

20th Century Indian Eugenics: Scientific Colonial Discourse and its Postcolonial Representations

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed both the rise and decline of eugenics as a transnational scientific movement that sought to regulate human reproduction in the name of social progress and biological improvement. Rooted in the emergence of modern scientific rationality in the Western world, eugenics drew heavily upon developments in disciplines such as biology, statistics, and heredity, presenting itself as an objective and progressive science. However, its intellectual foundations were deeply entangled with colonial ideologies, particularly theories of race, sexuality, and degeneration that were shaped through the colonial encounter. These theories were not merely imposed by the colonizer upon the colonized; rather, they emerged through a complex process of knowledge production that involved both colonial authorities and sections of the colonized elite who actively participated in, adapted, and sometimes contested these scientific discourses. In the Indian context, eugenic thought developed in close alignment with concerns about population, fertility, and social reform, revealing the ways in which colonial science intersected with local anxieties about modernity, nationhood, and social order.

In India, the earliest manifestations of organized eugenic thought were closely linked to Neo-Malthusian movements that advocated birth control as a solution to poverty, overpopulation, and perceived social degeneration. These organizations framed reproductive regulation as both a scientific necessity and a moral responsibility, often targeting women's bodies as the primary site of intervention. Over time, such ideas were absorbed into broader state-led frameworks, eventually informing population control policies in post-Independence India. While eugenics is most commonly associated with German fascism and the extreme racial policies of Nazi ideology, and coercive reproductive practices in India are frequently linked to the Emergency period of the 1970s, both phenomena have far longer, more complex, and continuous histories. The Indian case demonstrates that reproductive governance and eugenic thinking cannot be reduced to isolated historical moments but must instead be understood as evolving discourses shaped by colonial legacies, nationalist aspirations, and postcolonial state power.

Bhagwati Charan Verma's Hindi novel *Rekha*, published in the early years of independent India, offers a compelling literary site through which these intersecting discourses can be examined. The novel brings together diverse concerns surrounding sexuality, gender norms, mental illness, and transnational scientific knowledge, reflecting the pervasive influence of eugenic thought beyond formal scientific or policy-oriented texts. Notably, *Rekha* foregrounds mental illness as a category of eugenic anxiety, particularly in relation to reproduction and social suitability, a theme that is often minimized or evaded in scholarly accounts of eugenics and reproductive control in colonial and postcolonial India. Through its narrative, the text exposes how ideas about hereditary fitness, sexual morality, and psychological abnormality were woven into everyday social judgments, especially concerning women and marginalized subjects.

This paper aims to explore the complex and layered history of eugenics in India by examining specific debates articulated, reinforced, and at times contested by European and Indian psychiatrists during the late colonial period. These debates reveal how gender, sexual deviance, race, and mental illness were co-constituted within eugenic frameworks, producing normative ideals of citizenship and biological worth that persisted into the postcolonial era. By reading these scientific and medical discourses alongside Verma's *Rekha*, the paper highlights the enduring postcolonial legacy of eugenics, demonstrating how literary texts not only reflect but also critique the lingering influence of colonial scientific rationalities in shaping modern Indian understandings of body, mind, and reproduction.