Let's get this straight

'Jhaadu', 'Bush', 'Noddle-wig', we have all heard it, and so far, accepted it as it is. The unique texture curls carry inevitably becomes an identity of that individual. Yet many of us choose to take the other route: the flat iron route.

"I was called 'jhaadu', 'portable jhadu', 'chidiya ka ghosla', 'bhussa baahar aara hai', 'dimaag baalon ke roop mai bahar aara hai', 'Maggie'.......sometimes adults also commented..." says Lipsa Mohanty, a Textile designer based in Delhi, sharing her incidences when her curls were the talk back in school.

Confluence of media and minds

"What a frizzball!" a student shouted at Mia as soon as she jumped on the debate stage. We all will unanimously agree that the 'Before' Mia from the Princess Diaries is the unofficial icon we have had for quite a long time.

The whole idea of straightening hair has subconsciously managed to make us believe that it is something so shameful that our textures and individuality should be hidden, and to our dismay, media of the recent past follows suit.

The idea of straightening our hair to look more 'presentable' or 'sophisticated' has been brainwashed into our minds with time. No one holds the singular power of influence as good as media does, and time and again, be it rather subtly, we are told that straight hair is better. Makeovers in teenage movies often end up in not more than changing an unkempt curly mane to straight smooth locks, which leads to magically making everything fall into place in the plot.

Ridhi Khattar, a Fashion Design student, shares that on a positive note, people do consider straight hair to be the better, yet the notion is slowly but surely, changing for the better, "Considering the example of Livon ad I got a little positive that curly hair are 'normal'. Also actresses like Kangana Ranaut and Sanya Malhotra have given a more positive outlook that actually give the impression that curls are pretty."

'Watch nearly ANY series and you'll notice that any female main character with curly hair in the first season will have it straightened by the second or third season.' wrote Forbes back in November 2017.

Yet curly hair does have its fair share of screen presence when it comes to characters who are considered 'quirky', 'geek' or, to be a bit positive, 'fierce' with the 'fros. Curls are portrayed to be a character of the untamed, adventurous sides of ourselves. Temptresses and sirens in story books are often shown with the same hair, even though they live in the sea! The wild and wanton natures are perfectly coupled as a metaphor curly hair provides, and the same has been taught to us as kids.

In order to look presentable, Khattar shares how she and her mother tackled her hair **"I started pretty early especially for weddings and parties because I guess my mother and even myself was not confident in the curls I have.** I used to do it (straightening) very often."

So why was it 'Curly Hair, Very Fair' back in kindergarten? We are told to associate curly hair to the good side only when it is long and flowy, depicting innocence and purity. These types of curves in the hair are often manipulated curls done with the aid of a curling iron, which makes the hair look more 'decent', yet giving the character enough personality to stand out.

Unruliness of the curls is something alerting to many who have grown up never seeing a 'bushy' crown-head in their own family. People simply do not like what they don't know, and are wary of venturing into the unknown. Agreeing, Khattar mentions "The (Indian) society is all about being 'Normal' and doing what majority of people do, which is why they like straight hair." They don't accept exceptions and people who are different which is why they are kind of insensitive." Exceptions in a physical state is something so different to the common folk that is is not accepted by people right away, leading us to be obliviously insensitive towards each other.

Its all in History
Where exactly did the notion of straightening began? Since time immemorial, textured hair have been straightened out for reasons unimaginable. Hair is often given a significance in one's religion. Especially in African tribes, hairstyles played a major role in determining the social status based on ethnicity, marital status, wealth and a spiritual way of reaching out to God. These elaborate looks required hours of braiding and twisting each curl, and often became a focal point of meeting and socialising.

When North Americans first sighted the texture back in 1444, they termed it as 'wool', and were nonetheless fascinated and entranced by the complexities of the hairstyles Africans then carried. Since their main aim was slavery, robbing the tribe off their identity meant a shaven head.

The then Europeans pushed their standards of beauty: fair skin, straight hair and Caucasians facial features. This mentality and belief system was passed down subconsciously to younger generations.

1700s brought hope to Black Hair, free women wore eye-catching hairstyles, drawing attention of everyone. Later on 'Tignon law' forced them to cover their hair with a fabric in the 1780s, which backfired as women of colour went for the most elaborate fabrics and gigantic yet beautiful hats to showcase their identity without necessarily having their hair open.

The Hassle with the Tassel
The media's notions playing in our minds like a reel forces many young girls to wake up hours before school or work and straighten them manes out. Recent studies still show that textured or naturally curly hair are considered to be unprofessional at the workplace.

"4 out of 10 little girls with natural ringlets said they hated their curls. Additionally, only 10 percent of women in the US said they feel proud of their curls." mentions a Medium article tackling the issue. With lack of awareness about the hair type, many people with textured hair are often clueless on how to 'tame' their strands, and the easiest way out is to iron them flat.

Yet the youth of today is more accepting to variety than ever before. Any and all discrimination is given a second-thought. That being said, Indians have had their fair share of incidences when it comes to the diversity of our hair.

School children with textured hair are often bullied for it, and when it comes to us Desis, the tag of bullying is dismissed in the form of light-hearted mockery.

"I studied in a convent school which had a lot of South Indian Christian students. With my curly hair, a lot of people started called me 'mallu'." says Khattar, "Initially I was really offended by it. There have been incidents where my family members did that too. But I have made my peace with that."

To nullify the discrimination prevalent in their lands, US Government established the CROWN Act in 2019, which stands for 'Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural hair', prohibiting the denial of employment and education because of hair texture or carrying protective hairstyles ranging from braids, locks or twists.

Khattar believes that people who comment negatively on your unique traits simply lack an open mindset, "They are still a puppet to the media and the society", yet further mentions

that normalization of hair-differences is a major approach the Indian youth needs to partake in.

Seeing the glass half-full, Mohanty mentions that it is not all bad "...At the same time some people appreciated my hair, they liked my hair open and call them and me beautiful, but they were few." She laughs as she recalls a dry incident, stating how mean opinions do not shatter her confidence, "In school, **my classmates and friends would put pencil shavings and other stuff in my hair and laugh because the shavings used to get stuck in my curls.**"

The duality of the Perm and Equal Love

Permanent hair straightening became the most talked-about hair trend in the 1950s, so much so that almost every black person of the then American society had it done. Often termed as 'rebonding' in the Southeast nations, getting a 'perm' is no less than going under a knife to some, and deciding to do is is a major decision to many.

When Hermione tamed her hair for the Yule Ball with a potion, she told Harry, "it's way too much bother to do every day." and we can't disagree. Manipulating textured hair can be a task. Yet, just like Hermione, curlies sometimes do love a change. "**I temporarily straighten my hair when I was 20, just to see how will I look with straight hair** and to know the actual length of my hair at that time, (laughs) and most importantly to realise that it will take the almost the whole night to straighten my curls by myself." says Mohanty.

Societal pressures also plays a big role in forming an individual's opinions. Samridhi Jain, a poet working her way through life, mentions that she took to the perm "**I permanently straightened my hair since I was 18 years old because I was too tired of my unmanageable curly hair!**"

Some embrace the so-called extra, Khattar explains "I love my curls despite all the comments passed and multiple requests to get a permanent straightening. I mean, that is ridiculous. It's my hair. They're not coming in your face."

Do people regret the perm? Depends. For Samridhi, bumping into the Curly Girl Method has been a boon, "I learned about it just a few days back and I am so going natural now full on with my perfectly frizzy curly hair it has opened a door for me I didn't know existed!" Many still decide to straighten from time to time, and consider it to be no harm, and a nice change, be it for just a night.

"Curls look as beautiful as ever. Don't ever let it become your weakness because who can call beautiful curls weak??" Khattar believes, agreeing that she would not mind straightening her own crown occasionally.

Although insecurities regarding our physical attributes can be an issue undermined by bigger problems of equality, it is nonetheless a part of it. We have come a long way in claiming our hair, be it wavy, straight, kinky, coily or somewhere in between. Hair is an integral part of our culture, and the responsibility restore it's shine and pride is in the hands of each individual. India as a nation still has many more steps to take to accept the diversity that we bestow.