

## **PODCAST 1 – Experience sharing**

**Nishtha:** Hi listeners. Welcome to my podcast “The Pigment Paradox: Corporate Colorism in India and beyond, where we dive into a pervasive problem of colorism. I define colorism as the practice of treating people differently based on their skin tone. Lighter skin often receives preferential treatment, while darker skin faces discrimination. This bias exists across various racial and ethnic communities and influences important areas such as employment, housing, and social interactions. In this episode, we will dive into personal stories and tackle the tough topic of colorism in the workplace.

**Nishtha:** First off, let me introduce myself. My name is Nishtha, and I am a Rotman MBA student. I come from India where I spent four years working as a Project manager in a fintech organization after completing my Bachelor of Technology. You might be wondering why I am doing this podcast and why on this topic. Let me explain - coming from India, I have grown up hearing comments about my skin-tone wherein my dusky shade was always looked down in comparison to my fairer cousins. I broke down on several occasions and somewhere I accepted it as a societal norm, until I did not. It was when a distant friend of mine shared how she got laid off from her job because the company wanted to retain client facing employees who were all fairer skin toned women, it struck me that colorism is not contained only in households and has its effects in corporate discrimination too. Since then, I have worked on several awareness projects back in India to educate our youth on the detrimental effects of colorism. I am thankful to the Institute of Gender and Economy at Rotman for providing me the opportunity to work on my passion project under their mentorship as a BMO GATE fellow. We are talking about India because colorism is endemic in the society, so acceptable that it is hard to distinguish between right and wrong comments. It is so in-built that the students are taught black is ugly and white is beautiful since childhood. Even more so, colorism impacts women way more than men since light skin color is regarded as a pressing beauty standard that applies much more to women in India. I am sure that you must have heard about fairness creams. Fairness creams are skincare products that are perceived (or promoted to make people believe) to brighten their skin color over time. The pervasive advertising for these creams in India goes like: If your husband's lost interest in you, if your colleagues dismiss you at work, if your talents are ignored, whiten your skin to turn your love life around, boost your career and command center stage. The significant impact of this issue on women is evident from the large size of the Indian fairness cream market, which is around \$450M. This points to intersectionality, which is about how different forms of discrimination, like gender, race, ethnicity, and more, combine to affect people. For example, if a woman faces discrimination because of her dark skin, you can't separate her skin color from her gender identity. They both play a part in how she is treated.

**Nishtha:** Picture this: a workplace where ignorance allows subtle acts of colorism to go unchecked. Without awareness of what constitutes appropriate behavior, microaggressions become the norm, and incidents of discrimination often go unreported. Now, let's listen to three remarkable women who've agreed to talk about how colorism in India is a complex issue that intersects with gender. They'll share their experience on how ignorance, combined with social norms, shapes a culture where colorism is sadly accepted as the norm. Joining us today is Antara Kamath who is an MBA student at Rotman with roots in India. She grew up in India and

South Africa and she is here with us today to share how early experiences of colorism affected her childhood and perception of self as she grew up.

**Antara:** *Thanks Nishtha. So great to be here. So, my name is Antara. I am a full time MBA student here at Rotman and so my life is I was born in India, and I grew up in India and South Africa and I moved to Canada about a decade ago to do my undergrad in economics, after which I worked as a statistics analyst in an insurance advocacy firm. Now I'm here.*

**Antara:** *So, colorism for me is just being at a disadvantage or people being at a disadvantage due to the color of their skin. It's not. I wouldn't say it's racism. It's a little bit different from racism, where it is a more a, a more violent and direct kind of discrimination, whereas colorism is lot more subtle. It is - it comes across in microaggressions. Almost so that is what colorism is to me. The little snippy comments here and there, stuff like that.*

**Antara:** *Umm so. For me, it starts at in high school. Really, that was like, the biggest moment for me. So, when I entered my first class, which is science class, I realized that it wasn't gonna be a good fit for me because my teacher just hated me from the get-go and I had no idea why she made me sit in the back, away from everyone else. She would ask me very difficult questions - That wasn't taught or wasn't covered, and when I got the answer wrong, she be like ohh on Antara, and she would just walk away. And but the biggest moment was when, for a science project, I came in and I told her, you know, I would like to go into architecture. And I was thinking maybe I could use a little bit of architecture to do my science project, make it a lot better, gaining a little bit more experience in it. And she said no, that's not necessary. You're brown. You're gonna be in accountant anyway, so it's not. You don't have to do that at all, and that was the most hurtful thing I had heard. It kind of pushed me away from architecture. I ended up hating accounting and I was just overall very dejected, and I lost a lot of my confidence, very quickly.*

**Antara:** *Umm, when that happened, I used to. First of all, I started hating myself a little because I was like, well, you know, I'm brown, so I'm kind of been pigeonholed into this category. It takes a lot of unlearning and being kind to myself and being kind to others and a lot of self restrained to not jump to the worst conclusion, but thankfully over the years I've grown a lot and I think I've kind of gotten that under control.*

**Antara:** *Yeah, I mean back then, I wish I didn't have her as a teacher. People like that shouldn't be in the teaching profession because you're there to nurture and to, you know, help that person grow into who they want to become, not flawed their minds or, you know, break their confidence because of you. Uh, I don't know what the word is - just your uh perceptions of others you know, like don't, don't do that. Luckily for me, that teacher was later fired. Umm. So hopefully she's no longer teaching anywhere and inflicting her very wrong opinions on others, but that would have I would strongly suggest, that people who have that kind of mentality, who have these kinds of perceptions, don't go into fields that require helping others.*

**Antara:** *And in terms of healing, it really helps when, umm, people, for me at least color is there, but it's not the focus of a conversation. For me, it's not like when I say focus of the conversation, I don't mean ohh because we're so and so we must do it this way. Like, oh, I'm Indian. Therefore, I must eat spicy food, or I'm because I'm this color - I must go home and put on fair*

*and lovely, so stepping away from uh thinking that way and having conversations like that would have helped a lot.*

**Antara:** *Umm my Indian friends. They complain to me a lot. And so, people come up to them and say ohh, you're so dark. So, you should go home and put on some fair and lovely you're too dark, no ones gonna marry you. Or even growing up, when I grew up in India though, which is, I think the saddest part for me is we face colorism from our own people, which is the worst for me. UM, they would come up to me and you know they would say ohh this person called him "Kaalu" which is, you know, black or dark. And they would tease them and bully them because they were darker. There's this like one horrible instance, and I think middle school, where someone came up to me and said ohh that person called me burnt and like that is the worst thing ever. Like. That's awful.*

**Antara:** *I think just certain extent it does affect men too, but umm, it's definitely skewed towards women. Women, I don't know if you recently saw the Barbie movie like women get blamed for everything. So, the onus of being perfect also falls on the woman. You know you have to have the best job; you must be the fairest. You must be the well, the most educated. There's just so many conditions when it comes to being a woman. Uh, and that's sadly the case for colorism as well. If you are darker skinned woman, you probably don't get as many opportunities. And you also get the brunt of comments.*

**Antara:** *Wow, India has a population of billions, so it's gonna take a very, very long time for us to become a lot kinder and more inclusive to each other, but I think it really starts at the grassroots level in school really where teachers don't make comments like that. Don't make don't say things like. Oh, you're so dark. Or, you know, you shouldn't. You should. Ohh, that's a big other big thing. Don't go out in the sun because you already dark. You get darker, so not being at the point where teachers don't speak like that to children because children are very impressionable. So, and they carry these perceptions throughout their lives. So maybe don't. We should have kinder conversations. If a teacher sees another kid talking to someone like that, they should step in and say, hey, we don't. We don't talk like that, we don't bully based uh, we don't bully at all. Period. But you know, bullying on color, that's even worse.*

**Antara:** *And I would also say having more women of color, which is why I find myself fortunate to having more women in color in positions of leadership. It would be very helpful because they may have experienced it, they can prevent it happening in the workplace and in that culture. But they can also help to come up with, I would say, come up with ways to prevent it as well on a on a much higher level, which can then trickle down to the employees that are on the lower rungs.*

**Nishtha:** *Next, we will hear from Bidisha Sarkar, who is also an MBA student at Rotman and grew in India. She shares how one of her colleagues' faced incidences of colorism in the workplace.*

**Bidisha:** *Hi Nishtha. My name is Bidisha and I'm a first year MBA student right now and I am from India. I grew up in a small city in West Bengal. I have total of 5 1/2 years of experience in tech. I did my undergraduate in STEM. Ohh, computer science, engineering and that's have been my background. I've worked in like different sectors in tech in big corporations, medium size and even startups. So yeah.*

**Bidisha:** So basically for me colorism is not very subjective. It is it exactly what it sounds like. You discriminate people based on their colors, colors of their skin, and it is very widespread across India. I'm yet to come across a particular sector of India where colorism has not seeped into be it like personal, social, economic, like any side of the spectrum. Ohh as a matter of fact. Like when you look at the society, the entire, uh, preference towards fairness is so evident and it's so normalized that people don't even realize that they are discriminating against somebody on basis of their skin color or regardless of how the person is in general. It gives them a certain fair amount of advantage in any sphere of life, let's say in social life, or even gaining respect in normal day to day life or even advancement and careers where your presence and your entire, you know, presenting yourself matters in front of clients.

**Bidisha:** More than in one case, I have observed that when there is a hiring process the way, the hiring manager speak about the candidates, there have been instances where people have commented on the looks of the people like this person is XYZ is like really tall and fair. And they would fair against ohh short, petite, dark skinned colour curl. Ohh, barring like keeping everything aside. These are the terms which have been used to judge candidates for quite like respectable positions like marketing positions or marketing head positions or VP. People have a certain beauty standard which has been set up by the entire any kind of industry or even the society. So if women are falling short of that respect, I have been heard comments such as that everything can be forgiven if the person is fair, like you can pass a certain set of shortcomings if you have the fair skin and that does affect women because it generally affects the confidence from a very early age, and that seeps into their professional life as well. They're afraid of speaking up. They're afraid of being confident and outright about their opinion, even though they have really good and smart opinions to put forward. So it definitely affects them in their professional life more than the men.

**Bidisha:** So, I have a fortunately never faced colorism in workplace or in the general society outside of work. But regardless, I have observed a lot of ways that colorism has impacted people's professional life, like in my first company, I had a colleague who was Ohh who had a considerably like darker shade of skin and she an amazing, brilliant women with the brilliant mind. But she would. She is somebody who you would call an introvert. She couldn't put forward her ideas and her opinions very forthcoming across the table and so ohh as a matter of fact she had a very good I mean honestly, she had a very good opportunity later on in her career where she got the job in IBM Australia and she moved to Australia and believe me or not after six months we opened her social profiles and she was a completely different person. She looked like she has evolved from like a cocoon. She looked confident and radiant, and her LinkedIn was brilliant. She was doing amazing. She was gaining promotions and she looked generally really happy compared to the person she was back in India in the India office. So, it really makes you wonder that if it is particularly, you know, a country problem or the people's mindset problem, because it's bizarre how a person can completely change when you move them out of an oppressive environment.

**Bidisha:** Uh, the policy of colorism should be implemented, but then again it comes it comes to the nuance that how would you even detect that somebody is being discriminated because of this skin color? Because it's a very nuanced situation where. Like I said it again, I would say it also falls under harassment again, like it is the same as harassment. But then how do you even

*single somebody out that they are being discriminated because of the color? So, I would love such a policy to come on board and but also want to see the steps into like how are they being implemented because it's so nuanced in nature, it does affect people, but it's so hard to pinpoint that how like I mean it's basically difficult. I wanted to be eradicated, but then basically how to detect it in the first place?*

**Nishtha:** Finally, we have another exceptionally brave women from Delhi joining us to share her personal story and how these experiences have transformed her.

**Anonymous:** *Hello so I grew up in a small town in Haryana which is in the north of India, and I completed my engineering in Jaipur which is another city on the West side of India. And I just always wanted to go into business analytics and consulting jobs. So, upon my graduation, I joined a boutique consulting firm in Delhi as a business analyst. And now I work as a senior consultant for another analytics firm in Delhi.*

**Anonymous:** *So, for me personally, colorism is a constant reminder that there is something inferior about you that you cannot do anything about. It's just the feeling that leaves you worthless and it just makes you look past your quality and people just only focus on the color of your skin, which is like really bad.*

**Anonymous:** *Growing up, I used to get a lot of comments on my skin from my family, my cousins, but that didn't used to bother me much because they love me anyway. But ohh when I face these comments and discriminations during my job, that's when I realized that I should not have been OK with this in the first place like even with my family. So, as I started working at the company, everything looked OK in the beginning, but I slowly realized that something was off. Like I used to work hard, do very well in my task, but somehow, they always overlooked me for client facing roles and whereas my fair skinned colleagues seem to easily like get these opportunities which I was working hard for. Like ohh I remember that one day my manager asked to join a client project in Singapore, and I was like we he was talking to us in the team, and I was specifically denied for that. So, I felt really pathetic and bad because it wasn't the only incident that happened. Like I was being left out of the meetings being subtly told to change my clothes, and they asked me to style to fit in better.*

**Anonymous:** *So, I wanted to speak up, but I was so scared as whenever I wanted to talk to my friends, they always used to term it as overthinking and saying everyone is so sweet while thinking like that. But it never felt right to me, and I looked into my companies HR policies, but I could not find anything concrete to pinpoint all these instances because they were very small things, and I did not want to lose my job. There was always a worry in the back of my head. So, what I did was I just poured all my heart into work and without getting any chances or opportunities, I feel stuck. So by this time, three years had passed, and I still hadn't been promoted. And then my next promotion required me to bring in new client businesses. But as I told you before that I was never exposed to it in the first place. So eventually I had to leave.*

*It was a tough decision, but it led me to a place where my skills were recognized and valued. So, in the hindsight, I think leaving was relief, which also left me questioning why did I allow this to happen? Why was colorism accepted in the workplace? And but why? Why was it happening*

*even when it hurt people like me? So, I don't think it's just my story. I know there are other people who have faced same situations, but there the situation they don't change.*

**Anonymous:** *So uh, I just wanted to talk to you about all this today and I wanted to share my experience and say it out loud that I should not have let this happen. This was clearly wrong and to all the people who are listening to me and are on the same boat with me. Please, please don't think that this is OK, and you should let this happen to you. Please don't doubt yourself. We expect people to stand up for us, but first I think we need to learn how to stand up for ourselves because nobody helped me and somewhere I always felt that I was in the wrong, that people I was not doing such work. So, I was always in this under a state of self doubt, and I continuously let this behavior happened to me and some of my other colleagues, but I just want to say that anyone who wants to help out, you should always remember that workplace is meant to evaluate people on their skills and behavior and not the color of their skin. And we should call people out. And outside of the workplace, I think we need to teach our kids that dark skin is not bad, it's not ugly and everyone is an equal part of the society, and they should not grow up with this backwards mentality.*

**Nishtha:** Here is the thing that really stood out to me from these interviews: it is not just about gender or race—it's about the intersectionality of discrimination. That means the experiences of these women are shaped by the overlapping layers of their gender and skin color.

**Nishtha:** Maxine Thompson and Verna Keith's study in 2001 indicated that the effects of colorism are stronger for women than men, but it is disheartening that even after 23 years since the study, capabilities of women are defined based on the color of their skin, but it is time for change. Awareness is key here and what's the call to action? Well, it starts with us. We need to educate ourselves about colorism and its impact, challenge our own biases, and actively support our colleagues who may be facing discrimination. Let's challenge ignorance, amplify voices, and create workplaces where diversity truly thrives. Let's work towards a future where colorism against women is a thing of the past—a future where every voice is heard.

**Nishtha:** Thanks all for tuning in. Please like and review this podcast so we can get the word out! Until next time, keep striving for change and never stop fighting for what's right.