

FACTS

against MYTHS

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INFORMATION BULLETIN

BEAUTY AND BEAUTY CONTEST MYTHS (Part II)

COMMENT

"...the ideal of female beauty has been defined in India in charming aphorisms...Her actual life...has been less than the metaphorical ideal and more sordid...(She) has sometimes been exalted as a goddess but mostly... oppressed... Brahmins have succeeded in exterminating the primordial instinct for emotive love..."

-Mulk Raj Anand "The Book of Indian Beauty", 1993.

"...Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myths of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorises their abuse..."

-Simone de Beauvoir "The Second Sex"

"Beauty Contests" today have become global in their reach and impact mushrooming in various countries around the world. Significantly, the venues for these events have shifted to countries in the South including the former Socialist countries where they had been considered an anachronism.

The origins of 'beauty contests' go back to the 'Miss America' contest - the first such competition-established in 1921. In India, its avatar was in the "Miss India" contest established in the 60s and have since proliferated, being given an added boost by the victories of Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai. Their victories have enhanced the status of such competitions, completely out of proportion and in total disregard to existing socio-cultural events of far greater relevance.

These competitions are basically high-profile publicity campaigns of the corporate sector and foreign TNCs to boost the sale of their products. As such, they are package deals propagated by major ad agencies hand-in-glove with these corporate enterprises marketing various products of the 'beauty industry' (cosmetics, jewelry, diet books, weight-reducing programmes etc.) and also services 'appropriately'

provided by the 'feminine touch' (airlines, hotels, tours, etc.)

Over the years as a result of protests and demonstrations the organisers and promoters of 'beauty contests' in the West have been forced to re-name these competitions as "beauty pageants" a euphemism aimed at mitigating the harshness of the expression 'competition' or 'contests'; for contests are what victors impose upon the losers. In India, such campaigns have led to a peculiar situation similar to the current issue on personal laws. From time-to-time progressive groups are shoulder-to-shoulder with right-wing elements advocating obnoxious behavioral norms for women in the name of defending the so-called Bharatiya nari and Bharatiya sanskriti which often is a repressive form of Victorianism confused as "Indian womanhood" and "Indian culture".

A pernicious aspect of these contests is that they provide the export of culturally-specific notions of beauty that women everywhere are expected to meet-a white Caucasian standard. Such a criterion is an idealising, elitist obsession with passive perfection. It is a notion of beauty as it is perceived in the West but which the local elites in the country happily mimic. The concept totally negates the relevance of recognising the diverse notions of beauty in other cultures - of what is considered beautiful. But those behind such commercial ventures are least bothered about celebrating such elements of diversity. As ploys of the 'beauty industry' these competitions therefore are in the business of reducing hopes and aspirations to easily marketable formulae, so they tend to address surface or superficial concerns. They have to establish ideal shapes, sizes and skin types, so that they have easily identifiable, yardsticks against which to judge their products. Naturally, these competitions emphasize just one element-the look-



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through the promotion of the so-called physical ideal rather than a holistic view - to look at the whole-body, soul and mind. Ultimately, the bottom line is that the promotion of such 'beauty ideals' serve as convenient ploys for converting people in the South into avid patrons of their products that originate in the US, France or Japan.

Further, the cult of beauty that "beauty contests" project, leads to other anomalies - that of consumerism, the hedonistic way of life. It serves as an ideological tool of the ruling blocks "new economic policy" and liberalisation process, to perform a positive role in extending the consumption of goods so as to further the process of "economic growth with justice" in the so-called market economy.

Finally, the victories of Sushmita and Aishwarya are very disturbing in that unwittingly they have revived some of the worst myths and fallacies on what constitutes Indian womanhood especially at the time when right-wrong communal forces like the VHP and Sangh Parivar are on the ascendance and who, reportedly in *Hamara Mahanagar* (31-5-1995) were in Seventh Heaven over the victories and statements these women made on Indian culture and Indian womanhood. Their fallacious statements demonstrated that these shows are not only paternalistic but also tools in propagating the feminine cult-beautification, child-rearing, house-keeping and the culinary skills-and hammering in images of feminine beauty that the ad media readily exploits with the sales pitch: be like Sushmita or Aishwarya! "Beauty contests" thus aid in moulding and reinforcing images of women's view of themselves and their place in society. In the Indian context, this is all the more damaging as in a caste-driven, male-defined society the concept of feminine beauty is ideological in that it is a 'high caste', Brahminic one and as such 'varna' connected. (Draft Manifesto of the Mahasabha of joint Dalit-Adivasi Rural Literature, cited in Frontier, September 24, 1988.) The meaning of Rama and Krishna is black; they and Draupadi were black but were nevertheless considered beautiful. Otherwise the colour considered beautiful by them was white. Vasishtha Dharmasutra (op.cit) lays down that the black coloured Sudra or non-Aryan woman called Rama is only meant for enjoyment. The high-caste conception of beauty having emerged out of non-productivity, conceived a beautiful woman as white and delicate. Against this, the Sudra conception of beauty having emerged out of productivity visualises a beautiful woman as brown (syama) or dark and sturdy. (op.cit)



In conclusion "beauty contests" need to be necessarily viewed critically-beyond its supposedly innocuous form of mass entertainment. There is nothing conspiratorial about these events, but neither are they innocent. It is necessary to demystify it and situate the "beauty contest" to the more pertinent socio-cultural events issues and processes occurring in our society.

MYTH:

The main purpose of beauty pageants like Miss India or Miss Universe etc., is to select the year's 'most beautiful woman'.

FACT:

Apparently, this is the real aim. The main purpose, however, is to boost the sale of products of the mega firms sponsoring these competitions. They are primarily publicity and sales promotion strategies: excellent merchandising vehicles. The Femina Miss India '95 beauty contests, for instance was sponsored by MNCs like *Bausch & Lomb*, *Phillips*, and *Lakme*, among others to promote Ray-Ban sunglasses, electronic products and cosmetics, etc.. For the promoters, *Femina*, it is an opportunity to boost its circulation collect advertising revenue. They are thus extremely profitable ventures. Proof of the pudding: new "beauty contests" are spawned all the time. Some of the newest being *Lady Universe 1995*, *Queen of the World 1995* and *Femina Look of the Year 1995*. And in a large 'country like India the cosmetic market among the new middle class women is a potential 'El Dorado' with the real possibility of even a boom in "cosmetic surgery"!!

The beauty contestants and the actual winner, the "beauty queen", on the other hand is no more than the promoter's advertising tool, a vital component of the whole advertising campaign. On winning the title, the winner is virtually turned into a commercial product, used and sold very much like a pre-packaged Pond's make-up face-pack. Former Miss Universe, Sushmita Sen, was performing precisely this role in New Delhi on August 31 for the American TNC, *Apple Computers*. Thus "Beauty Queens" like Sen and Rai eventually wind up largely as pawns of the "beauty contests"-to carry out the sponsors subtle, commercial aims. The TNC Pepsi hired both of them to boost their sales soon after they were awarded the "beauty crown". In using "celebrities" in this way the sponsors succeed in persuading the gullible to flavoured and coloured sugar-water-costing them no more than a few paise - at Rs 6.

The owners of Miss Universe who awarded their title to Sushmita Sen who are in India reportedly stated (*Economic Times*: 23-9-94) that a beauty queen like Sen is employed by them on an allowance of \$50,000 to represent their company throughout the world. She generates revenue to Miss Universe Incorporated (MUI) by travelling, doing commercials, personal appearances and speeches. Their representative, Martin Brooks, could well be throwing a bait when he stated that India could be the venue for the 1996 Miss Universe contest and therefore "see" another winner (!) provided that India foots the location bill of around Rs 4 to 6 crores.

MYTH

Using an objective set of criteria or a recognised set of standards including a fair representation of experienced luminaries from the world of art, culture, humanities, among others, it is possible to select the most beautiful woman, in the country or world. Beauty pageants are proof enough.

FACT

A universally recognisable prototype of a woman's beauty does not exist. Even though a Caucasian can with some training, learn to recognise some Indian or Zimbabwean types as 'beautiful', these 'exotic' representations have to conform to the Caucasian type than to the norm of their own race. This argues against a universal standard "since we are obviously appealing to the ideals of a specific racial group, in terms of its own singular traits".

Unlike height, or speed, beauty cannot realistically be objectified and quantified. Partly, this is because beauty is only partly physical or objectively observable. The tremor of a smile, the twinkle in an eye-these cannot be measured and weighed against someone else's,² as someone with blacker hair or fatter waist can be determined.

Beauty is a combination of too many different kinds of subjective decisions for one to be able to reach a definition, much less general agreement about who, or what combination of characteristics meet that criterion. (op.cit) Even other relative terms-like 'tall'- can be specifically defined, and a standard of comparison established that is unambiguous and satisfactory to everyone. Negotiation is possible, on intellectual grounds. But feminine beauty is not like that.

Beauty of the human form is not only a subjective phenomena but different from person to person and an individual's judgment cannot be 'proved' right or wrong. If Sushmita is considered taller than Aishwarya and Manpreet refutes that, the issue can be resolved by bringing both the girls together, measuring them, and having recourse to a chart of average female heights. If there are, however, differences of opinion over the perceived beauty of these girls, no reasonable argument is possible.

A "beauty contest" therefore cannot be objectively arbitrated. The winner, Sushmita or Aishwarya, merely attracts the largest number of subjective preferences.

MYTH

Feminists and others holding 'dharnas', 'gheraos', etc., against beauty pageants are an ugly, disgruntled lot. They are simply unable to provide any convincing explanation to their knee-jerk opposition.

FACT

Feminists and others are neither against "beauty contests" per se nor are they against the young contestants. Opposition is primarily against the basic premises on which these so-called beauty contests are conceived, promoted and sold!. For instance, their critique is against the absurd attempt to judge feminine beauty by a quantifying method

that reduces beauty in terms of ranked lists; the so-called attempt to (ultimately) make scientific sense of the Evil Queen's mirror-to determine, once and for all, who really is the 'fairest of them all'. That is, if the opinions of a panel of somehow-reliable judges can be combined, the aggregate will represent 'the fairest of them all'!

One can, according to this logic, quantify beauty and determine a rank-order, with 50 contestants, 10 semi-finalists, 5 finalists, and the 1 true 'most'. To illustrate,

- In the *Miss America* contest the standard employed is a 100-point body breakdown. The "judges" allot 12 points for shape of the head; 10 points for eyes; 5 points for hair, 10 points for facial expression and so on and so forth!
- For the *Miss World* competition the owners, Eric and Julia Morley include what he calls the "basic material": pubescent girls aged between 17 and 25, ideally 5' 7½", 8 to 9 stone, waist 22-24", hips 35-36", "no more, no less", good teeth, plenty of hair and perfectly shaped legs from front and back-carefully checked for "such defects as slightly knocked kneed"!!
- In other such contests the rule of the thumb prevails. That is, a 35" bustline, with a shoulder dip of 20°; a slim tapering waist, hips larger than the breasts!
- In the so-called state of the art technology, computers are also becoming arbiters in judging the 'most' beautiful woman! It involves the judges' preferences for each contestant, in each sub-category (interview, swimsuit, talent). These are fed into the computers which totals the results and presents them to the TV audience on a scale of 1 to 10, to 2 decimal places. But all the results of each individual contest are swept aside in the final overall judging, so that its not clear what all the quantification is supposed to achieve!?

Mocking women as "ugly feminists" is an ideological ploy. It helps in devaluing not only the process of aging but also older women thereby eradicating women power. It performs the crucial task of cutting the links between generation of women and assuring that power is not passed on. It intimidates young women from relating with their older sisters, thereby preventing the transmission of authority.

Many women today deliberately choose to be "ugly" simply because it helps in deflecting unruly stares from men or their sexist, vulgar remarks; to even avoid the danger of a sexual assault.

The point is how can beauty be quantified and ranked in this way if so many variables - some by popular testimony, not even visible upon surface inspection, even in a bathing suit - are involved? Not to mention nagging doubts about the authority of judges, who are selected, typically, from the world of fashion, show business, modeling and ad agencies, film industry and cosmetics, and the previous *Miss World* or *Miss India* contests? Who determines feminine beauty? And, why is there the attempt to select the 'most' in this category - all virtues as abstract and open to controversy as beauty?.

Opposition to these competitions also stem from the real

threat they represent-of converting a genuinely noble value into a cult and a fetish, precipitating unfounded consumerist desires and false wants; and fanning baseless anxieties and fears specially among women to be constantly obsessed with their looks.

The cult of beauty that "beauty contests" are so much a part of also leads to a complex psychological problem, a form of narcissistic obsession which Bartky³ calls the 'fashion-beauty complex': the reverent and self-absorbed pleasures of the mirror, the other interiorised self. It is this 'fashion-beauty complex' according to her which also control the conditions under which false needs are met.

According to Bartky, "false needs" are needs which are produced through indoctrination, psychological manipulation, and the denial of autonomy; they are needs whose possession and satisfaction benefit not the subject who has them but a social order whose interest lies in domination. The price extracted for the satisfaction of repressive needs is high, for guilt, shame and obsessional states of consciousness accompany the repressive satisfactions allowed (women) by the 'fashion beauty complex'. Repressive narcissistic satisfaction is a stumbling block to the emergence of a genuine delight in the human physique, too: The woman unable to leave her home in the morning without putting on make-up will always fail to discover the beauty, character, and expressiveness she already has.

Moreover, the various images of femininity that "beauty contest" project, work in egging women to indulge in higher and higher levels of consumption of beauty products and devices. The beauty industry constantly tell woman to be obsessed with her appearances transforming her into a 'Panopticon', a self-policing subject; a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance, a form of obedience to patriarchy, subject to collaborating in her own subjection (Bartky)



Finally, objections are also over the pernicious, political aspects that these contests sometimes are linked with viz, the nexus between the declaration of the "winner" of the "beauty contest" and the market for the products of the beauty industry. Very often the selection of the winner is influenced by the sponsor's eyes on the vast market of these and other related products in the country the "competition" is staged. That is, the winner is ultimately one who hails from a country where TNCs dealing in cosmetics, high

fashion jewelry and designer wear, etc, have enormous sway both financially and politically; with the government being soft and patronising towards their investments deals. In return, the tokenism and flattery of the beauty award is made to that particular country's beauty "Queen". That is, a reward for the "free and fair economic policies" pursued by the governments of these countries. When Latin America had been identified as the boom continent there were suddenly a number of winners of various beauty contests-in Brazil, Venezuela, Costa Rica, etc. Today, it is India's turn as the latest recipient of such a "largess" with two successive winners in a row and almost a third (Manpreet Brar) who was a runner-up to this years *Miss Universe* contest. A former "Miss India" to a "Miss Universe" contest in the 80s reportedly observed:

"What happens is that the organisers indirectly tell you that America is important that year, for political reasons, or that Thailand at the moment is politically more important. They don't directly tell you to choose a particular person".

The media, the contest officials, etc., use the trick of playing up a particular beauty contestant. Thus the media managers, hand in glove with contest officials, and organisers, etc., ascertain which competitor "is acceptable" and artificially manufacture the "winner"

Finally, the opposition to "beauty contests" is also because in societies like India such extravagant beauty events detract women from real gut issues of greater relevance proper birth-control and health facilities, better AIDs prevention measures and programmes, denial of civil liberties and democratic rights etc.

MYTH

Sushmita and Aishwarya have done our country proud! The magnificent way they represented India at the Miss Universe and Miss World contests showed the world what our women can achieve and the status of Indian womanhood! Truly they both are our countries cultural ambassadors and role models for our youth!

FACT

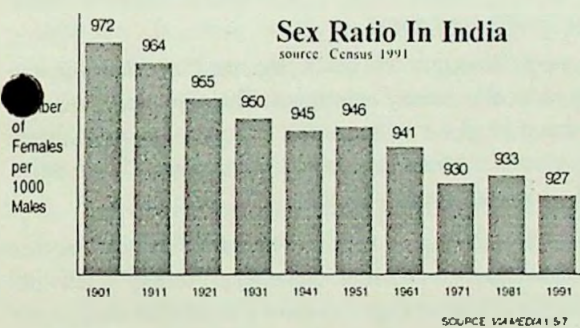
This is one of the many such saccharine-sweet encomiums that have gushed out by the votaries of "beauty contests" on "Indian womanhood", etc.

A random illustration of incidents from the recent past however, will show how women in India, in reality, are treated.

- the blood-curdling murder of Naina Saini
- the mental and physical abuse of Radhika (Nehru) Tikoo
- the stripping and torture of an expectant mother, Kamla, 22, of Parluka in Rajasthan
- the naked parade and humiliation of Usha Dhiman of Saharanpur in full view of the local bazaar, adjacent to the police station and a court,
- the acid assault on a 19 year old collegian, Deepti Khanna, at the Juhu bus stop, disfiguring and blinding her in one eye.

Radhika Tikoo's case is typical of what a large number of women undergo in the name of marital bliss. Most women do not see beyond the 'mata-devi' syndrome and will suffer in silence, allowing themselves to either be burned to death quietly after years of misery. Many also try, even on their death-beds, to protect their husbands pretending to the very end that they took their own lives or burned themselves accidentally.

One index of how women are treated in India is the sex-ratio. (In India, it is the number of females per 1000 males, while in non-Asian countries it is the number of males per 1000 females). With the exception of Kerala, the sex-ratio has been a declining over the decades-from 970 in 1901 to 927 in 1991; when males figures are indexed (as per the Human Development Report 1994) at 100, females stand at 93 in population; 55 in literacy; 34 on years of schooling and 42 on labour force.



According to Lalita Panicker in the *Sunday Times* (27.11.94), the plight of the underprivileged has proved to be as much a winning card for these "beauty queens" as their perfect vital statistics and dazzling good looks. The following figures however of the awesome extent of deprivation of that most underprivileged class, women, demonstrate the false promises these pageants are:

- Every 7 minutes a crime is committed against a woman;
- Every 26 minutes a woman is molested;
- Every 56 minutes a woman is raped;
- Every 1 hour and 42 minutes a dowry-death takes place.

Besides socio- economic and religious taboos have kept Indian woman out of the decision making process and will continue to do so since only 39.42 % of women were found literate at the last count.

The projected ratio of men to women by the turn of the century is a depressing 500 million males to 480 million females. With the spread of modern techniques like amniocentesis, the elimination of the female child even before it is born has been made much simpler and cheaper. (refer to *Facts Against Myths*, Issue #3, 1995 *Myth of Sex Determination Test* by Mr. R.P. Ravindra of this Publication)

Even more invidious is the attempt to portray these "beauty queens" not only as socially committed achievers but as the New Indian Woman and as role models for young women.

Apart from having made a politically correct answer-prob-

ably coached by *Femina* - these "beauty queens" have nothing to qualify as role models. At 18 years and lacking in maturity and even in a graduate degree how can they be expected to have achieved things that will inspire a whole new generation? On the contrary, these women have unwittingly aided in precipitating a *Westward ho!* movement that will eventually lead to the same mania with the body beautiful as in the West, and a life devoted to trivia. These range from one extreme of Indian women being influenced by orthodox values to the other extreme of a Western materialistic weltanschauung. Rather than being representatives of a new breed of cosmopolitan and intelligent Indian woman these women actually serve in graphically highlighting the widening gulf between the Westernised elite and the mass of neglected and subjugated Indian women. The life of the average Indian woman is characterised by systematic discrimination in all walks of life. Victories at beauty contests only succeeds camouflaging the plight of such women.

MYTH

"Women in India have now become aware of their rights.....(and) the origin of the child is a mother and is woman.....who shows a man what love and sharing and caring is all about"
-Sushmita Sen at the finals of Miss Universe 1994

FACT

The reference to "Women in India", merely addresses one section of the urban middle class, including Sen herself! Her statement is in illustration of pop feminism in which Sen evidently did not find the need to challenge male-defined gender-roles. Women still need to be perfect housewives and perform the double (patriarchal) task of home/work as a symbol of their power, while men just watch T.V. etc. most of the time, without sharing in her domestic burdens.

Sen urges women to show greater self-confidence and self-determination, another illustration of pop feminism. She however hastened to add that she's not prodding women to be feminists but that "...Men are important. It is important to give man his respect. But you must know what you want and get it" !! Her homily betrays an ignorance typical of anti-feminism including Lakme-feminists distressed with the fallacy that feminism means rendering man redundant and disrespecting them rather than recognising feminism as demand for equal rights and justice.

Typical of her pop feminism, however, Sen also contradicts herself by referring to Mother Teresa as a perfect illustration of "a person who is totally selfless, devoted and unconditional"-qualities that a patriarchal order appreciate; to keep women domesticated.

The worst thing she uttered was, ironically, or typically, what awarded her the beauty crown, on the question, what "the essence" of a woman is. Sen responded with the most damaging tropes of patriarchy-of maternity, and women as nurturer and protector with the rider: "The origin of the child is a mother and is a woman.

A woman is one who shows a man what love and sharing and caring is all about?" Sen suddenly seemed to forget her

urging women to assert themselves. !

These responses by Sen on aspects of Indian womanhood is one of the major elements of the dominant myths about womanhood, viz., a woman's identification with the domestic sphere and the consequent blocking out of a social valuation of her work. According to Prof. J. Bagchi⁴ of the School of



Women's Studies, Jadavpur University the 'sexual division of labour' is itself a myth that helps devalue women's work as merely reproductive rather than productive. The myth perpetuates the belief that women are naturally, hence invariably the child bearers and child rearers. Whatever work can be accommodated into the pattern of child bearing and child rearing is conceded to women as paid work, whereas the observed reality is that it is childbearing and child-rearing, that has to fit into women's work.

Sen's reference to Mother Teresa illustrates another prevailing myth of womanhood - the false image of woman as a long-suffering, chaste, self-sacrificing superwoman. Mythcentred pop media in tandem with religious beliefs valorize and sanctify the unequal behavior pattern between the sexes. That sanctification in turn breeds popular myths clamping the lives of women. The drudgery of every-day life makes women cling to popular notions of men as breadwinners, leading to an over-valuation of male children, and a craving for marriage as the only security-generating social institution. The lived reality of their lives contradicts these myths at every point. It renders their work socially less valued, their marriages fragile and treatment of their girl children, who happen to be their best support system, hos-

tile. Once again the unseen boundary of class operates Bagchi states (op.cit)

The middle-class leisured woman like Sen and Rai with all their leisured consumerism, provides them with a fantasy of freedom, however, 'mythical' it might be.

Finally, Sen's pacans to Indian motherhood is no longer a source of women's power that it once was viz., womans procreative role which today has rendered her powerless, i.e. specially subject to male domination. Perceived as a field in possession of the owner of seed (read semen). "a woman's motherhood renders her specially susceptible to male control and domination. Deprived of minimum safety nets such as nourishment, safe birthing, adequate ante natal care, child care facilities, motherhood renders working Indian women, specially in poor rural areas, extremely vulnerable. State sponsored incentives to motherhood both as ideology and material help are also questioned as patriarchal, denying women the ability to render motherhood as materially empowering". (op.cit)

Acknowledgment

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