

PODCAST 2 – HR and DEI perspective

Nishtha: Hello listeners. Welcome again to "The Pigment Paradox," where we navigate the complexities and realities of colorism against women in Indian workplaces. We heard about the challenges faced by employees in the last podcast but today, let's hear the perspective of HR managers and their challenges in solving this issue. We will also hear from a few professionals working in the space of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, also known as DEI about their view on colorism and whether it is even an issue to be solved for under the DEI realm.

Nishtha: Researchers Keith Maddox and Stephanie Gray conducted a study in 2002, and what they found was eye-opening. Both Black and White participants tended to link darker skin with more negative qualities and see lighter-skinned people in a more positive light. This bias isn't just confined to everyday interactions; it extends to corporate settings as well. But do we have enough evidence to confirm this bias in the workplace? Probably not! According to HR professionals I've spoken with, policies are typically based on data and employee feedback. But what if employees don't feel safe speaking up and fear facing consequences? While we champion broader diversity initiatives, colorism lurks in the shadows, unaddressed and unchecked. Let's hear from an HR manager at a mid sized manufacturing company in India where he talks about his troubling reality. He shares how he flies blind, groping in the dark for solutions without clear data on reported incidents.

Anonymous (HR): *Of course. Uh, I'm delighted to be here, Nishtha. I'm in HR manager at a mid scale manufacturing company based in Mumbai, India with over 10 years of experience in human resources, I've had the opportunity to lead many employees related interactions from new hire trainings to leadership development and I can tell you it's been quite the journey and I'm excited to share some insights with you today.*

Anonymous (HR): *So, uh, so policies are formed. Well, First off, policies are not formed every day, or even rather every year it takes a long time for a policy to be first formed and then be enforced. I've seen policies such as sexual harassment work from home, maternity leaves, leaves of absence, all policies being formed as a result of I feel 2 main things. One we look at what other firms have for their policies and so it acts as a benchmark. And second, what is particularly needed for our firm, we generally map the standard policies and see if we need to keep it same or make adjustments depending on our firm situations.*

Anonymous (HR): *I can tell you it's not easy to form policies. Uh, you need to realize that people do not like change. So that is why we rely a lot on data while framing these policies. And it usually comes from employee satisfaction surveys, exit interviews, or general interactions with our employees. We also prioritize issues relate raised and discussed with leadership in terms of feasibility of implementation in the company as well.*

Anonymous (HR): *Uh I think with colorism the issue is that it is. It is very hard to quantify the instance of colorism. If you ask me, I've not received substantial reported incidents of colorism. Also, I feel if an incident happens it is very hard to pinpoint that the discrimination happens solely on the basis of color. Uh, so I'm not sure if leadership would prioritize forming an explicit policy against colorism or even for me to advocate such a policy because of the lack of data on these incidents.*

Anonymous (HR): *We do have an open-door policy where employees can come and share any issues that they're facing with me and my team, but if you ask specifically about the employee satisfaction survey, we have an overarching question regarding whether anyone is facing any sort of discrimination based on gender cast, religion, etc. But we do not ask a separate question for discrimination based on color due to the issue of measurement. So, in a way, you can say that it is not a proactive approach to finding cases.*

Anonymous (HR): *However, we do encourage our employees to speak up by creating a psychologically safe environment. But yes, we do not have an open dialogue about issues such as colorism, which may give a perception to the employees that we don't take this issue seriously. However, in companies outside India, there are communities for people of color. But in India, where everyone belongs to the same race or ethnic background, I do feel that it kind of does not make sense.*

Nishtha: As I reflect further, I can't ignore the uncomfortable truth—we've overlooked colorism in our policies and our employee surveys. While we wait for the employees to reach out with their problems and do nothing proactively, the employees look to switch jobs. And this is not just me saying. According to a study by BCG, Employees who can be their authentic selves at work are happier, more motivated to give their best — and nearly 2.4 times less likely to quit. And actually colorism can be one of the factors for unhappiness.

Nishtha: Switching gears, we have seen the emergence of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the past few years, but colorism hasn't made its own place in the DEI realm. So, to discuss whether colorism is even an issue at all to be addressed, let's hear from Oindrila Sen who grew up in India and is now a DEI leader in the US.

Oindrila: *Uh, so my name is Oindrila Sen. I'm originally from Calcutta, India. I came to the US for Graduate School and I've been here for 32 years now. So longer in the US than in India, I went to school for International affairs, majoring in Southeast Asia with political science, economics, and communications. But I've never really worked in that field. I've worked in universities I've worked for Target and now I work for Alger, so I'll just spend my longest employer for 21 years.*

Oindrila: *My understanding of colorism is where people of color discriminate against other people of color, and it's based on how lighter or darker the skin tone is. So that's my perception of colorism.*

Oindrila: *Colorism came off of racism. So once there was a perception of Fair or being white means being smart and pretty and you know, knowledgeable and having, you know so called class like being darker skinned was considered to be stupid and you know all of that stuff. Not beautiful. So, I think that kind of transferred over to people of color. So, within that group, they started making that distinction that the darker you are, the not good you are versus the fairer you are, you are more desired, you're more acceptable. You're prettier. You're smarter. You're all of those attributes though, within the people of, you know, people who are brown skinned. There isn't white or what you consider white, but it kind of transferred over cause I think it has more to do with, you know like if you if you are smarter, prettier brighter, you know, but people like you more it gives you much more of a sense of power and therefore you know I have more*

power than darker skinned person. I'm more light so I can put somebody else down and I think it comes from racism, but I think that's where the root of colorism is. I didn't live in this world before. Colonialism happening, which gave rise to racism. So, I don't know whether that society had colorism or not, but the present society definitely has colorism

Oindrila: Definitely like it is women who are affected more than men are. And then again, you know it's about again gender dynamics followed by color dynamics. You know, it's like one that's layered over the other. So, men are always considered to be more powerful, you know, smarter. Better, whatever you know. Whether that's true or not, and so, you know, women start on a, you know, a step behind with that, with what society thinks is how power is distributed or what women or men can do.

And then you add a layer of - If you're darker skinned, then you're considered to be umm, you know, less able, less smarter, less capable. So that kind of flows into the discrimination pattern. So you have like you know this is where into the intersectionality comes in. You know you're a woman and a person of color, and if you're a darker skinned person of color, then you face more. There's more chances. Not that necessarily will, but there are more chances of barriers being put up against you in your career development or in your career path.

Oindrila: No, I never personally had to deal with it, but I've had friends who had that issue again, not so much an employment, but growing up with colorism being told you're dark, even the prettiest and the smartest women, not men. It's always women that had their confidence has taken a beating and you know they've held back and it takes a long time to get over something that you are subject to from when you're a child. So, it takes a long time and I've seen my girlfriend's like in the 20s and 30s. Finally, when they are successful, to be able to let it go and like, no, it doesn't matter what color shade, not even color, what shade my skin is, yeah.

Oindrila: I know in India when you apply for jobs, you have to put your photograph in it, which you know, I didn't realize that to do it. Cause I've I have a friend who works in our heads and HR department and he's told like he heads the HR department and the CEO of his company will come and tell him that no, not this one. And he knows like this person is more capable. But the only reason I'm being told not to hire this person is either for the color of their skin or their caste. So of course it's not unconscious. A lot of it is completely conscious at work. I think it's completely conscious and especially in the Indian context.

Oindrila: You know when anybody says that its client facing and so therefore, they want the person to be more representative of the population, I mean to me that is a made-up thing cause the population actually more of the population is not lighter skin, more of the population is darker skinned. So it's just this notion and you know, it's sad to say in 2023 that in India there's still this notion of if you're darker somehow you're, I mean, you're not evaluated on your capabilities on something you're being evaluated on something that you literally have no control over. I mean, you know, well, we have fair and lovely, which is a lot of story that this is how bad it is that you have bleaching creams that are you see ads and gigantic hoardings on the streets. I mean, talk about it being almost a fabric of Indian society, but you know, having been in the US for a long time and having had friends who come from various parts of the world, various parts of the world that isn't white. Colorism extends there too. I mean, even in the US, within the African American community, colorism exists.

Lighter or darker? You know, it totally exists and it's makes absolute no sense, but that's how biases happen. That's how you know if you're told over and over again that this is good, this is good, and that's what you kept showing you then, then tend to believe that lighter is better. Darker is and the darker person is told that they're dumb. They're not pretty. They're not, are not intelligent. You know, you've got that worm into people's psyche, now to believe that that is true.

Oindrila: *And so it's a, it's a it takes I think real reflection on every individual's part to be like, what am I if this? Like I think you know the best thing, one of the things that people should do is like, you know, not like we have the Photoshop and God knows what else is like, take the photo of person who is dark and lighten their skin. But before you show it to someone who may or may not be biased and see how they react. You know what attributes would you give this person? And then? Show them a picture of the same person with the same skin tone. What? How would you attribute this? What attributes would you have this person?*

Oindrila: *Talking to like heads of Organizations, I think it is. I don't know if you've heard the term frozen middle. Umm, so I think alternately, that's the segment that we really need to get to cause they're the people that do the hiring. They're the people that work with the people that are going to be, you know, moving up and all of that stuff. So if we can get the frozen middle to really acknowledge and be taught and learn from what to do, what not to do, umm, and how to understand what a bias is, and that all of us are biased like you can't get rid of bias. I mean, that's how human beings survived all these years. So I actually do a workshop called mitigating bias, not overcoming bias. So if you acknowledge what you biases are, you can then try and catch yourself on hey, what am I doing? Let me ask these questions to myself. So it's really. I think those deep diving questions and not necessarily you know the you know overcoming bias workshops, all that stuff doesn't work because you know after an hour you're gone. It's like if you're gonna do this. Workshops. You need to send people home with tools of how do you keep practicing this every single day and? And this, I think storytelling is the best way to get people to understand and personal stories, cause again, throw up a lot of numbers, you know, and say, oh, this is the consequence for it and it's like, doesn't really have as much of an effect as, say, Nishtha, if you told your story to somebody, there would be like ohh my God, this happened to you. Someone who knows you and they'll be more conscious about not exhibiting the same behavior if they did, or calling out somebody for calling in, not calling out that, hey, why did you do this? What does it mean to you? You know, but I think storytelling is a best way to get people to identify with something that they may not or rather empathize with something that they may not identify with.*

Oindrila: *It's such a peculiar thing for people of color like it doesn't matter if you're Puerto Rican or it came from Kenya or India or China. It's just affects, a huge part of this world, and it's very, very hard for necessarily, you know, what we called white people to understand. They understand racism, but they have a really hard time understanding colorism. Like what? You all people of color. So that's a really, really tough thing. I think where people quite don't understand that there is an underbelly to racism, and that is colorism.*

Nishtha: Coming up next, we have Jaskaran Kohli, who has worked as an HR consultant in India, and he will share his opinion on this issue and about how this can be tackled.

Jaskaran: So, my name is Jaskaran. I'm currently a second year MBA student at the Schulich School of Business. I have worked for about five years prior to the MBA in the human capital verticals I worked as an HR consultant in talent strategy. So, focusing on internal projects for making work better for people, making people better at work, that's the way I like to summarize it. And after that I left to start my own boutique consulting venture, which was moved into career consulting and also independent consulting. So got the opportunity to work with some of the leading management consulting firms as an independent consulting focusing on talent transformation and business strategy.

Jaskaran: I think I would look at it from 2 perspective. One is an individual perspective, and one is more from an organizational perspective. And again, these all views are minor, not representative of any organization. But I think from an organization perspective, there is less focus given on colorism. There is more focus given on ethnicity and race. So for instance, if you, let's identify it as an Indian, so you are kind of bucketed into let's say issue and or Indian South Asian as a race, right? Wherein there is no your skin tone or your color does not matter, right? That's more from a conventional corporate culture environment. If you ask me personally, there is distinction. I think there are, you know, different shades of brown, right? Or do you need different shades of any color for that matter? So I think these two are interrelated, but they are definitely separate. You could belong to a particular race, but still feel you know discriminated or, you know, some sort of microaggression just based on the skin tone. And there are certain skin tones which are favorable and certain skin tones which are not, which is again dependent on the context of the country and the culture that you're a part of.

Jaskaran: So, I think. Firstly, when I look at microaggressions, I think it could be some our subconscious wherein you are not informed, or you do it just because you're not aware of it. And I think there are certain which are kind of, you know, deliberate right wherein for certain reasons you might have something against, you know, certain preconceived notions. Right. So, I think that's how microaggressions stems deliberate versus subconscious. How are they handled in a workplace environment? So, most organization, right? Especially if you look at the Fortune 500, global conglomerates do have a very strict EDI policy or overall policy, which obviously kind of penalizes microaggression behaviors that they have an open door policy wherein if you feel discriminated or any microaggressions, there are certain protocol that you can follow or, you know, reaching out to your. So there's separate ER / LR team- employee relations and labeled relations team to which you can reach out. So they kind of act as a mediator, right? Because you can't reach out to your immediate management because that's that wouldn't exactly be fair. And you also have this thing that you might not be looked at in a positive light. So you have like an unbiased third party which sits predominantly in HR. That kind of investigates and looks at the appropriate action that that needs to be taken if it's ohh, escalated.

Jaskaran: Uh, yes, I think it is a big challenge. I think the first part I would want to start with is not how an ER LR approaches right. I think that's that comes very late I think the first step is how do you make people comfortable or you know, empower them to support such instances in the 1st place, right? So I think the first step needs to start with how do you inculcate certain programs or policies by which individuals are comfortable, you know, to raising this issue if they face these sort of, you know, microaggressions. So, one of the ways of doing it is through

trainings, right? So top to bottom wherein you make individuals aware of, you know, a certain microaggression and the impact, you know, these have on the overall carrier and also the personality, the confidence of the individuals that are there. Right. So that is 1. The second is also, I think what helps is certain initiatives which are much more which hits you at a personal level. So, I think if you have these sort of initiative, let's say individuals who have faced colorism or you know, they kind of voice out their opinion and give them a comfortable platform that kind of hits you in a personal note. So the entire idea is to 1st aware, then educate and then replicate.

So I think that would be the aware educate is again more on educating also the ER teams, the employee relations team, not to you know go just by the book, but also you know empathizing with the employees who have escalated this issue, you know being unbiased in their investigation and you know giving, you know these sort of investigations, the same amount of importance that that you give to any other you know EDI related issue and the last one is again replicate that that you know ensure that the communications are proper ensure that adequate actions are taken so that such microaggressions are not repeated right and again it's something which is collective it requires you know top line as well as bottom line and a buy in from all stakeholders and not just the HR and not just the EDI vertical or not just the top management.

Jaskaran: So, I think I'll pick on the hiring bit first because one of the roles that I've actually done previously was managing you know the business and design school hiring. You know at the firm. So, I think when you look at you are trained, I think there is a policy wherein you know you all interviewers or all stakeholders who are involved in the hiring process are made to do mandatory trainings to get certified. We call it certified to interview, which has, you know, incorporation of, you know, EDI elements that that, you know, you can't discriminate people based on everything. Right. But again, within that there is limited when it comes to colorism. That is there uh. B. As I mentioned earlier, there are certain biases which are deliberate. There's certain biases which are subconscious. I think if you train individuals and you know have these policies, it is you can kind of fix on the subconscious bias by making them people aware. But yeah, if it's a deliberate bias, it's kind of hard to, you know, hard to rule out. So one of the ways that you can do it is by A is expanding the interview panel itself. So rather than limiting, let's say one person taking an interview, especially when you get to see the person and the visual perception is there, maybe expanding the panel by having more panelists to kind of, you know, liquidate the kind of bias that may arise. The second is also taking, let's say, more individuals from let's say, the population that is negatively affected by colorism on the panel itself. So in a way, they are able to give a neutral or an unbiased opinion and that counters the one in case there is any deliberate bias that is there, so that is more on the hiring piece.

Jaskaran: Let's be very honest in a corporate environment, you have to look at things both from a qualitative and a quantitative perspective, both from a monetary and a nonmonetary perspective, right? That's the reason you will find a lot of research. Also, you know quantify certain impact, right that if you know the companies with more inclusive hiring practices, you know you know have X percent revenue growth as opposed to other firms, right? So, I'm being very, very candid. So I think you have to supplement both quantitative as well as qualitative elements to the top management. That is point number one, point #2 is how do you actually create a top management which is diverse in itself, right. So, which has to do with the second

aspect that you talked about, right career progression. So I think you have to make the career progression such that people who are already at a disadvantage, you know, by the colorism are able to rise to the top because when they are able to rise to the top, they will be able, you know, they kind of empathize with the challenges that they have faced and they will be kind of the voice of change for these top you know these strategies or policies to be actually uh, you know implemented. So, I think those two would be the major challenges and I think those two are the ways by which you know a top to bottom trickle down happens. So, at the end of the day, it's more of the buy in and as to how you can get that buy in through these things.

Jaskaran: *And also, please cascade this the findings of this research. You know, to firms to their top leadership and you know, so that they are also aware and I'm pretty sure that you know by such projects and such initiatives that there will be an effect in the long term.*

Nishtha: I cannot help but bring back our attention to the elephant in the room—the lack of representation. Darker-skinned women are sidelined, their voices muted in a sea of lighter shades. How can we foster an inclusive environment when the faces at the top don't reflect the diversity below?

Nishtha: The key problem stares back at me—without clear data, explicit policies, and a culture of inclusivity, we're adrift in a sea of inaction. It's time to shine a spotlight on colorism, to bridge the gap between HR and DEI, and pave the way for a truly inclusive workplace.

Nishtha: Thanks for joining me on this journey of discovery. Until next time, let's keep striving for inclusivity and embracing the richness of diversity beyond the skin color.