

The South Asian Perspective(s): Desi & disabled*

Podcast Dissertation by: Dr. Grishma Shah

Skin Tone Part 2 (Men) Transcript • 38:15 mins

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

cheese, chuckles, desi, worth, thought, beauty, family, homo erectus, hem, people, average, growing, disability, haw, beautiful, tall, high school, worthy, understand, talk

SPEAKERS

Danny, Grishma, Nargis, Dev, Jeetendra, Rajnikant

(Upbeat, cheerful, violin music begins)

Grishma 00:04

I was considering interviewing only Desi women for this dissertation, since my research question focused a lot on perception of beauty and worth and disability. But a part of me really wanted to understand how these things affected men, even if it affected them just a little bit. Because honestly, I didn't hear men talk about it. They wouldn't open up about things like this. Even though growing up, I had more guy friends than girl friends. Boy, am I glad that I did interview Desi men. And man did they like to talk! The men had more to say than the women. The men storyteller interviews went over two hours, and some were even close to two and a half hours long. While the women storytellers were closer to the one and a half hour or one hour and 45 minute mark. Pretty interesting, right? So let's start part two with our friend Jeetendra and Gandyo. Do you remember Gandyo? That guy that Jeetendra spoke about from a previous episode? Gandyo had that intellectual disability. And because of his disability, everyone in his community referred to him as stupid (*Gandyo*), wherever he went. I asked Jeetendra how he thought being called stupid continuously affected Gandyo's understanding of beauty and worth.

(Upbeat music fades out)

Jeetendra 01:41

Oh, I think they probably thought they're worthless. Honestly. No one takes him seriously. I'm sure the parents really cared and at the same time, like, I feel like that parents would have been embarrassed are embarrassed of him or her, in this case, him. And for Indian families, especially Desis, perception is everything. And once that perception has changed, especially what they think other people are thinking of them, then they feel like they're not doing well, their family's not doing well. And to have someone with a mental disability, especially in the family, they're gonna think like, *we know what do people think about us, because we had this "gandyo" as a son, and now everyone thinks that like our family is, everyone's like that in our family just because one person is like that.* So I think perception is huge. And it's almost like a standard of worth, in India for a family. So I can't imagine what this person went through, growing up having no one taken very seriously. Top of that, him thinking his family thinks he's an embarrassment. It saddens me really to think about all the experiences that he had to go through.

Grishma 03:06

Do you think that that person could do anything to improve their self-worth or their standing?

Jeetendra 03:14

That's a great question. I wanna say Yes, but I don't know what they can do from their own standpoint to change that. Talking is one thing, but in Desi culture, we don't really talk, that's not something that we do as a family...My dad's side of the family and my mom's side of the family, we don't sit there and talk about your feelings. I think that's the standard for most Desi people. And I think if we can start working at, talking is okay. Talking about feelings is okay. It doesn't show a sign of weakness, it's actually the opposite, has opposite effect. I think a lot of the stigmas that Desi people and Desi standards (have) can really be alleviated, especially when it comes to disability. And, that's just the way that our parents, first generation grew up. And same way, they didn't really talk about their feelings. So it's hard for them to say, hey, son, daughter, tell me about your feeling(s) right. They don't know. They don't have that experience. But we second generation or third generation has the understanding of how much talking about feelings and talking about certain stigmas, talking about disability, can really have an impact, a positive impact on, on the person or on whatever you're feeling. And what it can really do. I think that is going to have a huge, huge role as our second generation, third generation starts to manifest and we're the generation that understands where parents are coming from and all different stigmas that that came with them, but at the same time we can work at really helping to alleviate a lot of those, those things. Because

now we understand from both sides. We understand from a parent's perspective. But now we also understand from our perspective, which is, I think, significantly different.

Grishma 05:11

I bet you're curious to find out how Jeetendra felt about how he looked.

Jeetendra 05:18

So, on a scale of one to ten, I would fall under, and hold on, just bear with me okay? I would start off as a ten, because a lot of these guys are not tall. And I think that's one thing, a lot of Desi, Desi people, especially I know, girls, it's like, *I want a tall guy*, right. But from the subcontinent that we are from, if we look at the data, an average, I think height of a guy's like, 5'7 or something. So we're, we come from a country that has short guys, but for me to be 6'2, I'm already the outlier right. So from that perspective, I would say ten. But then I go back to Well, now a lot of these Desis have instilled in them, that beauty is light skinned. So now I get pushed back a little bit, because I am darker than most Desi guys. So now it's like, I go from being tall as ten, to now being dark as being one. So now I say, okay, what's the average I kind of fall right in between. Probably be around like five.

Grishma 06:26

So how has that affected how you see yourself? Understanding that from one standard of beauty, you're a ten, which means, you know, the greatest thing you could be. And then you said that, then you fall into a one, which is the least thing.

Jeetendra 06:43

Growing up in the summer, we're predominantly white, or Caucasian, I don't think that really mattered as much. So even though growing up outside of specifically, like high school, you know, when you go to like *Garbas* you know, during Navratri time. Truthfully, the only reason I went was because one, there's a lot of girls, Desi girls, and two, I love to *Garba*. So, I still remember. I think when, I went for a *Garba* when I was probably sometime in high school, sophomore or something. We went and I got there. and I was like *Oh my god there are so many girls, this is awesome*. All my friends are super excited, right. But my friends, honestly, truthfully don't know how to dance, do *Garba*. I love doing *Garba*. And I just, you know, went in and started doing *Garba* I was like, *this is great* and I'm sweating. And I still remember, you know, I was like, main reason I came here with my friends was actually to try to talk to girls and see if we can get some numbers or something. But I ended up going there to actually do *Garba*. And I

realized that it's not just about physical looks. I think what happened was, a girl saw me do Garba. And she's like *Hey , you're very good at this*. I was like, *Oh, thanks. I didn't realize you were paying attention to me, like doing Garba*. She was like, *Yeah, no, this is I picked it up really well*, we started talking. And she gave me her AIM screen name. I remember back in the day it was AIM. It wasn't like, here's my number. And we chatted on AIM and stuff. But I think it came to a realization like, in hindsight now that I didn't like, you know, go in thinking, Oh look at me, I'm tall but also dark. I just went in thinking Oh see how many girls are here, but then I got into like, doing the Garba. So it was me realizing that it's not just physical, it's like what you're interested in, you know, what you enjoy doing and I think if you enjoy doing something that I wasn't necessarily passionate about, I just, I enjoyed enjoyed it, that other people might see that, as really attractive. Maybe that girl that saw me didn't see me for, *Hey look he's tall, ehh I don't like him cause he's a little bit darker*. She saw me because, *Oh, wow, he's a good dancer, or he can really Garba* (chuckles) *and not a lot of Desi guys can do that*. So, it really taught me that, you know, it's not just about physical looks. It's about everything else you have that makes up you: your personality, are you personable? Are you easy to talk to? There are a lot of other features outside of physicality, cause I was always a little bit shy, actually, believe it or not. Like, I didn't really speak a lot. You know, the whole dark thing didn't really hit me until I got to high school. And then I didn't realize I was tall either...so yeah, I would say probably sometime in sophomore year where I really understood (chuckles) attractiveness of self I guess. I don't know if there's a psychological term for that, but that's when I really realized Okay, you know, I have other things I can offer, I love do this or that and I have other things that make me more attractive than just physical.

Grishma 10:09

Jeetendra mentioned in part one, that he has seen many arranged marriages, where the woman is beautiful and the man is less attractive. He argued that he went back to education and providing for the family. Rekha too mentioned that she thought physical disabilities were more of a stigma for women, while mental disabilities were more of a stigma against men. Even men like "Gandyo " face stigma because it was more about the breadwinning capabilities for the men. It reminded me of the TED Talk, Denis Dutton did in 2010, called a Darwinian theory of beauty (Dutton, 2010). What I took away from his talk was that, in the same way as a peacock has his wings to arouse the peahen for sexual selection, the forefathers of Homo sapiens, who were the Homo erectus, made art to their potential partners. According to Dutton, this art was considered desirable, because it was a sort of fitness signal for potential Homo erectus partners. This art, which was a hand-axes, symbolized that this Homo erectus male had fine motor skills, was smart, had access to scarce materials, among other things. In other words, this Homo erectus male that created beautiful art had these desirable qualities that few

Homo erectus females could resist, which made them worthy of procreation. Especially since language didn't exist in that time period. Language came 50 to 100,000 years later. And what happened to the Homo erectus males that weren't so good with their hands? Well, they had less chances of procreating because as generations continued, those Homo erectus males that had these desirable qualities gained higher status in their community, and were the ones that got to survive and have families. I'd argue that we're sticking to that *old story* of worth, for men and women like our ancestors, the Homo erectus. Men being desirable for their intellectual qualities, and women being desirable for their physical qualities.

I want to introduce you to our newest storyteller, and our 10th storyteller. Rajnikant is in his thirties. And he was born into a Hindu family in India, and came to the United States as a computer engineer. When I asked him how he felt about the way he looked, what he said really surprised me.

Rajnikant 13:11

Like, I'm 5'3, I'm not a general standard of good looking men around the world, you know, six feet. I'm really bony (chuckles). So I don't even look like really masculine as well. And it's never attracted me as well. So it's not something that I'm trying to be...So here's the thing, I can be happy alone, just by myself. For like, almost a year, if you give me like, you know, if you put me in a place and I have my fun things to play with, like, you know, computer software, robotics and stuff, and I can go out when I want just for hiking, even if I'm alone I can be by myself, I don't, I don't care. So, learning to be by myself, with myself was the biggest revolution which I felt slowly, slowly unfold in front of me. I don't consider myself like, physically attractive from the exterior. But I think I'm a beautiful person from the inside.

Grishma 14:17

You say that you recognize you're not a good looking person, but you know that you're beautiful. How are you able to come to terms with both of them at the same time? Did something happen to you, where one day you're just like, *No, I am beautiful*. Did someone teach you that?

Rajnikant 14:44

So it took me a while to actually understand that I'm not worthless, in school. You know, because it's not like I was bullied or something. It wasn't like, you know, I was ignored. But it was just that I was, I just didn't stand out. So I just thought of myself as being more in the average category, in every sense. So I never thought (of) myself of being

beautiful, you know, special. I just always thought I was just one of the human beings on Earth. And slowly, slowly that started changing when I actually started learning computers. I got very close to computers because I was able to understand how computers work and that made me stand out. Even though I wasn't appreciated, I wouldn't say appreciated, I wouldn't, I wasn't standing out in front of like, you know, other people. But I still knew that I am able to do something with myself, you know, I was able to learn by learn it by myself. I'm able to do programs for myself without any teachers around, just, you know, understanding how this thing works. So I taught myself. And slowly, slowly, I, I started understanding, I'm not like an average, I'm not just average smart, like I can, I can, I can actually also be smart and understand things. And so that's what it was, I think. I wasn't given too much of motivation when I was in school. You know, no one motivated me, *Oh, you can do it, you are the best*. Nothing. So I just thought of myself as average. And then slowly, slowly, when I started understanding how I can make my own decisions, change my life, learn things by myself, I was able to fall in love with myself as a person.

Grishma 16:37

So it sounds like when you found out your strengths, you found your worth?

Rajnikant 16:43

To give you an example of the way, how it can be, when I was learning computers by myself, I was 12-13 years of age, and I never got like the best grades in my school at all. You know, I was always average, B, B+ kind of a student, 70-75 you know, around that mark in India. And then when I started doing computers, we had this computer course in my school in ninth grade, and then I actually topped my class. And I was like, *Okay, I can do it. It's not like I'm worthless*, you know. It took me a while to actually understand that but, it wasn't like I was doing it for that. It was a surprise, it was shock to me as well actually. And that has never happened in my life before that. So that's what I would say...you know, I never got good grades. I was not great at sports. I wasn't a good speaker in my school at that time. I wasn't somebody who can actually charm anybody (chuckles) just by speaking... The thing is, like you know, I did not think myself of being a very special person. For me, you know, if you are like, outstandingly tall, you're not average, because you know, you can, people can point out saying, *Oh, you know, this guy's really tall guy*. I had like couple of friends who are like, my height, so I wasn't like even standing out in my height...but...in my high school the girls didn't look at me. They didn't even like, think of me as somebody. You know, that's what I would say, you know, that's one example of it. The other example, my teachers never called me out saying, you know, *he will answer my question*, you know, *because he knows it, I know that* kind of thing, because they never expected from me. Same with my parents, they never thought

I would be going places. Now that I have been doing what I've been doing, like programming, and computers and all, people in India, here, they have a good view of me, like I'm in good consideration of theirs. Big part of Desi culture as in India, the families and extended families and cousins and all, they have been really happy with what I've been doing. Like, you know, they are proud of me. You know, *Oh he's an engineer, he's a computer engineer. He does software.* I think that is a big thing that they get proud of.

Grishma 17:01

Do you think that if you were not doing software engineering, they would think of you as worthy?

Rajnikant 19:27

I think everybody has their own idea... but... if it's another kind of engineering... maybe I would be the same standing. If I'm like a medical doctor then maybe it's higher than what I am. But if I'm not just an engineer, but let's say if I'm going for, say, social sciences, or let's say some other, I don't know maybe, cause so I've heard a couple of my relatives talk to their kids as, like you know, *you should be doing engineering, look at him.* You know they compare a lot. So like, for example, my brother, you know, he didn't want to get into engineering. So his worth in the Desi culture is not that much, as much as I am, I think. I mean, of course, they like him, they respect him for what or who he is. But when there are times to give examples. He is not the example that people give.

Grishma 20:27

So listener, It's question time. Do you think your relatives would tell their kids to be more like you, or less like you? While you ponder on that, I want to tell you a story about cheese. One of the best books that I've read is called *Who Moved My Cheese* (Wikimedia, 2021). This book is applicable for fourth graders, scholars, and everyone in between. When I read this book, he reminded me about the lens of change (Ganz, 2020), that we talked about, in part one. The main characters of the story of *Who Moved My Cheese* were two "little people" called Hem and Haw and two mice, Sniff and Scurry. The cheese in this story was actual cheese, but it symbolized precious things that make people enter the rat race. It could be money, worth, a mansion, (chuckles) things like that. Inside this maze, the four characters would roam around to find their cheese. And one day, they found a lot of cheese in station C. It became their go-to- station, but then the cheese was no longer there. So sniff and scurry, put on their running shoes, and we're ready to explore more areas of the maze to find more cheese. They expected it because they saw the cheese slowly decrease in size. But Hem and Haw didn't follow in

their furry friends footsteps. They thought the cheese would return the next day, exactly where it was. Only it didn't. Time went by, but they stayed put. And in the meantime, Sniff and Scurry continue to explore unknown areas of the maze and found bigger bundles of cheese, even different kinds of cheese. Haw ends up looking nearby, finding small crumbs of cheese, which he brings back to Hem. But Hem didn't want this new cheese, Hem wanted the old tasting cheese. The unknown scared Haw and Hem, but it didn't stop Haw. Instead, he wrote on the cheeseless wall. "*What would you do if you weren't afraid?*" Eventually, Haw ends up where Sniff and Scurry are and wonders if his friend Hem will ever join him. If we look back to the lens of change, I see Sniff and Scurry as the mice that rejected *continuity*. They rejected the *old story* of cheese being in station C. And that old story no longer worked. While Hem was *rejecting change*. He wanted his old cheese, not crumbs of new cheese. And he wanted his old cheese to be in station C. Haw I'd argue, went through all the motions of change. He too rejected change and felt that the cheese would come back in station C. But after recognizing that it wasn't going to, he tried to go to nearby stations to find cheese. No matter what he found, he made his way back to station C. So I'd argue that he tried *accommodating* and even *adapting*, but to no avail. He realized that he needed to *reject the old story* of station C being home and leave Hem because Haw couldn't convince Hem to go with him. But when Haw did leave Station C he learned many lessons along the way. Like being more prepared for change because cheese keeps moving, cheese can go bad, quantity of cheese can decrease over time. And cheese doesn't have to taste just one way to be delicious.

Grishma 24:42

Now it's time to hear from Dev Anand.

Dev 24:47

I'd say that there have been multiple points in time where I've probably realized worth, not just worth of me but worth everything that is around me. Worth of experience, that's the most amazing thing, the fact that we are able to sit here or stand here and experience, what we do. I tend to think of ourselves as just an experience vessel, that is our worth, we are just a vessel of experience. So, so I had sort of challenges growing up and there were a couple of points in time where something amazing happened. It didn't happen overnight, but something amazing happened. And that just kind of showed me the beauty of worth and experience. One of those moments was, was, I actually, as a child, for many years, I had a speech impediment. In my younger years, I couldn't finish a sentence, I was, I used to stutter extremely badly. And I went to speech therapy classes, and all sorts. None of that really helped. And so that continued, and, obviously, I was in school, so kids would notice. And it's a very, very easy thing to take and create a

joke out of, for the satisfaction of one's ego. So there were instances when that happened. So created suffering and created like a bubble of suffering. And that suffering grew and grew and grew. Until eventually, I realized that, that suffering is just suffering. It's self made, I let it affect me too much. And so kept playing and playing and playing in my mind, until I realized that it's just playing. I mean, it's just a thought, a thought can't really hurt you. And a thought is just an experience. And so probably when I realized that, that point in time, kind of let go of the, the importance of trying to correct myself trying to speak. And then I believe that that was a very large factor, to actually being able to finish a sentence. And then to speak another sentence. So, so, once I dropped it and just kind of lost its importance, lost the importance of being able to finish a sentence, I was eventually able to finish a sentence. And then add on another sentence. Another sentence. And that happened after speech therapy classes. It just happened a couple years, into my teens, probably. So at that point in time, there was a, there was a very nice (chuckles) building of worth, in my mind.

One of the most amazing lessons that I learned of self-worth is it's, you might want something, but it's not the end of the world if you don't get it. Just drop the expectation. That's probably one of the greatest lessons that kind of taught me over time. And, and, clearly over the years that, that didn't stick with me, because security and insecurity is seasonal also, you know. In my later teens and early 20s, when I was thriving for a or when I was like gunning for a profession, obviously, I lost that. Importance, all of a sudden, became important. I had to have things that were important, I had to have expectations. And that lasted for about a decade, time to time. And then it's probably only in the last couple years, in the last few years, where I've been on a spiral where everything becomes less important or not important. Yeah, there, there have been a couple of triggers there. Some people who I've observed or, you know, books that I might have read, but yeah, it's, it's amazing, like, like as a child, I went through this great self-worth moment. And then I lost it for a couple of decades, and now it's coming back...We all follow different paths of experience.

Beauty, it's taught me that there are a lot of colors (chuckles). And there are a lot of flavors that are beautiful. So it's expanded my horizons of beauty. Within Desi there are so many languages that all seem to work together within this one country.

There are so many different types of dishes, everyone appreciates, as part of the Desi culture, flavors, vegetables, fruits, and it is an extremely diverse culture to have grown up around. And so your horizons of beauty are greatly expanded. There are thousands of Gods. And so every God becomes beautiful. And so beyond that, it's very easy to stretch it, such that everything is God (chuckles) So, yeah, it's definitely shaped my perspective of beauty, later on. So worth I'd say comes back to this point of value. So, when you see everything as beautiful, you see everything as worth. So I think the two work in tandem.

So because you're exposed to so much diversity, the worth of that diversity grows. So everything is worthy. Simply put.

Grishma 31:03

Dev's example of beauty being in different cuisines and fruits and vegetables reminded me of *Who Moved My Cheese*, where we learned that cheese doesn't have to look one way or taste one way to be delicious. Once Hem got the opportunity to try a different type of cheese, Hem said no. Hem was conditioned to see cheese a certain way. Maybe like the way that we are conditioned to see beauty? Light skin as more beautiful or more worthy and darker skin as less beautiful and less worthy? Unless, of course, your family is more like Danny's family.

Danny 31:50

In my family, I don't think my family would align with what Desi people think is beautiful. So I think, Desi beauty means fair, white. But I think fair and white is, you know, one of those things that always comes up. And so if you're dark, or brown, that's considered not beautiful, which is kind of strange to me, because we didn't thankfully didn't grow up that way...Oddly, my family had like a mix of all skin colors. So yeah, I don't think we bought into that idea. But having said that, I think mentally because of marketing, and because of what you see on TV, and you know, you still have some part of your mind thinking that way. I think worth would be, if you weren't an engineer, if you weren't a doctor, if you want a chartered accountant, and not a, like well earning well respected member of society, then you're kind of worthless, so. I shouldn't say worthless, it's a little strong. But you know, it's made known that you're not a meaningful member of society, I think.

Grishma 33:15

So it would be made known that you are not as worthy?

Danny 33:19

Yeah, I think so.... I would say, like, probably in the bell curve of average to upper.

Grishma 33:30

Why do you feel like you might be average or upper?

Danny 33:34

Because I think I'm...I check some of those boxes, right. In terms of just the way I will look at myself, I wouldn't think of myself as extremely attractive, but I'm not unattractive either. So I believe average would be an easy answer to go with...And I guess I'm tall, (have a head of) hair, fairer skinned, like financially well to do so yeah... I think it's been inculcated I guess, throughout the years, and it's been self-taught. Growing up I was shy, let me put it that way. And then I think, closer to you know, later high school, which in here would be like 12th grade, where I consciously tried (to) be more confident and I wouldn't say outgoing, because I think I'm still, like introverted. But the confidence level does help. So I mean, I wouldn't be out of place in situations that the shy me would have been, had I not changed.

Grishma 34:47

I think it's time for a recap. Danny found his self-worth close to age 18. Rajnikant found it when he was between 14 and 16 years of age. Jeetendra found it in his sophomore year of high school, so that's around 14 and 15 again, and Dev Anand said that he found it in his teen years, and then lost it again for a few decades. What's interesting is that Madhubhala, Helen, Nargis and Mumtaz said that they found their self-worth between the ages of 24 and 26, around the time they finished school. Rekha, the youngest storyteller of them all said that she found her self-worth at age 18 or 19 and was the only woman storyteller who found her self-worth closer to when the men storytellers did. Having said that, Rekha did say that she constantly has to remind herself of her worth. Where do I fall with all of this? I think I relate to Dev Anand the most. I still remember when I was a sophomore in high school, I would go to the girls bathroom and see the future Miss World, Miss Universe, Miss Illinois, and it didn't phase me at all how beautiful they were. I would stand next to them and take up a small part of the full size mirror, put on my chapstick and confidently exit the bathroom. That was me. I was confident and unapologetic about it. And then one day, it was gone like that. And I couldn't figure out where the fuck it went. I want to end this episode with something that Nargis said.

Nargis 36:39

I'm so glad that you're doing this cause I don't think it's something that other cultures or ethnicities would know about. Right? Unless, I mean, everyone I guess has their own things that they get insecure about within their culture itself. But I think the South Asian community we, we don't talk about it like no one, it's all unspoken, right. And so you just carry this with you, your entire life. And then you pass it on to your children too right, which is like my biggest fear. I don't want my children to have the same insecurities and issues with self-worth that I did for so long. It's so crazy cause it can all be very passive,

right. Like no one wants that kind of thing, but it can just happen, right, whether you realize it or not.

Grishma 37:35

I feel this is the whole reason I'm doing this dissertation in a way that's more accessible so that stories can reach communities. I am convinced that if my parents and sister knew of stories where Desi girls with disabilities could be successful in love and in life. They wouldn't have worried so much or aged so quickly. (Starts to whisper) But don't tell them I said that. (End of whispering). And with that we end part two of skin tone.

(Robotic, upbeat music fades in, after few seconds music fades out)

End of Skin Tone Part 2 transcript

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