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# Socially disgracing women

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When I was working with a European company that made different types of home cleaning products like sponge, cleaning duster, mop with stick and the like, I remember an accusation the brand got of being disrespectful to women. With the client we had devised a special mopping innovation where the handle's manoeuvrability enabled easy cleaning and washing of the mop to reduce effort while increasing the comfort of home cleaning. It provided great consumer advantage. The advertising storyline used the tango dance. The stick represented the man, the mop the woman. The product achieved huge sales success within six months. Then one day, the client got a notice from the court that women were being abused as servants thereby degrading them. The ad had to be stopped within 48 hours. Even the product concept was questioned because in the tango dance, the woman, the mop here, does all the dirty work as a slave through complex dance steps, while the man, the stick, largely only provides the balance. However, the client could save the concept and the product while kicking out the advertisement. The big lesson we learnt was to be super-sensitive to not tamper on people's sentiments and women's dignity. The attack of women being insulted was not from activists, but the consumer forum. Just imagine the superior

power consumers have in developed countries that the industry cannot do things any way they want.

Zapping the TV remote yesterday, I stumbled upon an edible oil advertisement on a regional Indian channel. The prospective bridegroom's family was choosing the bride based on her cooking ability. Doubtful, scrutinising faces were shown to light up brightly when one by one they tasted her cooking. Great cooking quality was only happening due to the oil brand. The prospective bride's family was shown surreptitiously paying thankful reverence to the oil brand for achieving this success. Isn't it shocking how we socially ill treat our women to sell branded products? That the girl's performance is judged as though a cook is being hired is bad enough. Add to this our unjust social system that debases the honour of women by accepting such a bride selection-elimination process. To top it all, here was this TV commercial blatantly demeaning the woman's cooking competence while showing a heroic brand overcoming her shortcoming to make her a winner. The ad's tone and manner may purport to be fun, but isn't it a below-the-belt punch on women's dignity? How can arranged marriages use women as merchandise to be selected on abilities that will provide comfort to the family choosing her?

I remember when I was about 10 years old, I was among my maternal uncle's family who had gone to select a bride for him. The girl was very beautiful. I was the only child there, she was very attentive to me in another room. I quickly became fond of her and felt happy she would

be my aunt. She was called to walk around and serve us all delicious food and sweets. I was looking forward to the marriage date, but after sometime I heard the marriage was not to be. I was very disappointed, but could not understand why. Much later, after I'd gone to France and was on a holiday trip home, while having some nostalgic conversation, I was shocked to discover the reason why she was rejected. When they had asked her to walk, it seems she took big bold steps which displayed her character to be very independent-minded. So it was assumed that she would not be a subservient daughter-in-law. You can't imagine how ashamed I felt that my family could inflict such insult on women.

People in our country lack the courage to challenge scientific logic. They either fight, not debate or keep quiet. I squirm to see fairness cream advertising in India that disgracefully slurs women's honour. Being the world's most heterogeneous society with strong geographical change across the south, east, north and west, every Indian's morphology and pigmentation obviously cannot be the same. Yet culturally, in every region, fairness is coveted. The ads emphasise how fair skin increases a girl's confidence, lands her plum jobs and raises her marital fortunes. Skin lightening cosmetics have, year after year, played on the insecurities of people about their skin colour and created a R3,000-crore industry by 2014. As film stars are used to advertise these products, the film industry is largely responsible for propagating such social non-acceptance fears because of dark skin. How many heroines have you seen who are dark? Does it mean the role model for women in our country is fair heroines?

The earliest commercial fairness cream in India was made in 1919. In 1975, came an MNC whitening product that's ruled monopolistically for several years to become a R1,000-crore brand. It seems 30% of fairness creams are secretly used by men, so from 2005, a special whitening product for self-doubting men promising them better prospects with lighter

skin was successfully launched. Today many international cosmetics companies have joined the fray to entice women to become white. Millions of our people are below the poverty line or don't have the money to take care of their skin through nutrition. Instead, they fall victim to such products for their skin troubles. Don't whiteness promising companies realise how insulting their proposition is to women's natural beauty? The Centre for Science and Environment says health is at stake, too, because about 44% of fairness creams marketed in India contain high toxic mercury levels that can eventually affect the nervous, digestive and immune systems, lungs, kidneys, skin and eyes. By quoting this NGO, I am, of course, not raising any issue of creams protecting skin from the sun's ultra-violet rays. Frankly, we don't require activists to rebel against such disgraceful money-making activities. The consumer forum can stop such products that feed on people's unsure sense of worth and horribly humiliate women. There are so many different angles that women in our country have to face disgraceful insults from. It's a shame.

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