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Fairness and Marriageability: Colourism, Caste, and the Politics of Marriage in India

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Abstract: ***In the Indian marriage market, fair skin of a woman functions as a pivotal marker of her "marriageability," which on one hand elevates her perceived desirability, social capital, and bargaining power in arranged alliances while on the other hand it exposes how colourism operates in everyday choices by privileging lighter complexions as proxies for beauty, status, and suitability. This bias is overtly manifested in matrimonial advertisements, which describe ideal brides as "fair and beautiful" and shows "an overwhelming bias among males for brides lighter-skinned than themselves" (Jha and Adelman 65). This preference for fair skin is a manifestation of colourism, which Alice Walker defines as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same race people based solely on their colour."***

Key words: Fairness, Marriageability, Colourism,Caste, Politics of Marriage, sexual conduct, violence.

In India, this discrimination or prejudice based on the lightness or darkness of skin tone functions similarly to racism, where lighter skin is treated as a sign of beauty, refinement and superiority, while darker skin is associated with backwardness and lower status. This paper explores the origin of colourism in India by tracing its roots to colonialism, intertwining it with caste and class, and how it operates in the Indian marriage market through matrimonial ads, websites, family negotiations, media and beauty industries that target women, thereby intensifying colourist bias, especially for dark-skinned women.

Colourism in India is rooted in the pre-colonial diversity of skin tones shaped by geography and climate. However, under British rule, fair skin was elevated into a racial marker which was "associated with modernity, respectability, and desirability, and whiteness became an aspirational marker of social status" (Lingamneni 72-73). India became a British colony ruled by people who "claimed themselves to be a 'superior' and 'intelligent' race…born to rule 'inferior' and 'black coloured' Indians who were more akin to crude animals than humans," weaponizing white skin as a visible symbol of civilization, intelligence, and beauty to legitimize their domination over the indigenous population (Mishra 731). This ideology deeply embedded race-based notions in the minds of darker-skinned Indians, who were segregated into "Black Towns," excluded from senior job positions, and subjected to the message that their bodies were uncivilized, barbaric and unclean.

This colonial mentality of white superiority and dark inferiority is intersected with caste, class and gender in Indian society, where fair skin is associated with upper castes and wealth, while dark skin is linked to poverty and lower castes. Jidugu Kavya Harshitha explains this skin tone variation by relating it to caste practices prevalent in society. She argues that, because oppressed castes were pushed into hard outdoor labour while upper castes had indoor, better-paid work, dark skin gradually became associated with poor, "oppressed" castes and fair skin with richer, "oppressor" castes. She notes that this process "gives us an insight into the persisting influence of historical practices like the caste system and contemporary practices like inclination towards fair skin, thereby implicating an implicit caste-related dimension within prevailing aesthetic standards" (222-223). This representation of caste and class is frequently coded in mainstream Hindi cinema, where, in movies such as Bandit Queen (1994), Manjhi-The Mountain Man (2015), Super 30 (2019), Article 15 (2019), Dhadak 2 (2025), lower-caste or poor characters are portrayed as markedly darker than upper-caste. However, critics argued against the use of "brownface" on fair-skinned stars to play lower-caste, poor or rural characters. This understanding allows colour preferences to operate as a proxy for maintaining caste boundaries, reinforcing Mishra's point that colourism "hides behind variables" like caste and class.

The practice of colourism in India is deeply gendered, where women bear the burn of discrimination in marriage and daily life. In the marriage market, fair-skinned women are systemically preferred as suitable brides, their lighter tone treated as an unearned asset that enhances "marriageability," social capital, and reduced dowry demands, whereas darker-skinned women face rejection, higher bargaining costs, or "compromise" alliances, reinforcing their internalized sense of inferiority and inadequacy. This discrimination extends beyond matrimony into everyday life, where fairness is culturally inscribed as the ultimate marker of confidence, refinement, and the ideal beauty, ingraining a deep psychological inferiority in darker-skinned women through constant comparison and subtle shaming.

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Matrimonial advertisement and family preferences consistently filter out darker-skinned women, with studies showing that "fairness of prospective brides is highly prized," and the dark-skinned women face rejection or lower ratings even when other traits are equal (Parameswaran and Cardoza 256). This filtering of darker-skinned women is starkly visible in traditional newspaper matrimonial advertisements, where the phrase "fair and beautiful" is used as a formula for the ideal bride, frequently phrased as "Alliance invited for a fair and beautiful, well-educated girl from a respectable family" or "Wanted: fair, slim, beautiful bride for our son." Even when families of girls advertise for grooms, they often highlight the daughter's fairness as her prime quality, such as "Bridegroom wanted for fair, pretty, cultured, homely girl…," thereby, treating skin tone as a core selling point that signals not only physical attractiveness but also a "good familial background" of refinement and status. Studies of these ads show that phrases such as "fair," "very fair," and "beautiful, slim and fair" are among the most common codes used to describe brides.

Tanpreet Sachdev's analysis of eight months of newspaper matrimonial ads reveals that "colour of the skin is one of the main parameters in accepting and rejecting the brides for marriages," with Brahmin ads using the term "fair" more than any other group and explicitly "associating fair skin colour as being beautiful," while "not a single advertisement holds a word for dark" women (278-283). On one hand, this linguistic pattern renders "fair" virtually synonymous with "beautiful" and culturally desirable, while on the other hand, it is deeply intertwined with caste hierarchies. This covert linguistic reinforcement of caste through colourism allows families to maintain endogamy and status without explicitly stating caste barriers, perpetuating a pigmentocracy where skin tone functions as a proxy for caste and class privilege in everyday matrimonial negotiations.

This colourism in the marriage market is not confined to traditional newspaper matrimonial advertisements alone, it is actively reproduced by contemporary matrimonial websites as well, which are now a dominant platform for arranged and semi-arranged marriages. Jha and Adelman's study "Looking for Love in All the White Places" shows that these sites systematically privilege fair-skinned women. In their analysis of user profiles and "success story" wedding photos, they find that "results showed an overwhelming bias among males for brides lighter-skinned than themselves" (65), which means fairness effectively becomes a non-negotiable requirement for women, while men's own complexion receives far less scrutiny. Because these websites are primarily used by families for community-specific matchmaking, the digital filter effectively continues the same hierarchy observed in newspaper ads, searching for "fair" brides within their caste or community.

This preference for fair brides that appears in matrimonial ads and websites finds powerful reinforcement in Hindi films and advertising, which both mirror and actively shape societal practices and attitudes towards skin tone. Bollywood, as a dominant cultural force, has perpetuated colourism from earlier decades to contemporary times by constantly portraying fair skin as the ideal of beauty, desirability, and romantic success, while darker-skinned women are portrayed as facing rejection, family anxiety, and the need to "fix" their complexion. For example, in the 1986 film Naseeb Apna Apna, the dark-skinned village wife Chando is treated as inherently undesirable, which Kashyap describes as "a highly colourist narrative" in which she is "neglected and condemned by her husband," while his fair, modern love interest is framed as the "real" romantic partner (6). Later, in movies like Vivaah (2006), darker skin becomes a source of anxiety around marriage and dowry, where the mother frets over how hard it will be to find a good husband for her dark-skinned daughter, echoing a wider social belief that darker-skinned daughters will need larger dowries or compromises to secure a match. Recent cinema claims to critique colourism but often reproduces it through movies, featuring Bollywood celebrities for fairness-cream advertisements, that promise not just lighter skin but enhanced confidence, employability, and romantic prospects, directly feeding the insecurities that drive families to prioritize fairness as an ideal quality, and darker-skinned women are treated as problems to be fixed rather than equals.

While colourism continues to shape preferences in India's marriage market, in the contemporary world, it is increasingly challenged through activism and public campaigns that directly confront its social harms. The "Dark is Beautiful" campaign, started in 2009 by Chennai-based NGO Women of Worth, seeks "to challenge the belief that the value and beauty of people…is determined by the fairness of their skin," using workshops, events and media advocacy to build self-esteem among darker-skinned individuals and reject colour hierarchies. To mark its 10-year milestone, the campaign was relaunched with a more inclusive name, "India's Got Colour," supported by UNESCO and featuring a celebrity-filled music video produced by Nandita Das, that explicitly aims "to spark a conversation around colourism in India" and celebrate "the diversity that exists in India." These campaigns create powerful counter-narratives to matrimonial ads and

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fairness-cream ads, telling girls that their worth does not depend on becoming fair but lies in their inherent humanity and the richness of India's varied complexions.

Moreover, public backlash against colourism has also begun to force limited changes in the beauty industry, even if many of these moves remain largely symbolic. For instance, after petitions and years of criticism, Fair & Lovely had to drop the word "Fair" and rebrand the cream as Glow & Lovely, admitting that the use of "fair," "white" and "light" in its marketing "has promoted a singular ideal of beauty." This shows that colourist beauty standards are now contested rather than taken for granted; however, the underlying beauty ideal of aspiring toward lighter or glowing skin persists in subtler forms.

Furthermore, alongside older films that reproduce colourism, some recent series and films begin to name and critique it directly, showing that popular culture can also be a site of resistance. The Netflix reality show Indian Matchmaking and Made in Heaven have been widely criticized for offering "a window into the colourism, casteism and sexism that are part of the Indian marriage market." These newer texts show that while popular culture has long reinforced colourism, it can also expose and question it, challenging audiences to rethink the equation of fairness with value that earlier films once took for granted.

In conclusion, colourism in India is deeply rooted in colonial racial hierarchies intertwined with caste and class to make fairness a powerful form of social and marital capital. The evidence from matrimonial advertisements, online matchmaking platforms and experimental studies shows that light skin is treated as a near-essential trait for an ideal bride, while darker-skinned women, more often from marginalized castes and classes, face systematic filtering, higher dowry expectations, family anxiety, and internalized inferiority. However, at the same time, colourism is increasingly being named and contested through campaigns, critical films and public backlash. Ultimately, dismantling colourism will require not only individual attitude change but also structural interventions, such as legal recognition of colour-based discrimination, regulation of colourist advertising and platform design, and intersectional feminist and anti-caste organizing, so that notions of love, family and respect are no longer built on the skin tone of a person.

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