

Review Article

Fair skin in South Asia: an obsession?

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A large part of South Asia was governed by the British for around two centuries. The 'white' race was the ruler and the 'dark' or 'black' natives were the ruled. The colonial legacy in South Asia may be one of the contributory factors for the belief that White is powerful and White is beautiful.

The British and American influence

The British left South Asia by the middle of the twentieth century. Large parts of Asia and Africa gained independence in the 1950s and the 1960s and the Sun was finally beginning to set on the British Empire. The decline of the British was followed by the rise of their transatlantic cousins, the Americans. The American empire in contrast to the British was mainly an economic one. The American dream and the idea of America as an El dorado caught the imagination of the masses. Hollywood, American television and the entertainment industry exerted a powerful influence on South Asia.

The invaders

South Asia, a heterogeneous region has been a melting pot of cultures since antiquity. The fair Aryans subjugating the darker

Dravidians has been stressed in history, though recently some historians have cast doubts on the theory. There were later invasions of other fair skinned races like the Moghuls and the Europeans.¹ The Hindu caste system with the 'fairer' higher castes and 'darker' lower castes in general, may have given another impetus to the notion of the superiority of fairness.

Fairness and South Asian society

In South Asia, pale skin is considered as social markers of aristocratic lineage and class allegiance. Dark skin is associated with labour and field work in the Sun.¹ 'White' skin has a colonial notion of power and superiority.² According to many authors, the preference for 'white' is also reflected in the South Asian film industry. The heroines of films are usually fair and beautiful, the heroes are fair and handsome and the villains are dark and swarthy. There have been exceptions to this rule of course. In recent times, beauty pageants have become common in certain regions of South Asia and South Asian women have done well in international beauty contests. In India, beauty contest winners are extraordinarily tall, breathtakingly slim and have a light honey-colored skin.³ Matrimonial columns and web sites reveal the influence of a young woman's skin colour on her marketability to marriage partners.³

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Generally speaking, a preference for fair women is universal and has been known to exist in nearly every society including ancient India, Egypt, Crete and Japan.¹ Fairness of skin was considered as a yardstick of purity and innocence.

Fairness creams

This widespread preference for fair skin has been exploited by the manufacturers of fairness creams. A consumer goods giant launched the mother of all fairness creams in the subcontinent in 1976. Today, the product is marketed in over 38 countries and has become the largest selling skin lightening cream in the world. Today a number of other companies have also jumped on the 'Fairness creams' bandwagon. The craze for fairness creams has emerged in the last fifty years. Skin whitening and fairness creams have spread to other regions with dark-skinned people like Malaysia, Egypt, Nigeria and other African countries.^{4,5} Recently a fairness cream has been launched exclusively for men. Initial surveys show that an increasing number of Indian men are already using or are in favour of using the cream.⁶ Recently the male fairness cream was also launched in Nepal and other South Asian countries.

The power of advertising

The natural preference for a fair skin has been fanned by the manufacturers of fairness creams. Advertisements in the media aim to produce a hierarchy of values based on the notion that fairness is an object of desire.⁷ Certain advertisements had tried to project a notion that a fair skin is a necessary prerequisite for success in both the

professional and the personal sphere. The natural anxiety of men and women regarding skin colour has been heightened. Whitening has been represented as an active process effected through lightening.² Fairness creams portray fair skin as an object of desire in countries where a large proportion of the population is dark. Fair skin is said to heighten attractiveness towards the opposite sex. The advertisement for a male fairness cream shows a dark-skinned college boy being ignored by girls. On using the product his complexion lightens and girls flock to him like moths to a flame.

Melanocytes, melanin and skin colour

The melanocytes in the epidermis are responsible for the intensity of skin colour. The number of melanocytes is the same in both fair and dark skinned people. The amount of melanin produced by the melanocytes is partly determined by genetics and partly by the environment.⁸ People living near the tropics have more melanin to protect them from the harsher rays of the Sun. In the 1800s white skin was deemed desirable by many people of European descent.⁸ Women even ate arsenic to make their skin pale. However, during the twentieth century, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction and a tanned skin became a fashion trendsetter among Caucasians.⁸ Fairness creams halt the natural production of melanin to bring about an artificially-enhanced and genetically-unnatural whiteness.² A study states that there is marketing of a hybrid creature, a dream-doll with Asian features and Caucasian skin.²

Adverse effects of skin lightening preparations

Certain advertisements portray the sun as an enemy and harp on the theme that the skin should be protected using sunscreens and sun blocks. A demelanised skin would of course be more vulnerable to damage by the sun. Many fairness creams may contain skin-bleaching agents like hydroquinone, steroids, mercury salts, hydrogen peroxide and magnesium peroxide among others.¹ Mercury derivatives may cause neurotoxicity, mercury-induced nephropathy and immunotoxicity.⁹ Hydroquinone preparations can cause ochronosis, hyperchromic or hypochromic erythrocytes and neuropathy.⁹ It is reported that up to 60% of those who practice skin lightening may suffer from at least one complication.

Economic impact of fairness creams

Added to the adverse effects, the cost is another worrying fact associated with the use of fairness creams. In India, it was found that of the Rs. 3,000-crore cosmetics and toiletries market, the skincare segment accounts for Rs. 1,200 crore. Among these cosmetics products, fairness products account for a whopping Rs 700 crore of this segment. The annual growth rate is between 10 and 15 per cent.¹⁰ One popular cosmeceutical company recently has reported that the rural growth of their market had been phenomenal in the latter part of the year, 2006 from 1.7 per cent in the first quarter to 14 per cent in the last quarter. They also launched several newer products in the latter part of the year, leading to an overall 64 per cent market growth.¹¹ In general, the cost of fairness creams is very

high. For example, one of the commonly used fairness creams cost 45 Nepalese rupees (1US\$=72.5 Nepalese rupees) for 45 grams. One might need 45 grams for a week making the monthly expenditure nearly 200 Nepalese rupees. Many times, the patients go for a more costly preparation believing that these will work better for them.

Promoting an ideal body image

Fairness creams project a particular body image as the preferred one and then sell a product to help people attain the particular ideal. Thus it may meet the criteria for disease mongering.^{7,12} Pharmaceutical companies also manufacture demelanizing preparations. Controlled studies on the efficacy and safety of fairness creams are lacking. A particular advertisement had claimed that a particular product produces 60 per cent more fairness than any other cream. The advertisement does not mention which studies were conducted, where and on whom.¹³

Skin lightening beauty treatments

Skin lightening treatments are offered in many beauty saloons. These treatments rely on bleaching to give the skin a lighter appearance. Many preparations are unregulated. Ayurvedic preparations contain natural skin-lightening agents like *Kumkumadi tailum*.¹ Studies on the safety and efficacy of these preparations and treatments are lacking.

Fairness creams are a fact of life over much of South Asia. They are over the counter products and are available without a prescription. Doctors and especially

dermatologists have an important role to play. They should educate patients that black is also beautiful and skin colour is not the sole arbiter of beauty. The concept of an ideal body image being propagated through the media should be countered. The mechanism of action of these creams can be explained to patients and the public. Dermatologists as learned and respected members of society can lead a debate on the issue of fairness creams and skin whitening.

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