



**“Y**ou used to be so beautiful. Now you are dark.”  
How can I forget what an Indian Auntie — much darker than I — offhandedly said to me when I was 13?

Shocked, I didn't realize I stopped being beautiful just because the sun had hugged me a little tighter over time. At that age I was ignorant that measurement of skin color for beauty was rampant among Indians. This was the onset of my “inferiority complex-ion.” Feelings of inadequacy. Insecurities for not meeting the cultural standards of a favorable complexion, resulting in deflated self-esteem and self-worth.

Unfortunately, it was not just Auntie's opinion that placed value on skin color. The Indian culture has glorified the pursuit of fairness. And colorism is a global thread uniting our beliefs with those of some Asians, African Americans, Jamaicans, and Latinos, who have similarly overvalued the lighter skin tone.

You cannot escape the white preference in American pop culture, media, billboards, desi marriage classifieds, and crowned Miss Indias. Look at Disney's Snow White (who is the fairest of them all?), Bollywood's glamorization of European actresses and popular skin whitening products like Fair and Lovely/Handsome (or Fair and White found in America).

I find it ironic that among Jamaicans there is a trend to bleach skin browner, for fashion and increasing social status, in the manner that some Indians are whitening theirs, whilst whites are tanning theirs darker.

Was I wrong to believe these one-dimensional views were standards? Yes. I know otherwise today thankfully. How did I come to learn that natural and lovely was ugly? Was I alone in feeling dejected and rejected for my complexion?

No, I was not alone. Seeking clarity, I spoke to Radha Modi, a doctoral student of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Modi interviewed 85 second-/third-generation South Asian Americans on whether skin color framed their lives.

In short, her findings:

“Feedback” or messages on favorable complexion began in childhood *within* their own communities. It came from: Parents.

Immediate/Extended Family.

Networks, like religious communities.

Out of love so the child is given “the best life possible” (better chances for suitable partners if light-skinned).

The burden of “managing skin color” fell disproportionately on girls, due to the global beauty industry, pressures of marriageability and the community-level desire to pass on light skin color to the next generation. These girls needed to remember to:

Avoid the outdoors, the sun and beach.

Use sunblock and umbrella.

Use homemade chickpea flour and turmeric remedies

Use Fair and Lovely, if accessible

They suffered an emotional struggle — growing up in USA, interviewees experienced frustration and guilt about desiring light skin.

What are the adverse psychological and mental consequences of such beliefs? I interviewed Indians living in America to understand the effects.

A 19-year-old Gujarati girl says, “When I was younger I wanted to be lighter. But I didn't know why. Went to school, didn't have colored friends. I wanted to fit in. The models, actors and actresses were white. To be big in the world, you have to be white to be accepted. I tried turmeric, yogurt, and *channa* flour, takes off dirt and blackheads too. Then as I got older it didn't affect me as much. I won't go to the extreme, bleach my face or not go outside because of the sun. It is what it is and have to accept myself for who I am. It would hurt if someone said some-



**Xahej Bajipura** discovers her struggle to overcome inadequacies felt for her skin color are part of a common narrative.  
Sketch: **Dominic Xavier**

thing to me but I won't let it ruin my day. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You have to move on.”

When she was having problems — overworked and a husband questioning his sexuality — Sona Surajmukhi, 42, recalls her *bhabhi* (elder brother's wife) saying, “I know things are not going your way, but at least you're fair.”

“Being fair doesn't help in hell,” she says sarcastically. Her feelings were discounted. The color of her skin was meant to trump any suffering she experienced, she says. “I felt insulted and hurt, much more than by any racism I felt growing up in America.”

In India she was treated like a supermodel once she walked off the airplane. In America, she was mostly ridiculed. Because of this inequality, she rebels against any mentality driven by color by “being (*her*) own person, not fitting into a box or following another's path, and not paying any heed to what others want.” Skin color does not figure in conversations with her nine-year-old autistic son. “He is free to be Saiyan.”

Sona, who was always bothered by her yellow skin undertone, uses a dark blush called Black Radiance made

for African Americans. People would call her crazy for tanning, though she admits she looks better and healthier with more color.

Speaking with non-Indian friends, I learned that they had no concept of our “inferiority complex-ion” issue. Are we catastrophizing something that is wholly about self-hating, racism and insignificant in understanding beauty?

I learned to love my rich earth-tone skin only after I had uprooting myself and moved thousands of miles away from both India and from my home state of California, where I grew up in a tight-knit traditional Indian community. Strangers outside my background helped me build self-worth. They saw something my Indian counterparts could not allow themselves to see. I began to appreciate the beauty of my skin because others around me recognized its beauty. They always envied its splendid earth color. They couldn't believe Indians didn't like their natural complexion.

When did color begin to matter?

According to UCLA history Professor Vinay Lal, the first notion of distinguishing people on account of color began in the Rig Veda where it noted “fair-skinned Aryans” defeated “dark-skinned Dasas.” He said, “Once colonial rule was established in India, it was but natural, under the circumstances, that being white-skinned or light-skinned was seen as a mark of superiority, as something that conferred privileges.”

Tufts Sociology Professor Pawan Dhingra, added that given “all the British imports (*metric system, system of governance, education system*) to our cultural history, British appearances are valid, valuable, though it is surprising and unbelievable that the colonized would emulate the colonizer rather than object all that the colonizer subjected them to.”

He added: “How do you fit into a country? By adopting and navigating through a hierarchy system within it — find ways into it and succeed within the racial system. You praise whiteness and criticize blackness — I'm not saying that's what's going on, but where it is. If African Americans were emulated in the US, then it would be different.”

It breaks my heart when on an online medical health forum I read a mother asking a doctor:

“How do I improve the complexion of my eight-month-old to make him fair?”

Are we teaching our children and our people that we are not as valuable, as desirable, as lovable because of something they could not choose?

Who is to say what is and is not beautiful?

I can only speak for myself and I do:

*“They say beauty is in the eyes of the beholder  
Now I say it's in the eyes of me as I've gotten older  
Everything but natural, I dust off my shoulders  
You can chip away, I'm built like a boulder  
I'm my own creator and molder,  
Every hair, scar, and freckle  
speckling my rich earth tone skin  
from my nose to what I know  
I'm as beautiful outside as within  
Only to my affirmations I listen  
and look how high I've risen  
soared from the core  
I know so much more  
of my beauty than anyone has ever seen  
To love each unique curve, shade, and blemish  
is a blessing  
I eject external shallow standards  
Accepting anything else is slander  
Unhindered, I transcend the limits of ignorance  
knowing the significance  
of my inner consciousness.  
Feeding into obsolete beliefs is debauchery,  
Time to free ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.  
Glowing skin is a gift from our ancestors  
Embracing the richness of it is the answer.”* ■