line with the Hindu right’s long history of promoting religious obscurantism and scientific quackery. Among other outrages, the Modi government has sanctioned the teaching of astrology and palmistry at universities and colleges accredited by the Education Ministry. In 2015, at the 102nd annual conference of the Indian Science Congress, the country’s premier scientific congress, the Modi government organized a session on the supposed achievements of ancient Indian civilization, which included claims, based on purported readings of the Vedas, that ancient India had airplanes and even rocket ships. Similar claims were made at the next four congresses, causing an outcry among genuine scientists and finally forcing the congress authorities to impose procedures to better vet the scientific quality of proposed papers.

The science is clear. The concept of race has no validity. In the current historical context, the proposed study, no matter how it is couched or soft-pedaled, has the most reactionary consequences.

At a time when the unity of the working class is vitally important, all such actions to divide workers based on whatever distinctions must be firmly rejected.



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