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Q5(c)

Is race a valid and biologically meaningful concept?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · The Nature of Culture

2.1 The Nature of Culture: The concept and Characteristics of culture and civilization; Ethnocentrism vis-a-vis cultural Relativism.

Core demand of the question

- Is race a valid and biologically meaningful concept? Write a note
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Classical races are not valid biological taxa.

Boas split race from language and culture and showed plasticity.

Most genetic diversity lies within groups, not between colour boxes.

Clines and local ancestry are biologically meaningful.

Social race is real as discrimination, not as subspecies.

Introduction

Race as a few fixed human types is not a valid biological taxonomy. Human variation is real. It does not form the classical races of textbooks.

Body**Why classical race fails**

- **Franz Boas** showed that cranial form changes with environment. Race, language, and culture do not coincide.
- Most genetic variation is within so-called races, as **Richard Lewontin** stressed. **Clines** of skin colour and blood groups cross the old maps.
- **Ashley Montagu** and later **AAA** statements treated race as a social myth with biological pretence.

What remains meaningful

- Local populations, ancestry, and clinal traits matter for medicine, forensic estimation, and evolutionary history.
- Sickle-cell tracks malaria, not a Black race. Lactase tracks dairying, not a White race.
- Social race is brutally meaningful in discrimination. That is sociology and history, not a Linnaean subspecies.

Verdict

- Race as four or five types is invalid. Biological variation is meaningful as **clines**, populations, and ancestry, not as those types.

Flow diagram

Human variation -> Clines populations
Human variation -> Classical races
Classical races -> Invalid types
Clines populations -> Medicine history

Conclusion

Classical race is not a good biological concept. Human biological diversity is real and is badly boxed by colour labels.

Facts & figures

Boas

Immigrant head-form studies undermined fixed racial cranial types.

Lewontin

Argued that the larger share of genetic diversity is within populations.

Clines

Gradual geographic change in trait frequency, as in skin pigmentation.

AAA

American Anthropological Association statement treats race as a social, not a scientific, partition of humankind.

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