

# Colourism in the South Asian Community and its Deeper Context

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Colourism is defined as discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of colour over their darker-skinned peers.<sup>1</sup>



This includes unjust beliefs that darker skin tones are less beautiful, less successful, and deserve less respect than their lighter-skinned counterparts.

# Colourism's roots in colonialism

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Colourism is deeply rooted in the violence of colonial history.<sup>2</sup>



The valuing of light skin is deeply tied to the slave-owning colonial societies of the Caribbean and the United State's sustained myths of white racial purity.<sup>3</sup>

As seen by the "one-drop rule," where individuals with even a small trace of Black ancestry were not considered white.

2. Hussain, M., 2022

3. Hussain, M., 2022

# Colourism in the South Asian community



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South Asian experiences cannot parallel the Black experience of racism and colourism. While we have aspects of their experience in our lives, it was not to the same extent.

South Asian communities, however, have also grapple with the legacies of their colonial histories.

### Some examples include:

- Colonial thinkers distinguished between “strong <sup>4</sup>pale Aryans” and small, dark-skinned primitive Dravidians.
- Colonial ethnographer and member of the Indian Civil Service further racialized Indians by classifying <sup>5</sup>different castes ranging from “Dead Black” to “Flushed Ivory.”
- Colourism doesn't just impact the South Asian community but also affects East and Southeast Asian community members.

4. Hussain, M., 2022

5. Hussain, M., 2022

# Colourism as an indicator of the caste system

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In South Asian societies, colourism remains a persistent remnant of the caste system.

The preference for lighter skin is a form of caste oppression.

Lower caste members, working outdoors and partaking in manual labour, developed darker skin. However, higher caste members were able to evade the sun and thus spent most time away from the sun.



Skin colour thus became associated with privilege, caste, purity and socioeconomic status.

# Colourism as an indicator of the caste system cont.

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Dalits are often ostracized as the “untouchables,” are a group so low in the Caste system that they were excluded from the caste system altogether.

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- They often face the most intense colourism and were considered impure because of their perceived dark skin.
- Dalit scholar and architect of the Indian constitution B.R. Ambedkar pointed out that these divisions have historically been deepened by centuries of British colonial rule and indicate a loss of strength in our inability to stand up to racism.

**While the caste system has now been abolished in most societies, the flawed ideals of fairer skin tones has persisted.**



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# Skin colour as marriage capital

Historically, South Asian cultures did not allow women economic independence. This placed greater value on who they married. <sup>8</sup>

Several scholars have tied colourism to marriage capital in South Asian communities.

This is because, in South Asian communities, the patriarchal institution of marriage has historically converted fair skin into a type of marriage capital that is barterable with dowry demands.

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8. Kukreja, R., 2021

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# Colourism and skin bleaching products



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Unfortunately, because of colourism and the association of paleness/lightness with beauty, success, and status, skin-bleaching products have gained popularity among many Asian communities.

Skin bleaching creams and products is a multibillion-dollar industry with several widely available products marketing being fair or lighter with positive attributes such as lovely or beautiful. Further, the marketing tactics used by these brands perpetuate stereotypes and further exacerbate the social issues associated with colourism.

While skin bleaching and lightening are extremely dangerous, it, unfortunately, continues to be practiced across many communities today.

# Colourism and Racism

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Colourism is entrenched within our communities, and there is a difference between colourism and racism.<sup>10</sup>

- “In cases of racism, two people of different races but identical colours will be treated differently. In cases of colourism, two people of the same race but different skin colours will be treated differently” - Dr Sarah L Webb

***"Colourism is the daughter of racism" in "a world that rewards lighter skin over darker skin".***

**- Lupita Nyong'o**



The ongoing caste and colour issues in South Asian culture exacerbates anti-Black racism.

In order to be a true ally to the Black community and address anti-Black racism in the South Asian community we must amplify voices that disrupt daily practices of racism, colourism, casteism and oppression.<sup>11</sup>

With our complex colonial legacies of anti-Blackness, we must simultaneously look inward while reflecting outward<sup>12</sup>

We need to interrupt our own biases and hold our communities accountable.

11. Hussain, M., 2022

12. Estrada, M., 2020

## Looking to address and confront anti-Black racism in the South Asian community? Check out and these resources.

- Read **The Karma of Brown Folk** by **Vijay Prashad**
  - The book examines the model minority myth in South Asian communities and explores how it has been consistently used as “a weapon in the war against Black America.”
- Read **The Secret History of South Asian and African American Solidarity** by Anirvan Chatterjee
- Read Issue # 3 by [@burntrotiUK](#) on confronting anti-Blackness in South Asian communities
- If you're looking for resources for having a conversation with South Asian communities and family members read “**Confronting Anti-Blackness in South Asian Communities**” by Queer South Asian National Network
- [@SouthAsians4BlackLives](#) on Instagram
  - South Asians 4 Black Lives is a volunteer-led organization focused on educating South Asians on anti-Black racism.
- Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators
  - [@onabse\\_org](#) an organization that works to promote equity for African Canadian students, educators, and professionals at all levels in schools
- Urban Alliance on Race Relations
  - [@uarrtoronto](#) non- profit organization working to address inequality with educational programs, advocacy & research

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