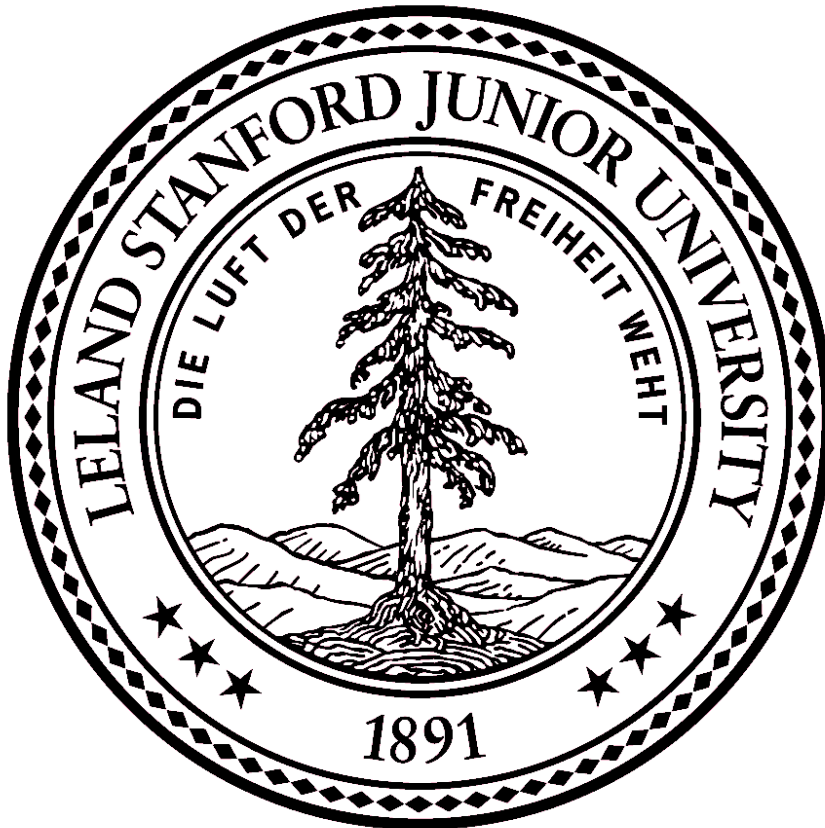


*The Empire Strikes Back*  
Postcolonialism and Colorism in Indian Women



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Honors Thesis  
Program in Feminist Studies  
Stanford University  
May 2014

*Stanford University*  
*Program in Feminist Studies*

**Honors Program**

**The Empire Strikes Back:  
Postcolonialism and Colorism in Indian Women**

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**Dedicated to my parents, who raised me with the truth – it's what's inside that matters.**

**Abstract:**

In this thesis I aim to consider a contemporary social phenomenon that I find particularly disturbing – the bias towards fair skin in India, especially concentrated among Indian women. This colorism is reflected in matrimonial advertisements, commercial advertising and media, especially the 500 million dollar skin lightening product industry, and Bollywood, the cinematic opium of the masses. I hypothesize that this cultural mindset arises from the history of the subcontinent, namely the numerous invasions and imperial conquests that have occurred, where an imbalance of power has been created along the lines of light skin and dark skin. This power dynamic leads to a difference in socioeconomic status that over time became correlated with India's caste system, and remains deeply entrenched in Indian society, even after the legalized prohibition of caste-based discrimination. For this paper, I have examined matrimonial advertisements, commercial advertisements for fairness creams, and the role of color in determining beauty standards reflected in Hindi cinema. I have also considered theory from Deborah Rhode and Anne McClintock, as well as inferences drawn from my primary research.

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## Introduction

Colorism is discrimination based on the socially constructed meanings or associations of an individual's skin color. The term was coined in the 1980s by Alice Walker<sup>1</sup>, who felt that the word racism did not capture the full extent of discrimination on the basis of skin color. Indeed, in multiple parts of the world where colorism is prevalent among populations - such as parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, East Asia, India, Latin America, and the United States - the issue moves beyond racism. Racism is the association of social status, privileges, and treatment based on the social construct of race, but colorism is the same association of identity solely on the basis of skin color - even within a single 'race'. Thus, under colorism, differential treatment of an individual is the result of the social value associated with that shade or tone of skin, not from any perceived racial categorization.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary India, colorism manifests itself as a decidedly favorable bias towards lighter skin. This will be referred to henceforth in the paper as fair skin bias.

The trope of 'fair = beautiful' recurs often in literature and legend. In classical Greek mythology of the ancient era, Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena vie for the title of 'The Fairest' in the Judgment of Paris that later sets off the Trojan War. In 1136, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britannaie*, laid the foundation of Arthurian legend, becoming the world's first - but certainly not last - introduction to the Fair Maid of Astalot, the Three Fair Queens, and the countless other fair maidens of Camelot. Who can forget the pivotal refrain of the 1812 Brothers Grimm tale, Snow White - "Who is the Fairest in the land?" Or what is often called the most

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Alice. *"In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose"*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Trina. "Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color." *Duke Law Journal* 49.6 (2000): 1487-557. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 May 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/1373052?ref=search-gateway:9ecb3848f752b5944927b86516c2cd71>>.

perfect musical of the 20th century, *My Fair Lady*?<sup>3</sup> Here, the word fair connotes gentleness and class distinction. Additionally, the title of the Lerner and Loewe musical may have also been influenced by the last line in every stanza of the most popular and well-known nursery rhymes in the English-speaking world. “London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.”

Etymology reveals much about the word fair as an adjective. It derives from Middle English *fager*, and Old English *fæger*; akin to Old High German, *fagar*, which means beautiful. Old Saxon *fagar* and Old Norse, *fagr* are true cognates<sup>4</sup>. Incredibly tellingly, the third definition in an online dictionary is “lightness of the hair or complexion, or light in color”<sup>5</sup>. The fourth definition is “beautiful or lovely to look at”. Lastly and most importantly, the connotation of “light-complexioned” overtook the meaning of the word fair, reflecting tastes in beauty, around the 1550s<sup>6</sup>.

These definition constructs are all from the Western world. In India, a superficial linguistic analysis presents us with some similarly problematic connotations. The Hindi word *gora*, *gori*, and *gore*<sup>7</sup> refers to a light-skinned person or group of people - it is often used to broadly denote people who originate in “the West”, despite the fact that “the West” is not a monolith of white-skinned people. It is additionally used to describe light-skinned Indians, with the crucial secondary connotation of beauty and a charming nature. The word for “white” has literally become a way to compliment someone on his or her perceived physical beauty. Bollywood songs – the dominant form of lyric-based music in the subcontinent – are a treasure trove of citations, throughout multiple eras of Hindi cinema, where the word *gori/gore/gora* is

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<sup>3</sup> Steyn, Mark. *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then and Now*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Harper, Douglas. "Online Etymology Dictionary." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 May 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "fair." *Dictionary-reference.com*. Dictionary.com, 2014.

Web. 8 May 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See Footnote #4

<sup>7</sup> Masculine, feminine, and plural/respect form.



used in this connotation. The 1950 film *Samadhi* features a song, “Gore Gore O Banke Chore”; 54 years later, the 2004 romantic comedy, *Hum Tum*<sup>8</sup>, features a song called “Yeh Gore Gore Se Chore” – almost the same title, which translates to “This handsome lad”<sup>9</sup>. Another song from 2004 begins with “Gori Gori Gori Gori, Gori Gori”. The translation is a vocative, “Oh, beautiful one.”<sup>10</sup> Lastly, a 2013 film was titled “Gore Tere Pyaar Mein”. This was translated in two broad ways: “Beauty In Your Love”<sup>11</sup>, and “Girl...In Your Love”<sup>12</sup>. Beauty has literally been simultaneously equated to both whiteness, and femininity. This connection between language and thought displays the power of perception and historical conditions in shaping how we consider the world today.

In the case of India, the idea of fairness and colorism has always had strong associations to casteism and socioeconomic status, and it is thus imperative to consider the relevant historical foundations - the post-colonial legacies of fair skin bias, the mindsets and cultures prevalent in India surrounding skin color and tone, and furthermore the way the fair skin bias disproportionately affects women. In so many parts of India, across geographic, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic lines, women face greater challenges and are the subject of greater discrimination due to entrenched societal misconceptions. Women who are not “fair-skinned”, however, not only deal with the burden of gender but also that of color. Although the preferential bias towards fair skin is a phenomenon that affects both genders, female Indians experience discrimination on the basis of skin color to a far more severe degree than their male counterparts. This paper will examine not only the possible reasons for this fair skin bias, but also the situation

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<sup>8</sup>“Hum Tum.” *IMDb*. IMDb.com, 28 May 2004. Web. 28 May 2014

<sup>9</sup>“The Translated Lyrics Of Hum Tum.” *THE TRANSLATED LYRICS OF HUM TUM*. BollyWHAT, n.d. Web. 28 May 2014.

<sup>10</sup> “The Translated Lyrics Of Main Hoon Na.” *THE TRANSLATED LYRICS OF MAIN HOON NA*. BollyWHAT, n.d. Web. 28 May 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Chute, David. “Film Review: ‘Gori Tere Pyaar Mein’” *Variety*. Variety, Nov.-Dec. 2013. Web. 28 May 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Tsering, Lisa. “Gori Tere Pyaar Mein (Girl ... In Your Love): Film Review.” *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., Nov.-Dec. 2013. Web. 28 May 2014.

of women in this puzzle, using the historical framework of colonialism as the first segment, to be explored in *Chapter One: “Invasions, Insurgencies and Imperialism” Historical Framework*.

The bias can be observed through two cultural areas of great importance to the people of contemporary India: 1) Marriage: Matrimonial advertisements and arranged marriage culture, and 2) Media: Bollywood, Indian Television, and Other Media.

Marriage, truly a pillar of Indian culture, is an excellent way to observe this bias. Traditionally, family plays a significant role in marriage, and the paradigm of parents and family elders selecting a suitable match is still widespread in India today. From that perspective, arranging marriages for the next generation is the best way to ensure that future progeny have characteristics desirable by the family – including, almost always, fair skin. This is clearly reflected in the matrimonial advertisement terminology, which is practically a language of its own. The acronym SM stands for “suitable match”, and the phrase “alliance invited” is used to indicate that a good connection between the families is as important as the one between the prospective bride and groom.<sup>13</sup> The pages are chock-full of poetic ways to describe idealized skin tone - “peaches and cream”, “wheatish” and “very fair”. Open any Indian newspaper and flip to the matrimonial sections, and you will find countless mentions of skin color. Equally informative is the lack of descriptions of darker skin color – describing a bride as “tan” or “dusky”, despite these terms in themselves being positively connotative, would be unthinkable. On the other hand, similar advertisements for men, describe height, education, salary, and age with a much higher frequency and proportionality than skin tone. Since marriage is such a visible and significant aspect of Indian society, the fair skin bias is very well reflected in it.

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<sup>13</sup> Preeti. "Deciphering Matrimonial Ads - A Glossary." *The Big Fat Indian Wedding*. N.p., 8 May 2012. Web. 28 May 2014.

The Indian media – whether commercial advertising, cinema, television, or other forms of print media, is another mirror through which this bias is reflected, promulgated, and propagated. Many advertisement shorts feature dark-skinned heroines unable to find husbands, but once they use fairness products and successfully lighten their skin, they are flooded with proposals. Beyond the theme of marriage, the media is also notorious for illustrating women with poor job prospects using fairness creams to lighten their skin and instantly becoming successful. In *Chapter Two: “All’s Fair in Marriage and Media” Contemporary India*, the focus is matrimonial advertisements in actual newspapers and online dating and marriage websites, as well as the depiction of marriage of fair-skinned women, and colorism in Indian society in today’s media.

Lastly, although the original structures that created class differences in Indian society have mostly disappeared, the aftermath of imperialistic class hierarchies and caste divisions linked to skin color linger on as a relic of historical times. Modern-day perceptions regarding shades of skin color in India, as in other countries, are rooted in these historical socioeconomic divides that grow wider over time. The historical pattern of lighter-skinned peoples subjugating the subcontinent through invasions, settlements, and colonialism played a significant role in creating a preference for the lighter skin color of the victor. This then became the proxy for the social and economic superiority that remains associated with fair skin even today.

This is only exacerbated and solidified by India’s history of casteism. Etymology once again offers insight into the origins of societal understanding of this concept. Varna was the term for the 4 broad divisions of society under the ancient caste system: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.<sup>14</sup> The word Varna comes from Sanskrit and is derived from the root वृ, which means “to cover, to envelop”. However, the connotation of Varna in the Rigveda<sup>15</sup> has a

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<sup>14</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*. Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2006. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Rigveda: A sacred collection of Sanskrit hymns, and one of the Vedas, the canonical sacred texts of Hinduism.

literal meaning, “outward appearance, exterior, form, figure, shape, color” and a figurative one, “color, race, kind, sort, character, quality, property”. Lastly and most importantly, it can also refer to “class of men, tribe, order, caste”. This shows a connection between caste and color, entrenched in the collective history of the country and the mindset of its people. What this resulted in was a social system as follows: Caste became associated over time to not only socioeconomic status but also skin color. Higher castes were also wealthier and lighter-skinned; in addition, due to the way the caste system function, they would also be considered better educated and more moral than the poor and darker-skinned lower-castes. After the legalized prohibition of caste-based differentiation, this societal fragmentation remained but evolved into classism based on socioeconomic status. A combination of slow-changing social mindset, along with the traditional norms of marrying within caste, tribe, and socioeconomic strata has caused caste to remain correlated with skin color.

Thus, the final segment of this paper, *Chapter Three: “No fair: Colorism and the Beauty Bias” Theoretical Framework*, will investigate the beauty bias, examining how the marriage market and the media and advertising industry display the sharp disparity in gender norms when it comes to colorism and the fair skin bias, as well as how this links to socioeconomic levels in an apparently post-colonial and post-caste contemporary Indian society.

## Chapter One: “Invasions, Insurgencies and Imperialism” Historical Framework

Understanding this complex contemporary issue requires a close look at India’s sociopolitical history. Historically, lighter-skinned races - the founders and rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal emperors and their dynasty, and lastly, the Europeans, ruled over the Indian subcontinent. The period of European colonialism, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, culminated in the British Raj, the most codified form of foreign rule the subcontinent faced. Subsequently, around the 19th century, an alternative hypothesis about the Aryan invasion and subsequent subjugation of the Dravidian communities of early India emerged from multiple European scholars and Christian missionaries, perhaps most famously, Max Mueller. Some theorists<sup>16</sup> today allege that this alternative hypothesis was purportedly to explain the similarities in Sanskrit and Latin-based language derivatives, and more perniciously, to create a foundational legend of Caucasian superiority.

While Max Mueller’s work<sup>17</sup> on the Rig Veda and early India stratified Aryans into a social group and – albeit unintentionally - codified it as a race, recent historians like Romila Thapar have debunked the theory<sup>18</sup> that the Aryans were a separate race that intermingled with Dravidians, eschewing that terminology of separate races in favor of Aryan-speaking people and Dravidian-speaking peoples<sup>19</sup>. Certainly, it is linguistically clear that Aryan languages and Dravidian languages were very different. According to Mueller and his contemporaries, who did work on the Rig Veda and the other Vedic scriptures, Dravidian-speaking people were estimated

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<sup>16</sup> Knapp, Stephen. "The Aryan Invasion Theory: The Final Nail in Its Coffin." *The Aryan Invasion Theory: The Final Nail in Its Coffin*. Stephen Knapp, n.d. Web. 29 May 2014

<sup>17</sup> Figueira, Dorothy Matilda. *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity*. Albany: State U of New York, 2002. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Thapar, Romila, and Percival Spear. *A History of India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.

<sup>19</sup> This is the concept that both Aryan and Dravidian refer to sets of language families and the different communities. Thapar, Romila, and Percival Spear. *A History of India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.

to have entered India in 4000 BCE. Aryan-speaking people entered perhaps around 1500 BCE.<sup>20</sup>

Romila Thapar states that the earliest traces of human activity in India go back to 400,000 and 200,000 BC, and that by 1500 BC, Indo-Aryans from Iran had migrated into the north-western region of the subcontinent.<sup>21</sup> This version of India's narrative - of a steady migration of a people into another existing population, not a sudden invasion - is substantiated by linguistic, genetic, anthropological and archeological sources.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, according to Thapar<sup>23</sup>, the ethnographic makeup of the subcontinent was that of many communities - distinct in nature and appearance, but not drastically different in skin tone. Despite this, the myth of Aryan color dominance has captured the nation's consciousness. Although it is far more likely that Aryan language-speaking people simply diffused into the existing population by a process of slow miscegenation<sup>24</sup> - what does it say about a nation that buys into a myth of a white superior? Evidently, both reality and perception show that Indian history evinces a bias towards the lighter-skinned.

Historians are uncertain about whether this introduction of Aryan-speaking people was the initial factor in creating the fair skin bias. Thapar notes when examining the early history of subcontinent, that the concept of a caste system based on color was not even present in early Vedic scripts, rather, that it became a concept only later. It is unclear whether the bias entered social consciousness closer to the initial migration in 3000 BCE or the Mughal invasion in the 1500 CE.

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<sup>20</sup> Knapp, Stephen. "The Aryan Invasion Theory: The Final Nail in Its Coffin." *The Aryan Invasion Theory: The Final Nail in Its Coffin*. Stephen Knapp, n.d. Web. 29 May 2014

<sup>21</sup> Thapar, Romila, and Percival Spear. *A History of India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.

<sup>22</sup> Bryant, Edwin F. *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.

Bryant, Edwin F., and Laurie L. Patton. *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Thapar, Romila, and Percival Spear. *A History of India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Thapar states that it is linguistic, not racial. *ibid*

The Mughal Empire, according to most conventions, began in 1526 after Babur's defeat of the last ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, Ibrahim Lodi, in the first Battle of Panipat<sup>25</sup>. It remained a dominant sovereign empire of the subcontinent, stretching control over smaller kingdoms and princely states, until the British officially took control of India in 1857. At its height, the Mughal Empire established rule through its superior military capabilities, strategies, and firepower<sup>26</sup>, which helped spread Mughal culture - art, religion, language, and music - and was established as an aspirational alternative to existing local culture. Lastly, Mughal art in particular offers an interesting lens to examine the retroactively favorable bias. Artworks of the period depict fair-skinned, Caucasoid peoples - all noblemen or women of the court.<sup>27</sup> The Mughal Empire is yet another example of how the bias forms a self-perpetuating cycle of perceived superiority, validated by historical actions and social perceptions. Towards the end of the Mughal period, the first wave of European settlers entered the continent, as early as the 1500s. It was not until the Revolt of 1857 that the British Raj officially began.

Social stratification was a defining quality of life during the British colonial period. Indians were prevented from holding the highest posts in government and were generally treated like second-class citizens in their own country.<sup>28</sup> The British also exacerbated the caste system – which predated them – and emphasized differences, to keep rebellion and mutiny down among Indian colonial subjects. Meanwhile, due to the long period of the Raj and the degree of settler colonialism, miscegenation occurred and a new class of Anglo-Indians appeared. These Anglo-Indians were also 'superior' to Indian colonials, were in general lighter-skinned, and had physical appearances that harkened to both India and England. In that way, the Anglo-Indians,

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<sup>25</sup> Thapar, Romila, and Percival Spear. *A History of India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.

<sup>26</sup> Stein, Burton. *A History of India*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Print.

<sup>27</sup> Welch, Stuart C. *The Emperors' Album: Images of Mughal India*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987. Print.

<sup>28</sup> Thapar, Romila, and Percival Spear. *A History of India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.

superior on the basis of their physical appearance, built upon an existing beauty bias and provided positive feedback for the prior mindset that fair skin is linked to superior class and social standing. In a way, they were the forerunners of the phenomenon we see in India today with the success of mixed-heritage and ethnically ambiguous-looking actresses. This will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

During this period, other things became part of the narrative of Indian history – on a larger scale in Europe, the alternative Aryan theory was forming – and within the subcontinent, white was becoming factually better than Indian, and fair was becoming tangibly better than dark. The British colonial systems of governance codified the caste system and built upon the foundations of the fair-skinned Mughals to reinforce the notion that fair skin was an ideal to be prized and aspired to.

Given the vast scope of Indian history – from the miscegenation of the Aryans, to the first noted foreign invasion of Alexander, to the Mughal Empire and finally European settlements and the British Raj – pinpointing the exact start of development of a fair skin bias is almost impossible. To a certain extent, it is also the wrong approach - identifying the exact beginning of a mindset in this sort of historical scenario is irrelevant. Although it would be fascinating to ascertain, the *perception* of the bias as time goes on is the more significant question. More importantly, when did the caste system become tied to color? And why does this perception persist even when the concept of color is missing from original Vedic scripture?

After Independence and the formation of a unified Indian nation (and a separate dominion of East Pakistan and West Pakistan), the caste system was abolished and could no longer legally affect occupation, education, or accessible status to society. However, centuries of discriminatory practices do not disappear overnight. Caste still plays a huge role in social



interactions, and is a highly important factor for many families – though not all – when it comes to matters of marriage and relationships. Furthermore, due to historical disadvantages and advantages to different castes, present-day society and neighborhood distributions remain delineated on the basis of caste. Caste has thus remained a vestige and influences education levels, occupation, and socioeconomic status in a de facto, rather than de jure fashion. Inequality deepens over generations – and to return to colorism, the fact that color became positively correlated with caste over the centuries resulted in a highly stratified color society as well. After independence, these divisions have become much more fluid, which is a step in the right direction. However, perpetuation and reinforcement of these ideas through the media and through societal mindset, visible in matrimonial advertisements, but also many other outlets, continues to create a social issue surrounding colorism and inequity in India today. Thus, the color-based and race-based social stratification of India during this colonial period had far-ranging effects on the mindset and beauty standards of the Indian people even for several decades after Independence.

## Chapter Two: “All’s Fair in Marriage and Media” Contemporary India

Although the original structures that created this class difference have mostly disappeared, the aftermath of imperialistic class hierarchies and caste divisions based on skin color linger on as a relic of historical times. The bias can be observed through two cultural areas of great importance to the people of contemporary India: 1) Marriage: Matrimonial advertisements and arranged marriage culture, and 2) Media: Bollywood, Indian Television, and Other Media.

Given that matrimonial alliances and the hoopla surrounding them are a reflection of both beauty standards and gender norms of a society, marriage in India thus becomes an interesting lens through which to view the issue of colorism in India. Examining these trends has been made easier by the advent of matrimonial advertisements, which are exactly what you think they are – advertisements, either “Bride Wanted” or “Groom Wanted”, posted in the classified section, right after landlords looking for tenants and people selling cars. These two-by-three boxes first started appearing in Indian newspapers in the early 1970s<sup>29</sup> and are now a traditional fixture of the Sunday papers. While some read them for amusement, they are still a serious option for prospective grooms, brides, and most importantly, their families. They are also, from a social science perspective, a gold mine of documented, true preferences of a society. One theory is that the limited space – there are literally thousands of ‘personal advertisements’ placed in a paper on any given Sunday – forces families to choose the most important qualities for them – wealth? Education level? Or caste?<sup>30</sup> To illustrate, this is a “Brides Wanted” advertisement from the Hindustan Times’s Independence Day special – Thursday August 15, 2013.

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<sup>29</sup> Fuller, Thomas. "India's Shifting Cultural Scene, as Seen in Matrimonial Ads." *The New York Times*. N.p., 12 Nov. 1993. Web. 15 May 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Poonam, Snigdha. "Lessons From the Sunday Papers." *India Ink - Lessons From the Sunday Papers Comments*. The New York Times, 27 Apr. 2013. Web. 15 May 2014.

*“Status Affluent S. Delhi PB Khatri Doctors Family, Seeking V. Beautiful, Tall, Fair, Prof. Qulfd / Medico Girl for Dr. Boy, 5’11’’/82 born, H’some only Son, Doing Int’l Med. Resi in US, Fmly running 2 Medical Centers.”<sup>31</sup> (sic)*

As displayed above, the steep price of verbosity – in 2013, for the leading Indian newspapers, around 3,200 rupees for 25 words – creates an incentive to get to the point quickly. Thus, the salient characteristics that remain in this desperate-sounding self-characterization are the ones that are indispensable – Status. Affluent. Khatri<sup>32</sup>. Doctors Family. This advertisement not only highlights the still-impressive pull of the US-educated groom, but also the importance still paid to caste and color.

Examining two different New York Times articles from 1993 and 2013 offers us an interesting perspective for the twenty-year period. Although there are some differences in trends – MNCs, or Multinational Corporations were not a popular concept in India in 1993, only two years after liberalization. Two decades later, however, is a completely different story, and grooms working in these MNCs have a touch of the NRI<sup>33</sup> and foreign-educated allure about them. The demand for fair skin, on the other hand, has not changed at all – if anything, it has increased, because the demand for fair grooms is slowly increasing to match the demand for fair brides.<sup>34</sup> The gender imbalance persists, however; 58% of my sample group said they would either forbid their hypothetical sons or brothers from marrying a girl darker than him, or would be unhappy with his decision.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See appendix for screenshot from online Hindustan Times Matrimonials, August 15<sup>th</sup> 2013 – Figure 1.

<sup>32</sup> Khatri - a caste from north India, mostly Punjab. Khatri is the Punjabi word for Kshatriya, which is the ‘warrior caste’ in the Brahmanic varna system of caste ranking.

<sup>33</sup> Non-Resident Indian. An Indian-origin individual who is currently abroad, or has recently returned.

<sup>34</sup> Poonam, Snigdha. "Lessons From the Sunday Papers." *India Ink - Lessons From the Sunday Papers Comments*. The New York Times, 27 Apr. 2013. Web. 15 May 2014.

<sup>35</sup> From primary research. 14% were indifferent, 14% were tolerating and positive, and 14% did not respond to the question.

The links between the fair skin bias and matrimonial prospects are also a key aspect of commercial advertisements and other forms of media, especially cinema. In a country that makes over a thousand films a year<sup>36</sup> in at least seven different film industries, where television and film actors alike feature in photos on household walls next to gods and goddess, and where products as mundane as soap, laundry detergent, and salt crackers can be advertised and made glamorous by A-list actors, it is not unusual to have multiple skin-lightening creams marketed by cinema stars whom people already idolize. Advertisements tend to mimic Bollywood movies themselves: dramatic, glamorous, and laden with subliminal messaging.

In one advertisement by beauty product brand Fair and Lovely - one of the most popular brands in the industry since its launch in 1978, the scene unfolds in one family's noticeably modest living room<sup>37</sup>. A reference is made to their struggling finances, and the father sighs sadly, "If only we had had a son." The daughter, who is the only child supporting her ageing parents, is distraught to overhear this statement, and runs to her room, where her mother comforts her by bringing out a solution to all of her problems: a tube of fairness cream.

The next few steps of the story are fairly straightforward. With her new fair skin, the daughter is able to acquire a higher-paying job and thus support her family. The scene ends with our newly-lightened protagonist taking her parents out for a nice dinner. The father smiles and says "Beta," affectionately. Although these days many use the word beta colloquially for both genders, its literal translation is "son". Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this particular advertisement is the complex role of gender and the subversion and simultaneous affirmation of gender norms. Here, the fairness cream is helping her find a job, rather than a husband. A husband would have fulfilled the expectation of financially supporting his family, either by saving her from being "a

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<sup>36</sup> "Indian Feature Films Certified During The Year 2012." *Film Federation Of India*. General Data Pvt. Ltd., 2009. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>37</sup> "Fair & Lovely - Airhostess." *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Jan. 2010. Web. 30 May 2014.

burden” to her parents’ care or by directly contributing to their maintenance. But by becoming fair after the use of the beauty product, our protagonist has become an earning woman, thus acquiring the power and position of a ‘male provider’. Fairness cream has allowed her to overcome her weakness of being a woman by compensating with being light-skinned, which allows her to transcend her gender.

Most pernicious is the insinuation that fairer skin will improve a woman’s chances of employment. Unfortunately, this depiction is reflected in reality. In *The Beauty Bias*, Deborah Rhode states that women who fail to meet conventional beauty standards, or are overweight, are often passed up for promotions and often suffer from the intangible effects of people’s perceptions.<sup>38</sup> In an ethnographic survey I conducted over the summer of 2013, 63% of respondents affirmed that they believed fair women had a better chance of being successful in the workplace (than ‘dusky’ women). The respondents, who believed this wasn’t the case, still agreed that fair women were likely to attract matrimonial alliances with far greater success than darker-skinned women. This indicates that it is far more likely that ‘dusky’ Indian women do indeed bear the brunt of the workplace beauty bias, even if the general population does not recognize this concept. This most likely arises out of the original conception of dark skin and its caste-based connotations in relation to education and class distinction; dark-skinned women are more likely to be thought of as backward, slow, and unrefined and less likely to be promoted or received well on teams.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the assumption of backwardness is derived from the perceived connection between caste and color, and the historical tie of caste to socioeconomic status, and while both men and women suffer from the assumption, men have a slightly better situation

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<sup>38</sup> Rhode, Deborah L. "Introduction: Appearance Discrimination." *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2010. 11-14. Print.

<sup>39</sup> Evidence from Ethnographic Surveys, primary research conducted in Summer 2013 by Samra Adeni.

because of a social mindset that ties their self-worth to their appearance to a much, much lesser degree than women.

A 2008 advertisement with A-list stars Bollywood stars Saif Ali Khan and Priyanka Chopra told the same story<sup>40</sup>. After a failed relationship, Chopra uses a Pond's product called Pond's White Beauty to lighten her skin. There is no mistaking the implied causation viewers are meant to infer, as the cinematic storyline is interrupted by a graphic facial timeline<sup>41</sup> of Chopra, each subsequent photo with lighter skin than the previous. In interviews conducted with the actors<sup>42</sup>, Chopra says that she grew up with Pond's and that it was a big part of her life as a young girl. She states: "Love makes the world go round...and Pond's White Beauty gives it a helping hand."<sup>43</sup> As brand ambassador of Pond's, Chopra may be obliged to make these statements, but as a public figure and a popular actress, her insinuation that lighter skin is the route to love and happiness is yet another vehicle of perpetuating the fair skin bias.

Lastly, an advertisement for Indian jeweler company Tanishq, showed a marriage ceremony with a bride decked out in exquisite pieces of traditional Indian jewelry.<sup>44</sup> The ceremony didn't seem out of the ordinary at first - it showed a somewhat dark-skinned woman in a bridal outfit – speaking to a child. The audience discovers only later, during the wedding ceremony when the groom and bride are making the *saat phere*<sup>45</sup>, that the bride is the mother of the child. The reception to this jewelry advertisement was remarkable - many Indian media outlets, both local and Western-based, applauded this advertisement for its positive and

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<sup>40</sup> Chandran, Rina. "All's Not Fair in Fairness Cream Advertising." *India Insight*. Reuters, 25 July 2008. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Very common to fairness cream advertisements. Image in Appendix, Figure 2

<sup>42</sup> "Saif & Priyanka Chopra Talk About Their Latest Ad." *YouTube*. Pond's India, Oct.-Nov. 2008. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Chandran, Rina. "All's Not Fair in Fairness Cream Advertising." *India Insight*. Reuters, 25 July 2008. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>44</sup> "Tanishq Gets Thumbs up for Breaking Norms and Celebrating Remarriage in New Ad." *India Today Online*. India Today, Oct.-Nov. 2013. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>45</sup> The seven rounds around the marriage pyre that solemnize a traditional Hindu wedding ceremony.

normalized depiction of a woman's presumed remarriage, and simultaneously, for showing a dark-skinned bride. But the fact that this advertisement received equal attention for showing a dark-skinned bride as for showing women remarrying is a telling display of the preconceptions still strong in Indian society.

In the last decade, the skin lightening product market has expanded to include men as a target segment of the population. In 2005, Emami, an established Indian conglomerate for fast-moving consumer goods, launched Fair and Handsome. In 2007, Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan agreed to be the brand ambassador for Fair and Handsome.<sup>46</sup> There was some voiced backlash against this from activist corners of India, although advertisements for women's fairness creams continued to air without the same degree of public condemnation. This foray into men's fairness products by beauty and health companies, is indicative of contemporary Indian society in the same way as female beauty product advertisements, but somehow manages to reinforce gender stereotypes. The official website<sup>47</sup> for the product line has marketing statements such as:

"Male skin is also somewhat deeper in skin color due to greater amount of melanin in skin cells... Daily shaving has some uncomfortable side effects on the skin. Constant abrasion of skin due to Razor, alkaline shaving products and lack of regular Miniaturization makes Male Skin appear Darker and Irritated...Finally, more percentage of men work outdoors than women for similar activities, and hence men are more prone to Tanning, Spot formation & Un-Even skin color." (sic)

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<sup>46</sup> Dhillon, Amrit. "India's Hue and Cry over Paler Skin." *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 07 Jan. 2007. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>47</sup> "World's No.1 Fairness Cream for Men." *Emami Fair and Handsome*. Emami Ltd, 2006. Web. 30 May 2014.

Finally, the most damning of all is the website's stock photo, which shows a decidedly Caucasian man.<sup>48</sup> Here, the message is not subtle at all – it's not just white skin that's handsome, but also being 'white' itself. The imperialist legacies present in this advertisement have a deep effect on social mindset. Moreover, the idea that men are "more prone to tanning" because they're meant to be outdoors relatively more, not only comes from a flawed view of women's role in society, but further perpetuates an idea that fairness is feminine, and darkness is masculine. This idea is supported by my primary research; 18% of surveyed respondents said that the first thing that came to their mind when someone said the word 'fairness' was women. For a write-in question, an 18% response of "women" is quite high. (68% of respondents said their primarily-associated word was beauty). Given this incredible gender-based compartmentalization of beauty standards, it's truly a triumph of capitalism to be able to market Fair and Handsome while still adhering to gender norms.

Bollywood, one of the most important types of media in India, consistently propagates fair skin bias. The most popular actresses over the past few decades have all been incredibly fair - from Madhubala, in the 40s and 50s, to Madhuri Dixit in the 80s and 90s, to Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Katrina Kaif, today<sup>49</sup>. Aishwarya Rai's light-colored eyes and fair skin, as well as her ambiguously Caucasoid features contribute to her beauty, while Katrina Kaif is half-Kashmiri, half-British. Her look is thus representative of a minute percentage of the Indian population - but her presence in Bollywood makes her a symbol of beauty - unattainable beauty - for the vast majority of Indian women.

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<sup>48</sup> Figure 3 in appendix. From: "World's No.1 Fairness Cream for Men." *Emami Fair and Handsome*. Emami Ltd, 2006. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Vasudev, Shefalee. "The Changing Face of Beauty." *Archive*. The Indian Express, Aug.-Sept. 2011. Web. 30 May 2014.



Furthermore, there are strong links between advertising and Bollywood – as noted earlier, Shah Rukh Khan, one of the most popular actors in Bollywood today, became the brand ambassador for a fairness cream for men – a move that brought astounding success to the product line, despite criticism of Khan for perpetuating bias, and despite the fact that under Indian cultural norms, men do not use cosmetic products.<sup>50</sup>

Dark-skinned actresses like Konkona Sen Sharma, Nandita Das, and Chitrangada Singh find it harder to play mainstream roles, instead opting for art-house films and smaller productions, where they play characters that are not associated with beauty. These actresses known for their darker skin tone and often patronizingly termed ‘dusky beauties’ by the Indian media. Even A-list film stars like Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra, who do not meet traditional standards of fairness, face pressure from the media and the film industry to lighten their skin – indeed, their skin is almost always lightened in print media or on screen. Nandita Das has noted, as part of her campaign, that even actresses who were dark in their first movie are noticeably lighter as their careers progress, displaying the pressure to conform to societal beauty standards in the media.

Das in particular is very outspoken about the biases of the industry. In May 2013, she became part of a campaign, Dark is Beautiful, launched by activist group Women of Worth in 2009, with the goals of raising consciousness and celebrating beauty beyond color. Das has related stories where filmmakers asked her to lighten her skin to go along with the assumption that upper class, affluent, high-caste, educated Indians are fair-skinned. “I have even had directors/camera persons telling me that it would be good if I make my skin lighter as I am playing an educated upper class woman.... If you are dark, then you are fine playing village

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<sup>50</sup> Shevde, Natasha. "All's Fair in Love and Cream: A Cultural Case Study of Fair & Lovely in India." *Advertising & Society Review* 9.2 (2008): n. pag. Web.

women, slum dwellers etc., but an urban, affluent character always must be the fair-faced person!”<sup>51</sup>

This blatant characterization displays two things: the power of the media in perpetuating ideas, and one of the driving factors behind the favorable bias towards fair skin - despite the fact that many of India’s historians have now established that the caste system was originally not based on color. The trend in Bollywood of casting a very light-skinned tract of the Indian population is not just limited to capturing a certain skin tone, but also a certain look. In actions that clearly harken to post-colonial mindsets, some of the actresses most thought of as beautiful are not Indian, or Indian-looking, at all. Katrina Kaif is one of the more high-profile actresses to be ethnically mixed, with a Kashmiri father and a British mother, but she is part of a growing trend of actresses who achieve fame in Bollywood for their Western looks and light skin tone. Nargis Fakhri, who has a Pakistani father and a Czech mother, was cast in multiple roles as an Indian woman, despite the fact that most Indians do not share her features. The best example though, would be Amy Jackson - a Caucasian British model with dark hair, but absolutely no Indian background, who has been cast in roles of Indian women in both Tamil and Telugu cinema.

The issue thus moves beyond color and into race. One incident that clearly displayed the entrenched perceptions manifested in the form of discrimination against darker-skinned people, involved Rimi Sen, another Bollywood actress, who was quoted as saying, “Rohit Shetty is amazing as a director. He can make even a black African look pretty.”<sup>52</sup> Such a statement would have been unthinkable for a Western-based celebrity to make publicly, but not only did Sen say

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<sup>51</sup> Quote from Nandita Das. Mohan, Shivani. "Wknd. : Dark Horse." *Wknd. : Dark Horse*. Khaleej Times Magazine, Aug.-Sept. 2013. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>52</sup> "Anger over Rimi Sen Comment." *The Asian Today Online*. The Asian Today, 3 Jan. 2008. Web. 15 May 2014.

this for the purposes of an on-record interview, *Yahoo! India* and *Glamsham*, the publications with the quote, refrained from any editing or censorship – until the backlash from mostly international media and some human rights groups, which prompted them to then quietly remove the interview. Sen’s remarks show the level of complacency about colorism and the extent to which the fair skin bias is ingrained in the mindset of a society. While it is safe to assume that neither Sen nor the magazine editors had any intention of being offensive to people of African origin, the concept that dark skin was not attractive was apparently more of an obvious fact than a problematic opinion.

### Chapter Three: “No fair: Colorism and the Beauty Bias” Theoretical Framework

In contemporary India, fair skin is considered attractive. The probable historical theories for this have already been established. What makes fair skin attractive? Social scientists and historians have debated for years about whether beauty is a definable property or a subjective perception.<sup>53</sup> Certain conclusions can be drawn about the links between color, beauty and women. Attractiveness matters more in white-collar jobs in metropolitan areas than in manual labor jobs in rural areas. On the whole, less attractive individuals are less likely to be hired and promoted, and they can earn lower salaries despite the absence of any differences in cognitive ability. Moreover, gender-based double standards result in women being punished more for appearance. Lastly, skin color and the desire for Anglo-European features play a huge role in acquiring beauty.<sup>54</sup> These social interactions and outcomes will be explored in this chapter.

How does this relate to skin color and the fair-skinned bias? Evolution plays a role in this as well - the reason higher castes and income-level individuals were historically lighter skinned may have been imperialism, but it was reinforced by the natural darkening of people who worked manual labor or field work jobs, in the Indian subcontinent. This also causes a link in fairness and family background. As seen in the marriage advertisements, Indian families look for fair-skinned alliances for their sons and daughters because of the importance in Indian culture of family, and the notion that a fair individual comes from a more educated and highborn family background that has been either modestly comfortable or wealthy for at least a few generations.

As Deborah Rhode writes, bias falls along a continuum. “At one end is discrimination based on characteristics that are difficult or impossible to change, such as height and facial

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<sup>53</sup> Donoghue, Denis. *Speaking of Beauty*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. Print.

<sup>54</sup> Rhode, Deborah L. "The Importance of Appearance: Interpersonal Relationships." *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2010. 27-28. Print.

features. Although sex, race, and ethnicity have such an effect on appearance, they implicate identity in a more fundamental sense than other traits and are generally considered separately in legal and theoretical discussions of discrimination. At the other end of the continuum are purely voluntary characteristics, such as clothing and grooming. In between are mixed traits, such as obesity, which have both biological and behavioral foundations.”<sup>55</sup>

From different perspectives, skin color may be at different ends of this continuum, and actually feed upon this paradox. On one hand, skin lightening advertisements imply that skin color can be changed and improved, and an entire 500 million dollar industry<sup>56</sup> is based on this notion, that it is possible to improve one’s skin color and lift oneself out of the stigma of being dark and associated with ‘uneducated low-class people’. Yet at the same time, the virtue of being dark is that it’s associated with race and ethnicity in a way that allows only the fair-skinned individual, thus the person who is truly ‘well-born’, to access the most desirable perceived color identity and social class level.

A greater question is why women are unfairly (no pun intended) held to the stringent beauty standard of light skin, much more so than men are. The language of matrimonial classifieds – calling for fair brides, but ‘qualified’ grooms – and the fact that products aimed at women dominate the fairness cream market, shows the imbalance of power and gender in the beauty industry. One theory is that it is because women are associated with bearing responsibility, both genetically and socially, for future generations. A fair woman is more likely to be upper class and educated, which means that her children will be raised in an upper-class and

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<sup>55</sup> Rhode, Deborah L. "The Importance of Appearance: Definitions of Attractiveness." *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2010. 25. Print.

<sup>56</sup> About 3000 crore INR, roughly equal to 500 million dollars.

Bhatt, Shefali. "Journey of Fairness Creams' Advertising in India." *The Economic Times*. N.p., 26 Feb. 2014. Web. 30 May 2014.

educated manner. Secondly, for women, fertility is tied to physical appearance, which leads to greater emphasis on women's physical appearance in society.

A crucial aspect to consider is the strange paradox of fair skin being genetic, and yet, acquirable. Fairness cream products sell a story of transcending socioeconomic and caste/tribe lines by changing the color of one's skin. However, the validity of fair skin being valuable rests on the concept of it being the domain of solely upper class Indians. The idea that fair skin is acquirable is the result of capitalism, and the ideological shift that individuals now have more agency and power to change their life than they did before, not only because of the loosening of caste and greater occupational mobility, but the idealized universal access to education and modernization.

"In sociobiological frameworks, evolution is the dominant explanation for the importance of appearance."<sup>57</sup> As Rhode writes, aesthetic preferences become hard-wired in a society and passed down through generations because of an awareness that certain features that lead to beauty furthermore lead to higher social status. Thus, knowing that fair skin has been historically tied to wealth and class makes it desirable, and this demand translates to beauty, and this notion of fair skin being beautiful amplifies its demand – a cycle of reinforced ideals. On the other hand, dark skin is tied to historic inequality, the concept of being lowborn, and thus carries negative associations. People who have dark skin aspire to be lighter because they correctly believe that greater society will presume they are of a relatively lower socioeconomic status.

As Natasha Shevde argues, fair skin is, considered "-the means of attaining social inclusion," as well as an indicator of wealth and prosperity. Indians who originate from lower castes view fairness cream products as a method to overcome social stigma and transcend to a

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<sup>57</sup> Rhode, Deborah L. "The Pursuit of Beauty: Sociobiological Foundations." *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2010. 45. Print.

higher level in the social hierarchy. When women in villages spend money on Fair and Lovely sachets instead of on food, this is no longer a trifling problem with Indian society. Skin-lightening products have become a way for women to overcome social barriers. However, this bears uncomfortable resemblance to the days of colonialism, when beauty products were originally marketed as a way to transcend class, race, and color.

This is explored more in Anne McClintock's "Imperial Leather". There are disturbing parallels between the fairness cream market in contemporary India and the soap industry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both are the capitalistic promotions of imperial ideals - the rebranding of soap as a necessary commodity and mass marketing led to not only a reinforcement of patriarchal ideals - "No dust, no dirt, no labor."<sup>58</sup> - promoting a soap that would erase the need for domestic labour - thus denigrating 'women's work' but also to a reinforcement of racial superiority - the Pears' advertisement with a black child and white child shows a black boy's body, magically white after washing with Pears. His face, however - in the perception of the Victorian Era, the fixture of the true self - remains black, unchanged. The black boy embodies the racial hybrid that the colonized was intended to become - white in manner, but colored inside. In contemporary India, fairness creams reinforce societal ideas of beauty that light skin is beautiful. Thus, if soap was a vehicle for spreading and maintaining ideas of racism in the nineteenth century, fairness creams are spreading and reinforcing colorism in Indian society today.

Perhaps most telling of all is the quote at the beginning of Anne McClintock's chapter on Soft-Soaping Empire. "Soap is Civilization" was the slogan of Unilever, back in the nineteenth century. Ironically, Unilever is Fair and Lovely's parent company. The ties between ideas of

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<sup>58</sup> McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.

racial superiority promulgated through imperialism, and colorism and self-perpetuating fair skin bias in contemporary India are much closer than they seem.



## Conclusion:

Ultimately, perceptions regarding shades of skin color in India, as in other countries, are rooted in history and socioeconomic divides that grow wider over time. Colonialism and invasions by lighter-skinned peoples throughout history played a significant role in this, by creating an economic effect in favor of the victor, that became tied to skin color in such a binding way that even today, the gap that exists between light skin and dark skin is socioeconomically visible. Thus, the preference for fair skin was handed down from imperial times to modern times, even though the legal implications were abolished, it is a vestige of those times. Descendants of economically backward and subjugated people tend to be still relatively economically backward and in the lower education and income brackets of society. This explains why maids, drivers, people who live below the poverty line, or have relatively low education levels, or hold occupations that are not esteemed highly by societal conventions, are generally speaking, more dark-skinned on the spectrum of skin tones in India.

Given India's history of casteism, and the fact that caste was tied to skin tone with the higher, richer, and fair-skinned castes considered more moral and deserving of their wealth and education than the lower, poor, and dark-skinned castes, this societal fragmentation has evolved into classism based on socioeconomic status, but still tied to skin color.

Thus, the skin-lightening industry in India is an important part of the contemporary culture of the subcontinent and it is imperative to draw links to its societal and historical foundations. While a common argument made in support of the 'natural' desire for Indians to be a fair is a comparison with the West's desire to be tan and their tanning industry, the fair skin bias in India runs deeper than that. Tanning arises both out of self-perpetuating norms in the West, but also out of a new social categorization of color – tanning indicates leisure time and a

standard class level. These comparisons overlook the fact that the western world only turned to tanning in the most recent period, and that India's beauty bias is the result of far older cultural forces.

Moreover, the idea of fair skin cannot be untangled from the issue of marriage, prestige, dowry, class, and education – especially not for women. Both my primary research and secondary research showed that fair skin is the manifestation of latent cues that indicate the socially constructed worth of a woman. This explains the great popularity of these fairness cream products in rural India and villages where women aspire to be lighter-skinned so they can transcend their socioeconomic status – either directly, by marrying a wealthier man, or by paying less dowry, or indirectly, by becoming eligible for higher-paying jobs and moving up the social ladder – all through their fairness cream. Thus, these creams take advantage of class differences and the historical divisions of caste along color lines by providing women with the promise of reaching a higher social class and seemingly attaining happiness.

While some attitudes are changing – especially with globalization and exposure to different standards of beauty – conventional ideas, fetish, and stigma, have remained largely constant. Although beauty pageants, like the Miss India competition, have become more inclusive and have started including darker contestants as well, these contestants never make it to the final round, and the winner of the beauty pageant ends up modeling for the skin lightening product of the company that sponsored the pageant – another example of capitalism driving these social norms. This is easily seen in the stark contrast between Nina Davuluri, Miss America 2014 and the first Indian American to hold the title, and Navneet Kaur Dhillon, the 2014 Miss India pageant winner, to see that the Indian mindset has not moved very far from older norms. Davuluri is a South Indian of Telugu descent, and is several shades darker than Dhillon, a North

Indian Punjabi. While Nina Davuluri was breaking barriers for her race and color, Navneet Kaur Dhillon, the winner of the Pond's Femina Miss India 2014 pageant<sup>59</sup>, was fulfilling her modeling contract by being the face of Pond's White Beauty BB+ fairness cream<sup>60</sup>. Lastly, the response to Davuluri from Indians was significant for its acrimonious nature. Comments on the news articles such as the Times of India coverage of the Miss America pageant all revolved around how ugly and dark Davuluri was. "The standards of beauty are going down." "Indian and black cross-breed? Looks so." "Oh god!!! She is so ugly...America, this is the best you've got?" "Next year someone from Somalia descent will also win." "Even Michelle Obama looks prettier than her."<sup>61</sup>. Davuluri also received xenophobic and hostile comments from Americans about her ethnic background and immigrant parentage, but the backlash from India, drawing on not only the color of her skin but also venturing towards racial slurs, shows how deep the fair skin bias is embedded in India's values and social consciousness, and how terrible it can be.

While India remains tied to the conventional standards of beauty, our legacy of colonialism needs concerted efforts to dismantle. Only by recognizing the role history played in creating this standard of beauty, and by remaining vigilant of the insidious power hierarchies embedded in colorism, can we break the self-perpetuating cycle of a desire to be fair, and thus move into an era of greater social mobility, equality and justice, and – dare I say it – an altogether different kind of fairness.

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<sup>59</sup> Organized by Femina, a magazine for women, and sponsored by Pond's, a cosmetics company with a significant line of skin lightening products.

<sup>60</sup> "Pond's White Beauty BB+ Cream Gets Miss India Navneet Kaur Dhillon as Brand Ambassador." *Pond's White Beauty BB+ Cream Gets Miss India Navneet Kaur Dhillon as Brand Ambassador*. Adgully Bureau, 29 Apr. 2013. Web. 30 May 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Screenshots of comments from Times of India 2013 article in Appendix. Figure 4.

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## Appendix:

Figure 1:

**06 | htclassifieds** HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI THURSDAY, AUGUST 15, 2013

# MATRIMONIALS BRIDES WANTED

**BISA AGARWAL**

PQM pretty from Del/NCR 4 NM Goyal boy smart, 5'4" born 05.05.85/05.05 pm/Paharganj Wheadin. B.S/Comp/MBA Gold Medal, Asset Wng. Del Bank, 5 Lac., Own house in Delhi & Ggn. Cont: 09895419378 Email: rahptrapsouptas5@gmail.com

PQM 4 Mgtk Gool H'some Boy 7-12.88 Total 5'9" BE MBA Wkg Top Pharma MNC Ggn. 11.5LPA South Delhi Edu. Fmly. Email: guptam415@gmail.com

SM4 Del. bad. Agmt. H'some, Silm 34'S 10'7" 17LPA, BE, M.Tech. Own Design Constnry & Guest House Ggn. Nees Divorce, Fhr Sr. Clt/Ocr. #2953293966, E: gupta1214@gmail.com

PQM4 Biso Agg. Karsal Gola Mgtk v. h'some 8'10.1.0.85 (Eam Df) BE, MBA (F) fm MDI, CFA (Int) Wkg US co. Ggn. 12+Lpa. E: rapsed7.aggarwal@yahoo.com

SM4 Gang Gola (Gola no Bar) Boy 30'S 5'7" Graduate, doing business belonging to well known family old Pbd # 9310637000 Em: rajpalaggarwal21@gmail.com

**BRAHMIN**

SUITABLE Match for Delhi based Bt Boy Oct 85/5'11" B.Tech. MBA Wkg Top MNC Ggn/12LPA. Himech/Int Pbd. Pfrld. M.08115-90468, Bm/ydograt@gmail.com

**ARORA**

WKG B'tul Match for only son Sep 79 Del 5'8" wkg MNC MBA High Income in 7 Figure Own House Well settled family. Photo must. mail: mtr759@yahoo.com

SM4 Arora NM 1982 5'7" MBA working MNC GGN/17 LPA. Detaild and Photo email: mtr759@yahoo.com

PQ Match 4 N.Mgtk 30'S 5'8" Pb Arora (BE) DCE MBA, FT/IT runs Family Business (Okhla, Delhi) Em: kotsikoo@gmail.com Contact: 9899944995

M4 Punjabi / Arora Boy 28'S 10'8" B.Tech MBA S.R.Engineer in PSU Delhi. Only Preferred Govt Job/Teacher in Pay Scale. Mobile: 9818003913

ARORA boy MBA fair handsome well settled wholesale business of garments earning 25lac PA contact: 09314754747 Email: ashil.arora@live.in

WELL Educated & Status South Delhi based Arora family seeks alliance for their son 28' MBA from IIT Nagpur, 84'S 11' 1/2" fair, handsome, posted as Business Analyst in Sydney since Jan 12. Wish to hear from beautiful educated & cultured girl. Email: mtr759@yahoo.com

PQM Btily CA/CS/CA 4 Pb Kh/ Arora h'some 34'S 5'7" 24.84 3-18 AM DI B.Com. (H). CA own pte in W.Delhi # 9891915611/25947923 fca\_ambati@rediffmail.com

SM 4 Sikh boy 81 / 5'9" / 6'W Engineer. 15Lpa wkg Puna Mahager. MNC 3 figure family. Contact: 8880599989 Email: gurnati1981@gmail.com

B'TUL, Tall, working M4 Sikh, 33'8" (Dry/Short/marriage), MBA Mgr in US MNC Noida, 14 LPA, # 9810845413 Email bioteda & photo to skigrover7@gmail.com

PQM for Arora Sikh Boy, 33'8" S/W Engg working in NCR, 16LPA, Cont: 09875549700, riponmatri@gmail.com

SM for Sikh Ramacharia Clean Shaven, tall & handsome boy, 27 yrs, B.Tech-MBA, wkg in Delhi L.Ming for b'tul, edu & silm gnt. Caste no bar. Cont: 09822016210, Email: targatewedding2013@gmail.com

PQM farsant turbaned Ran- arlab 31yrs 8'2" MCA/PDCA working MNC own 1815 DGR #919850814142 011-36133709, Em: navneet1219@gmail.com

PQM 4 h'some NT / ND Sikh Arora boy 29 / 5'8" MBA Wkg in MNC 14.20 LPA edu status Delhi bad family 989846234 E: jomela.india@gmail.com

SM 4 Rangarhila h'some Boy 5'9" 12-32 / MBA Wkg Noida, Clean shaven, Prof. b'tul, silm, edu gnt. # 9971594290, Send BHP: sudash05@gmail.com

B'TUL PQM for H'some Khatri Sikh Boy 29, 5'-9" B.Tech MS (USA) Working USA SR Consultant H-1B Caste No Bar. pkaur0356@gmail.com

SM4 Chd based US Citizen Nyr Married Wkg. Rajput Tribd Sikh born in 1975. Home in India

YOUNG Dr. Boy born 85/5'10" own Exp. Inc. Bness Hongkong & USA. Segin hongkong. Fmly living in Delhi. If You want Personally Cont at 8-5/108, S.End N.Delhi (M) 9810173195, abhishahanghan1985@gmail.co

STATUS Affluent S.Delhi PB Khatri Doctors Family, Seeking V.Beautiful, Tall, Fair, Prof. Quldr / Medical Girl for Dr. boy, 5'11" 82 com, H'some only Son, Doing Int Med. Resi in US, Fmly Running 2 Medical Centers. # 9560381940, Email : omsai35@gmail.com

B'TUL Gnt, wkg M4 Pb. Kh. Boy B.Tech 5'8" 12-84 rawat wkg. S.W MNC Ggn. 10.00 Lpa Prof.essor/Teacher also welcome father member SEIAA 0818440-810, sk\_khanna8@yahoo.co.in

MATCH for h'some fair MBA wkg MNC Df 12.5.84 11:50AM, Df 5'11" 15Lpa-5M all fmly own house greater kalash thr MNC/ self Empld have substantial rental income seeks b'tul fair silm tall wkg MNC Wkg Educad Manglik girl FM silm status prbly South Del/NCR 9910721112 Email: arora112@yahoo.in

SM4 Khia Anesh Mgtk boy 56' 22-12-86/5:45 am DR CA own pte, regd b'tul CA/Teacher/Doctor? Bank emp # 9810172164 dmahar2910172164@gmail.com

ALLIANCE invited for London based Rangarh Turbaned, veg. Sikh Divorce (no children) 35yrs Athletic Build, 5'11" fair, h'some, B.Sc. Business in London, Caste No Bar. Msting India Spcn. Cont: Das Anil Khutana 9871006353, E: dasanilkhutana@gmail.com

PQM for h'some Gnt based Pb Kh NM boy 5'11" 79/ Poursala 6:15pm 5'8" PG Wkg MNC, GGN 22Lpa # 98798707373 Em: alliance.vg@gmail.com

PQM4 h'some fair Arora bachelor 33'5'7" Delhi B.Tech MBA 5.5Lpa early marriage BHP must taste no bar Email: wecks@gmail.com

N/NM Silm fair PQM 4 fair h'some Pb Kh. Boy 29, 10.82/ 5'9" B.B.E / M.A. Delhi based Group 'A' Govt Officer # 98184-39381, Em: ankhnd5@gmail.com

AFFLUENT Match 4 B'ness class 29 yrs 5'11" fm high status family of Delhi, Ukg 4 Prof Quldr Match fm Delhi RCR # 9873192163, E-mail: shivshad76@gmail.com

SM4 H'some, manglik MBA/ 27yrs 5'11" wkg with MNC Gurgaon. Seeks professionally qualified, match # 956015368 # shad pvtankara@gmail.com

HLY Edu, Stue Khatri B'ness Fmly from Pb. seeks b'tul, silm, gnt culturd M4 Extremely H'some TT, MBA, Canada/ Czn Boy 15-Oct-1990, 10:45AM Pk 5'8" (Looks 25) Income High 7 Figure. Father former Senator GNDU. Brother Bhabhi CA, Caste no bar. Boy Presently in India. schadha2013@gmail.com 8054819687.

ALLIANCE invited for London based Rangarh Turbaned, veg. Sikh Divorce (no children) 35yrs Athletic Build, 5'11" fair, h'some, B.Sc. Business in London, Caste No Bar. Msting India Spcn. Cont: Das Anil Khutana 9871006353, E: dasanilkhutana@gmail.com

**DIVORCEE/ WIDOWER**

LESS SM4 h'some Punjabi boy 37' 5'4" Govt servant 7Lpa, had kidney transplant. Father held own house. No dowry. # 90138-19399, mahia33@yahoo.co.in

SM4 Arora Boy 46'S 6'8" IIT-K, MS & MBA (USA) Divorcee, USA Citizen, Own Software Firm, Educated girl FBY Living in USA Caste No Bar, Mob: 989014350, email: blusangel182013@gmail.com

PQ Silm fair M4 NM h'some Pb 1less div 34'S 5'8" MBA (USA), CFA, wkg MNC, Int. Bank, 25Lpa. M: 9800701167 Send BHP: shivwak18@gmail.com

MEDIC/ Non Medico match for mutily shorted Punjabi Boy from high status Doctor family MBBS, DCH, 40'S 7" very fair, own hospital, Parents Doctors. Caste no bar, income in high six figures/ month. Cont: 9896000789.

SM4 Prof Quldr Div Boy 36'S 8" Wkg as Mgr in UAE, Inc in 7 fig. Ukg Match fm India/ Arora. Caste No Bar. # 9868183063, wfmatri01@gmail.com

HOMEY/Teacher old 4 h'some

A screenshot of the online version of the Matrimonial Classifieds for the Independence Day special of the Hindustan Times.

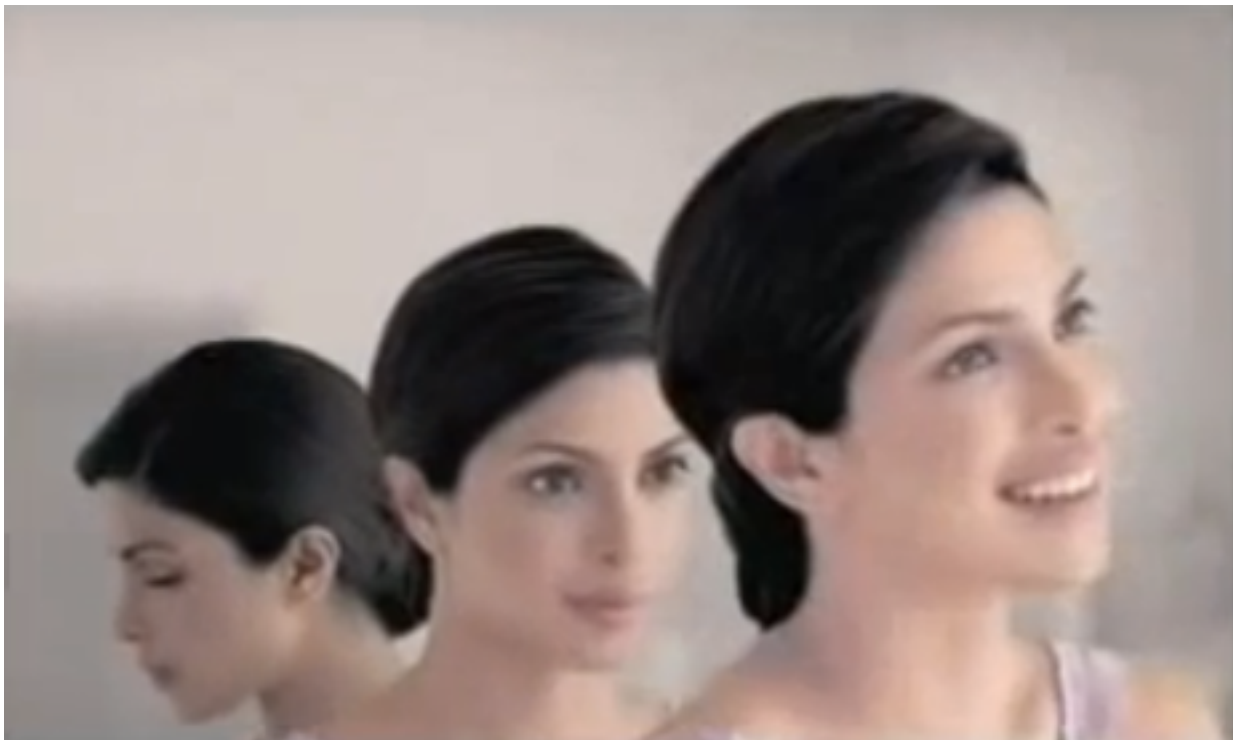
A closer look at the advertisement is below.

Figure 1b:

**STATUS Affluent S.Delhi PB Khatri Doctors Family, Seeking V.Beautiful, Tall, Fair, Prof. Quldr / Medical Girl for Dr. boy, 5'11" / 82 born, H'some only Son, Doing Int Med. Resi in US, Fmly Running 2 Medical Centers. # 9560381940, Email : omsai35@gmail.com**



Figure 2:



A captured still of the 5-part mini-film advertisement series with Saif Ali Khan and Priyanka Chopra. Here, Chopra is shown progressing from unhappy and dark, to happy and fair.

Figure 3:



This is the stock photo used on the Emami Fair and Handsome product website, showing a Caucasian, fair-skinned male.

Figure 4:




This is a screenshot of the September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 article in the Times of India, announcing that Nina Davuluri was the Miss America 2014 pageant winner, and the first Indian American to hold the title.

These are screenshots of comments made on the Times of India article in 2013 announcing Nina Davuluri's win.

Figure 4b:







Figure 4c:



**n modi** (Gujarat)  
 1 hr ago



I personally think she's worst Miss USA since the the start if the competition 100 years ago . I mean there's many better looking women in America than this . I wouldn't shag her.

[Reply](#)

 Agree (1)  
 Disagree (17)  
 Recommend (2)  
 Offensive





---


**Food For (India)** replies to **n modi**  
[+ Follow](#)  
 54 mins ago **Silver: 1439**


 2  
 2  
 3


Better looking?? Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. If you find her ugly then you are an ugly person.

[Reply](#)

 Agree (0)  
 Disagree (0)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

---


**anonymous** (India)  
[+ Follow](#)  
 1 hr ago **Bronze: 30**



Oh God!!! she is so ugly... America this is the best u got ???

[Reply](#)





 Agree (4)  
 Disagree (9)  
 Recommend (3)  
 Offensive

Figure 4d:


**crab68** ()  
 4 Followers [+ Follow](#)  
 2 hrs ago **Silver: 1369**

 2  
 2  
 3

She looks like from North Indian black ,, a real nigga woman

[Reply](#)

 Agree (1)  
 Disagree (6)  
 Recommend (1)  
 Offensive

Figure 4e:


**Rajesh Kumar** (Bangalore)  
 7 Followers [+ Follow](#)  
**Gold: 5361**

 5  
 4  
 4

Indian and Black Cross Breed? Looks so.

[Reply](#)

 Agree (0)  
 Disagree (5)  
 Recommend (0)  
 Offensive

Figure 4f:

 **Meri Awaaj** (Mumbai)  
+ Follow  
3 hrs ago Silver: 778 🏆

Congrates Black Beauty....

Reply

INFLUENCER 1 WORD SMITH 1 FREQUENT FLYER 1

✓ Agree (2)  
✗ Disagree (0)  
👍 Recommend (0)  
🚫 Offensive

Figure 4g:

 **pawan singh** (delhi)  
+ Follow  
3 hrs ago Bronze: 240 🏆

I doubt that she is Indian. Indian rag pickers are more beautiful than her.

Reply

WORD SMITH 1 NEWS KING 1 FREQUENT FLYER 1

✓ Agree (2)  
✗ Disagree (9)  
👍 Recommend (0)  
🚫 Offensive

 **Amit Thackeray** (Bhayya Hunter)  
78 Followers + Follow  
3 hrs ago Platinum: 28.2K 🏆


Indians and africans have similar looks.

Reply

INFLUENCER 7 WORD SMITH 6 NETWORKER 2

✓ Agree (4)  
✗ Disagree (14)  
👍 Recommend (2)  
🚫 Offensive

Figure 4h:

 **BC MENON** ()  
52 Followers + Follow  
3 hrs ago Gold: 19.1K 🏆


God knows how did she become Miss America.

Reply

INFLUENCER 7 WORD SMITH 5 NETWORKER 2

✓ Agree (2)  
✗ Disagree (3)  
👍 Recommend (0)  
🚫 Offensive

Figure 4i:

 **latha seshadri** (Unknown)  
51 Followers + Follow  
3 hrs ago Gold: 10K 🏆

Didn't they get a better photo. This is the ugliest photo anybody can put there.

INFLUENCER 7 MODERATOR 1 WORD SMITH 5

✓ Agree (16)  
✗ Disagree (1)

Figure 4j:



saveUS (earth)  
3 hrs ago

She looks so ugly..there were many more beautiful women there...not sure what was the selection criteria.

[Reply](#)

- ☒ Agree (6)
- ☒ Disagree (12)
- ☒ Recommend (4)
- ☐ Offensive

Figure 4k:



Anupam singh (Paharpur)

4 Followers

[+ Follow](#)

4 hrs ago

Silver: 2839



Next year Somalia decent gonna be miss us.....:)

[Reply](#)

- ☒ Agree (4)
- ☒ Disagree (10)
- ☒ Recommend (1)
- ☐ Offensive

Figure 4l:



Bhartiya ()

1 Follower

[+ Follow](#)

5 hrs ago

Silver: 947



ugly.. the blonde with tattoos was awesome.

[Reply](#)

- ☒ Agree (9)
- ☒ Disagree (14)
- ☒ Recommend (3)
- ☐ Offensive

Figure 4m:



con air (Norway)

2 Followers

[+ Follow](#)

5 hrs ago

Gold: 7161



I thought she was a black. Anyways, proves that majority (90% ) of desis are not brown but black. Good luck with fairness creams desi gentlemen, LOL

[Reply](#)

- ☒ Agree (7)
- ☒ Disagree (10)
- ☒ Recommend (3)
- ☐ Offensive



Swap (Pune) replies to con air

8 Followers

[+ Follow](#)

4 hrs ago

Silver: 3028



She seems to be of south Indian descent and most of southies are black and not brown

[Reply](#)

- ☒ Agree (2)
- ☒ Disagree (12)
- ☒ Recommend (1)
- ☐ Offensive

Figure 4n:

kaka (mumbai)  
5 hrs ago

I think Michel Obama looks pretty then her. Americans have bad taste.

Reply

✓ Agree (17)  
✗ Disagree (27)  
👍 Recommend (4)  
🚫 Offensive

Figure 5:

Sample Survey Question Sheet used for conducting primary research and creating an ethnography for this project.

## PERCEPTIONS REGARDING FAIRNESS OF SKIN

Research Project by Samra Adeni, Stanford University

### Introductory Questions:

1. What comes to your mind when I say the word fairness?
2. What was the last advertisement for fairness cream you saw?
3. What form of media was it in? (Print, digital, television, theatre, billboard, etc)
4. Could you elaborate on your reactions to such advertisements?

### Survey Questions:

1. Do you think it is important for women to be fair? Y N
2. Is it more important for women to be fair than for men? Y N
  - a. Why?
3. Do you think all Indian women naturally desire to be fair? Y N
4. What drives the mindset that fairness is a positive physical attribute?
  - a. Media b. Parents/Family c. society d. Peer pressure e. all of the above f. fairness is not a positive attribute
5. Do you use fairness products? Y N
  - a. If yes, Do you feel forced to use fairness products? Y N
6. Why are fairness product advertisements always aimed at women?
7. Do you see any benefit/harm in these advertisements? Benefit / harm
8. Do you think fairness product work?
9. Assuming that fairness products work, What would be your perception if your daughter/(female relative) used fairness products?
  - a. Happy b. Sad c. Indifferent d. confused
10. Assuming that fairness products work, What would your reaction be if your son used fairness products?
  - a. Happy b. Sad c. Indifferent d. confused
11. Do you think fair women have a better shot at being successful at their workplace? Y N
12. Do you think fair women have a better shot at being successful in marriage proposals? Y N
13. If you had a son/brother, how would you feel about him marrying a girl darker than him?

14. Do you think Western Caucasian women are more beautiful than African?      Y  
N
15. Do you think Katrina Kaif is more beautiful than Bipasha Basu?      Y  
N
16. Please rate the following in the order of beauty and attractiveness. Refer to accompanying photos, if necessary.:
- a. Aishwarya Rai \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Bipasha Basu \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Princess Diana \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Halle Berry \_\_\_\_\_

**PROFILE QUESTIONS:**

1. Gender:      M      F
2. Age: 18 – 25, 26 – 35, 36 – 50, 51- 75, 75 +
3. Highest level of Education:
  - a. High School
  - b. College (B.A., BCom, BSc, ...)
  - c. Professional Degree (MBBS, MD, BTech, MTech, LLB)
  - d. Masters (M.A., MSc)
  - e. Doctorate (PhD)
4. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Avg Annual household income range or self report socio-economic level :
  - a. 0 – 1 Lakh
  - b. 1 - 10 Lakh
  - c. 10 – 24 Lakh
  - d. 25 – 99 Lakh
  - e. 1 Crore ++
6. Have you ever lived abroad?
7. Survey Response number : \_\_\_\_\_