

Ethnic Classification and Distribution of Indian Populations

India is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Its population is composed of various racial, linguistic, cultural, and regional groups.

Over time, anthropologists and scholars have tried to classify this diversity using different criteria such as physical features, language, culture, and genetics.

Among them, **H.H. Risley**, **B.S. Guha**, and **S.S. Sarkar** are the most prominent contributors to the ethnic classification of Indian populations.

1. H.H. Risley (1851–1911)

Approach: Racial and Caste-Based Classification

H.H. Risley was a British anthropologist and colonial administrator who played a major role in classifying the people of India during British rule.

His work was conducted during the **1901 Census of India**, where he tried to divide Indian society into distinct racial types.

Methodology: How Did Risley Classify People?

Risley used **physical features** (a method called anthropometry) to classify Indian populations. He believed that physical measurements could reveal the "racial identity" of people. Two of the main indices he used were:

- **Cephalic index:** This measured the shape of the head—whether it was long or broad.
- **Nasal index:** This calculated the width of the nose in relation to its height.

He **combined these physical measurements with caste**, assuming that higher castes had more “Aryan” (European-like) features and lower castes or tribal people had more “primitive” features.

He strongly believed that **caste and race were directly related**, which is now considered incorrect.

Racial Types Identified by Risley

Risley proposed **seven racial types** found in different regions of India:

1. **Aryo-Dravidian**
 - Found in North India

- Mixed features of Aryans and Dravidians
- Moderate skin tone, intermediate head shape

2. Indo-Aryan

- Found in the Northwest (e.g., Punjab)
- Long head, fair skin, narrow nose
- Considered to be closer to Europeans in appearance

3. Turanian

- Found in Central India
- Broad head, medium complexion
- Mixed features

4. Dravidian

- Found in South India
- Long head, dark skin, broad nose
- Deeply rooted in Indian subcontinent

5. Mongoloid

- Found in North-East India
- Flat face, yellowish skin, prominent cheekbones, epicanthic fold over the eyes

6. Scytho-Dravidian

- Found on the West Coast (e.g., Gujarat, Maharashtra)
- A mix of features from Scythians (Central Asian nomads) and Dravidians

7. Pre-Dravidian

- Found among tribal groups
- Short stature, very dark skin, simple physical traits
- Considered “primitive” in colonial thought

Criticism of Risley’s Work

Risley’s classification has been **heavily criticized** by modern scholars for several reasons:

- **Typological and Eurocentric:** He assumed that each race had a "pure type" and compared Indians to Europeans. This view ignored the vast diversity and mixed ancestry of Indian people.
- **Racial Hierarchy:** He placed upper castes (especially Brahmins) at the top, suggesting they were more "Aryan" or European-like, while placing tribal groups at the bottom as more "primitive." This reinforced **social and racial inequalities**.
- **Outdated Scientific Basis:** Modern genetics and anthropology have proven that **race and caste do not have a biological basis**. His measurements could not capture the complexity of Indian diversity.
- **Colonial Ideology:** His work reflected the **colonial mindset**, where British rulers tried to justify their rule by portraying Indian society as rigidly divided and unequal. His ideas were influenced by **social Darwinism**, which wrongly applied evolutionary ideas to human societies and justified inequality.

2. B.S. Guha (1894–1961)

Approach: Physical Anthropological Classification

Dr. Biraja Sankar Guha was a pioneering Indian anthropologist and the **first Director of the Anthropological Survey of India**. He made a significant contribution to the study of Indian population diversity through a more **scientific and data-driven classification** of racial types, moving beyond colonial biases.

Methodology: How Did Guha Classify People?

Guha's approach was grounded in **empirical observation and systematic data collection**. He used:

- **Anthropometric measurements** (e.g., body height, head shape, facial features)
- **Cephalic index** (head length and breadth)
- **Nasal index** (shape of nose)
- **Skin color**
- **Hair texture**

The data was collected across diverse Indian populations by the **Anthropological Survey of India**, and Guha's racial classification was formally **published in 1935**.

Racial Types Identified by B.S. Guha

Guha identified **six major racial types**, further subdivided into **nine sub-types**, based on physical characteristics. Unlike Risley, Guha focused **less on caste** and more on **regional and tribal diversity**.

Main Racial Types (with examples and features):

1. Negrito

- Very small presence in India (e.g., **Great Andamanese** of the Andaman Islands)
- **Short stature, dark skin, woolly hair, and broad nose**
- Considered the earliest inhabitants

2. Proto-Australoid

- Most common among **tribal groups** (e.g., **Santhals, Oraons**)
- **Long head, broad and flat nose, dark complexion, wavy hair**
- Possibly the earliest mainland settlers of India

3. Mongoloid

- Found mostly in **North-East India** and some Himalayan regions
- Features include **flat face, broad cheekbones, epicanthic fold, and yellowish skin**
- Examples: **Mizos, Nagas, Bhutias**

4. Mediterranean

- Present among many **upper-caste populations** in South and Central India
- **Long-headed, fair to brown complexion, narrow nose, medium stature**
- Related to West Asian and Middle Eastern populations

5. Western Brachycephals

- Includes three sub-types: **Alpine, Dinaric, and Armenoid**
- Found in **Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bengal**
- **Broad head, robust build, varying skin tone**
- Possibly came through **northwest migration routes**

6. Nordic

- Found in parts of **Punjab, Rajasthan, Kashmir** and among some **upper castes**
- **Tall, light skin, blonde to brown hair, narrow nose, long head**
- Guha believed this group resembled **northern European races**

Significance of Guha's Work

- **Scientific Method:** Used **anthropometric data** instead of colonial imagination or caste stereotypes.
- **Recognized Diversity:** His classification showed the **composite and heterogeneous nature** of Indian people.
- **Inclusive:** Took into account **tribal populations**, often ignored or marginalized in earlier studies.
- **Indian Perspective:** As an Indian anthropologist, Guha's work shifted the racial classification of Indians from **colonial to national hands**.

Criticism of Guha's Model

While Guha improved upon Risley's work, his classification is not without criticism:

- **Still Typological:** Though based on data, Guha still followed the **racial typology model**, which assumes "pure types" that don't really exist.
- **Ignored Genetics:** His classification did not use **genetic or molecular** data (which wasn't available then).
- **Cultural and Linguistic Overlooked:** Guha focused on physical traits but did not account for **cultural, linguistic, or social factors** like inter-caste marriage, migrations, and assimilation.
- **Static Model:** Like other racial typologies, it did not capture the **dynamic nature** of human variation and population mixing.

3. S.S. Sarkar (1908–1982)

Approach: Evolutionary, Interdisciplinary, and Population-Based

Prof. S.S. (Sarat Chandra) Sarkar was a leading figure in **Indian physical anthropology** and a pioneer in **paleoanthropology**.

He made a significant departure from earlier typological approaches and introduced a more **scientific, evolutionary, and multidimensional perspective** on human variation in India.

He did **not** provide a **fixed racial classification** like H.H. **Risley** or B.S. **Guha**. Instead, he **rejected typological models** and approached Indian population studies through a **scientific, evolutionary, and population-based framework**.

Methodology: How Did Sarkar Study Indian Populations?

Unlike his predecessors who focused mainly on physical traits (like head shape or nose type), Sarkar used **multiple sources of data**:

- **Serological studies**: Studied blood groups and other genetic markers
- **Genetic analysis**: Looked into gene frequencies and hereditary traits
- **Archaeological evidence**: Examined skeletal remains from **prehistoric sites** (e.g., **Mesolithic, Neolithic**)
- **Population history**: Focused on **how populations evolved over time**, not just how they looked

This made his method **interdisciplinary**, combining **biology, archaeology, and cultural history**.

Viewpoint: What Did S.S. Sarkar Believe?

- **Rejected racial typology**: He **did not support dividing people into fixed racial types** like Risley or Guha did.
- **Supported micro-evolution**: Indian populations are the result of **long-term evolutionary processes**, including **admixture** (mixing of populations), **migration**, and **gene flow**.
- **Believed in regional continuity**: He emphasized that **local populations evolved gradually**, and there were no “pure” races.
- **Stressed cultural diffusion**: Movement of **ideas, technologies, and practices** also shaped population structure, not just genes.

Key Contributions of S.S. Sarkar

1. **Studied ancient skeletons**: Analyzed remains from **prehistoric Indian sites**, which helped in reconstructing **population history**.
2. **Pioneered genetic anthropology** in India: Introduced the use of **genetic markers** (like blood groups) to understand population relationships.
3. **Explained ethnic dynamism**: Instead of viewing Indian ethnic groups as fixed, he showed that **ethnicity is dynamic**, changing over time due to interaction and evolution.

4. **Critiqued colonial and caste-based models:** Argued against colonial ideas of race and the linking of caste with race.
5. **Encouraged population-based studies:** His work inspired later anthropologists to focus on **population genetics** and **regional diversity**.

Comparative Overview

Scholar	Methodology	Basis of Classification	Racial Types Recognized	Criticisms
H.H. Risley	Anthropometry + Caste	Cephalic & Nasal Index + Caste	7 Racial Types	Colonial, hierarchical, outdated
B.S. Guha	Physical Anthropology	Body measurements, morphology	6 Main Races + 9 Subtypes	Typological, not genetic
S.S. Sarkar	Biological + Genetic + Archaeological	Serology, skeletal analysis	No fixed types; emphasized processes	Modern, evolutionary, dynamic

Current Understanding

Modern anthropology and genetics have largely **moved away from racial typologies**. Today, Indian population diversity is studied through:

- **Population genetics**
- **Linguistic and cultural diversity**
- **Clinal variation and gene flow**
- **Ethnographic and archaeological evidence**

Studies from the **Human Genome Project**, **mitochondrial DNA**, and **Y-chromosome** analyses show that Indian populations are highly mixed and cannot be neatly divided into rigid racial types.

Insights from Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

- PYQs often ask to **compare Risley and Guha** or **evaluate their classification methods**.

- Some questions ask to **discuss the limitations of racial typology** in light of modern genetics.
- Questions on **S.S. Sarkar** focus on his evolutionary approach and contributions to prehistoric anthropology.
- You may also be asked to explain **the distribution of ethnic groups in India** based on these scholars.

Conclusion

The ethnic classification of Indian populations has evolved from colonial typologies to scientific, evolutionary approaches. While Risley and Guha laid the groundwork with physical anthropology, S.S. Sarkar's interdisciplinary and genetic approach paved the way for modern population studies. Today, the focus is on understanding diversity through historical, biological, and cultural processes rather than rigid racial labels. For UGC NET, it is important to grasp both the historical context and the scientific progression in these classifications.

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