

Understanding “Colorism” in India: The Complexities of Skin Complexion

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Abstract

This study focuses on the discriminations done on the basis of skin complexion, which is a persistent problem in India. Definitions of beauty that are socially and culturally constructed and based on skin complexion reflect western realities and uphold beauty standards that shape the beliefs and practices around fair skin color for not only Women but also Men. Through media such as movies, music, advertisements, cosmetics, marriage and more, people have grown accustomed to Colorism and normalized the prejudice against skin color. The market's increasing interest in fairness products is proof of this. Unfortunately in India, skin color discrimination has become so commonplace that people are not willing to face it, accept it, or discuss it openly. Instead, they are welcoming it wholeheartedly and becoming fixated on using bleaches, beauty products and medical procedures to lighten their skin tone. Even though we live in the twenty-first century, people still prefer lighter skin colour over darker ones and it is quite unsettling that stereotypes about dark-skinned people are still prevalent in India. One form of this type of prejudice is "Colorism" or "Shadeism," which refers to discrimination against someone based on their skin color or complexion. Colorism has a long history that is hard to eradicate, not just in India but throughout the entire world.

The situation has gotten worse in the modern world because colorism is now endangering society by disguising itself as a number of factors. By examining the elements that act as a catalyst for the spread of Colorism in India, this research aims to understand how colorism impacts Indians' mentalities and how it impacts both individuals and society as a whole.

Keywords- Colorism, Discrimination, Prejudices, Shadeism, Skin Color or Skin Complexion

Introduction

Color is the aspect of any object that can be characterized by hue, lightness, and saturation. It is what the human eye perceives when light bounces off of an object. When we state that colors are uniquely linked to different facets of culture then according to cultural studies, the body is a site of meaning. That means when it comes to color, our body is the first thing that comes in our mind because primarily the color of our eyes, hair, nails etc., they somehow play a very major role in defining our features, visuals and also the paradigms of beauty that comes with it. We also associate colors with our emotions like ‘Blue’ for depression and pain, ‘Green’ for calm and natural, ‘Red’ with anger and also ‘Pink’ for love and affection. Since we see the diversity in skin tones, becomes the reason for why skin has been perceived as having a far greater influence on the basis of color than other parts of our body.

So when we ask that Does skin color matters? the answer should be ‘yes’ because it does matter for a variety of reasons. According to medical terminology, your skin speaks volumes about your health and body condition. However, what about the significance of skin color based on biased assumptions. Will the response remain a "yes"?

It gets little complicated and complex too, when we start talking about skin tone in India because it seems that Indian psychology hasn't embraced the diversity of skin tones in a positive way; rather, it is more

discriminatory or prejudiced, with people favoring lighter skin tones over darker ones, because white skin has been regarded as the pinnacle of ideal beauty for generations.

As an enormous variety of skin tones, from the lightest pale to the deepest brown skin color, can be found in India, this is the outcome of belonging to various geographical regions, weather patterns, environmental factors, genetics, production of melanin, exposure to the sun, any disorder and so on. But Indian society holds that a person's skin tone determines their value; all virtues are linked to 'fair' skin, while anything dark is seen negatively. This obsession with fair skin is well-known and deeply ingrained in the mindset of Indian society and color prejudice is pervasive and openly practiced throughout the nation.

'Colorism' or 'Shadeism' are terms used to describe this practice of discrimination or prejudice based on skin tones or preferred biases over skin complexion. Colorism has been defined differently by numerous scholars. However, this term is associated to Alice Walker, who coined this term 'Colorism' in her 1983 book *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She coined this phrase to refer to the Whites in a Black community, describing the privileges and preferences that people receive simply because of their skin tone, with lighter people being granted more privileges than darker people. As we have all witnessed, how Black people were claimed as slaves by White people in American-African history. Colorism is the practice of discriminating against some members of the same race more than others based solely on the color of their skin. Although it is said to be a gendered phenomenon that disproportionately affects Indian women, this is not totally accurate as Indian men also experience discrimination, albeit to a lesser extent. Although Colorism can occasionally be easily recognized, it typically manifests in more subtle ways, like in day-to-day behaviors. Calling someone beautiful and fair-skinned is a common occurrence in India. While those comments do not necessarily denigrate individuals with darker skin, they do illustrate how society prefers those with lighter skin. This demonstrates how discrimination is becoming so commonplace that it is actually becoming more normalized.

Insights on Colorism in India

In her book *The Black Rose: My Story of Colorism Silently Lived by Millions*, Shweta Aggarwal quotes the statement, "Colorism is a Cousin of Racism"(6) which implies that racism includes colorism. The concept of racial supremacy or the subjugation of one group by another is the focus of racism, whereas Colorism or Shadeism tackles discrimination both within and between groups. Accordingly, racism is defined as prejudiced attitudes and/or discriminatory acts against people based on their actual or perceived racial status, whereas colorism is defined as hateful attitudes and/or discriminatory acts against people based on the color (shade or tone) of their skin.

In the literature of Ancient India, Colorism has a distinct history. Numerous scholars have postulated that the caste system's occupational hierarchy, as described in the Varna System, is where colorism originated. In Sanskrit, Varna literally means color or shape. However, the term was originally used to refer to the four major caste divisions of Indian society: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. According to this theory, Brahmins were said to be born from the head of Brahma and were trained to become vedic priests, Kshatriyas were born from the arms of Brahma and were trained to be rulers or warriors, Vaishyas were born from the thighs and were trained to be farmers or merchants, and Shudras were born from the feet and were trained to be servants or laborers. This Socioeconomic status is the result of this caste based labor differentiation, and the worst labor outcomes are also linked to the difference in skin tone.

Additionally, Light-skinned invaders such as the Portuguese, Mughals, and Britishers have invaded India numerous times in the past (Mishra 730). The system of color-based oppression was established by the British, who ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1757 to 1947. Because they were fair-skinned, British people believed that they were a superior race that was born to rule over those who were inferior to them or had darker skin tones. As a result, they gave light-skinned people preference and first privilege when it came to employment, and they forbade dark-skinned people from entering institutions or restaurants that they owned. Following its colonization by the British, British public officials portrayed 'Black colored' Indians as inferior because they were perceived as British "allies," lighter-skinned Indians were more likely to be employed for government positions, while darker-skinned Indians were less likely to be hired and assigned to odder and more tiresome jobs (Mishra 731).

Nowadays Colorism operates by disguising itself behind a number of factors, which also contribute to its normalization in Indian culture. Every one of these elements including social, cultural and psychological contributes significantly to the promotion of colorism in India and has a significant impact on the stereotypical mindset of Indians. Some of these major factors are mentioned below.

Colorism through Mediascape

The standards of beauty (slender figure, sensual clothing, fair skin tone, makeup, etc.) are colonizing people's brains and forcing them to conform by limiting their presentation of sensual content. Unfortunately, because of the influence of pop culture, western culture, and their elders, Indians have been exposed to these prejudices since they were young. They freely make fun of people with darker skin tones, but when the target of the joke is made fun of in return, they get defensive. In light of all of this, Mediascape has been crucial in influencing people's attitudes, both positive and negative, worldwide. These days, it's common on social media sites to make fun of and criticize people based solely on their appearance including their skin color and other aspects as well.

In order to fit themselves into the molds of ideal beauty features, people are using camera filters to make their skin tone appear lighter, making them appear more attractive, in order to create their social media persona. Social media perpetuates colorism today through a variety of strategies, ranging from ridicule to the reinforcement of limited beauty standards, in addition to offering a platform for the sale of skin-lightening products. All things considered, social media sites play a big role in influencing how society views beauty and sustaining colorist beliefs. It takes a coordinated effort from platform developers and users to combat colorism on social media by encouraging inclusivity and opposing discriminatory behaviors.

Colorism through Product Commercialization

Indians spend billions of money on fairness creams and other fairness products every year. Advertisements for such hyped skin-lightening products are fairly common in India. Although women were the primary target of these ads at first but now men are also targeted (Bhattacharya 121). These advertisements try to use well-known celebrities in an effort to persuade a sizable segment of the public to buy their products. Because these days, people of all ages are very interested in these products; from teenagers to adults and older people, everyone wants to look their best, giving top priority to their skincare routine.

Skin-lightening products are now widely available in the Indian cosmetics market as a large range of bleaching creams and lotions, from the least expensive to the most costly, are easily accessible as a result of people's addiction to upholding socially constructed standards of beauty. This widespread use of skin-lightening products for adults and other age groups, such as newborns, teenagers, and also elderly people not only in India but around the whole world reveals a lot about the attitudes of society because these products

and their marketing have been influencing the population's perception of beauty by presenting lighter skin tones as the most essential characteristic of being attractive, cool, handsome, beautiful and therefore always desirable and in becoming successful.

Bollywood and its obsession with fair skin

Bengali, Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Assamese, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Marathi are among the diverse film industries that comprise Indian cinema, and each is committed to producing films in a specific language. All of them have been disparaging dark-skinned people, but Bollywood, the Hindi film industry in India, which is thought to be the most well-known of them, has long been condoning this form of discrimination, albeit covertly, in order to entertain audiences. Using famous Bollywood actors in their advertising campaigns, the cosmetics industry has long targeted consumers, convincing the majority to purchase skin-lightening products that promise to give them fair, light skin. Ironically, a number of celebrities who have personally experienced colorism have appeared in advertisements for products that claim to lighten or even whiten dark skin.

Having dark skin has been portrayed in the films as a sin or as something that viewers can make fun of. Many Indians only watch Bollywood films for amusement, but they also help to create a culture that is less accepting of men and women who don't fit the preconceived notions of beauty. People who don't fit in are ridiculed and under pressure to live up to strict standards of beauty. These negative elements of Bollywood, are the causes of the growing prevalence of discrimination among Indian viewers.

Let us look at how Bollywood music influences people's preference for lighter skin tones over darker ones. The term "Gori" is frequently used in some Bollywood songs to refer to women, suggesting that girls with light or fair skin tones are attractive. A beautiful woman is collectively represented by the term "gori," which means "a white person".

Some examples of such discriminatory Bollywood songs are:-

1. "Gori Chalo Na Hans Ki Chal"- from Movie *Beti Bete*(1964), Lyricist- Hasrat Jaipuri, Singer- Asha Bhosle and Mohammad Rafi, Starring- Mehmood, Sobha Khote, Music Directed by- Shankar-Jaikishan
2. "Ham Kale Hai To Kya Hua Dilwale hai"- from Movie *Gumnaam*(1965), Lyricist- Shailendra, Singers – Mohammad Rafi and Mehmood, Starring- Helen and Mehmood, Music Directed by- Shankar-Jaikishan
3. "Meri Kali Kaluti ke Nakhre Bade"- from Movie *Apne Rang Hazaar*(1975), Lyricist-Anjaan, Singers- Kishore Kumar, Starring- Sanjeev Kumar, Bindu and Leena Chandavarkar, Music directed by Laxmikant Pyarelal.

These are only few of the songs mentioned here taken as an example which demonstrate how Bollywood perpetuates social injustices and elevates fair skin as the ideal of beauty. However, there is more than just Bollywood music when it comes to the prejudice between people with light and dark skin.

Colorism through Matrimonials

The general public regularly brings up the point that although it is simple for fair girls to get married and accept marriage proposals, it is very difficult for brown girls to get any kind of proposal at all. However, since everyone has encountered this issue at some point in their lives—whether personally or through friends or family who are facing a comparable issue, we can contend that it is real because that is how our society functions. Ironically though, no one does anything to alter it, everyone just complains about it.

One of the few instances where we can clearly observe the preference for lighter complexions over those with darker skin is in matrimonial advertisements. In the past, this kind of discrimination was limited to women, but it now affects men as well.

Societal Colorism

Kamala Das is the most popular confessional poet of India, she shared her experience with discrimination in her autobiographical book *My Story* or *Ente katha*. The first chapter of the autobiography entitled as –“Rule Britannia”, talks about the racial discrimination faced by Kamala Das as being a brown student in a European school in Calcutta. It was the time of British rule in India, Kamala and her brother were humiliated and bullied as “Blackie, your blood is red”(10) for being brown in color.

Indians have been using disparaging remarks, slurs, and names based on skin color to mark people's appearance, regardless of whether they have light or dark skin. This has become commonplace in many ways. For instance, people are given offensive nicknames like Kaali, Kallu, Kariya, and Kaala Kaluta, which refer to people with black skin because of their dark complexion, which is somehow quite common in India. In Telugu, the phrase maala kaaki implies “dark scavenger” or “Dalit crow”. Another one is Tamil word “Karuvachi” means Blacky or “Karuvaya” meaning Black Mouth. “Kaali Kaluti Baingan Looti” is a phrase that many Indians humorously use which means a dark-skinned girl who has stolen her color from Brinjal. The myths and superstitions held by people against the color Black are worth noting. For example, “Don't drink too much tea or your color will get darker,” “Kaali zubaan,” which is used to describe someone who constantly predicts bad things will happen, “Use a fairness cream to make dark skin lighter,” “try some natural remedies to lighten the skin tone,” “drink saffron milk while pregnancy for a baby with fair skin,” “avoid prolonged sun exposure as it can cause darkening of the skin” although the sun can cause damage to the skin, the primary concern will always be the darkening of the skin. Even those with fair skin are not left unattended by Indians; for example, the term “Gora Chitta” or “Gori Chitti” is used to identify someone with fair skin (Dhillon 7).

It is crucial to consider how society has determined what constitutes beauty and ugliness based on skin color. Information opposing colorism is scarce because those involved are regrettably unwilling to confront, accept, and engage in candid discussions about the issue of colorism or shadeism. These attitudes have made colorism more acceptable rather than examining ways to eradicate it. Most people are unaware of colorism, let alone that it is a significant issue.

Dark Is Beautiful

‘Dark is beautiful’ is a campaign started in 2009 in India by ‘Women Of Worth’ to fight colorism. It conducts workshops and events to spread awareness among the people with the message - “a person's self-worth does not depend on the colour of their skin”.

They celebrate the diversity of all skin types through the slogan ‘Stay Unfair, Stay Beautiful.’ In 2013 Nandita Das an Indian actress and film maker became the face of this campaign ‘Dark Is Beautiful.’ On the Tenth Anniversary of this campaign an extended version of Dark is Beautiful was launched and hosted by UNESCO on 14 October 2019, this reinvented campaign got the name ‘India's Got Color.’ The theme of this campaign from 2019 onwards is “Colourism Ends With Me.”

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand Colorism and investigate how in India it has influenced people's perceptions by fostering social stigmas and stereotypical thinking by constructing an unattainable ideal of beauty, hiding behind various factors. Since people have long held the view that fair skin is superior, there is

a disparity in how people perceive skin color, and emphasizing skin tone may unintentionally perpetuate racist or colorist beliefs. It may be necessary to discuss skin color depending on the circumstances, but it should be done accurately and sensitively. Use descriptive terms like "light skin," "medium skin," or "dark skin" without connoting anything negative if it is must to discuss skin tone.

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