Colorism in India

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Part 1 - Problem:

Colorism is a prevalent social issue in India where people with darker skin are discriminated against based on their skin color. Black skin is considered as a symbol of inferiority, even though India's population is largely comprised of dark skinned people (Mishra). Both women and men are obsessed about fair skin, since the pervasive bias influences them in family, workspace, school, and marriage, almost every aspect of life. Colorism is practiced openly across the country, leaving trauma on the victims.

Part 2 - Causes:

Indians' skin color is generally determined by the "geographical area to which [people] belong" (Misha). In ancient time, the society did not discriminate a person's skin tone due to the racial diversity. Many Indian deities like Lord Ram and Kali are depicted with dark skin, representing power, love, and beauty (Mohandas). However, this perception was changed dramatically by the British colonization. The British colonizers claimed themselves "as a superior and intelligent race," and they preferred Indians with fair skin (Misha). As a result, fair-skinned Indians took privilege of their inborn appearance to get better jobs, elevating their social status. Besides the influence by the British authority, the Indian caste system also contributed to the formation of colorism. The caste system enabled the upper castes to exploit the oppressed castes who were more likely to have darker complexions owing to the intense labor under the hot sun (Khalid). The British colonization and caste system are the historical causes that shaped the Indian colorism. In the modern society, colorism is promoted by the media, which continuously instill the notion that "fair is beautiful" (Abraham). "Fair and Lovely" and "Fair and Handsome" are two widely-sold bleaching products in India. The product advertisements equate fairness to beauty

through the stark visual contrasts formed by the juxtaposition of fair skin and dark skin. The ubiquitous advertisements reinforce the superiority of fairness, rendering colorism a deep-rooted problem.

Part 3 - Possible Solutions:

To reduce the toxic effect of colorism, India's government should foster the awareness on the need of responsible advertisements. According to the Guardian, the Advertising Standards Council of India "banned adverts depicting people with darker skin as inferior" (Abraham). Audiences are usually vulnerable to the advertisement influence. Under the government's regulations, profit-minded companies would somewhat reduce their exaggerated depiction. Nevertheless, many Indians still resort to skin bleaching to brighten their skin regardless of the presence of media. A survey conducted by Washington University shows that 84% of female users buy bleaching products in spite of knowing the harmful effects. The government regulations might not be able to change people's ingrained mindset, but many NGOs — non-governmental organizations — have succeeded. For example, the campaign ColorMeRight have presented several petitions and successfully made two Indian cosmic companies change their advertisements bias (Beatty). Another example Dark is Beautiful Campaign, endorsed by the Bollywood actor Nandita Das, provides a forum for people to share their personal stories of skin color bias (Emmanuel). The NGO's flexibility provide various solutions to the issue, including media literacy education, mass petition, and online forums.

Part 4 - Recommended Action Plan:

The best way to combat colorism is to combine the power of government and NGOs. Government's regulations serve as rigid standards, and the NGOs have the potential to make widespread impacts when they appeal to emotions and public opinions. Regulations may be

ineffective without people's support, and people's petition may be ignored without government's endorsement. Thus, the anti-colorism campaign exerts the maximum power if and only if government and NGOs cooperate together.

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