Inequality is the product of history, politics and power, not our genes

Angela Saini does not find lazy jokes that reinforce race stereotypes funny. What makes this Indian-origin British science writer laugh these days are farces such as the emerging ancestry-tracing industry that claim to tell you something by testing your DNA. Her new book ‘Superior: The Return of Race Science’ has received praise for debunking the right-wing notion that social inequality is the product of our genes. Saini talks to Sharmila Ganesan Ram about pseudoscientific racism, nepotism and other cheap jokes that need to be genetically modified.

As a person of Indian origin in London, did you face a lot of racism growing up?

Racism was the backdrop to parts of my teenage years, but I didn’t suffer nearly as badly as many. My family lived in a part of southeast London that was not particularly diverse, so we stood out being non-white. Most of the racism was the casual, everyday sort, comments in the street.

What is race science?

It’s the biological study of differences between so-called racial groups. In the past, this kind of work not only categorised people in spurious ways but also reinforced the idea that there is a such a thing as a racial hierarchy.

Was that the trigger for the book?

The reason I wrote the book now is that the world is seeing a resurgence in right-wing populism and the ethnic nationalism. Issues of race have zoomed up the agenda, and I wanted to explore the way biological notions of race play into politics and identity. It’s as important to call out pseudoscientific racism now as it was in the 1930s when the Nazis were developing their theories of racial hygiene. These are dangerous times we live in, and science is a target for abuse by those with political agendas.

Does this mean that inequality has nothing to do with our genes whatsoever?

There are individual differences between us, in appearance, natural talent, skill and intellect, but these are not the same as population-level group differences. Inequality between social and racial groups is the product of history, politics and power, not our genes.

Surely then, the whole emerging industry of people who promise to trace ancestry must make you laugh?

Many scientists have called out ancestry testing as both unscientific and misleading, because these companies don’t make clear exactly what it is they’re showing customers when they test
their DNA. They’re not proving race or ancestry, they are merely spotting certain statistical
genetic connections between living people who have also had these tests done. The results are
always fuzzy, as you would expect given the amount of genetic commonality between all
humans.

**Do you think India’s notion of some races being superior to others or even its obsession
with fairness creams stem from its colonial hangover?**

I do think that the rest of the world inherited some of its ideas about racial superiority from
white Europeans, but I also think there are local dynamics. British colonialism rule certainly
introduced, hardened and reinforced certain ideas about racial difference in India in deeply
damaging ways, which people still live with.

**Where do you stand on eugenics and the whole debate about nepotism that’s a burning
topic in Bollywood at the moment?**

We know that exceptional talent is rarely transmitted from one generation to another in the
same way that hair colour or height is. The idea that brilliant parents will necessarily produce
brilliant kids is based on outdated eugenic thinking, and is deeply unfair to those talented
people who have to work harder to prove themselves because they don’t have talented or
privileged parents. Nepotism is obviously wrong. We should look for talent everywhere, not just
among the few who have power.

**What can we all do to not be racist? Are we allowed to laugh at jokes poking fun at
community stereotypes?**

The one thing I do is to try and approach every new person I meet without prior assumptions or
stereotypes, to get to know them on their own terms as a unique individual with their own
particular interests, skills and experience. I don’t have a problem with self-deprecating humour,
or laughing at silly stereotypes. But when a joke reinforces a stereotype, that’s not funny, it’s just
cheap and lazy.

**In your dedication, you say: “For my parents, the only ancestors I need to know.” You like
your family trees short?**

My dedication is in part a joke at expense of ancestry testing companies who claim to tell us
who our ancient ancestors were, as though this could tell us anything about who we are in the
present, but also a genuine gesture to my parents, who were immigrants to the UK and gave me
everything, including my culture and values. I didn’t have anybody else to raise me, just them.
They are the ones who made me who I am.