

The Politics of Skin in America

We like to think that the US as a country and as a society is rapidly getting over the racism and other prejudices of the past. We might think of racism as an anomaly, a diseased attitude we inflicted on ourselves with slavery and civil war, a problem that civil rights laws and education has nearly fixed.

We have indeed progressed. Many today are only dimly aware of how bad it was throughout much of our past. It was not just a matter of Southern ex-slaveowners and segregationists with their Jim Crow laws and lynchings, as bad as that was. The entire nation was racist.

The following article by Vivek Bald chronicles an early lost history of a time of Black-Bengali racial solidarity. It shows from a different perspective what many immigrants as well as native-born minorities had to endure.

[The Skin I'm In](#)

"A law passed in 1922 voided citizenship for American women who married foreign men."

"federal law had stated that only "white persons" and persons of African ancestry could be granted citizenship. Previously, lawyers for Indian immigrants...had argued that Indians were of "Aryan descent" and therefore "whites" eligible for citizenship. But a 1923 Supreme Court decision (United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind) voided all citizenships granted to Indian migrants by declaring them non-white. It was not until 1946 that US immigration law finally allowed Indian-born migrants to become citizens without having to resort to re-definitions of race."

This was the Federal government. There was no appeal to a higher authority. People with dark skins could be, and were, legally discriminated against, considered inferior.

Slavery was abolished in 1865. All born in the US, including blacks, were declared citizens in 1868, and those of all races were granted the right to vote in 1870. During Reconstruction, enforced by occupying Federal troops, blacks were often able to exercise their rights, but the compromise of 1877 prematurely ended that protection. By 1879 many blacks were fleeing northward.

Strange as it seems today, it was the Republicans who tried to legislate non-discrimination, but the Supreme Court ruled in 1883 that private racial discrimination could not be prohibited, and in 1896, decided that state segregation laws were acceptable.

Laws requiring separate taxicabs, sections of buses, building entrances, restrooms, drinking fountains, schools, cemeteries, restaurants, libraries, and parks were common throughout the South. Republican attempts to outlaw lynching were filibustered and defeated. With various subterfuges like poll taxes and literacy tests, blacks' right to vote was almost entirely denied.

By denying them voter registration, Southern states also excluded blacks from juries, which made equal justice impossible or unlikely. Black men were sent to prisons, which leased them out for coal mining and industrial labor, effectively making them slaves.

[Asians and the U.S. Immigration Laws of 1924](#)

from [The Nation](#), 1927

Reading this article might lead one to believe there is nothing new. Racism and immigration-- it was blatant then, perhaps less so now, but the attitudes remain more than we would like to think.

The more we know about the past, the better we can understand the present and how far, exactly, we have come.

-cosmicrat Feb. 26, 2013