



By Rasna Warah



Priyanka Chopra, a leading Bollywood actress who has also acted in Hollywood films, came [under fire](#) recently for endorsing the Black Lives Matter movement while at the same time being a brand ambassador for skin-lightening creams in India. Critics say that this movie star cannot claim to support a movement against racism when she herself has promoted products that suggest that light/white skin is more beautiful than dark/black skin.

Indian movie directors have also been accused of promoting the idea that light skin is better by insisting that their leading ladies be fair-skinned. The few dark-skinned actresses who have made it in Bollywood have had to jump many hurdles to be taken seriously; often the only acting roles they get are in “alternative cinema” where they play poor or marginalised women. Dark-skinned actresses often have to invest in a fair amount (no pun intended) of make-up to pass screen tests that are partial to light skin and European facial features.

“If you watch Bollywood films, you’d imagine India was a country of white folks”, quipped the Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy in a recent [interview](#). (The billion-plus Indians’ skin colour ranges from rosy pink to tan, chocolate-brown and a kind of ash-grey that could pass for black.)

The desire for fair skin is not limited to Bollywood; it extends to Indian society as a whole. Matrimonial columns in Indian newspapers are full of ads seeking “fair” brides.

British colonialism undoubtedly instilled feelings of inferiority among the dark-skinned Indian people. Since “whiteness” was associated with power, wealth and technological advancement (not to mention beauty), light skin became an aspiration among Indians. (Though it must be said that not

even a century of colonisation managed to erase Indian culture and India's major religions, which remained largely intact despite the British presence; in fact, some say that the British colonialists were both baffled and in awe of the resilience of Indian culture despite their attempts to denigrate and erase it.)

The furore against Chopra comes against a backdrop of statues of Mahatma Gandhi being removed from a university in Ghana and debates around whether India's most revered freedom fighter and non-violence resistance advocate was in fact a racist, given that he did little to fight for the rights of black South Africans during his 21-year stint in South Africa before he returned to his home country in 1914 to contribute to India's freedom struggle.

In recent years, there have also been complaints by African students studying in India that they face harassment on the streets and discrimination when it comes to housing. Africans living in India find the country to be a hostile environment that is difficult to negotiate because the racism is coming not from white people, as is usually the case, but non-white people. As Roy commented in her interview, "Indian racism towards black people is almost worse than white people's racism".

Horror stories of female African students being stripped in public or being called derogatory names have been emerging in recent years, yet there has been no diplomatic crisis, as the one that erupted recently when some African countries made official complaints against the Chinese government for allowing the mistreatment of Africans living in China, ostensibly because they were perceived to be infected with COVID-19.

The discussion on "brown-on-black" racism has been further fuelled by a much-needed conversation in India on whether Indians have any right to condemn White America for racism when Hindu India has for decades been discriminating against Muslims and low-caste Hindus (known as Dalits). Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has a distinct Hindu nationalist agenda, India has become more intolerant of religious minorities and marginalised groups, with reports of Muslims and Dalits being lynched and even murdered by Hindu mobs.

Perhaps now that Priyanka Chopra has moved to America (she recently married the American singer and songwriter Nick Jonas), she is more aware of racism. Indian immigrants in Europe and America find that even the most light-skinned among them eventually face some form of discrimination. This has led some to join hands with black-led movements. In the UK, for instance, there was a strong push for Asians to define themselves as "black" during the conservative Thatcher years to emphasise the power imbalance between white and non-white people in Britain and to give the black movement political clout. Asians in the UK who called themselves "black" were making a political statement.

The Indian diaspora in the United States and other Western nations may feel slighted by the white racism they experience, but many have no problems supporting divisive politics at home. Ms. Chopra, for instance, is an ardent supporter of Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharataya Janata Party (BJP). As Ashok Swain [wrote](#) in the December 2017 edition of *Outlook*, "[The] Hindu diaspora has been a major powerbase and source of funding for the Hindutva politics in India . . . While Hindu NRIs [non-resident Indians] are so sensitive and even aggressive to protect their perceived minority rights in the country of their residence, at the same time they refuse to accept minorities in India".

### **The blurred line between race and caste**

So are Indians inherently racist? This is a complicated question because in India the line between caste and colour often gets blurred. The Hindu caste system is such that skin colour is often associated with caste background. Lighter-skinned Indians of Aryan descent are often associated with high caste background, even though there are many high-caste Hindus in India who have dark

skin, and many low-caste Hindus who are light-skinned.

Caste prejudice, therefore, easily translates into colour prejudice in the Indian context. Black Africans are perceived as low caste – people who can be looked down upon and mistreated without the perpetrator suffering any sanction. It's as simple – and as ridiculous – as that.

Historians maintain that the caste system was brought to India by the Aryans, a pastoralist tribe from Central Asia that invaded northern India around the second millennium BC and subjugated the indigenous population. As explained by historian Romila Thapar in her book, *Early India: From Origins to AD 1300*, the dominant view is that the Aryans introduced Sanskrit, an Indo-Aryan language that is used in the sacred Hindu texts, the Vedas.

The Aryans were viewed as representing a superior civilisation that later became the foundation of what might be loosely referred to as Hindu culture. Hinduism sprouted a pantheon of gods and goddesses (some adopted from the faith of the indigenous animists) and introduced a system that divided people into occupational groups and relegated others to servitude.

However, Thapar is of the view that ascribing a superior race to the Aryans is not accurate because there is little archaeological evidence of a large-scale Aryan “invasion” of India that displaced the existing indigenous culture. However, there is evidence of an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Indo-European family “having been brought to northern India from beyond the Indian-Iranian borderlands and evolving through a series of probably small-scale migrations and settlements”.

Thapar says that by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept that the Aryans had a superior language and race began to fall apart. It is more likely that there were “Indo-Aryan speaking peoples”, not an Aryan race. “It is important to emphasise that it [Aryan] refers to a language group, not a race, and language groups can incorporate a variety of people”.

To muddy the waters even further, the ruling BJP has been denying that there was ever an Aryan invasion in order to support the theory that Hinduism (the dominant religion in India) was not imported to India, but is indigenous to the subcontinent. This theory also demolishes the idea that Indian culture is a product of “alien” forces. The “aliens” in Modi's India are Muslims and Christians, who are being portrayed as being the by-products of invading Muslim armies and conquerors or European missionaries (conveniently forgetting that Islam and Christianity existed in India before the advent of the Muslim Mughal Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and before Britain colonised India in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century).

Regardless of their origin, it is widely accepted that the Aryans established the Hindu caste system in India. It is believed that the new rulers needed a system to entrench their rule, and to enforce obedience among the people whose lands they occupied. “Since a mechanism for maintaining racial segregation was required, this took the form of dividing society into socially self-contained and separate castes . . . Race was seen as scientific explanation for caste and the four main castes or *varnas* were said to represent the major racial groups. Their racial identity was preserved by the strict prevention of intermarriage between them”, writes Thapar.

At the top of the caste system were, naturally, the creators of the system, the Brahmins, who monopolised priesthood and learning. Then came the Kshatriyas (warriors), followed by Vaishyas (traders) and finally Sudras (workers). Outside these castes or *varnas* were what are known as the “Untouchables” (who Gandhi, in an attempt to destigmatise them, referred to as Harijans or Children of God). The Untouchables, who were assigned degrading menial jobs like cleaning latrines, were not allowed to come near upper caste Hindus, and were not even allowed to enter temples. They were denied access to common wells and other public areas because they were

viewed as “impure” or “polluted”. (Nowadays, Untouchables are referred to as Dalits, a less stigmatising and more politically correct word that in the Marathi language means “broken people”.) In other words, the caste system legitimised inequality and discrimination.

B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit who rose to be India’s first Law Minister, called the caste system a “degrading system of social organisation”. He said that, especially for Untouchables, “Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors” that denies them even the most basic of rights.

Added to the grief of the lower castes is the notion of *karma* - the belief that individual suffering is the result of bad deeds committed by an individual in a past life, a sort of divine retribution that must be endured by those who experience suffering. Poverty and other debilitating conditions are considered an inevitable outcome of bad *karma*. With such a belief system entrenched in the psyche of the average Indian, it is no wonder that Dalits have not risen against their oppressors in large numbers, though in recent years they have formed their own political parties, and a few have also been elected into Parliament.

Apologists for the caste system say that by defining areas of occupation for various groups, the caste system helps Indian society to function without much conflict or stress because each caste knows its place and role in society, and obtains some kind of solidarity within its own caste group and legitimacy within the wider society. On the other hand, critics like Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism before his death in 1956, say that it is a system that hinders social and economic mobility, and ensures that certain groups remain in a permanent state of “backwardness”, with little chance of rising to positions of power or influence.

Although casteism is less prevalent in India than it was when India gained independence, it is not unusual to still hear stories of low-caste people being lynched, raped and generally exploited by upper caste Hindus - a reality that has become more common under Modi’s leadership. In fact, as Roy and women’s groups have consistently highlighted, Dalit women are more likely to be raped by upper-caste Hindus than women from higher caste backgrounds.

### **BLM: An opportunity to dismantle caste prejudice**

So if one wants to understand Indian racism, one must also unpack casteism, which is in some ways more insidious than racism because it is accepted as normal and God-ordained.

Casteism is a particularly difficult concept for non-Indians to grasp because, unlike racism, it is socially and widely accepted as an integral part of Hinduism, and is therefore considered sacrosanct. As Roy states, “Casteism and racism, though they have different histories, are not different except that casteism claims some kind of divine mandate”. In other words, you could say that casteism is not unlike the revisionist Christianity advocated by white South Africans that sanctioned the separation of the races.

Hindus must divorce themselves from the caste system which, in any case, does not benefit the majority of Hindus. They must dismantle the rigidity of the system, which relegates people to superior or inferior status by pigeonholing them into occupational groups that in India are also associated with skin colour. They must make the connection between their own caste prejudices and the racial prejudices endured by people in other countries. This work needs to be done in tandem with anti-racism and human rights movements everywhere, and would require a massive shift in consciousness that would require redefining what it means to be a Hindu.

As Arundhati Roy points out in the introduction to the book *Annihilation of Caste* by B.R. Ambedkar, though caste is not the same as race, casteism and racism are comparable. She writes:

Other contemporary abominations like apartheid, racism, sexism, economic imperialism and religious fundamentalism have been politically and intellectually challenged at international forums. How is it that the practice of caste in India - one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organisation that human society has known - has managed to escape similar scrutiny and censure? Perhaps because it has come to be so fused with Hinduism, and by extension with so much that is seen to be kind and good - mysticism, spiritualism, non-violence, tolerance, vegetarians, Gandhi, yoga, backpackers, the Beatles - that, at least to outsiders, it seems impossible to pry it loose and try to understand it.

Although various Indian governments and India's constitution have tried to dampen the negative impact of the caste system by instituting various affirmative action programmes and laws that protect Dalits (or what are known as "scheduled castes") and other minorities, caste prejudice is still rampant in India. Upper caste Hindus still dominate top jobs in government and in business, and colour prejudice is apparent everywhere, including in advertising billboards and movies.

We must understand that casteism, like racism, is an exploitative economic strategy, crafted by those in power to ensure their dominance. The question is always about who gets to control the resources. Slavery and colonialism were institutionalised racism that allowed white people to exploit non-white people and their lands. Racial superiority is nothing but a myth perpetuated by supremacists who would like people to believe that skin colour is a privilege, not just an accident of geography, climate, migratory patterns or other factors.

The global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has offered all of us an opportunity to examine whether our societies have institutionalised discrimination, not just along the lines of race, but also along the lines of caste, religion, ethnicity, tribe, clan, gender and sexuality. This opportunity must not be lost; Indians should seize it with both hands.

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