**A few shades fairer, please**

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***Abstract***

This piece examines the growing Indian desire for fairer skin tones; besides the so-often-criticized-but-still-selling-strong skin-whitening products, the event that generated quite a storm in the media were the series of Garbha Sanskar workshops, whereby women were allegedly taught how to purify their wombs and beget fairer (and taller) children. But there is a problem: it is not only simplistic to criticize this ideology as regressive, but also difficult because of the register the *sanskaris* deploy; they use the rhetoric and logic of science, and science, as a placeholder for modernity itself is what informs our own minds, those of ‘us’ who perceive the views of the *sanskaris* as problematic. Critical engagement with the issue shows how complex it is in terms of laying simultaneous claim to different epistemologies. I offer no solution, for there are none so easy: I attempt to map some of the important complexities and contradictions of the scenario.

***Mirror, mirror on the wall***

The Aryan invasion theory has been debunked; but it did shape a lot of our perceptions and perspectives when it was in its adult days, robust and healthy. Since school history textbooks lag a long way and are not up-to-date with current scholarship and theoretical premises, the fact that Aryan invasion theory has lost credibility is slow in percolating down to reorient consciousness. And when it ruled the roost, one of the most redeeming factors of those invaders used to be that they, by inter-marrying, had altered our appearance, our skin-tones. In other words, besides allegedly wiping clean the valley of the Indus river they cleaned up the skins of progeny as well. We were taught that their movement towards the southern part of the subcontinent was opposed by those living there, and (as if) as punishment for the resistance, those communities failed to get the chromatic benefit of the intermarriages.

White signifies the good, the pure, the developed, the first-world; white is fair, and it seems fair to be fair. We are obsessed with fairness. But fortunately, there continues to exist some fairness-dissenters, notwithstanding their own melanin-count. In recent times we have heard voices getting stronger against the plethora of skin-whitening products and fairness creams and gels; unfortunately the advertisements continue to beam, and products continue to sell. Nicholas Dirke says that civil society was meant “to ‘free’ individuals in new and progressive societies from ‘traditional’ modes of social organization and from the myriad constraints of premodern and/or feudal politics” (1: p-59). In this context however, freedom comes in a different way: freedom means to be able to buy into the fair-is-good ideology. Desire – especially if subterranean – is a hypocritical imp.

However, this issue of desiring to become fairer, suddenly became more complex and menacing. The desire shifted goalposts: from *becoming* fairer to *begetting* the fairer, from pinning the desire on the self to pinning it on the other, especially the other that emerges from the self. Fairness has shifted from the literal to the metonymic; from implying ‘good looks’, it expanded to describe the ‘perfect’ human being itself.

***Sanitizing the womb***

Garbha Sanskar or sanitizing the womb took the media by storm. As the health wing of the RSS, Arogya Bharati launched the Garbha Sanskar project whose chief mandate is to help women give birth to the best child – *uttamsantati* (2, 3).It came as a bit of a surprise that this program had been functional in Gujarat for a decade by now, and is only now planning to spread to other states. Recently, notwithstanding a High Court stay order, a two-day workshop cum counselling session was organised in Kolkata (2). Select Kolkatans were offered tips on how to purify their (otherwise impure obviously!) wombs and thus, beget perfect, fair and tall offsprings.

The womb has been in the news for different reasons in the past one year: first it was the ban on commercially renting out the womb for third-party childbearing in August 2016; then it was the news and subsequent debates on the transplant of the womb in April 2017; and now the mechanism of reconfiguring the purity-quotient of the womb. The womb has been in the news in days bygone too: for instance,when colonial reformers, while advocating against child-marriage argued that the womb was not fully developed in very young girls and not fit to bear healthy children; thus girls should be married off at a later age (4); also, when the postcolonial state dictated the number of times a womb could exercise its reproductive potential –when the state told us *hum do humare do*, it was the womb that was under the scanner.Fascination with and politics over the womb goes much back in time: in the article ‘Why Mammals are called Mammals’, Londa Schiebinger exposes the deep rooted sexism of biologists and taxonomists. She discusses how, “among all the organs of a woman’s body, her reproductive organs were considered most animal-like” (5: p-394). What makes the womb so susceptible to statist intervention, popular discourse and media news is, naturally, its organic ability to gestate and give birth – something that doubles up as a problematic schism because, while the womb and its processes belong to the female, its produce, the child, belongs to the state, and the state is patriarchal. The state controls the produce but not the process and naturally feels the need to be as close to it as it can, monitoring and intervening from time to time. Until the time synthetic wombs, completely dissociated from all manner of women, are not invented and popularized, this schism will continue, and so will the statist gaze on and manipulation of the organic womb.

The *sanskar* part of Garbha Sanskar rests upon the assumption that the womb is not clean in a primal sense and needs to be cleaned in order to ensure that the *uttamsantati* – the ideal/best child is conceived and subsequently born. And to attain this perfect birth, the representatives of Arogya Bharati are guiding couples on when to have sex (i.e. when to conceive) and when not to have sex, what to eat, what to listen to, and how to conduct life during the pregnancy.According to a news article in the *Indian Express*, Dr Hitesh Jani, national convener, Arogya Bharati said, “The parents may have lower IQ, with a poor educational background, but their baby can be extremely bright. If the proper procedure is followed, babies of dark-skinned parents with lesser height can have fair complexion and grow taller” (3).The group has allegedly claimed that till date, 450 children have been born under their guidance.

***So what?***

The so-whatters are many, growing at an exponential rate. A section of them thinks so what’s the big deal about wanting to have the child that you want to have? Another section is more attached to the ideologue and is convinced that that is how things should anyway be, while yet another are crying themselves hoarse over how the commies and the pseudo-liberals are faking all this about the RSS (and by extension, the government (6)). Since, by now the Garbha Sanskar has already taken place in Kolkata and that too, disregarding the court’s orders, there’s no point arguing with the third group. We can engage with the other two.

According to the garbha sanskaris, their knowledge system is based on Ayurvedic principles; they have claimed in one breath that their methods are validated by science. It is important as an epistemological exercise to realize that Ayurveda was born in the East and modern science in the West; the science-ization of Ayurveda happened at a precise moment in colonial history and has been discussed by postcolonial historians of science.According to some, the moment was distinctly marked by 50-rounds of gun salute from Fort William at Calcutta (now Kolkata). As a system of knowledge Ayurveda continues to be distinct from Western science – the models sustaining the knowledge systems are different, the way by which each system interprets the body, illness, disease and health are different – yet investors in Ayurveda keep claiming validity using the banner of science, even as science and its advocates consider all manners of healing systems besides allopathy as its distinct outside. Interestingly, the agenda of the community is “to have a GarbhVigyanAnusandhan Kendra, a facilitation centre, in every state by 2020” (3). The placement of the term *vigyan*, ie. ‘science’ against a methodological framework that is inspired by ancient, pre-modern knowledge system(s) remains an epistemological anachronism – albeit intriguing.

Science as we know it is a specific method of enquiry that emerged in the modern west some centuries ago; it has its own set of theories, analyses, rigour and methods of arriving at knowledge. There have been and will be other systems of knowledge and methods of enquiry; however, using the hegemonic advantage of one to then subvert that very system and foreground up another does come across as convenient and opportunistic. While it is the hegemony of modern/western science (which is experienced in terms of modern medicine by the common man on a daily basis)that gets established through such endeavours, the real threat lies deeper:one witnesses an intriguing blend of ‘scientific logic’ and assertions that are (yet) not based on science: and since is are tenets of science that are used to legitimize practices of the other system, social acceptance becomes an easier target to achieve, even if for ideals and ideologies that are unscientific, sexist, classist, racist. For instance, it is an accepted part of scientific/medical knowledgethat women need more calcium when the skeletal structure of the foetus starts to develop, and obstetricians too systematically prescribe calcium supplements as part of antenatal care. So we are not disturbed when the *sanskaris* echo this understanding too.

Obstetric science also says that the emotional well-being of the pregnant woman is of utmost importance for foetal health and development; it is considered part of obstetric best practice to ask the woman to do what she enjoys to do and listen to good music and keep happy; the explanation is that stress releases cortisol in the blood and high cortisol levels are harmful for foetal health. The *sanskaris* say this too, and we think they are in sync with the frame of science. We get unsettled when they then prescribe for the woman: Dr Karishma Mohandas Narwani, national convener of the project, said, “Ayurveda has all the details about how we can get the desired physical and mental qualities of babies. IQ is developed during the sixth month of pregnancy. If the mother undergoes specific procedures, like what to eat, listen and read, the desired IQ can be achieved. Thus, we can get a desired, customised baby” (3).Point is, who decides what makes a woman happy, when happiness *per se* is warranted during a pregnancy? If a woman feels happy listening to music we are happy with her; if she is happy when she reads the lives of legendary heroes we are okay as well. But if she wishes to chant the god’s name to attain peace of mind and happiness? Where do we draw the line? I agree,*prescribing* a single thing to all women (viz. listening to and reading the scriptures for instance) might not seem a sensible stance to adopt, very paternalistic too, agreed; but a lot of doctors do similar things: they ask all pregnant women to ‘be happy’ – read a book, watch a good movie.Why is one set of prescriptions good and the other worrisome? The point is, advocates of science and those belonging to a space that is opposed to modern science, both use the hegemonic language to justify their prescriptions; the *sanskaris* use the language and ensure popular uptake before slipping into a different path at the last moment; so it becomes all the more important to tease out the overlaps and divergences in their arguments before we can call it either a deliberate hoax or a praxis that is flawed. It becomes imperative to understand how are these two arguments/beliefs(that asking the woman to listen to good music is scientifically legitimate, and asking her to listen to scriptures is baseless) are different *in terms of their epistemological validity*; it cannot be a question of degree.

***The catch-me-if-you-can eugenics***

This is definitely a form of eugenics, but structurally different from the Hitlerianversion, the Sanjay Gandhi version and also the more contemporary assisted reproductive technologies enabled Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosisversion. This new form is a new version, one that is technically (and till now) outside the legal ambit.

This is a curious form of eugenics where, unlike previous phases, no already-born human being is being killed for having the wrong/undesired cultural or gender identity or for being poor, and neither are embryos being selectively discarded for having genetic challenges.The ‘killing’ is not taking place at any of these articulable levels that could then be examined by the legal vocabulary. The ‘interventions’seem to be happening at a distance, through words,so to say.

While it is fair enough (pun not intended) to be curious about the 450 babies born under the supervision/intervention of the *sanskaris*(how tall, how fair, etc.), it is the *desire*of the common (wo)man to beget a child who is healthy (and fair) that is being put to use/exploited. I would dare to say that a lot of us are eugenicists deep down (or otherwise) in some form or the other: even while sincerely standing for and advocating the rights of, for instance, the differently abled citizens, even while never agreeing to abort an embryo that gets diagnosed with some genetic abnormality, would all of us actively *prefer*a differently abled child over one that is not? (And here I am not talking of adoption since people are known to want to adopt a differently abled child). These could be troubling thought-experiments. And then again, if really, 450 children have been born who are tall while their parents have all been not-tall and are fair while their parents have all been not-fair, I believe it merits a systematic enquiry to understand how it happened – in terms of the genetic science of it, instead of deriding the claim and the results.

I wish to make a detour here to put on table my own experience: at the 20-weeks ultrasound scan it was realized that the foetus had talipes of both feet. A supremely arrogant and obnoxious doctor also asked me if I had second thoughts about continuing the pregnancy and I was aghast! I failed to grasp why anyone would consider terminating a pregnancy for talipes! After my daughter was born, I went to a brilliant paediatric orthopaedic and she underwent treatment for her feet; now that her feet ‘look’ normal and she can walk and run and climb stairs, I do not deny I amhappy. The point is, I *did* try to get her feet ‘look normal’. Is that not a eugenicist in me? I can rationalize my act: when there is a treatment available (and not a very complicated one at that) and when I had access to one of the best doctors for this, why should I not get the problem corrected for my daughter? If I do not do it how would I explain that to her later? Why should I put the onus of my politics on her without her consent? And then again, I myself can counter these rationalizations. I stand guilty too, somewhere; eugenics is very complicated.

It is complicated because it is a slow process wherein ideology is implicated, but not in black and white shades, it is *very*graded, stepped – and all the more reason why we need to build our counters logically and systematically.

When the language of science is used, all arguments get fortifiedmanifold – even though we know science is not just supremely dynamic, but deeply social and political too. It is science that has told us that consanguineous marriages are not wise, because of how genes are passed on to the offspring. Even for non-consanguineous marriages it is common to hear that instead of the baseless horoscope-matching, we should go in for blood-group matching, for testing certain genetic conditions like thalassemia before zeroing in on the partner. It seems perfectly humane and ethical to *not* want to increase the chances of thalassemia for a prospective child. Of course having a child with thalassemia (because both parents are positive) is *not*the same (or closely so) to having a child with dark skin because both parents are dark-skinned. But I am arguing that this is a question of the *grade*of the desire to erase the possibility of something (to want to erase the possibility of thalassemia seems absolutely acceptable,while to want to erase the possibility of having a dark-skinned child seems ridiculous and inhuman); *theregister remains the same*. And in a nation where notwithstanding the train of protests, fairness and whitening creams rule the roost, for a lot of people the promise of being able to avoid a dark-skinned child will appeal a lot. And that’s the deeper danger, that these workshops and counselling sessions will appeal to the common (wo)man, surreptitiously and otherwise, consciously or otherwise.The risk is not that the organizers will continue to ignore court stay orders and go ahead with the workshops, but that we will think, why not, why not just see what they say, and if they prescribe a few easy things (and the obstetrician too will anyway also prescribe a list of things), why not abide by those and see if the child is really born fairer and grows up taller? An easy mix of Fair-&-Lovely and Horlicks.See, the seeming simplicity of the thing is what makes it easy to access minds and desires.

***Tread softly***

Those signing up for the workshops are not criminals; they can well argue, we are not harming anybody in this – we are hoping our child, who is yet not conceived, will be born with good looks and a good body. There might be a woman in there who faced abuse at her in-laws for being dark skinned. In fact, a lot of us do hope that our children grew up healthy, and such terms, outside of the WHO dictionary, mean different thing to different people. We do wishcertain things for our children – some might force those down their children’s throats and others might keep them contained, but a lot of us do harbour hopes and wishes:when I think I want to see her grow up into a sensitive, caring, good-at-heart human being, that is hope as well. And if a couple add that they want to see their child born with a skin shade fairer than theirs, what is the logical counter to that?

They could legitimately argue they are not harming anybody by desiring a fair child; they are not harming any born child or unborn foetus. It becomes difficult to articulate a critique. And thereby it becomes all the more important to engage with this issue in all its complexity, work through its multiple layers. Because what does get erased are our sensitive emotions, the ease of being happy with who we are and who we give birth to; we end up treading on ourselves and our pain in the long run, by denying to accept a generation that is not substantially fair, by desiring to beget progeny that is fairer than *us*, by agreeing to look upon ourselves as lacking. We end up treadingnot just on dreams but also on rights, hope, on life and love, and we are treading not softly either.

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