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Colorism in India: The Economic Lens

In 2003, an Indian corporation by the name of Unilever began airing an air hostess advertisement for the whitening cream "Fair and Lovely" on Indian television. The advertisement depicts a retired father lamenting over the fact that his dark-skinned daughter's current job does not provide a high enough salary to allow him to add more milk to his coffee. Trying to please her father, she finds a new job as an air hostess. To prepare for her interview, she uses "Fair and Lovely." With her new, light skin, she lands the job and makes her father proud by buying him coffee at a five-star hotel. Unfortunately, the prejudice against darker-skinned individuals as seen in the commercial is a common circumstance for many women in modern India. Hemal Shroff, a researcher at the Tata Institute in Mumbai, India, conducted a study in 2018 to assess the scope of the skin-lightening industry in India. Shroff concluded that 54% of respondents had used skin whitening products to increase their chances of success during their employment (Shroff 2). This alarming statistic is a reminder that colorism is engrained in the employment system of India. Ami Zota, a researcher at George Washington, discovered that six in every ten women in India use skin-lightening creams and other bleaching products (Zota 2). Thus, the industry has become a substantial part of India's economy and has caused major human rights problems. In current discussions of the skin-lightening industry, one debate has been whether or not the market should be prohibited. On one hand, multinational companies argue that the skin-lightening industry helps the economy of India due to massive revenue. Margaret Hunter, a researcher at UCLA, found that the global market for skin lighteners was worth \$8.6 billion in 2020 with India as the top producer (Hunter 2). Thus, India's global economic status stands as the top exporter of skin-lightening products. On the other hand, economically disadvantaged women emphasize that the products create a larger economic gap in the employment market. With the majority of individuals in the employment process using skin-whitening products (Shroff 3), lighter-skinned individuals are the majority of the working class. If India decides to prohibit skin whitening companies, there would be a substantial economic impact on connected multinational industries and citizens in the employment process for an average household. As the 2nd most populated country in the world, a typical Indian household varies dramatically throughout the region. A typical Indian household consisting of four people varies between classes. A house consists of multiple stories rented out by a family each. Their meals vary from location; south and north Indians have varying cultures and preferences. The average daily dietary energy consumption of a typical Indian is approximately 2233 Kcal for rural India and 2206 Kcal for urban India (Nadda, 2015). Multinational industries such as Fair & Lovely and Godrej are strongly against the prohibition of the market due to the massive revenue the companies are earning. These companies are the backbone of the country's beauty and cosmetics industry accounting for "about 80% of India's \$1 billion markets for cosmetic products in 2019," according to Evelyn Glenn of the University of Berkeley. Glenn's findings prove that these products have caused

India to rise in the internal economy. India is the top producer of skin-lightening products globally (Hunter 2). Therefore, multinational industries' revenues flourish as the companies become internationally known as the producers of specific products. Saima Khan from the National University of Singapore corroborates Glenn's research noting, "Fair & Lovely didn't take much time after liberalization to become a household name." In the 1990s, India dismantled its socialist regulations and thus the skincare markets opened up due to the reduced limits on foreign investment. Opening the economy to foreign investors expanded the exposure to Indian brands and consumer products, such as skin-lightening creams. Glenn's quote creates the context for Khan's evidence since the large market is due to the liberalization of India's government and the revenue will expand with the reduction of government controls. If protectionism occurs, the market will close, the forecasted demand will fall, and so Glenn's prediction of increased profits would no longer stand true. The skin-lightening industry is no longer an underground market. Instead, the products have become a substantial part of India's global presence since India is now known as the top exporter of lighting products. As the distributors of the market, multinational industries contend with the proposal of prohibition of the market since the businesses and the global standing of India would diminish. Economically disadvantaged women of an average household share a concern that skin-lightening products affect the employment process. The target market of Fair and Lovely is predominantly young women ages 18–35, according to Karnani from the University of Michigan (Karnani 4). This also happens to be the average working age in India as determined by Jayati Ghosh of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi (Ghosh 3). According to Shroff, "Individuals with darker skin in India are often assumed to be blue-collar or manual workers." There is an underlying assumption that darker-skinned individuals have low economic status since they are not the ones in professional jobs. Individuals with the financial freedom to spend on skin-whitening products create a larger gap between light and dark-skinned employees. Jayati Ghosh continues Shroff's thought stating that "You can likely tell the household per capita income from the color of someone's skin." When employers lack information about an individual's capabilities for a job, they may resort to perceptions about a group's characteristics, such as skin color. The skin-lightening industry increases the number of fair-skinned individuals in the employment market. Thus, Ghosh's claim suggests that there are higher wages and employment rates for lighter-skinned individuals in comparison to similarly qualified darker-skinned individuals. These perspectives exemplify the extent of the skin-lightening industry's economic influence beyond direct GDP contribution. Therefore, individuals who use skin whitening products to bleach their skin would have an economic advantage in the employment market. If the skin whitening market diminishes, fair-skinned Indians looking for a job would no longer have the same edge in the process. Although colorism in the employment market would not retire, the prejudices exemplified by the skin-lightening companies would decrease. Given the polarity of these perspectives, the discussion on prohibiting skin-lightening products remains unresolved. As multinational industries argue that skin-lightening products help the economy of India due to massive revenue, economically disadvantaged women emphasize that the products create a larger employment gap. Because of the opposing views, creating clear guidelines would become a difficult task. Natasha Norman of the Oxford School of Global Studies reported that multiple multinational industries have recently changed their branding. The rebrand was enforced to create an "updated global portfolio of skin-lightening brands that is inclusive to all skin tones (Norman, 1)." Melanie Crasta of Queens University reported that Unilever changed the name of its "Fair and Lovely" face cream in India, dropping the term 'fair', a common Indian euphemism for lighter skin (Crasta 10). There was however

much skepticism about whether a mere change of name would change industry practices of promoting light skin. Writer and activist Poorna Bell from the Huffington Post respond to change, stating, "It doesn't do enough to make reparations for the damage done by colorism (McEvoy 2)." Continuing Poorna's idea, Michael Safi from the University of Sydney states that "Every company that's selling products claiming that it will make you whiter and fairer is telling every brown-skinned person in India that you're not good enough"(Safi 8). Thus, the only way to directly remove the prejudices created by the skin whitening industries is to diminish the market entirely. Companies will need to decide if the backlash from the citizens of India is strong enough to abolish their brand altogether. Regardless, colorism will continue to stay prevalent in India, unless regulations are placed on advertisements and filming industries. These rules must establish guidelines for inclusivity, so that all skin tones are equally represented. Media can still marginalize dark skin by finding loopholes such as the previously mentioned brownface, but such regulations are foundational steps toward acceptance of darker skin tones and the removal of the fairness paradigm.

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