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# THE PIGMENT PRESCRIPTION: WHY PINK AND BLUE ARE THE FIRST BOUNDARIES WE BUILD

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By Diksha Shekhar<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Pink for girls, blue for boys—a social construct so powerful that it orders perceptions, behaviors, and opportunities from infancy well into adulthood. Far from natural or biological, the color-coded system actually came about through inconsistent practices in the early part of the 20th century and was then codified by post-World War II marketing and popular culture, as documented by Jo B. Paoletti. Such gendered color coding extends well beyond clothes to toys, accessories, and even services, entrenching cultural expectations about strength, emotion, and capability. The phenomenon has economic implications, too, such as the so-called "pink tax," where products and services marketed to women are priced higher than comparable male or gender-neutral items—a dynamic that compounds financial inequality in the context of persistent wage gaps. Apart from its economic impact, the pink-blue divide exerts a subtle yet potent social policing that circumscribes self-expression and enforces normative gender roles. For transgender and gender-nonconforming children, this unbending framework can clash with identity development, family expectations, and social acceptance. From a constitutional standpoint, such systemic differentiation gives rise to important questions under Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Indian Constitution that embody equality, liberty, and dignity. Landmark cases such as Maneka Gandhi vs. Union of India (1978), NALSA vs. Union of India (2014), and Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India (2018) hold that identity, liberty, and equality are guaranteed by our fundamental constitutional principles. This research paper aims to examine the evolution, societal effects, economic implications, and jurisdictional significance of pink-blue gender coding and its pressing need to abandon color-based ideologies to conform to our constitutional moral values of equality and dignity.*

## KEYWORDS;

Gendered Colour, Pink-Blue Divide, Constitutional Rights, Pink Tax, Colour Based Differentiation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Author is a law student at Bihar institute of Law.

**“Pink sweater hai, phir toh ladki ke liye hi hoga”**

**“Gender reveal mein pink hi use hota hai ladki ke liye.”**

**“Kya ladkiyon wale colour pehan rakhe hai?”**

These two are not lines from the movie but the statements I recently came across.

Or if I say statements which exist freely in our society on our day-to-day basis. Before a child ever finds their voice, the world has already decided who they are. It doesn't use words or labels at first; it uses a silent, visual shorthand. Usually, it starts in the hospital room and the nursery in the form of *Pink blankets. Blue balloons*. It's in those small, well-meaning gestures the soft pink onesies gifted with a knowing smile, or the navy blue sets bought without a second thought without realising the consequences of it. These colors aren't just choices, they are instructions on how to perceive a human being before they've even taken their first step. We've lived with this logic for so long that it has become a reflex.

**What instant thoughts come to your mind when you see a pink coloured cloth kept on a chair?**

As a society it is seen eminently that, *“It must be for a girl.”* There's no pause at all. No room for a "maybe." In that quiet moment, a simple shade of light is no longer just a color, it has become a person's entire identity.

But have you ever thought about what happens in a family when the walls are painted blue, the balloons are blue, the clothes neatly folded are blue and a transgender child is born? Not at birth perhaps, but at the moment the child begins to speak themselves into existence. The colour coded nursery, once filled with certainty of blue, suddenly becomes heavy with confusion. All the expectations carefully built around that blue i.e. strength, masculinity, inheritance begins to have cracks in them. Love slowly changes into fear, pride collides with social shame and silence often replaces celebrations but is it a child that fails expectations? Obviously NOT but we as a society fail the child's expectations.

Isn't it funny how we treat "Pink for Girls" and "Blue for Boys" as if they're laws of nature, like gravity or the tides. We assume it's always been this way because, for us, it has. But if you look back just a few generations, that "obvious" logic completely holds a different picture.

In the early 1900s, parents didn't see colors as a "boy or girl" thing, they saw them only as things for the "babies". History shows that walking into a store in 1918, a clerk might have actually corrected you for trying to put a boy in blue. Back then, pink was often seen as a "stronger," more masculine color (essentially a mini-version of red), while blue was considered dainty and "pretty" for girls.

It wasn't biology that changed the rules; it was **marketing** who did it all. Although the shift didn't happen overnight. It was a slow creep that turned into a landslide around the 1940s and 50s. After WWII, clothing brands realized they could make a lot more money if they stopped selling "unisex" white baby clothes. If they could convince you that a boy *couldn't* wear his older sister's pink hand-me-downs, you'd have to buy a whole new wardrobe.<sup>2</sup>

Then came the Ultrasound Era which actually was the real game-changer in the 80s. For the first time, parents knew the "color" of their baby months before they were even born. Retailers jumped on this, filling entire aisles with "Gender Reveal" gear before the baby had even taken a breath. We think we're just picking a cute outfit, but we're actually participating in a century-old marketing strategy that turns frequency of light into a personality trait.

It makes you wonder: if a pink sweater on a chair makes us think "girl," what other labels are we subconsciously pinning on people before they even have a chance to tell us their real existence? An American scholar named Jo B. Paoletti found in her research that it is not just a history lesson but it's a mirror held up to our own biases. In her book, *Pink and Blue*, she digs through piles of old catalogs and family photos to prove that our "common sense" about color is actually a very recent invention.

For a long time, we didn't look at a baby and think "boy" or "girl" , people just thought "baby." Little kids of both sexes wore white dresses because they were practical (easy to bleach) and gender-neutral. But as the evolution happened and the world started changing fast with women working more and the old "rules" of society started shifting and people started getting anxious.

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<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, *Pink and Blue* (history article summarising Jo Paoletti's research in **Smithsonian**) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/unraveling-the-colorful-history-of-why-girls-wear-pink-1370097/> accessed 14 January 2026.

Paoletti argues that we started color-coding our kids because we were worried. We wanted to put everyone back into neat little boxes, and color was the easiest, cheapest way to do it.

Further Paoletti's most striking point isn't just about how the colors switched but about why they stayed that way?

Notice how a girl can wear a blue shirt and nobody bats an eye? She's "sporty" or "strong." But the second a boy puts on a pink sweater, people get uncomfortable. They might even judge his sexuality.

This reveals two things existing under the surface i.e. **Blue** is seen as a step up representing strength and the public world, whereas **Pink** is seen as a step down, representing the soft or feminine world. Paoletti shows us that our obsession with these colors was never really about aesthetics or biology. It was about **value**. We stopped seeing pink as just a color and started seeing it as a boundary. The moment we decided pink was "feminine," we also decided it was something boys shouldn't want to be.

If the 1950s fixed the association, the 1990s monetised it aggressively. Toy aisles were divided into two, where pink shelves were screaming for girls and dark colours in bold marked for boys. Studies indicated that the vast majority of pink toys were labeled "girls only." Pink became a sign, maybe not of choice, but of limitation.

Colors have already started dictating the decisions of children before they had a chance to make one of their own, as gender reveal parties have become the new declaration of reaching maturity. Even before personality or awareness develops, the play-by-play begins, assigning either blue to symbolize strength and intelligence or pink, which symbolizes nurturing and passion. Being masculine reaches the top, so girls just have to be lauded for wanting it, while girls are just a stage to be moved through. Being pink, symbolizing backward growth, has been recognized in a boy reaching for it.

### Pink Tax and the Politics of Colour Based Differentiation

"Pink tax" is a name given to the difference in price charged for products and services targeted towards women compared to similarly priced products for men or products that are gender-neutral.

In India, to date, pink tax is not specifically banned or governed. Pricing for products targeting females is mainly market-driven. While there is limited direct or empirical data on pink tax in India, studies have also pointed towards a price difference for products targeting females and males.

This was observed not only in the Indian market. There have been examples internationally that validate this. In a research study conducted by the New York State Department of Consumer Affairs, it was found that the prices of products for the female gender were 7% higher compared to that of men. Women's personal care products rose in price 13% higher. In the United Kingdom, research showed that the deodorants for the female gender were 8.9% higher in price. The prices of the facial moisturizers for the female gender were over 34% higher compared to the men's products.<sup>3</sup>

The pink tax is inextricably linked with the pink-blue divide in terms of gender, whereby a product packaged in pink packaging or marketed exclusively towards the female demographic, such as razors, perfumes, cosmetics, footwear, and apparel, typically costs more than the male counterpart or a generic product. The pink color, in effect, becomes not only an indicator of femininity but also a promotional indicator of warrants applicable towards an increase in the price tag. Notably, the premium applied on the product also gets translated into a service, whereby ladies' haircuts, for example, may end up being charged a premium of as much as 60% compared to a male hair cut.

Its own name, "pink tax," was coined back in 1994 in California because it was then when this systemic pricing difference was recognized officially, although it had been happening for many years. This points to how gender coding by color—using pink to mean female and blue to mean male affects not only socialization but even economic inequality. Inflationating gender by coloring it pink means that pink stops being a simple matter of personal preference and instead becomes an economic punishment where markets are keepers of an inequality preserved by such gender color-coding.

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<sup>3</sup> Adnan Ali, *Pink Tax in India: Meaning, Examples & Impact on Women* (ClearTax, 11 July 2025) <https://cleartax.in/s/pink-tax-in-india> accessed 16 January 2026.

## Chromatic Bias and the Constitution; Examining Colour Based Discrimination

Have you ever paused to consider the idea that, in embracing pink and blue parenting so readily, perhaps we are, unconsciously, undermining the very basics of children's inalienable rights to equality and freedom with the prescience of separating their tastes, behavior, and identities through the color box?

The promise of the rule of law is that everyone gets an equality of start. However, when we treat a “pink child” differently from a “blue child,” we start the race with a tilted track.

Whereas through Articles 14 (Right to Equality) and 15 (Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth) of the Indian Constitution, as well as equivalent clauses on equality in every country, it is made a provision that "sex" shall not be used as a cage.

In a society where we proudly enumerate the rights of men and women, why do we identify our children by only two colors? In a situation where boys are denied softness and girls are denied strength, are we raising equals or are we just creating two citizens? How liberated are our children, and can they be termed equals if they are constrained in their identification even before they start? The Indian Constitution, in Article 21, which secures the right to life and liberty, has been judicially expanded to include “the right to live with dignity.” This aspect was clearly clarified in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*<sup>4</sup>, where it was held that Article 21 does not guarantee only “life in its bare essence as animal life” but “a life of dignity, of fairness, and of real and substantial liberty.” Dignity is the freedom to define oneself. When society says, *"You are a boy, therefore you must be 'Blue'."* it is a subtle theft of that child's right to develop their own unique personality without the weight of societal shame.

Expression need not be confined to speech and writings, as it also lies in the manner of living, dressing, and appearing in the world. The scope of freedom of speech and expressions under Article 19 (1) (a) of the Indian Constitution encompasses this aspect.

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<sup>4</sup> *Maneka Gandhi v Union of India* (1978) AIR SC 597.

It is dignity and not uncertainty that must reign supreme. In *National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India* (2014)<sup>5</sup>, it was held that gender identity is inseparable from personal autonomy. Thus, self-identification of gender has been held to be an aspect of Article 21. Denial of that right to a child is no cultural unease but a constitutional injury. Moreover, such denial was held to fall within Article 14, upholding that “equality is not identity but recognition of difference without discrimination. Subsequently, in *Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India* (2018), it was again held that “constitutional morality has to triumph over social morality,” making it abundantly clear that expectations of family, no matter how deeply rooted, cannot justify erasure of identity. Differentiating children based on colour preference we are only violating the very promise of liberty, equality and dignity that our Indian constitution guarantees to every person, irrespective of their gender.

The Constitution does not mention pink and blue. It mentions persons. However, long before any intervention by the law, children begin to be categorized, disciplined, and differentiated by these colors, which implicitly prescribe who they will be. That which is harmless a children’s dress, a toy, and décor becomes potentially the earliest means of discrimination, where identity is restricted before it finds any articulation. The Indian Constitution’s jurisprudence on this issue is persistent in its refusal to restrict identity. Right from *NALSA v. Union of India* to *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*<sup>6</sup>, The Supreme Court of India had consistently held that dignity, autonomy, and self-determination were not favorite heads conferred by family and society, but were in fact basic rights guaranteed under Articles 14, 19, and 21.

Hence, to move beyond pink and blue is not simply a social imperative but a constitutional duty. A truly Constitutional-minded society must start where discrimination starts in so far as it begins with birth, in homes, and with colors, and ensure that every child can grow up into freedom and not into an expectation.

It is imperative that we now confront and dismantle the assumptions that started in direct conflict with constitutional values and should question ourselves;

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<sup>5</sup> *National Legal Services Authority v Union of India* AIR 2014 SC 1863.

<sup>6</sup> *Navtej Singh Johar v Union of India* AIR 2018 SC 4321.

**"If equality is a fundamental right, why do we start the journey of a human life by assigning them a color-coded set of limitations? Is a child truly free if their very first 'choice' was made for them by a clothing rack?"**

