

## Rising Through The Color Code

"Your daughter is too dark; how will she ever get married in a good family."

Growing up in India has given me wonderful experience, lots of knowledge and exposure, beautiful traditions to enjoy and meet lots of inspiring people. But like any other country, the Indian society has its own set of negative beliefs, which in turn can affect someone in a positive or negative way - It is finally up to the individual on how to deal with it. In my case, due to the strong support of my family and friends it made me grow stronger and better. Not everyone is that lucky.

I've grown up in a beautiful supportive family in northern India who loved me immensely and unconditionally. However due to my dark complexion I also grew up with statements like above. Not only me, but my parents also had to listen to things like your daughter is not beautiful, her skin color is so dark, how will she get married in a good family. And if someone would be kind enough one might say "how does she look!" Well, no points for guessing as they didn't mean good. I remember I had to face a lot of discrimination at my school as well because of my dark color. No matter how bright academically or skilled one is, you will be judged by your looks.

Basically, it was the skin color that mattered most to lots of people in society. My wonderful parents would firmly defend me every now and then because they loved me a lot and raised me and my siblings equally and very nicely. Talking about my siblings, I am the middle child with an older brother and a younger sister. The charm of a fair skin is directed towards the women folk. (Men are usually not judged by their looks!) My sister has fair skin and so she did not have to deal with this negativity.

My color bothered most people, especially the neighbors and relatives. While my mother absorbed most of the negative energy and kept telling me that I'm beautiful, my father used to defend me. He always replied strongly to whosoever bad mouthed his beloved daughter. My father used to tell people who talk bad about me that my daughter is better than everyone else. My parents prepared me well to face the world but there were times when things went bad.

I remember when I was in 7th grade, some people were really rude. I was at a marriage function when one of our distant relatives told my mom how bad I looked. She went a step further asking my mom how come you and your husband look so good and why is it that daughter looks so ugly (read dark complexion). Some others offered me fairness cream too. At that age, I took this to heart and started getting conscious about my looks. I have always been a bright student but my confidence to go out in public shattered completely. I started avoiding people and family get togethers. I tried to find ways to just hide in the crowd if going out. My parents and siblings tried their best to encourage me, but I think I was too sensitive at that age to understand anything. But you never know who comes into your life like an angel and makes an impact.

One day a family moved next door and the lady of the house had a dark complexion, just like mine - but she was beautiful and was full of confidence. I loved talking to her and she would always say that skin color doesn't matter. She encouraged me to step out and be myself and inspired me in lot many ways. We used to go out shopping, watch movies, eat out but the best part was we (me, my mom, my sister and the lady) all used to get together in the evenings on terrace and just spend time talking. By the time I finished high school I was a completely different person. It's not that people had stopped commenting and stopped treating me differently for my color, it just wasn't bothering me anymore. I would do what I wanted to do. Even after getting married to a wonderful person and joining a good family and becoming a mother, I still get some comments related to my color - But I know for sure that they matter the least to me now. My family and parents have always been so proud of me and would say that I'm beautiful inside out and which I had started believing long ago.

My Dad is not with us anymore but I remember him telling me in the hospital that "I knew my daughter will surely come if something happens to me, My daughter My pride" We both sisters were always his princess and will be forever. I always Thank God for the wonderful family I have both before and after my marriage and to the angel next door who changed my life.

Till just a couple years back, a lot of multinational companies would sell skin whitening creams to gullible folks in India! Things are changing for the better now, especially the perception of beauty based on a person's skin color. Many prominent personalities and support groups stepped up to change this belief of beauty by working with dark complexioned models, not endorsing products which define beauty by color and so on. The change will keep happening for good, but I was lucky to be able to break the barrier of color for myself to become a better and stronger person.

There are positives and negatives in every sphere of life. The important thing is to learn and continue to grow as a person.