

## Hindu Mythology and the Caste System

Children in India are brought up with the notion of dark skin being a negative trait, a sentiment that is passed down through generations. Shaadi.com, an influential Indian matchmaking site, only recently got rid of a feature that allowed users to sort through matches based on skin color over a decade after its establishment. Not only was the reversal a decade late but it was initiated following backlash from international users (Yasir, 28 June 2020). Colorism in India can be seen not just through prospective matches, but also through the film industry which tends to moralize skin color through casting choices. Further, India has a booming skin-lightening industry according to a 2018 study in Mumbai that found that 54% of respondents had used skin-whitening products at some point (Senthilingam, 23 Nov. 2022). This is the reality of colorism in India. The roots of colorism in India can be traced back to the caste system, a three-thousand-year-old enterprise still deeply ingrained in modern Indian culture, with those of lower castes being forced into poverty due to extreme discrimination and isolation (Rao). Despite the formal abolishment of the caste system in 1950, its harmful sentiments and ideologies have been kept alive through the manipulation of Hindu mythology, a large part of Indian culture. Hindu mythology is not inherently colorist, however, portrayals of Hindu characters in modern literature and art reinforce detrimental prejudice that is passed down through families. Recognizing the social weaponization of Hindu mythology facilitates the breaking down of the internalized prejudices many Indian people have grown up with.

The caste system is one of the most pernicious parts of India's history and culture. The caste system is a strict social hierarchy based on one's karma, the sum of one's negative and positive actions from their past lives, and dharma, their duty. In an ancient Indian scripture known as the Bhagavad Gita, it is written in direct referral to the caste system:

“*guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ*”(Prabhupāda). “*guṇa*”—of quality, “*karma*”—and work, “*vibhāgaśaḥ*”—in terms of division (Prabhupāda). The division within the caste system is determined by the quality and work of a person. However, in widespread versions of Hindu mythology, it is believed that we originate from the god Brahma, the creator of the universe. At the top of the hierarchy were the scholars who were believed to come from Brahma’s head, then came the warriors who supposedly came from Brahma’s shoulders. Next were the traders who came from Brahma’s thighs, and last were those who came from Brahma’s feet and did all the menial labor. At the bottom of this social hierarchy were the Dalits, who were not even labeled with a caste (“*What Is India's Caste System?*”, 8 March 2023).

This myth behind the caste system emphasizes one’s origin, and as a result, the social hierarchy of caste is now based on the holiness of the body part from which a person is created. The defined philosophy of caste became one based on one’s birth and origin, something immutable. There is no control over one’s parents, one’s influence and wealth inherited from the family, or one’s parent’s occupation—which historically, one was bound to inherit if they were of lower caste. This social weaponization allowed for easier control and manipulation of the masses and further segregation of lower castes. It became easier to accept the inequities within living conditions and healthcare when these were predicated on pre-destination. The inimical consequences of this exploitation make it all more important to work towards a just and fair society.

The class of people not even represented on the creator’s body, the Dalit people, now represent over 240 million people in India or nearly 25% of the population (“*India: The Current Situation of Dalits.*”, 8 March 2023). Not all Dalits practice Hinduism, but this fact has been diminished by the cultural hegemony grounded in the influences Hinduism has over secular

Indian society, which in turn influences the material conditions that non-Hindu Dalits live with. The focus of Hindu mythology as a tool of prejudice in this paper does not intend to erase the diversity of the Dalit population further, but instead, analyze how they have been neglected and systematically oppressed within the context of Hinduism. Dalits have been dismissed to the lowest parts of the social hierarchy for centuries, considered impure and untouchable. They have been excluded from most social, political, and economic opportunities and have faced discrimination and violence from the dominant upper-caste Hindu groups. Discrimination against Dalits has been institutionalized through the caste system, which is deeply ingrained in Hindu society and is used to justify the suppression of Dalits. This paper is a hopeful step to amending the deeply rooted prejudices and discrimination against Dalits and those of lower caste within the context of Hinduism and to create a more inclusive and just society for all.

As seen in its scriptural origins, the correlation between caste and color is unsubstantiated. It just happened to be that those of lower caste who took care of the menial tasks were darker and tanner, as they had to adapt to the abundant amount of sunlight and UV rays they had to face as a result of their occupation (Prasad, 18 Aug. 2018). However, over time there became a correlation between skin color and caste. Skin color became a reflection of one's purity. The less karma one had, the purer one was, and therefore more likely to be of a higher caste and vice versa. The baseless connection led to a lot of disparity, with one of the most prominent contributors being Hindu mythology.

The Ramayana is one of the two most important epics in Hindu Mythology. The Ramayana recognizes its main character, Rama, to be a reincarnation of Vishnu, the preserver and protector of the world. Rama is one of the most worshiped gods in India, with extremely popular festivals to celebrate him and his stories, such as Ramanavami (the celebration of the

birth of Rama), Diwali (the celebration of Rama's return from exile) and Dussehra (Rama's execution of the main antagonist, Ravana).

As a result of its extensive popularity and influence, the Ramayana was used as a tool to push the fabricated parallel between the caste system and colorism. The sub-story that sparks the main conflict of the Ramayana is the story of Surpanakha—a demoness. In introducing Surpanakha's character, the author juxtaposes Rama and Surpanakha's beauty:

Rama's face was lovely, Surpanakha's was hideous. Rama had a slender waist, she had a huge belly. His eyes were large, hers were deformed...He was lovely in appearance, she was ugly. His voice was sweet, hers was shrill...He was positive, she was perverted...Rama was just and loving while she was overcome by lust.

(*“Welcome to Valmiki Ramayana: Valmiki Ramayanam.”*, 8 March 2023).

Throughout all these descriptions, skin color is never mentioned. Yet the popularized portrayals of Surpanakha and Rama include a light-skinned man and a dark-skinned woman. Some versions of the Ramayana do specify the skin color of the characters in which both Surpanakha and Rama have dark skin, however, these descriptions are twisted so that Rama's skin is so dark he has an inhuman color of a beautiful blue or green (Deshpande). This distinction turns the positive qualities of dark skin into something coveted by divine beings. Surpanakha's categorization as a demoness places her at the bottom of the social hierarchy, similar to those of lower caste, and places Rama, a god, in a place of power and therefore similar to those of higher caste. This correlation demonizes those with darker skin and of lower caste. With the portrayals of Surpanakha displaying a “fat and ugly” woman and the Valmiki Ramayana emphasizing Surpanakha's deformed and disabled appearance, this, by default, lowers the status of those with disabilities and conventionally unattractive qualities.

In the Ramayana, however, power and one's 'caste' weren't completely intertwined as one would assume. Ravana, the antagonist of the Ramayana and Surpanakha's brother, was the king of Lanka, an Island home to demons. Along with his status as a King, Ravana was a Brahmin by practice and a devout worshipper of Shiva, the god of destruction. Despite his *guna* and *karma* that enabled him to be a prosperous king, he was still belittled to be the villain of the story due to his 'nature' as a demon. This was another way of emphasizing his maternal lineage of a long history of demons, a factor of his life he had no control over. This reiterates the immutability of the caste system and enforces the acceptance of the common man's unfair predicament of caste and social class.

As a result of the Ramayana's popularity and influence in India, many of the stories have been retold in the form of cartoons and comics for children, in which many colorful ideals are portrayed. Amar Chitra Katha is a well-known comic book series in India, first published in 1967, where it features illustrated retellings of Hindu myths, legends, and historical events and is popular for its entertaining depictions of Indian culture and history. The series has sold millions of copies, been translated into multiple languages, and expanded its reach through media and partnerships. Despite the changes in media since its establishment, it remains a cultural icon in India and for immigrant children in foreign countries and continues to engage new audiences through its storytelling.

In their depiction of the demoness Surpanakha, they portray her as an unattractive, deformed character with purple skin, and Rama and the other characters as the opposite. This turns out to be a commonality among their series. In their paper titled "Immortal Comics, Epidermal Politics", researchers Radhika Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza write: "Amar Chitra Katha's stories of gods, goddesses, kings, demons, and historical events associate

light-skinned masculinity with divinity, strength, virtue, compassion, and upper caste status. Comic book illustrations code dark-skinned masculinity through the semiotics of violence, brutality, stupidity, bestiality, and low caste status”(Parameswaran). The negative biases translated across all these comics are then internalized by their audience, the children of future generations, leading to a cycle of prejudice and injustice.

The use of the Ramayana to indoctrinate children to colorist biases enables them to fall victim to harmful standards and project those prejudices onto others. In media, those of higher caste were “described as a pure, noble, and superior race: physically tall, with sharp noses and lighter skin color...[those of lower caste] on the contrary...considered of lowly origin and racially inferior due to their dark skin”(Ayyar), these stereotypes from the caste system have then become the norm for the new generations. These notions should have been erased along with abolishing the caste system, however, they still thrive in new generations in the form of harmful biases and prejudice in media and day-to-day life. Most Indian adults say they read or listen to recitations of scripture either on a yearly basis or oftentimes even less than that (Mitchell, 27 Oct. 2022). The lack of direct reading from scriptures allows for inner biases to be translated across spoken stories, which then contributes to the spread of negative biases.

Though India has taken the obvious first step to formally abolish the caste system, further caution and care must be applied to the subtleties of the culture and media. Hindu mythology is used as a tool of oppression to maintain cultural hegemony, and Dalits face the worse end of this discrimination. Popularizing the canonic descriptions of Hindu mythology in media and literature could be the first step to denouncing discrimination based on color and caste. This can be set in action by rewriting old dramas and movies that portray inaccurate versions of myths, as well as books and comics. Taking the initiative to make sure that it's not just because they're a demon or

“ugly” and deformed that they need to have dark skin and be stuck in poverty. Actively connecting good-natured characters to darker hues and lower-caste backgrounds, unless otherwise canonically mentioned, provides the audience and people with inclusive representation. The recharacterization of these stories reclaims the magic in the myths and reprograms an engine manufactured for injustice, to one of equality.

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