Cultural Representation of Fatness: Exploring the Cultural Narratives in India

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Abstract
Cultural Identity is part of an individual's self-conception and it is mostly influenced by various factors like region, religion, and belief system that one follows. One's cultural identity holds an impact on how one perceives the world they live in. The representation of fatness is also highly dominated by cultural perceptions. This study aims to look at the locus of fatness in society based on cultural representations in India. Fatness in Indian culture is understood in various means of social perceptions depending on religion, caste, beliefs, health and beauty standards. Fatness is discursive and has been portrayed under various lenses like traditional, colonial, spiritual, mythical, and health consciousness. Fat body types were considered as a symbol of negativity in myths. Most of the demons are given a fat body. Fatness is related to riches, luxury in tradition where people see Lord Kubera, god of wealth in Hindu religion, as a fat figure. In the colonial period, fatness was related to laziness and most of the working class people were thin. Medically fatness is seen as a disease. Post-Independence, fatness is related to ugliness. Media treats fat people as aliens. Fat characters in movies are used as comic relief and it reduces the value of fat people. Fat people in the modern era are fighting for proper recognition. Social media has made it harder for fat individuals to survive. The online platform judges individuals without proper understanding and provides space for prejudices and stereotypes. This study aims at proper understanding of cultural influences of representation of fatness in India. Also the paper aims at examining the intersection of fatness with categories such as class, caste, and gender. The paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of fatness reevaluating the Indian cultural narratives.
Keywords: Cultural Identity, Fatness Representation, Social Perception, Indian Culture, Media Stereotypes, Intersectionality

Introduction

Culture often gets reflected in narratives as symbols, stories, ideologies, and language. These represent the traditions, values, practices, and belief system of a group. These cultural narratives eventually hold its impact on society, providing a lens to individuals to look into any subject matter in a specified manner. For example, portrayal of gender roles, position of caste, class structure, and family practices, depicted in cultural narratives have a stronger influence in society. They guide, aspire and structure societal ideas, behaviour and expectations. The cultural narratives not only reflect society but also shape the society.

"As India loses battle of bulge, experts call on govt to watch girths of people" (Jaiswal). The term bulge, and the idea of calling obesity a war is reflecting the context of fatness in India. Obesity is not a disease, rather a condition of the body. There are varied factors contributing to obesity.

The only factor considered is overeating and less physical activity. The position of fat people and ideas on fatness has been presented in cultural narratives for a longer period worldwide. In India, the cultural representation of fatness reveals the growing relationship of beauty, identity, and social values. The portrayal of fatness in India has undergone evident change in connection with tradition, colonial impact, modernity, and globalization.

Traditional India saw fatness as a symbol of prosperity, and fertility. The harsh stereotypes of the present modern world were not made on fat people. The values and belief system of ancient India, never let people to discriminate others on appearances. The colonial period changed this setup by imposing western beauty standards in India. The post colonial period saw a drastic change in beauty and fashion. The Western ideal thin bodies were made a symbol of beauty in India. The growth of cosmetic products in postcolonial India, reflect the craze over beauty and self image. Thin bodies with clear skin and soft hair were the demanded look. These complicated the cultural narratives around fatness. Modern lenses leave fatness as an indication of lack of self-discipline and active lifestyle. Movies, advertisements, magazines, and social media, perpetuates unattainable beauty standards, leaving no space for fat bodies. Recent trends follow the Korean models in fashion, beauty, music, dramas, and food culture. The Korean cultural narratives and portrayals only emphasise slim body types. Fatness is shown as a comic element, mostly denied of inclusion. In India, the discourse of fatness gets complex with the intersection of class, caste, region, and gender.

On a brighter note, there are few supporting facts on fatness sprouting in the contemporary world. Fat activism, Fat Liberation, Body positivity, and Fat Acceptance are gaining their phase in society. These movements work to redefine fatness and aim to remove the inequality based on size. The impact of these movements in India needs detailed research. This paper is aimed at exploring the cultural narratives depicting fatness in India, thoroughly analysing the traditional folklore, mythologies, movies, advertisements, media, and literature. The analysis helps in understanding how discourse on fatness is evolving in India.

Traditional View on Fatness in India

In Indian mythology, and folklore, fatness is often linked to power, identity, and wealth. The fatness represented in mythology carries complex ideas symbolizing power, prosperity, excess, and moral lessons. While characters associated with power and wealth often carry negative traits like greed, laziness, and indulgence. The duality of fatness in Indian mythology has depicted the cultural perspective on the body.

Hindu mythology has Gods portrayed with large bellies. For example, Lord Ganesha, Lord Kuppera and Goddess Lakshmi are full in abundance. Their curvy, big bodies are symbolic representations of prosperity and power. Lord Ganesha's big belly is known for his ability to consume the offering of the universe, both good and bad. The belly represents the need to gain spiritual nourishment. His belly signifies duality, material wealth and spiritual wealth. The belly is said to have the capacity to digest all the positives and negatives that life offers, equally. Also the quality of generosity is linked to the size of Lord Ganesha. The bigger appearance of Ganesha is always taken in positive sign, symbolizes the coexistence of material and spiritual abundance. Goddess Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, prosperity, and beauty, and Lord Kupera, the Hindu god of wealth, are said to have full bodies. Their fullness and round personality represents material wealth. Kupera's bigger body suggests that physical appearance has nothing to do with spiritual and material abundance. Goddess Lakshmi's full body is associated with prosperity, and fertility. These two gods challenge the social inequalities based on appearance as they represent the combination of material wealth and spiritual wellbeing. Laughing Buddha, Budai or Hotei, from Eastasian folklore also joins the list. Budai is a Chinese monk with a big, fat belly. His fat belly is said to represent generosity, happiness, and contentment.

Bhima from Mahabaratha, an Indian epic, is a great warrior. He is the strongest Pandava, and is depicted with a large and powerful frame. His fuller body symbolises his immense strength, warrior nature, and his inner vigor.

The other case in Indian mythology, considering asceticism, views fatness differently. The Hindu mythology has a long list of Rishi, saints who follow strict rules of self-discipline. Most of the rishi, and saints are said to have thin bodies. Their lives are more disciplined and the fat body is seen as a symbol of materiality.

In some legends and mythology, demon, rakshasas are of grotesque appearance. They present a great variety of deformity. Some are dwarfs, others like beanstalks; some fat, others emaciated; some have over-long arms; some only one eye, or only one ear; some have monstrous bellies; some have crooked legs, some one leg, some three and some four; some have serpents' heads, others donkeys', horses' or elephants' heads. In this case, fatness is sometimes related to ugliness, deformity, and evil.

Fatness is often related with evil forces symbolising greed, power, and darkness. Notable examples include Mahishasura, a buffalo demon, who reflects greed and moral corruption. Vritra, demon from hindu mythology depicted as huge. His big appearance symbolises arrogance. Then comes the Asura king, Naragasura. He was evil, tyrannical and was a great threat to earth and heaven. His death is celebrated as Diwali, honoring the victory of good over evil.

In Ramayana, an Indian epic, Kumbakarna is the brother of Ravana. Kumbakarna is a huge, sluggish giant. His massive size symbolises laziness, excess, and moral decay. Similarly in most of the Indian folklore, villains come in huge sizes, full of greed, demonic nature, facing downfall.

Historical View on Fatness in India

Fatness in Indian history varies across time, region, and social class. In the Vedic period, 1500-500 BCE, the major focus was on spiritual growth. The vedas have fables of mythology, rituals and its instructions, and spells. The caste system is a product of the myths found in vedas. The vedic period gave importance to health and less preference to body appearance. Later the idea of fatness took up a negative role in Manusmriti texts. The Gupta period, Golden Age, had its cultural zenith. The art, architecture , and food habits saw a new phase, developed to the fullest. The ability of royal and aristocrats to access luxury was reflected in art, scriptures, and paintings. There is no direct reference to fatness, but the paintings and statues with fuller body modals symbolize wealth and prosperity. In this sense, fat bodies were not seen negatively.

The religion of people had an impact on their beliefs, values, and habits. Buddhism, and Jainism emerged in 6th century BCE. People who followed these religions maintained self-control and strict discipline. Fat body is considered as a symbol of material pleasure, which was less desired by people of these religions. On the whole, in Ancient India, fatness symbolized luxury and royalty.

Colonial period had a tremendous change in India. The British invasion brought many changes in social perspectives, beauty standards, and ideology of fatness. Indians suffered from the racial hierarchy. Indian methods, ideas, standards, practices were seen as uncivilized. The Britisher ways were considered right and superior. Western ideas of fit body, thin structure marked beauty, while fat Indian elite marked laziness. Fatness was seen as an indication of lack of self discipline and fitness.

Medical Representation of Fatness in India

Ayurveda, the traditional Indian medical system, is 5000 years old. Ayurveda is based on the idea that the body is made of three doshas. The harmony of these doshas results in disease free healthy lifestyle. Ayurveda promotes a healthier lifestyle which emphasises diet, exercises and yoga practices. Obesity (Sthoulya) is a disease in Ayurveda. "According to Ayurvedic Samhitas, Sthoulya is a Santarpanjanya Vyadhi which is described in Astonindatiya Adhyaya in Sutrasthana of Charaka Samhita in detail. In Sthoulya disease mainly Medovaha srotas is affected due to which there is overgrowth of Medodhatu and this process eventually manifests as Obesity disease." (Chauhan et al.). Ayurveda promotes a healthier lifestyle which emphasises diet, exercises and yoga practices.

Western medicines diverge from traditional Ayurveda, creating a different perspective on fatness. The discourse of fatness was related to laziness and lack of discipline. Westerners believed that the Indian diet, rich in good fat, carbohydrates, led to obesity. The colonial rule in India brought huge changes in Indian methods and practices. The British altered the food production and started consuming processed foods, sugar, and tea, the Indian food market began to see the rise of refined sugar, oils, and processed tea powders. Indian dietary habits underwent change with these processed food items. According to current experts, consumption of these processed food items leads to obesity.

Modern beauty standards, heavily influenced by Western media and fashion, emphasize a slim, toned body as the epitome of health and desirability. This eventually led to starving diets, disordered eating, pushing a generation towards ill health. And fatness is often stigmatized, with overweight individuals being deemed lazy, undisciplined, or unattractive.

Fatness in Contemporary Indian Society

The impact of western thoughts shapes modern India. Fashion, Beauty, Education, Health, and Lifestyle is completely based on western trends. The cultural structure is influenced by western ideas. Media plays a key role in directing people towards the western standards. Medicalization of fatness in India resulted in a growing obsession with health and fitness. Fitness and health are linked to the economic condition of individuals. Factors like culture, economy, family history impact the access to resources, including healthy food, fitness and medical care. It becomes an option or choice, when it comes for fitness, for elite groups. People from low economic status cannot afford fancy diets. The economic status directly reflects life choices. Fatness is perceived differently across the social spectrum.

Upper and middle class groups, with their access to fitness, diets and self-care sources. Their exposure to international beauty and fitness standards creates obsession over slim body, glass skin, and celebrity lifestyle. The discourse of fatness here is influenced by global standards rather than experiences.

Lower class unable to reach the unattainable beauty standards face discrimination. Fatness is portrayed as an aversion and result of self care, and discipline. The trendy diet plans include Keto, Paleo, Vegan-based which are meant for the elite groups. The class structure symbolises fatness as a sign of laziness, poor self control, and lack of knowledge on good health, missing the reality that fatness is a byproduct of social and economic conditions.

The discourse of fatness again undergoes a change with the lens of gender. Societal norms and expectations vary based on gender. Considering men and women, women undergo a lot of pressure for being fat, comparatively. Women body types are expected to be slender, toned, and youthful. This shapes the idea of fatness as lazy, ugly, unattractive and unhealthy. Fat women are forced to face intense judgements, making women feel unworthy. The discrimination begins and could possibly inculcate fatphobia. Men are less pressured when it comes to beauty standards. Queer people face rejection, discrimination, ill treatment, and struggle to furnish an identity of their own. Fatness worsens the journey. Fat queer are subjected to additional torments.

Media Representation of Fatness in India

Representation of fatness in Indian media is complex. The influence of western trends had nuanced the discourse of fatness. There are noticeable stereotypes on fatness portrayed in advertisements, movies, and social media platforms.

The usage of social media in India has drastically grown in recent decades. People express their feelings, opinions, and ideas using social media. The discourse of fat is also expressed through social media platforms. For example, V. Sivankutty, the Minister of General Education in Kerala, recounted his experience of being body-shamed on social media. On November 24, 2022 in a press conference, the Minister said, referring to his post on social media, that a person commented asking Mr. Sivankutty to reduce his belly. The minister

replied to the comment, calling body shaming "a heinous practice." He added that "the State government will create awareness among students and teachers and consider making it part of the school curriculum." (The Hindu Bureau).

When taken for consideration, movies provide solid examples for the embedded hatred and discrimination. Fat characters are often depicted as lazy, lack self discipline, less smart, pitiable, and funny. Fat characters are denied serious, important roles. For example, Tamil comedian Sentil, often seen in combo with actor Goundamami, was fat shamed in the majority of the movies he acted in. In the Hello telugu movie, there is a scene when Ramyakrishnan purposely avoids a fat passenger from sitting next to her. She tries hard to get rid of the fat passenger. This scene is meant to create humor instead it depicts the negative mindset of the majority towards fat people.

Comedian Gundu Kalyanam, Lakshmi Narayanan, is named based on his appearance. Gundu is an informal Tamil phrase, referring to a fat body. Addressing an actor based on appearance is not a commendable gesture. Gundu Kalyanam's role often involved appearance based discrimination.

Advertisements also use fat people in funny, lazy, useless, dependent characters. Fitness industry tries to market certain food items on the label of health. Most of the advertisements used by the industries portray fat people in a negative perspective. For example, Lipton Green Tea advertisement shows a woman who is desperately wanting to lose weight specifically to have a flat tummy. The advertisement portrays the obsession with flat tummies and it also shows that thin bodies are more attractive and healthy. This advertisement traces a false understanding of beauty and health.

Snickers Almond advertisement from 202 is made in a gym set up. There are people capturing a video of a fat person struggling to get off a treadmill. The treadmill was broken and the person could not turn off the machine. The idea of using a fat person struggling and seen as someone who gets in trouble easily is unfair. The other possible understanding is that the machine is broken when a fat person uses it. The actual tagline of the chocolate, "When you are hungry grab a Snicker" has nothing to do with fat people. But still the portrayal of fatness as a comic element expresses the biased mindset prevailing in society.

Body Positivity Movement in India

Body positivity in India is at an early stage in India. Modernization has started altering some harsh realities in the cinema industry. Recent developments like body liberation, health at every size, have paved the way for positive portrayal of fat people in movies. Size Zero, a telugu movie, with a fat heroine depicts the struggles faced by a plus size girl. The movie aims to inculcate self love and self acceptance. There are recent advertisements using plus size models. The awareness to understand fellow human's mindset has given space for a positive discourse on fatness.

Social media provides space for both positive and negative ideology on fatness. Social media influencers' fame do influence social perspectives. Body positive movements are evolving and get reflected in social media. Influencers and activists use social media to break unjust social norms and encourage people to develop acceptance in self love. Fashion world has started an inclusive attitude, creating and promoting plus size fashion. Fitness influencers have started to prompt fitness of any everysize. The change in health discourse reflects the positive attitude towards fatness.

The positive image is not easy to be held on. The influencers, and content creators still face discrimination, bad comment, and hatred in social media for being and supporting fat. Fat acceptance and body positivity is sometimes used as a marketing tool, rather than fostering change in societal view on fatness.

Summation

The paper explores the evolution of fatness representation in India. The portrayal and perception of fatness in India is a multifaceted issue, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, historical, medical, and societal influences. Ancient India saw fatness as a symbol of prosperity. However, the colonial invasion

brought a change in the perception of fatness . Fat people continue to endure discrimination and exclusion especially in environments influenced by Western standards. The post-independence era saw thin body types as the epitome of beauty, influenced by global media, advertising, and growth of the cosmetic industry. The intersection of fatness with class, caste, gender, and economic status complicates the discourse, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of societal rejection. Social media amplifies the stereotypes like being fat is bad, and fat individuals are funny or lazy. On the brighter side, there are growing movements of body positivity, fat activism, and inclusivity movements aimed to stop the discrimination, promoting self love, and redefining beauty standards.

The study attempted to summarize the locus of fatness in India. The ongoing struggle for body acceptance in India necessitates a more nuanced understanding of fatness, which would extend beyond the medical and aesthetic concerns to encompass social, cultural, and economic components. The paper suggests an appropriate understanding of fatness, health, and beauty. Proper education, awareness, and open dialogue are essential to overcoming the detrimental prejudices and biases that continue to stigmatize fat individuals in Indian society.

Future researchers could focus on deeper exploration of how body positivity movements intersect with class, caste, and gender that could reveal the social barriers faced by fat individuals. It is essential to explore how medical and healthcare systems in India are responding to these shifts in societal attitudes towards fatness, and the impact of these changes on policy and public health initiatives.

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