

## **The Politics of Beauty: What's not Looking Good about 'Beauty' in India**

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### **Abstract**

*The Politics of Beauty: What's not looking good about 'beauty' in India* focuses on the stresses and controversies surrounding the contemporary 'beauty' culture in India. It highlights the politics and economics of the promotion of physical appearance alteration techniques and products, while bringing into focus some health concerns involved in its use. The author highlights that often the unattainable is considered as that which is desired or desirable and the rare or unique is often rated higher. The author argues that in India today there is an imposition of western notions of beauty and desirability with the aggressive marketing strategies employed by cosmetic manufacturers in India, which is seen as the largest consumer in this globalised economy. The author connects globalization to the larger politics of discrimination and objectification of women and how it impacts women of colour in particular. The paper calls for the exercise of caution in any assumption about women's self-determination and choice in the use of these techniques and products. We cannot rule out the possibility that women might be under pressure from patriarchal practices that have become so internalized that women themselves fail to view beauty culture as patriarchal domination. The paper argues that even common beauty practices can damage women's health, create sexual difference and enforce female subordination.

## **Keywords**

Women; beauty; objectification; body; politics; patriarchy; globalization.

When I proposed to students that they look at the beauty culture of today for an assignment in a Women's Studies class on Gender and Culture, there were smirks and smiles around the classroom. Students had several comments and questions even before they began the assignment. Almost everyone threads their eyebrows; we all like to look beautiful; are feminists against beauty and is it wrong to want to look beautiful? I refused to answer the questions and respond to comments before the assignment was completed. For the assignment, students had to speak to people from three different generations to understand what the concept of beauty was in the past to be able to compare it with the present. They had to ask people about what was done in the past to look beautiful, how much money people spent in the past on looking beautiful etc. The assignment was an eye opener to the students of the Gender and Culture class and this paper is an attempt to discuss some of the concerns which this small exercise managed to throw up. This paper discusses some of the controversies around beauty.

## **The Beautiful Concept**

Classical views on aesthetics held the 'ideal' or 'divine' as superior to all things human or physical (Richter 1978; Krishnamoorthy 1981). Some thinkers held that beauty was a 'matter of mathematical proportion' (Armstrong 2004; 28). Armstrong (*ibid*; 26) discusses how Pythagoras, the sixth century BC mathematician discovered that a musical note plucked from one string could harmonise with a note plucked from another that was exactly half the length of the previous string. Music, the visual arts and all human responses to

beauty according to classical thinkers were considered things of symmetry, mathematical structure, perfect calculation and balance. Eric Newton in the nineteenth century held that beauty was 'the underlying mathematical behaviour of phenomena apprehended intuitively' (Kirwan 1999; 55). The English artist William Hogarth (1697 – 1764) held that there was a 'serpentine line of beauty' and argued that he could explain how certain principles – "fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity and quantity" cooperate in producing beauty' (Richter 1978; 90). In the East, all things natural with their simplicity were considered things of beauty (Bahm 1957). Krishnamoorthy (1981; 5), discussing Indian theories of beauty argues that "Nature may have beauty of its own and it can be faithfully represented or artistically transformed....The artist need not always create beauty. But he (sic) has to discover it with his gift of sensitive taste or imagination". Most classical debates around beauty did bear a flavor of patriarchy and privileged the elite as bearers of finer aesthetic sensibilities. Therefore those belonging to the assumed 'higher' social classes and also so called 'higher castes' also assumed themselves to be the moral adjudicators of aesthetic standards for those they held as social subordinates. Chinese theories of aesthetics emphasized the importance of 'continuity and convention', clearly privileging tradition but not implying however, that beauty was unimaginative (Yu et al. 2010). Bahm (1957; 250) discussing the difference between Western aesthetics and Orientalist positions argues that Western aesthetics sees beauty as an "intrinsic value which appears as if embodied in an object", while "Oriental aestheticians conceive intrinsic value in such a way that the distinction between subject and object is not only irrelevant but even a hindrance to its enjoyment". The same author continues to suggest that if beauty is reserved for 'pleasure objectified', then another aesthetic term must be found to designate the enjoyment of self, or enjoyment in which the distinction

between subject and object are irrelevant, namely - 'Nirvana' (ibid.). Understandings of beauty are hugely diverse and there are several theories of aesthetics; Formalism, Voluntarism, Emotionalism, Intellectualism, Intuitionism, Organicism, etc. (Weitz 1956). In fact, Weitz (1956; 27) argues that we have not yet arrived at the ideal theory of aesthetics and that 'almost everyone interested in aesthetic matters is still deeply wedded to the hope that the correct theory...is forthcoming'.

Different cultural groups have different understandings of beauty and often follow very divergent social practices to fit in with the social aesthetic norms. For example, foot binding in China to achieve a small foot size and wearing multiple brass rings around ones neck to elongate the neck that is the practice in parts of Asia and Africa, however discriminatory these practices might be. Although body piercings, tattooing, body modifications, have existed for a very long time, they were earlier bound to a community's tradition. Contemporary understandings of beauty seem to be quite different. Although body piercings, body modifications and tattoos have become much more widespread today, it is necessarily practiced as a part of a community's tradition but related to a trend and sense of fashion. Today we seem to have moved far away from earlier classical positions as is evident from teenage fashion, music divas, hair styles, etc. Symmetry, mathematical calculation and balance seem to be replaced by uniqueness, self-determination and individuality. In this paper, we will not be delving into the contentious definitions of beauty itself but will focus on the politics of the contemporary promotion of 'beauty' and products that are supposed to enhance personal beauty.

## **Women's Movement Responses to 'Beauty'**

Beauty has been a subject of intellectual engagement amongst those in the visual arts and design and philosophers have contemplated about beauty for over thousand years. There is considerably less work on the concept of beauty amongst social scientists but the denial of rights to a woman over her own body, restrictions and compulsions on her regarding dress have been an ever growing concern within the women's movement, cutting across several disciplines.

According to Bell Hooks (2000; 31), 'challenging sexist thinking about the female body was one of the most powerful interventions made by the contemporary feminist movement' as before the women's movement 'our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men' (ibid; 31). In this same work, Hooks recalls the 1970ss, during which period, groups of radical women stripped their bodies of 'unhealthy and uncomfortable, restrictive clothing – bras, girdles, corsets, garter belts, etc.' (ibid; 31). She said that the 'clothing and revolution created by feminist interventions let females know that our flesh was worthy of love and adoration in its natural state; nothing had to be added unless a woman chose further adornment' (ibid; 32). The point that requires to be stressed here is that the women's movement, whether radical, liberal, Marxist or any other is not opposed to all forms of adornment of the women's body be it dress, make-up, jewellery but what is of prime import is women's self-determination, her choice and ruling out all accompanying discriminatory politics. Obsession with beauty and body image stems from indoctrination with patriarchal cultural practices that are negative and harmful to women and which, in turn impact on interpersonal relationships that only strengthen the roots of that indoctrination. It perpetuates a culture in which women are

objectified and seen as sex objects whose primary purpose is for male gaze and pleasure. So when we talk of self-determination and choice we have to be able to rule out the pressure that women may be under from patriarchal practices that have become internalized and so engrained that we fail to view it as patriarchal domination. This is further complicated by the politics of race, class, caste, colour, and the associated processes that Srinivas (1952; 30; 1956) termed as 'Sanskritization'.

In the Indian context, the north-south politics, the Aryan supremacy is perpetuated by the cosmetic industry in its promotion of skin-lighten products, a politics that holds fairness above dark complexion. Products advertised in the market use gender discriminatory traditional beliefs, practices and biases for its promotion. Almost all skin bleaching products use stereotypical images of young women being anxious about their skin colour and the product marketed as her rescue before her marriage, her saviour for a beauty pageant and even the reason for her success at a job interview! Even sportswomen and others engaged in outdoor activities are portrayed as being preoccupied with the colour of their skin. This is notwithstanding the fact that most Indians are dark or wheat complexioned. Sadly most of us in India, neglect to understand the economics of this advertising. If the majority of Indian women are dark complexioned, and if it is promoted that fair is desirable and dark is not, imagine the number of probable consumers, of skin-lighten products there will be across the Indian subcontinent. Not much is said however about the side-effects of these products.

According to Hooks (2000;33) "Challenging the industry of sexist-defined fashion opened up the space for females to examine for the first time in our lives the pathological, life-threatening

aspects of appearance obsession". The women's movement has been critical of beauty pageants and the fashion industry who they view as collaborators in creating in women, and young girls particularly, a warped body image, compulsive eating and compulsive starvation, etc., as part of the 'appearance obsession' created by them (Saad 1996; Hooks 2000; Jeffreys 2005; YWCA 2008). Despite the loud protests from the women's movement, the commerce of the industry has cleverly been able to even give in their advertisements the semblance of gender or political correctness while in reality being as gender discriminatory and pushy about the importance of appearance only to be able to market its products. 'Today's fashion magazines may carry an article about the dangers of anorexia while bombarding its readers with images of emaciated young bodies representing the height and beauty of desirability' (hooks 2000; 34). What has resulted from this are confused messages particularly to young girls and women who have never engaged with feminist politics.

Sheila Jeffreys (2005) in her book *Beauty and Misogyny* tries to explain why despite the 1970s feminist critique of pervasive beauty regimes, the brutality of beauty practices have only become more severe. While some feminists may argue that because women 'choose' to use the product or subject themselves to the physical appearance alteration techniques there is nothing offensive about them. Jeffreys (2005) however, is more critical and shows how this is connected to the larger politics of discrimination and objectification of women.

The Miss World 1996 Beauty Contest that was scheduled to be held in Bangalore, India faced strong protests from women's groups and NGO's in Karnataka and the movement for the first time in India gained a huge momentum. The protest which began

in 1995 gained support from the UN World Conference of Women held at Beijing in the same year, ie.1995. A resolution was passed at the World Conference condemning beauty pageants as they 'commodified' women. The protests saw several former beauty queens too, from Japan and Australia in particular who shared their experiences of being undermined, objectified and 'commodified' by the industry. According to Vimochana, a Bangalore based women's organisation:

'This homogenised and universalised culture also refuses the diverse notions of beauty in different cultures- for some fat is beautiful, in some thick lips are sensuous, in other dark is divine, while in some a big nose is nothing to be sneezed at, what Miss World does is to reduce and standardise all notions of beauty into one universal ideal – which is of course white, blonde, blue eyed and svelte. For it is this culture that has always and will continue to dominate- all others in relation to this are found wanting... And so let us not get carried away when once in a while the dusky Sushmita Sen's are placed on top of the world. It is naïve to presume that the world is more liberal and that globalization of cultures implies an end to racism. It just means that the fair and lovely world is seeking to entice the coloured consumers into the white but global market.' (SAAD 1996; 9)

An NGO called INSAF brought out a powerful poster in support of the Campaign against the Miss World Beauty Contest, depicting four emaciated Indian women in tattered sarees wearing sashes on which Miss Poverty, Miss Displaced, Miss Landless and Miss Homeless was inscribed. There was a fifth sash for Miss Girl Child which was on the ground with a note saying 'could not participate as she was murdered soon after birth'.

The protest against the Miss World Pageant 1996 gained support from Mahila Sangharsha Okkuta, Bangalore, a network of many women's groups which criticised the lowering of excise on cosmetics from 120% to 40% even as tariffs on basic commodities like electricity, water and fuel had shot up (SAAD 1996; 8). However, the Miss World event was shifted to Goa, where unfortunately the women's groups were not unanimous in their opinions about beauty contests and the event was held without much protest.

In India, while the women's movement has been critical about beauty pageants like we saw in 1996, there has not been a very loud or unified voice against the politics of beauty culture, the increasing number of beauty parlours or the suspect beauty products available in the market and the hazardous physical appearance alteration techniques promoted. It is indeed worrying when some women's studies cells have even toyed with the idea of training women as beauticians for self-empowering programmes.

### **Cultural Variations**

Beauty according to Goran Sorbom in *The Classical Concept of Mimesis* (2002;19) 'is not external and constant but culturally dependent'. We all have probably at some time or the other, heard the expression 'beauty lies in the eye of the beholder'. Yes, there are several aspects of beauty that vary from one culture to another. For example, some cultures, particularly contemporary western cultures consider dark skin as a mark of beauty, while other countries like India, for example is engulfed in a tradition where the fair skin is held as more beautiful. This view has been a source of tremendous discrimination of women particularly on the grounds of colour. Coupled with draconian traditional practices like the practice of dowry, the families of darker complexioned women have faced more often than not, a larger burden of bride price. Cultural

variations cannot only be seen in the beauty ranking of a women's complexion, other cultural variations too exist. A women's beauty might be measured in Africa according to the width of a woman's hips, large eyes and black long hair may be considered beautiful in India, in China it might be the delicateness of a woman's hands and feet, whatever be the notion of beauty, when examined more closely, one will find that these notions of what is beautiful and what is not has emerged from a patriarchal and gender discriminatory cultural base. Further, often the unattainable is most desired and that which is rare or unique is often rated higher. For example, when one has curly hair what is seen to be desirable is straight hair and vice versa.

There are a few scholars that debunk theories of cultural variation such as the 'philosopher of art, a web entrepreneur and a media activist', Denis Dutton. A Google search for more contemporary views on 'beauty' led me to a very provocative TED Talk video that featured Denis Dutton. In this lecture, Dutton agreed that the 'experience of beauty, with its emotional intensity and pleasure, belongs to our evolved human psychology' but disagreed with the view that the notion of beauty was something that was 'culturally conditioned'. He proposed a Darwinian or evolutionary theory of beauty and aesthetics. In his talk he illustrates how beauty and art appreciation has travelled across the globe and argues that beauty is not 'in the eye of the beholder'. Dutton assertively says;

No! It's deep in our minds, it's a gift handed down from the intelligent skills and rich emotional lives of our most ancient ancestors. Our powerful reaction to images, to the expression of emotion in art, to the beauty of music, to the night sky, will be with us and our descendants for as long as the human race exists. (Dutton TED Talk)

I was disturbed by the TED talk by Denis Dutton particularly by his lack of understanding of the realities in countries like India and the absence of a gender sensitive approach to aesthetics. What the speaker Denis Dutton did not mention was the power that the West and today the power of the western corporates in particular have on the third world through the media and advertisements. Though Denis Dutton's talk is with reference to beauty and aesthetics in art and art appreciation, for this discussion I will stretch the notion of beauty to include personal beauty and grooming. It may be a fact that women in India are using beauty products and wearing fashion of international brands but the dominance of capitalist cosmetic and fashion industries, marketing strategies in the Third World have no small role to play. I might agree with Denis Dutton in that today beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. Yes it is in the hand of the beautician and cosmetic surgeon.

Walk to the nearest corner store even in a village in India and you will find some item that constitutes 'make up' for women – some product that is intended to enhance a woman's appearance or hide aspects of their natural selves such as wrinkles, the size of one's nose, lips or eyes, the length of one's eyelashes, the colour of one's skin, complexion, hair, nails be it *kajal* (an eye darkening cosmetic), lipstick, nail polish, blush, eyeliner, etc. Media and advertising make it hard for the public to escape from the 'transformatory' role that make-up can play by contrasting the before and after make-up visuals. Many like Denis Dutton might argue that the use of make-up is age old and cross cultural but today one cannot deny the economics of the beauty industry. Can make-up be accessed by all?

### **The Politico-Economics and Health Consequences of Beauty**

The imposition of western notions of beauty and desirability is evident in world beauty pageants where beauty standards and

the selection criteria set for the pageants often differ from the culturally established standards of beauty in those participating countries. This no doubt has impacted all levels of selection of 'beauty queens', and by this strengthening native as well as global capitalist patriarchies. Minority women are forced to internalise dominant western standards of beauty. The beauty standards such as required height and figure for example, set for beauty pageants are often unattainable by women from the east.

The media further promotes images of the ideal beauty and advertise huge rewards for competitions based on appearance. The cosmetic, fashion and now fancy food industries have made many women consumers of their products, which has resulted in many young girls being insecure about their appearance when that desired figure or standard of beauty is unattainable. Some women have been sold on to expensive diet programmes and other women who have been left even more insecure, have given in to cosmetic surgery – anything to achieve that unrealistic and maybe even unattainable physical look.

The mushrooming of beauty parlours all over India, even in the most remote village and the widespread use of physical appearance alteration techniques by women in India not only urban women but rural women, particularly girls and young women as well, is indeed baffling. Is it the impact of cinema, magazines, television? Is it because women are more empowered that they can spend time and money on altering the way they look or is it rooted in some need to be seen different by men, is it rooted in vulnerability and poor self-image? I guess only a detailed study which might also need to delve into psychology can truly answer these confusing questions. The worrying thought however is that in India, a country where the majority are barely able to afford two meals a day, what are the consequences when appearances are a priority. Often this is also

at the cost of health. Let us take the example to Goa, a State that has reported a high per capita income (Census 2011), high literacy but yet an alarmingly high incidence of anaemia and a high rate of malnutrition among women (NFHS II and III). An even more confusing reality in the small state of Goa is that despite the high cost of living and exorbitant land prices that has made housing and food inaccessible, the daily struggle for survival does not seem to be striking visible as dress and general appearances continues to be a priority. The evidence here is the long list of social events and festivals celebrated in Goa, the number of garment stores and boutiques and of course the long queues at beauty parlours and hair-dressing salons of women and men waiting to subject themselves to some form of physical appearance alteration technique; from simple and cheap like threading, waxing or shaving off unwanted facial or body hair, to hazardous and expensive which might include subjecting the body to all sorts of chemicals, piercings and tattoos. Cosmetic surgical procedures and other medical interventions too are often advertised by the medical and dental fraternity in their claim to being able to alter one's physical appearance. Often these claims are advertised like it's a needed service that is being provided to the community without giving a thought to the impact this might have and the underlying politics behind this expectation of a universal concern for physical beauty. An online report of the YMCA on *Beauty at Any Cost: The Consequences of America's Beauty Obsession on Women and Girls* (2008) states that "Lookism", or the prejudice based on physical appearance and attractiveness, is an increasing equal-opportunity problem' and that 'weight based discrimination consistently affects every aspect of employment, from hiring to firing, promotions, pay allocation, career counselling and discipline' (page 5). In this document it is reported that the top five cosmetic surgical procedures that were performed on women in the United States of America in the year

2007 were: 1) breast augmentation, 2) lipoplasty, 3) eyelid surgery, 4) abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) and 5) breast reduction and that a total expenditure incurred on these procedures was \$5.33 Billion (ibid.;5). Needless to say that there are probable complications with any or all of these cosmetic surgical procedures, in their restructuring the face, body, skin or teeth. Sheila Jeffreys (2005) argues that western beauty practices should be included in the list of harmful traditional cultural practices as even common beauty practice damages the health of women, creates sexual difference and enforces female deference.

The 'slim is in' has become part of popular culture in India today and no small role in establishing this was and continues to be played by Indian cinema, magazines, television and the fashion industry. Not surprising then, that a large section of teenaged girls in India end up being dissatisfied with their appearance and have unhealthy weight control practices such as fasting, dieting, skipping meals, forced vomiting after meals, taking laxatives and even smoking cigarettes to kill their appetite, leaving them at the end of it all with a low self-esteem. The added danger in India when there is such a huge market for beauty products is the mushrooming of unlicensed manufacturers and untrained practitioners. The market is full of look-alike products with dubious ingredients at reduced prices. Further these cosmetics are not subjected to testing by Food and Drug Administration. Sadly there are hardly any studies and even less medical research done on the effect of cosmetics and physical appearance alteration techniques including cosmetic surgery on women in India.

### **Motherhood, Breastfeeding and Looks**

In the past motherhood was assumed to be desired by all women. In Goa, India however as revealed by the last two rounds of Census

(2001 and 2011), 20% of women in the age group 20 – 49 years in Goa are unmarried. Further as indicated in the Table 1 below, women in Goa are having fewer children. From anecdotal evidence, we see more and more women not only choosing to remain unmarried, but also choosing to stay childless even if married and many who simply do not aspire to go through the nine months of pregnancy, followed by child birth and the breastfeeding of infants and might even opt for adoption.

Table 1: Table indicating decreasing number of children born in Goa from 2001 - 2011

Census Year	Number of women with 1 or more children	Number of women with more than 2 children	% of women with more than 2 children (with respect to women with 1 or more children)	% of women with 1 or less children
2001	3,16,645	1,62,576	51%	49%
2011	3,64,495	1,45,783	40%	60%

Source: *Census of India 2011 and 2001*

The WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for an infant in the first six months. Chandoik et al (2015) in their study of the changes in exclusive breastfeeding practices in India from NFHS data (1992 – 2006), have revealed that less than 10% of the women in Goa practise exclusive breastfeeding and the percentage of the practice of breast feeding is lowest in Goa. This is astonishing, considering that the women in Goa are not only literate but also have a high level of education (Census 2011). The per capita income also in the state of Goa is very high. (ibid. 2011). Doctors have often lamented that in Goa, women do not want to breast feed their infants for any longer than the medically stipulated time frame.. These women are often portrayed in public programmes on breast-feeding

as the 'new liberated' or 'working' woman. But I wonder whether it is the sense of liberation or the fear of the consequences of physical changes, in appearance and attractiveness that causes the mothers to do so. Is it not the same patriarchal cultural indoctrination at play? How many of these decisions regarding motherhood and breast feeding are independent, self-empowering decisions by women and how much does the social pressure and fear of losing the ability of being attractive to men play in these decisions?

### **Some Insights from the Voices of Women in Goa, India**

In the introduction to this paper, a reference was made to the student assignment in a class on Gender and Culture which required students to speak to people from three different generations to understand what the concept of beauty was in the past to be able to compare it with the present. The following insights have been drawn from this classroom exercise:

In the past the concept of beauty distinctly varied amongst the different religious communities. For example it was important for Hindu women to keep their hair long, oiled, braided and adorned with flowers. Long and thick plaited or braided hair was considered more beautiful amongst the Hindu community. The Catholic community wore their hair, styled in various lengths. Short hair was also considered beautiful. It must be mentioned, that Goa was a Portuguese colony up to 1961, and conversion to Christianity was a major agenda of the colonizers. Conversion to Christianity came with benefits as well as strict bans or restrictions (De Souza 2000). The bans included the prohibition of Christian women from braiding their hair, wearing flowers in their hair, the *bindi* or the spot of vermillion on their forehead, etc., These practices were considered by the colonizers as the perpetuation of 'pagan' practices that would hamper their missionary agenda (ibid: 457). Today,

there is an element of syncretism among the religious communities regarding the concept of beauty. The essentialist conceptions of the past have been broken. Today it is harder to identify one's religious community by the length or the way their hair is worn. It is not unusual for people from similar cultural backgrounds to follow very different practices.

In the past, natural beauty was valued more than beauty achieved with the use of cosmetics. Many women from the older generations talked of stereotyping women who wore make up as being 'loose-moraled'. The present generation are more conscious of the political incorrectness of this branding of women's character and stereotyping based on the persons physical appearance. The use of cosmetics is more widely used by urban youth. Television and other media have borne a strong influence on the youth and fashion.

Beauty salons and parlours did not exist in Goa forty years ago. The village barber (always a male) would travel with his wooden box and mirror on a cycle going from house to house to provide the personal grooming that was required. He was self-trained to do a few standard hair styles, besides giving his customers a shave if required. The whole household would be groomed on the arrival of the village barber. Today there are numerous salons and 'beauty parlours' while the village barber continues to practice his craft in a few remote villages in Goa.

Being plump was considered beautiful in the past while today having a trim figure is more desired. There have been many changes in the conceptualization of beauty over three generations in Goa. One aspect however which has not yet changed has been the favouring of a fair skin over a dark complexion. While there are many skin whitening or lightening products in the market today, there have been many home made products that have been used in

the past to make a woman fairer, such as lime, gram-flour, fuller's earth etc. Earlier however it was only important for a woman to be 'Fair and Lovely' but today there are products in the market in India for men to be 'Fair and Handsome'! –They are names of a popular brand of skin whitening cream.

Students of the Women's Studies class on Gender and Culture concluded that there were variations in the understanding of beauty not only from one generation to the next but also within the same generation and within the same community too. This finding led students to view beauty contests as meaningless and the politics of the judging criteria became even more evident. Students discovered that the earlier generations too used products which they believed would enhance their beauty, except that these were home remedies using natural and organic material rather than branded products purchased from the market. Students also concluded that although there was a fair amount of stereotyping of women based on appearances in the past, this has undergone some change though stereotyping still exists in Indian society. Most students felt that holding a rigid understanding of beauty can be very detrimental to women and might have an impact on women's health, social status and self-perception.

### **The Ugly Side of Beauty**

So what is the price of beauty particularly for women in the Third World? How much money do women in the Third World spend on beauty techniques and products and what is the impact it then has on the health of these users? We have shied away from treating this as a serious researchable academic topic. We have for too long looked at beauty practices as a matter of personal choice and even symbolic of women's self-determination and liberation for too long. Is it not true that cosmetic companies look at India and other

Third World countries with large populations as markets for their products regardless of the impact these products would have on the health and lives of the users? Why are we blinded to the patriarchal roots of beauty culture, that have only furthered the gender divide in society? Till we document all the anecdotal evidence of cosmetic surgery failures, side effects and negative reactions to cosmetic use, the struggles faced by women in altering their physical appearance, the psychological impact of such practices that scar one's self-image, aids to beauty will never be seen as a serious health concern. Is it not time that all cosmetics come under the scanner of the government health departments or those departments that oversee food and drug administration? Is it not time that we regard beauty culture as damaging to women's health? One does not need training in feminist politics to realise that this is a serious concern.

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