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Original Article

The Colonial Stain: British Rule and the Enduring Legacy of Colorism in India

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Abstract - The article talks about how British colonialism ingrained the ideology of colourism in India's social and cultural systems, thus generating a stubborn racial and aesthetic pecking order that is in favour of whiteness and lighter hues of skin. Drawing on postcolonial theory, critical race discourse, and cultural studies, this paper examines how racial classifications adopted in the colonial era have been applied in both education and literature, and can also be found in media representations.The study draws close comparisons between Anglo-Indian narratives, nationalist writings and popular culture of today to show how the colonial "whiteness as superiority" fable turned into an unadulterated mark of class, happiness, and moral rectitude in postcolonial India. Then it considers how these hierarchies have continued to kick up a storm in both matrimony practices and advertising, film, and the levelling of languages. Thus, this article refutes the suggestion that colorism in India is merely a social prejudice and argues instead that it continues to be a legacy of the colonial past: a reminder that independence in politics did not necessarily bringabout decolonization at all levels of representation and thought. Finally, the paper concludes with a call for greater decolonial consciousness in literary and cultural analysis to dismantle the residual structures of chromatic inequality.

Keywords - Colorism, Colonialism, Postcolonial Identity, British Raj, Whiteness, Racial Aesthetics, Decolonial Theory, Indian Literature, Cultural Hierarchy, Colonial Legacy.

1. Introduction

For centuries, there has been one silent determinant of social status, economic potential, and beauty in India—skin color. Fair complexion, or fairness as it is called, has not only been a cosmetic feature but a mark of power and privilege deeply rooted in the country's cultural and historical context. While the original caste system linked lighter skin with higher status, British colonial expansion further amplified the hierarchy, connecting fair complexion to intelligence, authority, and social superiority. Even today, 74 percent of respondents in a study on colorism, the concept of having prejudices in a racial or ethnic group based on skintone, and discrimination within the workplace in India agreed that lighter-skinned people are more accepted in Indian society, demonstrating the long-lasting nature of pre-colonial and colonial biases.

The skin-whitening industry now accounts for 50 percent of India's total skincare market, worth an estimated 450 to 535 million dollars, indicating just how deeply skin-color preference is rooted in modern society. British policies that privileged light-skinned individuals in both political and legal systems did not cease with independence but instead were institutionalized in media, advertising, and economic systems—informing India's own beauty standards and reinforcing fair skin as both a status marker and a prerequisite for upward mobility. Though colorism in India derives its roots from pre-colonial systems like the caste system and Mughal-era beauty ideals, British colonialism formalized these racial hierarchies by promoting lighter-skinned individuals in administration and jobs, while Western beauty ideals entrenched these biases in law, media, and cultural norms—an institutionalization that globalization later reinforced, infusing a lasting preference for fairness that continues to influence India's social psyche, economic opportunities, and aesthetics.

2. Pre-Colonial Origins of Colorism in India

Colorism in India was not a product of British colonialism but a continuation of ancient social stratifications in terms of the caste system, religious teachings, and prior foreign invasions. The thousands-of-years-old caste system already identified whiteness with superiority and blackness with lower social status. Similarly, Mughal and Persian influences cemented fairness as a virtue, particularly in the ruling class. While British rule may have reinforced these biases, fair skin was greatly desired in Indian society centuries prior to the arrival of the British.

The *varna* system, which was the focal point of Hindu society, equated caste with skin color, labeling Brahmins (the priestly caste) as "white" and Shudras (the laboring class) as "black." The *Manusmriti*, an ancient Hindu legal text, also legitimized these identifications, codifying caste distinctions in terms of purity, occupation, and, by implication, skin color. Although the *varna* system was initially an occupational hierarchy, it developed over time into a rigid hereditary system in which fair skin signified purity and dominance.

3. Mughal Influence on Colorism and Aesthetics

The Mughal Empire (1526–1857) also established colorism within Indian society. Persian cultural ideals, which for centuries associated light skin with elegance and nobility, shaped Mughal aesthetics of beauty. Seventeenth-century Mughal portraits habitually depicted idealized women with smooth skin, slim faces, and high-end-appearance clothing, as seen in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' *Portrait of a Mughal Woman* (ca. 1630-45). The white, powdery chest and belly of the subject, her silky black locks and translucent robes indicate the upper class preference for light skin as a sign of status and beauty. This preference for white skin was made possible by Mughal court paintings, which merged Persian, Indian, and European styles. Seventeenth-century Mughal portraits typically depicted women as having fair skin, narrow waists, and curvy hips, conforming to an archetypal ideal that may not be an accurate representation of the actual appearance of women at court. As a result of the *purdah* system, whereby royal women were secluded from the world, most of these paintings would have been idealized and not necessarily realistic, and courtesans and players might have served as models for Mughal portraits. In addition, aristocratic women of Mughal society were strongly associated with richness and fertility, as seen in paintings such as *A Woman Grasping a Flowering Tree* (ca. 1720) in the Deccan, wherein a plump woman transfers fertility to a budding tree. Color-based hierarchies were additionally reinforced by association of light skin with beauty, nobility, and prosperity. Even the *Dara Shikoh Album* (ca. 1635-42), the most extensive portraiture album of women to have survived from Mughal periods, depicts women with fresh, youthful faces and pale complexions, which implies that beauty ideals were not only imposed on courtesans but on women of royal birth as well. Moreover, the Mughal imperial workshop (*tasvir khana*), in which Persian and native artistic traditions were blended, further spread a persistent visual culture identifying fair skin with power, prosperity, and beauty. The iconography of portraying women in gossamer, gold-embellished drapery and depicting them as light-skinned and having smooth, delicate features reflects an innate preference for fairer-complexioned women as the beauty standard among elite-level Mughals. It also came to be internalized in course of time within Indian notions of beauty, extending well into society outside the Mughal period.

Even before British rule, lighter-skinned individuals had greater social mobility, particularly in marriage markets. Ancient Sanskrit texts and classical Indian literature habitually characterized ideal female beauty in terms of fairness, associating light skin with virtue, youth, and attractiveness. This bias was extended to marriage alliances between royal and aristocratic families, where fair-skinned brides were favored. The *Kamasutra* and other ancient texts mentioned fair skin as one of the major features of beauty, once again reaffirming that colorism existed independently from British colonialism.

4. Colonial Institutionalization of Colorism

While colorism in India existed before British colonialism, it was more a cultural and social preference rather than a legally codified system of privilege and the British took an existing bias and transformed it into formal, institutionalized hierarchies, introducing discrimination on the basis of color into employment, government, and law. In addition, unlike the caste system, which was regionally and religiously governed, British rule officially enforced

racial segregation and color-based exclusion. The British martial race theory furthered these hierarchies by assigning the presumptive superiority of light-skinned, Indo-European-speaking 'Aryan' North Indians over darker-skinned, Dravidian-speaking South Indians. It justified North Indian groups such as Sikhs, Rajputs, Gurkhas, and Dogras' unbalanced recruitment to combat roles and exclusion from combat for most South Indians.

British colonial rule habitually entrenched racial hierarchies by linking whiteness to power, intelligence, and moral goodness and darker populations to subordinate roles. These divisions along racial lines were not only cultural but institutionalized in the form of legal, economic, and social systems that defined boundaries to power. The Cornwallis Code of 1793 formalized this racial ordering by reserving senior administrative positions exclusively for Europeans, on the assumption that Indians were incapable of holding offices of trust. Even in junior bureaucratic positions, complexion played a deciding role in recruitment, since lighter skin color was equated with civilization and compatibility with British values. This racialized system of employment was further reinforced through the British education system, which sought to produce a class of Indians who were "English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This policy disproportionately benefited upper-caste, fair-skinned Indians, giving them preferential access to Western education and government employment, thereby consolidating colonial racial orders.

The British did not just favor lighter-skinned individuals—they instituted an economic structure that overtly connected skin color with occupation and compensation. Lighter-skinned Indians, and particularly Anglo-Indians, were disproportionately represented in railway administration, military service, and colonial bureaucracy. Darker-skinned Indians were largely limited to less well-paid labor, reinforcing a cycle of economic disadvantage.

Beyond work, the British cautiously created racial distinctions through legal practices and penal institutions that inscribed a ranked system of belonging. Racialized criminalization was one of the central tools of colonial domination, as seen in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which criminalized entire nomadic and marginalized communities as hereditary criminals. Such legal instruments not only justified enhanced surveillance and penalization of dark-skinned and lower-caste individuals but also reinforced the colonial notion that criminality was a racialized feature. Similar frameworks were used across the British Empire, in Kenya and the Caribbean for instance, where colonial authorities invoked collective punishment acts to maintain racial hierarchies. British colonialism codified racial hierarchies as it constructed and disseminated narratives of black and brown people being inherently criminal, which it underpinned through legal codes. Labeling nonwhites as being naturally criminal or untrustworthy was a foundational feature of British colonialism.

Visual culture also reinforced these racial cleavages, making them stick in public perception. Official photos, bureaucratic portraits, and public imagery frequently depicted lighter-skinned Indians with British officials, echoing their supposed superiority over darker-skinned counterparts. This practice followed a broader imperial strategy wherein racialized portrayals of Black and Asian communities as threatening or deferential were summoned to justify colonial rule. The colonial regime relied on an unyielding cultural imperative to measurement and classification, which arranged racial hierarchies materially, symbolically, and psychically. This effort was realized in the census efforts of British India and the anthropometric studies carried out by Sir Herbert Hope Risley, an Indian Civil Service administrator who tried to classify Indian groups based on bodily features. Risley's practices relied heavily on the quantification of nasal indices and cranial morphology to establish a racial dichotomy between Aryan and Dravidian groups, consolidating the perception that caste was founded on biological difference. These categories were institutionalized in official manuals, census reports, and legislative codes, linking caste to inherent inferiority and rationalizing colonial dominance through an imposed racial order. These categories were used by the British government not only to legitimate their dominion but also to regulate the mobility of lower-caste and tribal groups, shaping colonial policy regarding education, employment, and criminal surveillance. White supremacy in Britain was legally codified and visually inscribed in propaganda representing racialized subjects as below whites. These representations enabled the ideological construction of whiteness as the pinnacle of civilization and relegated darker-skinned people to positions of permanent subordination.

The Ilbert Bill Controversy of 1883 also tested how much race penetrated the colonial judicial system. The bill, which allowed Indian judges to adjudicate cases against Europeans, was greeted with virulent resistance from British officials and settlers. This resistance was sustained even after such judges were elite, Western-educated Indians of fair complexion, indicating the narrow bounds of colonial racial discourse. Lastly, the bill was passed in a compromised form in 1884, allowing Indian judges to try Europeans but providing the right to a defendant to appeal for a jury of at least half Europeans. This watered-down form preserved racial hierarchy, as it confirmed British supremacy was conditional on Indians being subordinated. The controversy demonstrated the degree to which racial discrimination was not just circumstantial but intrinsic to British imperialism in India and officials who made no bones about asserting that "it was perfectly impossible and ridiculous, so long as we retained our hold on India, to give Native races full equality." Racial hierarchies established during British rule are not only legacies of the past; their impact still shapes contemporary social and legal institutions. The exclusion of Indians from judicial power, regardless of their education or social standing, illustrates how racial hierarchy was embedded in British colonial rule. However, the denial of equal status even to Indians who were fair-skinned reveals that British racial thinking was not based on physical appearance. Instead, race existed as a politically constructed and socially created category in which ancestry, culture, and colonial power dynamics decided one's place in the hierarchy. British colonizers and administrators may have recognized fairer Indians as being more "civilized" or Western but did see them as necessarily distinct and subservient due to their non-European origins. This is an example that colonial discourse on race was not exclusively skin color but concerned maintaining European domination by tightly controlling who had the power.

Through the inscription of racial discrimination into legal, economic, and social institutions, British colonial rule caused colorism to become a cultural bias and to morph into a durable system of power. This systematic racialization of labor, law, and representation rendered whiteness the norm of authority, while darker-skinned groups were maintained in the state of perpetual subordination. The persistence of these frameworks, both historically and in the present, underscores the long-term influence of colonial racial ideas. As James Baldwin in *Exploring Britain's Racialized Colonial Legacies in Criminological Research* so astutely observed, “People are trapped in history and history is trapped inside them.” The endurance of racial orders established under British colonialism testifies that these orders continue to shape global power structures long after the official empire closed.

5. Modern and Global Influences on Colorism

Scholars, such as Ramya M. Vijaya and Naureen Bhullar, theorize in “Colorism and Employment Bias in India” that modern colorism in India is not the direct consequence of British colonialism but rather a by-product of globalization and Westernization of the postcolonial era. They theorize that international beauty standards, Hollywood, and international consumer culture have played much greater roles in perpetuating colorism than the policies of Britain. While colonialism may have instituted some racial stratifications, they argue that mass media, multinational beauty firms, and global capitalism have influenced modern conceptions of fairness far more in India. Critics of the colonial thesis argue that the appeal of Western standards of beauty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly with Hollywood, social media, and global marketing, has served to spread colorism rather than British colonialism. The global beauty industry, dominated by Western corporations, promotes fair skin as the universal standard of beauty, influencing Indian standards of beauty through global television advertising and celebrity culture. An additional compelling argument for the role of globalization in promoting colorism is the aggressive marketing of fairness creams by multinationals such as L’Oréal, Unilever, and Procter & Gamble. Critics argue that companies rebranded and heightened skin-whitening campaigns in the twentieth century, decades following British colonialism. Unilever’s “Fair & Lovely” was launched in India in 1975—close to thirty years after independence—and became one of the best-selling skin-lightening cosmetics globally. The global beauty industry has continued to take advantage of Indian consumers’ insecurities, promoting colorist values for profit without regard to colonial history. Although recent colorism criticism has led to some companies pulling products or refocusing their advertising campaigns, the global beauty industry has long enjoyed reinforcing colorist values. In 2020, following the re-emergence of anti-racism demonstrations and growing condemnation of skin-whitening products, Unilever

announced it would rename its "Fair & Lovely" product to "Glow & Lovely" to drop explicit mentions of fairness, but critics noted that the product formula and marketing strategy did not really shift. Similarly, Johnson & Johnson discontinued its Neutrogena Fine Fairness product, and L'Oréal pledged to remove words such as "whitening" and "fair" from its face products. Nevertheless, in spite of the changing winds, skin-whitening creams remain available and the market remains forecast to grow heavily, with the global market potentially reaching $8.9 billion by 2027. Even as businesses struggle to adapt their marketing in response to backlash, many still promote the attractiveness of lighter skin, reflecting how deeply entrenched colorism has become in consumer culture.

Another indication that globalization, rather than British colonialism alone, has driven colorism is that it is prevalent in countries that were never colonized by the British, such as Japan, South Korea, and China. Whiteness has been employed to signify aristocracy, wealth, and modernity in these countries but not due to British colonization. For example, the aesthetic of K-beauty (Korean beauty) markets fairness as a desirable goal, idealizing pale, translucent skin through wholesale use of whitening beauty products and treatments. Since these countries were not colonized by the British, this suggests that colorism is really a product of global beauty standards rather than necessarily British-specific racial stratification.

6. British Consumerism and Colonial Beauty Propaganda

While the role of globalization and modern media in colorism in India cannot be denied, they cannot be analyzed in isolation. The colorist norms that permeate modern Indian society are deeply embedded in the history of British colonization, which not only created but legitimized racial hierarchies centuries prior to the existence of mass media and global advertising. British colonial occupation changed colorism into more than just a cultural bias; it became a de jure system of discrimination entrenched within government, law, education, and society. While the appeal of Western beauty standards may have compounded colorism in the postcolonial era, the British policies formally made skin color a marker of power, wealth, and legal status—transforming colorism from a social norm to a structural system of discrimination.

British colonial rule in India not only established racial hierarchies in government and employment—it actively reshaped Indian beauty standards, inserting whiteness as the desirable aesthetic. Through policy, advertising, visual propaganda, and consumer goods, the British associated fair skin with modernity, respectability, and desirability, and whiteness became an aspirational marker of social status. These colonial beauty ideals were strategically designed to support British hegemony, encouraging Indians to internalize a racial hierarchy in which fairness was synonymous with intelligence, moral value, and economic status. The long-term success of this colonial project is evident today in India's multi-billion-dollar skin-whitening industry, a legacy that continues to thrive on colonial anxieties regarding complexion.

One of the earliest and most successful ways in which the British colonial state institutionalized whiteness as a valued trait was through consumer products designed to alter complexion. British businesses flooded the Indian market with skin-whitening creams, soaps, and products that positioned fairness as a requirement for cleanliness, refinement, and upward mobility. Pears Soap, Vinolia, and Snow White Cold Cream were household names in India, touted as tickets to European standards of beauty and social mobility. Advertisements commonly made stark contrasts between dark-skinned "natives" and light-skinned individuals who had achieved whiteness through British commodities. One notorious Pears Soap advertisement from 1884 spread this message by depicting a white child washing a Black child as the caption said, "I have found PEARS' SOAP matchless for the Hands and Complexion." (Figure 1) This advertisement, originally published in *The Graphic* for Christmas 1884, is based on the fable *Washing the Blackamoor White*. This advertisement reflects the imperialist and racial ideologies of the Victorian era. The image on the left shows a Black child being placed in a tub while a white child holds a bar of Pears' Soap. In the next image, the Black child's skin appears to have been washed "clean," reinforcing the colonial belief that whiteness represented purity and civilization.The message was implicit: darkness equaled inferiority, while whiteness equaled purity and advancement.

It was by the early twentieth century that the British had actively encouraged the production of skin-whitening creams within India itself, so that the colonial preference for fairness was firmly entrenched even after independence. The first mass-market fairness cream, Afghan Snow, was introduced in 1919 under British economic policies and gained popularity instantaneously. This local development of the fairness industry, initially created during British rule, laid the foundations for India's postcolonial skin-whitening industry.

Apart from ads, the British-controlled education system consolidated fair skin as the marker of sophistication and superiority. Indian students in British-controlled schools were subjected to Eurocentric curricula that glorified Western civilization, British hegemony, and European physical characteristics. Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) explicitly sought to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." While this policy was devised primarily to constitute a loyal bureaucratic class to govern British interests, it also ordained cultural and aesthetic aspirations, exhorting Indians to embrace European norms of beauty and self-worth.

Fig. 1 Pears' Soap Advertisement (1884)

Source: Michelle I. Parker, "Soap, Race, and Cleanliness," Dalnavert Museum, January 17, 2019. https://www.friendsofdalnavert.ca/blog/2019/1/17/soap-race-and-cleanliness.

British-written textbooks and literature near-uniformly featured light-skinned historical heroes and darker-skinned laborers, peasants, or submissive figures. Classroom photographs, which were in every British-held missionary school, always featured the British administrators towering in authoritative pose, amidst lighter-skinned Indian clerks, reinforcing the myth that racial whiteness signified power and competence. Over time, these racialized lessons implanted the idea that fairness was the prerequisite for intelligence, social acceptability, and success.

The British colonial authorities employed photography and visual representation as a powerful tool for establishing whiteness as the dominant aesthetic and signifier of prestige. Official paintings and photographs of British rulers consistently placed light-skinned Indians close to the rulers, while darker Indians were placed in the background or depicted performing menial tasks. These were not accidental artistic choices; they were deliberate propaganda intended to accustom Indians to a racial hierarchy based on skin color, where fairness equaled proximity to power.

The colonial state also ensured that Anglo-Indians-individuals of British-Indian mixed ancestry—were overrepresented in British-approved occupations, solidifying a direct link between lighter complexion and professional accomplishment. Anglo-Indians, who tended to be fairer, were rewarded with benefits in the areas of employment, education, and social acceptance. Anglo-Indian women, in particular, were strategically used in British-run offices, railway work, and public-facing occupations such as telegraph operators and clerks since their fair complexions made them appear more "European" and thus more palatable as representatives of modernity and British presence. British reinforcement of light skin as a marker of status extended beyond employment and education—it entered marriage markets and social customs as well. During the British colonial era, Anglo-Indians of lighter skin tones and European-like features were enumerated as "Europeans" in the census, whereas darker-complexioned Anglo-Indians were denied entry into elite institutions based on social and legal barriers. The 1911 Indian census allowed Anglo-Indians to class themselves as "Europeans," reinforcing an ordered racial hierarchy that benefited those who could effectively "pass." In 1931, census officials noted that Anglo-Indians "who are not handicapped by excessive pigmentation" classified themselves as Europeans, demonstrating how skin color immediately correlated with social standing and mobility. The colonial state made it easier for this rigid racial ordering to occur, with light-skinned Anglo-Indians receiving increased access to government, the military, and education, while darker-skinned individuals were often relegated to lower-status jobs. Such a racialized system legitimized the idea that equitability was a preferable social good, inexorably tied to privilege and access to British-dominated institutions. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this racialized ideology had permeated into Indian upper-caste marriage markets, with families actively procuring fair-skinned brides for their sons.

Marriage advertisements from colonial times in British-held newspapers habitually and openly included "fair complexion" as a desirable trait for prospective brides, a practice that continues in Indian marriage culture today. These racialized beauty standards were not simply extensions of pre-colonial caste hierarchies but were perpetuated and reinforced through the British government, education, and media. By institutionalizing fair skin as a sign of desirability, British colonial occupation transformed fairness into a social and economic resource that continues to influence marriage markets in contemporary India.

By associating whiteness with power, status, and desirability, British colonialism transformed colorism from a cultural bias to a strongly institutionalized system of social and economic stratification. Through consumer goods, education, photographic propaganda, and marriage practices, the British ensured that fairness became the dominant beauty ideal in India.

7. Conclusion

While globalization and modern media have certainly intensified these biases, they remain inherently rooted in the colonial period. The continuation of skin-whitening industries, fairness-based employment discrimination, and colorist marriage preferences are all direct legacies of British policy. Far from merely exploiting pre-existing prejudices, British rule actively constructed, reinforced, and institutionalized colorism, shaping beauty standards that remain deeply entrenched in Indian society today.

The lasting influence of British colonialism on India's colorism extends well beyond historical discrimination and remains alive today in social rankings, economic opportunity, and cultural norms that shape Indian society. By institutionalizing racialized hiring practices, codifying fairness as an ideal norm in education and media, and entrenching color prejudices in the military recruitment process, colonialism raised colorism as a cultural bias to a fully entrenched system of domination. While some argue that colorism predated British colonization or that globalization explains more of today's fairness prejudices, these accounts fail to register the extent to which British policy organized and reaffirmed these hierarchies by law, administration, and economies. The colonial inheritance of racialized policing and economic marginalization continues to act against darker-skinned individuals, but the global beauty industry merely rides upon colonial anxieties, not building them. The British did not invent colorism, but they institutionalized it into a rigid system that currently regulates social mobility, attractiveness, and self-worth in India. Colonial institutionalized racism continues to influence policing, surveillance, and immigration policy today, as in the

continuing legacy of the Criminal Tribes Act on racial profiling. Black and Asian communities in Britain today are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system, an extension of colonial racial logic that positioned racialized subjects as inherently suspect. Similarly, economic marginalization of darker-skinned individuals during the colonial era has produced enduring imbalances in employment and wealth distribution. Colonial racial orders have never been overthrown; instead, they have been reinscribed, remade, and recuperated into modern systems of inequality. These legacies confirm the deep structural inheritance of colonial rule, demonstrating how racial hierarchies shaped under British imperialism remain instituted in modern systems of power. As Aimé Césaire so eloquently put it, "No race holds the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of strength / and there is place for all at the rendezvous of victory." The history of colonial color hierarchies informs citizens that abolition of systemic colorism is not simply a question of historical acknowledgment—it must be actively dismantled to undo its current consequences.

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