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Conversatia

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Colorism in India

“Don’t play outside. You’ll get too dark”, “No one will marry you if you have dark skin”, and “Men only want fair-skinned women” - these are the words rooted into the minds of young Indian girls on a daily basis from the minute they open their eyes (Rao). Comments such as the ones above stem from a long-existing problem known as colorism. Colorism has progressed to become a deeply embedded problem in Indian society and a basis for the discrimination many Indian women face in marriage, education, jobs, and other aspects of their daily lives.

Colorism can be traced back to colonial times, when lighter-skinned Europeans ruled over the darker-skinned Indians, as well as the Hindu Caste system. While the caste system wasn’t based on skin tone, the lower castes performed hard labor outside while experiencing prolonged sun exposure due to India’s geographical location, eventually leading to darker skin tones (Frayer). This correlation between skin tone and caste can also be connected to poverty since the socioeconomic status of darker-skinned individuals is seen as lower, making it harder for them in regard to the education system and labor markets. They have low upward mobility in society as educators and employers prefer light-skinned Indians since they perceive dark skin as “dirty” and “uneducated” (Thelwell). The coloristic ideal planted in history, combined with the caste prejudices and general bias against women, led to the toxic mentality against dark-skinned Indian women (Frayer).

Through fear of this prejudice, dark-skinned Indian women turned to the many skin care products designed to whiten skin available in India. Some products use multivitamins, such as

vitamin B3, to lighten the skin which doesn't have a negative effect on the body as well as natural remedies for skin problems such as turmeric (Frayer). However, many of these products, such as Fair and Lovely - a popular lightening product in South Asia - contain dangerous ingredients such as steroids, mercury, and hydroquinone, commonly found in bleaching products. The high mercury levels in these products can cause unwanted side effects such as mercury poisoning, damage to skin cells, hypertension, and even kidney and liver damage. In addition, the strong steroids can cause the skin to become red, itchy, and bumpy upon stopping the use of this product, creating an endless cycle of consumerism. This exploitation of steroids to effectively addict their customers much to their unknowing detriment is a ploy of businesses that essentially drives the global market for bleaching products (Rao). Some of these products even go as far as to include shade cards in order to track how much lighter a user's skin gets over time (Frayer). As long as colorism exists, many young Indian girls will continue to give in to society and play right into the hands of these businesses, ruining their health along the way (Rao).

This situation only worsens through the many billboard ads and media advertisements promoting colorism. Many of these billboards and ads portray similar images all throughout India: "On one side, a dark-skinned woman is sad and alone, and on the other side, she's armed with skin-lightening cream that has worked its magic". All essentially deliver the same message: be lighter and be happier (Rao).

The Bollywood industry contributes to this as well, such as when Priyanka Chopra promoted a product called "White Beauty" in a show in which she uses a lightening paste in order to seduce the man of her dreams who falls in love with her due to her lightened skin. Another way the industry indirectly promotes colorism is through its hit songs which unintentionally promote favoritism for light skin through lyrics that essentially present white skin

as “beautiful” and say it “makes men go crazy” (Frayer). In addition, the South Indian film industry doesn’t portray an accurate range of South Indian skin tones by preferring light-skinned actors/actresses, furthering the light-skinned bias (Roy, Naisha). It can also be seen in recent Indian tv, for example, in a new show released over quarantine called “Indian Matchmaking” which features a matchmaker working to match her clients together. As the show progresses, the matchmaker states that fairer skin tones make it easier to match clients, especially for women. This represents the link between sexism and colorism, showing how hard life for dark-skinned women can be (Veeraraghav).

This discrimination during marriage is not just on TV, however, but rather something many Indian women face in reality. Stemming from the long-standing ideal of same-caste marriages combined with the idea promoted by brands such as Fair and Lovely, dark-skinned brides have a hard time finding marriages. Some arranged marriage match-making sites even let brides be filtered based on their skin tone (Frayer). These beauty standards have bled into the cosmetics industry as well, as darker-skin tones are under-represented in beauty lines with limited shades and undertones. Many companies try to make up for this shortcoming by increasing the number of products offered, but even then many of them are marketed towards lighter skin tones (Roy, Naisha).

This obsession with fair skin that can be seen in many aspects of India is a stain on its beauty that leaves many women feeling insecure in their own skin (Frayer). Comments such as “you’re so beautiful and fair-skinned” are common in India. While they may be used as a compliment, (Thelwell) they cause many young women to grow up thinking that they need to have lighter skin in order to be beautiful and to be accepted into society (Veeraraghav). These coloristic ideals have detrimental effects on mental health as many dark-skinned women feel

worthless and inferior due to comments and the discrimination caused by their skin tone. They can fall into self-blame and guilt, affecting their body image, and causing anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Roy, Naisha). The fear of being “called one of the dark-skinned people in our country” can break even the boldest of women in India as stated by Hiran, a young girl in India, during a phone interview (Frayer).

Starting as a simple commonality between those in a caste/trade, colorism has grown to be a pervasive part of the everyday life of many Indian girls and restricts them to a toxic mentality regarding themselves. It is continuously promoted in skin-care advertisements and through the film industry to change women’s perception of their own skin tone and embed a desire for lighter skin from a young age. This desire can influence the mindsets of society with respect to education opportunities, job proposals, and marriage aspects fueling ongoing caste problems and trapping young women even further. Colorism and its harmful ideals have become an endless cycle intertwined in India’s beautiful society which continues to suffocate India’s beautiful women.

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