



## Lasantha Pethiyagoda

The birth of a child is still heralded with pleasure in Sri Lanka, and a girl child is usually no exception. In recent times, a close member of my extended family gave birth to a beautiful girl. Visiting them at the maternity ward, I found her to be adorable, albeit odd-looking as babies usually are, with rather out of shape face, slightly flattened brow, and half-closed eyes too large for the face. Gazing at the baby, I could see my cousin in the corner of my eye, waiting for a chance to comment on something – the colour of her skin.

Celebrating a new arrival invariably focuses on skin colour, something Caucasians do not have to worry about. After years of living in the West, I was completely staggered by how my relative went on about how her family members including her mother and grandmother seemed to ignore the baby, not cradling him, no one going "wow, how sweet, aney daaarling" and touching her – all because of the colour of her skin.

But what really rankled, were my relative's comments. In Sinhala: "It's the first time in our family that such a kalu child was born. Everyone was shocked. But the shock will wear off with time. Then they will carry the baby". I quietly commented that it could hardly be the reason, considering the colour of the mother, who was of a dark complexion. She replied "That is thalaelalu no, the baby is really kalu" She went on to justify her reasoning, saying that people naturally thought that way, and it was not just her opinion. Later on, I found out more about my relative, when I saw messages she had sent to my cousins overseas. The only thing she seemed to convey was..."The baby is dark" In my mind's eye, I visualised her disappointment about twenty odd years ahead, when preparing for the girl's marriage (in contrast to eligibility as a human being in society) Messages both verbal and "texted" had a similar theme, with "Sin, no" (colloquial for it being a pity) repeated countless times. Upon quiet requests for clarification she elaborated that she was "being realistic, and this is how the world is, this is how people think, no" I know that the misguided notion of beauty dictated that fair people were prettier than dark people.

It is disheartening and embarrassing to think that after generations of colonial rule, exposure to the consequences of discrimination on a variety of bases, that they have adopted an alien value that fair equals pretty and dark equals ugly. Why is dark skin not beautiful?

Ah, but we forget that nature can be defied, so it is "OK". The remedy is the ever-present and miraculous "Fair & Lovely" with commercials depicting the glorious effects of a fair skin, ranging from attracting a handsome prince, wealth and job prospects and the special love of one's closest friends.

While the claims made, are at most, laughable, the contexts are absurd and demean basic intelligence, while the messages themselves are preposterous. On TV, naturally fair young women are made to say things like: "My husband loves me more because I am much fairer now". This marketing gimmick has altered social values, introducing the notion that being fair makes you the epitome of attraction, people flocking around you like

ants to a pot of honey.

This notion is being established as a prerequisite for success in both personal and professional spheres, and sets a dangerous precedent further relegating merit-based criteria as being less important. Dumb beauty threatens to become the yardstick of social mobility, ranging from what the president "looks like" and the leader of the opposition "looks like" to eventually what doctors, engineers, dentists, architects, accountants, teachers and lawyers "look like" as a measure of their credibility or worth.

This notion also threatens to heighten a natural anxiety in women and men and their critical ability to remain comfortable in their own skin. The bizarre reality being developed, is that the best way to market a product is to feed on misplaced cultural views fuelled by human insecurities.

Further developments introduced to the notion of young women's beauty in recent times is the colour of their intimate areas (not just their cleanliness, it would seem). This is marketed as another "opportunity" to make themselves more attractive to the opposite sex. It is an Indian product, probably as dubious as its predecessor meant for the face. Marketers argue that if lipstick can be used to heighten the sexual desirability of one's lips by making them brighter and red, the same theory can be used to lighten the dark nether areas.

The lack of fairness is exploited in numerous ways. Consider this example. If you had two daughters, the younger one fair and the elder dark, the mother would ensure that the younger is hidden from prospective suitors visiting their home, as the elder needs to be "rid of" (as in lightening the "burden") first, and her prospects would diminish if not.

Even causal reading of hundreds of advertisements for "marriage proposals" in Sri Lankan newspapers will reveal they are replete with this misguided notion as a cultural "norm". Watch any Bollywood "commercial" movie (those designed primarily for profits rather than artistic enrichment) made during the last ten years. In the many song and dance scenes, you will see the girls dancing at the centre of the screen have blonde hair, are pale white in complexion and are comparable to "European" in most aspects, while those who are shown sparingly have darker skin and black hair.

The colonial sediments of a basis for subjugation have been rejuvenated to reflect the superiority of white as being powerful, if not in political preponderance, then at least in artistic merit. History, written from a white perspective has often assumed this naturally, while our idiotic marketers exploit this for monetary gain.

White skin is now recognised as a social marker for high class, while darker skin is associated with labour in the hot sun, a total reversal of how class is viewed in European and American societies where a tan is associated with travel and therefore luxury.

Imagine a dark-skinned Sri Lankan girl who had been brought up in a Western society having had to cope with discrimination based on colour, looking for succour from her own compatriots "back home". Comments like "Look at you aney, you are still so dark no, after living so long in suddo country..."

It would be deeply depressing to be judged on one's skin colour in a country where most people are naturally kalu, or making one feel ashamed of a feature they have no control over, degraded and burdened by dark people who refuse to regard those who look like themselves as being beautiful.

They will develop an inferiority complex which will affect not just a minority in a 'foreign' country but which affects the vast majority of the population, and contribute to further degeneration of society.

# SKIN-COLOUR DISCRIMINATION IN SRI LANKA

Yes.. It is there....

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Skin colour discrimination in Sri Lanka must be as socially unacceptable as discrimination for caste differences, class differences and disability difference. Otherwise, young people will, in despera-

tion run into the waiting hands of the predatory monster that is the marketing industry, which will gladly embrace them with open arms and slowly leach them dry.

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