

WORSHIPPING WHITE IN AMERICA AND INDIA

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We are all aware of the large-scale protests, some violent, that shook the United States soon after videos showing how white police officers mercilessly caused the death of a black man, George Floyd, in Minneapolis went viral. As ‘coloured’ people, our natural sympathies go to those oppressed by the white man, but we also realise that as long as the malaise of racial discrimination is not eradicated, its external manifestations are bound to recur. Colourism—which propagates an aversion towards those who do not look like us and are therefore ugly—is our enemy, not the police.

On this single parameter, many Indians would surely fare worse than white Americans, as the former’s almost spontaneous animus against Africans is no less vicious. Such openly racial behaviour by people who themselves are coloured and just a few shades fairer than their target is hardly ever witnessed in the rest of the world. An issue that is often tangled with dark colour is the fact that a few Africans have been caught messing around with drugs. Hindi films like *Dum Maro Dum*, *Raman Raghav 2.0*, *Kaminey* and *Shaitan* have further compounded the racial problem by directly portraying drug peddlers as African nationals.

The fact that the outrageously racial behaviour of many Indians will never be forgotten by Africans matters little. Paradoxically, many of them revel in a chauvinistic pride that India enjoys a ‘glorious’ position among all nations, not realising that their own racism harms whatever position Indian diplomacy has toiled to secure in Africa. We need the support of the 55 countries in Africa and one may not be surprised if many of these nations vote against a racist India in the UN and elsewhere. But because such utterly unacceptable behaviour is neither countermanded by families or by society in this country, nor punished demonstratively enough by the state machinery, it smoothly extends itself to torment dark-skinned fellow Indians.

What’s worse is that Northeastern citizens often face the vilest of harassment at the hands of colour majoritarians in north India. Short-sighted predators hardly realise how precarious the Northeastern region is to India. Many films like *Apne Rang Hazaar* and *Naseeb Apna Apna* focus on the dark-versus-fair theme but we need to hammer in more sincerely that, in a multi-ethnic country like India, there are bound to be vast differences in the pigmentation of the skin.

Anthropologists can explain this professionally and disprove racial imaginings. Unfortunately, even if we discard the deep-rooted Aryan-Dravidian theory, we are still infected with false notions, right from childhood, that the fairer the skin, the higher the pedigree.

This obsession with fairness is equally prevalent among Muslims, where lighter skin is said to imply 'purity' of the blood of conquerors from West and Central Asia, while darker-skinned ones are 'lower' local converts. It affects Indian Christians as well. In fact, in 1924, Stella Kramrisch, the pioneering international authority on Indian art, had written a piece titled 'The Influence of Race on Early Indian Art'. But as we observe in the Ajanta paintings, the fair-skinned often 'served' the darker people, who appeared to wield more power. It is sad that state and society have hardly come out to propagate that social strata and colour are not necessarily the same. If caste and colour were really coterminous, why would actors from the highest castes like Manoj Bajpai and Dipannita Sharma face discrimination on account of their relatively darker skin?

Let us recall how Sunil Dutt had to be darkened in the 1957 classic, *Mother India*, because he was too fair for his role as a farmer. This act, known worldwide as 'brown-facing' or 'black-facing', has been widely used by white Westerners in earlier decades to lampoon the coloured, but is now considered a cardinal offence and a racial insult. In India, however, it is carried on with impunity, which surely makes us worse than the American racists we condemn. In recent times, movies like *Bala*, *Super 30*, *Gully Boy* and *Article 15* have coloured fair actors rather than locate talent among the naturally darker one. They also reinforce prejudices that the working class and other less privileged people are necessarily much darker than the 'gentlefolk'. It is time the film industry stops feeding hungry prejudices and reverses the campaigns to unify Indians.

There are lucrative 'skin whitening' industries that gain today. In 2014, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) had to issue guidelines on the promotion of fairness products, declaring that dark-skinned people cannot be equated to being depressed or disadvantaged. But is dark really ugly? This is a Caucasian world view prevalent in the white hemisphere that infected India at different stages, but history and Indian art tell us otherwise. Thota Vaikuntam, for instance, paints his women as fat and dark and yet they represent real Indian beauty. It is time for us to support campaigns like 'Dark is Beautiful' that have done commendable work to offset prejudices. As a tropical country, let us be proud of what nature has gifted us, among which is a brown skin of different charming hues.