

Unfair theme for world health day 2021 smells of ethnocentrism

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Surprisingly, the theme for 2021 World Health Day has been chosen as "Building a fairer, healthier world"⁽¹⁾. The logic put forward for selecting this theme is global inequality, identified as unfair. Quoting COVID-19 example, the WHO encourages all leaders to monitor health inequities, ensuring that everyone has living conditions conducive to reasonable access to quality health services when and where needed.

I strongly object to the wording of this theme. Linguistically, the term fair has many meanings. Some people use the term to indicate something being impartial, just, or unbiased. For others, it implies freedom from favor to anyone. A right and proper decision may be labeled as fair. FAIR enough!

However, simultaneously, the term fair also implies the 'white' color of the skin! All this had happened when the Hindustan Unilever Ltd. had renamed its best-selling 'Fair & Lovely' products as 'Glow & Lovely.' This was done after objections were raised by people. It decided to remove the nomenclature that propagated racial stereotypes.

There is a need to investigate how the word fair was used to indicate the color of our skin. Did this use precede the use of the word to indicate justice / ethical aspect? Since when are we using the term dark comedy, grey shade characters in films? Similarly, we need to discuss why we use the term gay to indicate homosexuals? The word gay has other meanings also. Such use indicates that heterosexual people are unhappy! There is also a need to investigate the use of expletives like dog, donkey or even saalaaa (wife's brother), sasuraa (father in law). All such words indicate the prevailing power structure in our society.

Here, the moot question is why to use a word that may imply a hidden agenda! Was it deliberately apartheid-

tinted? Was there some Aryan race conspiracy behind this?

I believe that the English language is rich enough to supply an alternative term to the word fairer. WHO needs to understand that we browns get hurt and feel insulted whenever the focus is on words like fairer!

A lighter complexion skin is favored among women since antiquity. Before the Industrial Revolution, inhabitants of the continent of Europe of the middle ages had a bias towards pale skin. It indicated a feature of high social class. Working outdoors with exposure to the sun gave a darker complexion to the poor people. Light skin in the upper-class people was a result of staying indoors. Eventually, a fair complexion skin came to be indicative of the gentry.

It seems that the concepts of ethnocentrism & Sanskritization can explain the use of words like fairer. As per the ethnocentric mindset, our inherent dislike of people unlike us (different color/shape) is because one's norms, values, ideology, customs, and traditions are considered superior to other cultures.

A belief of the colonial era about skin complexion has perpetuated to a great extent in the modern times of globalization. As per this concept, the underprivileged section of society, who mostly had dark skin, were considered subservient to Europeans, the fair-complexioned ruling class. This was in tandem with the racism which endorsed the status quo of the superiority of the White invaders.

Sanskritization concept implies that people tend to copy the higher-ups in the social ladder. As dominant castes have almost always ruled our society, it has tended to overlook/ignore lower caste people. Quite commonly, the people of low caste imitated other castes' rituals in


their daily life routine. This explains the efforts of Asians/ Africans to WHITEN their skin through various means.

So, WHO needs to rethink the wording of its theme. Also, in the future, it needs to be sensitive and careful about the choice of words. After all, our language and vocabulary are about communication. The primary purpose of any communication is that the message from the sender is well received and understood by the recipient. If the language used by the sender is likely to hurt the feelings of the receiver, there is a definite need to rephrase our message. It is as simple as that!

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