

THE winning of the Miss Universe crown by Sushmita Sen in 1994 and the Miss World crown by Aishwarya Rai later that year were celebrated by the Indian mass media and the urban elites as though they were momentous events in Indian history. Manpreet Brar's qualifying as first runner-up this year in the Miss Universe contest has convinced many Indians that the winning of the earlier two crowns was not a fluke — that India has indeed arrived on the international scene. We thought we had conquered the world whereas in Europe and America little attention was paid to our grand accomplishments.

Up until the 1970s, beauty contests used to be peripheral affairs, only covered by specialised women's magazines such as *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*. They were hardly ever a topic of animated discussion in middle-class homes. But now they have acquired a prominence in our social life totally out of proportion to their significance. Millions sat glued to their TV sets in India to watch the crowning of Sushmita and Aishwarya. The prime minister and the president received them as though they were high dignitaries. Big national and international companies spent millions of dollars promoting their products and image through association with the contest and the winner.

Beauty contests now get prominent front page coverage in leading national newspapers. It is inconceivable that a high status paper like the *New York Times* would organise a beauty contest to boost its circulation. But in India, where earlier the Miss India contest used to be a mere *Femina* event, it has now been converted into a grand *The Times of India* gala. For instance, on May 14, 1995, *The Times of India* gave the lead story to Manpreet Brar, the first runner-up in the Miss Universe 1995 contest, an

When India "Missed" the Universe

Madhu Kishwar

"I have a terrible tendency to put on weight. If I have more than two chapatis at a go, I bloat. If I have one extra biscuit, I feel so guilty, I wander around the house moaning that I look fat. Of late I have become obsessed with food. If I see a two-day old chapati that a dog wouldn't eat, I start drooling."

Madhu Sapre, fashion model and former Miss India

eight column space across the entire front page. The burning of Charar-e-Sharif in Kashmir was relegated to a much less prominent place.

The victories of Sushmita and Aishwarya had been even more lavishly praised — their achievement was celebrated in India the way America celebrated its first astronaut's walk on the moon. Even Doordarshan telecast it live this year on the national hook up at prime-time.

To the inferiority complex ridden Indian elites, the Indian beauties who won international crowns gave them

a hope, that if they continue to ape the West in its mannerisms, lifestyle, consumption patterns, fashion designs and what have you, they will one day make it to world class, just as Sushmita and Aishwarya did by learning to walk, talk, dress, smile and wear makeup like Hollywood stars. On the surface, participation in these beauty contests may even give the impression of having a liberating effect on the supposedly tradition-bound Indian women by encouraging them to enhance their physical and sexual appeal. To see Indian women parading confidently in front of men



and being sexually provocative could be seen as a sign of self-assertion of their womanhood and sexuality. But in actual fact these contests are hardly a celebration of women's beauty. They end up reducing their bodies and their whole existence to well-packaged products to get them to act as vehicles for consumer goods. Most of these are useless products and, therefore, must rely on media hype to generate an artificial demand. It is no coincidence, for instance, that Pepsi hired Sushmita and Aishwarya to boost their sales in India soon after they won the crown. It is only by using such glamorised models that they hope to persuade people to buy flavoured sugar water costing them no more than a few paise at Rs 6 a bottle — and in the process harming their own health.

Protests against beauty contests, the use of women as sex objects and the commodification of women's bodies have been key components of women's movements in the West. Western feminists realised that beauty contests, by their demonstration effect through various media, had the serious potential to harm women — physically, mentally and emotionally. Unfortunately, we in India are catching this western fever years after thinking women in the West challenged and discarded those concepts of beauty. The Miss India Contest has become an important national event. Beauty contests have proliferated in thousands of women's colleges and in hundreds of local clubs and hotels.

The “Beauties” of Miranda

The euphoria whirling around these Indian beauties brought back memories of the days in 1971 when, as president of the Miranda House Students' Union, I worked very hard to get the Miss Miranda beauty contest abolished. In those days the Miss Miranda beauty contest had pretty much the same glamour among its

more restricted audience as the Miss India contest. This time, when Sushmita won the Miss Universe contest for India and the country went ecstatic over it, I just could not react in the manner I did in the 1970s. This is not because I've changed my mind about the harmful effects of beauty contests, but because looking back on the fall-out of our campaign in the university, I am left with very ambivalent feelings.

When I joined Miranda House as a starry-eyed 16-year-old in the late 1960s, I got the first and most long lasting culture shock of my life — one that played a substantial role in

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shaping my life and thinking in the years to come. In those days Miranda House was considered India's premier institution for women's education and attracted daughters of the bureaucratic and business elite in large numbers. The college population was divided into three distinct categories — the westernised Mirandians who came from elite schools, the science types, and the Hindi-speaking *bhenjis*. Not everyone who came from an English speaking school qualified to be admitted into the first group. Ragging not only served the purpose of sifting the freshers into neat categories but also showed each group its place in the Miranda House scheme of things. Without any formal sanction, fairly strict and visible forms of segregation

were practised routinely and viciously. The "real" Mirandians would never condescend to even rag a fresher if she did not come from the right background. You had to be from a school such as Welhelms, Loreto, Tara Hall or Convent of Jesus and Mary in order to qualify to be admitted to the charmed circle. Someone from Salwan school or Guru Harkishan Public School would be automatically ruled out, even if the school taught through the medium of English. Your father had to be a highly placed bureaucrat, preferably of the IFS or the IAS, or a senior army officer, or a top business executive for you to qualify to be ragged by the “hep” seniors. You had to be able to speak English with the right public school accent. If you were a day scholar, your parents would need to have a house in some prestigious South Delhi colony, unless you lived in the princely bureaucratic part of New Delhi. Often the seniors could tell from the way someone dressed if she belonged. Occasionally, a *bhenji* type dressed in ways resembling the elite would be summoned for ragging. But the first few questions would decide whether she was considered worthy of ragging or not. “Your name, fresher? Where do you stay? What does your father do?” Only if you had “satisfactory” answers to each of those qualifying queries did the select few condescend to rag you. If a fresher answered that she lived in Kamala Nagar or Shahdara or a trans-Yamuna colony or that her father owned a dry cleaner's shop or was a postal clerk, she would be at once asked to “get lost”. Through this process, the seniors sifted and selected the freshers they considered worthy of notice and friendship. The ragging period ended on a celebratory note — with the famous Miss Miranda beauty contest. Though entry to it was not formally forbidden to the *bhenji* types, it was well understood that the prestigious

title could only go to the hep elite: the *bhenjis* hardly ever even dared to enter the contest.

A Hallowed Tradition?

The beauty contest set the tone for the whole institution. The college seemed to function more as a finishing school for a large number of young women, where they came to acquire airs rather than academic qualifications. Undoubtedly, there was a facade of selecting as Miss Miranda House someone who combined beauty with “brains” and “good grooming.” That usually amounted to asking a few questions like, “What would you do if you found yourself on the moon?” The fresher who managed a cheeky and funny answer usually was considered brainy enough to deserve the crown. All the intelligence required of you amounted to no more than being able to come up with an instant joke or a smart alec response.

This crowning event was followed by a series of parties organised by the boys of the St. Stephens college. The senior Mirandians would take the Miranda House freshers along in order to facilitate pairing off with the Stephenians. The height of a Mirandian’s ambition was to get a boyfriend from among the Stephenians, preferably someone with a car who could take you out to fancy discotheques and parties every weekend. In all the years that I studied in that supposedly premier institution, I heard

very few of my fellow classmates discuss books or ideas except to borrow each other’s notes for examination preparation. Most of their time and energy was spent on talking of boyfriends, shopping trips, dressing up, and planning for parties and outings. In that sense, the beauty contest was not an isolated event in which a few participated for fun. It set the tone and cultural milieu for the hep Mirandians all year round. The message was clear: Your body shape, waist and bust size, the way you dressed, the accent in which you spoke English (reflecting the social, economic status of your family), and the kind of male attention you were able to attract were far more important than any other qualities you might have. For instance, while Miss Miranda was considered the celebrated heroine of the campus, very few students knew who topped the university in various subjects or won medals in debating or various sporting events. The beauty contest promoted vicious elitism and low-level competitiveness among women at the cost of talent and other

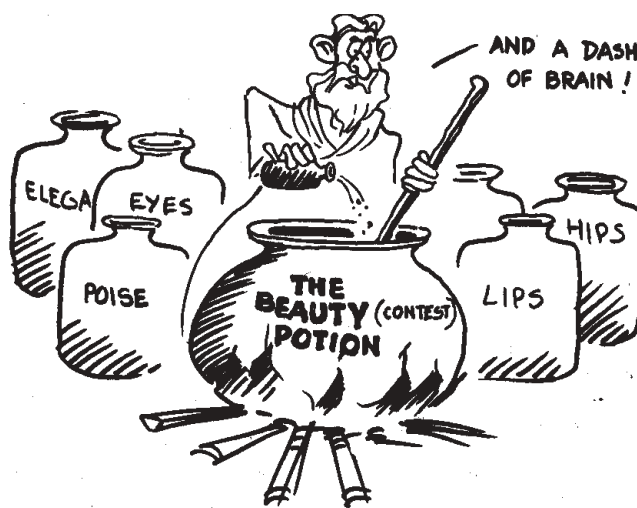
human qualities.

Ironically enough, these contests and fashion parades were organised by the college Students’ Union which, until then, was monopolised by the same beauty culture elite. This Union hardly ever concerned itself with academic issues or various legitimate problems faced by the students. The president and the secretary of the Union sat as judges in the beauty contest along with former beauty queens of Miranda House.

In 1969, Akhila Ramachandran took over as president of the Union. I was vice-president of the Union that year. We tried to transform the Union into the voice of organised student opinion on various issues relating to the university, as well as the general society and polity. When our elected team tried to raise the issue of abolishing the beauty contest, we met with vigorous opposition from the dominant elite of the college. Akhila worked out a compromise and tried to tone down the beauty-cutie part of the contest by asking a few

“intelligent” questions of the contestants and selecting someone who was not beautiful in the conventional sense. I personally was not satisfied with this “beauty-cum-brain” contest idea because it kept the basic derogatory message intact while bowdlerising the notion of intelligence in women.

Therefore, when I got elected as president of the Union in the



Rustam Vania

following year, the two issues we began the year with were:

- An end to nasty and often obscene ragging of freshers by the seniors.
- An end to the beauty contest.

We began our campaign by calling a General Body meeting to discuss the issue. At the end of it, when we called for a vote, an overwhelming majority of the college students voted against the beauty contest and in favour of a freshers' week of cultural activities. It was decided that the emphasis should be shifted from competition to exposing first year students to various extra academic aspects of university life, and encouraging more and more students to take part.

The hep elite were clearly in a tiny minority, but they were so used to having their writ obeyed all these years, that they could not stomach the idea that the college *bhenjis*, who they considered riff-raff, could dare vote out one of their most sacred rituals — one that affirmed the superiority of their way of life in the college. Even though the function was supposed to be organised under the aegis of the Student's Union and more than 90 percent of the student body had voted against it, the beauties and cuties were not willing to accept this verdict. This unleashed a virtual civil war in the college.

They sought and got the support of the college administration for holding the beauty contest.

In those days, the English department, along with a sprinkling of faculty from the History and Economics departments, used to dominate college affairs in pretty much the same way as the hep English speaking elite dominated the student body. The college principal, along with a group

of influential teachers, declared their support for the beauty contest, defending it as one of the “hallowed traditions” of Miranda House. On our side, we began a vigorous signature campaign in the college, going from class to class, holding long discussions with small clusters of students and, thereby, successfully mobilising a very large body of determined opinion against the beauty contest. Since we were accused of manipulating a majority vote in the general body by rabble rousing, we asked for a secret ballot, a sort of referendum on the desirability of holding the controversial contest. A day was fixed for it. But the beauty contest lobby felt insecure knowing that they were a helpless minority, and therefore, with the help of the then college principal and a few supportive teachers, they decided to hold the contest surreptitiously, a couple of days before the agreed date of the secret ballot. As soon as we got to know of it, we were able to organise, at short notice, a massive *dharna* at the proposed venue and pre-empt the holding of the contest. The beauties in all their fineries trooped out of the college and held a contest in a private apartment on the outskirts of the University. They had the satisfaction of having held the contest anyway. We were satisfied it could not be called the Miss Miranda beauty contest any more. That was the last beauty contest in Miranda House.

I remember reacting with a great deal of annoyance at being labelled a feminist and being called the Kate Millet of India for spearheading the campaign against the Miranda House beauty contest. My response was to reject such parallels because, until then, I had practically no knowledge of the western feminist movement, nor the issues it had raised. In those days I saw western society mainly through the Marxist prism as a “decadent

bourgeois” society and wanted as little to do with it as possible. Indian papers in the early '70s carried very little information about other countries. What little trickled through carried with it the stereotyping and biases of the western media on women's issues. Books by feminist authors had not yet invaded the Indian market as they came to do in later years.

Interestingly, it was not just my response which was based on sheer ignorance. The hep elite of Miranda House ended up by taking such a hostile stand against our efforts to abolish the beauty contest and indulged in a vicious hate campaign against us because they too seemed unaware that the beauty contests were being similarly challenged by a newly emerging women's movement. In the West, beauty contests were on their way to becoming unfashionable, at least among the intellectual elite. In those days there was a much larger time lag in ideas and technology from the West to third world countries like India, unlike today, when Star TV, CNN and BBC are able to bridge the information gap almost instantaneously.

Self-turned Racism

One strand of our opposition to the Miranda House beauty contest echoed some of the issues raised by western feminists in their protests against beauty contests. For instance, among other things, our campaign leaflets talked about how the beauty contest trained women to view themselves as sex objects and to remain engrossed in attempts to become sexually attractive to the male eye at the cost of developing other talents and human qualities. But that was only a small part of our objection. For me, the more important motivation behind the campaign was to fight against the vicious forms of elitism perpetuated by the super-westernised elite of our college.

Their contempt for those who did not dress according to the correct fashions of the day, did not speak English with the appropriate public school accent, or did not boast of a suitable address in one of the elite colonies of Delhi was so corrosive that it destroyed the self-confidence of many who felt rejected by this group. The beauty contest was a mere symbol of this nasty elitism which enveloped all aspects of student life. In order to be part of that charmed circle you had to have a taste for western music, see western films, read only western literature. If you were seen

viewing Hindi films or listening to folk songs, that stamped you as an unfashionable *bhenji* forever. Likewise, you were allowed to speak in Hindi, Marathi, or whatever your “mother tongue” may have been, only to servants and drivers. If you read Agatha Christie or even the silly *Mills and Boon* you were “in”. If you were seen reading a Hindi novel by Premchand or a Tamil book, you would immediately be considered “out.” Not that everyone who tried to be part of this “in” group all came from thoroughly westernised homes.

I recall the pathetic case of one of my classmates from English Honours who came from a wealthy, but not so westernised *Bania* family. Her family still lived in the unfashionable old city. However, she never gave her correct address to anyone, including her close friends, and made out that she lived in a fashionable suburb of south Delhi. For this she had to incur a great deal of inconvenience every day. Since your social status in the college also depended on whether you took one of the college special buses



to an appropriate south Delhi colony, everyday she would take a bus headed towards south Delhi along with those whose social approval she desperately desired, and then come all the way back to the Red Fort to reach her house in the Chandni Chowk area. If any one of her classmates chanced to see her near where she lived, she would refuse to recognise the person and pretend it was someone else they saw. I myself felt a semi-outcast because though I studied in English Honours and could speak English with the appropriate Indo-British accent, I enjoyed the friendship of the pass-course *bhenjis* more than that of my own fancy classmates. I also enjoyed singing Hindi songs. As Union president, I insisted on holding all general body meetings in Hindi because the majority of students were not comfortable or fluent in English, even though they had a basic knowledge of the language. This choice provoked extreme hostility from my English language oriented contemporaries.

Copy-cat Elites

I am not against elites per se, but I

am against those elites whose claim to superiority depends solely on their economic status and political clout rather than on any moral or intellectual worth. The Miranda House beauty lobby represented the copy-cat elite — culturally and intellectually. Miranda House was like an intellectual slum of the West. My fellow students prided themselves on knowing more about the royal family of Britain but would not have heard of a man like Chaudhary Chhotu Ram of Haryana, or have an interest in Sardar Patel. They could write a treatise on Jane Austen but would not condescend to read

Mahadevi Varma. This was before the “ethnic” became fashionable and South Asian studies departments in western universities began promoting and funding research on Indian literature and politics.

This elite prided itself on its alienation from its own people, its own culture and traditions. Its survival depended on uncritically and unimaginatively borrowing western technology, western ideas and western ways of looking at the world. Therefore, it could not claim to being a genuine intellectual elite for that requires the ability to think independently, to be creative in generating ideas and providing intellectual leadership to your own society. A mentally enslaved, colonised intelligentsia cannot do that. That is why the Miranda House elite felt so threatened when a silly symbol of their hitherto assumed superiority of their way of life, the beauty contest, was abolished in 1971.

Fortunately, in Miranda House, the beauty contest was never revived.

However, in the last two decades, the beauty contest culture has proliferated widely and engulfed most women's institutions, including the non-elite ones. In Delhi University, you have Miss Daulat Ram, Miss Gargi, Miss Maitreyi Devi, with virtually every women's college holding its own contest. Does it represent democratisation of westernisation in our society? The very same *bhenjis* on whose behalf we had launched the anti-beauty contest campaign in 1970 have now taken to fashion parades and beauty contests with incredible vigour and gusto. It makes one wonder whether this is the inevitable direction in which the aspirations of the vast majority of modern women is likely to move. If this is what most women want, does one have any moral right to oppose it, since there is no evidence women are being coerced into this culture but are happy being seduced by it?

In the meantime, the beauty-cutie elites of the 1960s and 1970s got themselves admitted to western universities and got the opportunity to catch up with the latest fashions in the West. Many of them returned to India in the 1980s as enthusiastic feminists after a few years in and around western university campuses, because by then, feminism had established itself as a powerful force in western society. New academic disciplines, new departments, jobs and fellowships were created in response to the western feminist demands for equitable sharing of power in the universities and outside. These days, to declare oneself a "third world feminist" is to open the gates of many career opportunities which otherwise would not come your way — research grants, fellowships, teaching assignments, invitations to international conferences, project funds, and so on. You are at once admitted as a member of the intellectual elite of the

world. In the last decade, with the various international funding agencies promoting feminism in third world countries, to be identified as a third world feminist has become a very lucrative proposition indeed. So we have the interesting phenomenon in India whereby fashionable beauty contest holding elites of the 60s and 70s have taken to feminism, and have come to look down upon beauty contests. The *bhenjis*, on the other hand, have now become great enthusiasts of beauty contests and fashion parades. It is a case of particular aspects of western influence reaching certain sections of our population at different paces.

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Whereas earlier being pro-beauty contests was proof of one's elite status for women, today being against the "culture of commodification of women's bodies" has become more fashionable than winning a beauty contest, for holding the latter opinion connects you to the international intellectual elite. It is not a coincidence that whereas the various Miss Worlds and Miss Universes used to be mostly European and American, they are now mostly from third world countries and the contests are given undue coverage in national papers only in these countries.

There were many other surprising fall-outs of our campaign against the

domination by the over-westernised elite in Miranda House. Earlier, the college principal invariably owed allegiance to this group and the college was unduly dominated by the English department. While their enthusiasm to pretend that Miranda House was an extension of some British university meant that students learned very little about their country and became ridiculously Eurocentric, they also fostered some positive characteristics. The college atmosphere was relatively liberal, with far fewer restrictions on student mobility. Girls could be out every day until 8 p.m. and were allowed weekends out with no one keeping a tab on whether you went to your local guardian's home or not, as long as you brought back the leave book duly signed by the supposed guardian. Nobody bothered to check whether the signature was forged or real. Students met their boyfriends openly and went out on dates without hiding, unlike in other women's hostels which functioned mostly as prisons or *nari niketans*. The hostel was a place for fun with no restrictions on visitors into the rooms as long as they were female. Day scholars intermixed freely with hostellers and the hostel itself was the hub of activity. The westernised teachers were more likely than the other teachers to be friendly and informal with students and would invite students to their homes. Some would even offer cigarettes and drinks. All these things undoubtedly gave Miranda House girls the reputation of being "fast", but the unusual amount of freedom available to women students allowed space to explore life — if you wanted to. For me, personally, the liberal atmosphere of Miranda House provided a space for experimenting and thinking things anew. My tenure as vice-president and president of the Union were really tumultuous years for the college. We turned many old conventions upside down —

challenged the quality of teaching, demanded and got representation on the Governing Body, supported college workers demanding better working conditions and injected a high dose of radicalism in the student body by attempting to get it exposed to national politics — especially the radical left variety. We organised innumerable protest marches, *gheraoed* the Governing Body and the principal, frequently confronted the staff council, and got involved in Delhi University politics without being treated as pariahs. In their flexible response to our activism, our westernised teachers communicated some of the positive virtues of liberalism. No matter how much we differed with them, many of the teachers whose decisions we were challenging remained good friends and rarely turned vindictive.

Victoriarism, Indian Style

However, while I never regretted challenging the hegemony of the westernised elite in Miranda House, I did recoil in horror to see the results of a shift in power from the English Department to the non-elite departments like Hindi and Sanskrit. A few years later, when Miranda House hired its first principal from the Sanskrit Department, she brought such a repressive culture with her that the institution became unrecognisable. Innumerable ridiculous restrictions were placed on students. Iron grills and huge iron gates were introduced to bar the movement of students from one part of the college to another. For instance, day scholars were forbidden from entering the hostel and their access to the hostel was blocked off by iron grills. The college began to resemble a cage. Hearing stories of the harassment suffered by students and teachers in those days, I realised that, as was the case in the rest of the country, challenging the monopoly of the westernised elites did not necessarily

bring a more benign culture. The home-bred elite can easily bring with it repressive *karwa chauth* culture and *khomeinivad* for women.

That is why I am extremely wary now of joining campaigns against beauty contests and the like. Most of those who are opposing them today have a tendency to advocate oppressive norms for women in the name of protecting Indian culture (*Bharatiya sanskriti*). While the anglicised elite tend to lag behind a few years in catching up with the latest intellectual fashions in the West, the Hindi and other regional language elites tend to absorb western notions of 50 to 100 years ago and even then, indigenising them in peculiar ways. For instance, their notion of *Bharatiya sanskriti* is, more often than not, repressive Victorianism in an Indian garb. For them, sex itself is a bad word — it is *ashlil* [vulgar] — and women's bodies something of an embarrassment.

The Barbie-doll Aesthetic

The moment one expresses distaste for beauty contests, it is assumed that one wants every woman to look like an inmate of a Gandhi ashram, and to lead a self-repressed life.



To be opposed to beauty contests is not to be opposed to women beautifying themselves. Throughout history, women have been known to express their love of beauty by embellishing themselves and everything around them, including objects of everyday use. Indian women in particular have been exceptionally creative in this regard. They decorate ordinary mud floors with beautiful designs, have a rich tradition of colourful clothing with intricate embroideries, create lavish mirror work and a host of rich designs. It is but natural that they would express their joy in beauty by beautifying their bodies as well. *Shringar* is an age old tradition in India where women put on special jewelry, special makeup and decorate every part of the body.

However, the concept of beauty that comes to us from the West along with these beauty contests has very little to do with beauty and more to do with marketing a self-view to women whereby they all try to look and behave like standardised products — rather than normal human beings. This makes women self-hating by wanting to conform to a pre-set glamour doll image.

For years, western feminists have grappled with how men have come to define beauty in such a way as to manipulate women into considering themselves attractive only when men find them sexually provocative. Much of this is tied in with a sick obsession with youth in western culture, which effects all strata of the society. Women have access to an extremely tenuous bit of power as long as they are young and attractive to men. Western men, however, have a different standard for themselves. They believe they continue to be attractive even in middle age. In fact, if they are rich and powerful, their age only adds to their charm. Streaks of silver in a man's

hair are supposed to enhance his sex appeal, but not so for a woman. There is pressure for her to carefully hide them with a dye, along with other tell-tale signs of aging. As she starts greying, her breasts start sagging, wrinkles appear, or her waist starts bulging, she is made to feel increasingly dispensable. The obsession with having big and firm breasts, narrow waists and shapely legs drives vast numbers of women in the West to go on starvation diets. One and a half million women in the West are known to have their breasts artificially inflated through surgery. American friends tell me that losing weight is such a national obsession that you cannot talk to a woman for any length of time without the conversation veering round to calories and diets. Many women become anorexic in their anxiety to stay trim and get sick because they cannot eat. Others who can't resist eating their fill, learn the art of vomiting soon after each meal so that they are able to eat with abandon without putting on any weight.

For years, magazines like *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly* (now defunct) have been trying to propagate these and other western obsessions among Indian women but so far their influence has stayed confined to a very tiny section among the urban elite. Eating disorders and plastic surgery are relatively unheard of in our country. But if the euphoria over beauty contests keeps spreading at this pace, fuelled by interested sections of the mass media, women in India are in for a lot of trouble.

So far, the main unhealthy aspect of our notion of beauty in women is our tendency to consider dark skin a sign of ugliness. A heavy premium is put on women being "fair skinned". (In this respect Indians are no less racist than some white skinned

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Westerners). My friend, Surabhi Sheth, a Sanskrit scholar, confirms that the bias in favour of fair skin abounds in Indian literature. A *gaurvarna* is associated with *prakash* (light) and *saundarya* (beauty). There are also caste dimensions to the preference. *Brahmins* are associated with white skin, the *Kshatriyas* with red (valour), *Vaishyas* with yellow skin and *Shudras* with black. While fair skin was traditionally prized for its association with *saundarya*, during colonial rule it acquired a new connotation - that of power. That perhaps explains the fascination Indians have had with the Nehru family. Since they were almost as fair as Europeans, they were treated like they were natural born rulers. I am convinced that Indira Gandhi would not have been so valourised and allowed to get away with so many evil deeds had she been dark skinned.



A dark skinned girl is often treated as the ugly duckling of the family and finds it tough going in the marriage market. Skin whitening creams that promise a "fair and lovely" complexion are as sought after as anti-wrinkle creams in the West. The premium most Indians put on fair complexion in women is indeed weird considering that majority of us are rather brown skinned, if not dark. However, in most other respects, I find traditional ways of looking at beauty far more balanced and healthy.

For instance, in India, we are not tyrannised by the pressure to stay trim. If I put on some weight, most of my friends and family are likely to tell me that I'm looking healthy. Likewise, whenever I have lost a few kilos, I am constantly besieged with queries like: "Have you been ill? Why are you looking so pulled down?" As long as a woman is not outright obese, a plump look is associated with being healthy. Most parents would actively discourage their daughters from going on diets to lose weight. In fact, if a woman does not put on weight after marriage, it would be seen as a sign of a stressful marriage. It is widely believed that if a woman is happy in marriage, "her body should fill out" (*sharir bhar jana chahiye.*) Even film heroines in India are almost never skinny — unlike most Hollywood stars who have to have a lean and starved look in order to be considered right for glamorous roles. Our film stars would be considered plump and many even outright fat by western standards. But in India, heroines like Meena Kumari, Nargis, Asha Parekh, Hema Malini, and Mala Sinha among the older generation were never rejected simply because they grew fat with age. Even among the younger generation, Sridevi, Juhi Chawla and many others have fairly plump bodies. But that does not prevent them from

being considered attractive. Most Indians like them for their “healthy” look.

The Didi/Amma Advantage

Unlike in the West, where women’s youth is highly valued and old age dreaded, women in India are respected and taken far more seriously as they begin to get older. An Indian woman’s position in the family is enhanced and she comes to acquire much greater bargaining power as she advances in age. As young wives, women in India do not have it so good. They are expected to be subservient to the elders in the family and not allowed much autonomy. However, as they become mothers and grandmothers, they often emerge as authority figures in the family. That is why, by and large, Indian women do not dread ageing as do western women. Perhaps that explains the absence of anti-wrinkle creams in the Indian market — though there are dozens of brands of “Fair and Lovely” creams floating around.

In public places, an older woman with grey hair is unlikely to be treated shabbily. The social norm is to extend “mother-like” respect to such a woman. If you are not old enough to be treated in a mother-like fashion, you will be addressed as a sister. *Behenji* is one of the most common forms of respectfully addressing a woman in many parts of India.

Some western feminists find the Indian obsession with respecting women as mothers and sisters offensive and an expression of denying women their selfhood. That is really missing the point altogether, for this ideology provides women a way out of the sex object trap and gives them



Kalighat painting, 19th C. Bhairavi tramples a male figure underfoot

opportunities to deal with men in a range of close relationships without having to be constantly viewed as sex objects. Thus, there is much less pressure on women to be forever sexually attractive to men. The ideology of glorifying motherhood has a major plus point in that men, even after they grow up, are expected to be reverential to their mothers. While society often condones a man behaving badly with his wife, a man being rude or

By and large, Indian women do not dread ageing as do western women. Perhaps that explains the absence of anti-wrinkle creams in the Indian market — though there are dozens of brands of “Fair and Lovely” creams floating around.

nasty to his mother is socially looked down upon.

Bowing before a mother’s commands and obeying her wishes is considered the appropriate behavior for sons even after they are married. A dutiful son is held up as a social ideal. In western culture, such a man is likely to be laughed at. He would be seen as abnormal, needing to “become a man” and told that he needs to see a psychologist for being tied to his mother’s apron strings. Not so in India. It is popularly believed that you don’t have to worship any God as long as you serve your mother in a worshipful fashion. It is considered better than divine worship.

This can lead to major problems for the daughter-in-law if the mother is not wise about exercising her influence and authority, or if the son ignores his wife’s needs. It also often means that Indian men are awkward as husbands, especially with young wives. That is perhaps why most Indian women start early at moulding themselves into matriarchs, often in the process undermining their role as attractive sex partners.

Likewise, women as older sisters, aunts and even grandmothers can exercise a great deal of power and influence over men who are expected to assume responsibility for and behave respectfully towards women in these roles. You don’t have to be a real blood brother or nephew for that. Neighbourhood boys are expected to behave in a brotherly fashion towards girls of that area who can legitimately expect that they will come to her help if the girl is being harassed by someone. It is the very opposite in western culture, where men in their roles as brothers, sons and nephews can be

both awkward and unwilling to take responsibility, and cringe at the idea of having a woman tell them what to do. Indian men tend to be rather sappy and sentimental about these relationships and are used to being nagged and ordered around by women relatives.

Of innumerable such instances from my own experience, I cite one. A few months ago I was walking down to the local chemist shop in Lajpat Nagar when I saw a man on a two-wheeler scooter suddenly fall down with a thud on the road. I rushed to help thinking he had been hit by a passing vehicle, but that was not the case. He had fallen down from his scooter because he was dead drunk. With the help of nearby shopkeepers, we removed him from the road and made him sit on the pavement. I lifted his scooter, parked it on the

side, took out the ignition keys, and told him that I was not going to allow him to drive home in that condition, and that we would send him home in an auto rickshaw. His first response was to start yelling at me in a drunken rage: "Who the hell are you to stop me? How dare you keep my scooter back?" I calmly replied: "Your older sister who doesn't want to see you dead in a road accident!" Though I wasn't sure I was actually older than him. Even in that drunken state his tone changed. From then on he began pleading and apologising, begging me to let him go home with his vehicle. In the meantime nearly 25 people, some passers-by, some neighbours, had collected around us, and they all



Kalighat painting, 19th C. A wife leads her sheepish husband by a string

supported me in preventing him from driving home in that drunken state. He was still too drunk to realise that I meant business. So he kept pleading and arguing - though no longer in the earlier insulting tone. Now it was, "Didi, please let me go. I promise I will never drink again!" Some men of the locality wanted to hand him over to the police. When I resisted, saying they will only beat up the fellow and steal whatever money he was carrying, they began to hit the drunken man saying only a sound thrashing would teach him a lesson. I put myself between them and the drunkard and asked them to stop beating him up. This got them enraged and once again I was rudely confronted with: "Who do you think you are? Supercop?" All I

had to say with folded hands was: "No, I am your neighbourhood sister, pleading with you not to beat up a man who is already in such a humiliating position." That instantly calmed them down. They parked the scooter in a courtyard to ensure its safety and told the drunk man that he had to do as I told him and come back to collect his scooter when sober. Finally, a local shopkeeper offered to drive the man to his house in his car provided "Didi" came along. The next morning the man returned for his scooter not only profusely apologetic for what had happened but equally thankful to his "didi" for having taken care of him the previous night.

I find this "didi," "amma," "mausi" role far more advantageous for women because not only do men listen to a woman more respectfully once she establishes this kind of an equation with them, but it also saves her from being sexually harassed or being treated as a sex object. I have often been successful in thwarting unwanted sexual advances and flirtation by male friends or colleagues by beginning to address them as so and so "bhaiya" or even "beta" even if the man is not actually young enough to be a son to me. This *didi/amma* advantage does not work as well on the over-westernised men. Age, in fact, lends tremendous advantage to women in India, and that is why many women learn to use this advantage rather than hide it.

Through Male Eyes

In western culture, by contrast, as women grow older, they become more pitiable. Their husbands often start

sniffing around for younger women. The concept of equality and women's rights has brought with it easy access to divorce. But in the ultimate analysis, high divorce rates and breakdowns of marriage do not go in favour of women, one reason being that as they advance in years, they find it harder and harder to find marriage partners, since men seem to prefer, and many are able to get, younger women. The notion that



Courtesy: Aditi

women must remain attractive sex partners forever puts an enormously unrealistic burden on western women, many of whom go to ridiculous lengths to stay young and trim because in roles other than sex partners they get much less attention from men.

In the West, even after feminists made beauty contests less respectable among the elite, women continue to be under tremendous pressure to be sexually interesting to men and try to mould their bodies to be copies of models in fashion magazines. Most western fashions, designed mostly by men, emphasise sexual provocativeness in women's clothing. By contrast, in cultures like India's, a woman might even jeopardise her chances of marriage by dressing up provocatively. While the system of family arranged marriages in India has many drawbacks, there are several advantages to it including the fact that a woman's chances for marriage are not largely dependent on whether or not men find her sexually attractive, as happens in the West where self-arranged marriages are the norm. Since the entire family takes an active part in selecting a bride, in India a woman is

expected to be pleasing to a vast range of people and not just one man. This plays an important role in ensuring that popular norms of beauty are not entirely male defined, as in the West.

The relative stability of marriage and family life in India frees women from the pressure to stay forever young and wrinkle free. Especially in a joint family setup, the stability of the marriage is to a large extent decided by how well a woman manages to get along with the various members of her husband's family — his mother, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. For these people, her youthful good looks are of subsidiary importance and other human qualities far more valued. A woman who gets along with the rest of the family has some support against being deserted by her husband because the rest of the family would join in to keep the man on a leash. The stigma attached to divorced men may not be as strong as it is for women, but it is sufficiently strong to make a majority of the men learn to make the effort required to keep their marriages intact, even when they do not get along with their wives or feel attracted to other women.

It is this relative confidence that her marriage will last, whether or not a woman stays youthful and attractive enough to satisfy her husband's sexual fantasies, that allows women in cultures like ours to age more gracefully rather than live in mortal dread of wrinkles, grey hair, sagging breasts and bulging waistlines. Women in India do not need to waste quite as much time in being seductive to men and can invest far more energy into building

other relationships, especially with other women.

If the culture of beauty contests takes root in India, it will erode some of the areas of strength traditionally available to women in India. It brings in vicious forms of competitiveness among women and makes them self-hating as they get excessively self-involved and begin to look upon other women as rivals and competitors, desperate for a certain kind of male attention. It makes them more and more unidimensional creatures who are more easily manipulated by men because they see themselves mostly through the eyes of men. While millions of men indulge in sexual fantasies about Sushmita and Aishwarya, I cannot imagine young men wishing they had them as a sister or too many fathers/mothers being anxious to have them as daughters. They tend to provoke only two kinds of responses: sexual excitement in men and envy, or even hostility, among women. In my experience, a woman who only invites envy or hostility among other women becomes a very insecure person despite all the adulation she may get from men. □