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The unbeautiful truth: How beauty standards perpetuate casteism, patriarchy, and colonialism in India

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Abstract

 This paper examines the complex relationship between beauty standards and systematic issues of patriarchy, casteism, and colonialism in India. It argues that beauty is not merely an aesthetic ideal but a social construct that deeply intertwines social control and power dynamics. This piece will also analyze how the historical evolution of beauty standards, influenced by religious, cultural, and colonial factors, has perpetuated social inequalities, particularly valuing lighter skin and specific body types associated with upper castes. This essay highlights how women's bodies are commodified and reinforced by oppressive norms through artistic representations and social expectations, and the legacy of colonialism further complicated these standards, embedding the notion of white supremacy into the contemporary perception of beauty. So, this analysis highlights the need to challenge these deep-seated ideals to foster a more inclusive understanding of beauty that embraces diversity and dismantles existing inequalities.

Introduction

Beauty is a dynamic, complex, and multifaceted construct that requires one to hold oneself to the beauty standards dictated by society. Indian culture heavily values beauty standards, which significantly influence self-perception and others. However, these ideals are rooted in a complex web of social control, power dynamics, and economic exploitation. There have been severe social, economic, and political repercussions when the maintenance of particular beauty standards has upheld detrimental oppressive systems like casteism, patriarchy, and colonialism. The use of beauty standards in India to uphold casteism, patriarchy, and colonialism is examined in this article. This has allowed for social control, political scheming, and economic

exploitation. To provide light on the standards development, upkeep, and contestation, it explores the historical and cultural background of these norms.

The Shaping of Beauty Ideals: Ancient Indian Art and Literature

India, a land steeped in rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions, has long been a canvas upon which the evolving conception of beauty has been painted. Throughout Indian History, the notion of aesthetic ideals has been shaped by a complex of societal norms, religious beliefs, and the influence of colonialism. In the pre-colonial period, standards for beauty in India were not significantly different from the imperatives of the dominant culture and religions. The "Lakshmi-face" was a traditional model for beauty, fashioned after the Hindu goddess of prosperity and good fortune, showing a round face and large eyes. According to Dhavalikar, the Mauryan figurines in the 4th to 2nd century B.C. represent the first representation of women in India. In the Sunga period, Bhartut depicted women in the first century B.C. with "*elaborately platted hair...round breasts, thin waist, and wide hips*," portraying these women as "stiff." However, images of women in Sanchi taken over half a century showed their bodies twisted into an "*S-shaped curve*." The *"S-shaped curve"* body and many other female body proportions had been standardized. Many other proportions of a woman's body, including the "eyes were placed two-thirds of the way up the face, the bottom of the breast were placed one heads height below the chin, the whole figure stood seven heads high... and the use of a fairly round face," had become standard by the time of the Kushan period, which lasted from the first to the fourth century C.E. Given that these proportions were not inherent to Indian women, the portraits suggest that the artists ought to be trained in order to create them and they were considered idealized beauty standards. Indian culture was shaped by the sculptures of goddesses and how Indian artists depicted gods and goddesses. As Deheja mentioned(Dehejia, 1999), the statue of Parvati, the Hindu goddess of fertility, love, harmony, marriage, and children, is another example of Indian beauty ideals; it may be deduced that her image defined the standard for beauty for women of South Asian descent. Parvati is described as a *"slender-bodied maiden of comely hips and moon-like face,"* emphasizing that people with round faces found thin bodies with prominent hips desirable.

Meanwhile, the artistic representations of women from various periods are supported by texts from antiquity. However, it is infrequent to find Accurate descriptions of beauty standards in ancient Indian literature. However, terms like *"large hips, thin waists, large and globular breasts, and lotus petal eyes"* used in various literary works conjure consistent imagery over a

protracted span of Indian history. The Shringarashata of Bhartihari describes a woman with *"heavy hips," "thick tresses that shame black bees*," and *"skin that eclipses gold luster."* Based on the literature of this kind, one might infer that the ideal definition of beauty was thick black hair and golden skin, as South Indians typically had darker features than those from other parts of the country.

So, beauty standards are not something new, and we can not say that this ideal frame of beauty is set by whom and when, but it is one way clear that it is a practice from our ancient period. In north Indian literature, which is considered an episteme of beauty, the characters are portrayed with slender hips, moon-like faces (pale/ fair skin tone), and red lips. However, in South Indian literature, women are portrayed as having red lips, long black tresses, and dusky skin. Mishra (2015) found many dark-skinned heroes in the traditional stories and folklore of the area. According to Mishra, it is unlikely that people of the time saw being black as a bad thing because one can assume that at the time, black was acceptable as a skin color for heroes, some of the most powerful gods and goddesses, and beautiful princesses. Draupadi, the main character of the Mahabharata, with *"skin as dark as night."* given that his name, Krishna, is Sanskrit *for "dark skin,"* another critical Hindu deity, was initially depicted as blue before portrayals of him changed to reflect his black complexion. It would be incredibly reductionist, though, to believe that Eurocentrism is the only factor influencing South Asian beauty standards nowadays. As has already been mentioned, considerable Aryan immigration occurred in antiquity following Alexander the Great's conquest of the areas that are now Pakistan. Having arrived in the seventh century, the Turkic-Mongol Mughals ruled over South Asia from 1526 to 1858. They were distinguished by their angular bone structure, straight and sharp noses, and fairer skin—presumably, lighter complexion. A more equitable complexion was probably a subjective norm before the spread of occidentalization.

The Manu law, which is holy and unalterable, instructs women to be based solely on religious and domestic grounds. In early Indian epics like Ramayana, the beauty of women is conceptualized and well-defined as good and evil. Shurpanakha, the anti-heroine characterized *by "dark-skinned, Pot-bellied, deep voice and thinning eyebrows," is evil. In contrast, Rama's devoted wife, Sita, defined with "paled skin, moon-shaped face, thick long black hair, red lips, soft voice, is the goddess, chaste and pure."* Lighter tones of the skin describe being pure, good, calm, and beautiful. Dark hues represent evil, chaos, and ugliness on the contrary. An Indian bond between art and the divine is a pursuit of beauty, meaning an experience of bliss and

higher truths, further influencing society's epitome of beauty. According to Gupta (2019), the able-minded woman who gets the first play is often the thin-boned, fair-complexioned actress representing Hindu cultural values and portrayed as the feminist of Indian society.

Casteism and beauty: The intersections of social hierarchy and aesthetic ideals

The connection between beauty and casteism is a complex and profoundly entrenched issue in India. If we look at history, we can see that in India, beauty standards have been closely tied to caste hierarchies. This connection can be seen in several ways, such as fair skin and upper caste, cultural and religious text, marriage, social mobility, and many more. A dark complexion is considered ugly and connected to lower castes, but fair skin is deemed lovely and desired. Darker complexion tones have historically resulted from underprivileged classes being compelled to perform physical labor outside. On the other hand, the upper caste were lighter-skinned and had more free time. Language is used to disparage Dalits based on the color of their skin; terms like "Nalupu" (dark) imply dirtiness and disgrace.(Dhanda, 2022). Sahana Heiderscheidt (2019) discusses how cultural and historical factors significantly influence beauty standards in India, reinforcing caste hierarchy. Fair skin, associated with purity, wealth, and social status, has roots in ancient caste systems where upper castes had lighter skin due to non-sun exposure professions. The historical Aryan influence on the caste system based on varna or color further reinforced the association of lighter skin with higher social status.

Also, L. V. Pandian (2021) mentioned that Brahminal philosophy bases purity and bases on skin tone because in Vedic Brahmins, the caste system is rooted in skin tone, which associates the high caste Brahmins with white skin, Kshatriya with red, Vaishyas with yellow skin and Shudras with Black. Women with lighter skin in India often give in to the demands of beauty values and norms that prevail in their caste. However, people with darker skin face a two-way battle: they are ostracized as high-caste women or struggle with fairness within their caste. There is a unique power in the concept of skin tone in Indian society. The Hindu community believes that a person is reborn into a caste by means of his or her previous life, and good conduct leads to higher castes, and bad conduct lowers his or her castes. Colorism impacts many different facets of life: social class, family educational attainment, and self-esteem. Drak-skinned individuals often face limited clothing choices and feel pressure to use filters to appear lighter, even on social media. Harvard University recently added caste as a protected category for graduate students, recognizing the prevalence of caste-based discrimination(Nimmagadda, 2021), and Institutions like Kalakshetra Foundation have been

accused of favoring students with specific physical such as tall, fair skin, thin for coveted roles in dance performance.(Nimmagadda, 2021; Raju, 2023). So, in Indian society, Casteism has deeply ingrained specific beauty standards that are fair-skinned and of specific body structure, all linked to upper castes. This has thus led to widespread discrimination and has had an impact on the esteem of a dark-skinned person. The change in beauty norms must also address caste-based discrimination for an inclusive society.

Patriarchy and the pursuit of beauty

The correlation between patriarchal structures and beauty standards is profoundly interconnected, influencing cultural norms and the lives of women in India. Ancient texts have women as appendages to men, and they represent their biopower technologies of beauty, purity, devotion, love, motherhood, and artistic pursuits, making them faithful wives, daughters, and mothers. This has ensured that patriarchal systems have enabled ideas that seem impossible to achieve and have bought one's physicality as a commodity. In his 1976 essay The History of Sexuality, Foucault examines power as a crucial disciplinary control mechanism that normalizes the subjugation of the female subject. Foucault also uses the gendered body as a location for investigation. He discusses two main types of disciplinary measures that contribute to a feminine body defined by patriarchy and the way women objectify themselves. This group includes practices such as dieting and plastic surgery. The second group of practices is very restrictive and confined for Indian women, in which they have to control their body gestures, posture, and movement to produce a feminine effect. Indian women are often seen as mere complements to men in society's social and cultural conscience, with their physical attributes being a tool for men's cultural, social, and economic conscience and being measured against desired standards. These days, a person can only be deemed beautiful if they meet the rigid criteria established by the patriarchal culture. Indian men use the expectation of women to resemble Barbie dolls to gain social acceptance and cultural power. Their status in society is measured by their economic and social capital and their cultural capital. Women, who view their accomplishments through their men, strive to attain beauty standards through self-turned hegemony. The practice of 'seeking brides' or 'seeing girls' in India infuriates women's bodies and faces, allowing the groom's families to evaluate the bride and determine if she meets their standards. This pressures young women to conform to societal beauty standards and highlights the power imbalance in Indian society, where both men and 'the few' have power. As Lee ,Heiderscheidt) Mentioned, "She is considered a good woman only if she meets societal norms,

and the strong, independent woman will eventually feel content only in a man's arm, which reduces her to a mere state of physical existence. Women are always under pressure to conform to family, society, and community expectations. In India, family members mold women into their ideal roles of wife, mother, daughter, and so on. Furthermore, cultural assumptions of womanhood are reproduced through stipulations, and the women body becomes a site of societal control. (Meena, 2010)

Beauty and colonialism

The British ruled India for 200 years, causing significant damage to the country's resources and governing structure. They exercised their rule with high caste social stratification, where whites were regarded as superior and the browns as inferior. This they achieved through polarizing groups, as there are Indians who are lighter in color receiving better jobs and rights while those darker in color were penalized and oppressed. This tended to make caste lines more rigid, with a division between the lighter-skinned Indians and the darker-skinned Indians. The polarization became intense at the twilight of British rule as there were different groups that emerged to be contenders for the new governing party. Like in the past, South Asia had a systematized definition of beauty, but due to several British power invasions, this definition has changed from the imagined traditional South Asian qualities to a highly idealized projection of what beauty should be. In the context of India, the terms "fair" and "attractive" are considered interchangeable. It has now been refuted that colonial administrators such as Herbert Risley Hope were experts in *"scientific racism*." Based on nose width, Risley Hope separated the aboriginal population into two races: the *"Aryan"* (Indo-European) and the *"Dravidian"* (South Indian). Although the British intended to use this distinction to understand the people better, it polarized society by introducing systematic oppression, making it difficult for those from deep South India to make ends meet and attempt to rise. Simultaneously, the Northern counterparts, who trace their lineage back to ancient Aryan migrants, received comparatively more favorable treatment.

Persistent effects of Western beauty standards in the Indian post-colonial context have very important sociological implications, this is a phenomenon that is complex and rather multifaceted. Colonial-era feminine beauty standards persist even today in aspects related to the South Asian popular culture of depicting and perceiving the female body. This colonial legacy has long and complex psychological implications for Indian women, more particularly in terms of how they form their perceptions and perceive their roles in society. Internalization

of foreign beauty standards has ushered in deep inferiority complexes among those women who cannot measure up to these standards. Fanon in Black Skin, white mask(1967) argues that colonialization does not merely occur due to the economic and teritorial benefits but also leaves a profound psychological influence on the interaction between colonialized and colonialists. He argues that colonial powers inseminated Western culture, leading to people of color adopting the same values and ideals as invaders, creating a vision that deviates them from their world and prevents them from becoming a white nation. The inferiority complex implanted during colonization alters the understanding of superior-inferior relationships with other groups.

In modern India, skin tone determines one's beauty level, with whiteness being associated with beauty standards. Fairness is so essential to Indian beauty standards that, as Indian scholar Meenu Bhambhani stated in an interview, a lady may be deemed lovely only for possessing this characteristic and not having any other particular defects. Modern beauty standards in India and globally prioritize fair skin and slim figures, with historical Indian women preferring curvy hourglass figures and extra stomach fat. The *"slim figure"* has gained popularity recently as a measure of attractiveness in actor appearances and marriage ads. In India, hair is considered an additional aspect of attractiveness, with texture, color, and length playing significant roles. Globally, long or medium hair length is favored, while black, curly, and wavy hair is preferred. "Many women come to him for advice on how to make their hair grow longer," Gelles says, citing an interview she did with an Indian hairstylist. "He recommends oiling and vitamin supplements." British colonization of India for over 200 years inseminated Western values, culture, and language, weakening traditional values and language. The British promoted the white-superiority notion, defining beauty as good and beautiful, social status, caste, and intellectual ability. They attributed fairer skin tones to higher-class, smart, and beautiful Indians, while darker Indians were considered low-class and ugly. This reinforced patriarchal society, leading to Indian women's aspiration for fairness to improve their social status(Mohammadpur-Dehkordi, n.d.). As Wardhani(2018) pointed out, women in post-colonial societies think that skin color determines social status; she mentioned that prior to colonization, women were idealized according to regional standards of beauty, which included round breasts, black hair, moon-like face, huge eyes, medium-complexioned skin, a tight waist but larger hips, and arched eyebrows. Because women have been duped by the beauty standards established by colonialist agents, the local beauty standards have vanished in recent times, and the idea that white people are the socially favored skin tone worldwide was absorbed by British

colonists in India. Consequently, by eliminating and misrepresenting the traditional Indian beauty standards and advancing the Western beauty ideal, British colonial officials were able to successfully introduce the idea that 'white is beautiful' into Indian society through a variety of means.

However, in postcolonial countries, features such as face shape, posture, height, dress code, and all facets of lifestyle are also considered in the redefining of beauty standards, not just skin tone. As previously mentioned, pre-colonial women were idealized based on regional features such as round breasts, black hair, moon-like faces, large eyes, medium-complexioned skin, arched eyebrows, and round eyes. In postcolonial India, however, Western/Caucasian features such as tall and slim bodies, blond hair, blue eyes, and white skin have replaced these features. In another work by Rochana Majumdar article on marriage and advertisement in the twentieth century, she describes how marriage advertisements were used in the 'study of traditional Indian societal beauty standards' as they provide insight into the qualities that are valued in women in general and brides in particular. One of these marriage ads features a girl's family from 1910s Calcutta characterizing their daughter as having a 'good figure, medium complexion skin color, and medium complexion.' In 1927, the parents of another child said of their daughter that she had a '*glistening dark complexion*.' This article suggests that the centuries-old norm from ancient India has persisted and demonstrates the predilection for medium to dark complexions. However, due to foreign invasions, there is now an association between fair skin and beauty.

While white supremacy and the assumption that white people are beautiful were ingrained in colonized nations due to colonialism, globalization greatly standardized the ideal of beauty. It altered people's perceptions of beauty everywhere. According to Geoffrey Jones (2011), the Western civilization mission of colonialism produced white superiority and the perception that "white is good" in colonized countries; nevertheless, globalization strengthened these values and was crucial in spreading the Western beauty ideal worldwide. Globalization can be defined as the complex interconnection of nations around the world created by swift movements of ideas, commodities, and cultural practices. It has significantly influenced global beauty standards, as it has in India. The beauty landscape of India has come to bear a significant change- the rate of Western beauty standards is going up, but the practice of indigenous aesthetic values has steeply risen.

The primary route through which globalization has impacted Indian beauty standards is the extensive dissemination of media and entertainment platforms, of which Bollywood is the greatest. The cinematic representation of feminine beauty has always held a powerful influence over the societal beauty norm; however, the rising exposure to international media has increased the centrality of Eurocentric characteristics while steering clear of typical Indian beauty standards. As Rebeca Gelles explains, Ideologies, opinions, and values from other locations are more widely accessible globally as a result of the current digital era's rapid rise and spread of globalization, especially because of the media. In addition, it appears that Western-style beauty standards are making their way to India through culture.

The interplay of Economic exploitation and beauty

Indian beauty industry has grown at an exponential rate because of the increasing consumer spending and because of the standard of beauty followed around the world. However, this grew into economic exploitation, unrealistic beauties for women, and globalization's influence on Indian customers. The industry aggressively promotes products conforming to these standards, such as weight-loss pills, hair straighteners, and skin-lightening lotions. Brands like Fair & Lovely have faced criticism for elevating fair skin as the ideal of beauty, feeding colorism, and exploiting darker-skinned people's fears. Anti-aging products also involve exploitation. Advertisements often demand unrealistic beauty standards, thereby unnecessarily increasing the amount of money spent on rather overpriced or useless products. The global beauty industry is worth approximately $511 billion and remains primarily healthy on the grounds of profit, mostly at the expense of consumer safety and ethics. Companies frequently exploit insecurities related to beauty standards to drive sales, leading to a cycle where consumers feel pressured to purchase products that promise to enhance their appearance. (Connelly, n.d.)The production of beauty products often involves exploitative labor practices, particularly in developing countries where workers may face poor working conditions and low wages. Gender dynamics compound this economic exploitation, as women are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs within the beauty supply chain. (Connelly, n.d.). According to a Nielsen study, in grooming and cosmetic and beauty products, women from India spend more than in all other developing nations, including particularly the lower and middle classes, in which product purchases seem necessary for social mobility and self-esteem, leading to very severe financial consequences for the customers. A comprehensive

strategy is used to target Indian consumers in the beauty business. Considering diverse dimensions that influence a consumer's behavior, many elements influence Indian consumer preferences for cosmetic items, such as personality and its effects, perception, attitude, physical attributes, cost, and environmental conscience. Because of globalization and media representations, the beauty industry frequently takes advantage of Indian consumers by upholding unachievable beauty standards. The pressure to conform to narrow beauty ideals can lead to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders. The economic implications extend beyond individual spending; they reflect a broader societal crisis linked to the commodification of beauty and the emotional toll it takes on individuals. (Dove, n.d.; *How Much Do Our Insecurities Cost Us?* n.d.). Globalization also promoted the spread of beauty standards through different tools that affected cultural definitions of beauty by reshaping social identities. The media's normalization of specific beauty standards for Indian women makes those who do not fulfill those standards face challenges as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the complex relationship between beauty standards and societal structures in India reveals a profound legacy of casteism, patriarchy, and colonialism. These ideals of beauty have been deeply entrenched in historical contexts and continue to perpetuate social inequalities and empower oppressive narratives about self-worth and identity. The commercialization of women's attributes and societal norms around looks has created an environment where discrimination is more prevalent, particularly towards people with specific body shapes and skin tones, impacting marginalized communities who have endured this form of systematic bias. We have to look at the present-day beauty ideal by challenging these very deep notions and creating a sense of beauty that is more inclusive, celebrates diversity, and shows resistance to conformity. By destroying the power structures that have historically shaped society's conceptions of beauty, this process seeks to advance a more just and equitable society in which each person is respected and acknowledged for who they are, free from the oppressive limitations imposed by antiquated and constrictive ideals of beauty.

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