India is the world’s second largest country, with a population of 1.2 billion people (India Census 2011). It also has one of the world’s fastest growing economies and, despite its reputation as a third-world nation, findings indicate that improved economic conditions, in terms of increasing levels of individual income, are occurring in both urban and rural areas (Banerjee and Banik 2014). In spite of its progress, India is still plagued with internal issues like discrimination based on skin color, racism against Africans and Indians of the Northeast, and violence against women of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. As this chapter will show, these are not issues that have recently sprung up; they have roots in Indian society’s formulation of the caste system centuries ago. British colonialism and, more recently, the advertising industry have been instrumental in propagating racism in India. The objective of this chapter is, first, to describe the twenty-first-century issues that are relevant to the discourse on race and media in India and, second, to further the discussion on how to address the related problems.

An Obsession with Fair Skin

India’s perception of beauty is defined by fair skin, or “whiteness,” emanating from a centuries-old social hierarchy created by the Hindu caste system and, later, British colonialism. India historically consisted of two primary races, namely Caucasian Aryans who migrated to India from the north around 1500 BC and the darker-skinned indigenous Dravidians of the south (Shevde 2008; Glenn 2008; Parameswaran and Cardoza 2009). To suppress and exert dominance over the Dravidians, the powerful and more civilized Aryans created the first caste system and divided society into various groups based on color (“varna”) and occupation. The upper caste consisted of Brahmins, or priests, who were synonymous with whiteness, purity, and cleanliness; Kshatriyas or warriors were denoted by “red”; Vaishyas or merchants/traders were given the color “yellow”; and the lower caste—Shudras—were associated with black, which symbolized ugliness, dirt, and impurity (Shevde 2008; Arif 2004).

Other writings on the origins of colorism in India described the privileged as having a pale hue since they lived a sheltered life, while those who toiled in the sun had a darker hue (Khan 2009). As centuries passed, Great Britain colonized India and, during its rule,
Western notions of beauty were introduced and white supremacy was enforced. Fair skin was again seen as a symbol of power, dominance, and superiority (Shevde 2008). In India, as in many cultures around the world, the white woman, and especially the tall, thin, blonde, and upper-class white woman, was seen as the epitome of beauty and “is a complex identity born out of differentiations of race, color, and class” (Osuri 2008: 115). The English woman soon became the benchmark of beauty and cultivated a desire among Indian women to emulate their lighter skin tone. In terms of “aspirational” skin tones, there are variations of whiteness, ranging from the white skin color of Northern European Caucasians to the olive skin color of Southern European Caucasians and the North Indian Punjabi community (Parameswaran and Cardoza 2009: 218).

Skin color can play a significant role in India’s highly patriarchal matrimony scene. Light skin color is a visible social capital that would help ensure an Indian woman finds a good and accomplished husband. Those with dark-skin, however, face social obstacles where to compensate for the lack of fairness, parents have to pay a high dowry to the groom’s family (Grewal 2003). Dowry is the “monetary measure of a woman’s value as a person” and the darker the skin, the higher the dowry (Phillips 2004: 269). On the other hand, those with lighter skin have the advantage of negotiating conditions for dowry (Phillips 2004; Varsha and Khandare 2013). Findings from a survey of the popular Indian matrimonial website, shaadi.com, revealed that close to half of the male members wanted brides who were fair (Singh 2011).

In a more comprehensive study of Indian matrimonial websites, men used words such as “beautiful” and “lovely” to describe the preferred qualities of their prospective brides (Jha and Adelman 2009: 65). The authors add that matrimonial websites display the wedding photos of “success stories” in which all the photos were of light-skinned brides; dark-skinned couples were invisible. Research has also indicated that in their profiles Indian women highlight their light skin color far more than men (Pandey 2004), and the need for fair-skinned grooms was non-existent in matrimonial ads (Deshpande 2002). These notions are gradually changing as men have been found to also highlight their physical attractiveness, including light skin color, in matrimonial ads (Ramasubramanian and Jain 2009). This can possibly be attributed to the influence of mass media messages that are propagating the attractiveness of light skin color and toned physiques. Nonetheless, these idealized notions of beauty continue to be considered much more often when evaluating women than men (Jain 2005).

Beauty pageants like “Miss World” and “Miss Universe” have played a tremendous role in propelling Indian models like Aishwarya Rai, Priyanka Chopra, and Sushmita Sen to international stardom. The beauty queens these widely televised events produce have become “symbols of Indian women’s new visibility in the public sphere” (Parameswaran 2004: 6). With the popularity of beauty pageants growing, the concept of beauty itself was transformed to “fairer, taller, slimmer, and straighter-haired” (Lal 2003), which is seen as a more acceptable image on a global stage. The beauty queen is seen as a symbol of India’s success in the international arena and, furthermore, this success can be attributed to fairer skin color (Osuri 2008).

Winning these titles can also mean lucrative careers in the world’s largest film industry, Bollywood, a conduit through which Indian culture is portrayed and a media machine that disseminates the culture of consumption (Osuri 2008). Through its “re-enactment of patriarchal and caste-based identities,” Bollywood has a tremendous influence on the psyche of the Indian viewers (Kapur 2009: 221). Models and, later on, stars like Aishwarya Rai are living symbols of Bollywood femininity (Osuri 2008). Even dark-skinned
background dancers in Bollywood movies and award functions have been replaced with fair-skinned Indians or Caucasians (Joseph 2000).

A more explicit example of the attraction for fair skin was seen in 2008 when a group of mostly white National Football League cheerleaders from the US were flown in to support the Bangalore Royal Challengers in the Indian Premiere League (IPL) “Twenty20” cricket series (Wax 2008). Cricket organizers were trying to attract a younger male audience, and the novelty of scantily clad cheerleaders at an erstwhile “gentleman’s game” quickly became popular in a nation where cricket exists in the same plane as religion. Since then, each team in the league has adopted its own cheerleading squad, with a majority of the cheerleaders from Russia, Ukraine, Belgium, Norway, and South Africa.

India’s obsession with fair skin long ago caught the eye of marketers, but it was not until the early 1990s that India liberalized its economy and opened its doors to foreign investors (Banks and Natarajan 1995). Soon after, Indian cosmetic brands like Lakmé and Pond’s started to face stiff competition in the form of international companies like Revlon, Avon, and L’Oreal. For marketers, the attraction to India lies in its massive population of 1.2 billion people and their increasing disposable income. According to the India Census (2011), the birthrate of women increased substantially between 2001 and 2011, and the gender ratio has gone up in both rural (where 48.6 percent of the population is female) and urban (48.1 percent) areas. Fairness products aimed at 18–35-year-olds (Shevde 2008) are not limited to middle-class, urban women. According to MART (2012), a leading rural marketing consultancy in India, the combination of the country’s rural villages and small towns translates into a $1 trillion market with 1 billion consumers. It is the largest market of “Fast Moving Consumer Goods” and consumer durables, and there are an estimated 10 million operational retail outlets in India, of which 68 percent are in rural areas (Banerjee and Banerjee 2000). For example, the India Tobacco Company’s (ITC) Choupal Saagars are hypermarkets that sell not only agricultural products to farmers but also consumer products like packaged goods, apparel, appliances, and cosmetics, thus giving consumers in rural India a wide-ranging shopping experience (Himatsingka 2010; Craig and Douglas 2011). Compared to urbanites, rural women are more likely to face color discrimination, and they buy fairness creams to overcome the social stigma of their dark skin. They see skin lightening as an opportunity to not only gain social acceptance but also allow for personal and professional pursuits that would not otherwise be possible (Shevde 2008).

Historically, the Indian perception of upper-class white femininity in the United States was formed through a relationship to valuable things, like fashion, cosmetics, and household goods (Heneghan 2003). More recently, white femininity and its association with success has been commodified by Western marketers and treated as a trait to be desired among Indian women in general (Osuri 2008). Marketers recognize that the image of a white woman in advertisements can be used as a seductive tool to sell products and experiences in markets where darker shades of skin color are more prominent.

Research has shown that dark-skinned models are a rarity in Indian print ads. According to a content analysis of print ads (1997–2002) in Femina, India’s oldest and largest women’s magazine, the majority of the models were light-skinned and models with darker shades of skin tone were nearly invisible (Reddy 2005). Li et al. (2008) found that 82 percent of Indian print ads had Indian models and celebrities, reaffirming the dominance of beauty pageant winners and Bollywood stars in the mass media. However, the skin color of most of the models appeared more Caucasian-looking than Indian.
On critically evaluating Indian ads, Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) found many brands tend to portray their products as “magnified images of commodities against the backdrop of pale surfaces” (240).

In the branding process, marketers try to associate existing cultural meanings with their products, mainly to distinctly position themselves in the consumer’s mind, to break through the clutter in a crowded marketplace, and to promote overt consumption (McCracken 1988). Advertising as a practice survives on symbolism and aids in the transference of meaning, helping consumers perceive “essential similarity” between the cultural world and the product (77). The drawback to this process is the unintended effects; that is, with consistent advertising, the link between fairness and beauty becomes stronger and at the same time perpetuates cultural stereotypes like the pairing of dark skin with inferiority. In the guise of meeting the desires of consumers, corporations are known to manipulate cultural symbols in their advertising to feed their bottom lines. Skin-whitening brands in India especially fuel the cultural beliefs established by the caste system and by British colonization. Twenty-first-century advertisements for L’Oreal’s “White Perfect” feature Bollywood actress Sonam Kapoor as the endorser who suggests that fair skin equates to perfect skin. As Mire (2005) has observed, L’Oreal’s ads reinforce white supremacy and tie this notion back to the cultural sphere of the fair-skinned woman as one who is privileged.

With a market share of 57 percent (Singh 2013), one brand that has revolutionized and increased the demand for fair skin products in the Indian market is Hindustan Unilever’s “Fair & Lovely.” Touted as “the world’s first safe and effective skin lightening product” (www.fairandlovely.in), the brand, since 1975, has aggressively promoted fair skin color as a symbol of beauty and success that can enhance one’s personal and professional life. Apart from deep underlying cultural beliefs, advertising and Bollywood have transformed fairness creams from a “want” to a “need.” To illustrate, many Bollywood celebrities like Juhi Chawla, Hema Malini, Yami Gautam, and cricketers like Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma are major endorsers of the brand. Even though the Dove brand falls under the Unilever umbrella, its advertising message promotes “natural” beauty and empowerment while Fair & Lovely, in contrast, promotes beauty and success that can be achieved by overcoming flaws like dark skin (Shevde 2008). A close competitor to the Fair & Lovely brand is Emami’s “Fair and Handsome,” which has capitalized on the men’s fairness market since 2005, and Bollywood heartthrob Shah Rukh Khan became its brand endorser in 2007. In the ads, the actor attributes his success to fair skin.

The widespread advertising of fairness creams has not gone unchallenged in India and has led to a public outcry from women’s empowerment groups like “Women of Worth,” whose mission is to enlighten, encourage, empower, and equip women to value and reach their full potential. Their 2009 campaign called “Dark is Beautiful” (2014) was launched to combat the corroding effects of the fairness stigma as a yardstick of beauty. The awareness campaign also seeks to celebrate diversity and beauty in all skin tones. Internationally renowned actress and director Nandita Das joined the cause and became the face of the campaign, and her presence helped bring a sharp focus to this ongoing debate. Amidst criticism from the All India Democratic Women’s Association regarding their ads, the Fair & Lovely Foundation was established in 2003 (Glenn 2008). The foundation’s mission is to help women become self-reliant by economically empowering them to achieve their dreams. As per their website, the foundation has given out 10,000 scholarships to applicants in areas like higher education, vocational training, and business start-ups. It cannot be denied that the brand has attempted to instill self-confidence and
self-esteem in Indian women, but the disparity created through its ad messages in terms of color prejudice is a cause for concern for future generations. Glenn (2008) iterates that men and women need to be reeducated on the beauty of different shades of skin color and thus have whiteness removed as the benchmark.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) (2014) is a self-regulatory voluntary organization that addresses advertisements that are considered false, misleading, indecent, illegal, or that lead to unsafe practices or unfair competition. In August 2014, in response to public feedback and consumer activism regarding the depiction of dark-skinned people as inferior, ASCI released four major guidelines for the advertising of skin-whitening cream: (1) Advertising should not communicate any discrimination as a result of skin color. Specifically, advertising should not directly or implicitly show people with darker skin in a way which is widely seen as unattractive, unhappy, depressed, or concerned; (2) the expression of the model/s in the real and graphical representation should not be negative in a way which is widely seen as unattractive, unhappy, depressed, or concerned; (3) advertising should not associate darker or lighter color skin with any particular socio-economic strata, caste, community, religion, profession, or ethnicity; and (4) advertising should not perpetuate gender-based discrimination because of skin color. These guidelines are commendable and if strictly enforced then advertisers would involuntarily have to change their messaging.

It appears that Indian resistance to skin-lightening advertising has had some impact on the cosmetics industry. According to Nielsen’s Moving Annual Total, the $464 million fairness cream market saw a 4.5 percent dip in sales (Singh 2013). Fair & Lovely experienced a dip of 4.2 percent while close competitor Emami’s Fair and Handsome experienced a decline of 14 percent.

**Caste and Gendered Violence Against Minorities**

As mentioned earlier, the caste system’s use of color as an identifier has made life difficult for those in India with dark skin, but when combined with a second factor—gender—the problems deepen considerably. Advertising and television campaigns to counter the problems have not yet had much impact. Rural women in India, especially Scheduled Castes, or “Dalits,” and Scheduled Tribes, or “Adivasis,” face a combination of racial and gender discrimination in the form of violence by men from upper castes. Scheduled Castes primarily consist of “untouchables”—the 160 million Indians whose births into the caste system have for centuries deemed them less than human (Mayell 2003). Though officially banned by the Indian government in 1950, overt prejudice, discrimination, and violence against the untouchables remain. As Mayell reported for *National Geographic News*:

> India’s Untouchables are relegated to the lowest jobs, and live in constant fear of being publicly humiliated, paraded naked, beaten, and raped with impunity by upper-caste Hindus seeking to keep them in their place. Merely walking through an upper-caste neighborhood is a life-threatening offense.

(2003)

The classification of Scheduled Tribes refers to the indigenous tribal communities (Sharma 2013). Both Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes suffer from “stigmatized ethnic identity” due to their perceived unworthiness in society, experienced as oppression and exclusion (Berreman 1971: 2).
According to the National Family Health Survey (2007) conducted between 2005 and 2006, rural women in India were more likely to experience physical violence than their urban counterparts. Findings from the comprehensive report also indicate that violence decreases with higher levels of education and wealth. Sexual violence is used as a tactic to assert dominance over lower-caste women, and the “Prevention of Atrocities” Act of 1989, designed to protect the Dalits and Scheduled Tribes from hate crimes, has clearly not been enforced by the local authorities (Sharma 2013). In a 2014 tragedy in which two Dalit girls were raped and hanged in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), the first question one of the fathers was asked when reporting his daughter’s disappearance to the police was “What is your caste?” (Fontanella-Khan 2014). In 2007 alone, 90 percent of the rape victims from the state of UP were Dalit women, a crisis also seen in other Indian states like Bihar and Haryana (Fontanella-Khan 2014). The major emphasis here is not on gender disparity that is largely prevalent in a patriarchal society like India but to re-emphasize the role played by social hierarchy defined by the caste system. According to Deshpande (2002), a prospective bride in rural India has to first satisfy the requirements of caste, region, and class before skin color is even considered. Deshpande believes that exposure to mass media, especially television, can complement education in turning the tides in favor of underprivileged women. TV has now become the most popular medium and Direct-to-Home (DTH) television connections—i.e., the use of personal satellite dishes to receive TV programming—in rural India was more than double the number in urban areas (Nielsen 2010). These signify changing trends, albeit slowly.

Among a few notable awareness campaigns on the issue, the ad agency Taproot partnered with Save Our Sisters to launch the “Abused Goddesses” advertising campaign that garnered a lot of media attention, especially online (Oberoi 2013). The ads had photos of models dressed up as prominent Hindu deities with bruised faces; it instantly went viral. The campaign declares, “Pray that we never see this day. Today, more than 68 percent of women in India are victims of domestic violence. Tomorrow, it seems like no woman shall be spared. Not even the ones we pray to.” The campaign was not without its controversy. It received a lot of attention, but Save the Children India did not endorse or approve it, citing that battling domestic violence was not its mission. A disclaimer was provided on its website to clarify its stance on the issue:

A project of Save the Children India does not endorse the campaign on abused goddesses. Taproot had created the campaign for Save Our Sisters but it was not approved to represent us or use in any form or shape in association with us. The campaign does not represent the work or ideology of the Save Our Sisters movement which is working towards the prevention of trafficking of women from sources areas and the active rehabilitation of rescued victims of trafficking.

The campaign received mixed responses, with some critics accusing the campaign of trivializing Hindu goddesses (Oberoi 2013). Nonetheless, the novel campaign did create some awareness and helped continue the conversation on a critical issue that is downplayed frequently in India.

Not long after the goddess campaign, a second effort to expand the discussion arrived with the launch of a new comic book called “Priya’s Shakti,” the brainchild of Indian-American filmmaker Ram Devineni (it can be viewed at www.priyashakti.com), designed to combat gender-based violence. The story was inspired by the internationally reported story of Jyoti Singh Pandey, a 23-year-old who was beaten and gang raped by a group
of men in a private bus in 2012. She succumbed to her injuries and died 13 days after the rape. The incident garnered national and international protests and resulted in a new law called the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance (and known as the anti-rape bill) passed in 2013. According to the law, jail terms were increased and the death penalty was instituted for a repeat offense of rape, or rape that causes coma. In an interview after the brutal attack, Devineni recalled that a policeman placed the blame on the victim, saying that “no good girl walks alone at night” (Pandey 2014). The statement, according to Devineni, confirms the notion that violence against women is a cultural issue in India. The gruesome incident inspired Devineni and his team to come up with a comic book character, Priya, who is a rape survivor and, with the help of the Goddess Parvati, she fights gender-based crimes. The award-winning comic book targets children and teenagers and, by intertwining Hindu mythology with gender-based violence, the aim is to reach out and educate children at an early age.

The comic book is the first of its kind to use augmented reality; by downloading a free app called Blippar, readers point their mobile devices to certain portraits in the comic book which tell the real-life stories of rape survivors, which have been animated to conceal their true identities (Pundir 2014). As part of the campaign, local artists painted murals on walls replicating the character Priya and the Goddess Parvati at a few locations in Dharavi (Mumbai), one of the largest slums in the world. Being novel and timely in its execution, Priya’s Shakti raised the discourse about race and gender in Indian media. It is interesting to note that even though the deceased Pandey was an urbanite in New Delhi, her reincarnation as “Priya” is of a rural girl who is depicted as dark-skinned, wearing traditional Indian clothes, and living in a village, recognizing that rural Indian women are the primary targets of physical and sexual abuse. In the comic book, Priya is described as one who is curious and hardworking with dreams to become a teacher, but as she grows older her father, who is traditional in his ways, instructs her to stay at home and take care of the house. The plotline mirrors the current scenario faced by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in rural villages. Furthermore, this example shows how innovation in new media technology like augmented reality, a tool typically used in advertising campaigns, can also be used to spread awareness of race and gender-based violence.

Racism and Ethnic Discrimination in India

Newspapers in India and international news organizations regularly report on incidents of racism, much of it related to discrimination against émigrés from Africa. There exists a growing number of Africans from nations like Kenya, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Sudan who come to India to pursue higher education (Soumya 2013). Unfortunately, Indians in general view Africans as suspect; men are stereotyped as troublemakers and drug-traffickers and women as sex-workers. These negative associations have routinely resulted in discrimination against Africans in India, which is widely reported by news organizations. In 2013, a Nigerian national was murdered in the Western state of Goa, which sparked statewide protests by Nigerians and further caused a political rift between the two countries (Soumya 2013). In 2014, three African students were brutally attacked in the nation’s capital of New Delhi; such treatment is not uncommon, and is extended to African Americans as well, as reported in The Hindustan Times (Vasudeva et al. 2014). One of the men who was beaten told Al Jazeera,
“Africans are familiar with Indians due to the huge diaspora in most parts of Africa. It’s only now that Africans are coming here and I feel they [Indians] are not prepared for us” (Soumya 2013).

The Indian mass media play a huge role in shaping the public’s perception toward Africans. For example, global brands like Coca-Cola’s Sprite, Parle Agro’s LMN (a lemon drink), and British Petroleum’s Castrol engine oil have launched campaigns in India where Africans are portrayed as savages and cannibals (Singh 2010). Singh explains that even though there are many documented instances of discrimination against those from the Indian diaspora abroad, including in media representations (e.g., Ashton Kutcher playing an Indian character “Raj” in a commercial for PopChips), it still doesn’t deter Indians from propagating racial stereotypes of other cultures in their home country. Color prejudice is also seen in sports, especially in the country’s greatest national pastime, cricket. Event management companies that advertise, interview, and select Indian Premier League cheerleaders primarily focus on skin tone, prompting reasonable allegations about racism. *The Telegraph* reported that for an IPL match in Mohali, British cheerleaders Ellesha Newton and Sherinne Anderson, both of African descent, were prevented from entering the cricket grounds by an organizer of Wizcraft International Entertainment, who explained, “People here don’t want to see dark people” (Allen 2008). Decisions such as this continue to propagate discrimination and reiterate the existence of a color divide in India, which can be tied back to the underlying attitudes and behavior against those with dark skin that have been established by the caste system and British colonization.

Another group that has experienced repeated discrimination at the hands of their own countrymen are Indians from the Seven Sister states of the northeast—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. The more liberal and progressive culture of the northeast has resulted in disturbing stereotypes—men as incompetent and drug-addled and women as prostitutes, as *Al Jazeera* has reported (Das 2014). With communal unrest plaguing the seven states, coupled with the lack of job opportunities and better education, the major Indian metro areas have witnessed an influx of northeasterners (about 15,000 per year) who want to pursue higher education and start a new life but who face frightful prejudice (Bhowmick 2014).

Social media in India has had mixed results in its contributions to the dialogue on race in India. Its power to bring about collective change is undeniable: social media was used to help win Barack Obama the presidential election in 2008, to rally protesters in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, and to voice the opinions of African Americans about the 2014 police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. At the same time, such a tool can also be used to threaten and invoke fear in minorities. When power struggles between Bengali immigrant Muslims in Assam and the indigenous Bodo tribe led to an insurgency in the northeast, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were the tools of choice through which videos and morphed photos of northeasterners attacking Muslims in Assam were disseminated, causing communal violence against the large northeastern community (Magnier 2012). Hate messages were also sent via Short Message Service, warning northeasterners to leave for their respective states before the end of the holy month of Ramadan. The fear of escalation prompted a massive exodus of northeasterners from the South Indian cities of Pune, Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad. The increased train traffic due to the exodus pushed the railway authorities to increase the number of trains to the northeast. With the government stepping in by beefing up
security and assuring safety, many of the northeasterners returned after the situation was stabilized, thus gradually ending the exodus. Northeasterners have faced casual racism since their arrival but the exodus marked the emergence of a more acute mindset born from inherent racial biases.

The *Times of India* reported in 2014 that Lulminlal Haokip, 21, and Lepmin Len, 18, who hailed from Manipur, were verbally abused and then physically assaulted by a group of local youths in South Delhi. The assailants were later taken into custody but the deep scars caused by racism remained. Similar incidents have been reported in major Indian metros like Bangalore and Gurgaon. The turning point came when Nido Taniam, 20, from Arunachal Pradesh was ridiculed for his hair and clothes and soon a brawl ensued (Agarwal 2014). His injuries were so severe that he died, which led to several protests by students in New Delhi to highlight the country’s penchant for racism against northeasterners. India is devoid of an anti-racism law and, in response, a committee headed by M. P. Bezbaruah, a member of the Northeast council, was formed with its major goal being the prosecution of assailants “under specific provisions that recognize such crimes as racially motivated” (Malhotra 2014).

Citizens of Nepal, a sovereign country nestled between India and China, are also subject to discrimination in India. About a fifth of Nepal’s 28 million residents live and work in India (Prasad 2014). Due to the similarity in the Tibeto-Mongoloid features of the Nepalese with Indians of the northeast, they have been perceived as a single group and have been similarly abused. An ad campaign was created around the negative stereotypes associated with Nepalese men as night watchmen. The Asian Center for Human Rights (ACHR 2014) labeled a recent ad by “Champions League T20 – #T20Nights Are Back!” as racist. In one of the ads, a Nepalese character sings the lines, “Woh Raatein Bhi Kya Raatein Thi, Naach te teh, gaate teh, chilla te teh, purra mohalla ko, haami toh jagate teh” (What nights were those nights, used to dance, used to shout, we are the ones who used to wake up the entire locality). The words in connection with the actor’s nationality clearly implied that Nepalese are stereotyped as night watchmen and, to drive home the point, accompanying radio ads employed a heavy Nepalese accent. Stereotypical simplifications showcase a false perception of diversity, and consistent media portrayals reinforce the minority’s outside status in the host culture. Generalizing diverse cultures can create a set of incorrect beliefs about the entire group but, more importantly, “in-group bias” (Brewer 1979) is generated where members of the in-group (mainland India) see themselves superior to out-groups (northeast).

The effects of violence coupled with media stereotyping can slow down the acculturation process and make minorities feel the host culture is indifferent to their values. Even though the Seven Sister states fall under one flag, people of “mainland India” see themselves as physically and culturally different from the northeasterners and vice-versa. Apart from proximity and language barriers, former Nagaland Chief Secretary Alemtenshi Jamir points out that “even if the government enacts an anti-racist law, as long as people don’t understand other cultures within its own territory it won’t help in solving this issue” (Kharmujai 2014). Kharmujai cites a major flaw in the Indian educational system, in which awareness of the various cultural nuances existing in the northeast is limited, and more comprehensive media coverage of social and current affairs in the region is needed to prevent alienation and promote successful integration between the mainland and the northeast.
The Future

To truly progress as an advanced country, India has to first empower its people by overcoming social stigmas like colorism and gender disparity, and the country’s media system could be central to that effort. Scheduled Castes comprise nearly 17 percent and Scheduled Tribes nearly 9 percent of the total population (India Census 2011). These numbers indicate that their advancement is critical in the country’s road to progress. Dark skin color, which is more prevalent in rural India, will have to stop being treated as a handicap, especially for women. Also, race, gender, and violence are inextricably linked in the country, and constructing social boundaries with respect to caste is an impediment as women bear the brunt of discrimination and physical/sexual violence. Research has confirmed that there are long-term economic benefits from investing in women’s futures (Marquis et al. 2010), and discrimination based on skin color and social designation can negatively impact their self-esteem and ability to successfully pursue their personal and professional lives. In terms of racist tendencies against the African diaspora and the northeast Indians, further media introspection is needed. As Ayyar and Khandre (2013) point out, it would be prudent for India to borrow the cultural significance of the Sanskrit saying, “Atithi Devo Bhava” [Guests are God or should be treated like God], which was seen in the Ministry of Tourism’s “Incredible India!” campaign that promoted India as a prime tourist destination to a global audience. In retrospect, the current scenario is a far cry from how India treats not only its guests but also its brethren. Nonetheless, in the light of slowly changing perceptions of beauty and governmental intervention in unison with self-regulation by the mass media, India appears to be on the path of breaking from the shackles of its insecurities and racial biases.

References


Further Reading

Mehta, P. (2013) “Imagining Sikhs: The Ethics of Representation and the Spectacle of Otherness in Bollywood Cinema,” *Sikh Formations* 9(1): 73–95. (Studies the Sikh community through a cultural lens and explores how the belittling or exaggerated portrayals in Bollywood cinema mask the community’s true identity.)
