

Dark is beautiful: the battle to end the world's obsession with lighter skin

Saturday 18 August 2018, by [ABRAHAM Mary-Rose](#) (Date first published: 4 September 2017).

Skin colour bias has spawned a global, multibillion-dollar industry in cosmetic creams and invasive procedures. Mary-Rose Abraham talks to consumers and campaigners in India about the dangers this poses - and how to stop it

"It starts when children are young: the moment a child is born, relatives start comparing siblings' skin colour. It starts in your own family - but people don't want to talk about it openly."

Kavitha Emmanuel is the founder of Women of Worth, an Indian NGO that is standing up to bias toward lighter skin. The [Dark Is Beautiful campaign](#), launched in 2009, is not "anti-white", she says, but about inclusivity - beauty beyond colour. It carries celebrity endorsement, most notably from the Bollywood actor Nandita Das, and provides a forum for people to share their personal stories of skin colour bias.

The campaign runs media literacy workshops and advocacy programmes in schools to counteract colour bias. Emmanuel says this even occurs in school textbooks, where a picture of a fair-skinned girl might be labelled "beautiful" and a darker one "ugly".

"Some children are really shocked that this affects them so intensely," Emmanuel says. "Some are in tears [during the workshops]."

This is not bias, this is racism. There is a whiteness travelling from the US to shopping malls in other countries

Sunil Bhatia

A perfect life from perfect skin - but only for those of the right shade - is the message and mindset that's being passed down. This has spawned a multibillion-dollar industry in cosmetic creams and invasive procedures such as skin bleaching, chemical peels, laser treatments, steroid cocktails, "whitening" pills and intravenous injections - all with varying effectiveness and health risks. It's more than a bias, it's a dangerous cultural obsession.

Multinational cosmetics brands have found a lucrative market: global spending on skin lightening is projected to triple to \$31.2bn (£24bn) by 2024, according to a [report released in June 2017](#) by the research firm Global Industry Analysts. The driving force, it says, is "the still rampant darker skin stigma, and rigid cultural perception that correlates lighter skin tone with beauty and personal success".

"This is not bias. This is racism," says Sunil Bhatia, a professor of human development at Connecticut College. Bhatia recently wrote in US News & World Report about [deep-rooted](#)

internalised racism and social hierarchies based on skin colour.

In [India](#), these were codified in the caste system, the ancient Hindu classification in which birth determined occupation and social stratum. At the top, Brahmins were priests and intellectuals; at the bottom, outcastes were confined to the least-desired jobs such as latrine cleaners. Bhatia says caste may have been about more than just occupation: the darker you looked, the lower your place in the social hierarchy.

Fair skin bias was perpetuated and strongly reinforced by colonialism, not just in India but in dozens of countries ruled by a European power. It's the idea that the ruler is fair-skinned, says Emmanuel: "All around the world, it was a fact that the rich could stay indoors versus the poor who worked outside and were dark-skinned."

Now globalisation is spreading the bias. "There is an interesting whiteness travelling from the US to shopping malls in other countries, featuring white models," Bhatia says. "You can trace a line from colonialism, post-colonialism and globalisation."

Western beauty ideals, including fair skin, dominate worldwide. And with these ideals come products to service them. In Nigeria, 77% of the country's women use skin-lightening agents; in Togo, 59%. But the largest and fastest-growing markets are in the Asia-Pacific region. In India, a typical supermarket will have a wall of personal care products featuring "whitening" moisturiser or "lightening" body creams from wellknown brands.

'Deformation not transformation'

Pooja Kannan, 27, from Mumbai, spent years buying cosmetics that promised to lighten her complexion. She bought creams, facewash and soaps for treating "skin fairness problems", spending Rs 200-300 every two months - equivalent to a week's worth of travel to her college. Over four years of use, she says her skin did lighten up a little, but wonders whether that was due to the cream or her taking more care when going out in the sun.

Kannan's natural skin tone is a healthy light brown, but when she was growing up, her aunts would shake their heads in disappointment over her complexion. A tan would lead some relatives and classmates to admonish her: "You've turned black," they said. In India, where skin tone often defines success, ability to find work or a spouse, such comments matter. Kannan says she felt insecure.

Advertisement

"When I was getting dressed up to go out, I would remember what they said and put on more make-up." Kannan is also a dancer and felt discriminated in performances too. "The prettier, skinnier and fairer girls are positioned at the front of the stage," she says. "That gets to you."

Movies, TV programmes and especially adverts reinforced the bias. In 2016, actor Emma Watson (of Harry Potter fame) had to issue a statement saying she would no longer endorse products which "do not always reflect the diverse beauty of all women", after criticisms of her earlier appearance in adverts in Asia for Lancôme's Blanc Expert line. ([In a statement](#), Lancôme emphasised the product's "evening" rather than lightening properties, saying that it "helps brighten, evens skin tone, and provides a healthy-looking complexion. This kind of product, proposed by every brand, is an essential part of Asian women's beauty routines.")

I was so surprised when I came to India that your chances of getting married depend on

your skin colour

Ema Trinidad

In 2014, the Advertising Standards Council of India banned adverts depicting people with darker skin as inferior, but products are still marketed. Ads for skin-lightening creams still appear in newspapers, on television and on billboards, featuring Bollywood celebrities such as Shah Rukh Khan, John Abraham and Deepika Padukone.

In [multiple Facebook posts in April](#), actor [Abhay Deol](#) called out several of his colleagues for endorsing fairness creams. In the Hindustan Times, he wrote: “Advertising preaches that we would get a better job, a happier marriage and more beautiful children if we were fair. We are conditioned to believe that life would have been easier had we been born fairer.”

Skin lightening is not the sole preserve of the modern cosmetics industry. India’s traditional Ayurveda medical system teaches that pregnant women can improve their foetus’s complexion by drinking saffron-laced milk and eating oranges, fennel seeds and coconut pieces. Earlier this year, an Ayurvedic practitioner in Kolkata led a session for expectant couples, promising that even dark-skinned, short parents could have tall and fair children.

A 2012 study by a women’s health charity in India found that childless couples often insisted on – and paid more for – surrogates who were beautiful and fair, even though the woman contributed no genetic material to the baby.

But perhaps nowhere is the fair skin preference more ingrained than in newspaper classified adverts seeking a spouse. Along with requirements for the prospective bride or groom’s caste, religion, profession and education, physical characteristics are listed too. Someone described as “dusky” may be skipped in favour of one who is of a “fair” complexion.

“Potential brides spend a lot of money; it’s really unlimited in the months before the wedding,” says Ema Trinidad, a Filipina beautician who runs a spa in Bengaluru. “I was so surprised when I came here that your chances of getting married depend on your skin colour. We don’t have that in the Philippines.”

The mindset is so normalised that many people accept fairness treatments as a standard part of wedding preparations – for men as well as women. When Karthik Panchapakesan got married in 2001, he was intrigued by ads for a “complete makeover” and decided to try it out.

“I had never gone to a salon before,” says the media specialist working in community radio. “The massage felt really good. Then they put this fruity and flowery white paste all over my forehead, cheeks, nose and chin. They promised it would even out my skin.”

Panchapakesan said his eyes started burning after about five minutes, and he got an irritation around his nose as the sweet smell turned to acrid fumes. He suspected it was based on ammonia: “It was more chemical than horseradish,” he says. When it was all done, his face looked as if it had been dusted with talcum powder. “It was not a transformation, it was a deformation.”

The danger of cosmetics

Most skin-lightening treatments target the skin’s ability to produce pigment, or melanin, which gives skin, hair and eyes their colour. Everyone has about the same number of cells to make melanin, but how much you actually produce is down to your genes. Having more natural melanin means darker-

skinned people tend to develop fewer wrinkles and are less at risk of skin cancer.

Skin-lightening creams often aim to interrupt the production of melanin or just improve the general health of the skin. They can contain a natural ingredient such as soy, liquorice or arbutin, sometimes combined with the medical lightening agent hydroquinone (not all creams contain this: hydroquinone is a potentially carcinogenic ingredient, and products containing it are banned or restricted in Ghana, South Africa, the Ivory Coast, Japan, Australia and the European Union, though they are still used illegally).

Mercury was also previously found in some lightening creams and soaps, according to the [World Health Organisation](#). Mercury suppresses the production of melanin, but can also damage the kidneys and brain if it is absorbed by the skin and accumulates in the body.

Other lightening methods include a chemical peel, which removes the top layer of your skin – leaving fresher skin exposed to harmful solar radiation and environmental pollutants. Laser treatments offer an even more aggressive approach by breaking up a skin's pigmentation, sometimes with damaging results.

“There's a pressure on Indian men and women,” says Dr Sujata Chandrappa, a Bengaluru-based dermatologist. “They have some role model in their head and they want to get there no matter what. That's the wrong concept.”

Chandrappa says clients often come in wanting the skin tone of a favourite Bollywood celebrity. “If their obsession is just with colour, then I will outright tell them I'm more worried they're unnecessarily seeking something they don't need. If I encourage them too much, I get the sense that I'm promoting racism.”

Shannah Mendiola spends 3,200 rupees (£40) a month on skin-lightening supplements – a lot by local standards, but Mendiola has a well-paying job with a multinational company. Originally from the Philippines but now working in Bengaluru, Mendiola says she has been taking the pills for the past five years, not just for lighter skin but for their antioxidant properties.

“I like going to the beach and I feel really dark after a holiday,” she tells me by email. “I would always prefer to buy and use skincare products that contain skin-whitening ingredients – like my body lotion, face wash and moisturiser. In the Philippines, it's always a plus if you are fair.”

Mendiola describes herself as *morena* – not too fair and not too dark – and says her skin returns to its natural colour faster when she uses the pills. “Having an even skin tone that's healthy and glowing gives me more self-confidence when I meet people for work. Why not? Don't we all want to look good?”

The pills she takes are glutathione, an antioxidant naturally produced by the liver that can protect the skin from UV rays and free radicals, which contribute to skin damage and pigmentation.

When the patient stops using the cream, the skin reacts and develops rashes – so they start again. It's a vicious cycle

Dr Shyamanta Barua

A more direct form of treatment is glutathione injections. These are commonly used to counteract the side-effects of chemotherapy, such as nausea, hair loss or difficulty in breathing, but their growing popularity for skin lightening has led to official concern.

In 2011, the Philippine Food and Drug Administration issued a public warning about an “alarming increase in the unapproved use of glutathione administered intravenously”. It highlighted adverse effects including skin rashes, thyroid and kidney dysfunction, and even the potentially fatal Stevens-Johnson syndrome, in which the skin peels from the body as if burned.

In 2015, the US Food and Drug Administration warned of the potentially significant safety risk to consumers: “You’re essentially injecting an unknown substance into your body – you don’t know what it contains or how it was made.”

Nevertheless, there is growing consumer demand. Mendiola has taken two treatments of injectable glutathione, but mostly relies on pills.

Dr Mukta Sachdev, a clinical and aesthetic dermatologist in Bengaluru, refuses to administer the injections, despite repeated requests from her patients. “I practise on evidence-based dermatology, and there’s not enough literature supporting the use of injectable glutathione.” On the web, there are many videos showing how to self-inject the substance.

“From a medical perspective, it is not possible to lighten skin permanently – but you can even it out,” Sachdev says. In fact, many of her patients are actually seeking treatment for problems with other skin-lightening procedures – primarily the use of steroid creams.

India’s pharmaceutical regulator has approved at least 18 different corticosteroids for topical skin use, ranging from mild to super-potent. These usually cost less than £1.50 a tube, and most pharmacies across the country will dispense them, even without a prescription.

People apply them indiscriminately to treat pimples or for fairer skin, but steroid creams take off the protective outer layer of the skin, so it is more exposed to UV rays and environmental pollutants such as smog and cigarette smoke. But more worrying is that they can be addictive, says dermatologist Dr Shyamanta Barua.

“The moment the patient stops using the cream, the skin reacts, gets irritated, develops rashes,” he says. “So the patient starts the cream again and it’s a vicious cycle. They become psychologically addicted.” He thinks users should be counselled as if they were addicted to recreational drugs or alcohol.

Furthermore, there are signs that improper steroid prescriptions – often in cocktails containing a mix of steroids, antibiotics and antifungals – may be fuelling a surge in bugs resistant to normal treatments. Dr Rajetha Damisetty, a cosmetic dermatologist in Hyderabad, talks about one combination containing clobetasol – the most potent steroid known to humans, which is used to treat inflammatory skin conditions like eczema – mixed with two antibiotics and two antifungals. “Only India has this crazy combination,” Damisetty says, adding that the result is a “nightmare”.

Typically, she says, “around 70–90% of those affected by fungal infections would have used topical steroids for treatment, and they would respond within two weeks. But now we are having to give four times the dosage for eight to 12 weeks. It’s an epidemic across the entire country.”

Changing attitudes?

Campaigners standing up against the world’s bias towards lighter skin are fighting more than just bad medical practice and consumer habits. They are battling millennia-old preferences for lighter skin.

[Women of Worth](#) founder Emmanuel is optimistic, however. She believes people are more aware of

the issue than ever before, and hopes the next generation will see things differently – not just in India, but across the world.

In 2016, three students at the University of Texas, Austin, started an Instagram campaign called Unfair & Lovely – a play on the name of India’s most popular fairness cream. The [#unfairandlovely](#) hashtag invited darker-skinned people to share their photos.

In 2013, a young woman in Pakistan, Fatima Lodhi, launched the country’s first anti-colourism movement, called [Dark is Divine](#). Lodhi has written about the prejudice she faced as a child: “I never got a chance to become a fairy in my school plays because fairies are supposed to be fair-skinned!” Now, she leads sessions at schools to make students more aware about skin colour discrimination.

Attitudes are starting to change among women as they gain greater confidence from education, employment and financial independence outside the home. Emmanuel describes one Dark is Beautiful session at an all-girls middle school in the southern Indian city of Chennai. A dark-skinned teen – “stunningly beautiful but with deep self-esteem issues” – came to the front. She was weeping because, just that morning, her brother had taunted her about her skin tone.

Emmanuel was more surprised, however, when another, lighter-skinned, girl stood up. She said she’d believed dark was ugly until that moment, but apologised to her classmates with a promise to treat them better.

“They all started clapping,” Emmanuel recalls. “That’s a big move for a teenager. She really had the bigness of heart to say something like that.”

Mary-Rose Abraham

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/sep/04/dark-is-beautiful-battle-to-end-worlds-obsession-with-lighter-skin>