

# Manufacturing Beauty: Going under the scalpel and the bleach creams in Mumbai

An article by: Natasha Fatah

Sitting in a midtown cafe in Mumbai, there are about a dozen gorgeous women all around me.

Some are clearly young, aspiring models and actresses hoping to get noticed by the right casting director. This is the heart of Bollywood after all.

Others are older, with perhaps a few too many collagen injections. They, too, are beautiful and they have money to burn.

This is part of the life and look of the new middle class in South Asia's cultural capital, where beauty is big business.

Over the past decade, with the rise of real wealth among India's middle and upper classes, there has come a boom in the demand for cosmetic surgeries and procedures.

And the most popular procedures might surprise you: Overwhelmingly, Indian women are getting "work" done that makes them look more like white women.

Skin bleaching, nose jobs and liposuction are by far the most popular requests.

## **'Everyone is getting it done'**

At Dr. Purnima Mahtre's Gorgeous Skin Care Clinic in Mumbai, the waiting room is packed with women willing to pay enormous amounts to look like their favourite Hollywood actresses.

"Oh this industry is growing at a very fast pace, not only in Mumbai but all over India," says Mahtre, who practised for two years in Canada, before returning to India.

She is now one of the most successful cosmetic surgeons in the city and a regular feature in the society columns.

Dr. Mahtre assures me she is not exaggerating when she says she expects a 50 per cent increase in business, which is a pretty big jump from the already frantic pace of seeing about 90 clients a day at her three clinics.

In fact, she is hoping to open 22 more clinics all across India by the end of next year.

"Everybody is getting it done," says Susie, a 27-year-old marketing director who wants liposuction.

'Susie' doesn't want her identity revealed so she gives me a Western name to match the Western look she would like to have.

She says she's 25 to 30 pounds over weight and, according to her, being plump isn't acceptable anymore in today's India.

Neither is being dark skinned or having a broad, hooked nose, features that are traditionally associated with being from the subcontinent.

India's mainstream media is telling women, with varying degrees of subtlety, that the more white you look, the better, says Susie and thousands like her.

### **Bleach cream**

That's why Fair And Lovely skin bleach cream is the biggest selling beauty product in the country, with an ad campaign that says "Guaranteed fairness or your money back."

This emphasis on fairness, however, "is having a bad impact on society as a whole," says Mariam Davley, an activist for women's rights.

In 2006, she sued Fair And Lovely when their commercials had become particularly negative about dark-skinned women.

She won her case and now Fair And Lovely only focuses on the so-called positive side of being fair.

Davley argues that this widespread penchant for lighter skin and model-like bodies only encourages people to look on women as objects.

And there is some indication that Bollywood is starting to take notice, even if only just a little.

One of the more popular TV series in India these past three years has been *Saloni Ka Safar* (Saloni's Journey), which tells the story of a confident, dark-skinned woman making her way in the world.

It is a big step from the day when actresses such as Nandita Das, one of the stars of the Deepa Mehta films *Fire* and *Earth*, were passed over because of their complexion.

Even Vogue India recently put a dark-skinned model on its cover, observes fashion editor Bandana Tewari, who was much in favour of the move.

This, she says, after years in which "brown models were routinely Photoshopped white."

## **Fly-ins**

A big part of the current boom in India's cosmetic-surgery industry is coming from abroad, which helps create extra capacity for those who live here year round.

Women of Indian descent living in Europe and North America are booking their surgery dates in Mumbai.

Often referred to as NRIs (for non-residential Indians), these women come flooding in during the summer months as well as for their winter holidays in December and January.

For them, they pay a fraction of the cost they would for the same procedures in the West.

Plus, they get treated like royalty with personal assistants to tend to their needs. And they get to heal in a place where none of their friends back home can see the scarring and bruising.

Indians, of course, aren't alone in wanting to look better and younger.

People all over the world are seeking out these same procedures.

But, some say this desire to look European is deeply rooted in India's history and psyche because of the centuries of British colonialism and subjugation.

"We ape the West," says Susie. "We were ruled for 200 years by white people so it shows that a certain amount of power came with being white. White is beautiful. And beauty is power, right?"