

All's Fair in Love and Cream: A Cultural Case Study of Fair & Lovely in India

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Abstract

The fairness cream market is flourishing in India, a country that represents a unique amalgamation of social, religious, and cultural stigmas and stereotypes. For the last three decades, consumer goods giant Unilever/Hindustan Lever (HLL) has successfully leveraged business opportunities inherent in India's obsession with lighter skin tones with the launch of Fair & Lovely, considered to be the leading fairness cream in the Indian subcontinent. The goal of this paper is to take a closer look at the issues related to skin color in India by analysing how Fair & Lovely skin-whitening cream is situated in the context of Indian culture, is fetishized through media, and is distributed to consumers.

"Marwari Kshatriya, fair, handsome, April '76 born, 5'4"/65kg, well educated, owns gold business. Seeks proposals from fair, educated Marwari girl."

"Sunni Muslim groom wanted for a pretty, very fair, slim, 32-year-old daughter of social worker and educationist."

"Telugu Brahmin parents settled in Australia looking for alliances for their beautiful, fair daughter, 25 years, 5' 4", acquired double degrees in Australia, UK and USA."

"I am a 36-year-old man looking for an ideal Indian wife. She must be beautiful, fair skinned, well mannered and respectful of my aging parents."

—Taken from an assortment of popular online Indian matrimonial websites, browsed in 2008.

The fairness cream market is flourishing in India, a country that represents a unique amalgamation of social, religious, and cultural stigmas and stereotypes. The above matrimonial advertisements, only a few examples of the thousands that appear in India's leading national daily newspapers, demonstrate that the notion of "fair is beautiful" is deeply rooted in Indian culture. In fact, its origins can be traced back well before the British colonial days to the advent of the caste system, wherein the priestly Brahmin class was associated with whiteness or purity and the inferior *Shudras* and Dalits ("Untouchables") with blackness or filth. In stark contrast to India's current image as an emerging global superpower exists a society that remains fixated by a fairness frenzy, fuelled further by factors such as Bollywood (the Indian film industry) and advertisements for creams that promise to lighten the skin.

Three decades ago, consumer goods giant Unilever/Hindustan Lever (HLL) successfully leveraged business opportunities inherent in India's obsession with lighter skin tones with the launch of *Fair & Lovely*, considered to be the leading fairness cream in the Indian subcontinent. The goal of this paper is to take a closer look at the issues related to skin color in India by analysing how *Fair & Lovely* skin-whitening cream is situated in the context of Indian culture, is fetishized through media, and is distributed to consumers.

Fair & Lovely: The "Mother" of all Fairness Creams

Traded primarily as a non-prescribed beauty product (with certain medicinal properties), *Fair & Lovely* comes in various incarnations, ranging from *Fair & Lovely* Fairness reviving lotion to

cold cream and soap. The brand is marketed primarily to young women in the 18-35 year age bracket. Considered to be the most elite of the fairness creams, the price of a standard tube of Fair & Lovely best suits the middle class and above, but it is sold in many corner shops and drug store in cities across India.



Indeed, at the rural level, Fair & Lovely is being made available to poor villagers in the form of inexpensive sachets. South India (where the population is dominated by people with darker complexions) is the largest market, while the relatively fairer populations in Northern and Western India each have a smaller yet significant market share. However, even though Fair & Lovely is one of the leading fairness cream brands, it faces growing competition from cheaper skin-whitening products, such as Revlon's Fair & Glow and CavinKare's Fairever.

Yet the market seems to keep growing. Based on McCann Erickson's Consumer

Insights Report,¹ the desire for fairness as an essential physical attribute has been steadily on the rise over the past few decades. Out of the current \$180 million skin care market in India, which is growing by 10 to 15 percent annually, more than half of the revenues are now generated by fairness products alone. The present wave of herbal products and renewed focus on cosmetics for men has poised this industry for success like never before.

Fairness, Film, and Advertising

Two key factors—advertising and Bollywood—have played influential roles in the commodity fetishization of fairness products, making it possible for them to perform a host of cultural tasks.

HLL's advertising and promotional expenditures on Fair & Lovely products are significant. Ranging from huge billboards splashed across strategic locations in the major Indian metropolitan hubs to radio, TV, and print media in leading magazines and newspapers, it is almost impossible to escape the widespread influence of the brand's advertising campaign. HLL has the reputation of being one of India's largest advertisers and has been seen to juggle promotions across various media and target audiences at a much quicker pace than rivals such as Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson. In fact, industry sources claim that the company has spent up to \$5 million on TV advertising alone for its Fair & Lovely product range.



A typical print advertisement involves a montage of images of the "Fair & Lovely woman" as she progresses through the various stages of the skin-whitening process. The Fair & Lovely model has come to be emulated as a brand character by millions of women across the nation who wish to be as successful as she is, with the promise of paler and more beautiful skin. Additional visual imagery, such as pastel-colored flowers (especially lotuses and roses), has been attached to fairness creams and has therefore become accepted as appropriate motifs for them.

Since the launch of fairness cream in 1978, it has been evident that the advertising strategy would rest on a core pillar that exploited the existing social stigmas associated with darkness. Television ads for this product are more blatant in employing the promise of social and cultural benefits. One such ad depicts the dejection of a young girl upon being tormented by her father for not being born male, followed by him dismissing the limited job prospects she had as a woman due to her dark complexion. Subsequently, she uses the Fair & Lovely cream and impresses the interviewers with her newfound beauty, thereby securing the job and winning the approval of her father. Another popular ad on television shows a dark-skinned woman using the Fair & Lovely skin-whitening routine before the arrival of a prospective groom, who instantly falls in love with her due to the radiant glow on her newly beautified face. Some ads depict the benefits of having lighter skin in the professional beauty industry, as in another spot where the dusky woman aspires to be a model but does not qualify for the role till she discovers the benefits of Fair & Lovely moisturiser.

The collective mantra generated by these ad campaigns is simple: If you buy this fairness product, you will make your family proud, you will look beautiful, and you will secure a wonderful husband—all of which are considered to be vital determinants of a woman's happiness in the highly patriarchal and male-dominated Indian society. Oddly, the current brand proposition for the cream—"Fair and Lovely: The Power of Beauty"—implies a more modern message about choice and economic empowerment. It is also interesting to note that although Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty also falls under the Unilever brand umbrella, there is a stark contrast between its advertising strategy and that of Fair & Lovely's. While Dove's campaign promotes the achievement of excellence because of one's natural beauty and despite one's

imperfections, Fair & Lovely's advertisements focus more on the potential to succeed by first obliterating one's physical flaws, particularly dark skin.

The role played by Bollywood in propagating the Indian obsession with fairness also deserves mention, given its social power as the largest film industry in the world. Since Bollywood provides the most popular escape mechanism for millions of Indians, who lose themselves in the fantasy and drama of the movies, it is hardly surprising that the leading parts are played by fair-skinned Bollywood actors and actresses. Famous light-skinned personalities, such as Aishwarya Rai, Hrithik Roshan and Amitabh Bachchan, are clear examples of this trend.

The crossover between Bollywood and advertising via celebrity endorsements for skin-whitening products has had profound implications on the fetishization of fairness creams in general. For example, Shah Rukh Khan (undoubtedly one of the most popular stars in the history of Bollywood) has been signed on as the new brand ambassador for the recently launched male beauty cream Fair & Handsome. This has resulted in a mass following for the product based on the deadly combination of Khan's appeal as a Bollywood personality and his ratification of the fairness cream as an element of his success. This product has had astounding success, even though there are strong taboos against Indian men using cosmetics creams for beautification purposes.

Though current influences from film and marketing are important to the success of fairness creams, it is important to understand the deep social roots that also support this phenomenon.

Fairness and Color in Indian History

The caste system, believed to have been introduced by the nomadic, Caucasian Aryan group when they arrived in India around 1500 BCE, is often blamed for first creating color-based divisions in Indian society. Social historians hypothesize that the defeat of the indigenous, darker-skinned Dravidian populations at the hands of these fair-skinned foreigners sparked off the imposition of an alien caste system. In order to keep the local Dravidians suppressed and to establish a superior status, the Aryans differentiated people into various social strata or *varnas* (Sanskrit for "color"). The apex of the caste pyramid was assumed by the fair-skinned priestly *Brahmins* followed by the warriors or *Kshatriyas*, who were often associated with the color red owing to their ferocity on the battlefield. The next layer was comprised of the *Vaishyas* or farmers and merchants who were symbolized by the color yellow. The *Shudras* or laborers fell to the bottom of the hierarchy and were comprised mainly of the darker-skinned menial workers, such as the Dravidians. Yet others, such as the *Dalits* or *Untouchables*, were considered to be too impure to even be included in the caste pyramid.

These complexion-based rifts were further emphasized through religion. Hindu mythology, for example, depicts heroic tales of fair-skinned benevolent gods, such as Ram and Shiva, fighting the darker-skinned devils and demons, analogous to the Aryan versus Dravidian battle. Religious stories, such as that of Lord Shiva ridiculing his wife, Goddess Parvati, for her dark-skin color, remain part of the religious literature:

One day the god Shiva teased his wife, the goddess Parvati, about her dark skin; he called her "Blackie" (Kali) and said that her dark body against his white body was like a black

snake coiled around a pale sandalwood tree. When she responded angrily, they began to argue and to hurl insults at one another. Furious, she went away to generate inner heat in order to obtain a fair, golden, skin.

-Padma Purana, Hindu religious text

One could argue that these mythological scriptures were not meant to promote racism based on skin color, but nevertheless they have created stereotypes in the minds of the readers and followers—stereotypes that have lingered for generations.

The period of British rule in India from 1858 to 1947 further fuelled the divisions associated with white and dark skin. Some argue that, during this period, the minds of millions of Indians were influenced by the image that fair skin signifies superiority, dominance, and power, while dark skin represents the weaker, inferior masses. Lighter skin thereby emerged as a vehicle for shifting one's social status from the side of the oppressed to that of the more powerful oppressor. The stereotypical image of the British woman with her white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, has lingered over the years as the epitome of pristine beauty. This further explains the hangover effect amongst Indian women who strive to emulate their foreign counterparts by lightening their skin tone.

Given Indians' reverence for skin color based on social, religious, and historical dynamics, it seems logical that the skin care industry (in particular, the niche skin-whitening product market) is currently one of the biggest and fastest-growing segments of the bustling Indian economy. Changing lifestyles, higher disposable incomes, and the sharp rise in globalization via television and the Internet (by which more Indians are being exposed to foreign physical attributes, such as fair skin and blond hair), however, also contribute to this growth.

Fairness and Poverty

In the beginning, Fair & Lovely was specifically designed to meet the needs of the middle-class Indian customer. The growing Indian middle class had become increasingly fashion conscious and was enjoying higher levels of disposable income. Fair & Lovely was launched with that specific target audience in mind; Unilever distributed the product widely in urban areas both at a micro level via corner shops, local retailers, drug stores, and chemists, and macro level via the cosmetic sections of larger departmental stores in malls and shopping plazas.

Although the distribution model of the product was initially centered in the major Indian cities, HLL also invested substantial amounts of money in a rural marketing program for Fair & Lovely. Impressive reach was achieved by the Fair & Lovely "Vani" scheme, which was created after witnessing the high demand for skin-whitening products even among the poorer segments living in Indian villages.

The Fair & Lovely Vani network is spread across several thousand villages in multiple states across the nation. The main goal of the program is to empower women in rural areas in earning a livelihood, while also striving to achieve better distribution and greater proliferation of Fair & Lovely's skin-whitening products. Once a target village has been identified by HLL, the Fair & Lovely Vani team meets with key decision makers, such as the head of the local village advisory board, the school principal, prominent business figures, or anyone who is held in high regard by the villagers.

The opinion leaders play a vital job in helping the activation team select a local Fair & Lovely "didi" (Hindi word for "sister") for that particular village. Essentially, the didi is a friendly, well-known face in the village in good social standing amongst the local inhabitants. Her main function is to attract crowds towards the Fair & Lovely team as they present the benefits of their skin-whitening products to the villagers. Reports suggest that this Fair & Lovely Vani distribution program has significantly increased product sales in India since its inception.

The cultural and social implications of this product are so powerful that they raise debates as to whether such products are a luxury or a necessity. Although one could argue that fairness cream does not fill any vital human need, how then do we explain why, in many Indian villages today, young girls spend their few pennies not on food but rather on Fair & Lovely sachets? Such behavioral patterns clearly defy the traditional notions of rational economic activity wherein the consumption of "unnecessary" goods, such as Fair & Lovely, would be expected to decline with lower income levels. It seems that the strong tendency of the poorest strata living in the most rural Indian environs to purchase this product reflects its power to tap longstanding social conventions and prejudices in a way that is probably linked to local conceptions of dignity and creditability.

Fairness and Gender

Fair & Lovely perpetuates the particular pressure on Indian women to look beautiful, as the country's obsession with skin fairness is typically found to be gender-lopsided and targeted more towards women. Needless to say, Fair & Lovely has created a bone of contention between supporters and active users of the product and feminist groups, both of which adopt a very different approach to the issue of using fairness creams. While the former have no qualms in leveraging the product as a way to springboard out of social or economic constraints, the latter consider the very concept of make-up and grooming practices, such as skin-whitening, as pretentious lies.

Fair & Lovely has often been accused of fostering the commoditization of female attractiveness by highlighting the importance of a woman's physical appeal in a predominantly male-dominated Indian society. Nowhere has this phenomenon of commoditization been more evident than in the arranged marriage business in India. By exploiting notions about the opportunity cost associated with having dark skin (which include limited job opportunities, as well as poor marital prospects and low social acceptance) and the scarcity of fair complexion, the marketing of skin-lightening products has clearly made fairness a fetish.

As elucidated by the marital advertisements at the beginning of this paper, skin-whitening creams raise the sensitive issue of an Indian woman's "marketability" in the marriage arena to prospective males who deem a fair complexion vital for a successful and happy matrimony. Although a growing number of ads now claim that caste is no bar to marriage, the true intent of securing the perfect female "commodity" is clearly revealed by the adjective "fair" that regularly precedes the professional qualifications listed in these marriage ads, even among the wealthiest and best-educated families hailing from the most modernized cities across India. Although dowry is illegal in India, it is common knowledge (especially in rural parts of the country) that a darker bride will have to compensate for her physical shortcomings by paying a higher dowry.

Dowry evaluations are carefully negotiated by both parties involved in the "transaction." Because dowries are based primarily on a bride's value as an object of male accompaniment, they are largely dependent on her physical appeal. More recently launched fairness products, such as Fair & Lovely Anti-marks (which highlights the importance of beauty and fairness amongst expectant mothers) and Healthy & Fair baby massage oil (stressing on fairness from a very tender age), have also caused huge uproars from numerous human activists who denounce these products on ethical and moral grounds.

Given the social pressure associated with skin color in Indian communities, however, one can also see that products such as Fair & Lovely play a critical role in providing women with social credibility, social connectedness, and positive reaffirmation. In truth, the power of this product transcends the mere desire to look beautiful and instead embodies an Indian woman's dreams, hopes, and aspirations. While "normal" cosmetics, such as foundation creams, could provide similar results in terms of making one appear fair, the prolonged outcome of fairness derived from creams such as Fair & Lovely is the strength of the product's promise in societies like India. In sum, given that "fairness equals godliness" is ingrained in the female Indian population and that most girls are brought up believing that fair skin is their key to success (whether in their careers or personal lives), the overwhelming demand for Fair & Lovely comes as no surprise.

Fairness, Identity, and Esteem

The color of a person's skin ties in closely to his or her position in the caste pyramid of India. Fair & Lovely is thus viewed by the lower castes as a vehicle for them to overcome the social stigmas associated with their position in the hierarchy and to develop a sense of belonging and identity with the community at large. Adam Smith argued that the most fundamental human needs are not biological, but social; indeed, he said that necessities were to be defined as anything that was required for a human to be seen as creditable in the eyes of his or her community. For better or worse, in the culture of India, Fair & Lovely serves as a means of attaining this level of social inclusion. On the other hand, since fair skin has long been an indication of economic prosperity and wealth in India, the role played by Fair & Lovely in perpetuating the economic bipolarization associated with skin color in this society is also noteworthy.

By facilitating the acceptance of darker-skinned women in the general community, Fair & Lovely could be said to promote the interaction and integration of more Indian women in social spheres. The lighter-skinned benefactors of the product are wholeheartedly welcomed by the community (especially in Indian villages) because they are considered to be physically more appealing. They are thus more likely to partake in social gatherings in which they previously might not have been comfortable. Interactions between males and females in the so-called Indian "marriage market" are also likely to increase in frequency because of the growing number of women resorting to Fair & Lovely.

Bearing chilling resemblance to the British colonial days wherein the superior white man ruled over the black, Fair & Lovely ironically bridges the gap between the haves (fair-skinned) and the have-nots (darker-skinned). Communicating one's identity within such groups and making visible one's culture, which becomes more important than ever in the current Indian context in terms of gender, caste, and economic standing, is pivotal.

The fact remains that, for most young Indian women, Fair & Lovely symbolizes a means of breaking free from social barriers and cultural norms, and of striving towards goals that would have otherwise been more out of reach because of their skin color. The desire among Indian women to use cosmetic fairness cream mirrors their desire to be included in society and their need to overpower the social barricades that have been harboured in their minds over time.

Global Reach

Although Fair & Lovely was first introduced by HLL into the Indian market, its reach has now proliferated to more than 38 countries around the world. The remarkable success of Fair & Lovely in India prompted Unilever to launch the product in neighboring South Asian countries with similar population demographics (in terms of physical attributes as well as economic conditions). In Sri Lanka, for example, the product was introduced in 1992 and soon became a huge success in this untapped market. Interestingly enough, Fair & Lovely performs equally well in Pakistan, a country which has fought many religious and cultural wars against neighboring India. By fulfilling the same fundamental human needs of social acceptance and inclusion in both nations, the product plays a subtle role in homogenizing the supposed differences between Indians and Pakistanis, who essentially share a common lineage.

To limit the scope of fairness creams such as Fair & Lovely to the Indian subcontinent would be inaccurate because these products have gained widespread international popularity in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Whether Halle Berry and Beyonce in the West or Aishwarya Rai and Priyanka Chopra in the East, it is easy to draw parallels between black and Asian preferences for lighter complexions. Even in Middle Eastern countries, such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Jordan, Oman, and Iran, women spend vast amounts of money on beauty-enhancing fairness creams, thereby shattering the notion that skin-whitening products like Fair & Lovely are primarily restricted to poor nations alone.

Conclusion

The Fair & Lovely product in India is laden with important cultural, social, and historic connotations. Although it is tempting to draw analogies between the Western hype over tanning products and the Indian obsession with fairness creams, one must acknowledge that the latter stems from a way of thinking that has been mired for centuries in a country of diverse cultural and social forces. Issues such as reputation, marriage, dowry, prestige, and oppression are important factors that manifest into various behavioral patterns in society, especially among females. Fairness creams play an important function by serving as mechanisms for the expression of such latent sentiments on the part of women and by providing them with the ability to challenge socially imposed limitations and culturally created boundaries that prevent them from reaching their true potential.

Some evidence suggests that historical attitudes towards women and beauty within Indian cultural and social spheres are in fact undergoing reform. For example, beauty pageants, such as the Miss India competition, are becoming more sensitive to the importance of portraying the country's inherent beauty by choosing models with "real" Indian attributes like dark skin. In mainstream Bollywood too, actors with darker complexions are catching up with their fair-skinned counterparts in terms of popularity, thereby signalling a change in demand from Indian

audiences. For the most part, however, the conventional social stigmas and attitudes towards sensitive issues remain impervious, especially among the majority of the population that lives in rural areas. It is therefore clear that as long as India remains a country white-washed with the traditional notions of skin color, products such as Fair & Lovely will continue to thrive.