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India's Color Complex: One Day's Worth of Matrimonials

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Abstract Lighter skin complexions may function as a form of capital, particularly for women, in marriage markets. The existence of a preference for light skin for marital partners is an index of the presence of colorism or color bias in a given society. This paper reports on a detailed examination of marital advertisements that appeared in India's Sunday Times on a single day in March 2013. It asks how often skin shade is mentioned in the advertisements placed among those seeking grooms and those seeking brides, how those mentions are distributed by the reported age of the prospective marital partner, and the type of language used to describe the individual's complexion. The study finds that skin shade is described far more often in advertisements placed by prospective brides or their families than prospective grooms or their families, and, whenever complexion is mentioned, the possession of lighter skin shades.

Keywords Stratification economics · Skin shade · Colorism · Racism · Marriage markets · Marital advertisements · Gender · Gender bias · Patriarchy

Introduction

Marriage, in the historical heteronormative sense, provides both men and women with a measure of social capital. Nevertheless, due the institution's patriarchal history it is imperative for women, more than men, to first conform to the normalized idea of beauty to individually amass the necessary amount of social capital to be considered marriageable. Women's often- abased social and economic status force them to follow a strict gender script in order to reflect society's, or their specific culture's, interpretation of femininity and beauty. Globally femininity and beauty are correlated with light skin; similarly, India's complex relationship with colorism means that within the country

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beauty is synonymous with light complexion. Debate persists about the origins of colorism in India. Some scholars suggest that it is a direct result of European imperialism; others argue that people around the world possess a natural affinity for light skin. However, based upon research it appears that colorism is a significant factor in the mate-seeking process.

Colorism complicates both race and gender politics. Arguably, colorism would fail to exist without the presence of racism, which is a symptom of the construction of race. Therefore, colorism adds a color component to the social capital women might seek to possess in order to present themselves as marriageable.

Hunter (2013) defines race capital as "the way light skin and Anglo bodies operate as a form of capital." Just as racism birthed race capital, colorism spawned color capital, which is the privilege afforded to lighter complexioned individuals with Eurocentric physical features. Color capital greatly influences women's overall social capital. Furthermore, internationally, wealth and status are associated with people of light complexion. Consequently, women who desire to marry men of considerable wealth and/or social status must typically possess or create a high degree of social capital of their own, in this case, color capital. Women who lack the color capital necessary to make them marriageable often use skin lighting products and other cosmetic procedures to borrow the desired color capital.

This study extends the work of Hunter (2002) on the international skin-tone bias women face, and Jha and Adelman (2009) on how gendered ideology and colorism affect women during the mate-seeking process on matrimonial websites. The paper highlights the origins of colorism within India and specifically how this form of discrimination affects marriage choices and the institution of marriage. Furthermore, it analyzes the relationship between social capital and skin color for both men and women globally, with an acute focus on Indian women. Most importantly, the matrimonial database composed using 1 day's worth of advertisements from New Delhi's *Sunday Times* tests Ramasubramanian's and Jain's (2008) hypothesis which argues that, in regards to Indian matrimonial advertisements, women announce their skin complexion more than men make known their desire for light complexioned women and few if any advertisers describe themselves as dark complexioned.

Literature review

Colorism and social capital

Racism operates as the "discrimination against persons based on their racial identity, which in turn is traditionally designated through a complex mix of self-identification and other-identification through appearance (including color) and ancestry" (Harris 2008). Conversely, colorism is far more complex because it "involves discrimination against persons based upon their physiognomy, regardless of their perceived racial identity" (Harris 2008). Marira and Mitra (2013) add that colorism is a "subtype of racial phenotypicality bias in which skin tone is used as a metric by which to discriminate against those outside or within one's own racioethnic group." Colorism is arguably distinct from racism since it can operate both within and upon a racial group. Some would affirm that people within the same race lack the ability to execute

racism, but individuals of the same race can execute colorism because physical variations exist within racial groupings.

Nevertheless, a definite connection exists between colorism and racism. Hamilton, Goldsmith, and Darity even declare that "colorism functions as a specific type of racism associated with the stigmatization of persons with darker skin and the privileging of those with lighter skin" (Hamilton et al. 2009). Hunter (2002), in conjunction with Hamilton and colleagues, argues that "colorism would likely not exist without racism, because colorism rests on the privilege of whiteness in terms of phenotype, aesthetics, and culture." Maddox (2004) supports Hunter's argument, declaring that racial bias grows from the idolization of white Eurocentric phenotypic characteristics (light skin and eyes, long and straight hair, narrow nose and thin lips) over "features toward the other end of the continuum" (dark skin, kinky or coarse hair, broad nose and thick lips). According to Maddox, "as a consequence, white and non-white members of many societies are exposed to this ideal and adhere to it in their evaluation of themselves and others."

More scholarly research has focused on race as opposed to colorism and, though most scholars understand race to be a social construct, few discard the construct's relevancy and power. Colorism, arguably a byproduct of racism, "is a global phenomenon that consistently privileges lighter skin tones over darker ones" (Marira and Mitra 2013). Whether colorism emerged with racism from the fruits of imperialism or predated the manifestation of white supremacy, it is undeniable that darker complexioned people possess less social and monetary capital in India and many other parts of the world.

"The globalization of media, technologies of body modification, and persistent power of race and gender hierarchies around the globe have made the pursuit of racial capital an important strategy for economic success" (Hunter 2013). In an effort to amass monetary and social capital, some people attempt to augment their color capital. Skin-lightening creams and cosmetic surgeries have created avenues for people of color around the world to alter their skin shade and phenotypicality.

"Desire for whiteness finds expression in the existence of intraracial discrimination in the use of skin whiteners and cosmetics designed to make one look more white" (Jha and Adelman 2009). According to Glenn (2008) the main customers for these products are women between the ages of 16 and 35. Shrestha (2013) mentions that Indian men also use skin lighting products, but the practice is often "derided as a further marker of Indian otherness against a white, masculine norm."

"Racial capital only makes sense in a racist society…[and] is connected to the large systems of racism and colorism" (Hunter 2011). In a society infected with racism individuals' human capital is determined by where their race rests within the society's racialized hierarchy of power and privilege. Hunter contends that this is especially the case for women, and some men, of the Global South, which includes Africa, Asia and Latin America. "For example, matrimonial advertisements in India are notorious for specifying a desire for the bride to be 'wheatish' or 'fair' in complexion…thus, the skin shade preference may also have a greater gender specificity in some contexts" (Hamilton et al. 2009).

The situation is more severe for women because "beauty is a form of social capital" (Hunter 2002) and an interesting relationship between skin color and beauty exists that connects lightness with beauty. Nevertheless, "whiteness as a standard of beauty does

not emerge from third world contexts or among people of color but it is also perpetuated as a feminine ideal for and by white women. Skin lightening products have a long history of catering to white women in the United States" (Shrestha 2013). Throughout history, white women historically wanted lighter skin—outside the context of imperial influences. Later, imperialism brought that aesthetic and desire for/value of whiteness/lightness to other cultures.

Globally a strong correlation exists between light skin and wealth, which is considered the color-class hierarchy. Russell-Cole and colleagues (2013) define this phenomenon as the "social, economic, and political societal framework that follows skin-color differences." The authors argue that color classism's roots began centuries ago in agrarian societies because day laborers possessed darker complexions than landowners. However, they insist that imperialism exposed the world to the "bleaching syndrome." Many indigenous populations suffered the destruction of their cultural values and practices, finding themselves forced to adopt European values and practices. European conquerors established an environment in which non-Europeans internalized the belief that light skin and European phenotypic features represent true beauty and economic power. These beliefs were reinforced by the fact that Europeans were most often the rulers and economic elite of the newly established order. As a result, in today's society "people's judgments about people are literally colored by skin tone, so that darker-skinned individuals are viewed as less intelligent, trustworthy, and attractive than their lighter-skinned counterparts" (Glenn 2008).

Colorism and India

Harris (2008) argues that "the valuing of light skin has evolved in many regions – such as East and South Asia and the Philippines – independently (at least in part) of the black-white, European-African dynamics of race that have so characterized the Americas and Europe." Nonetheless, scholars still debate colorism's origins within India and how this particular form of discrimination relates to the caste system. For example, some argue that colorism is a symptom of the dramatic change in Indians' concept of race, ushered in by the British Invasion. Typical of European conquerors, the British largely ignored the caste system and other Indian values and practices, instead following their own cultural values to empower high status, and lighter-skinned Indians, as regent leaders. "In that way, lighter-toned skin increasingly became associated with the upper classes, and light-skinned individuals began to become more upwardly mobile, while the darkest-skinned Indians fell to the bottom of the economic ladder" (Russell-Colle et al. 2013).

Furthermore, these scholars tend to believe that India was not immune to the globalized effects of the racialization of humanity. "Racialization, or the assignment of racial meaning to real, perceived, or ascribed differences among individuals or groups, produces hierarchies of power and privilege among races" (Burton et al. 2010). Thus, assigning individuals to specific races and then ranking the groups begets racism and engenders a society in which power and opportunity increases as shades lighten and phenotypic features conform to the normalized depiction of beauty.

Another group of scholars argue that "the caste system in India promotes the hierarchy of skin color, since lighter skin is more likely to be seen in higher caste members…with darker skin viewed as being of a lower caste" (Jha and Adelman

2009). According to Russell-Cole and colleagues (2013) India has a strong color-class hierarchy that is typically only undermined by the caste system. Throughout each class there exists an array of skin complexions; however, this fails to signify that Indians place no value on light skin. In general northern Indians are lighter than their southern counterparts and within each group the upper-class tends to have lighter skin. This would indicate that, even though social status may be primarily associated with caste, social status is also related to skin color.

Yet many scholars tend to align with Vaid's (2009) suggestion that the origins of India's color-class hierarchy are far more complex. She writes that nothing in ancient Vedic text or religious scriptures suggest that lighter skin is supreme. And while some scholars posit that, color consciousness could have begun with the Aryan invasion of north India. Vaid contradicts their conclusions by declaring that despite some linguistic similarities between Sanskrit and European languages, little archaeological evidence suggest an Aryan invasion. (The term *arya* may have been used in the sense of "noble" as opposed to a reference to the Aryan race.) "Another speculation about the origins of color consciousness comes from the fact that the Sanskrit term for *caste* (*varna*) also means 'color,' and there are well-documented proscriptions against the mixing of upper and lower casts through marriage (*varna-sankara*)" (Vaid 2009). Consequently, some believe that the color-class hierarchy emerged as a means of keeping the upper castes pure. Yet the sheer array of complexions within castes challenges this interpretation.

Like Vaid, Cox proposes that "the caste system, as we know it today…is admittedly not based upon Aryo-Dravidian racial antagonism" (Cox 1948). He believes that India's social order evolved as a system that prized priesthood as opposed to fair skin. "The writers who use modern ideas of race relations for the purpose of explaining the origin of caste make an uncritical transfer of modern thought to an age which did not know it," he writes (1948). Cox goes on the explain that the word *varna* also means appearance, exterior, color, kind, species and caste, suggesting that other scholars' focus on one meaning has caused them to make incorrect assumptions about race's relationship with the evolution of the caste system.

"Scholars have posited that the exchanges between South Asian colonized and European colonizer fostered mutual co-optations and appropriations of one another's lifeworlds, if not regimes of rule" (Khan 2009). These co-optations and appropriations include the perception of color capital and its relationship with marriage and beauty. Irrespective of the true origins of India's color-class hierarchy, today, skin color serves "'as a visual agent' in placing individuals 'in a local social hierarchy, if not an increasing global one'" (Jha and Adelman 2009).

Colorism and gender

"To compound the invalidating effect built into traditional cultural norms, the entry of Western media into the Indian cultural landscape, coupled with India's economic liberalization in the 1980s, has led to the pre-eminence of western standards of beauty in India" (Jha and Adelman 2009). "The relation between skin color and judgments about attractiveness affect women most acutely, since women's worth is judged heavily on the basis of appearance" (Glenn 2008). Furthermore, "contemporary media strongly reinforce colorism, and multinational mass media promote a homogenized global body image that is being telecast the world over [and] media and advertising foster a

hegemonic notion of skin tone that clearly privileges light skinned women" (Jha and Adelman 2009).

Jha and Adelman (2009) point out that in Hindi there is a specific word for coloring among women. *Gori* means "fair complexion/skin tone"; however, it also means beautiful and "girl/woman." This appears to mirror the European understanding of beauty. The British definitely considered their skin and phenotypic features as the pinnacle of beauty. Furthermore, "they made invidious comparisons between lighter-skinned groups, whose men they viewed as more intelligent and marital and whose women they considered more attractive" (Glenn 2008). But this definition destroys "not merely beauty but femininity itself for those women who do not have lighter skin" (Jha and Adelman 2009).

Likewise, "men's yearning to marry a 'fair' bride has objectified Indian women who often suffer from low self-esteem due to skin complexion issues…these beauty standards are gendered in the sense that they are more likely to be applied while evaluating women than when evaluating men" (Ramasubramanian and Jain 2009).

Colorism and marriage

"Social structures in patriarchal societies such as India's often reinforce and propagate male privilege while 'othering' women's experiences…those who do not or cannot fit into these stringent norms are likely stigmatized, marginalized, and devalued" (Ramasubramanian and Jain 2008).

In India as in other parts of the world, marriage has a strong economic as well as social component. In accordance with Indian marriage customs, bride's families offer dowries. Ramasubramanian and Jain (2008) explain that the "value of the dowry, a function of the bride's 'marketability,' correlates with factors such as her virginity, physical appearance, domestic skills, and education." There is an inverse correlation between the desirability of the bride and her dowry. Irrespective, "many Indian women still believe…that not only can dowry be used to overcome disadvantages in the marriage market, such as dark skin color, but it gives them dignity and status" (Stone and James 1995). Nonetheless, in many cases even a dowry cannot increase a dark-skinned woman's desirability. To explicate, one husband who tried to burn his wife, attempting what is commonly called dowry murder, stated that he did so at the urging of his family. The victim's mother-in-law told her son, "Leave this woman and we will get you another one…What her parents have given us is nothing. Moreover, this girl is ugly and she is dark." (Stone and James 1995).

Due to the business nature of marriages, there exists an entire market dedicated to matrimonial advertising. "Matrimonial ads in Indian dailies are a popular way to seek prospective partners. Most of the national and regional dailies in India devote substantial portions of their content to matrimonial classifieds every day," according to Ramasubramanian and Jain (2008). They argue that often "those dealing with marriage treat people as products: they highlight the best features of the 'product.'" They mention that the actual advertisement in some cases is used as a measure of the person or family placing the advertisement.

In such advertisements, color is one of the features used to help promote the 'product.' "Skin tone is seen as an important marker of physical attractiveness, especially in women, in India. Colorism…is deep-rooted in India and results in strong

preference, especially in mate selection, for light skin color" (Ramasubraminan and Jain, 2008). Ramasbramanian and Jain (2008) discovered that men often make known their desire for light complexioned bride, and women typically announce their skin color more than their male counterparts. Also, few if any advertisers describe themselves as dark; complexion is generally only mentioned in the case of fairness.

"When colorism becomes part of the cultural fabric, it promotes social stratification and exclusion based on invalidating preferences" (Jha and Adelman 2009). Consequently, a "pigmentocracy" develops and women endowed with light skin possess significantly more social capital than their darker peers as they compete for mates. "Socially, over the past few decades, beauty and fairness ideals have also become increasingly institutionalized in the marriage market, once again, disadvantaging women," according to Jha and Adelman (2009). They mention that this is increasingly true in India where the unique execution of the marriage has been studied due to its "patriarchal domination that disadvantages women financially, socially and psychologically."

Data and results

The data for this study come from the March 17, 2013 *Sunday Times*'. Using the matrimonial advertisements, a data set was constructed with the following variables: fair, very fair, and no preference indicated (for men); and fair, very fair, wheatish, rosy and no complexion indicated (for women).

The data only includes advertisements in which the age was mentioned for the prospective bride or groom. The skin complexion men expressed a desire for in their brides is reported in Table 1.

While less than 20 % of the prospective grooms' advertisements included a stated preference for the bride's skin shade, *none* of the grooms' advertisements requested a darker complexioned bride. It is noteworthy that *none* of the advertisements from potential grooms include reports on the men's complexion. In contrast, about 40 % of the advertisements placed for the brides indicated their skin tone reported in four categories: very fair, fair, wheatish, and rosy. Again, *none* of the brides' advertisements reported a darker skin shade. Nor did the brides' advertisements indicate a preferred complexion for the grooms.

Men who mentioned the desired skin complexion of their brides, separated by age groups. (See Table 2). The prospective grooms' advertisements requesting light complexioned brides overwhelmingly were placed on behalf of younger men. Similarly,

Table 1 Groom's desired skin complexion for bride

Complexion	Observations	Percent
Fair	71	16.75 %
Very fair	5	1.18 %
No preference indicated	348	82.08 %
Total	424	100 %

Table 2 Groom's age and de-
sired skin complexion for bride

Age	Fair	Very Fair	Total
25–34	67	4	71
35+	4	1	5
Total	71	5	76

prospective brides' advertisements reporting on their skin tone overwhelmingly were placed on behalf of yourger women (Table 4). The data is separated by age in order to analyze grooms' desired skin complexion between those seeking younger, versus older, brides.

The data table illustrates the frequency with which women used the self-described complexion variables to detail their physical appearance (Table 3).

Women who stated their skin complexion, separated by age groups (*See* Table 4). The data is separated by age in order to analyze bride's self-described skin complexion between those that are in late teens to early twenties, mid-twenties to mid-thirties (most common age range) and those mid-thirties and above.

Discussion

This analysis of the *Sunday Times'* Matrimonials section on March 17, 2013, emphasizes the importance of marketing one's self as the normalized embodi-ment of beauty, especially for women. Indeed, the gender asymmetry that emerges in the data is striking. Men' advertisements never indicated their skin complexion. In addition, men's advertisements only specified their bride's complexion less than 20 % of the time; however, women announced their complexion approximately 40 % of the time.

Women also listed their complexion on a spectrum, using specific labels such as "wheatish" or "rosy," while men only specifically asked for "fair" or "very fair" brides. Finally, no women's advertisements described their complexion as "dark" or "very dark", and no men's advertisements mentioned that they desired dark brides. Complexion only was mentioned in the context of declaring a preference for or the possession of a light skin tone.

Table 3 Bride's self-described complexion

Complexion	Observations	Percent
Fair	152	36.98 %
Very fair	6	1.46 %
Wheatish	3	0.73 %
Rosy	1	0.24 %
No complexion indicated	249	60.58 %
Total	411	100.00 %

Table 4 Bride's self-described skin complexion by age

Age	Fair	Very Fair	Wheatish	Rosy	Total
18–24	14	0	0	0	14
25–34	123	6	3	1	133
35+	15	0	0	0	15
Total	152	6	3	1	162

The stark differences in patterns of skin complexion reports between men and women may illustrate the effects of patriarchy within the marriage market. This suggests that color capital is more essential for women than men, causing women to have a heightened sensitivity to skin shade because it influences their marriageability. This corroborates both of Ramasubramanian's and Jain's (2008) hypotheses. These matrimonials illustrate that a significantly lower proportion of men's advertisements make known their desire for a light complexioned bride than women's advertisements announce their skin color.

In addition, the matrimonials illustrate the gender asymmetry embedded in the Indian marriage market. The advertisements listed in the newspaper are focused disproportionately on the physical attributes of women and their capacity to function as homemakers (the advertisements use the term "homely" to identify projected good housekeepers) while for men the focus is more on education and occupation.

Neither females nor males described themselves as dark complexioned. Since pictures are not included with the advertisements, it is impossible to know what the individual actually looks like. But, patently, based upon this investigation, a significant share of Indian women seem to be convinced that reporting a lighter complexion is more likely to draw attractive suitors.

With respect to age, it is difficult to tell if younger people actually care more skin shade age or simply more advertisements are submitted for younger people, either independently or at the behest of their parents. It also is difficult to determine whether parents placed the advertisement for their child or the person mentioned in the advertisement actually placed it independently. If it is the former, that may indicate persisting colorism among an older generation that values white/light over darker complexions. If women are truly placing a significant portion of these advertisements independently, another disturbing possibility is they are assuming a preference that does not actually exist within the Indian marriage market. Or could it be that the affinity for light skin is so pronounced within Indian society that men, or their families, find it less necessary to mention the desire for a light complexioned bride?

More in-depth studies on the marketing involved in mate-seeking are needed to fully understand the extent to which colorism contributes to the global bleaching phenomenon. It is apparent that colorism impacts global gender politics, thus the institution of marriage; however, the true existent is unknown. This data only focuses on 1 day's worth of marriage advertisements in one newspaper that is circulated in India's capital city, which may have a more educated, urbane population, less tied to traditions. More comprehensive research must be done that focuses on multiple newspapers over a longer period of time in various municipalities in India to establish stronger generalizations.

Lastly, the psychological effects the global bleaching phenomenon has on dark skinned women warrants deeper examination. Given the patriarchal nature of marriage markets, women carry the burden of conforming to the normalized idea of beauty more heavily than men; therefore, the stress of that burden most likely translates to many aspects of women's lives.

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