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# Fair and Lovely: Standards of Beauty, Globalization, and the Modern Indian Woman

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**FAIR AND LOVELY:**  
**STANDARDS OF BEAUTY, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE MODERN INDIAN WOMAN**

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Fall 2011

**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Traditional Indian Beauty.....	7
The Modern Indian Woman.....	11
Skin.....	12
Hair.....	15
Figure.....	18
Clothing.....	21
Societal Effects.....	22
Conclusions.....	31
References.....	34
Primary Resources.....	34
Secondary Resources.....	35
Bibliography.....	37

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**Abstract:**

With the expansion of globalization in the modern era, ideas from individual cultures are more easily able to spread to other parts of the world. One set of cultural standards that may be spreading to India is that of beauty, where a media with an increasingly Western style shares television space with advertisements from corporations that are often foreign in origin. This study seeks to examine exactly what influence this globalized media has on its viewers, and, in particular, on their perspectives on beauty. In addition, since the ability to conform to cultural standards affects how people view themselves, this study will scrutinize exactly what effects these standards of beauty have on the women being measured against them.

Most of the data gathered in this study was collected from residents of the city of Delhi, with supplemental information collected from residents of Jaipur, from previous studies on related issues, and from the media itself. This study was conducted using qualitative methods, mostly through individual interviews with members of demographics likely to be affected by changing standards of beauty or likely to have significant numbers of interactions related to these changing standards. The findings of this study are that cultural standards of beauty in India are narrowing and conforming to more international standards, and that these changes are causing new physical and psychological problems to be introduced into Indian society.

**Introduction:**

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as the saying goes. In recent years, a number of studies have been done that dispute this, studies that try to define an objective standard for beauty, to classify exactly what makes someone beautiful in the eyes of others.

These studies have examined issues as variant as waist-to-hip or waist-to-chest ratio<sup>1</sup> and facial

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Gründl, Marita Eisenmann-Klein, and Lukas Prantl. “Quantifying Female Bodily Attractiveness by a Statistical Analysis of Body Measurements.” *Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery* 123.3(Mar. 2009): 1064-1071. Internet. 11 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://journals.lww.com/plasreconsurg/Abstract/2009/03000/>

symmetry.<sup>2</sup> Many of these studies provide compelling evidence for their claims. But even if these factors contribute to beauty, it would be difficult to claim that they are the sole determiners of what constitutes an attractive appearance. This leaves many areas in which determination of beauty is subjective, and varies cross-culturally. For example, just in Western culture, consider the evolution of society's views on the ideal skin tone. In the *Odyssey*, one of the classics of Western literature, Homer expounds upon Nausicaa's beauty by describing her as "white-armed"<sup>3</sup> in the same sentence as he claims "she outshone [all the other maidens], though all are lovely."<sup>4</sup> However, in the modern era, white arms are more likely to be considered pasty than beautiful in most Western countries, and American fashion magazines are filled with articles about how to maintain tan skin during the cooler months.<sup>5</sup> Other areas where beauty cannot be objectively determined include weight, hair and eye color, hair length and texture, height, and clothing style.

Standards of beauty are not just an academic issue: they are affected by culture, and have an effect on the people measured against them. In America, for example, the desire to be tan leads many women to go to indoor tanning salons that increase their risk of skin cancer.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, some sources argue that this ideal of tan skin has arisen from its association with an upper class lifestyle and having enough leisure time to leave the indoor office and relax in the

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<sup>2</sup> Gillian Rhodes, Fiona Proffitt, Jonathon M. Grady and Alex Sumich. "Facial Symmetry and the Perception of Beauty." *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 5.4 (1998): 659-669. Internet. 11 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/eq4178xr00474432/>

<sup>3</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996) 6.112.

<sup>4</sup> Homer, 6.120.

<sup>5</sup> Dawn Davis. "Keep Your Summer Glow Going Strong." *Cosmopolitan*. Internet. 11 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/hairstyles-beauty/skin-care-makeup/summer-glow-gradual-self-tanners>

<sup>6</sup> Stacey Colino. "Scary Truths Tanning Salons Deny." *Cosmopolitan*. Internet. 11 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/advice/health/indoor-tanning-dangers-1209>

sun.<sup>7</sup> The desire of people to conform to an idealized, even unreachable, standard of beauty can have a negative effect on both their physical and mental health. And since standards of beauty are not static, when these standards change, it is necessary to examine the causes and effects of these changes, both negative and positive. In India, it appears that these standards are in the process of changing. The question that must be addressed, then, is why these changes are occurring and what their effects are.

To understand development we must understand not only what effect individuals and society can have on development but also what effect development can have on society. And in the case of beauty standards, we see a situation in which the effects of a certain type of development on Indian society may not be entirely positive. If it is possible for certain brands of development to lead to an increase in health problems or a decrease in the empowerment of a certain group of people, this is a factor that must be considered in deciding whether to adopt that particular development strategy.

When studying development strategies, one of the most difficult things to determine is what makes development actually sustainable. However, one requirement for sustainable development that can be agreed upon is that sustainable development must benefit those who do not traditionally have power in society, those who are marginalized. In India, those groups range from lower caste members and Dalits to tribal groups to women. The issue of beauty is particularly applicable when considering this last group, since women, in general, are the people most affected by beauty standards.

India is a society undergoing a dramatic increase in its Westernization, partially caused by the opening up of its economy to international businesses, a step taken by the government in

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<sup>7</sup> Liane J. McDermott, Mike Emmison, and John Lowe, "Changing Discourses and Popular Attitudes to Suntanning," *Some Like It Hot: The Beach as a Cultural Dimension*. Eds. Allan Edwards, Keith Gilbert, and James Skinner (Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport Ltd., 2003) 91-93.

order to promote the growth and development of the Indian economy. This Westernization has not only affected what businesses operate in India, but many aspects of urban Indian culture. One need only look at the streets of large cities like Delhi or Jaipur and note how many members of the younger generation are clad in jeans instead of *salwar* to understand how significantly this change has already influenced Indian society. And with the change in these aspects of culture, it is no surprise that standards of beauty appear to be changing as well.

But are these changes positive or negative? In many ways, women in Western society appear to have more choices and opportunities: in general, they can marry whom they choose, live independently, have sex outside of marriage without being ostracized, and wear revealing clothing. It is not clear whether these, and other, opportunities are universally empowering, but for those who believe they are, it might appear that Western society is more empowering for women than Indian society. In this case, it might be assumed that adopting Western standards, for beauty, sexuality, or anything else, would be empowering for Indian women. This is a dangerous assumption, even if we take at face value the claim that women are by and large more liberated in Western society than in Indian society. For one thing, even if a society as a whole treats women better than another, this does not mean that each aspect of that society's culture is more beneficial to women.

In fact, the issue of beauty and body image is one part of Western culture which struggles with its treatment of women. Eating disorders are just one of a number of areas in which this struggle is manifested, as Western societies generally have a significantly higher rate of the disorders than non-Western societies.<sup>8</sup> So there exists a strong possibility that even if

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Makino, Koji Tsuboi, and Lorraine Dennerstein. "Prevalence of Eating Disorders: A Comparison of Western and Non-Western Countries." *Medscape General Medicine* 6.3 (Sep. 2004). Internet. 14 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1435625/>

Westernization in general were to have a positive impact on Indian women, Westernization of beauty standards might still have a negative one.

So what effects has the Westernization of beauty standards actually had on Indian women? Because India is a culture with historically very different ideas about women's roles than those of most modern Western culture, it may be feasible in India to distinguish between ideas of women that are inherent in India culture and ideas that have been borrowed from the Western world. Due to this, it becomes possible to examine exactly what impact globalization has had on Indian women, and to embark upon the more difficult task of exploring whether this impact has been positive.

To thoroughly understand this issue, there are four questions that must be answered. The first is what Indian standards of beauty were historically, which must be answered to get a clear picture of how they have changed. The second is what Indian beauty standards are now. The third is what effects these standards of beauty, and in particular the changes in these standards of beauty, have on women in India. And the fourth question is whether these effects are positive ones.

This paper will attempt to answer all of these questions, with an emphasis on the final three, as the historical aspect of this issue is not intended to be the focus. Since almost all primary data will be taken from two cities, Jaipur and Delhi, some of the information obtained may be applicable only in these areas and not in India as a whole. In particular, body image and beauty in rural areas may be significantly different than that in urban centers like Delhi and Jaipur. As such, this paper will focus on these issues with respect to urban women, rather than to Indian women in general.

### **Traditional Indian Beauty:**

In recent years, it has been argued, beauty standards in India have begun to change.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the claim is that beauty standards have narrowed, with the requirements for ideal beauty becoming increasingly constricted. As a result, women in India have amplified their efforts to modify their appearances to fit the societal standards, leading to the growth of the cosmetics industry and the introduction into the Indian market of products and procedures designed to enhance appearance.<sup>10</sup> But to understand these changes, it is necessary to understand not just how they are changing but what they were initially. If one is making a claim that Indian women have begun measuring themselves against international standards of beauty rather than Indian standards, as Runkle does in her article, one must understand exactly what these Indian standards are.

There are a number of helpful sources that can be found on this topic, from ancient art to early examples of marriage advertisements from the beginning of the twentieth century. It may not be possible to form a cohesive definition of these standards, however, because they have presumably changed at other points in history as well. Still, a better perspective on the historical context of beauty in India will be useful for understanding modern standards of beauty. India has a long history, and it would be impractical to discuss each of its art traditions in this space, so only a brief art historical background will be provided before moving on to the more relevant topic of recent history, where it will be necessary to use mostly secondary sources.

The earliest images of female figures in India are from the Mauryan period, from the fourth to the second century BCE, and represent women with “large breasts, wide hips, [and]

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Runkle. “Bollywood, Beauty, and the Corporate Construction of “International Standards” in Post-Liberalization.” *South Asian Graduate Research Journal* 11 (2004): 38. Internet. 27 Sep. 2011. Available: <http://www0.hku.hk/sociodep/bbf/BBF%20Readings%20W10/W10%20Bollywood%20Beauty.pdf#page=44>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

tapering legs.”<sup>11</sup> This representation continued in the Sunga period, during the first century BCE, where images from Bharhut portray women with “elaborately platted” hair and “large round breasts, thin waist, [and] wide hips”<sup>12</sup>. Interestingly, “there is no attempt to differentiate individual women on the basis of their physical appearance.”<sup>13</sup> Women in these images are described as being stiff, but only half a century later, still during the Sunga period, images of women in Sanchi show bodies contorted “into an ‘S’ shaped curve.”<sup>14</sup>

By the Kushan period, from the first century to the fourth century CE, the ‘S’ shaped curve had been standardized, as had many of the other proportions of a woman’s body, ranging from how high up her eyes were to the ratio of her head to her total height.<sup>15</sup> These proportions were not the same as those in nature, and were consistent from artist to artist, showing artists must have been trained to use them, and that they were considered idealized rather than natural.<sup>16</sup> One aspect of these proportions that might be considered distinctive was the use of a fairly round face shape. The curving of the body at the breasts, waist, and hips is also worth noting, as it seems to demonstrate some emphasis on those locations. As one scholar noted, “[These proportions] are in short an idealisation of the female form. A form that is instantly recognisable to its viewer as being an image (rather merely a symbol) of femininity while at the same time being utterly unattainable by any real woman.”<sup>17</sup> Direct observation of images from these eras reveals the dominance of the hourglass figure; however, many of the images showed women with at least a small belly in the front, even when the waist remained narrow at the sides.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Bracey. “Ideals of Beauty in Indian Art.” 2007. Internet. 16 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.kushan.org/essays/women/ideals.htm>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> National Museum, personal observation, 29 Nov. 2011, Delhi

shape of the bodies of the women depicted is in marked contrast to that of Greco-Roman women at the same time, who were usually shown as willowy and slender.<sup>19</sup>

It can also be instructive to look at portrayals of individual goddesses, particularly Parvati, who is described as “the grand personification of [...] the concept of beauty.”<sup>20</sup> Parvati is “a slender bodied maiden of comely hips and moon-like face.”<sup>21</sup> “Comely hips” most likely means noticeable ones, re-emphasizing the same ideals seen in the ancient art—a slender waist with curves. As for the “moon-like face,” it most likely refers to a face that is glowing, pale, or both, as those attributes are often ascribed to the moon. Other facial features of Parvati are also described adoringly by Shiva: “Her eyes [are] like lotus petals, her eyebrows are the bows of Kama, her lower lip is like the *bimba* fruit, her nose like the beak of a parrot.”<sup>22</sup> This preference for lush red lips, the color of the red *bimba* fruit, is reinforced by Sangam poetry from South India, which describes “mouth[s] red as coral.”<sup>23</sup> These poets also expound on their image of beautiful hair, describing “the darkness of black full tresses” and, perhaps due to the fact that South Indians are generally darker than their Northern counterparts, heap praise upon “skin like gold”<sup>24</sup> instead of the aforementioned “moon-like face.”

Turning from ancient art and religious imagery to more recent history, early marriage advertisements from the beginning of the twentieth century provide another valuable source of historical data. Before this time, marriage advertisements were not common, as marriages were typically arranged either by the individual families or through a *ghatak*, a kind of matchmaker

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Harsha V. Dehejia. *Parvati: Goddess of Love* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1999) 11.

<sup>21</sup> Dehejia. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Dehejia. 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Bracey.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

fluent in caste hierarchy and genealogy.<sup>25</sup> How a family advertised their daughter provides a strong indication in what society valued a bride, and by extension in women in general. One such advertisement, put out by the family of a thirteen-year-old girl from Calcutta in 1910, describes their daughter as having a “medium complexion, beautiful face, [and] good figure.”<sup>26</sup> Another, for a fourteen-year-old in 1927, echoing the “medium complexion” description, speaks of the girl as having an “*ujjwala shyama varna*,” literally meaning “glistening dark complexion.”<sup>27</sup> According to Rochona Majumdar, the author discussing these matrimonial advertisements, “referring to a person’s complexion as bright yet dark is to emphasize lightness of color as opposed to the deep brown complexion common in the tropics.”<sup>28</sup>

Around the same time as these advertisements were written, writer Mohitlal Majumdar illustrated exactly what he believed the ideals of beauty for a Bengali woman were:

She is like the dusk, a portrait who is demure, tender, and modest. She is medium-complexioned, with wide downcast eyes; her tresses are black, wavy, and flowing; her posture is not aggressive, and her feet small. Her most beautiful feature was her gaze, not sharp but loving and gentle. From the dot on her forehead to the *alta* on her feet, she shows no dearth of modesty and decency.<sup>29</sup>

These portrayals of women shown in both the marriage advertisements and Majumdar’s depiction demonstrate a decided preference towards medium-complexioned women. It is unclear whether this preference is as the ideal or as compared to dark-complexioned women, and it is possible that a dearth of fair-skinned women in Bengal led to an emphasis on medium complexion. However, the fact that even the idealized description provided by Majumdar describes a medium-complexioned woman may point to an actual overall preference for that skin

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<sup>25</sup> Rochona Majumdar. “Looking for Brides and Grooms: Ghataks, Matrimonials, and the Marriage Market in Colonial Calcutta, circa 1875-1940.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.4 (Nov. 2004). Internet. 18 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133195>

<sup>26</sup> Majumdar. 925.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Majumdar, 926.

color. This color might be comparable to the “skin like gold” described by the Sangam poets or may represent a minor historical transition to a more attainable beauty standard with respect to skin tone. Unfortunately, none of these descriptions describe exactly what an ideal figure or beautiful face means, other than the preference for wide eyes, so it is impossible to compare these more modern images to the ancient ideals.

Still, examining all of these historical images as a whole, it is possible to paint a fairly coherent portrait of traditional Indian beauty standards. Clearly, there is likely to be both regional variation, most likely a result of local disparities in natural appearance and foreign influence on border regions or territory, and changes throughout history, but the general image is fairly stable. The ideal Indian woman is fair or medium-complexioned, has a narrow waist but wider hips and breasts, and has large eyes, full red lips, and long black hair that is either straight or wavy. This image, or some form of it, has managed to endure for centuries, perhaps encouraged by the religious imagery of Hindu goddesses. It would be unexpected, then, for this vision of Indian beauty to change significantly.

### **The Modern Indian Woman:**

In the present day, the urban Indian woman has a cacophony of voices telling her how she should look, from television and Bollywood to fashion magazines to her family. Depending on the woman, the messages she is hearing may vary significantly from each other. As such, it is necessary to go straight to the sources—advertisements, television, magazines, and the women themselves—to determine what Indian women believe is beautiful, and, by extension, what appearance Indian women strive to attain. In only a month, it is unrealistic to study the messages received by Indian women as a whole, so this study is concentrated on two cities, Delhi and

Jaipur, with a special emphasis on Delhi. It is reasonable to believe that the issues discussed here are similar to those experienced by many urban Indian women, but the rural experience, and even that of women in smaller or more traditional urban center, may be significantly different. Still, in most areas where television and similar mediums have penetrated, Indian women are likely to be absorbing some of the same messages.

There are a number of aspects of appearance, ranging from facial features to complexion to hair to body figure. This study will not concentrate on facial features, as this study focuses on pressure on women to try to change their appearances, and cosmetic surgery, beyond laser hair removal and vision correction surgery, remains extremely uncommon in India. The goal, then, is to understand the current beauty ideals for each of the remaining three major categories of appearance, as well as in one much more variable area—clothing.

### **Skin:**

The most important aspect of skin in India is, of course, a clear complexion. This feature is so important to the imagining of a beautiful Indian woman that it is emphasized in places ranging from the predictable fashion magazines to the more unexpected job advertisement.<sup>30</sup> However, the far more controversial aspect of complexion is that of skin tone. As noted in the historical section, Indian society has traditionally exhibited a preference for medium- or fair-skinned women. In recent years, that preference for fairness has become even more obvious, and even a medium complexion is often considered not enough. Where matrimonial advertisements from the early twentieth century described women with medium, even dark complexions, modern ones only refer to complexion if they can state that the person in question is “fair” or

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<sup>30</sup> IndiGo. *Hello 6E*. October 2011.

even “v. fair.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, in at least one edition of *The Times of India*, there was not a single reference to a complexion darker than “fair” despite hundreds of references to “fair” and “v. fair.”<sup>32</sup>

Fairness is so important to beauty in India that, according to Meenu Bhambhani, just being in possession of this one feature and having no other specific deformities can be enough for a woman to be considered beautiful.<sup>33</sup> She claims “the media tries to perpetuate that fair is beautiful.”<sup>34</sup> It is an argument with a lot of support. According to Li, et al., who categorized the skin color of models in advertisements into 14 categories using a color wheel:

The skin color of models (who were predominantly Indian) tended to be more fair and Caucasian-looking. The skin color of models in advertisements that emphasize “natural” tended to be moderately light—either soft ivory or natural ivory. Models in these ads had minimal make-up, conveying a “natural beauty” look. The skin color of models for prestige brands, and ads emphasizing a somewhat older “classic” or “elegant” image, tended to be a lighter classic ivory. Thus, skin color is conflated with class and whiter skin costs more.<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, fairness as beauty is not a new concept in India, but the influence of the media does appear to have solidified its place as a prerequisite for beauty. One of the most influential moments in the establishment of this narrow standard was the introduction of Fair and Lovely, a cream designed to increase fairness that was first marketed in India in 1975.<sup>36</sup> Suddenly, the perception was implanted in Indian women that you could make yourself fair, leading to the possibility that it might actually be your fault if you were not fair. Fair and Lovely has since gained a number of imitators, including Carefair, which claims it will “take care of your skin

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<sup>31</sup> “Matrimonials.” *The Times of India*. 30 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Meenu Bhambhani, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2011.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Eric P. H. Li, Hyun J. Min, Russell W. Belk, Junko Kimura, and Shalini Bahl. “Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures.” *Advances in Consumer Research* 35 (2008). Internet. 26 Sept. 2011. Available: [http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v35/naacr\\_vol35\\_273.pdf](http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v35/naacr_vol35_273.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Runkle. “Bollywood Beauty.” 40.

from the harsh effects of sun rays and pollutants, thus making the skin fair and charming.”<sup>37</sup> The equation of “fair” with “charming” is likely not an accidental one.

Still, not every woman has internalized these media images entirely. A number of the women I spoke to, when asked, claimed that they preferred medium or dark skin. For example, Padma Bika stated that her favorite skin tone was what she described as *namkin chehera*, or “salty face,” which is an idiom she used to refer to a medium skin tone somewhat lighter than the tone referred to as “dusky.”<sup>38</sup> Nandani Bhargava, without prompting, acknowledged that society generally preferred lighter skin, but noted “I think darker skin is often more beautiful.”<sup>39</sup> These were not unusual sentiments over the course of my interviews. But, to some extent, these attitudes are belied by the evidence. According to Neme Kalya and Binny Sandhu, both salon employees, women come to their salons seeking fairer skin regularly.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Sandhu says, the skin treatment for fairer skin is one of her salon’s most popular.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps that is because women who are happy with darker skin do not go to salons to change it, but it is still notable that, even if some women claim to prefer dark skin, no lighter women are seeking it the way darker women seek light skin. If it were all a matter of individual preference, one would expect women to be trying to change their skin color in both directions, but that is clearly not the pattern.

One possible explanation for the apparent disconnect between what women say and what they do is provided by Lakshmi Singh, who claims, “there are a lot of Indians who agree with it [the ideal of fairness], but I do not. I accept all the colors. A lot of women who are getting famous now, they are more accepting. But still in middle class families there is a focus on

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<sup>37</sup> Product label, *Carefair*.

<sup>38</sup> Padma Bika, personal interview, 10 Oct. 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Nandani Bhargava, personal interview, 8 Oct. 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Neme Kalya, personal interview, 29 Oct. 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Binny Sandhu, personal interview, 14 Nov. 2011.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

fairness. Since television is marketed to them, it shows that. But I think people are becoming more accepting,<sup>43</sup> Essentially, if her argument is correct, at some point after the introduction of fairness creams to the Indian market, society slowly began to back away from its obsession with fairness. Singh believes that the entertainment industry, at least, has become more accepting, but that, as of yet, India's middle class has not followed. As a result, she believes, the advertisement and cosmetics industries, which cater to the middle class, has not followed the lead of the entertainment industry.<sup>44</sup> This argument does seem to have some support: consider the recent *Vogue India* cover celebrating darker-skinned beauty.<sup>45</sup> So perhaps, at least in some circles, the emphasis on light skin as beauty is fading. Even so, if middle class India is still experiencing this emphasis, it remains an important factor in the experiences of modern women in India.

### **Hair:**

There are three major variables when it comes to hair appearance: color, length, and texture. Initially, it might not seem that the first of these factors would be very influential in India, since the natural hair color of all or almost all Indians is the same—black. However, this ignores the effects of aging, where elderly Indians, like elderly people of all races, eventually lose hair pigmentation and end up with grey or white hairs. The evidence of the undesirability of this feature comes not from direct statements of its undesirability but rather from the fact that the only disagreement between women spoken to seemed to be exactly what to do to solve the problem, where some women<sup>46</sup> preferred henna to outright dyeing. According to Pankaj Ojha, manager of Attitude Salon, hair coloring is one of the salon's most popular procedures, and they

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<sup>43</sup> Lakshmi Singh, personal interview, 28 Nov. 2011.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> "The Dawn of Dusk." *Vogue India* (Apr. 2010). Internet. 28 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.vogue.in/content/dawn-dusk>

<sup>46</sup> Renu Addlakha, personal interview, 24 Nov. 2011.

have many regular customers, maybe two or three hundred per month, for the procedure, some as young as thirty years old.<sup>47</sup> Vena Sapra, manager of Mona Lisa Salon, agrees: “It’s the most popular thing older women come for.”<sup>48</sup> She believes the trend is on the rise, observing that “since last twenty years women have [dyed their hair]. And it is growing.”<sup>49</sup> Whether this increase in dyeing of hair is because of the increased availability of hair dye is less clear—after all, henna has been around for a very long time, but it is also much more obvious when it is being used. In fact, there are references to henna being used in India as hair dye from as early as the fifth century CE, although these references refer to using it to “promote the growth of the hair and preserve its glossy sheen”<sup>50</sup> rather than to dye grey hair. Whether the trend of dyed hair is new or not, it is definitely widespread.

Length preference appears to have remained consistent over time—long, or at least medium, hair is almost universally preferred. In fact, according to Neme Kalya, a hair stylist, many women ask him for advice on how to make their hair grow longer, to which he recommends oiling and vitamin supplements.<sup>51</sup> He also states that, at least in Jaipur, where he works, “only children have short hair.”<sup>52</sup> When asked why, women have surprisingly similar answers. Although some also claimed it looked nicer,<sup>53</sup> or more feminine,<sup>54</sup> many women stated a variation of Nandani Bhargava’s answer: “You can make multiple styles.”<sup>55</sup> Still, even this appears to be changing on the fringes. While in Jaipur almost all women observed in public

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<sup>47</sup> Pankaj Ojha, personal interview, 28 Nov. 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Vena Sapra, personal interview, 28 Nov. 2011.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Jeannine Auboyer. *Daily Life in Ancient India: From 200 BC to 700 AD* (London: Phoenix, 2002) 270.

<sup>51</sup> Neme Kalya.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Anjani Sharma, personal interview, 10 Oct. 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Padma Bika.

<sup>55</sup> Nandita Bhargava.

spaces have hair that reached at least their shoulders, in Delhi it is not uncommon to see women with hair that is chin-length or shorter, although long hair remains the norm.

As for hair texture, preferences are not as clear-cut as they first appear. Although Kalya claims clients often ask for straight hair but never for curly, and in fact appeared puzzled at the suggestion that women might seek out curly or wavy hair,<sup>56</sup> according to Akhtari Khatun,<sup>57</sup> an employee at a hair supply and cosmetics store which sells curlers as one of its products, many people, mostly young women, do buy the curlers. In addition, many Bollywood stars are seen with curly or wavy hair, and models with such hair appear throughout the pages of fashion magazines like *Femina*. Thick hair is more collectively approved of, and at least two woman, when asked their best feature, cited their thick hair.<sup>58,59</sup>

One aspect of hair that is often overlooked is that of body hair. It is very difficult to find sources on historical attitudes towards body hair in India, perhaps because it was not considered particularly important, but in the modern day dealing with body hair plays a surprisingly large role in a fashion-conscious Indian woman's beauty regimen. According to Dr. Nikhat Arjun, who works at a laser hair removal and cosmetic surgery facility, hair removal, especially facial hair removal for women, is their most popular procedure.<sup>60</sup> Despite its cost, and the fact that the facility does not advertise, the facility's clientele have increased significantly in number in recent years. And these women represent only the most extreme cases: Arjun says that most women only come to the facility when they are tired of waxing and threading, more affordable, less permanent procedures.<sup>61</sup> Pankaj Ojha says that waxing is one of his salon's four most popular

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<sup>56</sup> Neme Kalya.

<sup>57</sup> Akhtari Khatun, personal interview, 10 Nov. 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Nandita Bhargava.

<sup>59</sup> Lakshmi Singh.

<sup>60</sup> Nikhat Arjun, personal interview, 10 Nov. 2011.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

procedures, on par with only haircuts, hair coloring, and facials,<sup>62</sup> and Lakshmi Singh, who claims not to go to the salon that regularly, was at the salon for waxing and threading only two weeks after her last appointment for the same treatments.<sup>63</sup> Singh also noted that of her friends who go to the salon regularly, one of the most popular procedures was face bleaching, which she explained by saying “you have bleach because you have hair on your face, so just to make it [match] with the color of your skin.”<sup>64</sup> And according to author Shoma Munshi, the industry for hair removal products has exploded in recent years, and many advertisements tie hairless skin to positive occurrences, as in the advertisements for Satinelle, which claim “it will result in ‘satin-smooth arms-n’-legs ... and a dazzling social life!’”<sup>65</sup> These cases all demonstrate a pattern, illustrating the importance of hairlessness, which is considered almost a baseline for beauty despite the fact that it is one of the most unnatural aspects of appearance. After all, some women are naturally fair, or slim, or straight-haired. The same cannot be said for hairlessness.

**Figure:**

While the historical images of Indian women are dominated by curvy hourglass figures and even the occasional hint of extra fat in the stomach area<sup>66</sup>, the modern ideal is all about slim figures. “Slim” is what families seek in brides for their sons,<sup>67</sup> “slim and trim” is what women admire in their favorite actress’ appearance,<sup>68</sup> and being “thin” is what women get complimented on by their cousins.<sup>69</sup> According to Shoma Munshi, this is a recent phenomenon:

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<sup>62</sup> Pankaj Ojha.

<sup>63</sup> Lakshmi Singh.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Shoma Munshi. *Images of the ‘Modern Woman’ in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001) 84-85. Internet. 27 Sept. 2011. Available: <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=qlmLv-oPfHIC>

<sup>66</sup> National Museum, personal observation, 29 Nov. 2011, Delhi

<sup>67</sup> “Matrimonials.”

<sup>68</sup> Binny Sandhu.

<sup>69</sup> Renu Addlakha.

Up until the 1980s, it was fine to be well-rounded and even voluptuous, and films and advertisements of those years reflect this. But come the 1990s, and Indian cinema and advertising reflect the arrival of the perfectly sculpted body to meet exacting international standards. It no longer matters that the international blueprint for beauty does not match the time-honored, indigenous one: way taller than the average Indian woman with never-ending legs.<sup>70</sup>

Susan Runkle, examining the Hindi film industry, concurs with this assessment, speaking about “actresses in the Hindi film industry who, following what are perceived as international trends, have metamorphosed into thinner, more model-like versions of their former selves.”<sup>71</sup> She points out that these trends in the media are reflected in the general population because men sit “in the audience and ask [themselves] why [they] should not have access to women with the same kind of body that [they see] on the screen.”<sup>72</sup>

This new focus on slimness has led to an increased focus on working out, with more and more women trying to match the ideal figure they see in the cinema. According to Prince Manocha, head trainer at Maximum Gym, the number of Indian women going to his gym, and to gyms in Delhi in general, has been on the rise in recent years: “From last five to six years, people are so passionate about their workouts.”<sup>73</sup> And what are these women seeking? Continues Manocha, “they want to reduce their weight, and also they want to tone their bodies.”<sup>74</sup> Vikesh Kumar, store manager at Proline Fitness, which sells exercise equipment for the home, agrees, and adds that his target market is people who are unhappy with their current appearances: “people who have tummies, extra weight, they are buying. We don’t get many persons who are thin.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Munshi, 85.

<sup>71</sup> Runkle. “Bollywood Beauty.” 48.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Prince Manocha, personal interview, 21 Nov. 2011.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Vikesh Kumar Jha, personal interview, 21 Nov. 2011.

But despite the emphasis of the media on slimness, some of the traditional ideals of wide hips and large breasts are ingrained into the culture, and have not faded away. Harinder Singh, whose store sells body shapers and enhancers, notes that although many women buy thigh, hip, or stomach shapers, which are intended to compress those areas, hip and breast enhancers are also popular, especially with younger women.<sup>76</sup> He observes, “people who don’t have hips, some garments don’t look good on them, you know?”<sup>77</sup> Although shapers and enhancers are relatively unknown, and used only on special occasions even by those who have heard of them,<sup>78</sup> their availability nevertheless suggests that the areas they are designed to “shape” and “enhance” are ones that Indian women as a whole wish to reduce or emphasize. Additional evidence of the entrenched preference for wide hips, despite the modern culture of slimness, was provided by one woman at the body image workshop “I Like My Body, But...”, who complained about society’s preference for “child-bearing hips,” which she said is justified by people using the logic “because if you have skinny hips, of course, you can’t bear a child.”<sup>79</sup> So despite the undeniable emphasis on slimness, certain historical norms persist.

Height is another aspect of appearance worth paying attention to. Although, as Munshi stated, the modern standards of beauty in India seem to demonstrate society’s preference for tall women “with never-ending legs,”<sup>80</sup> there is a certain point at which height ceases to be a positive and becomes a disadvantage. According to Meenu Bhambhani, “I have so many friends who are not married simply because they are very tall.”<sup>81</sup> How tall is too tall? Bhambhani elaborates, explaining that men often refuse to marry women who are taller than them, and thus presumably

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<sup>76</sup> Harinder Singh, personal interview, 10 Nov. 2011.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> “I Like My Body But...”, Workshop, Delhi, 12 Nov. 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Munshi. 85.

<sup>81</sup> Meenu Bhambhani.

favor women who are on the tall side but short enough to not exceed their height.<sup>82</sup> So tall women are only considered potential marriage partners by even taller men.

### **Clothing:**

Traditional Indian clothing for women usually consists either of a *sari*, *sari* blouse, and *sari* petticoat, or of a *kurti*, *salwar or churidaar*, and a *dupatta*, often known as a *salwar khameez*. Obviously, there is regional variation, but these styles are common in most areas of India. These two outfits have much in common: both fully cover the chest, shoulders, and legs, and both are relatively loose-fitting. Unlike *salwar khameez*, traditional *saris* occasionally bare parts of the stomach and back, but beyond that there is little variation in the level of modesty provided by these two outfits. In the modern era, many women, especially in large urban areas, also wear Western clothing, but the traditional Indian outfits have maintained their popularity, and are even a requirement in certain areas like colleges.<sup>83</sup>

But some of the modesty requirements of Indian clothing have begun, gradually, to change. Actresses are seen wearing sleeveless *sari* blouses that cover almost none of their stomachs, or donning see-through *saris* prominently displaying their entire stomachs and backs.<sup>84</sup> Even on the streets of modern cities like Delhi, it is not uncommon to see young women wearing knee-length skirts, lower-cut shirts, or spaghetti-strap tops. Tight clothing has also become more common.<sup>85</sup> Still, these changes have not permeated more than a small fraction of society—many of the outfits worn casually on a Delhi street would be shocking if transplanted into a rural village in Rajasthan. And even the women wearing the more daring outfits do so only

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Interaction with students, Sathyabama University, Chennai, 18 Oct. 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Renu Addlakha.

<sup>85</sup> Personal observation, ISP, Delhi.

in specific circumstances; they would never attend work, let alone a wedding, in such revealing clothing.<sup>86</sup> And many Indian women, even in cosmopolitan cities like Delhi, continue to prefer traditional Indian clothing. Says Binny Sandhu, “I like *churidaars*, *salwar kameez*, *dupattas*. I don’t like jeans. [Indian clothing] looks nice and I feel more comfortable in it.”<sup>87</sup>

And even for those who want to wear Western clothing, societal standards may make them uncomfortable doing so, although this appears to be changing. According to Addlakha, body type in particular had an effect on who wore Western ware: “I remember when I was growing up, I was slim, so I wore jeans, but women who were fat, they didn’t wear jeans. And that’s changed, in the urban areas. Even women who are fat wear Western clothing.”<sup>88</sup> So it appears that clothing standards are evolving, at least in urban areas, although more revealing clothing has by no means become either commonplace or even socially acceptable in many settings.

### **Societal Effects:**

Any society with the concept of beauty by necessity possesses beauty standards: if you do not have a way to differentiate what is beautiful from what is not, then beauty is meaningless. However, these standards may vary in their specificity, and, more importantly, in how they affect the people subjected to them. This question is highly relevant in the case of India since, as seen above, there is significant evidence that standards of beauty are changing on the subcontinent, becoming increasingly similar to international or Western standards, and as a result perhaps becoming narrower. Whether or not this is a problem is less clear.

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<sup>86</sup> Renu Addlakha.

<sup>87</sup> Binny Sandhu.

<sup>88</sup> Renu Addlakha.

Body image is a concept that may not have been defined historically, but the desire to improve one's own appearance has existed throughout history. This can be demonstrated in the fact that cosmetics have been in use for thousands of years throughout the world. However, an active preoccupation with the flaws in one's own appearance is less clearly universal, and more likely to be emotionally, or even physically, damaging. Women's self-esteem can be affected by poor body image, and they can even experience health problems caused by eating disorders or the use of dangerous chemicals designed, supposedly, to improve their appearance. Certain groups of women, like the physically disabled, who have a starkly apparent difference in their appearance from other women, may be especially strongly affected. Even women without poor body image can be adversely influenced by society's judgment of their appearance, experiencing problems ranging from emotionally stressful family pressure to financially stressful reduced job prospects. The overarching question, then, is whether Indian society causes these poor body image issues and related problems and, if so, what effects these issues have on Indian women.

The answer to the first part of the question, at least, appears to be yes. "In India, the issue of body image is emerging in subtle tones," claims one article. Many Indian women, when asked what they liked about their body, had little to say, but when asked what they would like to change most became far more verbose. The former question provoked a number of awkward pauses, and many women required prompting before giving a response. But in answer to the latter question, most women responded immediately, or with a list of complaints, with one woman even saying, jokingly, "how can I choose?"<sup>89</sup> At the body image workshop "I Like My Body But..." each participant was asked to respond to the question of what they would change about their appearance if they had unlimited money to do so, or a fairy godmother to grant their wishes. Of the over twenty participants, only one said they did not want to change anything, and

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<sup>89</sup> Padma Bika.

many had a laundry list of items they wanted modified.<sup>90</sup> These data points hint at a serious body image issue in Indian society, one that appears to be emerging even as many of its members do not know what the concept of body image means.

The open, and, at times, even blunt nature of many Indians often compounds body image problems. Relatives, friends, and even strangers may offer unsolicited advice or commentary about a woman's appearance, mentioning her weight gain, suggesting that she lose weight, or even recommending a gym for the purpose of doing so. These suggestions, while well-intentioned, may have a damaging effect on the psyche of the woman receiving them. Said one participant at the body image workshop, "When some says [something negative about your body], you suddenly feel your body's not your own anymore, it's public property."<sup>91</sup> Suddenly, occasions previously enjoyed, like opportunities to eat good food, become stressful events, as women worry about how others perceive them as they eat.<sup>92</sup>

Family pressures can also play a role in fostering self-esteem issues related to personal appearance in Indian women. In particular, the marriage process can be highly stressful. Many families create a marriage portfolio for their daughter, complete with photographs, and the pressure to look perfect is very high.<sup>93</sup> Matrimonial advertisements often contain requests for photographs.<sup>94</sup> One woman, in fact, stated the whole process made her feel like she was on exhibit.<sup>95</sup> And women know one flaw can be enough to eliminate a potential suitor: for example, if a girl wears glasses, this one factor on its own could be enough to remove her from contention for a particular groom.<sup>96</sup> And a decline in one's marriage prospects is a high concern in Indian

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<sup>90</sup> "I Like My Body But..."

<sup>91</sup> "I Like My Body But..."

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> "Matrimonials." *The Times of India.*

<sup>95</sup> "I Like My Body But..."

<sup>96</sup> Meenu Bhambhani.

society: not only is marriage expected, and women who remain unmarried often judged for it, but marriage is the only socially acceptable path to sexual relations and to raising children. If a woman is unable to get married she is also unable, at least by society's standards, to engage in either of those activities. Even for women who feel little personal desire to get married, family pressure to do so is very high, so any obstacles to doing so can become stressors.<sup>97</sup>

This problem can become especially pronounced in the case of disabled women. These women are often expected by society to be functionally asexual.<sup>98</sup> Meenu Bhambhani, whose disability is only obvious when she walks, related that when she was younger, because she was conventionally attractive, men would "make passes at her" when she was sitting. However, as soon as her disability was obvious, the passes stopped.<sup>99</sup> By some, this might be considered a good thing, but, says Bhambhani, "we talk about the problem of Eve-teasing. Talk to girls who have never been Eve-teased."<sup>100</sup> In other words, sexual harassment is not a good thing, but in a society where it exists, not experiencing it can make a woman feel undesirable. Bhambhani spoke of how, as an adolescent, she would observe other girls with their boyfriends and think "I should never desire that," not because she did not desire it but because she believed it impossible to attain and did not want to hope only to have those hopes crushed.<sup>101</sup> According to Debika Chatterjee, who works on issues of disability and sexuality, this sentiment is not uncommon among disabled women in India.<sup>102</sup>

Job prospects can also be affected by whether a woman successfully conforms to societal beauty ideals. Obviously, women who want to go into the modeling and entertainment industry

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Debika Chatterjee, personal interview, 8 Nov. 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Meenu Bhambhani.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Debika Chatterjee.

are affected by these standards, but the effects are not limited to these fields. Flight attendants are screened on appearance,<sup>103</sup> as are a surprising number of other areas, including those in the informal sector. One job advertisement for employees to work at a two-week long trade fair reads, “wanted: 200 smart, intelligent, good looking girls/boys” and adds “mail your resume with photo.”<sup>104</sup> And even in jobs which do not specifically request good looking candidates, there is the perception that women will have a better chance of being hired if they are attractive. In fact, Fair and Lovely cream plays on this perception in their advertisements, showing women using the cream to improve their appearance, and then getting their dream job.<sup>105</sup> Potential employers may also make assumptions about women’s abilities to do the work based on their appearance: one especially thin woman told me she had been asked if, because she was so skinny, her weight would impede her ability to do a certain job, even though the job in question did not require heavy lifting or other especially physically strenuous tasks.<sup>106</sup>

The media not only plays a significant role in setting these beauty standards, and thus indirectly affecting Indian women who experience localized pressure to conform, but also directly affects these women, as they see advertisements encouraging them to look a certain way or actresses they admire changing their appearances to fit new standards. According to one psychiatrist:

Concepts like beauty, fairness and perfect body size are glamorized and are associated with a lot of approval and acceptance. This somewhere gets reinforced in the minds of young women who then start to set unrealistic standards for themselves, [and] consequently employ unhealthy ways to achieve them.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> IndiGo. *Hello 6E*. October 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Job advertisement, Delhi.

<sup>105</sup> Fatima Chowdhury. “Body Image: Cruel Reflection.” *Boloji* (23 Sept. 2007). Internet. 9 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=1656>

<sup>106</sup> “I Like My Body But...”

<sup>107</sup> Chowdhury.

Especially in urban areas, where the media's influence is everywhere, from billboards to television to magazine to the cinema, it is hard to avoid absorbing the media's messages about appearance,

With all of these pressures coming together, it is unsurprising that many women have begun to develop poor body image, and in some cases more serious problems like eating disorders. In fact, eating disorders in India have been on the rise in recent years, both in the number of cases diagnosed and in what demographics are affected by the disorders. States one article:

Ten years ago, the cases of eating disorders — the most common of which is anorexia nervosa — were negligible in India. However, psychiatrists claim that in the past few years, the figure has increased from anything between five and 10 times. What is more alarming is that increasingly girls of a younger age are falling prey to anorexia and bulimia.<sup>108</sup>

Dr. Samir Parikh, a psychiatrist at Max Healthcare, agrees. In recent years, he says, he has seen far more patients with bulimia and anorexia, some brought in by family members and others referred by physicians because of serious health problems that turned out to be side effects of eating disorders. He also notes that he has encountered younger and younger girls with eating disorders.<sup>109</sup> He believes the media plays a significant role in the increase, saying “media portrays a specific look in celebrities, and it does portray a certain body image, the size zero type of body image and that does have an effect.”<sup>110</sup> He adds that it is not just the Indian media, but the Western media that depicts this body type as ideal, but that in the last twenty or thirty years the local media too has begun to show this Western look as ideal. However, he acknowledges

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<sup>108</sup> Kamayani Singh. “Anorexia Rising at an Alarming Rate.” *The Times of India* (18 Jul. 2007). Internet. 9 Nov. 2011. Available: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-07-18/delhi/27960724\\_1\\_anorexia-girls-end-body-image](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-07-18/delhi/27960724_1_anorexia-girls-end-body-image)

<sup>109</sup> Samir Parikh, personal interview, 15 Nov. 2011.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

that one reason eating disorders may be diagnosed more frequently now is simply an increasing awareness of their existence, and of the existence of psychiatrists in general.<sup>111</sup>

This data, and recent clinical studies showing that eating disorders and similar problems are increasingly common among Indian women,<sup>112113</sup> may initially seem surprising, since some doctors have claimed eating disorders are a Western culture-bound problem. However, evidence seems to indicate that, if this was ever the case, it no longer is. States one recent study: “This [research] suggests that clinical symptoms of [anorexia nervosa] in India may not be different from [anorexia] in western countries and it may not be a strictly western culture-bound syndrome.”<sup>114</sup>

Even for women without eating disorders, body image issues are increasingly apparent. According to Parikh, “there are a lot more people who might be having some symptoms of eating disorders, but not necessarily fulfilling the DSM criteria [which are the criteria used by psychiatrists to diagnose disorders]; that is happening more. It could be as simple as exercising a lot more but not reaching the DSM criteria.”<sup>115</sup> And even for women who might have healthy eating and exercise habits, their self-image may still be very negative. Both Tina Singh and Megha Roy, neither of whom come close to fitting the definition of overweight, explained their reasons for going to the gym as “to lose weight.”<sup>116</sup> Added Singh, “I’m growing out of

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> D. N. Mendhekar, K. Arora, D. Lohia, A. Aggarwal, and R. C. Jiloha. “Anorexia Nervosa: An Indian Perspective.” *The National Medical Journal of India* 22.4 (2009) 181-182. Internet. 9 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.nmji.in/archives/Volume-22/Issue-4/PDF-volume-22-issue-4/Volume-22-issue-4-Clinic-case.pdf>

<sup>113</sup> Hemal Shroff and J. Kevin Thompson. “Body Image and Eating Disturbance in India: Media and Interpersonal Influences.” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 35.2 (25 Feb. 2004) 198-203. Internet. 9 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eat.10229/pdf>

<sup>114</sup> Mendhekar, et al. 182.

<sup>115</sup> Samir Parikh.

<sup>116</sup> Megha Roy, personal interview, 27 Nov. 2011.

proportion these days.”<sup>117</sup> These attitudes do not appear to be unusual. According to a recent article in *The Times of India*, the majority of women see their bodies as shorter and wider than they actually are.<sup>118</sup> These facts, along with increasing awareness of what constitutes a healthy diet and exercise regimen, may serve to explain the increase in gym attendance<sup>119</sup> and dieting suggestions available. *The Times of India* now even has an entire section on its website devoted to diet, and most of the articles in the section relate to weight loss.<sup>120</sup>

And figure is not the only area where women have serious body image problems, and even occasional health problems. The appeal of light skin has led many women to try out different treatments to make their skin lighter, ranging from the mild to the drastic. Simple creams whose main ingredients are sunscreen are likely harmless, and body packs designed to remove dead skin and “tanning”<sup>121</sup> are as well. Even Fair and Lovely itself, and similar creams made of niacinamide, which is designed “to control dispersion of melanin in the skin”<sup>122</sup> are relatively safe, but products designed to bleach the skin<sup>123</sup> may be more dangerous, and some products marketed or sold more covertly that contain mercury or hydroquinone, which can cause cancer, may have serious side effects.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Tina Singh, personal interview, 27 Nov. 2011.

<sup>118</sup> “Women Distort Their Own Body Image.” *The Times of India* (16 Mar. 2011). Internet. 9 Nov. 2011. Available: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-16/beauty/28364948\\_1\\_body-image-body-parts-hand](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-16/beauty/28364948_1_body-image-body-parts-hand)

<sup>119</sup> Anand Dubey, personal interview, 21 Nov. 2011.

<sup>120</sup> “Diet.” *The Times of India*. Internet. 9 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/diet/articlelist/4751868.cms>

<sup>121</sup> Nemea Kalya.

<sup>122</sup> Kavita Karan. “Obsessions with Fair Skin: Color Discourses in Indian Advertising.” *Advertising and Society Review* 9.2 (2008). Internet. 16 Nov. 2011. Available: [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/advertising\\_and\\_society\\_review/v009/9.2.karan.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/advertising_and_society_review/v009/9.2.karan.html)

<sup>123</sup> Binny Sandhu.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Fuller. “A Vision of Pale Beauty Carries Risks for Asia's Women.” *The New York Times* (14 May 2006). Internet. 22 Nov. 2011. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/world/asia/14thailand.html?scp=7&sq=skin+whitening&st=nyt>

And the desire for light skin, which leads to the use of these treatments, is extremely widespread. One recent study found that “78 percent of women would like to be two shades lighter, as it makes them more attractive and confident.”<sup>125</sup> Binny Sandhu agreed: “People are very conscious about their skin. Everybody wants to look smart. Everybody wants to look good. People feel awkward around those with a fair complexion.”<sup>126</sup> These desires are reinforced by society’s negative treatment of darker-skinned women. “Being dark [...] sometimes resulted in social segregation and name-calling,” found one study, adding that the women spoken to also mentioned “the diminished ability to make friends” as a consequence of being dark.<sup>127</sup> Women even prevent their daughters from going outside to play for too long for fear that they will tan.<sup>128,129</sup>

This preoccupation with fair skin may have its roots in other forms of discrimination. Many scholars believe that the preference for fairness began with the invasion of the Aryans:

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").<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Karan.

<sup>126</sup> Binny Sandhu.

<sup>127</sup> Karan.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Bend It Like Beckham*. Dir. Gurinder Chadha. Perf. Parminder Nagra, Anupam Kher, Shaheen Khan. Kintop Pictures, 2002. DVD.

<sup>130</sup> Natasha Shevde. “All’s Fair in Love and Cream: A Cultural Case Study of Fair & Lovely in India.” *Advertising and Society Review* 9.2 (2008). Internet. 16 Nov. 2011. Available: [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/advertising\\_and\\_society\\_review/v009/9.2.shevde.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/advertising_and_society_review/v009/9.2.shevde.html)

And if the conquest by the Aryans and the caste system created the predilection for light skin, then the colonization by the British bolstered it.<sup>131</sup> Since conceptions of beauty are strongly influenced by prestige, it is no surprise that the skin color of the prestige groups, the conquerors and colonizers, would be adopted as the ideal. But Westernization here too has played a role, just as it appears to have in the preference for a slimmer figure.<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, it seems in this case that it is the desire to look Western, rather than the desire to fit into the Western beauty standards, that is driving the trend—most Caucasians actually wish to look tanned. This is echoed in the fact that darker-skinned Indian models have succeeded on the international stage, but not before failing in India and eventually leaving it.<sup>133</sup> Whether the ideal is Western, or simply Western-inspired, it does appear to be connected to the desire to imitate the prestige group. In this case, the prestige group appears to have colonized the entertainment industry rather than the land itself, but the end product is the same.

### **Conclusions:**

There is a strong amount of evidence that India is gradually absorbing Western ideals of beauty, primarily through its entertainment industry, and that these foreign concepts of beauty are modifying the way Indians define an attractive appearance. Moreover, there is considerable support for the claim that these new beauty standards, when coupled with traditional Indian values, have the potential to be both physically and emotionally damaging for Indian women.

These problems may or may not be unique to India, and many of them are absolutely not; eating

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Sonora Jha and Mara Adelman. "Looking for Love in All the White Places: A Study of Skin Color Preferences on Indian Matrimonial and Mate-Seeking Websites." *Studies in South Asian Film and Media* 1.1 (2009) 68. Internet. 18 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/safm/2009/00000001/00000001/art00005>

<sup>133</sup> Anjana Gosai. "Indian's Myth of Fair-Skinned Beauty." *The Guardian* (19 Jul. 2010). Internet. 22 Nov. 2011. Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/jul/19/india-fair-skinned-beauty>

disorders, for example, are common in Western countries, and damage from skin lightening creams is seen across Asia and Africa. However, the problems are definitely affecting India, and thus are worth addressing.

Others studying beauty standards in India might come to different conclusions about whether these changes are occurring, what these changes are, and whether they are harmful to women. Some might claim that most of the problems that appear to be a result of new beauty standards are instead side effects of profoundly positive changes, that eating disorders and weight insecurities are an unfortunate consequence of an increase consciousness of the dangers of being overweight and out of shape, that the efforts to hide aging with hair dye proceed from the generally healthy effort to prevent aging. They might even maintain that the influx of Western beauty ideals is a positive trend because they believe women in the West to be more empowered than those in India. These people might have difficulty justifying the obsession with fair skin, which appears to have no connection to any remotely positive ideas, but they might note that fairness has been considered preferable in India long before the media and globalization. If authors made these arguments, it could lead to the conclusion that the liberalization of the economy and globalization of the media are positive development strategies that lift up oppressed groups and propel India into the twenty-first century.

But this conclusion would be ignoring the damaging psychological effects of these so-called side effects, the lack of empowerment created when a woman feels pressured to look one particular way and unable to live up to these narrow standards. And a narrowing of beauty standards does seem to decrease empowerment: women have fewer choices, and experience greater pressure to fit into an increasingly tight mold of conventional beauty ideals. If all women are expected to lack body hair, for example, women who choose to retain theirs have to give up

on being considered attractive, whereas if this expectation did not exist, women who wanted to remove their body hair could choose to do so with no consequences. The same problem can be seen in terms of weight: if women of many body shapes can be considered beautiful, there is no penalty for slim women, but if only slim women are believed to be attractive, then any woman who is not slim enough to fit the standard will be considered unappealing. So, although it can be disputed whether Western culture in general empowers women, it seems fairly clear that the imposition of Western beauty standard on India does not.

As such, it seems appropriate to conclude, in the face of current evidence, that the form of globalization currently being experienced by India, whatever its other benefits, does cause harm through the imposition of foreign beauty standards on Indian women. As such, even if the type of development that leads to this globalization were sustainable in all other ways, the problem of how it affects Indian women must be tackled before it becomes true sustainable development. This study, however, does have a number of limitations, the most important being the difficulty of proving cause and effect between globalization and the changes in beauty standards. It is not enough that many respondents made this linkage themselves, as people often do not know what factors affect how they think. Further studies could examine exactly how influential the media is on beauty standards, perhaps by exploring how women who have recently seen advertisements promoting narrow beauty ideals view beauty as compared to women who have not been so recently exposed. However, a significant body of research has already been done on this issue, so perhaps the best direction new research could take is in analyzing not what changes are occurring nor why these changes happen but what can be done to empower the women affected by these new standards of beauty.

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