# COLOUR BLOCK

Nina Davuluri is raising her voice against colourism with her *#SeeMyComplexion* campaign, and emphasising that the fashion industry can contribute significantly to end the discrimination, finds Sonali Shah

PHOTOGRAPHS: **CHARMI PATEL PENA**

"You'd be so beautiful **if you were a few shades lighter**, or, you have nice features even though you're dark. It's **these comments that must stop**"

During the filming of COMPLEXion, the documentary that explores stories of diversity and acceptance, Nina and her team met numerous girls and young women who hated their own skin colour. They regularly used whitening creams, fervently hoping that their skin would turn a few shades lighter. Nina feels this is where the fashion and media industries can contribute positively. "It is important for designers and media to have a true representation of models of all Indian skin tones, not just those with light coloured skin. The fashion industry, with its incredible influence, can create impactful change simply through recognising the importance of inclusivity and representation in their campaigns," she suggests.

"When I was 5, I was obsessed with my mom's bubblegum pink and black sequin chiffon sari. When I asked her why she never wore that sari, she said the colour didn't suit her. I did not understand what she meant – I was certain that any colour would look great on my beautiful mom. It was only years later I understood the reason – the archaic notions of colourism that shackled our culture ensured my mom's pink sari lay untouched, gathering dust, along with our image of self-worth," Nina recalls.

Nina believes that we must raise our voices against colourism – whether it's at home or against brands.

//It's the subtle comments we've all heard – Don't go out in the sun, you'll get too dark. You'd be so beautiful if you were a few shades lighter, or, you have nice features even though you're dark. It's these comments that must stop," Nina Davuluri says. As the first Indian-American to win Miss America (2014), Nina is all too familiar with such commiserations. It took her participating in the pageant and receiving the compliments that followed, to truly love and accept her skin the way it is. Why is only fair skin considered ideal or elite, and how do we break the cycle across industries, are questions Nina aims to address with her #SeeMyComplexion campaign, which launched in June.

Nina discovered early on in life that fashion is deeply intertwined with the archaic notions of colourism in the Indian culture. Unsolicited advice is dispensed liberally on both children and women. The one Nina recalls is about avoiding bright colours for the fear of looking too dark. "Fashion statements should enhance our already beautiful and rich complexions, not mask it! Frankly, the idea that even the clothing should make your skin look lighter is ridiculous," she exclaims.

For her exclusive shoot with ELLE India, Nina chose bright colours with active intent – to show the world that dark-complexioned women are free to dress in these colours. As a reassurance to everyone who doubts their choices of orange, purple or sunshine yellow, she shows them how it's done.

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Confrontation can be a powerful tool to help speak up for oneself and create a change in our communities. "I hope everyone reading this will embrace their complexion, wear the colours they love, and when they look at themselves in the mirror, know that their skin is truly beautiful just the way it is," she smiles.

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